

Rural police get militarized

Pentagon gives battlefield gear to rural Western counties

Jonathan Thompson
September 20, 2014

La Plata County is a fairly peaceful place. With a population a little more than 50,000, mostly spread out over a lot of territory, it easily fits within the rural category, with the possible exception of quasi-urban Durango.

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 evidenced by a sampling from a recent police blotter, which included reports of an irate bicyclist on a street corner, an intoxicated man face down in a planter and a man with a white chihuahua who needed help. Oh, and then there was the bear that broke into a car and stole trail mix.

I had a hard time scraping up incidents that involved land mines, riots, terrorists or ambushes 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 U.S. Department of Defense – including at least 100 bayonets, three ordnance- and explosive-disposal robots, 18 M16 rifles, five M14 rifles, 15 .45 caliber pistols, four night-vision sniper scopes and a Cat-1 MaxxPro Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle or MRAP.

They got them through Program 1033, which distributes surplus military equipment to local law-enforcement agencies at little or no cost – essentially equipping police and sheriffs' departments in even the most rural counties to go to war. The militarization of local police has escalated in recent years, as billions of dollars worth of equipment is shipped home from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In La Plata County, residents recently expressed concern about all of the new gear, particularly the MRAP. So, a Durango Herald reporter 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?) cruising around in the thing.

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 needed to fight the so-called War on Drugs.

It hasn't always gone well. In 1997, a local 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 77-year-old Virginia Herrick, who was watching *The Price is Right*. They ordered her to the floor and searched the home before realizing they had gone to the wrong address.

These are the same folks who now have an MRAP and an increasingly large arsenal. What could possibly go wrong?

Innocent folks can die, for one thing. The conservative 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 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 police. 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 its job. No wonder the police want armor.

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

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

Montrose County, Colorado: two grenade launchers.

San Juan County, New Mexico: three MRAPS, two helicopters, a "combat/assault/tactical wheeled vehicle" and 192 assault packs.

Utah counties collectively picked up more than 1,000 assault rifles and pistols.

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 – 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 police and deputies decking themselves out as if they are fighting insurgents in Kandahar.

It sends a disturbing message, that your neighborhood cop is not a keeper of the peace and enforcer of the law, but a soldier in a war.