

Ferguson police response made possible by drug war

By Jarvis DeBerry

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The War on Christmas is imaginary. The War on Poverty was metaphorical -- not to mention inadequately funded and quickly abandoned. But the War on Drugs is real. The phrase is not the hyperbole of a government displeased with the drug trade. The word "war" accurately describes what our government has declared on the mostly black and brown neighborhoods it has targeted. The word "war" also tells us the kind of equipment being used.

Police in Ferguson, Mo., turned their military equipment against American citizens during the past week. Ferguson is the St. Louis suburb where, on Saturday, Aug. 9, police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, an 18-year-old that witnesses say was unarmed with his hands raised. Some of the protests that followed were peaceful. Some of them were not. But Ferguson police should have been able to respond even to reports of violence without menacing the people with military weaponry.

Russel Honore, the retired Army lieutenant general who brought calm to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, was right when he told CNN Thursday morning, "Any time we have policemen pointing weapons at American citizens, they need to go through retraining."

But why do they have military weapons and equipment in the first place?

The drug war, that's why.

The kind of equipment that Ferguson police used to menace protesters has been distributed to police departments far and wide by the Department of Defense. The Pentagon's surplus equipment program is one of the many reasons it will be difficult to halt the drug war. The police officers who are on the streets rounding up drug users and drug dealers have received too many cool toys in exchange for their participation.

Police departments have been stockpiling weapons and equipment for decades. Fifteen years ago, a New York Times story quoted Nick Pastore, who at that point was already the former police chief of New Haven, Ct. Talking about the Pentagon's eagerness to give him weapons, Pastore said, "I was offered tanks, bazookas, anything I wanted. I turned

it all down, because it feeds a mind-set that you're not a police officer serving a community, you're a soldier at war."

That former police chief recognized that there is a difference - or that there ought to be - between a police officer and a soldier. But the line separating the two has become blurred. It has become blurred because the federal government - by dangling money and equipment to police departments - have made them mercenaries in this war. The drug war hasn't benefited the people. It hasn't made anybody any less prone to get high. But it has greatly enriched police departments.

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After the alarming display of arms in Ferguson, Rep. Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat, says he plans to introduce legislation in Congress that will curtail the surplus equipment program. Expressing concerns that were echoed by Sen. Rand Paul, a libertarian Republican from Kentucky, Johnson said, "Our Main Streets should be a place for business, families and relaxation, not tanks and M16s," he said. "Militarizing America's Main Streets won't make us any safer, just more fearful and more reticent."

Johnson also pointed out how the madness is spreading. Last year, the police department at Ohio State University acquired what the military calls a mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle or MRAP. The campus police chief told the student newspaper that the MRAP - which are designed to withstand an explosion -- could be used in an active-shooter situation. But, he said, Ohio State would primarily use it to demonstrate a strong police presence, like on football game day.

In 2006 the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, published a report called "Overkill: the Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids Across America." According to that report, "In 1997 alone, the Pentagon handed over more than 1.2 million pieces of military equipment to local police departments."

The equipment has been used been mostly used by police SWAT teams, which most police departments think they need - even if there's not enough crime to warrant them.

"Given that small towns generally don't have the money for high-tech military gear," the report says, "this explosion of SWAT teams is almost certainly the result of the Pentagon's giveaway program, as well as federal programs that provide money to local police departments for drug control."

"Drug arrests," the Cato report notes, "made cities and counties eligible for federal money. And federal money and equipment allowed for the creation of SWAT teams. Non-drug-related policing brought no federal dollars, even for violent crime."

Remember the warning "This is your brain on drugs" with that picture of a frying egg? Replace it with a picture of American police brandishing their weapons at civilians. "This is your country - hooked on a drug war."