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The Student-Loan Raid: Not an Isolated Incident

By [David Rittgers](#)

June 9, 2011 3:14 P.M.

You've probably heard that the Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General served a warrant in Stockton, California. The initial reports painted this as a raid intended to collect unpaid student loans, but we've subsequently learned that it was part of a fraud investigation.

Reading the warrant, I don't feel any better about the pronouncement that this was a criminal investigation and not a debt collection at gunpoint. This is another example of the creeping police militarization that encourages police to forget that they are civilians and act like Special Forces "operators" on a battlefield. As I said in a recent op-ed:

True, they are civilians charged with enforcing the law and are empowered to use force to do so — but they are civilians nonetheless. When police officers refer to their fellow citizens as civilians and mean to exclude themselves from that category, they've mentally leapt from enforcing the law to destroying the enemies of the state. That's incompatible with a free society.

The fact remains that this was a white-collar-crime investigation that could have — and should have — been handled much differently. Unfortunately, this "isolated incident" isn't isolated at all. The OIG's office has to justify its existence somehow, and a dramatic raid is an obvious place to start. The growth of the federal government on all fronts encourages this behavior. The only antidote is a push for more separation of economy and state, a message that conservatives ought to be familiar with.

Ronald Reagan came to Washington on a promise to abolish the Department of Education, a federal agency that employs no teachers and shows little to no return on the tens of billions it spends every year. It's time to follow through on that promise.

Unfortunately, things are moving in the other direction. The government took over student loans across the nation. Expect more of this, if only to show that the Department of Education is trying to police "fraud, waste, and abuse." We'd be better off with government out of the student loan business, and much better off with it not kicking in doors to investigate possible student loan fraud.

For more on the militarization of American law enforcement, check out Cato's Raidmap and the Overkill white paper.

— *David Rittgers is a legal policy analyst at the Cato Institute.*

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