



An entire Florida SWAT team resigned last week. It's for the best.

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Last week, all 10 members of the SWAT team in Hallandale Beach, Fla., resigned (from the SWAT team, not the department). The members believe the team is “minimally equipped, under trained and often times restrained by the politicization of our tactics,” and were offended that the chief of the city’s police department “took a knee” in solidarity with anti-police brutality protesters, including the city’s 22-year-old Vice Mayor Sabrina Javellana. But maybe it’s best if Hallandale Beach doesn’t have a SWAT team.

I’ve written about Hallandale Beach both in a 2006 paper on police militarization for the Cato Institute and in my 2014 book “Rise of the Warrior Cop,” where I cited the city as an example of why small towns shouldn’t have SWAT teams. The city has a population of less than 40,000 and had just a single murder in 2018, the last year for which FBI crime statistics are available. Outside the SWAT team, over the past 10 years the police department has shot several shoplifting suspects, killing two, and paid out other settlements for police brutality. In fact, at times, the annual number of people killed by its police department has nearly equaled the number of murders in the city. (Nationally, the ratio over the past few years has been about 15 murders for every killing by police.) Hallandale Beach is about 80 percent white, but a 2015 Broward/Palm Beach New Times investigation found that 33 of the 38 no-knock raids the city’s SWAT team carried out over a decade were done in a single square mile enclave that is mostly black. The other five were within a quarter-mile of the enclave. None turned up a major stash of illegal drugs.

The Cato paper opened with a story from Hallandale: In 1999, a city SWAT team conducted a late-night raid on the home of Edwin and Catherine Bernhardt. The police team threw Catherine to the floor, and handcuffed her at gunpoint. An officer brought Edwin, who was still nude, clothing to cover himself: a pair of his wife’s underwear. They then took Edwin to jail, where he waited for hours still clothed only in the underwear. The police eventually realized they’d made a mistake and released him.

The couple later sued. In defending the police actions, a city attorney told the Miami Herald, “[The police officers] made a mistake. There’s no one to blame for a mistake. The way these people were treated has to be judged in the context of a war.”

In 2014, the city’s SWAT team conducted a raid on a 34-year-old black man named Howard Bowe Jr. and his 16-year-old son. The raid team first shot and killed Bowe’s dog, then confronted Bowe in his kitchen. Claiming he saw something “shiny” in Bowe’s hands, a SWAT officer shot Bowe twice in the stomach.

Bowe was unarmed and would later die from his injuries. As Bowe was being taken to an ambulance, a neighbor heard him scream, "Why'd y'all shoot me?" The police claimed they knocked and announced, but neighbors say they heard no announcement.

In 2018, the city settled with Bowe's family for \$425,000. At the city council meeting to vote on the settlement, several critics of the police department weren't permitted to speak before the vote, the resolution was passed in private and no one on the council would say Bowe's name out loud. One of the people who was scheduled to speak, but then disallowed, was Javellana.

It's not as if the end of the Hallandale Beach SWAT team would mean the town would no longer have access to one. The Broward County Sheriff's Office, which contracts to provide policing to smaller towns in the county, has 38 SWAT officers, enough for three or more additional SWAT teams. At least 10 other cities in Broward County have police departments with their own SWAT team. That's 14 SWAT teams for a county of 2 million people, in addition to any federal-local multi-jurisdictional anti-drug and anti-gang task forces operating in the county.

In the early 2000s, both the Miami Herald and the St. Petersburg Times published investigations of the proliferation of SWAT teams into south Florida and the Miami suburbs, including Broward County. The reports found that many cities exaggerated their crime rates to get surplus military gear from the Pentagon to equip their SWAT teams. The reports also found that though city officials cited incidents such as hostage takings to justify budgets for SWAT teams, the teams were primarily used to serve low-level drug warrants.

Not surprisingly, many of the other SWAT teams in the county have also faced controversy for illegal searches and questionable shootings during drug raids. Most famously, in 2017 the Broward County Sheriff's Office kicked a sergeant off the SWAT team for wearing a patch for the Internet fringe conspiracy group QAnon during a publicity photo with Vice President Pence. The officer was also wearing what is apparently the unofficial logo of the Broward County Sheriff's Office SWAT team — a patch emblazoned with what appears to be the Grim Reaper's scythe and an executioner's ax. The logo includes the inscription "Rom. 13:4." Romans, chapter 13, verse 4 reads, "For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Perhaps, given this history, having one fewer SWAT team in Broward County isn't such a bad thing. Perhaps, given this history, Broward County could stand for quite a few more vice mayors to offend their SWAT teams into resigning.

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