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SWAT and the Drug War: License to Kill

As of this morning, over 1.2 million people have clicked on the YouTube video of the February 11 SWAT raid on a suspected drug dealer's home in a quiet suburban neighborhood of Columbia, Missouri. Produced by the police themselves, the video went viral soon after it was posted earlier this month.

It's a fair guess that many of those clicks represent individuals who, revolted by what they saw and heard (gunshots, the screaming of a wounded dog), abruptly stopped viewing the video. What happened to that Missouri family, a terrifying police paramilitary attack that left two dogs shot, one dead, and a couple and their seven-year-old boy in shock, is an all-too common occurrence across the country. It is also profoundly un-American.

As Radley Balko writes in "Overkill: the Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America," his excellent 2006 Cato Institute report, "These increasingly frequent raids, 40,000 per year by one estimate, are needlessly subjecting nonviolent drug offenders, bystanders, and wrongly targeted civilians to the terror of having their homes invaded while they're sleeping, usually by teams of heavily armed paramilitary units dressed not as police officers but as soldiers. These raids bring unnecessary violence and provocation to nonviolent drug offenders, many of whom were guilty of only misdemeanors."

People die in these raids: grandmothers, children, family pets, suspected drug dealers, police officers. And for what? A pipe, a bud grinder, a small quantity of weed? Which is what the Columbia cops recovered from the raid on 25-year-old Jonathan Whitworth's home in Columbia.

I was a young cop in the San Diego Police Department when in 1967 an LAPD officer by the name of John Nelson suggested that the LAPD create a SWAT unit. His boss, then Inspector Daryl Gates, much beloved by his troops, much be-hated by civil libertarians, signed off on the proposal. It made sense. Nowhere in the country did basic police academy training prepare us beat cops for certain of the situations we were bound to face.

In a report prepared after the legendary shootout with members of the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974, LAPD officials listed the four reasons why they'd formed 15 four-officer Special Weapons and Tactics teams: (1) riots (Watts was still fresh in their minds), (2) the emergence of snipers, as well as (3) political assassinations, and (4) "urban guerrilla warfare by militant groups" (think Panthers of yesteryear, right wing militias of this era).

Notice there's no mention of the most vital and valuable uses of SWAT, namely taking down barricaded, hostage-seizing suspects in bank robberies, domestic violence calls, workplace and school rampages, terrorist attacks.

Nor is there a single mention in that LAPD document of what has become the most common reason to call out SWAT: a snitch-manufactured case of suspected drug trafficking. The cops in Columbia had been told by their informant that 25-year-old Jonathan Whitworth had a "dealer's supply" of pot in his home. (For a follow up on what that night was like for this one American family, read Balko's May 11 account.)

From Richard Nixon's presidency to Barack Obama's, the federal government has led and promoted a holy war against its own people. I've written often in this space on the long list of harms caused by U.S.-led War on Drugs: a trillion dollars squandered since Nixon's famous declaration of war, tens of millions of Americans incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses, otherwise innocent lives brought to ruin, civil liberties trampled, individuals, neighborhoods, and whole countries rendered unsafe, environmental devastation, economic and political destabilization of foreign nations, and on and on.

Since 9/11, "homeland security" dollars, billions upon billions of them, have found their way from the federal government to local jurisdictions whose police agencies have fallen all over themselves to create SWAT units, even in the tiniest of rural communities. And to use our tax money in the service of paramilitary raids on the residences of suspected drug traffickers.

Some questions about this practice, and the expenditure of these tax dollars:

- How many of these raids are predicated on useless, misleading intelligence, proffered by an informant with an axe to grind or a criminal charge to mitigate?
- How many are carried out with children or innocent others in the residence at the time of the raid?
- How many such raids are truly necessary?

The problem is not SWAT per se. SWAT is at its finest when it is staffed by rigorously

selected, vigorously trained, mature and disciplined personnel whose narrow mission is to save, not needlessly threaten lives. There's nothing like a well-oiled entry team or a sharp-shooting sniper--or a superb hostage negotiator--when the situation demands it.

SWAT members in the San Diego and Seattle police departments, the two agencies I'm most familiar with, have long prided themselves in rescuing hostages, and only very rarely being forced to take the life of an armed perpetrator. But even in these two cities, the most common SWAT mission is "high-risk warrant service." That's code for a drug raid.

As long as this country--its electorate, its political leaders--remains addicted to current drug laws, the police will have to enforce those laws. But where is it written that they must show up in the dead of night, armed and armored, in order to do so? What's wrong with reliable intelligence, expert surveillance, a traffic stop at three in the afternoon, a court-authorized search of an empty house?

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