

Militarization of police in America

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During the Obama administration, the Pentagon has been equipping US police departments across the country with a staggering amount of military weapons, combat vehicles, and other equipment, according to Pentagon data.

According to a *New York Times* article published last week, at minimum, 93,763 machine guns, 180,718 magazine cartridges, hundreds of silencers and an unknown number of grenade launchers have been provided to state and local police departments since 2006. This is in addition to at least 533 planes and helicopters, and 432 MRAPs—9-foot high, 30-ton Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected armored vehicles with gun turrets and more than 44,900 pieces of night vision equipment, regularly used in nighttime raids in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Much of the lethal provisions have gone to small city and county police forces. Neenah, Wisconsin, population 25,000, was given an MRAP last November. Walsh County, North Dakota, population 11,000, was given 40 silencers. Police forces in six states were given magazines that carry 100 rounds of M-16 ammunition, allowing officers to fire continuously for three times longer than normal. Ohio State University campus police received an MRAP. Valued at \$500,000 each, the armored vehicles given to police departments are worth \$200 million alone.

The American Civil Liberties Union says that billions of dollars' worth of military surplus has been handed over to local police departments at low cost through grant programs administered by federal agencies such as the Departments of Defense, Justice and Homeland Security.

“[W]artime weapons and counter-terrorism strategies mark a shift in the very nature of policing strategies,” the ACLU has written. “If the anecdotal evidence is any indication, tanks and counter-terrorism strategies encourage overly aggressive policing. SWAT teams

have become a key part of increasingly militarized policing strategies. While only a fraction of SWAT-style raids result in actual charges of any kind, they often provoke fear, hurt individuals and families, and result in damages to personal property.”

The ACLU estimates that police SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams engage in between 70,000 and 80,000 “no-knock raids” each year—bursting into homes unannounced, often at night. This figure is up from 50,000 in 2005 and 3,000 in 1981.

Innocent civilians regularly become casualties, including the elderly, children and infants. During one such raid on June 4 of this year—over a \$50 drug sale—police in Habersham County, Georgia threw a “flashbang” stun grenade—originally developed for wartime raids—into a crib where it exploded in a two-year-old child’s face. Bounkham “Bou Bou” Phonesavanh is still in a medically induced coma.

In 2010, a police SWAT team threw a stun grenade through the window of a Detroit home, setting fire to the blanket of seven-year-old Aiyana Jones, who was sleeping on a couch next to her grandmother. Seconds later, the SWAT team stormed through the door and shot Aiyana through the neck, killing her.

In 2006, the home of 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston was raided on the basis of a fabricated tip. She did not realize the men entering her home were police officers, and she pulled a gun on them. The Atlanta police gunned her down.

The recent militarization is part of a broader trend. According to Eastern Kentucky University professor Peter B. Kraska—who has studied this subject for two decades—as of the late 1990s, about 89 percent of police departments in the United States serving populations of 50,000 people or more had a PPU (Police Paramilitary Unit), almost double of what existed in the mid-1980s. Their growth in smaller jurisdictions (agencies serving between 25 and 50,000 people) was even more

pronounced. Currently, about 80 percent of small town agencies have a PPU; in the mid-1980s only 20 percent had them.

The domestic military ramp-up is far from being in proportion to any perceived threat to public safety. The *Times* notes that, “today, crime has fallen to its lowest levels in a generation... the number of domestic terrorist attacks has declined sharply from the 1960s and 1970s.” And yet, “police SWAT teams are now deployed tens of thousands of times each year, increasingly for routine jobs.”

The war provisions must instead be seen in the context of growing social polarization in the United States and part of the preparations of the ruling class to use military repression against inevitable social upheavals.

Social inequality in the US is at historic highs and still expanding. Since the crash of 2008, 95 percent of income gains have gone to the richest one percent of Americans. In 2013 alone, the world’s billionaires, 442 of whom are Americans, saw their combined wealth rise another \$1 trillion.

Meanwhile, conditions for the working class are being attacked from every angle. Nearly fifteen percent of the population lives in official poverty with the real figure far higher. Food stamps were cut by \$4 billion last November, health care costs are increasing, pensions are being slashed, public schools transformed into for-profit corporations, the labor force participation rate is on the decline. Young people face a future of crushing debt and a miserable job market. Endless, unpopular wars are perpetually waged abroad. Increasingly, the trappings of democracy are being disposed of in favor of authoritarian court rulings, as in the bankruptcy of Detroit, and last week’s ruling eliminating teacher tenure in California. Class tensions are reaching the boiling point.

The police in America already kill an average of one to two people every day. Investigations regularly reveal excessive use of force, or gunning down unarmed victims as they flee. On March 16, police shot a homeless Albuquerque, New Mexico man in the back, killing him. On May 20, three police officers in Salinas, California shot a migrant worker to death at close range as he backed away from them. During a routine traffic stop on May 11, five California Highway Patrol officers beat to death Tommy Yancy, a veteran

suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The list goes on.

About a quarter of all prisoners worldwide are kept in American prisons, despite the fact that the US accounts for only 5 percent of the world’s population. (See: “Police violence and the American gulag”).

A dry run for the imposition of martial law was the military/police lockdown of Boston following a terrorist bombing at the 2013 Boston Marathon. Police worked with the National Guard using machine gun-mounted armored vehicles, Humvees and Black Hawk helicopters to lock down the Boston area. One million residents were ordered to “shelter in place,” while police, with automatic weapons drawn, conducted house-to-house searches for one 19-year-old suspect.

The military also conducts “urban warfare” drills without notifying the population. In July of last year, Blackhawk helicopters were flown low over central Chicago with no lights on. City of Chicago officials claimed the exercise was “in preparation for overseas deployment.” In January of 2013, similar exercises were carried out in Miami and Houston, frightening residents.

Increasingly, the methods of imperialist war and military occupation, practiced by the United States with such bloody and disastrous results overseas, are now to be employed in the US. Whether in Iraq and Afghanistan or Los Angeles and Detroit, the purpose is the same: to protect the wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy against an increasingly hostile population.



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