



U.S. suddenly alarmed over militarization of cops

'Andy Griffith and Barney Fife could be using grenade launchers and a tank'

By Bob Unruh
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Organizations that focus on the Constitution and the rights it protects for Americans long have warned about the militarization of American law enforcement – a move launched by the federal government with its “surplus” equipment programs years ago, and recently in full-throttle acceleration.

For example, John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute has worked on lawsuits against departments over SWAT tactics and attacks, the way officers detain individuals and more.

Just in the last week, as the turmoil over the police shooting of a teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, exploded into multiple shootings and other violence, with a heavy-handed response from law enforcement that included tear gas, full armor-wearing officers, curfews and dispersal orders, he’s ramped up his warnings.

“For those like myself who have studied emerging police states, the sight of a city placed under martial law – its citizens under house arrest (officials used the Orwellian phrase ‘shelter in place’ to describe the mandatory lock-down), military-style helicopters equipped with thermal imaging devices buzzing the skies, tanks and armored vehicles on the streets, and snipers perched on rooftops, while thousands of black-garbed police swarm the streets and SWAT teams carry out house-to-house searches – leaves us in a growing state of unease,” he wrote.

He continued, “Mind you, these are no longer warning signs of a steadily encroaching police state. The police state has arrived.”

WND reports on the militarization in America date to within months of the news site’s launch in 1997, when Founder and CEO Joseph Farah wrote about a training session for armed federal officers – for the Environmental Protection Agency.

Describing a new multi-million-dollar training facility that was schooling thousands of federal employees, he wrote, “Critics of the growing militarization of the federal

government will also take no comfort in the fact that the center's program was designed with the help of a team of experts from the U.S. military."

Now Whitehead's warnings and Farah's reporting are being echoed by those representing the far distant opposite end of the spectrum from constitutional, conservative America.

Longtime Rep. Dennis Kucinich, a firm supporter of many things progressive in America, wrote this week in the left-leaning Huffington Post that the militarization of police needs to be reined in.

"We are at a moment of national crisis in the way our domestic law enforcement is being conducted," he wrote. "The killing of an unarmed civilian by a law enforcement officer is, sadly, not unique. But the police response to the protests has provided a powerful cautionary moment for America. The militarization of local police has led to the arrival today in Ferguson of the actual military, the National Guard."

He blamed what he called the "crisis" on "The erosion of a principle in federal law, Posse Comitatus, meant to restrict the use of the military in civilian law enforcement" as well as "The Pentagon's dispersal of military equipment to domestic police units, which has increased since 9/11."

Further, he noted, another problem is "Military-style police training reliant upon weaponry, as opposed to peace keeping, including skills development for de-escalation of violent tensions."

He appeared to be in agreement with Whitehead, who penned, "As journalist Benjamin Carlson points out, 'In today's Mayberry, Andy Griffith and Barney Fife could be using grenade launchers and a tank to keep the peace.' This is largely owing to the increasing arsenal of weapons available to police units, the changing image of the police within communities, and the growing idea that the police can and should use any means necessary to maintain order."

At a Department of Defense news briefing on Tuesday, the first two questions from reporters were about the military equipment given to local police departments, an effort officials said they were reviewing.

Kurt Eichenwald wrote in Newsweek, "While this might seem like a 'boys with toys' problem – cops playing dress-up as they search for their inner G.I. Joe – it's really about bad law enforcement tactics. One thing sometimes forgotten is that there are decades of research on policing tactics, and competent officers and their bosses rely on this research to guide them because they want to maintain law and order, instead of just pretending the movie 'RoboCop' was a documentary. Research shows that militarization rarely works, and usually makes things worse."

He continued, "When faced with a large-scale protest, police who understand their job know they must defend the free speech rights of participants with civility, while

maintaining public safety. That means they protect both the protesters and other civilians. Confronting angry citizens in the garb of jack-booted thugs does plenty of damage and accomplishes nothing.”

And he cited the opinion from Mike Masterson, chief of the Boise, Idaho, policy agency. His comment in a 2012 report for the FBI said, “Officers must avoid donning their hard gear as a first step. Police should not rely solely on their equipment and tools. Experience shows that ... dialogue is invaluable. Law enforcement officers must defuse confrontations to ensure strong ties with the community.”

Paul Shinkman wrote at U.S. News, “An image of a camouflaged man in Ferguson, Missouri, training a sniper rifle on a group of protesters with their hands up has forced Americans to ask themselves what kind of protection they’re willing to tolerate.

“The growing militarization of domestic police forces has been a concern at home for years, but has risen to the forefront of national debate this week as shocking footage emerges from Ferguson. The St. Louis suburb remains the site of clashes and heated racial tensions between protesters, angered by the shooting death of unarmed teen over the weekend, and the police forces they believe have a history of abusive practices.”

Elizabeth Beavers and Michael Shank wrote in the New York Times that Ferguson is a “virtual war zone.”

“The police response has shocked America. The escalating tension in this town of 21,200 people between a largely white police department and a majority African-American community is a central part of the crisis, but the militarization of the police is a dimension of the story that has national implications,” they said.

“Ferguson’s police force got equipped this way thanks to the Pentagon, and it’s happening all over the country. The Department of Defense provides military-grade weapons and equipment to local law enforcement agencies through the 1033 program, enacted by Congress in 1997 to expand the practice of dispensing extra military gear.

“Due to the defense industry’s bloated contracts, there is a huge surplus. To date, the Pentagon has donated military equipment worth more than \$4 billion to local law enforcement agencies. And the giving goes on, to police forces in all 50 states in the union.”

The concern is well-established, and local reports from all over the country are raising eyebrows – and tempers – over what Whitehead and others have been shouting about for years.

The Livingston County Daily Press and Argus in Howell, Michigan, wrote, “Michigan police departments have armed themselves with grenade launchers, armored vehicles, automatic rifles and other equipment – 128,000 items in all, worth an estimated \$43 million – under a federal program that allows police to obtain surplus gear free from the U.S. military.”

It explained that since 2006, Michigan law enforcement agencies have received “17 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles or MRAPs, built to counter roadside bombs; 1,795 M16 rifles, the U.S. military’s combat weapon of choice; 696 M14 rifles; 530 bayonets and scabbards; 165 utility trucks; 32 12-gauge, riot-type shotguns; nine grenade launchers; and three observation helicopters.”

“Federal officials won’t say which agencies got equipment, but the [Detroit] Free Press’ inquiry shows the gear went not just to large counties with high crime, but some of the state’s smallest counties and towns. For instance, Dundee police, who patrol a village of about 4,000 residents, got a mine-resistant ambush vehicle. Barry County in rural western Michigan, with just under 60,000 residents, got five grenade launchers.”

CBS reported this week that members of Congress are already talking about tightening the reins.

“Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., said police responses like that in Ferguson have ‘become the problem instead of the solution.’ Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga., said he will introduce legislation to curb the trend of police militarization. Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said his committee will review the program to determine if the Defense Department’s surplus equipment is being used as intended,” the report said.

CBS continued, “In Louisiana, masked police in full body armor carrying AR-15 assault rifles raided a nightclub without a warrant, looking not for terrorists but underage drinkers and fire-code violations. Officers in California train using the same counterinsurgency tactics as those used in Afghanistan.

“‘They’re not coming in like we’re innocent until proven guilty,’ said Quinn Eaker. SWAT teams last August raided his organic farm and community, the Garden of Eden, in Arlington, Texas. ‘They’re coming in like: ‘We’re gonna kill you if you move a finger,’” the report said.

At WZZM in Detroit several incidents were cited, including the fact a 19-month-old Wisconsin boy was critically wounded in the face and chest in May when a flash-bang grenade landed in his crib at a relative’s home in Georgia. Police were executing a no-knock warrant to search for a relative over a \$50 drug sale.

And the report cited “The 2010 death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, 7, of Detroit, who was struck by a bullet from an officer’s gun as she slept on a couch during a Detroit police raid. Police in SWAT gear used a flash-bang grenade in that raid, too. They were looking for a murder suspect, who was found in the upper level of the duplex and surrendered without incident.”

Further, “A pregnant mother, 26, shot with her 14-month-old son in her arms in 2008 when a SWAT team broke down the front door of her rented home in Lima, Ohio, and opened fire. They were looking for her boyfriend on suspicion of drug dealing.”

Cleveland.com reported that Ohio agencies have gotten grenade launchers, MRAPs, and assault rifles recently.

“Under the Department of Defense’s 1033 program, state troopers, sheriff’s departments, city police departments and even university police in Ohio have received nearly 4,900 assault rifles since 2006, according to state Department of Public Safety records obtained Monday by Northeast Ohio Media Group.”

“Ohio law enforcement agencies also successfully asked the Pentagon for a total of 743 rifles, 683 pistols, and 36 mine-resistant vehicles during the past eight years, according to DPS statistics. In 2008, the Delaware Police Department received an M79 grenade launcher to fire tear gas canisters.”

The report quoted Delaware Police Department spokesman Capt. Adam Moore pointing out that the equipment was just that – equipment.

“It’s not a philosophy,” he said. “It’s the use of [it] that could be debated.”

At The Week, a map was featured revealing the locations of many police attacks on people. The report called the map “terrifying and depressing.”

The map was created by Washington Post journalist Radley Balko and the libertarian Cato Institute, the report said, and “shows botched paramilitary police raids across the U.S. The map focuses on the use of heavily armed SWAT teams who use forced entry to storm homes unannounced, usually while inhabitants are sleeping. As many as 40,000 of these raids happen each year.”

The map (click image to go to Cato’s original interactive feature):



But Whitehead warns, “Once acquired, this military equipment (which is beyond the budget and scope of most communities) finds itself put to all manner of uses by local law enforcement agencies under the rationale that ‘if we have it, we might as well use it’ – the same rationale, by the way, used with deadly results to justify assigning SWAT teams to carry out routine law enforcement work such as delivering a warrant.”

He noted, “Clearly, the American homeland is now ruled by a military empire. Everything our Founding Fathers warned against – a standing army that would see American citizens as combatants – is now the new norm. The government – local law enforcement now being extensions of the federal government – has trained its sights on the American people. We have become the enemy. And if it is true, as the military asserts, that the key to defeating an enemy is having the technological advantage, then ‘we the people’ are at a severe disadvantage.”

Whitehead said individual Americans have a responsibility to get to work.

“For instance, take a close look at your local police officers, the ones who patrol your neighborhoods and ensure the safety of your roadways. Chances are they look less and less like the benevolent keepers of the peace who patrolled Andy Griffith’s Mayberry and more like inflexible extensions of the military.

“Who calls the shots for your local police? Who do they answer to? Who provides oversight for their interactions with local police? What drives the decision-making process for your local police – revenue or the rule of law? How transparent are your local police about their activities, their equipment and their processes? In other words,

who polices your local police? If it's more police or politicians benefiting from revenue-generating programs by the police, that's no answer.

“Remember, a police state does not come about overnight. It starts small, perhaps with a revenue-generating red light camera at an intersection. When that is implemented without opposition, perhaps next will be surveillance cameras on public streets. License plate readers on police cruisers. More police officers on the beat. Free military equipment from the federal government. Free speech zones and zero-tolerance policies and curfews. SWAT team raids. Drones flying overhead,” he wrote.

“No matter how it starts, however, it always ends the same ... all-out tyranny.”