ACLU report exposes US federal government's role in creating "paramilitary police"

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The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released an extensive report Monday on the militarization of the police in the US, showing that the "federal government has justified and encouraged the militarization of local law enforcement."

The report, entitled *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing*, shows that the federal government has spent billions of dollars arming local police forces with military-grade weapons and encouraged their use in day-to-day policing.

The report focuses on the increasing use of so-called Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) forces to take over the role of ordinary police forces. These units are, in the words of their creator, former Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, "quasi-militaristic" outfits.

SWAT teams have been deployed throughout the US to carry out such tasks as serving search warrants related to non-violent crimes. These raids proceed like the house-to-house searches made infamous during the US invasion of Iraq, involving police in military battledress throwing stun grenades, pointing automatic rifles at people, wantonly damaging property, killing animals, and gunning down anyone who actively resists.

The ACLU concludes that "this sort of violent, paramilitary raid is happening in about 124 homes every day—or more likely every night—not in an overseas combat zone, but here in American neighborhoods."

An earlier study, conducted by Peter Kraska of Eastern Kentucky University, concluded that, "the number of SWAT teams in small towns grew from 20 percent in the 1980s to 80 percent in the mid-2000s." Kraska estimated that the number of SWAT raids grew from 3,000 per year in the 1980s to 45,000 per year in the past decade.

SWAT teams were initially created as elite units capable of responding to extreme circumstances such as "hostage scenarios, and active shooter or sniper situations," the ACLU notes. This is no longer the case.

The ACLU's study, based on a review of hundreds of incidents, found that "only a small handful of [SWAT] deployments (7 percent) were for hostage, barricade, or active shooter scenarios." On the other hand, "The majority (79 percent) of SWAT deployments the ACLU studied were for the purpose of executing a search warrant, most commonly in drug investigations."

The report notes, "Across the country, heavily armed… (SWAT) teams are forcing their way into people's homes in the middle of the night, often deploying explosive devices such as flashbang grenades to temporarily blind and deafen residents, simply to serve a search warrant on the suspicion that someone may be in possession of a small amount of drugs."

The ACLU concluded, "The use of a SWAT team to execute a search warrant essentially amounts to the use of paramilitary tactics to conduct domestic criminal investigations in searches of people's homes."

The ACLU's report documents the way in which the federal government, including now under the Obama administration, has actively facilitated the militarization of local police forces, "in large part through federal programs that have armed state and local law enforcement agencies with the weapons and tactics of war, with almost no public discussion or oversight."

These programs include the Department of Defense's 1033 Program, grants by the Department of Homeland Security to local law enforcement agencies and the Department of Justice's JAG Program.

The Defense Department's 1033 Program is operated by its Law Enforcement Support Office, whose motto is "from warfighter to crimefighter." This program has transferred more than $4.3 billion in property from the

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military to local police departments. More than a third of the arms provided through the program are brand new, going from arms manufacturers directly to police departments.

The annual amount of equipment funneled through the military into paramilitary police units has skyrocketed. The Defense Department transferred $1 million of property in 1990, $324 million in 1995, and nearly $450 million in 2013. Local police agencies receive the military surplus property for free. The report notes that the federal government "requires agencies that receive 1033 equipment to use it within one year of receipt, so there can be no doubt that participation in this program creates an incentive for law enforcement agencies to use military equipment."

Through this program, about five hundred law enforcement agencies have received Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, which can withstand roadside bombs and sport turrets capable of mounting heavy machine guns and automatic grenade launchers.

Keene, New Hampshire, a city of 23,409, received one of these vehicles after it submitted an application declaring that city's annual pumpkin festival was "a potential terrorism target in need of protection with an APC [Armored Personnel Carrier]." Ohio State University Police received an armored vehicle in order to provide a "presence" at the college's football games.

The report took particular notice of Arizona, one of the most heavily militarized states in the country. It observed, "The Pinal County Sheriff 's office, for example, obtained 94 rifles, two armored vehicles, and three helicopters. The Coconino County Sheriff 's office obtained six armored vehicles, and the Mojave County Sheriff 's office has four helicopters. Arizona law enforcement, designed to serve and protect communities, is instead equipped to wage a war."

The militarization of police forces has proceeded largely in secret, with almost no oversight at any level of government. The one exception is Maryland, which requires SWAT teams to file periodical reports on their activities. The law requiring these disclosures was passed after a SWAT team raided the home of Cheye Calvo, the mayor of Berwyn Heights. "The county police department then held Calvo and his family at gunpoint for hours and killed his two dogs, on the basis of a misguided investigation in which Calvo and his wife were wrongly suspected of being involved in a marijuana transaction."

Police forces justify their use of SWAT teams mostly on claims that that a suspect may have a gun. But since half of American households own guns, the strict application of such criteria would mean that every search warrant should be executed as a military raid. Amazingly, the report concluded that, "of the incidents in which officers believed a weapon would be present, a weapon (typically a firearm such as a handgun but rarely an assault rifle) was actually found at the scene in only 35 percent of cases."

The use of so-called no-knock warrants, in which residents are not informed that their homes will be searched, but instead have their doors and windows smashed, have been justified on the grounds that they would prevent suspects from destroying evidence. Yet the ACLU study found that "in 36 percent of SWAT deployments for drug searches, and possibly in as many as 65 percent of such deployments, no contraband of any sort was found."

The report notes that paramilitary doctrine is deliberately instilled into officers through training. "We trainers have spent the past decade trying to ingrain in our students the concept that the American police officer works a battlefield every day he patrols his sector," wrote Glenn French, the Sergeant of the Police Department Training Bureau in Sterling Heights, Michigan.

A training document used by the Farmington, Missouri Police Department included a piece written by an organization called Killology Research Group, which concludes that "preparations for attacks on American schools that will bring rivers of blood and staggering body counts are well underway in Islamic terrorist camps." The document refers to police officers as "troops" and citizens as "civilians."

The militarization of police forces in the United States is one component of the sweeping attacks on democratic rights throughout the country, including the Obama administration's assassination of American citizens and the unrestrained illegal domestic spying carried out by US intelligence agencies. These attacks are rooted in the pervasive growth of social inequality and the deep-seated fear within the financial aristocracy of the emergence of mass popular opposition to its rule.

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