

Too much power to the police

By Nat Hentoff

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We may eventually know the facts in the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown by policeman Darren Wilson in the Missouri town of Ferguson. But the widely publicized confrontations with 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, Mo. 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.”

Also reporting on police militarization is Walter Olson of the Cato Institute: “Why armored vehicles in a Midwestern inner suburb?”

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. This is usually done in the name of fighting the war on drugs or terrorism.”

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.” But 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.”

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."

Sullum cited this sentence from Paul's op-ed: "There is a legitimate role for the police to keep the peace, but there should be a difference between a police response and a military response."

Sullum continued: "Paul went further, encouraging Republicans to consider what it feels like to be on the receiving end of excessive police force and excessive criminal punishment."

Again, Sullum quoted this line from Paul: "Given the racial disparities in our criminal justice system, it is impossible for African-Americans not to feel like their government is particularly targeting them. This is part of the anguish we are seeing in the tragic events outside of St. Louis, Missouri."

Sullum wrote: "We're not used to hearing Republicans say that sort of thing. But it happens to be true, and Paul ... 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.

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