



## Cops Deserve a Fighting Chance

Christopher Roach

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Seven police officers were shot in Florence, South Carolina last week. One of them, Sgt. Terrence Carraway, was fatally wounded. The suspect, a troubled Vietnam veteran, apparently had set up an ambush when the police arrived to serve a search warrant. He barricaded himself and rained down rifle fire upon the responding officers. A heavily armored MRAP obtained from the Department of Defense was critical in evacuating the wounded from the scene.

### **The Myth of Militarized Police**

The Florence County Sheriff Department obtained its MRAP through the Pentagon's 1033 Program. The program provides surplus military equipment to domestic law enforcement agencies. This is how the Los Angeles Police Department obtained M-16s after the infamous North Hollywood Shootout, and it's why Humvees, MRAPs, bullet proof vests, medical supplies, ammunition, batteries, and other surplus material has migrated from military warehouses into the armories of SWAT teams and ordinary patrol officers across the country.

The 1033 Program is an island of fiscal sanity amid an ocean of government waste. MRAPs are not, contrary to media hyperbole, tanks. But they are both bulletproof and intimidating, a testament to their birth on the battlefield. Even so, they are similar in technology and function to the familiar Brinks truck and the armored vans SWAT teams have used for decades.

Both the far Left and the libertarian right have warned about the specter of "militarized police" since the mid-2000s. The Cato Institute's Radley Balko made this a central focus for many years, culminating in his book, *The Warrior Cop*. The argument is that police increasingly see themselves as more military than civilian, inflaming tensions and decreasing empathy with the communities that they police. While the focus varies from training and gear to uniforms and department culture, we are told that we are facing an epidemic of police violence against blameless civilians, which is fueled by the police's increasing militarization.

The militarization critique became particularly pronounced after the 2014 riots in Ferguson, Missouri. Commentators at the time marveled at the appearance of well-armed riot police and armored vehicles. But the criticism was, frankly, really stupid. It reversed causation, blaming militarized police for the rioting, even though the controversy began with the shooting death of Michael Brown, which came at the hands of an ordinary patrol officer.

More important, the rioting occurred *before* the riot police showed up. Even if someone is angry at a grand jury decision—or the sight of armored cars on the streets—none of those things naturally cause the burning down of businesses, assaults on whites, and generalized mayhem.

After the events in Ferguson, Obama severely restricted the donation of surplus military vehicles to police, explaining that military equipment can “alienate and intimidate local residents and may send the wrong message.”

Obama has never seen a strawman he’s not willing to dispatch and, in this case, he recycled the old 1960s-era trope about “oppression by the Man” as the chief cause of lawlessness in our cities. This trend was not caused by militarized police; it’s been around at least 40 years. Rather, militarized policing was a response to communities that had *de facto* already been militarized into a guerrilla warfare atmosphere, where the most dysfunctional members of the community waged war on police and law abiding citizens, and found support among deeply alienated and dysfunctional communities, where snitching is a worse offense than rape and murder.

### **Before Militarized Police, a Society at War With Itself**

America was once very safe, orderly, and had low rates of crime. Police were respected, even in a sense by criminals, and this respect reduced the need for violence to curb crime.

Then, in the 1960s, the lid came off.

Liberal judges imposed rules that resulted in the mass-release of prisoners and made convictions harder to obtain. Mental institutions were depopulated. Families broke apart, and welfare participation increased. Newly integrated schools led to increasingly segregated cities, as whites fled to the suburbs in places like Boston, New York, and Chicago. Drug use and the drug trade exploded. Terrorist organizations, including Obama’s friends in the Weather Underground, deliberately targeted police for political violence, killing a San Francisco officer in one notorious bombing.

The 1960s also gave birth to the civil rights and anti-war movements. The movements’ criticisms of particular injustices expanded into a criticism of all authority, which was seen as tainted by the evils of racism at home and abroad. This remains the foundational view of leftism today.

As Thomas Sowell observed, “Collective guilt is one of the legacies of the 1960s that is still with us. We are still seeing a guilt trip for slavery being laid on people who never owned a slave in their lives, and who would be repelled by the very idea of owning a slave.”

Diversity probably always breeds a certain amount of intrinsic distrust, but such manageable friction is made worse by the broader leftist critique of all authority as tainted. This is, literally speaking, demoralizing. The tail end of the Obama Administration exposed an increasingly divided and low trust society, with brazen assassinations of police carried out in Dallas, Baton Rouge, and Brooklyn.

High trust and low trust societies differ in many ways. High trust societies are safer not primarily because of the actions of police, but because of a web of internal restraints, the fear of shame, the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors, and an intrinsic sense of law-abidingness. As Edmund Burke observed, “Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

Our militarized police, to the extent they exist, are a consequence, not a cause, of increasing distrust and disorder.

## **Law-and-Order is a Winning Issue**

Bush-era conservatism abandoned winning issues, considering them *declassé* and divisive. Previously, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush won by championing their pro-law-and-order *bona fides*, in contrast to the “soft on crime” stances of their opponents.

This softness was never more apparent than in the case of President Obama, but neither Mitt Romney nor John McCain had much to say about it, fearing perhaps the inevitable charge that being tough on crime is racist. For these compassionate conservatives, tax cuts, economic growth, spreading democracy, and broadening the Republican coalition were higher priorities than the blood simple issue of fighting crime. They lost.

Here, as on other issues, Trump has his finger on the pulse of the nation. Immigration and the economy no doubt played a big part in Trump’s 2016 victory. But Trump’s law and order stance contrasted sharply with Hillary’s mealy-mouthed uncertainty, particularly amidst the chaotic, racially-charged crime wave of 2016.

After the Dallas massacre, the feeling was one of a nation coming apart. Worse, then President Obama had spread confusion by distorting what should have been a simple message: “don’t riot, don’t kill cops.” Instead, Obama said: “there are still problems and communities of color aren’t just making these problems up . . . there are issues in which the law too often feels as if it is being applied in a discriminatory fashion.”

Well, I guess rioting is everyone’s fault.

Obama made common cause with the agitators, blaming appalling crimes on institutional factors, such as mass incarceration and militarized policing. This view is out of touch with the instincts of the majority of Americans and the overwhelming majority of Republicans.

Their middle-class value system is one of hard work, saving, striving, conforming, and playing by the rules. The elite’s common cause with the criminal underclass strikes those in the middle either as naïve or as an expression of hostility. Unlike the elite, they cannot afford gated communities or expensive bodyguards to protect themselves from disorder. They must live in the midst of it. This is why they want to keep their guns, and this is why they feel sympathy and respect for the difficult job of law enforcement.

Trump has been on the side of the good guys since the Bernie Goetz incident in New York. He saw a beautiful city sink into near-ruin as a consequence of crime and disorder, and he understood that sympathy with criminals was the domain of out-of-touch elites and their self-destructive lower class “pets.” Following through on his campaign promise, Trump quickly reversed President Obama’s executive order restricting the transfer of surplus military equipment to local police agencies.

Police work is fundamentally dangerous, and the police are, in the vast majority of cases, fundamentally the good guys. Sometimes the bad guys want to go to war with them, and, when they do, an officer’s shield can no more deflect bullets than wishful thinking. Police deserve the best equipment.

Six officers were saved this week by a surplus military vehicle that their agency obtained from the Department of Defense. If Obama and the Cato Institute prevailed, those policemen would

have been deprived of this tool. And, at least one of the six who made it out would likely also be having a funeral, a martyr to perfectly progressive policing.