

DOG DAY AFTERNOON: THE MILITARIZATION OF AMERICAN POLICE

I took great exception to President Obama's conduct in the Henry Louis Gates false arrest case in Cambridge Massachusetts. See [here](#) and [here](#). The reason I objected so strenuously is that there is a long growing problem in this country with the militarization of, and militancy by, police officers and the way Obama interjected himself into the matter prevented a valuable chance to publicly address the issue.

Courtesy of a chilling opinion piece slated for Sunday's Washington Post authored by Cheye M. Calvo, mayor of Berwyn Heights Maryland, we have another poignant reminder:

I remember thinking, as I kneeled at gunpoint with my hands bound on my living room floor, that there had been a terrible, terrible mistake.

An errant Prince George's County SWAT team had just forced its way into our home, shot dead our two black Labradors, Payton and Chase, and started ransacking our belongings as part of what would become a four-hour ordeal.

The police found nothing, of course, to connect my family and me to a box of drugs that they had been tracking and had delivered to our front door. The community – of which I am mayor – rallied to our side. A FedEx driver and accomplice were arrested in a drug trafficking scheme. Ultimately, we were cleared of any wrongdoing, but not before the incident drew international outrage.

You may remember this incident from the summer of 2008. It was, and is, a brutal reminder of

the awesome power the police exercise, and the casual belligerence and impunity with which they all too often abuse it. Mayor Calvo hits the problem on the head:

Yet, I remain captured by the broader implications of the incident. Namely, that my initial take was wrong: It was no accident but rather business as usual that brought the police to – and through – our front door.

In the words of Prince George's County Sheriff Michael Jackson, whose deputies carried out the assault, "the guys did what they were supposed to do" – acknowledging, almost as an afterthought, that terrorizing innocent citizens in Prince George's is standard fare. The only difference this time seems to be that the victim was a clean-cut white mayor with community support, resources and a story to tell the media.

What confounds me is the unmitigated refusal of county leaders to challenge law enforcement and to demand better – as if civil rights are somehow rendered secondary by the war on drugs.

Calvo goes on to explain how not only did the police abuse their authority, they attempted to falsify their story to cover up their misconduct and disregard of the Constitution and state laws. Then he describes the formation of what in criminal justice circles is known as "the blue line":

Yet, the wagons have circled in Upper Marlboro. The response is textbook: Law enforcement stands its ground and concedes no wrongdoing – and elected officials burrow their heads in the sand.

It is textbook indeed.

Abuse of the citizenry through over-projection of police power is becoming endemic to the United States, and the problem has only grown worse and been given cover through the fear and militarism resulting from the 9/11 attacks. The solution rests in the hands of each of us as citizens, the police work for us. But it is time for the discussion to be had and the problem addressed. Don't think the horror cannot happen to you, it can and the odds are increasing every day.