



Dallas shootings might give a new reason for police to look like soldiers

Hannah Allam and James Rosen

July 8, 2016

WASHINGTON - Criminal justice experts warned Friday that the deadly ambush in Dallas could undo two years of precarious progress toward demilitarizing police operations since the protests and riots in Ferguson, Missouri.

The conflicting trends of community policing and the militarization of law enforcement have coexisted in a delicate balance since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Those attacks led law enforcement agencies to focus on protecting people against rare but cataclysmic events, while the Ferguson unrest of August 2014 prompted a call to return to beat-based policing focused more on relationships than heavy-duty equipment.

Now, in the aftermath of the snipers' assault that left five Dallas officers dead, police chiefs fearful of copycat attacks have ordered their men and women to wear more protective gear, deploy in teams and carry rifles.

"It could take some of the political steam out of current arguments that police ought to give up protective gear and militarized weapons," Michael S. Scott, a former Lauderhill, Florida, police chief who heads Arizona State University's Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, told McClatchy.

Marjorie Cohn, a professor at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, expressed concern that the Dallas shootings could prompt law enforcement agencies to more often use their military equipment, including drones and tanks.

"Instead of moving toward community-based policing and citizens police-review boards to defuse volatile situations, law enforcement is likely to become more militaristic," she said. "This will exacerbate racial tensions and lead to even more violence."

Community policing is an approach that urges close working relationships between police officers and local leaders, business owners and area residents.

The Dallas Police Department has been regarded as a model as it increased training in de-escalation tactics, wore everyday uniforms instead of riot gear while on patrol and disclosed more about officer-involved shootings.

Since Dallas Police Chief David Brown took charge in 2010, the city had fewer arrests, fewer complaints about excessive use of force and fewer numbers of officer-involved shootings.

Beyond Dallas, the picture is mixed.

Tim Lynch, the director of the Washington-based Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, said that in recent years, law enforcement agencies in midsized cities, small towns and rural areas had received military equipment that, starting in the 1980s, had gone mainly to big-city police departments.

Law-enforcement agencies across the country, he said, now possess armored personnel carriers, M-16 assault rifles, camouflage uniforms, grenade launchers and other heavy-duty accessories.

“A related trend in American policing is not just the equipment and the weapons, but paramilitary units within police departments and the tactics that they use,” Lynch said. “Their deployment was supposed to be rare, but over time this mission has expanded into more routine policing such as execution of warrants in drug searches or even mundane regulatory inspections at local businesses.”

The Pentagon sells much of the equipment at steep discounts to police departments or gives it away as surplus, he said.

“For police chiefs that have already implemented these militaristic policies, they may dig in and be more resistant to change after Dallas,” Lynch said.

The nationwide public grief over the Dallas killings, said Chips Stewart, a former chief of detectives in Oakland, California, suggests that Americans respond sympathetically to “police work that is constitutional, respectful and adheres to the law.”

Stewart, who also held a U.S. Justice Department post, is now a senior analyst with the Center for Naval Analysis in Arlington, Virginia, outside Washington.

He said the 9/11 terror attacks and an increased number of mass shootings in the last decade had placed police on a warrior footing. Meanwhile, the Great Recession of 2008 meant cities raided community-policing funds even as the Pentagon pumped military equipment to them.

“They’ve been trained for the past 14 years in responding to people in suicide vests or how to deal with mass shootings like Columbine, and that has driven out a lot of community policing.”

Michele Jawando, a legal analyst at the Center for American Progress in Washington, said she was not persuaded that the Texas tragedy would mean that police undid the patchwork progress made since the Ferguson unrest.

“There were unique circumstances in Dallas,” Jawando said. “This was obviously someone who had mental health issues, who was an Army reservist and who had access to military assault weapons. The very real concern for law enforcement is the deluge of guns and the type of weaponry available to people in the community.”

She added that in Ferguson, “the police looked like an Army infantry as people were engaged in their constitutional right to protest. We don’t want to go back to that.”