



Militarization of police abounds

By Nat Hentoff
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We may eventually know the actual facts in the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown by policeman Darren Wilson in the Missouri town of Ferguson, but the widely publicized full-scale war on protesters there by the police has finally begun to alert Americans of all backgrounds to the militarization of law enforcement in many areas of our nation.

Constitutional lawyer John Whitehead, founder and president of civil liberties defender The Rutherford Institute, has been reporting often on this aggrandizement of our police:

“This is not just happening in Ferguson, Missouri. As I show in my book ‘A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State,’ it’s happening and will happen anywhere and everywhere else in this country where law enforcement officials are given carte blanche to do what they like, when they like, how they like, with immunity from their superiors, the legislators and the courts ...

“We’ve not only brought the military equipment used in Iraq and Afghanistan home to be used against the American people. We’ve also brought the very spirit of the war home” (“urning America Into a War Zone, Where ‘We the People’ Are the Enemy,” Whitehead, rutherford.org).

Also reporting on police militarization is Walter Olson of the Cato Institute (where I am a senior fellow):

“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 is my property!” he shouted, prompting police to fire a tear gas canister directly at his face.) (“Police Militarization in Ferguson — and Your Town,” Olson, cato.org, Aug. 13).

Olson added: “The dominant visual aspect of the story, however, has been the sight of overpowering police forces confronting unarmed protesters who are seen waving signs or just their hands.”

Meanwhile, in a recent op-ed in Time, senator and possible 2016 presidential candidate Rand Paul noted: “There is a systemic problem with today’s law enforcement. Not surprisingly, big government has been at the heart of the problem. 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 ... Americans think of as law enforcement” (“We Must Demilitarize the Police,” Paul, time.com, Aug. 14).

“This is usually done in the name of fighting the war on drugs or terrorism. The Heritage Foundation’s Evan Bernick wrote in 2013 that ‘the Department of Homeland Security has handed out anti-terrorism grants to cities and towns across the country, enabling them to buy armored vehicles, guns, armor, aircraft and other equipment.’

“Bernick continued, ‘federal agencies of all stripes, as well as local police departments in towns with populations less than 14,000, come equipped with SWAT teams and heavy artillery.’”

Furthermore, voters should be aware that, according to George Zornick of The Nation, “most of the candidates likely to contend for the presidency in 2016 have been silent” (“For Many Politicians, Ferguson Isn’t Happening,” Zornick, thenation.com, Aug. 20).

But Rand Paul has a lot to say, including:

“Americans must never sacrifice their liberty for an illusive and dangerous, or false, security. This has been a cause I have championed for years, and one that is at a near-crisis point in our country.”

Reading that, I’m looking at the photograph accompanying Paul’s column. A mother and her tiny child in Ferguson are holding signs nearly covered by tear gas: “Stop killing us.”

Rand Paul’s messages are reaching places that hitherto have not paid much attention to him. For instance, in the Aug. 20 New York Post, columnist Jacob Sullum wrote:

“He is challenging members of his own party to rethink their reflexive support of law enforcement and tough-on-crime policies” (“Rand Paul v. the cop-lovers,” Sullum, New York Post, Aug. 20).

Sullum wrote: “We’re not used to hearing Republicans say that sort of thing. But it happens to be true, and Paul, who in March 2013 introduced a bill that would effectively abolish the federal government’s mandatory minimum sentences, is trying to do something about it.”

I, for one, hope Rand Paul will be a 2016 candidate for the presidency, and we may have a chance to get our Constitution back.

Life in Ferguson continues here next week.