



Stop The Militarization Of Our Police

By Chip Wood
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What on Earth is happening with the local police forces in this country? The Washington Post vividly described just how much things have changed:

“The events in Ferguson, Missouri ... are an uncomfortable reminder of the militarization of America’s small town law enforcement agencies. The photos coming out of the town—of heavily armed officers in full combat gear squaring off against unarmed protesters—look like images we’re used to seeing from places like Gaza, Turkey, or Egypt, not from a midwestern suburb of 21,000 people.”

Yes, indeed, things are sure different now. And while the massive amounts of military equipment being given to local police may make the cops feel safer, it’s got to be a pretty scary thing for the innocent civilians in their path — and for all of us who prize liberty more than security.

Is it possible that what we’re seeing in Ferguson, and in hundreds of other small towns and cities across the country, is a deliberate plan to transform local police departments into well-armed agencies of the central government?

There’s no question that you can blame Washington, D.C., for much of the transformation. For years, the federal government has been giving local police forces surplus military equipment under something called the 1033 Program. And thanks to winding down the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a lot of stuff to give away.

Since the program began in 1997, more than \$5 billion worth of weapons have been given to local law enforcement. Last year alone, Uncle Sam bestowed more than \$449 million in equipment, weapons and vehicles to police departments. Who could resist such generosity?

We’re not just talking about arms and body armor, by the way, but even things like the 30-ton mine-resistant, armored-protective vehicles, known as MRAPs — and otherwise known as tanks. When you see one of those beasts rolling down the street toward you, it’s got to feel more like a military invasion than your friendly neighborhood cop coming to protect you.

The head of a libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., believes the changes are downright dangerous. Watchdog reported:

“There’s a blurring of the military mission and the civilian police mission and that is a dangerous thing,” Tim Lynch, director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the Cato Institute, said two months before the Ferguson unrest. “We want our civilian police departments not to lose sight of the fact that they are dealing with people on a day-to-day basis with constitutional rights, and we want them to use a minimum amount of force to bring suspects into a court of law.”

Both of those considerations were tossed aside in Ferguson, where reporters have been threatened and arrested, and where scores of civilians have been treated more like enemy combatants than the people they have sworn to protect.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) wrote an important essay on this subject with the title, “We Must Demilitarize the Police,” which Time published. Paul noted:

“Not surprisingly, big government has been at the heart of the problem. Washington has incentivized the militarization of local police precincts by using federal dollars to help municipal governments build what are essentially small armies—where police departments compete to acquire military gear that goes far beyond what most of Americans think of as law enforcement.”

Paul rightly pointed out:

“When you couple this militarization of law enforcement with an erosion of civil liberties and due process that allows the police to become judge and jury—national security letters, no-knock searches, broad general warrants, pre-conviction forfeiture—we begin to have a very serious problem on our hands.”

Indeed we do.

Maybe one of the few good things to come out of the conflicts in Ferguson, Missouri, will be a new national debate on the militarization of our local police. We need them to get back to their mission of “protect and serve” and off the path of “intimidate and control.”

Until next time, keep some powder dry.