

BERNARD B. KERIK
Police Commissioner – City of New York (Retired)
www.thekerikgroup.com

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What the Deaths of Michael Brown and James Foley Can Teach Us

As a result of the police response to the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, President Barack Obama has ordered a review of the distribution of military equipment to local and state police, to determine three things: (1) whether the federal/military surplus programs are appropriate; (2) whether the amount of training provided for that equipment is sufficient, and (3) how well the government audits the use of the money and equipment provided to our police departments.

I strongly believe that there is a clear justification for local, state and federal police agencies in the United States to be well equipped, well trained, and be prepared for the threats of violence and terrorism that we face today and in the future.

To eliminate or diminish these types of units because of mistakes that may have been made in Ferguson may be a temporary "feel good" solution, but that will only last until the first time an extremely violent act or terrorist attack occurs and those units do not have the equipment or weapons necessary to defend themselves or protect the communities they serve.

Then they will either fail and be criticized for not doing their job, or far worse, they will die trying.

I believe President Obama's concerns are justified and understandable, but I just hope that those responsible for the review, as well as our congressional leaders are fair, objective and think this out long and hard before they make a decision either way.

We cannot ask our local and state police to put their lives on the line, yet not give them the tools, training, resources and support they need to do the very jobs we expect of them.

According to reports, the review will be led by the President's Domestic Policy Council, the National Security Council, the Office of Management and Budget, and relevant U.S. agencies including the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice and Treasury, and will also be carried out in coordination with the U.S. Congress.

Given what we saw in the immediate aftermath of the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown, where unarmed peaceful protesters were confronted by armored vehicles, assault weapons and, as one former military commander said, "more gear than I wore in Iraq or Afghanistan," I understand the President's concern. I understand the questions.

Personally, I believe the initial police response, however well intended, was an over-reaction under those specific circumstances. We saw unarmed peaceful protesters, standing with their hands in the air, met by officers pointing assault weapons at them. That response only exacerbated an already difficult and painful situation.

However, when provocateurs, most of whom came from outside of Ferguson, infiltrated the peaceful protests in the nights that followed, they threw Molotov cocktails, looted and destroyed businesses and private property, and fired guns among the protesters.

The police had no option but to act, and act with force.

A crowd can, at any moment, turn from peaceful to dangerous. Law enforcement has to hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst, and never be afraid to do their job. When they do their job, their political leadership and superiors MUST support them.

History has taught me that at every turn in life, we must try to make good from a bad situation. In this case, I am sure there are many lessons to be learned from Michael Brown's death. And we owe it to Michael Brown, his family, the community of Ferguson and really all of America to do our best as a society to learn everything we possibly can from this tragic event.

Was the show of force with war-like weapons necessary? Could it have been handled differently? Do local and state police require the weapons and equipment we saw in Ferguson?

After 35 years in law enforcement and running two of the largest law enforcement agencies in America, overseeing the rescue, recovery and investigation of the attacks of 9/11, and being extremely familiar with the threats we face in this country from ISIS and radical Islamic extremist terrorists, I offer the following historical perspective.

In the 80s and 90s, the drug cartels and violent criminals were outgunning local, state and federal law enforcement officers. Bad guys went from carrying revolvers to semi-automatic pistols to semi-automatic rifles to fully automatic assault weapons.

In 1986, in Miami, FL, two men slaughtered two FBI agents with fully automatic weapons. In 1997, bank robbers in Hollywood, CA confronted Los Angeles police with fully automatic weapons. Attacks like these and increasing similar armed confrontations left law enforcement no choice but to enhance their weapons, ammunition and protective equipment.

Then came 9/11 and the threats of radical Islamic terror, which changed the dynamics of law enforcement all across our country, including at the state, local, and even small community levels.

Let's remember that New York City has been the target of at least 13 terror attacks over the past 12 years. Radical Islamic extremists targeted the Prudential Building in Newark, NJ, and others around the country. Two brothers planted a bomb at the Boston Marathon. A group of men planned to blow up a synagogue. I could go on and on.

In addition, in the past four years, we have witnessed mass murders on our military bases, in our colleges and elementary schools as well as shootings in our malls, either by Islamic extremists or some deranged lunatic.

Our local and state police are responsible for responding to these attacks and the increasing threats of terror and violence we face in America today.

In the most violent and extreme circumstances, there are specialized teams of highly trained men and women, some of which are referred to as Emergency Service Units (ESU), Special Weapons and Tactics Teams (SWAT), Emergency Response Teams (ERT), Hostage Rescue Teams (HRT).

When civilians need help, they call the police. When the police need help, they call ESU, ERT or SWAT.

When these units respond, they have to be prepared for anything and everything - a deranged gunman with assault weapons, a suicidal bomber, IEDs, a suspect wanted for murder, a hostage taker or barricaded suspect, or an emotionally disturbed person who wants to jump off of a building or bridge and is willing to take the life of anyone who attempts to stop them.

This is what these specialized units do day in, day out. Their primary mission: **SAVING LIVES.**

You would have to be either naïve or in complete denial not to admit that these teams are extremely important and play a vital role in securing and responding to threats of violence or terrorism in our cities and communities.

We should have a national debate on the response to Ferguson's demonstrations, and rightfully so. We can look at who receives equipment from the federal government or military, what equipment is necessary, and most importantly – more than anything else, whether the units receiving this equipment are not only adequately trained, but funded for training long term.

Local and state government leaders are quick to create these units to keep their communities safe, but then fail, and at times outright refuse, to fund them for the necessary training which is quite often more important than the equipment itself.

You can have the best equipment in the world, but if you do not know how to use it, or consistently train with it, or conduct mock drills and table top exercises as a cohesive team, then you are putting the men and women in those units, as well as the citizens in the communities they serve, in danger.

If we are going to look at these types of issues, I think we should also begin to look at many of our regulatory agencies.

In the past year or so, I have read about U.S. Health & Human Services raiding doctors' offices for fraud with heavily armed police, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency raiding a guitar company with a SWAT team, and U.S. Department of Education booming down a family's door in a morning raid in search of someone who failed to pay off his student loan.

If these reports are true, why do these and other federal regulatory agencies require that sort of firepower, when the U.S. Justice Department – FBI, DEA and Marshal's Service – has some of the best trained and most qualified non-military special weapons and operations teams in the world?

If a regulatory agency requires that sort of firepower, why not leave it to the real professionals, those who do it for a living?

There is a lot on the line for our country and all Americans as it relates to this issue. We need real debate, not knee-jerk reactions. Weapons of war on America's streets are not needed every day, in every circumstance. However, we must be prudent in our preparations for the worst possible scenarios while at the same time protecting our citizens, our communities, and our freedoms.

Just in the past few days, we have heard one threat after another from the newly-formed Islamic extremist army called ISIS. This barbaric and savage army claims to be in the United States, has threatened imminent attacks, and even boasted that they intend to raise their flag above the White House. We must be ready should their threats become reality.

There are no easy answers in a world where a man in black garb and a hood covering all but his eyes and mouth beheads an American and posts the video on the Internet for the entire world to see.

Yes, there is a lot for us to learn from what happened to Michael Brown. And there is a lot for us to learn from what happened to James Foley.

May the circumstances of their deaths cause all Americans, especially our government leaders, to pause and dig deep for answers about how we arm and prepare our communities in the face of such realities.

Let this be Michael Brown and James Foley's legacies. Their deaths can cause us to be better prepared and to help save lives. We must make that so.

May they both rest in peace.