The Militarism of the Police Reconsidered

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*All we are saying is
give peace a chance.*
—John Lennon, 1969

The traditional military model imposes unacceptable assumptions and expectations on police agencies. Major among the assumptions is that there is an "Enemy." Major among the expectations is that that "Enemy" must be contained or defeated.

The truth is there is no Enemy and thus there is no need to expect containment or defeat.

In a democracy, police are the servants of the people and often are given the responsibility of protecting their persons, their property, and their civil liberties. Indeed, police may be asked by the public served to further accept responsibility for numerous "quality of life" tasks desired by the citizenry. These constituents, thus, are the decisionmakers, and the police are the servants (see Neighborhood-driven Policing volume).

All citizens, including past and present offenders—caught or uncaught—are part of this constituency because everyone at times violates the law, and everyone at times is a victim of law violation. The public cannot be neatly divided into law-abiding or law-breaking citizens.

We have met the enemy and he is us.
—Pogo Papers, 1952–53

If police only protected the life, property, and liberty of constant law-abiding citizens, their role would be simple indeed. No one would qualify for services. Acceptance of this "dualistic fallacy" (that good citizens and evildoers are totally separate people), postulated by criminologists, indicates the further fallacy of using traditional military tactics in policing the community.

Indeed, given its new mission of peacekeeping and nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military has itself adopted new nontraditional tactics designed to "win the hearts and minds" of the people and are even looking to American police agencies for models. Those models lie within the realm of community-oriented policing (COP).

The task here is to offer an alternative to the traditional military approach—a model that combines COP, problem-solving, neighborhood-driven, and restorative justice approaches into a seamless system based on bringing peace, not war, to communities everywhere.

Important Questions that Remain

1. Who is the criminal? This should examine different perspectives on the question and adopt a specific definition.

2. How successful are war model efforts to contain/defeat the criminal element? (Perhaps using UCR clearance rates to examine the "success" of current policing efforts.)

3. What have national commissions found about the causes of crime and successes of crime suppression efforts? (Conclusions of several commissions concerning the reasons crime suppression has not worked well.)

4. How do proactive approaches differ from reactive approaches to crime control? (Here literature on how COP, etc. differ from law and order approaches may be most useful.)

5. How would a proactive peace model policing system work? (Outline a theoretical model.)

6. How would a proactive peace model policing system dovetail with a restorative justice system? (The basics of restorative justice postulate that if police fail to keep the peace, restorative justice seeks a 'balanced' approach to minimize damage and avoid further occurrences of the problem.)

7. How would a peace model make us safer and more secure than a traditional military policing model? (Perhaps a comparison of the two models plus a narrative would be useful here.)