

The Roots of Police Militarization

By Kevin Carson
August 28, 2014

The police rampage in Ferguson, Missouri has increased public awareness of police militarization and drawn well-deserved attention to writers like Radley Balko who've documented the proliferation of military equipment and culture in local police forces over the past decade.

It's certainly true that the post-9/11 security state and the Global War on Terror have flooded police forces with surplus military equipment, increased the prevalence of military cross-training (including "counter-terrorism" training by Israeli military personnel encouraging American police forces to view their communities in much the same way Israeli security forces view the Palestinians in Gaza).

But the roots of police militarization go back way further than 9/11 – all the way back to the aftermath of insurrections by the black populations of major American cities in the 1960s and the American political elite's desire to ensure that nothing like that ever happened again.

US presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon began creating an institutional framework to ensure that any such disorder in the future would be dealt with differently. This process culminated in DOD Civil Disturbance Plan 55-2, aka "Garden Plot," which involved domestic surveillance by the military, contingency plans for military cooperation with local police in suppressing local disorders, plans for mass preventive detention and joint exercises of police and the regular military. Frank Morales wrote in *Cover Action Quarterly* ("U.S. Military Civil Disturbance Planning: The War at Home," Spring-Summer 2000):

"At first, the Garden Plot exercises focused primarily on racial conflict. But beginning in 1970, the scenarios took a different twist. The joint teams, made up of cops, soldiers and spies, began practicing battle with large groups of protesters. California, under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, was among the most enthusiastic participants in Garden Plot war games. ... Garden plot [subsequently] evolved into a series of annual training exercises based on contingency plans to undercut riots and demonstrations, ultimately developed for every major city in the United States. Participants in the exercises included key officials from all law enforcement agencies in the nation, as well as the National Guard, the military, and representatives of the intelligence community."

It was against this background that then-governor Reagan introduced the first SWAT teams in California.

When Reagan became president, he appointed Louis O. Giuffrida, who as head of the California Guard had enthusiastically participated in Garden Plot exercises under Reagan's governorship, to head the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In that role Giuffrida worked with Oliver North to draw up plans for martial law in the event of a "national emergency." They worked together on the Readiness Exercises 1983 and 1984 (Rex-83 and Rex-84), which included mass detention of suspected "terrorist subversives" under the emergency provisions of Garden Plot.

The hypothetical civil disturbance/insurrection scenario these emergency exercises were supposed to be coping with was (ahem) a series of massive antiwar demonstrations in response to a U.S. military invasion of Central America. "North ... helped draw up a controversial plan to suspend the Constitution in the event of a national crisis, such as nuclear war, violent and widespread internal dissent or national opposition to a U.S. military invasion abroad (Alfonso Chardy, "Reagan Aides and the 'Secret' Government," Miami Herald, July 5, 1987).

The militarization of local police, and the encouragement of a police culture that viewed local communities (especially people of color in minority neighborhoods) as an occupied enemy populations, got further impetus from the War on Drugs, which was greatly intensified under the Reagan administration. By 1999 — well before the Global War on Terror — the phenomenon had progressed to the point that Diane Cecilia Weber wrote a Cato Institute paper titled "Warrior Cops: The Ominous Growth of Paramilitarism in American Police Departments" (Briefing Paper No. 50).

Since 9/11, the problem has grown beyond Weber's imagining. After Katrina the (largely black) flooded out portions of New Orleans got a demonstration of the same police hostility and aggression we're witnessing today in Ferguson. It's a safe guess that this is now the standard treatment to expect from local police in a community experiencing an "emergency" or (manufactured) "disturbance" of any kind.

Ultimately, what it boils down to is the government views its own people — particularly those of color — as the enemy. The question is how long we will tolerate it.

Kevin Carson is a senior fellow of the Center for a Stateless Society (c4ss.org) and holds the Center's Karl Hess Chair in Social Theory.