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Police Faulted Over Use of Military Tactics in Ferguson

By Mike Dorning
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Images of police in camouflage brandishing assault rifles and training laser sights on unarmed protesters in Missouri stirred criticism of military tactics in U.S. law enforcement that cuts across ideological lines.

Images of the law enforcement response over the first few days of unrest in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson after a police officer shot an unarmed black teenager flooded social media, often paired with pictures of the U.S. military at work in Iraq and Afghanistan. The website Mashable compiled a series of parallel scenes posing the question: “Ferguson or Iraq?”

Questions over the way local authorities handled protests after the Aug. 9 shooting led Missouri Governor Jay Nixon yesterday to order the state highway patrol to take over security in the city. With officers shedding body armor, gas masks and automatic weapons, demonstrations last night were peaceful.

President Barack Obama said yesterday that “many Americans have been deeply disturbed by the images we’ve seen in the heartland of our country as police have clashed with people protesting.”

The confrontation between police and demonstrators in Ferguson brought new attention to a long-running debate in civil liberties and law enforcement circles. Critics argue that that increased use of military equipment and tactics by local police alters officers’ psychology, encourages wider use of force and degrades trust between law enforcement and the public.

Police Culture

Leaders across the political spectrum faulted the police response. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, a potential Republican presidential candidate, published an article on Time magazine’s website headlined: “We Must Demilitarize the Police.”

Paul connected the scenes from Ferguson with a changing culture in U.S. law enforcement driven by the war on drugs, the federal response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and Defense Department programs to send military equipment left over from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to local police departments.

“There is a systemic problem with today’s law enforcement,” Paul wrote. “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.”

Attorney General Eric Holder said in a statement he’s “deeply concerned” over the message sent by “deployment of military equipment and vehicles” while Missouri’s Democratic Senator, Claire McCaskill, criticized the show of force by local authorities in Ferguson after meeting with local clergy.

Surplus Gear

“The police response needs to be demilitarized,” McCaskill told reporters. “The police response has become part of the problem.”

Police departments across the country have been amassing military equipment for years, fueled by federal government grants and programs that distribute surplus gear from the Pentagon. The stockpiles have grown faster as the Homeland Security Department promotes domestic anti-terror initiatives and the military winds down from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“This is not just Ferguson. It is small-town U.S.A. from coast to coast,” said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a research group based in Washington that calls for limited government and free markets.

The military equipment and training police encourages “a degree of overkill,” Olson added. “Things that would have been handled by one or two policemen knocking on a door are now handled by a SWAT team moving in.”

Police View

Jim Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, defended the increased use of military equipment in law enforcement as necessary to protect officers against a “proliferation of weapons” available to criminals including assault rifles and body armor.

“The whole idea in policing is not to play on a level playing field: to secure a position to minimize risk of escalation and further harm or damage being done,” Pasco said.

A June American Civil Liberties Union report estimated military-style SWAT teams were deployed 45,000 times last year. The ACLU's analysis of more than 800 SWAT deployments conducted by 20 law enforcement agencies found 79 percent were for executing a search warrant, most commonly in drug cases, and only 7 percent were for hostage, barricade or active shooter situations.

Search Warrants

Pasco defended the use of SWAT teams in police searches.

“The danger for all concerned in executing a search warrant is decreased by having a team that is trained to work together effectively and quickly,” Pasco said. “The intent is to intimidate people on entry and cause them to take a step back and avoid a shooting or a knifing or an armed confrontation.”

The ACLU report found 500 law enforcement agencies had received Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles built to withstanding armor-piercing roadside bombs through a Department of Defense program.

“I have never once heard of land mines posing a danger to police in America,” Olson said.

Tom Nolan, chairman of the Department of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh and a 27-year veteran of the Boston Police Department, wrote on the website Defense One in June that the shift in tactics is reversing gains police departments made during the 1980s and 1990s in developing relationships with the civilian they serve.

Relationships Eroded

“The trusting relationships so many police officers painstakingly built within their communities have been eroded by the mindset of the warrior cop,” Nolan wrote.

Representative Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat, yesterday proposed a “Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act” that would prevent the transfer of some military-grade weapons from the Defense Department to local police agencies, including large-caliber automatic weapons, armored vehicles, armored drones, flash-bang grenades and silencers.

“Our main streets should be a place for business, families, and relaxation, not tanks and M16s,” Johnson wrote in a letter to fellow members of Congress seeking backing for the measure. “Our local police are quickly beginning to resemble paramilitary forces.”

Police in Roanoke Rapids, a North Carolina town of 16,000, and at Ohio State University, are among recent recipients of MRAP vehicles from the federal government, Johnson said.

“Apparently, college kids are getting too rowdy,” he said.