



America has a ‘militarization moment’

By Rob Nikolewski
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Call it our “militarization moment.”

We have seen something like Ferguson, Mo., before. A police officer shoots and kills a young black man, which touches off protests and looting. Which prompts headlong rushes to judgment about the actions of everyone involved — the cops, elected officials, activists and the media. Which causes us to question our progress on race, our politics and our national character.

We saw it with the beating of Rodney King in 1992 in Los Angeles. We saw it again with the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 in Sanford, Fla.

What’s different this time is police officers armed with equipment and weaponry normally associated with overseas military operations.

And a lot of Americans don’t like what they see.

“In Ferguson and beyond, it seems that some police officers have shed the blue uniform and have put on the uniform and gear of the military, bringing the attitude along with it,” wrote Paul Szoldra, who served in the Marines in Afghanistan.

The photos have been dramatic.

For years the federal government has been providing surplus military equipment to local law enforcement through the 1033 Program which has, since its inception in 1997, delivered \$5.1 billion in weapons, Humvees, 30-ton Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, and even helicopters and drones to cities and towns across the country.

The pace of the military equipment dispersal has quickened with the winding down of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2013 alone, the 1033 Program transferred more than \$449 million in equipment, weapons and vehicles to local law enforcement.

“The only cost we incurred was the gas it took to drive it back,” the police chief in Ruidoso, N.M. — population 8,005 — told New Mexico Watchdog in June of the

practically mint-condition MRAP his department picked up in Sealy, Texas. “The cost was zero dollars.”

But carrying out a military operation is a lot different than local policing.

“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.”

Arming civilian police forces with military gear runs the risk of conditioning “police officers to see the people they serve — the people with whom they interact everyday — as the enemy,” Radley Balko, wrote in his 2013 book, “The Rise of the Warrior Cop.”

The hyper-arming of police has been going on in big cities and small towns.

Little Preston Idaho, population 5,000 has a MRAP, as a Watchdog.org reporter found.

Nearly 20 communities in New Mexico and New Mexico State University’s campus police now have MRAPs, New Mexico Watchdog discovered. The police department in Hobbs was so proud it produced a 30-second commercial featuring the vehicle and its officers in military gear, weapons drawn, bursting through the door of a house.

Federal agencies in growing numbers field their own law enforcement departments, Watchdog reported in April. These departments protect at taxpayer expense such security risks as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Department of Education.

Police chiefs who have solicited our excess military hardware insist it is helpful, especially in violent situations.

Like a domestic violence incident in May in Los Lunas, N.M. The bullet-proof MRAP protected officers and the public from 70 rounds fired by a suspect barricaded in a house, Police Chief Naithan Gurule said.

The wholesale rioting and chaos in Ferguson, Mo., was potentially far more deadly. However, watching a St. Louis suburb morph into a scene from Black Hawk Down has some Americans weighing concerns about lawlessness in equal measure with the armed might of lawmen.

“The militarization of our law enforcement is due to an unprecedented expansion of government power in this realm,” U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., wrote in Time magazine. “It is one thing for federal officials to work in conjunction with local authorities to reduce or solve crime. It is quite another for them to subsidize it.”

Since Paul's commentary was posted Thursday the national debate on militarized police has metastasized.

And that's a good thing. A full-throated argument — even an angry one full of distortion and political bias — has been long overdue.

After all, local police forces are funded with tax dollars that come from each and every one of us. Police are public servants, first and foremost, just like our elected public servants, our mayors, city councilors and clerks.