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In Ferguson's Wake, Odd Bedfellows

By Janet Hook
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The use of military-style power in Ferguson, Mo., has galvanized a coalition of libertarians and liberals calling for curbs on the use of force by police—a partnership that departs from the party-line splits that have long dominated American politics.

The alliance that has arisen in the wake of protests over the police shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson is the latest in a growing list of issues where liberals and libertarians have found common cause. The scope of National Security Agency surveillance, U.S. drone policy, criminal sentencing and corporate power all have emerged in recent months as topics of concern among both liberal Democrats and libertarian quarters of the GOP.

These instances of agreement hardly signal an end to partisan gridlock in Washington. Liberals and libertarians remain fundamentally at odds over basic policy questions such as government safety-net programs and federal regulation. But their occasional alliances do point to new political dynamics as national policy debates shift from the tax-and-spending issues that so easily split along party lines—and as the growth of libertarian sentiment within the Republican Party has created new coalition-building opportunities.

"It's too bad it takes a crisis like this [trouble in Ferguson] or the NSA revelations a year ago to get people to notice the problem of overreaching government," said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank.

Laura Murphy, director of the Washington legislative office of the American Civil Liberties Union, said that her traditionally liberal group has been cultivating closer ties with libertarian-leaning conservatives like Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) because they are an increasingly significant voting bloc that can help advance the ACLU's legislative agenda in Congress.

"There's always been a little more-libertarian group: now it has gotten bigger," said Ms. Murphy.

Although libertarians as a group are harder to measure than political parties, leaders like Mr. Boaz say they have seen an uptick in the share of Republicans who hold libertarian views. That wing of the party has developed, in part, in reaction to policies of

President George W. Bush that included expansion of antiterrorism efforts, government bank bailouts and increased federal deficits.

In the wake of the Ferguson turmoil, it was hardly surprising to hear the voices of the ACLU and the Democratic Congressional Black Caucus rising against police action that involved military-style weapons and aggressive tactics. Less predictable were the responses that rose from the GOP, the political party that has traditionally been a bastion of law-and-order advocates and defenders of law-enforcement agencies.

While many Republicans responded to Ferguson cautiously, the party's leading libertarian voices were full throated. Rep. Justin Amash (R., Mich.) was one of the first Republicans to decry the use of military equipment and ask on Twitter, "Is this a war zone or a U.S. city?" Mr. Paul drew wide notice for writing in a Time magazine article, "There should be a difference between a police response and a military response."

That put Messrs. Amash and Paul in league with prominent liberals such as Rep. John Conyers (D., Mich.) and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.), who also likened the scene to a "war zone."

It was reminiscent of the liberal-libertarian alliance that formed in 2013 after revelations of that the NSA had conducted massive surveillance of Americans' phone records. Mr. Amash made his name as a hero of civil libertarians as well as conservatives with his efforts to curb that surveillance program.

Similarly, Mr. Paul drew applause from liberals and libertarians alike in 2013 when he mounted a filibuster to warn of the threat to U.S. citizens posed by the administration's use of drones.

Another issue that has brought libertarians in league with liberals has been efforts to overhaul the criminal-justice system and ease mandatory sentencing guidelines that burden so many nonviolent offenders with long prison terms.

Mr. Paul has teamed with Sen. Cory Booker, a liberal Democratic senator from New Jersey, to advance a comprehensive overhaul of the criminal-justice system.

In some cases, GOP conservatives are sounding more populist on economic issues, echoing anti-Wall Street messages of the sort Ms. Warren has made famous. David Brat, the libertarian-leaning Republican who beat House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R., Va.) in the primary, has been so pointed in his rhetoric against Wall Street and corporate power that some analysts have dubbed him the "Elizabeth Warren of the Right."