



Urban combat: Ferguson and the Militarisation of Police

By Terry Goldsworthy
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Anyone watching the footage coming out of Ferguson, Missouri in recent days would be forgiven for thinking they had tuned into a scene from a combat zone, rather than suburban America.

There has been a public outcry over the heavily militarised response of local law enforcement to protests following the police shooting of a young black man, Michael Brown. But is this just a one off, or are police becoming more militarised in their responses to mass public protest?

The nature of policing

Policing is an occupation different from any other. It is one of the few civilian occupations where you are able to possess a firearm and other lethal weapons and are authorised to use deadly force in certain justifiable situations.

Police are paramilitary in that they rely on rank structure for command and control; their members wear the same uniform; they have access to substantial weaponry and are all working towards a common purpose. Police services have a strong organisational culture and to some degree are isolated from mainstream society, often socialising within the policing subculture.

American criminologist Peter Kraska describes police militarisation as the process whereby civilian police increasingly draw from, and model themselves around, the doctrines of militarism and the military model. He highlights four particular areas where police provide tangible evidence of this: material, organisational, cultural and operational indicators.

The US and decentralised policing

Part of the problem in the US is that many police services are small municipal departments that lack both resources and professionalism. This is a by-product of having a highly decentralised law enforcement environment. The Ferguson Police Department, for instance, consists of 72 personnel including 54 commissioned officers and 18 civilian support staff.

The UK recognised this problem and has recently undertaken steps to centralise policing services. In Australia there are highly centralised large policing services in each state. Centralisation provides the operational benefits of homogeneous command and control, capacity for resources and increased professionalisation.

One of the criticisms in Ferguson is that at one stage there were four different police services present at the protest – the Ferguson police, the St Louis County police (where Ferguson is located), police from the City of St Louis and police from the Missouri Highway Patrol.

The rise of the ‘warrior cop’

The blurring of the line between the military and the police, especially in the US, is now on the political agenda. Walter Olson, of libertarian American thinktank the Cato Institute, criticised the rising militarisation of law enforcement as illustrated 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?

Olson was not alone in his criticism of the heavy-handed response of law enforcement in Ferguson. Republican senator Rand Paul used the Ferguson case to argue for a reversal of the current US trend of supplying military hardware for law enforcement purposes.

Author Radley Balko has catalogued the rise of the warrior cop and the increasing convergence of military and policing operational doctrines. He illustrates how SWAT teams (heavily armed special weapons teams) have proliferated from the mid-1970s in the US:

The country’s first official SWAT team started in the late 1960s in Los Angeles. By 1975, there were approximately 500 such units. Today, there are thousands.

SWAT teams deployed in police raids in the US increased from 3000 per year in the 1980s to approximately 45,000 by 2007.

All Australian police services have a SWAT team-equivalent, but their deployment is more judicious. For instance, the Victorian Special Operations Group (SOG) requires

the permission of an Assistant Commissioner to deploy. The Queensland Special Emergency and Response Team can only be deployed to pre-planned operations that are high-risk situations by a deputy commissioner or delegate.

In 2011, the Victorian SOG completed 349 operations. They dealt with four sieges, affected tactical entry into ten buildings, conducted 54 high-risk arrests and target intercepts and 36 contain-and-call operations. None resulted in fatalities.

In some cases in Australia, the use of these specialist groups has actually declined. In 2013, the New South Wales ombudsman raised concerns that the call-out of the State Protection Group had actually fallen by 50% over the previous six years.

Military hardware for police purposes

Military assets and technology have also been brought within the policing sphere. In Queensland, police are currently using drones to provide “situational awareness”. The Queensland Police Service (QPS) has flagged the use of military-style drones used in Afghanistan for deployment during the G20 summit.

Many Australian police services use other military hardware. Western Australian Police, for example, use the Bearcat armoured vehicle.

Queensland police also recently purchased Remington R4s, a military assault rifle, for use by general duty officers.

Engagement and accountability

The images from Ferguson are cause for concern. Armed snipers are scoping the protesters. And yet, a line of officers in riot gear also stand in plain view in front of the protesters.

These images are contradictory. If there was any threat of an armed person in the crowd, officers would not be standing in plain view. Conversely, if there was no intelligence as to armed persons in the crowd, then there is no justification for armed snipers to be poised.

In Australia, the reaction of various police services to Occupy protests was vividly different. Victoria Police used extreme force to remove protesters with subsequent complaints against police. Yet when faced with similar Occupy protests in Western Australia, police used a more successful community engagement approach.

The use of force by any police service needs to be accountable. Some police services are taking progressive steps by utilising technology – such as body cameras – that will actually increase public confidence in police actions.

One Californian police service has attributed a 60% decrease in use of force and an 88% reduction in complaints to the implementation of body cameras. The police service involved was similar in size to Ferguson Police Department, but the lessons learnt could not be more different.