



Military police state becoming more evident

August 21st, 2014

It is disturbing to watch scenes like those coming from Ferguson, Mo., last week where there were five nights of rioting due to unrest over a black 18-year-old being shot by a white police officer. The young man reportedly was unarmed and shot several times by the police officer.

When local police show up in black or camouflaged SWAT military garb from head to toe, backed up by surplus armored military equipment, it seems to incite an already angry crowd of demonstrators. People gathering on the street no longer feel safe in practicing their freedom to peacefully assemble, which is guaranteed in the Constitution.

Burning and looting by these people is difficult to understand because they are only hurting their neighborhood business owners and the employees of those stores who are out of jobs until the stores can reopen. That kind of behavior simply cannot be tolerated and those illegal perpetrators need to be arrested and hauled off to jail.

Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, wrote an excellent opinion piece on CNN.com last Thursday entitled "Ferguson, a war zone or a U.S. city." Lynch details events leading up to the rioting and says, "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."

We are glad we are not the only ones observing this military-like transformation of local police departments. Lynch asks, "How could a small local police force act like an occupying military force?" Then he goes on to answer his own question. Through a federal action called Program 1033, the Defense Department hands down military surplus equipment to local police departments for use in situations like the domestic "wars" on drugs and terrorism.

Lynch says billions of dollars of military arms and equipment have been distributed to local police departments since the program started in the late 1990s. We can see where this program has led us when we observe such incidents as the riots and looting in Ferguson, Mo. In their zeal to protect themselves and quell civil disorder, the local

militarized police may have actually made the situation much worse by appearing in military uniforms.

Outfitting local police in soldier garb from head to toe is asking for trouble because the mindset of a soldier is way different than that of a police officer. The latter is trained to deal with citizens who are protected by the right to assemble under the Bill of Rights while soldiers are trained to fight a military enemy. The two don't mix.

Secondly, Lynch correctly points out that dressing a cop as a soldier does not make him a soldier. SWAT teams are not military special forces even if they try to act like them. Police officers do not have the training that military forces have and equipping them to be warriors is simply dangerous for them and the public they serve.

Lastly, if cities think they really need a SWAT unit, the deployment of such a unit should happen only in extraordinary situations beyond the capability of the everyday patrolman, such as a hostage situation. Members of these units receive special training to handle and react to unusual law enforcement situations. They are not your typical police officer who patrols the community.

Many Americans and some U.S. lawmakers are waking up and seeing the results of Program 1033. There already is legislation being crafted to put an end to the program due to what has happened in Ferguson. The sooner this happens, the better off we will be as a country.

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