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By Lance Eldridge

The debate over 'police militarization' continues

We should remember that our military forces have become more police-like while performing peace keeping and stability operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan

In January of this year, PoliceOne's Chuck Remsberg published a controversial letter from Retired Constable Scott Enlow that created a bit of a [blog firestorm](#).

Mr. Enlow expressed his concerns that with a combination of federally-purchased "military-type equipment," an influx of war veterans into the profession, and police uniforms that have what he believed to be a military look, has militarized our nation's local law enforcement profession. As a result, Enlow believes that law enforcers will eventually stand apart from the communities they serve.

It's unlikely, however, that the police will ever become truly "militarized" so long as police authority comes from the rule of law and our enduring though often-times eroded constitutional principles. Police in this country do not, after all, operate under a regime that allows for flexible and ever-changing rules of engagement determined by local or national executive authority.

The problem in discussing police "militarization" is that the word is vague enough that for some it conjures images of jack-booted thugs and, for others, its an understandable and justifiable answer to increasingly violent criminal behavior. This should be a clear-headed debate among professionals, but the responses to Mr. Enlow's letter shows just how distended and emotional this issue has become.

Some of the postings focused on the minutia of weapon and caliber selections for both handguns and patrol rifles. The selection of both is important but has little direct bearing on the topic of "militarization." One would also be hard pressed to explain why the issue of a patrol rifle to an officer was any more military-like than, say, the purchase of one of the several models of Thompson machine guns during Prohibition. As one contemporary author picturesquely wrote: "While the Thompson gun is a simple one to handle, it should not be used indiscriminately by any member of a police department. Machine gunning is a job requiring expertise."

Others took issue with Mr. Enlow's concern about uniforms that have a military appearance, one example being pants with cargo pockets. Many supporters of this look lauded the comfort and practicality. The current popular trend appears to be the reissue of darker uniforms (and a return to the traditional black-and-white patrol cars) that bring a tactical advantage, especially at night. However, this trend is not universal and local departments continue to make decisions based on community needs with the likely support of locally elected political authority.

It's also unlikely that the style or color of a uniform will deter the most violent or antisocial miscreants. With police homicides an increasingly common occurrence, it would be surprising to learn that the tragically murdered officers could somehow have avoided injury or death because of a uniform. Neither BDUs nor a more traditional light blue shirt will either discourage or encourage the most violent deviants from an unprovoked attack. Instead, the uniform may be more important to those we protect than those we pursue.

As early as 1982, researcher Daniel J. Bell concluded the officer's demeanor "exerts considerably more influence on the citizen's attitude than does the uniform, officer's attitude, or any additional factor acting independently."¹

More recently, Richard Johnson [maintained](#) that the darker the uniform the more likely it is that citizens will respond negatively to the officer, though Johnson's conclusions apparently do not consider the importance of officer attitude. Both suggest that those wearing a darker, more military-style uniform may act more aggressively, matching their tone with their dress. However, their conclusions are not conclusive. The uniform implies trust and authority. Only an individual officer can earn respect or alienate those whom he or she contacts by exercising authority before common sense.

Radley Balko of the libertarian Cato Institute has been especially critical of advances in police tactics and the growth of SWAT teams throughout the country. Though Balko believes that SWAT may serve a purpose in a large city, he's not so sure that such an organization has a legitimate role in smaller jurisdictions. He also argues that the special teams are inappropriately used to conduct routine police work and often violate an individual's civil liberties in the process, especially when SWAT teams mistakenly use force against the wrong citizen.²

Balko blames the growth of SWAT on the federal government's so-called war on drugs and the money and surplus equipment Washington makes available to communities that would otherwise not have a need for such capabilities. After all, small community police departments were able to serve warrants and arrest offenders before SWAT.

Those that are concerned that this trend in improved tactical capabilities and the acquisition of all things that go bang could change have little to fear. Recent press reports show that law enforcement requests for surplus military equipment has risen 400 percent since 2011 <http://www.thedaily.com/page/2011/12/05/120511-news-militarized-police-1-6/>. The amount of funding the federal government provides to local law enforcement agencies is also [astronomical](#).

One of the most insightful comments came from Bill DeWeese, a 14-year police veteran now teaching at Hocking College. He rightly noted that our military forces have become more police-like while performing peace keeping and stability operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He also noted a "bizarre cultural mix between mil & LE." Bill wrote that "militarization implies a fundamental legal, operational and administrative change in policing that hasn't happened."

The implied trend of which Mr. Enlow writes may be disconcerting to some, but probably little different than that experienced at the end of 20th Century wars and conflicts, when new members entered the law enforcement community with extensive military experience. The public has little to fear from LE professionals so long as our constitutional checks-and-balances remain effective and new officers understand and embrace the difference between their service as a soldier and that of a law enforcement professional.