



Unreasonable force?

By Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff

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Nobody was hurt or killed late last week when heavily armed police showed up to raid the home of a Cartersville man whose okra plants were mistaken for marijuana.

But there easily could have been.

Just a few months ago, a SWAT team lobbed a “flash-bang” grenade into the playpen of a 19-month-old boy during a raid at a home in rural Habersham County.

Police in that case made a mistake, too. The suspected drug dealer they were searching for wasn’t there – he was apprehended at a different home. The toddler’s injuries were so severe he had to be put into a medically induced coma to undergo numerous reconstructive surgeries to his face.

Sadly, dozens of people and their pets have been killed or injured in recent years because of questionable military-style law enforcement raids, the type of aggressive response once reserved for volatile hostage situations or active confrontations with armed individuals.

But, as in the cases of the Cartersville okra farmer and Habersham County toddler, police burst onto the scene in full force without warning. The tactic even has its own name – the “no-knock” raid.

There’s no doubt the nation’s criminal element is more sophisticated than in the past, but it’s increasingly obvious from national reports that police are overusing advanced weaponry and commando tactics to deal with what are essentially routine law enforcement matters.

An interactive database on botched para-military style raids can be found at Cato Institute, a conservative Washington think tank, at cato.org/raidmap.

A case can be made that many of the aggressive, no-knock raids increase the chance violence will occur. Imagine being a homeowner waking up in the dead of night to the sound of the family dog being shot and multiple men kicking in the front door.

How could anyone expect a dazed homeowner – particularly a law-abiding one with the misfortune of being mistakenly targeted by police – to react to such an assault with anything other than violence?

Police are not perfect – they commit errors. And society generally is forgiving of law enforcement officers who make honest mistakes. But our homes are our castles, and forgiveness is withheld, rightfully, when the gaffe results in teams of black-masked police showing up with machine guns, grenade launchers, attack dogs and armored vehicles.

In the case of the Cartersville okra grower, there even was a helicopter involved.

Bottom line: Police have little business storming through front doors like Navy SEALs unless there is a legitimate threat to officers or the public. And it should go without saying the SWAT gear should be left in the locker room unless there is actual criminal activity afoot.

The fact that members of a Georgia drug task force couldn't tell the difference between a staple of Southern cuisine and an illicit drug doesn't speak highly of their abilities as narcotics agents. You needn't be a botanist to correctly identify the characteristic shape of a marijuana leaf.

The owner of the okra crop, Dwayne Perry, told an Atlanta TV affiliate that officers apologized sincerely once they discovered the mistake.

But he also told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that officers were “strapped to the gills” with weapons.

“Anything could have happened,” Perry said.

He's more right than he knows.