

The Washington Post

Libertarians have been anything but silent about police abuses in Ferguson, Missouri

By Ilya Somin
August 14, 2014

Paul Waldman of the *Washington Post's* Plum Line blog takes libertarians to task for supposedly being silent about events in Ferguson, Missouri, where a police officer shot an unarmed black teenager, and then the authorities reacted to demonstrators with excessive force. He speculates that the silence is because libertarians "believe that when somebody's grandson has to pay taxes on their inheritance, it's a horrifying injustice that demands redress, but when somebody else's grandson gets shot walking down the street, that's just how things go sometimes."

Waldman's speculation is based on a false premise. Libertarians have in fact had plenty to say about both Ferguson specifically and overaggressive policing generally. Walter Olson of the Cato Institute – the nation's leading libertarian think tank – recently wrote a post describing the events in Ferguson as an example of indefensible police militarization, an issue he and others at Cato have focused on for years. As Waldman partially recognizes, *Reason* – probably the nation's leading libertarian publication – has posted numerous items about Ferguson on its site, nearly all of them highly critical of the authorities.

Perhaps more importantly, libertarians have for many years criticized the War on Drugs and the militaristic police tactics it has helped foster. Libertarian Radley Balko has written more about this than any other commentator, and last year published the leading book on the subject, which I reviewed here. The War on Drugs, which libertarians have denounced since its inception, is responsible for many of the violent interactions between police and young black males that lead to tragedies like the death of Michael Brown. You can certainly argue that libertarians should focus on these issues even more than they already do. But they have opposed both the War on Drugs and police militarization longer and more consistently than adherents of any other political movement. If they are at fault for not doing more, so too are liberals and conservatives, and to a substantially greater extent.

Waldman is right that libertarian-leaning Republican politicians Justin Amash and Rand Paul had not yet commented on Ferguson at the time he wrote his post. But as Ed Krayewski points out, many prominent liberal politicians have not said anything either, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

I don't think that any of these politicians' failure to comment proves that they approve of what has happened in Ferguson, or are indifferent to the issue. But for what it is worth, Amash recently denounced the government's tactics in Ferguson on Twitter. For his part, Rand Paul has called for scaling back the War on Drugs and reducing sentences for drug offenders. He hasn't gone nearly as far in this direction as most libertarians would like, but still farther than most other prominent politicians, including most Democrats.

Like almost everyone else, libertarians sometimes pay too little attention to some issues and too much to others. I personally think that libertarians should put more emphasis on liberalizing immigration laws. But it's hard to argue that libertarians have been remiss about either Ferguson specifically or the issue of police abuses more generally – not unless you are also willing to conclude that most liberals and conservatives are even more to blame.

UPDATE: I realize that there has been looting and violence by angry protestors in Ferguson, and the police can legitimately use force to prevent that. At the same time, however, the police have also used force against peaceful protestors, and even against at least one journalist.