

THE RECORDER

GREENFIELD, MASS. ESTABLISHED 1792 - N.E. NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR 2012.

Culleny: The stuff of nightmares

By: Jim Culleny - Wednesday, October 2, 2013

I had a dream the other night that was filled with organized brutality. It was disturbing; not because of the brutality per se, but because of the identity of the brutalizers. My nightmare cadres were too familiar and commonplace. They were made up of authority figures I was taught as a child to trust — but we've become a coarser society since we gave our tacit assent to state-sanctioned torture as an information-gathering tool.

Truth is, we ultimately brutalize ourselves when we brutalize others. It's one of the unintended consequences of our post-9/11 insecurity phobia. In short, my nightmare gangs were made up of police.

The mounting frequency of reports of excessive force by police that sparked my nightmare and inspired a poem. I wrote it soon after I'd read of yet another SWAT raid on a house that turned out to be at a wrong address. The innocent inhabitants were scared out of their wits, assaulted and brutalized in an event of overwhelming force. But we've become blase about this sort of thing or submissive or, as I said, coarsened.

SWAT raids are what we see as more and more communities militarize their police forces. Human nature loves to fill a vacuum. The more space in your house, the more stuff you buy to fill it. The more powerful your car, the faster you're tempted to push it. The more crowd-control equipment you spend money on, the more you have to justify its use. It's like that.

Here's the poem:

cops with army stuff
use more army stuff,
find more reasons

with more reasons
sometimes kill in the process

tasers, small tanks, flack vests
big muscle guns, jackboots
toughen up with army stuff

turn up the heat
see if gizmos work
go boom rattatat zap hurt

Taser use is a good example of what I'm talking about. Tasers are efficient and versatile. They're instruments of caution as well as torture. It's safer to tase than to talk, therefore what may once have been a long, drawn-out talk-down in a personal conflict event becomes a quick and easy takedown requiring less thought and more action. You have a taser; you use it. It's not as lethal as a bullet and more cost-effective than a time-consuming colloquy with a distressed, problematic citizen. But people have died from being tased. So? Ho-hum. At least, that was my dream gang's attitude.

Times have changed. I was raised in a small town in New Jersey where the police knew everyone and everyone knew the police. But this was before the creeping militarization of local police forces, before SWAT mania. I'm fortunate enough to live in a similar town now. I was raised to respect the courage required of police officers in the face of danger and the often-difficult task of emotional restraint it takes to remain professional and judicious in extreme, rapidly escalating situations. I still do.

But my dream was not about that kind of policing. It was not about responsible law enforcement professionals who risk their lives in service to others and understand the limits the Constitution puts on their methods.

I spend a lot of time keeping up with the news and pretty much every day I read of police raids that are botched and brutal. In an article written for the CATO Institute, Radley Balko notes, "Americans have long maintained that a man's home is his castle ... unfortunately ... 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."

"Special" once, maybe, but now less special more routine. Just a quick Google search turns up many incidents.

What we're talking about is not traditional police work and tactics. We're talking about police forces becoming domestic armies and the mindset of armies is not to protect citizens but to destroy enemies. It's a mindset that can result in ruthless acts of brutality as in the recent case of a woman in Tallahassee, Fla., who wound up after a police stop with injuries requiring reconstructive facial surgery. Again, such incidents are reported with more and more frequency.

This trend to militarize community police forces is something many of us turn a blind eye to, but it has upset Col. Peter Marino, a former marine who served in Iraq helping to build the Iraqi army. Marino, in impassioned remarks at a Concord, N.H. council meeting said, "What we're doing here, and let's not kid about it, is we're building a domestic army ... We're building an Army over here and I can't believe people aren't seeing it, is everybody blind?"

Being in the army-building business, Marino should know. But play his remarks over news footage of black-helmeted, flak-jacketed cadres of the local infantry in high-laced boots with "POLICE" written on their backs, pouring out of armored personnel carriers with heavy munitions surrounding demonstrators exercising their right to congregate and my bad dream of domestic armies becomes more than a personal nightmare.

Did bin Laden win after all?