

## Trickle Down Militarism

By Luther Lee McPherson IV

In the wake of protests surrounding police brutality, many are asking themselves if the violent crackdown on people in the streets represents a measured response. Indeed, countless examples have surfaced of forceful tactics including brutal shoves, kicks, and baton strikes. Not to mention close-range rubber bullets, fired with the care of a fifth grader who just got his first Nerf gun and tear gas deployed with reckless abandon as if it were mere stage smoke at an Alice Cooper concert. Somehow, the sight of MRAP armored vehicles and Black Hawk helicopters fail to communicate to the public that this is merely a matter of community policing.

So if you have seen all of this take place over the past few days and are left wondering how meaningful steps can be taken to disarm police departments, one should look to the real source of the equipment and training police have been increasingly modeled on: the US military. Accompanying departmental decisions for bombastic police presence, municipalities have also actively engaged in the criminalization of demonstrators. The securitization of free expression has resulted in aggressive tactics such as announcing curfews shortly before implementation as a means to criminalize any protestors, peaceful or otherwise. This is why the problem of militarization cannot solely be laid at the feet of police, military, and those in Washington D.C. Indeed, this mentality runs much deeper in American society than commonly recognized. Demilitarization of the police is only possible through a demilitarization of wider American society. Following decades of foreign interventionist wars its really no wonder that policing in the United States has come to resemble combat exercises rather than the work of public servants.

Some attempts have been made to demilitarize police forces fairly recently, particularly in the case of an executive order implemented by the Obama administration in 2015 to limit access to some military surplus equipment. This was a limitation placed on the 1033 program, which facilitates the sale of military surplus equipment to civilian police departments. Some of the equipment prohibited by this order included bayonets, tracked vehicles, grenade launchers, and .50 caliber rifles. However well-intentioned the policy, it failed to shift the overall combat-oriented culture which is at the forefront of the national conversation today by not addressing the core desire for these armaments on the part of police departments. To complicate matters further, this order was later quietly overturned by the Trump administration in 2017. It is clear though, that limiting access to arms is not enough.

More needs to be done to shift the policing culture which enthusiastically desires militarization. A 2018 University of Texas study found that former combat veterans working as police officers in Dallas were 2.9 times more likely to fire their weapon on the job than a fellow officer who had never been in the military. What is more, military veterans who never saw action

were still 1.94 times more apt to discharge their weapon when compared to a colleague with no military training. This data should not read, however as an indictment on veterans, rather it illustrates how police department training has failed not only these officers, but indeed the wider populace. As previously stated, the problem is much larger than mere department-level. By failing to stand for peace, human dignity, and measured justice abroad, the U.S. has created the conditions for these values to erode from within its own society.

Here is how pursuing a restrained foreign policy would lead to tangible changes in relation to policing. Scaling back military spending and conflict zones would serve to stifle the military surplus pipeline of equipment to domestic police forces including firearms, armored vehicles, and various other tactical gear. Ending joint training sessions between combat units and local police, coupled with police training more focused on service-oriented community policing, could go a long way to change the mentality of domestic policing. By virtue of a reeled-in military policy, less combat veterans will be discharged, thereby alleviating the struggle of reintegration into society thanks to simply having less Americans deployed in combat situations. This should translate to less combat-hardened police officers in American communities by lessening the flow of veterans through the military-to-police pipeline. Better training for current veterans on how to separate their former role in the military as a soldier to a community-oriented police officer who holds public service as their first priority should also help with reintegration.

Stunningly, the U.S. in its self-styled role as global policeman has routinely failed to recognize that strongarm tactics against asymmetric countries only beget further resentment. One needs only to look upon the myriad of police actions in the Middle East to see how U.S. leadership has been less-than-constructive. How could anyone think that strong arming protestors would do anything except further escalate the resentment that has boiled for generations of people treated unfairly by the police and the system at large? How many times does the U.S. have to get it wrong at home and abroad before the impulse to tear gas and bomb, respectively, is not indulged? Certainly Trump and other's suggested use of active duty military on U.S. soil to suppress the protests is the worst sort of indulgence yet offered by them who never met a problem that couldn't be solved with a threat or a gun, as if only able to resort to the worst of human nature at all times. Perhaps now Americans can understand the cycle of mistrust rife amongst the people of the Middle East and elsewhere who have been subject to U.S. policing interventions.

If the U.S. continues to delude itself of its role as world police, the world of everyday Americans will continue to be mired in ever-expanding policing. It is only through a fundamental rethinking of American foreign policy, that demilitarization has a chance to advent in the U.S. Until a shift in foreign policy occurs though, the cycle of trickle-down militarism will continue in the U.S. This is why an approach to international relations which abandons interventionism in favor of a peace-first off-shore balancing approach is critical, not only in a foreign, but also a domestic sense.