



Middle America is not a war zone

By Jim Maas
August 25, 2014

For some time now, libertarians and civil libertarians have been concerned with signs of a growing police state right here in the "Land of the Free," the U.S. of A. Now we can witness the results on the news every night. A city in Middle America has been turned into a war zone. Could something like that happen in Wisconsin?

A recent Gannett Wisconsin Media article reported that in the past decade, "Wisconsin police agencies have acquired more than \$28 million of military gear from the Pentagon during the past decade, including mine-resistant trucks, night-vision goggles, assault rifles, grenade launchers and a helicopter." A New York Times story reported that in the Obama era alone, police "have received tens of thousands of machine guns; nearly 200,000 ammunition magazines; thousands of pieces of camouflage and night vision equipment; and hundreds of silencers, armored cars and aircraft."

The result has been police officers, who are supposed to fight crime and protect communities, look like an invading army.

As a combat infantry veteran, I can testify that the mindset of the soldier is "us vs. them," which would be totally inappropriate for a police officer. Soldiers fight with overwhelming force an enemy who isn't wearing the same uniform. Police officers deal with fellow citizens who are protected by the Bill of Rights.

Police are supposed to be local people, hired to "Protect and Serve" their fellow citizens. They used to be referred to as peace officers. Judging by the equipment being used, those being protected are the ones holding the weapons, not the ones who paid for them. One consequence is that a police officer approaching often is not a welcome sight these days.

There is a sculpture near the east entrance of the Marathon County Courthouse called "The Protector." What a contrast with images of heavily armed police, equipped with body armor, armored vehicles and assault weapons, confronting unarmed American citizens protesting in an American city.

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the powerful military-industrial complex has been able to capitalize on the "war on terrorism." Politicians, the military-industrial complex and local police have taken advantage of the fear surrounding the war on terror and the drug war. Has there been a abundance of drug lords and terrorist masterminds in Wisconsin? Not so much. However, there are more military surplus armored vehicles here than in Missouri. That doesn't include the armored vehicles purchased with Department of Homeland Security grants.

Opponents of local police militarization face strong resistance in the Congress. (Follow the money.) In June, the House voted on an amendment to curtail the military weapons transfers. Nice try, but the amendment failed to pass, thanks to the bipartisan support for the police state by U.S. Reps. Sean Duffy and Ron Kind, among others.

Tim Lynch of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice explains: "If the Pentagon hands local cops millions of dollars worth of hammers, it should be no surprise when suddenly everything looks like a nail."

One concern for Robert Burke, Libertarian gubernatorial candidate, is that the new vehicles and weapons will get used during a time of civil unrest. "The armored vehicles are very intimidating and we all wonder whose side the police will be protecting in a case of political dissent," Burke has said. Libertarians do not believe in initiation of force as a means of achieving political or social goals.

In his Libertarian campaign for state attorney general, Tom Nelson is emphasizing police accountability. If elected, Nelson promises to make uniform enforcement of the law, both inside and outside of government, the centerpiece of his administration.

Wisconsin needs to carefully avoid overreacting to problems facing law enforcement. We need to require that the acquisition of surplus military hardware and adoption of military tactics receive greater scrutiny by appropriate civilian authorities who must carefully review justifications. The people are now paying attention.