

## BEACON BLOG

### SWAT Team Raids: Overkill Fit Only for a Police State

By [Robert Higgs](#) | Wednesday September 14, 2011 at 3:06 PM PDT

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I live near Covington, Louisiana, a charming, peaceful town of about 9,000 people located in the generally peaceful parish of St. Tammany on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Not much serious crime occurs here. The rampant violence that characterizes much of New Orleans, forty miles to the south, seems a world away.

Yet Covington has seen fit to equip its police department with a SWAT team, an armored vehicle, and God only knows what other paramilitary equipment. I sometimes see the SWAT commandos strutting about in their combat getup when I drive past the courthouse. I'm pretty sure, though I have not researched the matter, that the local government received some sort of federal subsidy or other aid to facilitate its establishment and maintenance of such battle-ready troops. Heaven knows that nothing in the local crime situation calls for such firepower.

Covington is but one small example among thousands of others in every part of the United States, where the militarization of the police has been one of the most horrifying trends of the past forty years. You need not have the brainpower of an Einstein to see that this reprehensible development has been an outgrowth of the "war on drugs" and has only received further impetus from the "war on terror."

Radley Balko has done outstanding reporting on this development. In the August 2011 issue of *Freedom Daily* (strange to say, a *monthly* publication of the Future of Freedom Foundation), Balko writes:

In the 1970s, only a handful of police departments had SWAT teams, and they were deployed only a few hundred times per year across the entire country. That number soared to around 4,000 per year by the early 1980s, and to an incredible 50,000 per year by the mid-2000s. There are now 130-150 SWAT raids per day in America. In most, police force their way into private homes, usually at night, then violently secure the premises at gunpoint. They sometimes deploy flash grenades, which are designed to cause sensory paralysis of everyone inside. And the purpose of the vast majority of these raids is to serve search warrants on people suspected of nonviolent, consensual drug crimes. According to my own research, at least 48 innocent people have died in such raids. That is, people who weren't caught with—or even suspected of having—any illicit drugs. Dozens more nonviolent drug offenders have been killed, as have about 30 police officers. [p. 29; not yet available online]

Five years ago, the Cato Institute published a huge [report](#) on this matter by Balko. I wish that everyone in the United States had read it, because I believe that many people who in a vague, not-much-considered way support the police and the drug war would be horrified by what Balko reports. I urge everyone to read this report and Balko's other writings in this area. He is an exceptionally thorough and careful investigative reporter. He is not a sensationalist—given the nature of the facts, no one need exaggerate these atrocities to make them more distressing than they already are.

Back in the heyday of Stalin's USSR, the very hallmark of its totalitarianism was the dreaded "midnight knock on the door," in which the police simply hauled people away, sometimes never to be seen again and often for reasons unrevealed to relatives and acquaintances of the person abducted. To this terrifying scenario, the American state has added the excitement of flash grenades, broken windows, battered doors, and often unnecessary gunfire. This rampant, gratuitous police violence is, to put it mildly, totally out of order in a place that many Americans continue to insist—however bizarrely—is a free society.

Of course, it may be too late to do anything about it. The truth may be that the people and their political "representatives" do not actually control the police at all and cannot do anything to reverse this senseless militarization, even if they wanted to do so. Whatever the potential for reform may be, however, for now, if you do not feel a rush of fear run through you whenever you see a police officer, you probably have not been paying close attention to the realities of policing in this country.

