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BALKO: Paramilitary police don't make us safer

Radley Balko

If it's of any size at all, the odds are pretty good that your town has its own SWAT team. If it does and it's like most other towns, the SWAT team is expensive. All of that equipment needs to be maintained, and the SWAT team itself needs regular training. In fact, if the SWAT team isn't expensive, that's a big problem. It means the officers who serve on it aren't getting the proper training, and the equipment they're using may be deteriorating.

Back in the 1970s, only big cities had SWAT teams, and they were used only in emergency situations such as bank robberies, barricades and hostage takings. But beginning in the early 1980s, that began to change. The federal government started taking the term "drug war" all too literally. Over the next 30 years, with federal funding and surplus equipment provided by the Pentagon, paramilitary police units, including SWAT teams and anti-narcotics task forces, started springing up all over the country. Criminologist Peter Kraska, who surveyed the use of those police teams from the 1980s until the 2000s, estimates that the total number of SWAT deployments across the country increased from a few hundred per year in the 1970s to a few thousand per year by the early 1980s to around 50,000 per year by the mid-2000s.

Today, every decent-sized city has a SWAT team, and most have several. Even absurdly small towns like Eufaula, Ala., (population 13,463) have them. In even more sparsely populated areas, federal funding has allowed for multijurisdictional task forces - SWAT teams that serve several counties. SWAT teams today overwhelmingly are used to serve search warrants on suspected drug offenders. Where their purpose once was to defuse an already violent situation, today they break into homes to look for illicit drugs, creating violence and confrontation where there was none before.

Whatever you think of drug prohibition, this is the wrong way to enforce it. Even if the police nabbed a drug dealer and contraband every time they broke into a home on a SWAT raid,

there would be reason to object to these tactics. There's an old Cold War saying commonly attributed to Winston Churchill (though I haven't found any hard documentation that he said it) that goes, "Democracy means that when there's a knock on the door at 3 a.m., it's probably the milkman." The idea is that free societies don't send armed government agents dressed in black to raid the private homes of citizens for political crimes. Given that all parties who participate in a drug transaction do so voluntarily, the prohibition of drugs is at heart a political policy. SWAT raids are being used increasingly to break up poker games and suspected houses of prostitution, too.

Of course, the police don't always get the people they're after in these raids. In a paper I wrote for the Cato Institute in 2006, I documented dozens of incidents in which police raided the wrong home, terrorizing, wounding and sometimes killing innocent people. Since that paper came out, there have been more high-profile incidents, including the 2006 Atlanta raid in which police shot and killed innocent, 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston, and the 2007 raid on the home of Berwyn Heights, Md., Mayor Cheye Calvo in which the police shot and killed Mr. Calvo's two black Labradors. Small towns considering forming a SWAT team might want to consider the lawsuits and settlements Atlanta and Prince George's County inevitably will be financing in coming years.

It's also far from clear that SWAT teams make the communities they serve any safer. The odds of a school shooting, terror attack or mass shooting hitting a given town are astronomical, and even when these events do happen, a SWAT team is usually of little use. The event is often over by the time the team assembles and arrives at the scene.

As for drugs, the massive 30-year increase in the use of SWAT teams doesn't seem to have done much to diminish the drug supply. Supporters of using SWAT teams for drug enforcement often argue that they are reserved for high-level, heavily armed and particularly dangerous drug suppliers. But when newspapers have surveyed the use of no-knock raids after a high-profile incident in their respective cities over the years, they usually have found that the raids don't turn huge supplies of drugs and high-powered weapons and, more often than not, result in little more than misdemeanor charges against the suspect.

After the raid on Mr. Calvo's home, the Maryland General Assembly became the first in the country to pass a bill requiring every police agency in the state to issue a quarterly report on how often and for what purpose it deploys its SWAT team. In the last half of 2009, there were 4.5 SWAT raids per day in the state and one per day in Prince George's County, where Mr. Calvo lives. More than half the raids in Prince George's County were for misdemeanors or what the FBI calls "nonserious felonies," usually low-level drug crimes. Despite one SWAT raid per day for six months, does anyone think illicit drugs are more difficult to obtain now in

Prince George's County than they were in June 2009?

In this era of tight budgets, smaller cities and towns should consider disbanding the local SWAT team. They'll save money on training, equipment and overtime. They'll be returning to a less aggressive, less militaristic, more community-oriented method of policing. And though there always will be crime, it seems unlikely that should they do away with SWAT, towns like Eufaula will suddenly find themselves overwhelmed by school shootings, bank robberies and terrorist attacks.

Radley Balko is a senior editor for Reason magazine. In 2006, he wrote "Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America," published by the Cato Institute.

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