With the recent events of police shootings and domestic terrorism, many are calling into question whether our law enforcement strategies are standing up to the ideals that police everywhere are known to follow—aptly, to protect and to serve. Claims of lingering societal racism and police brutality are under constant scrutiny by social and police reform activists and media coverage.\(^1\) Other studies state these claims are myths being reported daily as facts and are, sadly, finding their way into changing public policy.\(^2\) Tension between these arguments was succinctly stated best as “if you’re pro–Black Lives Matter, you’re assumed to be anti-police, and if you’re pro-police, then you surely hate black people.”\(^3\) But why should this concern the Department of Defense (DOD)?

At some point, the image of civilian police changed from the popular public servant, such as Sheriff Andy Griffith of the 1960s’ *The Andy Griffith Show*, to the strict enforcer of the law, as portrayed in the movies *RoboCop* (1987) or *Judge Dredd* (1995). Today, civilian police agencies’ capabilities and mindsets
are intimately related to DOD training and resourcing. Recent questions over similarities between civilian police and the military involve the use of a robot and explosives to end a standoff between a shooter and Dallas police after several officers were murdered in July 2016. This event grasped national headlines just as the 1992 Los Angeles riots did, and again, in 2005, during Hurricane Katrina.4 In fact, these instances have taken place in a variety of forms since the late 1960s and early 1970s.5 Two thoughts come to mind. First, during all these events that involved either military cooperation or equipment, the Posse Comitatus Act must have been a topic of conversation. If so, and after so many instances, civilian police and DOD have supposedly found an acceptable balance between these civil events and military intervention. In contrast, however, this article argues that the militarization of a civilian police force undermines the Posse Comitatus Act, and DOD’s equipment, training, and transitioning personnel have fueled this evolution for decades.

The Posse Comitatus Act and Police Militarization

In general, the Posse Comitatus Act’s intent is that the “military is currently prohibited by Federal statute from participating in domestic law enforcement.”6 This act was established in 1878 and allowed lawmakers to sanction those who “willfully use members of the Army or Air Force to execute the laws” of the United States.7 These instances do occur in modern times, but parties disagree on how lawful their usage is versus their effectiveness toward the enforcement of the law.

One specific example would be the Washington, DC, Beltway sniper attacks, which occurred from October 2 to 24, in 2002. Two individuals systematically committed 10 murders and 3 near-fatal attacks in the National Capital Region via the use of a Bushmaster XM-15 rifle. The 3-week spur of attacks solicited heavy national media coverage. This “led to the enlistment of military aircraft and crews to search the Maryland and Virginia suburbs of Washington for the gunman.”8 When military personnel supplied their utilities in aid of law enforcement, civilian police units found it hard to ignore those units’ methods given their effectiveness in locating a sniper’s “point of origin,” just as the military was trained to do in combat scenarios; however, if the sniper was found, it was expected that the civilian police would make contact.9 In fact, it was found that “aerial photographic and visual search and surveillance by military personnel [did] not violate the Posse Comitatus Act.”10

In times of great civil need the military’s logistical capabilities, not to mention manpower and leadership support, are almost too invaluable for civilian police not to utilize. This was the issue particularly in the Katrina aftermath when “[many] police officers actually turned in their badges so to speak and just walked off of the job,” in which the “National Guard was the quickest response force that the government could provide to fill that void.”11 Civilian police organizations, even those not in the midst of a disaster relief effort, understand the expanded capabilities that the military provides where civilian police in turn attempt to recreate these same aspects and features within themselves. This militarization could be what is causing reform activists to speculate that we are “going too far.”12 That implies that we are superseding the original intent of the Posse Comitatus Act by simply transitioning military styles, skills, technology, and tactics to civilian police officers. While we are not allowing the military to wear a badge, we are allowing those with badges to don combat helmets—and the mentality that comes with it.

When a civilian police force wields military equipment, it requires training. This training includes a combat mindset—an ingredient that may be more powerful than any assault rifle. The change of character and personality that a civilian police officer experiences through militarization may alter his or her perception of what a public servant’s purpose truly is. In this case, the civilian police are transforming into quasi–military police, and with that comes a unique area of self-identity that drives that behavior.

Beginning with structure, researchers who study civilian policing versus militarized policing claim that there is beginning to be a “blurring of the boundary between policing and soldiering.”13 As mentioned, civilian police organizations receive an ever-increasing number of tactics and ideologies from the military. This training includes, but is not limited to, weapons manipulation in high-stress environments, low-visibility and urban tactical operations, counterterrorism operations, and intelligence-gathering operations. Former Servicemembers have started their own weapons training curricula or have been hired by civilian weapons training academies, such as those offered by Magpul Core, which offer courses that teach militarily developed techniques.14 Some of these courses are offered both to law enforcement and current military members. Civilian police take this training back to their agencies and then train each other on the methods.

One not-so-recent change in police work involves the use of military-grade weapons by police across the Nation. In addition, police are also given ballistic protection that is able to stop projectiles fired from similar weapons in an effort to defend against violent criminals and provide the ability to fight back against ever-evolving, capable criminals and terrorist threats. It is reasonable to want law enforcement officers to have the most reliable and effective equipment, but are we attempting to focus on officer survivability or are we trying to win in a combat environment? Arguments can be made that both are occurring and are necessary. The procurement of such gear pressed the Barack Obama administration, both in rhetoric and in executive action, to prohibit the sale of “military-style equipment from the Federal government to civilian police.”15 But not all equipment procurements are being used to fight crime. Civilian police are also using military vehicles to aid in rescues and natural disaster relief efforts, but opinions on usefulness in the civilian police community differ.16

With this equipment and training, civilian police are continually developing...
specific teams more specialized than the easily recognizable Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams developed in the late 1960s. A quick online search will find units that range from the U.S. Border Patrol Tactical Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Joint Terrorism Task Force (NJTTF), U.S. Marshal’s Special Operations Group, U.S. Department of Energy’s Special Response Team, to the U.S. Park Police SWAT team, among numerous other state and local tactical/assault teams. Interestingly, the NJTTF has Active-duty military liaisons specifically provided by the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command—a division of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps. These teams are jointly using practices learned by their parent agencies decades ago from their military mentors, if they are not still learning them today.

Some have suggested that the Central Intelligence Agency originally developed many of these practices for Agency operatives. These tactical training regimens involved techniques such as counter-surveillance, identifying dead drops, and eluding law enforcement. These tactics have good intent behind them, but the fact that their roots come from “espionage” and “special operations” should be a concern for the average citizen. Moreover, civilian police attend training with military members, sometimes through formal joint training events or by chance encounters at a local gun range or civilian training academy, and adapt the methodologies learned and bring them back to their home police departments. These militaristic mindsets carry over when Servicemembers communicate these same military principles to civilian police officers.

In the U.S. Armed Forces, Servicemembers are taught to follow all the orders of the officers appointed over them and the orders of the President of the United States as long as they are legal, moral, and ethical. This is a militaristic hierarchy of control and is enforced by the chain of command. This same chain is replicated in part in civilian police organizations. For a police officer to advance in the hierarchy of the department, “the policeman must exhibit behavior indicative of a ‘relatively unquestioning belief in and acceptance of the organizational system.” The same could be said for the U.S. military. If Servicemembers do not adapt to the doctrine and culture of their unit, then they will likely not progress within the ranks. Many civilian police are no different. This is what two researchers call the “quasi-military command model.” Civilian police
departments that do indeed practice this leadership model demonstrate behavior that is naturally derived from the Armed Forces. This traditional practice in the military does produce an efficient style of mission execution, and this command model is effectively used with all other aspects of the military’s operational specialties. This may be giving civilian police officers, including some civilian police who are also retired military, a false sense of militaristic purpose. This goes deeper into the personal identity of the individual civilian police officer, and how he or she sees themselves working within the community.

This militarization of police departments may be having a negative effect on police officers’ self-defined job descriptions as they “began to confuse the role of police officers with a [S]ervice orientation with that of military personnel engaged in a domestic war.”20 This may point toward the militarization of civilian police that, in turn, creates concern for opponents of these changes. Despite the Posse Comitatus Act, which protects us from the use of Active-duty Servicemembers against our citizens, we may have bypassed this act all together simply by recreating soldiers in the civilian sector of law enforcement. While our civilian police forces are transforming to adapt to new threats, they are sacrificing significant perspectives of Service orientations and the community openness that goes with it.

How Communities View This Change

Among U.S. citizens, 65 percent of Americans admit that “police officers have a very dangerous job” and, despite conflicts between both sides of the argument on how policing should be conducted, as many as 58 percent state that they themselves “show too little respect for police officers these days.”21 Over the last 25 years, a popular method called “community policing” has attempted to create a mutual support effect on the fear of crime, and thus on the overall welfare and satisfaction of the citizens of a neighborhood. In general, community policing has a basic idea: if the police take the time to get to know their patrol areas’ citizens better, talk to them about their daily lives, and take note of urban issues that the city can solve, this would result in the citizens of that area being more apt to report crimes and to assist the officers in helping to reduce and solve crimes. Police usually reduce the amount of time in patrol vehicles and increase the use of bicycles or the frequency of foot patrols. Some programs resulted in the resident citizens of the targeted areas feeling as though their police force was “more hospitable than central police [traditional patrol officers]” and thus the citizens’ levels of contentment were increased.22 They felt as though their rights had been protected, and they were more concerned about fighting crimes by assisting law enforcement rather than shunning police and fearing that their own rights were being sacrificed.

In contrast, there have been examples where community policing was the intent but, based on witness accounts, appeared to have a negative effect. In Richland County, South Carolina, between 2005 and 2007, the sheriff’s department attempted to integrate community policing while still maintaining a standard of militarized policing. Community Action Teams (CATs) were developed in order to meet with citizens and community leaders in an effort to gain intelligence on illicit drug networks. However, after meeting with community leaders and citizens during the day, the people who made up the CATs would coordinate and execute counterdrug operations in the form of surveillance and raids during the night.23 This method of community policing, swiftly followed by militarized counterdrug operations, unraveled the concept of community engagement, and citizens began to lose trust in their civilian police. Soon, CATs were avoided altogether by citizens.24 Incidentally, the county sheriff at the time, Sheriff Leon Lott, was an institutionalized and trained Military Police officer with additional ties to the special operations forces community.25 Even without concrete statistics on the effectiveness of Community Action Teams, it can be argued that even the “appearance” of militarized policing dismantles any trust a community may have with its police force.

Possible Solutions

Eliminating Posse Comitatus.

The Posse Comitatus Act has several good intentions, but in recent times the act has been described as “archaic.”26 Additionally, any military response today is usually complicated and difficult to work through solely due to the act’s own bureaucracy; thus a solution could quite possibly be to eliminate it.27 This action would favor civilian police as it would widen the path the military is already on in assisting law enforcement. While civilian police would still interact with civilians on a daily basis, the military would theoretically still only ever need to be deployed in times such as crises of either natural or manmade events, but could also be used more quickly in law enforcement capacities when needed. The repeal of the act would likely necessitate a lengthy congressional action to draft and approve, but to maintain the current, loose balance between militarization and civilian policing, a recommendation could be to adopt a system more closely related to that of France.

On November 13, 2015, France suffered the deadliest attacks on its soil since World War II when 130 innocent people were killed in Paris by Islamic extremists. Given the complexity and lethality of the attacks, the French response began from a disadvantage. Numerous issues already existed with French police structure, such as a lack of history of community policing and a tradition of highly centralized decisionmaking.28 However, while their immediate response has been criticized for lacking sufficient firepower and coordination, the results were surprisingly successful as local civilian police effectively contained terrorists only minutes after their initial attacks.29 France’s police structure is completely nationalized and is broken down into two police forces: the Police Nationale, essentially representing the civilian police, and the Gendarmerie Nationale, essentially representing the military.30 When the attacks occurred, it was the
civic police force that responded first, containing the terrorists across the city, namely at the Bataclan Concert Hall. After the attacks, an aggressive search was initiated where “within 48 hours of the attacks, 168 homes had been raided and 104 people had been placed under house arrest.” This was accomplished by both the Police Nationale and Gendarmerie Nationale—a logistical feat that could not have been achieved without military assistance. In this case, using the military as law enforcement swiftly aided in not only ending the attacks but also bringing to justice those who had escaped or aided the terrorists.

In any case, a certain amount of trust must be placed in the military that they will not overstep their bounds. There will always be those who undoubtedly conclude that we are allowing the Armed Forces to gain too much freedom and that we should fear an eventual coup d’état. Ironically, this is exactly what happened recently in Turkey. On July 15, 2016, a faction of the Turkish military opposed the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, so strongly that it attempted to topple the government and impose martial law “in order to restore democracy.” Regarding the United States, there has never been an organized coup against our own government by the military. A reminder: the Armed Forces swear oaths to defend the Constitution and obey orders from anyone else. At home and abroad, the Armed Forces have time to determine whether separated Servicemembers and many military leaders and civilian police agencies would be hard pressed not to follow the law without legal consequences, as well as regular media coverage scrutinizing their decision-making processes.

Continuing with the Obama administration’s intent, prohibitions on military equipment procurement by civilian police agencies would be maintained as well as elaborated on. This would require a comprehensive review of what equipment has already made its way into civilian markets, as well as what has been restricted but authorized to sell only to law enforcement. However, any measures taken to cut the direct link between the military and civilian law enforcement would not stop the sale of military-style equipment from civilian companies that resource both the defense and law enforcement industries separately. Besides equipment procurement, joint training between the military and civilian police would require closer scrutiny to ensure that military-specific tactics and techniques do not find their way into civilian police agencies without an approved need. Sadly, the control measure for such a restriction would generate a maelstrom of bureaucracy. That supervisory oversight to ensure prohibitions are adhered to and training regimens are screened for necessity in civilian law enforcement agencies would add another time-sapping requirement to DOD’s burden. Nonetheless, the solution of trading delays could generate a maelstrom of bureaucracy.

The solution of trading delays could allow DOD to influence, if not control, joint training events could ultimately allow DOD to influence, if not control, the military; however, this issue may be more appropriately addressed by a third course of action that DOD could implement itself.

**DOD Oversight on Military Relations with Civilian Police.** If Americans trust their military, then perhaps our military can serve them directly by changing DOD’s relationship with civilian police themselves. Enforcing Posse Comitatus at the DOD level could present the best of both worlds for both opponents of militarization and civilian police.

Continuing with policies that prohibit equipment procurement, DOD would not only adhere to the already published list set out by the White House but also develop a required internal “trading delay” for any other equipment sales intended for combat—slightly similar to trading delays as seen in the stock market. But unlike stock market trading delays, where the delay amounts to hours, the DOD trading delay would need to be determined in years, or even decades, but not so long that the sale would render equipment obsolete by the time civilian police would require it. Hence, if DOD sells combat equipment too soon, there will be no difference between the military and police on American streets, and if DOD sells combat equipment too late, civilian police and similar commercial industries will attempt to recreate their own, potentially less-refined solutions. The solution of trading delays could allow DOD to influence, if not control, this conundrum.

Regarding training and mindsets, joint training events could ultimately be restricted to both disaster relief and counterterrorism operations. Disaster relief is quite simple pertaining to logistical, medical, search and recovery support, and so on. Enforcing policies against the transferring of counterterrorism operational knowledge, specifically knowledge involving combat techniques, would require more scrutiny. While it would be easier to deny any and all combat-related techniques from being taught to civilian police, that course of action unfortunately overlooks the
potential for DOD to improve civilian police survivability and service to their citizens if it were to impart at least de-escalation and less-than-lethal training to civilian police, which most civilian police already receive. An example would be the U.S. Marine Corps Inter-Service Non-Lethal Individual Weapons Instructor Course, which for 2 weeks focuses on the proper use and familiarization of TASERs, batons, OC (pepper spray), ocular and acoustic hailing devices, and verbal de-escalation techniques, among other techniques. The course culminates with an understanding by the police officer that the overarching theory behind less-than-lethal capabilities is that, to avoid lethal situations, less-than-lethal options should be used “early and often.” Accordingly, a more favorable action for DOD would be to classify lethal techniques to a higher security clearance more strictly and lower those of less-than-lethal capability than it has in the past, allowing civilian police to still benefit from those techniques that are absolutely “must share.” This again would constrain military personnel from imparting large amounts of knowledge to civilian police, preventing further instances where police misconduct could occur due to militarization, especially when citizen encounters result in the use of lethal force.

Finally, as retired Servicemembers leave the military, a control measure would need to be implemented to ensure that they do not accelerate the procurement of these techniques to civilian police, essentially creating a loophole around both equipment and training restriction policies. Congress has addressed this type of loophole before in the Defense Authorization Measures of 2008 and 2009, coercing DOD to enact a policy to prevent this. The existing policy is applied to “very senior employees” of DOD concerning defense contracting companies where they are “subject to a two-year restriction” from being employed by those civilian contractors. This policy has seen controversy and is alleged to have “done little to slow the rush” of Servicemembers transitioning to civilian agencies involved with the defense industry. But the policy could be more effective if first enforced by DOD before the Servicemember separates from the Service and, subsequently, by the Department of Justice where waivers to that policy would be required by the former Servicemember, and second if the policy were implemented specifically toward those in the military who wish to
pursue civilian policing positions where a 2-year restriction also applies. This could mitigate that rush and allow a period of reflection for those Servicemembers post-retirement before joining the ranks of civilian law enforcement.

As recent as 2016, a criminal justice survey was taken where 54 percent of Americans stated that “police using military weapons and armored vehicles is ‘going too far,’ while 46 percent [stated] these tools are ‘necessary for law enforcement purposes.’” This trend toward militarization cannot be ignored; however, this could be the natural progression of any law enforcement entity throughout a civilization’s lifetime. To combat new weapons and new threats and deter enemies of the peace, police will need improved forms of deterrence and apprehension. Thus, with ever-looming threats around the world, the last thing we want to do is lessen the abilities and effectiveness of uniformed civilian police officers.

Yet while police continue to serve and protect, there are those who are turning policing into something it was not meant to be. DOD has invented devastatingly effective means of eliminating its enemies, but there must be a moral question of whether we should allow civilian police to use those same methods on U.S. citizens. Even in ancient Rome, the natural progression of policing evolved from simple fire brigades meant to remedy the spread of a fire outbreak to an eventual strictly military force that was not the intent of its originator, Emperor Augustus. And much like in ancient Rome, this change in policing in the United States is something that DOD can and should assist in for the better while there is still time, and while it still has overwhelming favor with the American people. Choosing to maintain or eliminate Posse Comitatus will be a question to be answered in the future. We should hope, though, that DOD understands and accepts the role it has played in police development, the vast amount of influence it will continue to have on civilian police—and that it will have a response when this question is posed. JFQ

Notes

1 Emily Ekins, Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes Toward the Police. Results from a National Survey (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, December 7, 2016), 50–51.
3 The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Comedy Central, July 7, 2016. Specific excerpts from Noah were that “America has a problem within its police force,” “and although it is a problem that disproportionately affects black people, it’s not just a black problem. This is an American problem,” and that “with police shootings, it shouldn’t have to work that way.”
4 The California Army National Guard was activated on April 29, 1992, to assist civilian police with conducting law enforcement including conducting patrols within the city.
4 (Fall 2013), 1–5.


7 Ibid., 384; the Air Force was added into the language of Posse Comitatus in 1956, and the Navy and Marines were made subject to the act via a Department of Defense regulation in 1992.

8 Ibid., 387–388.

9 Philip Carter, “Why Can the Army Help Cops Catch the D.C. Sniper?” *Slate*, October 17, 2002, available at <www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/ex-plainer/2002/10/why_can_the_army_help_cops_catch_the_dc_sniper.html>. In addition to this exception, this article notes that there have been numerous, major exceptions to the act all in the name of quelling violence and fighting drugs or terrorism.


12 Ekins, 56–57.


14 These courses have been around for years, but the focus here is that instructors for many similar companies, not just Magpul Core, have regularly been former Servicemembers, particularly special operations personnel and law enforcement personnel who served in the military. See Magpul Core Web site at <www.maggpulcore.com/training>.

15 The ban was imposed on June 8, 2015. Items that were sold before the ban included 101 M113 armored personnel carriers, 6,600 bayonets, and almost 200 grenade launchers. While M113s and grenade launchers could be used for riot control, one must ask why issue civilian police bayonets, especially when some went to Lincoln University campus police. See John Kelly and Steve Reilly, “Many Local Police Already Got Banned Military Gear,” *USA Today*, May 18, 2015, available at <www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/05/18/police-already-have-military-gear-white-houses—ban/>.

16 Ibid. One M113 procured has “sat unused in a [police] agency’s barn for three years,” while others have used it frequently in arresting violent individuals and during rescue efforts.


19 Ibid., 2. This is apart from other models that deal with discretion rather than having a more authoritative system, such as the military.


21 Ekins, 74–75.


24 Ibid.


27 Ibid., 40.


30 Ibid., 9.

31 Ibid., 16.


35 For example, well-known weapons manufacturers like Sig Sauer produce weapons, such as the MPX, with specific capabilities including fully automatic actions and shorter barrel lengths that are advertised as only being permitted to be sold to the military or law enforcement. This weapon was demonstrated as recently as the summer of 2016 for an undisclosed military unit for this exact purpose. I attended this weapons demonstration, which was publicly released in Quantico, Virginia. Sig Sauer demonstrated the MPX weapon system to Servicemembers to aid in their missions dealing, coincidentally, with law enforcement.


37 *Must Share* is a phrase based on the traditional military classification system of sensitive military documents including “For Official Use Only” or “Law Enforcement Sensitive,” indicating that all relevant personnel should read or know the information marked as “Must Share” to improve the military unit as a whole toward their mission. It is a phrase used within the special operations forces community in particular.


40 David Francis, “DOD Retirees: From 4-Star General to 7-Figure Income,” *Fiscal Times*, June 5, 2013, available at <www.thefiscaltimes.com/Articles/2013/06/05/DOD-Retirees-From-4-star-General-to-7-Figure-Income>.

41 Ekins, 56–57.