

## Former Cops Speak Out About Police Militarization

By: Radley Balko, *Senior Writer and investigative reporter for the Huffington Post* – August 1, 2013

---

Since my book on police militarization came out a few weeks ago, it's been interesting to see the reaction from law enforcement officials. As you might expect, much of it has been negative, particularly on police discussion boards around the Internet. But it hasn't all been that way. At a Cato Institute forum on Capitol Hill last month, Mark Lomax of the National Tactical Officers Association said that as he read the book, he was nodding his head in agreement far more than he was shaking his head with disapproval. (Not exactly an endorsement, but I'll take it!)

In the book, I interview lots of older and retired police officers, many of them with SWAT experience. I also cite other police chiefs and sheriffs over the years who have raised concerns about militarization. The divide among police on this issue isn't political. One of the former police chiefs I interviewed -- Norm Stamper of Seattle -- is a progressive. Another -- Joseph McNamara of San Jose and Kansas City -- is a conservative at the Hoover Institution.

Instead, the divide appears to be more generational. Older and retired cops don't seem to like where policing is headed. (This is a generalization and an observation -- I haven't taken any polls.) Younger cops, who are nudging policing in a more militaristic direction, are naturally fine with it. Retired police Lt. Diane Goldstein, for example, wrote about the book and her concerns over militarization here at Huffington Post, as did retired NYPD Det. John Baeza over at Law Enforcement Against Prohibition.

And in a letter to the editor in response to a recent article I wrote on this issue for the Wall Street Journal, Jon W. McBride writes:

Police concerns about being outgunned may be a self-fulfilling prophecy and increasingly leads to local and state bureaucrats engaging in what lifetime appointed government workers do best: mission creep.

If not expressly prohibited, police managers will continually push the arms race. Their professional literature is predominately based on the acquiring and use of newer weapons and more aggressive techniques to physically overwhelm the public. In many cases, however, this is the opposite of smart policing.

Coupled with the paramilitary design of the police bureaucracy itself, the police give in to what is already a serious problem in the ranks: the belief that the increasing use of power against a citizen is always justified no matter the violation. The police don't understand that in many instances they are the cause of the escalation and bear more responsibility during an adverse outcome.

The suspects I encountered as a former police officer and federal agent in nearly all cases granted permission for me to search their property when asked, often despite unconcealed contraband. Now, instead of making a simple request of a violator, many in law enforcement seem to take a more difficult and confrontational path, fearing personal risk. In many circumstances they inflame the citizens they are engaging, thereby needlessly putting themselves in real and increased jeopardy.

An officer and leader of a SWAT team in Hamilton, Ontario also wrote a more critical letter, which you can read at the link.

In a recent interview with the Deseret News, Salt Lake City Police Chief Chris Burbank also expressed concerns about militarization.

Chief Burbank said Americans ought to know that wherever they go in the United States they can expect fair and consistent policing, “and we don’t have that now.”

“We’re not the military,” he said. “Nor should we look like an invading force coming in.”

Burbank said he emphasizes the need for his officers to be involved in the community. The city’s new Public Safety Building, which is scheduled to open next month, tries to symbolize this. It is an architecturally open building in which people may enter the first level without worrying about security.

He said police need to do more than just show up and deal with problems.

They also need to do more than scare the life out of young people or approach relatively minor problems in ways that escalate tensions and lead to the possibility of using deadly force.

In last week’s Sunday Times U.K., a former LAPD officer offered similar sentiment.

Older officers are wary of such heavy-handed tactics. “Captains like to attack even the smallest problem, like a domestic dispute, with overwhelming force,” said a retired Los Angeles officer last week. “Swamping makes them feel safer but it also increases the chances of stuff going bad.”

I’ve also received personal email from cops. This one, for example, came from Charles J. Key, a 26-year veteran of the Baltimore Police Department. Key also wrote that agency’s use of force manual.

*I founded the Baltimore PD SWAT teams in 1975. I now work as a consultant in police related matters, primarily for defense and primarily in police involved shootings. Although I work primarily for defense, I call them as I see them. I was the police expert in the Plaintiffs' case in Calvo (SWAT shot two Labs) and DOJ's expert in prosecuting cops in N.O. involved in the post Katrina shootings (Danziger Bridge and the Glover shooting). I read your article concerning the militarization of police departments and the overuse of SWAT teams. I completely agree. The trend scares me to death and, in my opinion, leads to incidents such as the shootings in New Orleans. Keep up the good work.*

Here's another, from a former police officer who asked me not to publish his name.

*I just finished your Wall Street Journal article and him surprised I've never read any of your writings prior to now; probably because I don't read the Huffington Post but gravitate more toward National Review; I do read Reason on ongoing basis though.*

*I was a cop in Southern California from 1976 to 1990 . . . went from a patrol officer to Capt. and then quit to practice law.*

*I have watched the "whatever it takes to go home" mindset involved in modern-day policing and am frankly pretty appalled by it. The number of police officers killed in the line of duty 70s was just as high, if not higher, on a per capita basis . . . but somehow now there is this paranoid mindset. Obviously policing can be dangerous; I have had one friend shot, and three others involved in shootings, but number one on the hit parade when I was on the street and supervising street cops was not to shoot unless absolutely necessary, and to be sure that you didn't arrest somebody unless you had a good legal basis, and were pretty sure it was the right person. Don't even get me started on no knock warrants and drug enforcement.*

*I worked with a lot of guys who were combat veterans from the Vietnam era, and they certainly didn't have anything to prove to anybody. They were probably less likely to get involved in violent confrontations than the types of cops I see nowadays, most of whom do not have a military background, and some who are acting out, at least to some degree, video game fantasies about being a bad ass. I always thought that "Adam 12" would have been the best training video for cops to watch, rather than some of the officer survival stuff.*

*Don't want to sound like an old guy opining about the good old days, but I remember when most cops had revolvers and didn't discharge hundreds of bullets in a shooting situation, or light up a pickup truck with two Hispanic ladies delivering newspapers in a mindless panic. Obviously technology in firearms is much better now, but the unfortunate downside is the 16 or 18 9 mm rounds that can be cranked out of a Glock or a Beretta in just a few seconds, and the disappearance of fire discipline that was ground into us in the police Academy.*

*American policing really needs to return to a more traditional role of cops keeping the peace; getting out of police cars, talking to people, and not being prone to overreaction with the use of firearms, tasers, or pepper spray. Also (said the old crank) those damn polo shirts and blue jean alternate "uniforms" have got to go too. Don't get me wrong, I've been in more than my share tussles and certainly appreciate the dangers of police work, but as Joseph Wambaugh famously said, the real danger is psychological, not physical.*

*Prior to the book, I've received similar emails over the years from older cops. Here's a typical example, from a former officer in Riverside, California, in response to an article I wrote on the issue a few years ago:*

*I read and thoroughly agree with your article on SWAT . . . I was in law enforcement for thirty years . . . I was forced out of the department after being branded a traitor to the department . . . I made several speeches and op-ed letters where I called for less military hardware and a more human approach to police work at the line level . . .*

*I'm glad to see your article and I can attest to the accuracy of your concerns over the developing militarization of our police. When I led the transition team acquiring property from the downsizing of the former March Air Force Base in Riverside, I was constantly beseized with requests for surplus military property from helmets and M-16's to armored personnel carriers. I started out my career with a six-shot revolver, no handi-talkie and I carried a roll of dimes in my briefcase so I could call the station or dispatch. One of the first things my field training officer did to me was make me get out of the car and walk up and down both sides of a residential street and meet and talk with the residents and then walk back to him and recap the conversations. He told me I would do more talking than fighting and I would get farther*

*with my mind than my fists. He didn't have a college degree, but he was definitely smarter than [police officials today] . . .*

*I am tired of beating my head with my former associates who dismiss all criticisms with phrases such as "come work a beat before you say anything". I teach sixth graders where I know I am making a difference and a change for the better. I was trained at the Los Angeles Sheriff's Academy, I retired as a sheriff's lieutenant and held a CA POST Management Certificate. I developed the project that turned 386 acres of March AFB land into the Ben Clark Public Safety Training Center. If I can ever assist you in your work on police matters, please do not hesitate to call.*

Here's another:

*My father was a cop for 35 years and a police chief for 20 of that. He was the president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. I am also a former police officer. We both discussed many times the problems with police departments becoming paramilitary forces. He was chief in a military town and had many former military on his department. He fought constantly to keep them from becoming too military like.*

*One of the problems we both saw in the early 90's were departments leaving the formal police uniforms with leather belts and holsters in favor of the dark blue fatigues with nylon mesh belts and holsters. This put police in a more fighting posture . . .*

*I worked as an officer where a college kid was recently killed [in a raid]. In the early 90's police [in my area] were heading toward the more aggressive styles of uniforms and tactics.*

*Thanks for the article. I do not think most people realize the value of good cops and the danger of bad ones.*

Here's another, from a retired officer who also asked that I not use his name:

*I was a law enforcement officer for well over a decade. I've trained police officer on a local, state and even internationally. I must state that I find your stories of the utmost importance if we as a country are retain any semblance of a free society. I'm very appalled by what I'm witnessing--a rapid (not gradual) descent into a totalitarian police state. Keep doing your best to bring this issue to the forefront of our consciousness.*

One interesting thing about this generational divide is that the older cops -- the ones who seem to be more wary and concerned about militarization -- served during a period when the violent crime rate was a lot higher and the job was a lot more dangerous than it is today.

With some of these guys, you get the sense that they're genuinely offended by what they're seeing. They relied on wits, talk, and emphasized deescalation and accepted the risks associated with the job. They resent that this generation of cops is prone to resort to use more force more quickly, even as the job is as safe as it's been in decades.