

Arizona Criminal Law & Sex Crimes Post

Militarization of the Police: Good Idea or Dangerous?

Posted by [Vladimir Gagic](#) on July 27, 2011

The police and the military are not the same thing. They have different rules, organizations, procedures, and objectives. How the military and police interact with the public should be different as well. The purpose of the police is public safety. The purpose of the military is national security. But has that difference eroded in the past few years? Do the police and military have the same mission? If that is the case, is that because of the threat of terrorism, or from another reason altogether? And of course, the ultimate question, is militarization of the police good or bad?

At least one person, Radley Balko of the libertarian think tank Cato Institute, does not believe the [militarization of the police](#) is such a great idea.

Over the last 25 years, America has seen a disturbing militarization of its civilian law enforcement, along with a dramatic and unsettling rise in the use of paramilitary police units (most commonly called Special Weapons and Tactics, or SWAT) for routine police work.

In [testimony before the United States House subcommittee on crime](#), Mr. Balko described militarization as "a broad term that refers to using military-style weapons, tactics, training, uniforms, and even heavy equipment by civilian police departments." And:

It's a troubling trend because the military has a very different and distinct role than our domestic peace officers. The military's job is to annihilate a foreign enemy. The police are supposed to protect us while upholding our constitutional rights. It's dangerous to conflate the two.

What Mr. Balko is describing is the creation and use of para-military type police forces, which are "extremely volatile, necessarily violent, overly confrontational, and leave very little margin for error." This is especially troubling when para-military forces are not used against heavily armed and dangerous criminals, but in common ordinary circumstances such as:

when you're dealing with nonviolent drug offenders, paramilitary police actions create violence instead of defusing it. Whether you're an innocent family startled by a police invasion that inadvertently targeted the wrong home or a drug dealer who mistakes raiding police officers for a rival drug dealer, forced entry into someone's home creates confrontation. It rouses the basest, most fundamental instincts we have in us – those of self-preservation – to fight when flight isn't an option.

Maybe I am overly cynical, but I don't think the militarization of the police has very much to do with the rise of terrorism. The creation and use of para-military police forces started in the early 1980s, which was even before Usama Bin Laden began fighting the Soviets. I believe the creation and use of para-military police units is a result of marketing and promotion of military weapons, by the military industrial lobby, to civilian law enforcement. Economists have a law called Saye's Law, "supply will create its own demand." The demand for para-military civilian police started when industry created and sold them the weapons, whether or not it served the public interest.

Now, unfortunately, it seems some officers have taken this further and they act if they are not members of the community serving a public function, but an occupying army. Let's hope that trend does not continue.

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