

## Waging War vs. Keeping the Peace

### *Rethinking How We Hire Cops*

By Michael I. Niman

One hot, muggy summer day a few years back I was walking with a friend across a public university campus in Buffalo, New York, when we saw a pair of police officers sporting bullet-proof vests and “high and tight” military-style hairdos while patrolling the nearly empty campus. “What’s up with the combat costume?” my friend wanted to know. “That’s just how they dress,” I responded. There were no precipitating incidents. No tactical threats. My friend’s concern, however, made me realize that this really was inappropriate dress for a community police force patrolling what has historically been a peaceful, tranquil community. So I asked a veteran of the force to explain. “It’s the young guys,” he responded. “They’ve got a whole different style.”

He went on to describe the aggressive culture among young police recruits, many of whom had returned from overseas combat. This police agency, like most, allowed a bit of leeway in their uniform regulations. Officers had the choice to gear up with Kevlar vests, even in the absence of any threat to them and despite the implied threat that such dress visually communicates to the public. I learned that these officers would regularly wear such attire to meetings with dormitory residents and student leaders, as if they were expecting incoming random fire. The military haircuts were just an extension of the look. Incidentally, beards were banned as somehow projecting the wrong message, as was male officers’ hair that strayed over the ear.

Many of us, especially in the alternative press, have been talking about the creeping militarization of our police forces since at least the Reagan administration. I remember back in the late 1980s when the Broadway Area Business Association in Buffalo asked the local police to stop parking their full-track armored personnel carrier in front of one of their precincts because, like the aforementioned vests and hairdos, it projected the wrong message to the community. The tank-like vehicle in question, which tore apart the street the one and only time the police deployed it in a drug bust, was a gift from the Reagan administration. It was the beginning of the same program that eventually gave us the obscene military display in Ferguson, Missouri, this past year (the response to protests after officer Darren Wilson fatally shot Michael Brown) and at about a dozen Occupy camps before that.

What made Ferguson a historical punctuation mark was the fact that the Ferguson Police Department’s remarkably stupid deployment of military force and aggression was so similar to visuals we were seeing from war zones in Ukraine, Gaza, Iraq, and Syria, and because the mainstream press actually began to cover domestic police militarization. Some thirty years later than it should have, the nation is finally discussing the brutal police tactics that communities of color and nonviolent political activists have been falling victim to for decades.

However, the focus has largely been on the military equipment rather than the military culture. This is to be expected from a techno-fetishistic media that has for decades covered U.S. wars in much the same way, marveling at the so-called smart weapons while mostly ignoring the casual-



ties and hatred they create. But what we saw in Ferguson wasn't just the deployment of inappropriate technology—it was also the deployment of an inappropriate attitude and strategy, one more becoming of an occupation army than a community police force.

And that's the problem with this myopic focus on military equipment. At the risk of sounding like the National Rifle Association, it's the military mentality that's the bigger problem. The toys could have stayed in the garage and rotted.

Looking at the human factor, however, is politically much more dangerous—because it means we have to question the way police officers are recruited and hired. A police officer is essentially a social worker with a gun. Beyond accident and medical response calls, most calls are of a social nature, often defusing a social crisis, be it a robbery, a gang turf war, or a marital dispute. Some police departments require college training in areas such as psychology, criminal justice, or public administration, with criminal justice courses usually administered by sociology departments since policing is a social function of society. A degree in sociology and social work experience would be ideal, with the arms and martial arts training occurring once a candidate is recruited. To hit the streets, the successful officer needs all of this. Even so, seasoned police officers often point out that a good mediator could avoid

using force in all but the most extreme cases. Put simply, you can't successfully address social problems with brute military force. Historically such strategies, while maintaining despots in power for the short term, ultimately have seeded revolutions, for better or worse. Syria is the latest horrific example.

Much of our current police recruiting, however, is now geared to recruiting warriors over social workers. Let's look at the Philadelphia Police Department. I start with them since they executed the most grotesque use of military power in modern history—and they did it without the state-of-the-art equipment we saw in Ferguson. In an attempt to end a 1985 SWAT standoff with armed suspects, the Philadelphia PD dropped a crude incendiary bomb from a helicopter onto a row house in a black middle-class neighborhood, killing six adult suspects and five children and destroying approximately sixty neighboring homes. So, almost thirty years later, how have they changed?

Unfortunately, a military culture still dominates the department. In their recruiting material they state, "The Police Department is structured as a paramilitary organization. ...This means that we employ a culture and protocols that closely approximate those of the armed forces." This language is certainly not unique to the Philadelphia PD. In various forms it's echoed across the country. On the West Coast, the San Jose Police Department describes itself

## CLASSIC HUMANIST

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years ago...



Crime may be defined as an antisocial act that is illegal or violates the rights of others. While punishment is not illegal, it *does* violate the rights of others, and, if it were perpetrated without cause, it would be considered a crime. For example: fines are a form of *stealing* property or money; spanking is a form of *assault and battery*; imprisonment is a form of *kidnapping*; and forced labor is a form of *slavery*. Generally, people do not perceive these acts as crimes

because they are committed as part of the system of justice in our society. But the effect on the individual who is punished is often the same. The punished person feels like a victim of a crime and, more importantly, acts the way a victim of a crime acts: he or she feels resentful and seeks retribution.

—Robert and Delorys Blume,  
"The Crime of Punishment,"  
November/December 1989

as “having a paramilitary structure,” and police departments across the country post variants on the same language. In truth, the organization of any police department is correctly described as paramilitary as it has rank and officers, a rigid chain of command, and uniforms reflecting rank. This is not where the problem lies.

The problem arises when the Philadelphia and San Jose police departments, and, to various degrees, hundreds of others, go on to explain that because they are paramilitaries, they have found that veterans can transition easily from active military duty into their departments, with some, like the Los Angeles Police Department, actively sending recruiters to military bases around the world. Many, if not most, police departments offer some sort of military preference in hiring, either by adding points to civil service scores, waiving educational requirements, or some combination of the two.

I need to be clear that veterans have a lot to offer. Understanding a military command structure does help with understanding a police bureaucracy, and, more importantly, the discipline and restraint that a successful professional soldier learns and practices are essential to success as a police officer. But it is also important to understand that the skillset and experience needed for successful community policing is extremely different than that which combat veterans acquire deployed as an occupation force in a military theater of operation surrounded

by well-trained and well-equipped enemies sworn to their destruction. Waging war and keeping the peace are different jobs and require different skills.

On the blogosphere numerous veterans have articulated their disgust at the paramilitary tactics recently seen in Ferguson. Writing for *Business Insider*, former U.S. Marine and Afghanistan combat veteran Paul Szoldra points out that his unit wore less military equipment when it rolled in Afghanistan than what he was seeing in Ferguson. He quotes various combat veterans voicing their disapproval of the militarization of a community police force while pointing out how militarization is “counter-productive to domestic policing and has to stop.” Szoldra ends his piece by writing, “If there’s one thing I learned in Afghanistan, it’s this: You can’t win a person’s heart and mind when you are pointing a rifle at his or her chest.”

Veterans tend to be excellent students, and veterans’ benefits often afford them the opportunity to go to school and acquire community policing skills. But fast tracking warriors from the battlefield to police service, as many departments are doing, can be a deadly mistake. ▣

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Yet matters are not hopeless, for with a proper recognition of the human estate, there must also come an awareness of the challenges and of the possibilities that await us; and there may be a source of genuine confidence and optimism, not despair and cynicism. For while there is death and failure, there is also life and success. And with life come great and bountiful promises: these are the joys of human love and shared experience, the excitement of creativity, the power of reason, the possibilities that we as human beings have some control over our destinies. We can, for example,

alleviate distress and suffering and help to create an equitable society. If we grant that not all human sorrows and evils can be avoided, still the human situation is not totally irremediable; and with some confidence in our powers, particularly of thought and intelligence, we may help to build a good life. Scientific intelligence in this regard is a great instrument, though it is not an omnipotent *open sesame* to salvation or certainty.

—Paul Kurtz, “The Case for Naturalistic Humanism,” November/December 1964