

TIME

We Must Demilitarize the Police

By Rand Paul
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If I had been told to get out of the street as a teenager, there would have been a distinct possibility that I might have smarted off. But, I wouldn't have expected to be shot.

The outrage in Ferguson is understandable—though there is never an excuse for rioting or looting. 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.

The images and scenes we continue to see in Ferguson resemble war more than traditional police action.

Glenn Reynolds, in *Popular Mechanics*, recognized the increasing militarization of the police five years ago. In 2009 he wrote:

Soldiers and police are supposed to be different. ... Police look inward. They're supposed to protect their fellow citizens from criminals, and to maintain order with a minimum of force.

It's the difference between Audie Murphy and Andy Griffith. But nowadays, police are looking, and acting, more like soldiers than cops, with bad consequences. And those who suffer the consequences are usually innocent civilians.

The Cato Institute's Walter Olson observed this week how the rising militarization of law enforcement is currently playing out 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”?

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.”

How did this happen?

Most police officers are good cops and good people. It is an unquestionably difficult job, especially in the current circumstances.

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 of Americans think of as law enforcement.

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.”

Bernick noted the cartoonish imbalance between the equipment some police departments possess and the constituents they serve, “today, Bossier Parish, Louisiana, has a .50 caliber gun mounted on an armored vehicle. The Pentagon gives away millions of pieces of military equipment to police departments across the country—tanks included.”

When you couple this militarization of law enforcement with an erosion of civil liberties and due process that allows the police to become judge and jury—national security letters, no-knock searches, broad general warrants, pre-conviction forfeiture—we begin to have a very serious problem on our hands.

Given these developments, it is almost impossible for many Americans not to feel like their government is targeting them. 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. It is what the citizens of Ferguson feel when there is an unfortunate and heartbreaking shooting like the incident with Michael Brown.

Anyone who thinks that race does not still, even if inadvertently, skew the application of criminal justice in this country is just not paying close enough attention. Our prisons are full of black and brown men and women who are serving inappropriately long and harsh sentences for non-violent mistakes in their youth.

The militarization of our law enforcement is due to an unprecedented expansion of government power in this realm. It is one thing for federal officials to work in conjunction with local authorities to reduce or solve crime. It is quite another for them to subsidize it.

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.

Let us continue to pray for Michael Brown's family, the people of Ferguson, police, and citizens alike.