

Police militarization in the united states research paper

[Law](#), [Security](#)



Police militarization in the United States was ignited by the fight against narcotics and terror alongside laws and streams of funding appurtenant thereto. In particular, the response of the State security machinery towards the September 2011 terrorist attacks further catalyzed and implanted militarization among the police. Homeland security immediately emerged as a key directive by the government causing a change in the level and nature of relationship as between different government agencies. There was a fundamental shift in the way these agencies related to one another as well as towards the public.

Some of the effects of the shift to this mode of operation include the change of the mode of confrontation of a number of issues by American citizens. For instance, Americans now use the Joint Terrorism Task Forces to confront the explosion of the FBI-police cooperation. The move towards the militarization of both the state as well as the federal police department was informed by the directive of the top echelon of the military. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was instrumental in the constitution of the Department of Homeland Security which went on to effect this transformation through funding and co-ordination. Rumsfeld was reported stating that the United States must respond to terror by engaging all instruments of power such as diplomatic, military, economic, law enforcement, intelligence and financial means. Rumsfeld defended the move to adopt such a twin approach to the whole problem while justifying the militarization of the police. Among the initiatives as proposed by Rumsfeld included a number of circumstances whereby the Department of Defense would be engaged in the keeping of security in the United States. In exceptional situations, the department would

employ combat air patrols in the conduct of military missions.

Some perspectives and real-life examples would be insightful. In January 2012, a police force dealing with narcotics conducted a raid in the home of Mathew David Stewart in the evening in Ogden, Utah. The police battalion consisted of 12 officers who descended upon the home acting on a tip off from Stewart's former girlfriend who had informed them that Stewart grew marijuana in his basement. Following the raid, Stewart awoke while naked and grabbed his Beretta pistol under the apprehension that he was under attack by criminals. In the ensuing melee, Mr. Stewart fired 31 rounds of ammunition with the police firing 250 rounds resulting in 6 casualties who were police officers. An officer named Jared Francom was also killed in the fire exchange and Stewart was shot twice before he was nabbed and charged with the killing of officer Jared Francom among other crimes. The police said that they had knocked at his premises and identified themselves whereas Stewart was of the view that the police did not do so. In the consequent search, the police found 16 marijuana plants in Stewart's basement though there was no evidence that Stewart had a past criminal record. Stewart was a military veteran and his father said that his son had suffered post-traumatic disorder following his service in the military and had resorted to taking of marijuana in a bid to cope. The trial of Mr. Stewart was set down for the following April and the legality of the search that had been conducted considered. In this vein, several citizens testified of the service of the drug warrants in the area to the Ogden City Council. Stewart lost the hearing in May challenging the legality of the search following which he hanged himself in the cell knowing well that the prosecutors were seeking a

death penalty as a punishment.

The above scenario illustrates vividly the nature of the police operation-that of militarization. Indeed, the tactics employed by the police in this case are not novel. These tactics have been around as early as in the 1960's, albeit not in a manifest way. Law enforcement agencies have since the 1960's severally glazed over the line between the police and the soldier in the face of increased security threats. This situation was brought about mainly by the rhetoric and the presence of military equipment such as bayonettes, M-16 rifles and armored personal carriers. The upshot of this has been an indoctrination of a battlefield mindset amongst the law enforcement officers in the United States. As already set out in this discourse, the increased fight on terror and narcotics has carved out a new stature of the police, ready for combat and armed to deal brutally with law violators thus posing a serious threat to liberties enjoyed by Americans.

A commonly used acronym concomitant with police militarization is SWAT which loosely stands for Special Weapons and Tactics. The initial formal SWAT team was started in the 1960's in Los Angeles and after roughly ten years later, there were 500 similar units. The increase of these figures has been phenomenal as evidenced by surveys carried out by Peter Kraska, a criminologist at the Eastern Kentucky University where 13 % of the towns at the time had a SWAT team. By the year 2005, the figure was in thousands representing nearly 80% of the towns which had such units. SWAT police units are well versed in methods of combat similar to the ones employed by the special wing of the military. Among the tactics they are familiar with include breaking into houses with battering rams, and the use of other

arsonist devices such as flashbang grenades which have the effect of debilitating persons in the vicinity. The main target of such units is usually to remove all threats and obstacles in the way besides subduing the occupants of an area.

It is instructive to note that the formation and operation of these SWAT units has not only been restricted to the police arm. Several federal agencies now boast of such units including NASA, the Consumer Products Safety Commission, Department of the Interior, and Fish and Wildlife Service. In particular, the unit attached to the Department of Education fluffed up a raid on a woman reportedly under investigation for defaulting in payments of her student loans with the agency later explaining that she had been suspected of fraud. Be it as it may, the crux of the matter and a cracking revelation was that the Department of Education had such a unit. It raises the issue as to the significance of such a military style policing and whether such is necessary. More so, the whole issue of police militarization must be seen in the context of the Constitution and the wisdom informing its framing. Indeed, America has treaded carefully on matters of engaging the military in the conduct of normal policing owing to the likelihood of abuse of citizen's rights by overzealous officers. At the time of the founding of the Constitution, the framers must have been wary of the chances that an overbearing executive might decide to follow the monarch and emperor's way of intimidating the citizens.

The first SWAT team in Los Angeles as already mentioned, emerged following civil unrest and strife and the growing frustration of the police department that they could not contain and respond adequately to incidents

like the 1965 Watts riots. Consequently, the then inspector Daryl Gates began entertaining the notion of having a military sort of force which could respond to disturbances. His idea was bought in the year 1966 by the new Los Angeles police chief Thomas Reddin and he started training his unit. This move coincided with President Richard Nixon's policy of no-knock on doors in the fight against drugs in an instance where officers were allowed to break into homes without knocking. At this time, the use of these units was key to the fight against drugs.

Without doubt, the result of SWAT team's invasions in an area is innocent bloodshed and destruction as happened in the Mathew Stewart case.

Usually, the victims happen to be innocent bystanders and police officers who are shot at, under misapprehension. Indeed, empirical evidence points to this direction thereby raising the question as to whether this mode of operation should be countenanced. It seems that such a culture need be discouraged. A key starting point in ending this would be cutting down on the amount of grants accorded to the police force thereby disabling them from acquiring the military gear. Similarly, videos featuring police recruitments initiatives showing police officers roping down from helicopters, kicking doors and shooting portend a militaristic culture among the police which must be changed. In fact, SWAT teams should be reserved for times when occasion demands such as where only violence initiated by the police is the only way to salvage lives of people. SWAT teams are not conterminous with community policing which mainly rests on interaction of the police with citizens with the police having a stake in the whole process without the use of brutal force.

References

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