



Fight against militarized police is a culture war worth having

By Gene Healy
August 25, 2014

Asked “whether it’s proper to militarize the nation’s city police forces,” President Obama opined last week that “one of the great things about the United States has been our ability to maintain a distinction between our military and domestic law enforcement.”

But the images coming out of Ferguson, Mo., recently — body-armored, camo-clad “peace officers” with sniper rifles and mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles — have a lot of Americans wondering whether that has become a meaningless distinction.

Still, Obama continued, “We don’t want those lines blurred. That would be contrary to our traditions.”

He got that right, at least. America was born amid fear and loathing of standing armies at home. “It was easy to foresee the consequences [that] followed upon sending troops into America to enforce obedience to acts of the British Parliament,” John Hancock proclaimed in his 1774 address commemorating the Boston Massacre: “cruelty and haughtiness ... citizens hourly exposed to shameful insults.” Thomas Jefferson worried that a peacetime military force would “overawe the public sentiment” and harm the republican character of our government.

If we share the Founders’ concern about domestic militarization, maybe we should stop subsidizing it. That’s what Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga., hopes to do with the Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act, a bill that has drawn interest from Republicans such as Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho and Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky.

Johnson’s bill takes aim at the Pentagon’s 1033 Program, which allows local police departments to acquire “free ‘military-grade’ weapons and equipment that could be used inappropriately during policing efforts in which citizens and taxpayers could be harmed.”

But the bill doesn’t touch the Homeland Security grants that bought St. Louis County its BearCat armored vehicle and that have lately become an even bigger driver of police paramilitarization. Any serious demilitarization effort will have to deal with Homeland Security Department programs arming local law enforcers with MRAPs and drones.

Reformers should expect vigorous pushback from the martial-law-and-order brigade in Congress.

In one of politics' little ironies, leading terror-war hawk Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., was once the Irish Republican Army's biggest supporter in Congress. (As Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., once cracked, "The only Republican organization I have ever noticed Mr. King represents is the Irish Republican Army.")

Today, as a member of the House Homeland Security Committee, King is leading the fight to make small-town America look like Belfast during the Troubles. Over the weekend, he told the New York Times there was "no evidence that giving the police heavy weaponry and equipment worsened the situation in Ferguson."

True enough, nobody got run over by a BearCat in Ferguson, and the press and protesters had more trouble with tear gas than sniper rifles. But one of the main fears about armoring-up local law enforcement is that it will encourage a warrior mindset among peace officers whose true mission is to protect and serve.

Joseph D. McNamara, former police chief of Kansas City, Mo., observes that "the police culture in our country has changed. An emphasis on 'officer safety' and paramilitary training pervades today's policing."

That's as it should be, some law enforcement officers insist: In a 2013 PoliceOne.com article, SWAT commander Glenn French writes: "We trainers have spent the past decade trying to ingrain in our students the concept that the American police officer works a battlefield every day he patrols his sector." As a former LAPD officer explained in the Washington Post last Tuesday, "If you don't want to get shot, tased, pepper-sprayed, struck with a baton or thrown to the ground, just do what I tell you."

How's that for "cruelty and haughtiness": Respect my authority — or get "served"? This is one culture war worth fighting.

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