



Ferguson, a war zone or U.S. city?

By **Tim Lynch**
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(CNN) -- The stories coming out of Ferguson, Missouri, paint an increasingly worrying picture—that of a Middle America city like most any other being turned into a war zone.

It began with the shooting death of Michael Brown by a local police officer. The shooting seemed questionable, but the feeling in the community was that the police could not conduct a real, impartial investigation. When the police department declined to identify the officer involved, protests began.

If a listener didn't know any better, he would think the description of events unfolding in Ferguson must surely be taking place in Iraq or Afghanistan—combat-armored shock troops shoot tear gas into crowds while snipers train high-powered rifles on groups of civilians from atop heavily armored MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) assault vehicles rolling through and blocking off city streets like tanks.

This is America, but it doesn't look like it anymore.

Republican Rep. Justin Amash of Missouri tweeted in the morning, "Images & reports out of #Ferguson are frightening. Is this a war zone or a US city? Gov't escalates tensions w/military equipment & tactics."

Pictures and videos tweeted out of the "war zone" show what appear to be camouflaged units of soldiers occupying and subduing the outraged civilians of Ferguson—but these are not soldiers, they are police officers.

How could a small local police force act like an occupying military force?

Under what is called "Program 1033," the Department of Defense has been doling out military surplus to police departments for use in causes like the domestic "wars" against drugs and terrorism. Billions of dollars of military arms and armament have been distributed to local police departments since the program started in the late 1990s.

This misguided policy leads to inevitable consequences like what we're witnessing in Ferguson. As early as 1999, the Cato Institute warned in a briefing paper, "Warrior

Cops: The Ominous Growth of Paramilitarism in American Police Departments" that Program 1033 is a terrible idea.

First, dressing police officers as soldiers is dangerous because the mindset of a soldier is entirely inappropriate for a police officer. Soldiers fight a military enemy; police officers deal with citizens, who are protected by the Bill of Rights.

Second, dressing a cop as a soldier does not make him a soldier, it makes him a more dangerous cop. SWAT teams are not military special forces even if they try to act like them. Police officers simply do not have the training that military troops have, and giving them the arms, armament and attitude of being warriors is simply dangerous.

Third, if cities really need a SWAT unit, that should be reserved for extraordinary situations beyond the capability of the ordinary patrolman, such as a hostage scenario. Such SWAT units should not be deployed for routine policing calls.

The escalation of conflict in Ferguson didn't have to occur. If the Pentagon hands local cops millions of dollars' worth of hammers, it should be no surprise when suddenly everything looks like a nail. We can only hope the situation ends without more violence. If President Obama wants to do something about the awful events in Ferguson, he should end Program 1033.

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