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Rural cops in the West get militarized

By Jonathan Thompson

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La Plata County, where I live, is a fairly peaceful place. The population is a little over 50,000, mostly spread out over a lot of territory, and easily fits within the rural category, with the possible exception of quasi-urban Durango, the biggest town by far with 17,000 people. A handful of law enforcement agencies are tasked with keeping the peace, and they have their challenging moments.

Since the mid-1980s, the county has seen, on average, 30 violent crimes or so per year, including one murder every couple of years. But on a day-to-day basis, things are a bit more tame, as is evidenced by a sampling from the past week's police blotter, which included reports of: an irate bicyclist on a street corner, an intoxicated man face-down in a planter at a Thai restaurant, a landlord harassing a tenant for painting her wall, and a man with a white chihuahua who needed help.

Oh, and then there was the bear that broke into a car and stole some trail mix.

As I dug through past blotters, though, I had a hard time scraping up incidents that involved land mines, riots, terrorists or ambush of police officers.

And yet, over the past several years, La Plata County's law enforcement agencies have received over 5,000 battlefield-tested items from the Department of Defense, including (but certainly not limited to): at least 100 bayonet knives, three ordnance- and explosive-disposal robots, 18 5.56 mm rifles (M16s), five 7.62 mm rifles (M14s), 15 .45 caliber pistols, 30 bipods for machine guns, four night vision sniper scopes, two exercise bikes and a Cat-1 MaxxPro Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle (MRAP).

They got them through Program 1033, which distributes surplus military equipment to local law-enforcement agencies at little or no cost, essentially equipping cops and sheriffs' departments in even the most rural Western counties to go to war. Though it's been happening for decades, the militarization of our local cops has escalated in recent years, as billions of dollars worth of equipment is shipped home from Afghanistan and Iraq. The protests in Ferguson, Mo., in response to the police shooting of an unarmed black teenager brought a heavy-handed response from the police. Images and accounts of local cops outfitted with military-grade gear have alarmed the public and politicians.

Back in La Plata County, some citizens recently expressed concern about all of the new gear, particularly the MRAP. So Durango Herald reporter Chuck Slothower asked the

sheriff's office why it needed a \$658,000 armored combat vehicle. The vehicle, a department official said, would only be used to rescue people from a natural disaster, or to evacuate people during an armed standoff. He also said he felt a lot safer (from irate cyclists and trail mix-pilfering bears, perhaps?) while cruising around in the thing. OK, fair enough. But what about the M16s, the bayonets and night vision sniper scopes?

Program 1033 was created as program 1208 in 1990 in order to give local law enforcement the equipment they needed to fight the so-called war on drugs. Our local sheriff has been an enthusiastic soldier in that conflict since he took office in 1995, and it hasn't always gone well. In 1997, the SWAT team entered a house on a marijuana bust and roughed up and pointed guns at kids (they did the same in a bust a year earlier), drawing a lawsuit. Then, in 2007, on a meth bust, the disoriented team, equipped with combat gear and gas masks, entered a home and encountered not a gun-toting Walter White, but 77-year-old Virginia Herrick, who was watching the Price is Right at the time. They ordered her to the floor and searched the home before realizing that they had gone to the wrong address. "I'm not about to argue with those big old guys," Herrick told the Durango Herald, "especially when they've got guns and those big old sledgehammers."

These are the same folks who now have an MRAP and an increasingly large arsenal. I mean, what could possibly go wrong? Innocent folks can die, for one thing. The libertarian think tank the Cato Institute has mapped botched paramilitary raids across the U.S., some of which have led to both civilians and officers getting killed. And a recent analysis by Richard Florida for CityLab found that Western states, namely Arizona, New Mexico and Utah — all of which are big recipients of program 1033 gear — are among the worst in the nation for arrest-related deaths per capita.

That law enforcement officers are afraid is understandable. The sale of assault rifles and ammunition has escalated in recent years, meaning there are more, increasingly deadly weapons out there that could be used against cops. And as the Cliven Bundy debacle in Nevada demonstrated, some members of the public are perfectly willing to wield those weapons to stop law enforcement from doing their jobs. No wonder the cops want armor.

And yet, my local sheriff, like many in the rural West, is a vocal critic of laws intended to keep the most potent, military-style weapons out of the hands of criminals, and he is one of more than 50 Colorado county sheriffs — many of whose departments are also stocking up on guns and armor — who refuses to enforce new state gun laws. Something here doesn't make sense.

The New York Times recently acquired a database of all program 1033 distributions (on a county, not an agency, level), and not only created this interactive map, but also released the database. Here's a tiny sampling of what rural Western counties are getting on the federal taxpayer's dime:

- Moffat County, Colorado, population 13,000, got 11 assault rifles and two grenade launchers.

- Montrose County, Colorado, got two grenade launchers.
- San Juan County, New Mexico, where the sheriff's SWAT team has its own menacing logo in which a raptor holds an assault rifle, a bayonet knife and a lightning bolt, got three MRAPS, two helicopters, a "combat/assault/tactical wheeled vehicle" and 192 assault packs.
- Union County, New Mexico, with a mere 4,000 residents, received some 2,000 items from the program, including an elliptical trainer, 14 M110 IWS sniper sets, a dishwasher, a milk dispenser, four projection screens, four radars, seven lawn mowers and edgers and six motor scooters.
- Fremont County, Idaho, with less than 13,000 residents, picked up no fewer than 60 assault rifles and pistols; that state's list of Pentagon-supplied booty is so long that Utah might start feeling nervous, except that —
- Utah counties collectively picked up more than 1,000 assault rifles and pistols, apparently to help them raid raves.
- Coconino County, Arizona, stocked up on more than 90 assault rifles, pistols and riot style shotguns, in addition to night vision goggles, 13 thermal sights and 40 ground troops' helmets.
- Big Horn County, Wyoming, population 12,000, got 25 rifles and pistols, a bunch of trucks and an MRAP.
- Goshen County, Wyoming, scored several riot style shotguns and a grenade launcher, apparently to quell the riots likely to break out among its 13,000 residents?
- Laramie County, Wyoming, got 246 assault rifles, nine pistols, an armored truck and a \$733,000 mine-resistant vehicle. All together, Wyoming law enforcement agencies received 936 assault rifles and 72 automatic pistols.

Program 1033 isn't the only federal source of such gear — the Department of Homeland Security has also equipped law enforcement to fight the so-called War on Terror. And program 1033 hands out a lot more than just weaponry, including sleeping bags, riding lawn mowers, televisions, flutes, medical kits, non-armored vehicles and even brassieres, duct tape and electric guitars.

I'm all for electric guitar-wielding deputies. And I understand the need for law enforcement agencies to protect their own. If the Pentagon's giving this stuff away, why not take it? Because if they have it, they may be tempted to use it. Besides, there's something wrong with local cops and deputies decking themselves out as if they are fighting insurgents in the dusty streets of Kandahar. It sends out a disturbing message, that your neighborhood cop is not a keeper of the peace and enforcer of the laws, but that he is a soldier in a war.

