Looking to curtail U.S. police militarization

By Radley Balko, Huffington Post

When the FBI finally located Whitey Bulger in 2010 after searching for 16 years, the reputed mobster was suspected of involvement in 19 murders in the 1970s and ’80s, and was thought to be armed with a massive arsenal of weapons. He was also 81 at the time, in poor physical health, and looking at spending the rest of his life in prison. Of all the people who might meet the criteria for arrest by a SWAT team, one might think that Bulger would top the list.

Yet instead of sending in a tactical team to tear down Bulger’s door in the middle of the night, the FBI took a different appraoch. After some investigating, FBI officials cut the lock on a storage locker Bulger used in the apartment complex where he was staying. They then had the property manager call Bulger to tell him someone may have broken into his locker. When Bulger went to investigate, he was arrested without incident. There was no battering ram, there were no flash grenades, there was no midnight assault on his home.

That peaceful apprehension of a known violent fugitive, found guilty this week of participating in 11 murders and a raft of other crimes, stands in stark contrast to the way tens of thousands of Americans are confronted each year by SWAT teams battering down their doors to serve warrants for nonviolent crimes, mostly involving drugs.

On the night of Jan. 5, 2011, for example, police in Framingham, Mass., raided a Fountain Street apartment that was home to Eurie Stamps and his wife, Norma Bushfan-Stamps. An undercover officer had allegedly purchased drugs from Norma’s 20-year-old son, Joseph Bushfan, and another man, Dwayne

Barrett, earlier that evening, and now the police wanted to arrest them. They took a battering ram to the door, set off a flash grenade, and forced their way inside.

As the SWAT team moved through the apartment, screaming at everyone to get on the floor, Officer Paul Duncan approached Eurie Stamps. The 68-year-old, not suspected of any crime, was watching a basketball game in his pajamas when the police came in.

By the time Duncan got to him in a hallway, Stamps was face-down on the floor with his arms over his head, as police had instructed him. As Duncan moved to pull Stamps' arms behind him, he says he fell backwards, somehow causing his gun to discharge, shooting Stamps. The grandfather of 12 was killed in his own home, while complying with police orders during a raid for crimes in which he had no involvement.

The Obama administration has begun talking about reforming the criminal justice system, notably this week, when Attorney General Eric Holder announced changes to how federal prosecutors will consider mandatory minimum sentences. If government leaders are looking for another issue to tackle, they might consider the astonishing evolution of America's police forces over the last 30 years.

Today in America, SWAT teams are deployed about 100 to 150 times per day, or about 50,000 times per year — a dramatic increase from the 3,000 or so annual deployments in the early 1980s, or the few hundred in the 1970s. The vast majority of today's deployments are to serve search warrants for drug crimes. But the use of SWAT tactics to enforce regulatory law also appears to be rising. This month, for example, a SWAT team raided the Garden of Eden, a sustainable growth farm in Arlington, Texas, supposedly to look for marijuana. The police found no pot, however, and the real intent of the raid appears to have been for code enforcement, as the officers came armed with an inspection notice for nuisance abatement.

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