

The Washington Times

Police militarizing with few checks on power, expert says

‘Does this community that hasn’t had a murder in ten years need an armored personnel carrier?’

By Phillip Swarts

August 23, 2014

Police forces around the United States are militarizing at an alarming rate, often without the knowledge of those who pay them, a criminal justice expert said Friday.

“Some of these city councils only become aware of what their police have and what they’ve been doing in the wake of a tragedy,” said Tim Lynch, the director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank.

“Then members of the city council start asking questions that should have been asked initially,” he said. “Does this community that hasn’t had a murder in ten years need an armored personnel carrier?”

The debate about increased militarization of police drew renewed attention this month ever since the Aug. 9 shooting of an unarmed teenager in Ferguson, Mo. Although there has been a large amount of looting and rioting in the town, there have also been incidents captured on film of peaceful protesters being confronted by police in full riot gear using tear gas and rubber bullets.

Mr. Lynch said he saw one photo of a police sniper set up atop an armored vehicle, watching the protests.

“That’s an image I won’t soon forget,” he said.

Police forces are increasingly receiving training from members of the military, which Mr. Lynch said was very troubling because the two groups have two very separate roles.

The military is used internationally when there has been a conscious decision to use lethal force. They are focused on completing the mission and are “not thinking about constitutional rights on the other side of a battlefield,” he said.

But in a country where people are innocent until proven guilty, police officers should do just the opposite and always be thinking about a suspect's rights.

"We want the police to avoid the use of force, and then use the very minimum use of force that may be required to bring a suspect into a court of law," Mr. Lynch said.

The laws of the United States still apply to the police, he said, something that separates America from authoritarian regimes. But when an officer steps out of line, prosecutors and police leaders must be ready to punish the wayward officer, not try to sweep the issue under the rug.

Police forces use to keep special teams — like SWAT — for only certain dangerous situations like hostage crises, Mr. Lynch said. But now those teams are getting involved in more routine operations and regular police patrols.

"We use to refer to police officers as 'peace officers' in this country, but with the paramilitarism, we're starting to get the opposite," he said. "They don't look like police officers to us. They look like soldiers who are getting ready for battle."

People think that SWAT teams barging into homes in the middle of the night may be an occasional event, but it's actually much more common than many believe, Mr. Lynch said, adding that it is common for officers to barge into the wrong address.

"They're also throwing flash bang grenades into the windows of these raids and sometimes there are tragic consequences," he said.

He pointed to an incident in May where a flash bang was thrown into a house without warning and landed in a baby's crib, seriously injuring the child who, at last report, is still in a coma.

The mother said that she wasn't allowed to see how badly her son might be wounded, as police officers handcuffed her and took her out of the house.