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The dangers of our increasingly militarized police

A. Barton Hinkle | August 23, 2011

The front page of last Tuesday's *Richmond Times-Dispatch* carried a startling photo: Richmond police officers taking a suspect into custody. What was startling was the display of force. The officers, accompanied by a robot and decked out in full riot gear with shield and combat helmets, could have been mistaken for American soldiers on patrol in Iraq. Yet they were going up against a single man—and they were not even sure was armed.

Regrettably, this is not a new development. In recent years police forces across the country have become increasingly militarized.

To a small degree, that trend represents a rational response in an arms race against the criminal element's escalating firepower. But more of it has to do with the lavishing of federal Homeland Security funds on local law-enforcement agencies. Local departments have used the money to buy themselves all kinds of fancy toys—from the Segways bought for the bomb squad in Santa Clara, Calif. several years ago to the Lenco BearCat G3 bought last year by the sheriff's department in Warren County, Va.

The BearCat G3 is an 8-ton armored personnel carrier. Its half-inch steel plating and 2.5-inch window glass can stop a .50-caliber round. Its sensors can detect chemical, biological, and radiological threats. "It's big enough to go through a house if it had to," says the department's Roger Vorous. Warren County bought the quarter-million-dollar vehicle with a Homeland Security grant.

"We're in a very dangerous business," Sheriff Daniel McEathron told the *Northern Virginia Daily* last year. "We're not interested in leveling the playing field. We're interested in having the high ground."

He's got a point: Police officers should not have to bring a knife to a gunfight. On the other hand, Warren County, which boasts that its "small-town charm" makes it "an excellent place to raise a family," has a population of fewer than 40,000. It averages about one homicide every three years. Insurgents have not detonated a roadside bomb in Warren County since—well, never. The need for an armored assault vehicle would seem scant.

But Warren County is not alone. McEathron says it is only one of several Virginia localities that have BearCats or similar vehicles now. Others include Roanoke and Stafford—whose sheriff, Charles Jett, said that if he had had his druthers, the money would have been used for patrol cars. "The priorities under Homeland Security are different," he said last March.

Still, it would be a mistake to lay blame for the militarization of the police entirely at the feet of the federal government's homeland-security endeavors. In "Overkill," a 2006 paper for the Cato Institute,

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Radley Balko traces the rise of paramilitary policing to the 1980s and the war on drugs. One of the earliest developments was the Military Cooperation With Law Enforcement Act, whose purpose was to let the military lend a hand in drug interdiction.

In the three decades since, the trend has only spread. In 1994, Congress authorized the re-use of military equipment by local law-enforcement agencies. In the following three years alone, the Pentagon provided local constabularies with 3,800 M-16s, 2,184 M-14s, and (yes) 73 grenade launchers.

Police officers might respond that they are simply trying to keep up with the bad guys. Maybe—although criminals in the U.S. are not known for driving tanks. That argument also does not explain the increase in no-knock raids, complete with battering rams and flash-bang grenades—or the stories about innocent people gunned down in such raids when informants give cops the wrong address. Three thousand no-knock raids took place in 1981. In 2005, police departments across the country carried out more than 50,000.

At this point a reasonable person might ask: What, exactly, is wrong with the paramilitary approach? After all: The police are on the side of law and order; they serve and protect law-abiding citizens. If you aren't breaking the law, then you have nothing to fear.

Yes, but: The paramilitary approach to law enforcement flies in the face of the idea that the police and the citizens are on the same side. Officer Friendly, strolling the block in a blue uniform and playing a paradiddle with his baton on a white picket fence, looks like he is ready to help carry groceries for the little old lady who lives on the corner. A cop in combat gear with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder looks like he is ready to go to war. In war, there is no presumption of innocence—and the opposing side is not a fellow citizen with constitutional rights. He is the enemy.

In prepared statements, police departments may speak of dedicated professionals who desire only to serve and protect. But in their riot gear and armored vehicles they look more like an occupying force, intending to conquer and command. That might be good tactics. It is not good government.

A. Barton Hinkle is a columnist at the Richmond Times Dispatch. This article originally appeared at the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

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