An army of cops in a community with little reason to trust them

By Steve Thorngate
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There are two general themes in the chilling reports out of Ferguson, Missouri. The first is racism: white authorities, in an old and shameful tradition, are denying black citizens their basic rights. A white cop shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. Now, a whole bunch of mostly white cops are using violence to prevent mostly black protesters from exercising their first amendment rights (and mocking them for trying). My earlier post joined the chorus taking up this theme.

The other thread is the general militarization of local police in recent years. Local departments are gearing up to combat threats real or imagined, aided by the Pentagon and Homeland Security. Excessive use of civil forfeiture, sometimes enforced by SWAT team, helps fund this militarization. In a chilling turn in Ferguson, journalists are being targeted. It's frightening: cops who don't seem to know what they're doing have massive firepower with which to do it. Officer Friendly is vanishing, replaced by a commando with all the gear but little of the training and no clear enemy:

> How come nobody blames THIS violence on video games?
> pic.twitter.com/Dvc9N6n7gq
>
> — § (@lawremipsum) August 12, 2014

Let's be clear, however: these are hardly two separate narratives. An ACLU report on police militarization finds that overpowered police raids for drug busts and search warrants disproportionately target black Americans (pdf). That shouldn't be surprising; police overreach has long taken a special interest in black people. "War on crime" policies have given lower-income black urbanites good reason to distrust the police. "When it comes to black and brown communities," says Jamelle Bouie, "there's a long-standing culture of aggressive, punitive policing."

And as police forces become armies, the other pieces tend to fall into place:

If officers are soldiers, it follows that the neighborhoods they patrol are battlefields. And if they're working battlefields, it follows that the population is the enemy. And because of correlations, [rooted](#) in historical injustice, between crime and income and income and race, the enemy population will consist largely of people of color, and especially of black men. Throughout the country, police officers are capturing, imprisoning, and killing black males at a ridiculous clip, waging a very literal war on people like Michael Brown.

[President Obama just made a statement on Ferguson](#). It was unsurprisingly uninspiring—as a president with polarized support, and as a black leader held to all the usual racist standards, [it wouldn't help much for him to betray any outrage here](#). Senator Rand Paul [came out stronger](#), calling for the demilitarization of police forces while also naming racial disparities.

"There are certainly passionate differences about what has happened," said the president in his studiously cautious statement. Maybe so. But anyone who thinks the cops in Ferguson are just reacting appropriately to genuine threats should watch this video, in which clearly peaceful protesters are blatantly attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets:

Yes, a few protesters eventually threw some of the tear gas canisters back at the cops. That's [hardly cause for dismissing protesters as rioters](#)—as if rioting (or [looting a convenience store](#), or [the presence of one Black Panther member](#)) [would somehow disqualify them from also being legitimate protesters](#).

A mostly black American town is under quasi-military occupation by mostly white cops. The images are shocking. But for many black Americans, this isn't an aberration from normal relations with the police. It's a heightened example of normal.