



Military grade?: Athens police buck weapons trend

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September 11, 2014

In the wake of the events in [Ferguson, Missouri](#), where police in full riot gear took to the streets with military-grade equipment to manage protesters and the ensuing violence, and after several botched police raids in different parts of the country over the last few years, a media frenzy has drawn attention to police behavior and sparked a substantial amount of criticism.

Though the question of whether police should have heavy weaponry and SWAT-type teams remains highly debated, and the level of concern people think is warranted by the nationwide situation varies, there is little question that the nature of policing has changed and given birth to the catch-all phrase “militarization of police.”

‘Do we consider that military-like?’

“The general definition [of police militarization] is giving police equipment that is not useful or needed for general law enforcement purposes,” said Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies. “Then it becomes a question of what that equipment might or might not be.”

But University of Georgia Police Chief Jimmy Williamson said “militarization” as a catch-all phrase has morphed into a largely misused and improper term for modern police activity. He said the police have never called it that.

“If police have an active shooter and we pull out rifles and go in, would you consider us to now be military-like? Do we consider that military-like?” he said. “I think some of the confusion is there are government programs out there that give excess military equipment to law enforcement. It’s called the 1033 Program.”

In addition to more police forces employing SWAT teams, government programs are in place allowing local and state law enforcement to obtain military-grade weaponry. Most notably, the Department of Defense’s multi-billion dollar Excess Property Program, known as the 1033 Program, makes surplus military equipment available specifically for use in activities “including

counter-drug and counter terrorism activities under Section 1033 of the [Fiscal Year] 1997 National Defense Authorization Act,” according to the Department of Defense’s 2015 budget.

“Occasionally those things, they come with training...to some extent,” said Burrus, noting there is also a state coordinator system that coordinates the Law Enforcement Support Office with the Defense Logistics Agency and may provide some training. “I think it’s more unofficial that they get the training. It’s not a requirement of the program.”

1033 has been around for years, but since as recently as 2006, The New York Times reported thousands of pieces of surplus military equipment distributed to local and state law enforcement in almost every county across the country.

At least one aircraft, one of the least distributed items on the Times’ list, reportedly went to almost 150 counties nationwide. Assault rifles, the most distributed, have been given to the majority of the counties in the U.S., representing every state except Hawaii.

With military aircrafts, armored vehicles, assault rifles, grenade launchers, body armor and more going to civilian law enforcement, in addition to higher numbers of SWAT team raids, where the line should be drawn depends on who is asked. But there is little question that over time American law enforcement has slowly undergone a shift that has, in recent weeks, sparked a heated national debate.

Janet Frick, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at UGA, said it is important to note the role media can play in how a given issue is interpreted and talked about. She said media has contributed to the national conversation about the police.

“The new world of social media means that there is more opportunity for various accounts of events to be disseminated,” Frick said. “I think we, as a public, have become more aware of some instances of police excessive force, and that is leading us to expect greater justification when police kill an unarmed suspect.”

Since the Aug. 9 shooting of black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson and the riots that ensued as a result, the question of whether police should be so heavily armed has blown up in the national and international media. This is added to the controversies already surrounding the issue after a 92-year-old Atlanta woman was shot to death by police officers in a botched 2006 drug raid and after a 1-year-old was seriously injured by a SWAT team flash bang grenade in the Atlanta area during a search this summer.

Burrus said the real problem is not the extreme cases such as Ferguson or the botched raids that resulted in someone’s death, but the larger problem of day-to-day police activities that have become excessively aggressive.

“You can’t look at the issue in isolation,” he said. “The bigger story with militarization of police is not the riot situation like we saw in Ferguson, it’s the raids that are going on, about 100 a day, for purposes that most of the time they should not be using SWAT teams for.”

In a way, he said, a sort of competition has emerged among police forces.

“In a very sort of strange and perverse way, in the sense that your town has 10,000 people and you look at the next town over, which also has 10,000 people, and they have a SWAT team, you kind of feel like you should have a SWAT team,” Burrus said. “It just becomes a snowball effect.”

Whether or not police being more heavily armed is a problem is debatable, but Burrus said trouble comes about in the changing culture of the police force. Police use the equipment because they have it and justify having it because they use it. The mentality can be seen, he said, through the high number of no-knock search warrants signed for non-violent crimes where there is no evidence of danger.

No-knock search warrants are intended only to be used when there is reason to believe there is a danger to police officers or to prevent the destruction of evidence, and according to a February 2011 USA Today article, the number of no-knock police raids issued per year went up more than 2,000 percent across the country from an average of 2,000 to 3,000 per year in the 1980s to 70,000 to 80,000 per year in 2010.

“The entire personality of the policeman has changed,” Burrus said. “I think it’s mostly because they have been given the opportunity to crack skulls with almost no accountability, whatsoever. It’s going on all over the country.”

‘I haven’t encountered anything like that around here’

With the media drawing national attention and associated concern to the police forces in Ferguson and closer-to-home Atlanta as recently as this summer, communities are beginning to look at their own local police forces, wondering if they should be concerned.

Burrus said there is no specific kind of place where police are getting government weapons, SWAT teams and defensive gear. It is just as likely in police forces in large cities with high crime rates as it is in small towns.

“It’s become almost no distinction,” he said. “There really is no rule or urban distinction whatsoever.”

Barry Hollander, a journalism professor in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, said it is not applicable to Athens-Clarke County or surrounding counties at this time, but when police do have military-grade equipment that is “absolutely” militarization.

“Even that’s not the militarization that freaked people out,” he said. “[In Ferguson], we are talking about armored vehicles and machine guns on armored vehicles and full riot gear. That’s different from police even in helmets and shields.”

Athens-Clarke County and neighboring Oconee County each have only two assault rifles from the 1033 Program as of Aug. 15 and neighbor to the north, Jackson County, has acquired 23

assault rifles and eight pistols, according to the Times. This is compared with Fulton County in Atlanta, which has taken home two planes, nine helicopters, 641 body armor pieces, 583 assault rifles, 471 night vision pieces, 62 pistols, three shotguns and one armored vehicle.

ACCPD could not be reached for comment as of press time.

Williamson said UGAPD does not participate in the 1033 Program, but is equipped for emergency situations.

“You know we have special teams and special tactics with special equipment, but I don’t see my police force being a military,” Williamson said. “The reality of the matter is most of the things that police are doing now come from some crisis prior where we were ill prepared.”

Hollander said the problem is not necessarily the equipment but the training.

“The danger is when the police don’t have the training for that kind of equipment. The second danger is, of course, is overkill in a sensitive situation,” he said. “I think the UGA Police and the Athens-Clarke Police are way too smart to let the situation escalate the way it has [elsewhere], but is it militarization if they are all running around with military equipment? Of course it is. Ferguson was an example of how not to do it.”

Williamson said though UGAPD does have certain equipment, including rifles in cars, certain gases and access to ACCPD’s armored vehicle, every effort is taken to minimize the risk that they will be used inappropriately.

“Everything we talk about equipment wise, and please take note of this, it comes back to the culture of policing,” he said. “Number two, your policies and procedures and number three training — It’s not the tool it’s how the tool is being used.”

Even though the possibility is everywhere, Hollander said he thinks Athens’ police forces militarizing is unlikely, especially in the violent, racially-charged way seen in Ferguson last month.

“Our police chief is African-American and we have a number of blacks on the police force and I am fairly convinced that the people who run Athens-Clarke County are a lot smarter than the people who run Ferguson, Missouri,” he said. “Demographically it could happen here but I don’t believe in reality it ever would.”

And junior English and international affairs major Dylan Hufford agreed, noting it is a complex situation.

“I haven’t encountered anything like that around here,” the Newnan resident said. “I don’t foresee it being a problem here but it’s always a possibility.”

‘Civilians should be concerned about it’

Though a militant police force may not be an issue in the Athens area, Burrus said that does not mean Athens residents should disregard the national problem.

“Every state has some participation in this program in different ways,” Burrus said. “This issue got almost no attention for decades and I don’t see any reason to believe it’s not a fairly uniform problem.”

A police raid on an innocent suspect has occurred in almost every state since the mid-1980s. In addition, dozens of raids have resulted in the deaths of nonviolent offenders and innocent people, three of which were in the Atlanta area, according to an interactive map on botched police raids produced by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

About 30 instances of injury or death of a police officer during a botched police raid were also reported, including one in Macon.

Though none of the botched raids took place in Athens, according to the data, Burrus said it is an issue people should care about even if it isn’t happening at their back door.

Anna Bowman, a senior chemistry major from Cumming, said she agrees it can be an issue, and police force is being used more than many people think it should be.

“With the whole thing in Ferguson, the whole issue is they are protesting the police, so when the police are fighting back it’s not going to help anything,” she said.

The culture of policing on a national scale has become problematic, Burrus said, noting a personal experience in which he saw several police officers in his home town of Denver, Colorado, wearing T-shirts reading “We get up early to beat the crowds” with an image of officers surrounded by weapons or actually being violent.

“I think it has fundamentally changed the attitude that the police officers have in a horrible way,” he said. “I absolutely think that civilians should be concerned about it.”