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Keene pumpkin riots bring police militarisation to the forefront – again

New Hampshire town's annual festival descended into chaos last weekend, and police responded with teargas, rubber bullets and pepper spray. Did their tactics make it worse from the start?

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By Sunday evening, most of the devastation around Keene State College had been cleared, and there was little sign of the destruction, rioting, and clashes with police that marred this small [New Hampshire](#) college town's annual Pumpkin festival at the weekend.

Just 24 hours earlier the streets around the college campus were the scene of a chaotic running battle between rioters and police. Several fires had been set, lamp-posts had been ripped from the ground and smashed, and a car overturned.

Called out to deal with street partying by students that had got out of hand, police deployed officers and Swat teams in full riot gear, and others in military fatigues. They used paintball guns firing pepper balls, pepper spray and teargas on students and partygoers, as well as 40mm guns that fired sponge-bullets – a weapon that is equivalent, Keene police chief Kennet Meola said, to “a long-range baton strike”.

Drunken partygoers threw liquor bottles, cans of beer and “billiard balls” at police, and at each other, according to Colonel Robert Quinn of the New Hampshire state police, who arrived on the scene with officers to assist Keene police at around 7pm on Saturday.

Over the course of more than 12 hours of rioting, more than 30 people were injured and 84 arrests were made.

Keene is already something of an emblem of police militarisation. The town received national attention when it was revealed that the police department had applied to purchase a military-style BearCat mine-resistant armoured vehicle. The application named the pumpkin festival – a traditional local event for the past 24 years, in which thousands of people flock to see numerous displays of jack-o'-lanterns, and other festive jollities – as a possible target for terrorists. (The BearCat was deployed on Saturday afternoon to near the college campus, but was not used.)

The central issue is not whether the police involved in the clashes behaved badly – by almost all accounts, officers responded well, under difficult circumstances – but whether a systemic culture of militarisation in American police makes situations like this worse.

“We’ve known for a long time that paramilitary police response – that relies on use of force against crowds as a whole – does escalate disorder,” said Dr Clifford Stott, a research fellow at the University of Leeds law school who specialises in crowds and public order policing.

“Within a large gathering, you might have a small number trying to create confrontation, but the majority are not,” he said. “When the police respond with indiscriminate use of force, that can create a psychology where previously differentiated people come to see themselves as united. That sense of unity is quite empowering.”

“Ironically, the efforts of police to quell disorder can often escalate it,” he added.

Keene State College is overwhelmingly white in its student intake. There is none of the buildup of bitter racial tensions that have seen more than 70 days of protests in Ferguson, Missouri. While the spark that kindled Ferguson was a perceived deep injustice – the shooting of Michael Brown – the Pumpkinfest riots were just drunk students.

But the police response – the military tactics and uniforms, the teargas and rubber bullets – is familiar. Even in Keene, a town where the young have no reason to distrust or hate police – they are not the victims of deep-rooted institutional racism, as the protesters in Ferguson are – some students still reacted with extraordinary hostility to the appearance of law enforcement.

The crowd’s behaviour was alcohol-fuelled and rowdy before the police arrived, but it was “normal college rowdy”, said Colin Middleton, a student at Keene State who witnessed the event. When the police turned up, Middleton said, “they formed a riot line, pushed everybody on to campus. They just lined up. That’s when things really got rowdy.”

Middleton said that the police were “trying to calm it”, but that he saw “some pretty fucked-up stuff. One kid I saw, he was trying to save his girlfriend; they pushed him to the ground and pepper-sprayed him pretty hard.”

Another student, freshman Robert Rein, also saw the night’s clashes. “I was being shot at with rubber bullets. We ran; had to hide behind a car in some kid’s driveway.”

Rein said the partygoers reacted badly to the arrival of police in riot gear. “People were shit-talking the police,” he said. At one point, students were filmed chanting “fuck the police”. He also said that he saw officers patrolling the streets later that night with “shotguns and M16s”, though he did not think they were fired. He said that he thought “they were trying to scare everyone away”.

Ian Freeman is a syndicated radio host, a member of the libertarian Free State movement, and currently a candidate for governor of New Hampshire. The Guardian interviewed him at a food

truck a block from Winchester Street, the epicentre of the weekend's clashes, where bought an egg sandwich from the truck using Bitcoin.

"It was pretty rowdy last year, but not like this," said Freeman, who lives in Keene.

"The police response wasn't as extreme." About the police tactics, he said: "Well, they didn't shoot anybody with a real gun, so that's good. But it was aggressive." He said that some police were dressed in military-style fatigues, and the state police in full riot gear "looked like stormtroopers".

"In my opinion, the police escalated the situation – which they seem to have a penchant for." He said that "it's like [the police] are boys with their toys. They're just waiting for an opportunity to use those toys."

Freeman videotaped many of the clashes between students and police. In one video, a group of at least 20 officers overwhelm two students who did not appear to be resisting, pushing them to the ground before handcuffing and arresting them.

"This is by no means the first time that low-level misbehaviour at colleges has been met with Swat-level response," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato institute. "It makes it more dangerous, not less, when police come in like an army rather than as fellow citizens. It's shocking for people to consider Keene, New Hampshire, having militarised police in the first place – this is not Baltimore, not Los Angeles, this is a quiet college town."

"If police dress up like the public are their enemy; if they were trained in military tactics to treat the public as their enemy, it is easy for them to make a mistake and treat the public as their enemy when they get on the street," Olson said.

Asked by the Guardian at a press conference on Monday whether the events represented a growing disaffection between the youth and law enforcement, police chief Meola said that he didn't know. "It seems we see it more and more," he said. Quinn told the press conference: "I don't think it could have ended any better than it did." He and Meola both said that many students had thanked police on the night for intervening.

"People, especially young people, young men aged 18 to 25 who are packed full of testosterone, they are going to react to what they see as aggression – it is aggression," said Lee Perkins, executive director of Cheshire TV, the local public-access station. "When I was a kid, cops didn't look like special forces; they looked like cops." By contrast, he said, the police in full riot gear and military fatigues in play at the pumpkin festival riots were "frightening" to kids.

The problem is getting worse. "There has been a large expansion over the last couple of decades of the availability of Swat equipment and the formation of Swat units across the United States," said David Sklansky, a professor of law at Stanford. "Some of this has been driven by federal grant money and federal programmes that allow police departments to get military-grade equipment virtually for free."

Jared Goodell, a reporter for Cheshire TV who covered the riots, told the Guardian that “for college students, it shows them that when they have a party, the police will show up with military force. It becomes the new normal.”

He adds: “If it has become normal, then what’s next?”