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Ferguson, Missouri: War comes to Main Street

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August 14, 2014

A white police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri on Saturday. The police chief claims that Brown assaulted the police officer and started to enter the police cruiser to reach for his weapon. Witnesses claim that Brown tussled with the officer, but did not enter the cruiser and was moving away when the officer shot him.

Brown's body was left on the pavement for four hours. Since then, Ferguson (pop. 21,000) has been the site of protests, looting and vandalism. The police have refused to release the name of the officer who shot Brown, they have imposed restrictions on journalists, and they have been engaged in military actions against the local populace that resemble counterinsurgency efforts more than traditional policing.

On Sunday, a candle-light vigil for Brown in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, turned violent. Businesses were looted, and more than 30 people were arrested. On Monday night, a crowd gathered on a Ferguson street, and police responded with tear gas. Fifteen more people were arrested.

On Tuesday morning, protestors gathered again, this time in front of St. Louis County Police Department headquarters. There was another protest Tuesday night. On Wednesday, the Justice Department opened a civil rights investigation into the shooting. Two reporters were arrested at a McDonald's restaurant in Ferguson, one from the Washington Post, one from the Huffington Post.

Protests began again on Wednesday night. Police responded again with tear gas, not just against the protestors, but against the press. They had at their disposal high-powered rifles, and what appears in one tweet to be a “Bearcat” Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle (MRAP).

(Missouri Department of Public Safety Communications Director Mike O’Connell says that St. Louis County has not received any MRAPs from the Department of Defense. He believes that the vehicle in the pictures is one of nine utility trucks acquired from DOD, and if it is an MRAP, he doesn’t know where it came from.)

[Rand Paul has responded](#) to events in Ferguson with a Time editorial, not about whether the police murdered Michael Brown, but about demilitarizing the police.

In the current climate, the killing of an unarmed black teen by a white police officer in a mostly black town (Ferguson is two-thirds black) could be expected to ignite protests. There is legitimate anger among the black community about racial profiling, and witnesses suggest that Brown was moving away from the cruiser, not into it.

There are different ways to deal with protest. It can be directed – channeled into areas where it can be monitored and kept under control – or it can be crushed. When we militarize the police, Paul suggests that the impulse will be to crush it. Rather than engage in traditional policing, they will engage in a military operation.

And that’s what the pictures from Ferguson look like. Police are supposed to “serve and protect.” They are supposed to be a part of the community, and to make the community a better place for the people who live there.

[Walter Olson draws a stark distinction](#) between that picture and what’s happening in Ferguson. “Why armored vehicles in a Midwestern inner suburb? Why would cops wear camouflage gear against a terrain patterned by convenience stores and beauty parlors? Why are the authorities in Ferguson, Mo. so given to quasi-martial [crowd control methods](#) (such as [bans on walking on the street](#)) and, per the [reporting of Riverfront Times](#), the firing of tear gas at people in their own yards? (“ ‘This my property!’ he shouted, prompting police to fire a tear gas canister directly at his face.”) Why would someone identifying himself as an 82nd Airborne Army veteran, observing the Ferguson police scene, comment that “We rolled lighter than that [in an actual warzone](#)”?

Police forces across America have become more militarized. They no longer see us as citizens to serve and protect, but as the enemy to be pacified and controlled.

The unrest of the 1960s helped fuel the creation of SWAT units, and with them the use of military tactics by the police. The War on Drugs expanded the use of military tactics, such as battering in doors and tossing “flash-bang” grenades to stun everyone inside – suspects, family, random civilians – potential enemies all – into helpless submission.

The growth of the national security state after 9/11 has given the police ever more access to military-grade technology and training. Federal grants have funded the acquisition of military

hardware to even small municipalities. Section 1208 of the 1990 NDAA led to the transfer of Defense Department equipment to state police agencies. In 1996, Section 1033 did the same thing.

In America, we are at war. We are engaged in wars against poverty, against drugs, against domestic terror. Out of fear of returning soldiers, who the Department of Homeland Security has considered a security threat, we are prepared to fight fire with fire. We are at war, and our police must be warriors.

Investigative reporter Radley Balko has written the authoritative book on this, "Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces." He clearly details the militarization of the police. The St. Louis County police have received less than some departments, but in addition to their nine "utility trucks," they've received night-vision rifle sights, an explosive ordinance robot, reflex sights, and other equipment through Section 1033.

Other small towns around the country have used 1033 to acquire MRAPs (the list price is \$733,000, but they can be purchased by your local police for as little as \$2,800), M16 automatic rifles, Humvees, camouflage fatigues, night-vision sights, robots and other equipment. The Bloomington, Georgia (pop. 2,713) police were given four grenade launchers. Bossier Parish in Louisiana has a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on an armored vehicle.

Fargo, North Dakota, a small city with about two murders per year, received an armored personnel carrier with a rotating gun turret. A town in New Hampshire with only three homicides in the last 13 years got an MRAP, which the police chief said would be used to maintain order at the local "Pumpkin Festival and other dangerous situations."

The Pentagon gave away over \$500 million in equipment in 2011. In the last ten years, the Department of Homeland Security has given away \$35 billion in grants to police forces to purchase military hardware.

As Balko observes, once you get a SWAT team and some firepower, you want to use it. Over 80 percent of police departments in cities with 25,000 to 50,000 people now have SWAT teams. In the 1970s, there were just a few hundred SWAT deployments per year in the U.S.; in 2005, there were 50,000. They were mostly used to enforce drug laws, though they have also been used to retrieve clothing purchased with stolen credit cards with "no-knock" warrants.

This militarization of the police has predictably led to tragedy. At least 50 innocent people have been killed in botched SWAT raids. The adrenaline pump of a SWAT raid makes police jumpy and accident-prone, as when a man not suspected in a crime and lying face down on the floor with everyone else in the house was shot by an officer who supposedly tripped. A 92-year-old woman, hearing her door bashed in during a no-knock raid and thinking it was robbers, pulled her gun and was shot five times. The police then planted marijuana in her home, which had been improperly targeted on the basis of falsified information.

The death of Michael Brown is a tragedy. It is too soon to say that it was a crime, but witnesses suggest that it was, and the police have preferred to arrest reporters rather than explain their side to them.

But that is an issue for the courts to decide. What America is seeing on the streets of Ferguson is another important story, though. It is what we should expect from a mix of military weapons, military tactics, and too much adrenalin. It is ugly, and it should not be America