

GANNETT

Are police peacekeeping or warring with citizens?

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Following the 1960 riots in Watts, Calif., the first Special Weapons Attack Team (SWAT) formed. It was the brainchild of Los Angeles Police Department inspector Daryl Gates, who later became chief of police and was forced to resign because of his brutal police tactics, primarily against black communities.

The Texas Tower Shootings (1966) in Austin, Texas, killed 15 people; SWAT teams proliferated in large cities thereafter.

No-knock warrants were legalized in 1970, as a result of a raid on the headquarters of the Black Panther Party. The District of Columbia Court Reform and Criminal Procedure Act of 1970, signed by President Nixon, contained a specific provision for no-knock warrants. This authority was soon granted to police precincts across the country. SWAT teams today obtain these warrants from judges reluctant to question the reasons presented by police to the court.

The Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Agencies Act was passed in 2006. In a report prepared for the Cato Institute, Radley Balko wrote that the law “authorized the military to share drug-war-related information with civilian police” and “authorized the military to take an active role in preventing drugs from entering the country.”

President Reagan signed the Comprehensive Crime Control Act in 1984. This allowed civilian law enforcement agencies working with federal agents on drug cases to get a cut of the seized assets (forfeiture money). One former LAPD commander called this policy “policing for profit.”

The Byrne grants, created as part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, resulted in billions of dollars going to local police, and the formation of narcotics task forces to focus solely on

conducting drug raids. Iowa City's Drug Task Force has received grants every year for 25 years. Research by Peter Kraska of Eastern Kentucky University found that in 2005, 50-60,000 SWAT raids took place in the United States — doubling those of 1995.

In 1996 the National Defense Authorization Security Act of 1997 greased the slide for transferring military property to local police forces. Under the Pentagon's 1033 Program, billions of dollars of military equipment has been provided to civilian law enforcement agencies across the country. This includes grenade launchers, M16 rifles and Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) — designed for overseas wars.

The Iowa City Police Department arsenal has, for several years, included ballistic helmets and vests, goggles, balaclava helmets, Nomex gloves, rifles, sniper rifles, breaching tools for forcing entry, noise bombs, chemical munitions (nerve gas, tear gas and pepper spray are possible examples) and ballistic shields. The Johnson County Sheriff's Department also owns much, if not all, of this equipment but — for no apparent reason other than it was “free” (paid for by forfeiture money) — felt the need to acquire an MRAP, designed to withstand roadside bombs planted by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Without doubt, under the right conditions citizens of Johnson County would turn out in huge numbers to protest an extreme governmental action. Studies have shown that such demonstrations remain generally peaceful until the police arrive, armed to the teeth and prepared to forcefully violate the right of the people to exercise free speech and peaceful assembly.

When confronted with force some citizens will respond with force; it is not surprising, then, that the provokers will get what they want — a “disobedient citizenry” — which gives them justification to utilize their arsenal with the brutal tactics recently seen in Ferguson, Mo.

In an Aug. 29 editorial, The Des Moines Register wrote, “the focus on war materiel in the hands of local law officers is the wrong question. A better question is whether police departments and sheriffs see themselves as peacekeepers or at war with their citizens.”