



## **Does armor turn police into soldiers?**

August 18, 2014

The shooting death of Michael Brown and the subsequent rioting in Ferguson, Missouri, have stunned the nation, reopened issues many had hoped were long settled and presented Americans with disturbing questions about not only race and poverty in our society, but the police as well.

Racial relations in Ferguson obviously are poor. In a town whose population is two-thirds black, only one elected official, from the mayor to the school board, is black. Of the 53 members of the police department, only three are black. Obviously, the political system is not working in Ferguson.

The department's false steps and heavy-handed actions indicate the separation between authorities and the people matches the lopsided numbers in representation. When you mix a sizable gap in communications with heavy-duty military equipment, you have a ready-made invitation for trouble.

Ferguson's sorry history of racial relations and abuse of power is a story we are still learning. Another story we should follow is that troubling aspect of police firepower. That is an angle that spreads to practically every town in America. Why do police departments have so much castoff military equipment? Delaware, for example, has millions of dollars of former military equipment, from combat and sniper rifles to Humvees. Some states, but not Delaware, have received "MRAPs." They are Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected armored vehicles. MRAPs are designed to withstand roadside bombs.

Why do local police departments have these things?

Libertarians and conservatives have been complaining about the militarization of small police forces for years. Journalist Randy Balko of the Cato Institute has documented cases of small-town police departments raiding the homes of supposed drug dealers in

the middle of the night with full body armor and powerful military-style weapons. Crowd-control techniques have been used against peaceful demonstrators. A number of these practices have gone wrong, and innocent citizens were hurt or intimidated.

Now critics on the left are joining the criticism. One of the strangest developments in the case of Michael Brown's shooting has been the criticism of the police coming from both the right and the left.

Why do the police need such armory? For sure, there are bad people with guns willing to attack police. However, another force is at play. This equipment from the U.S. government is practically free. Who can turn down a free Humvee?

The equipment, as we have seen in Ferguson, can serve to alienate the police from the people.

Gen. David Petraeus formulated his order for "Surge" in Iraq by telling his soldiers to get out of their Humvees. Get out and get to know the people you are dealing with.

That certainly would have helped in Ferguson. It surely will everywhere.