

‘Do Not Resist’: A chilling look at the normalization of warrior cops

Opinion by
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The haunting thing about the new policing documentary “Do Not Resist” is what it doesn’t show. There are no images of cops beating people. No viral videos of horrifying shootings. Sure, there are scenes from the Ferguson protests in which riot cops deploy tear gas. But there’s no blood, no Tasings, no death. Yet when it was over, I had to force myself to exhale.

What makes this movie so powerful is its terrifying portrayal of the mundanities of modern policing. I watched the movie weeks ago, but there are scenes that still flicker in my head. We all remember the clashes between police and protesters in Ferguson. We’ve seen the photos. We saw the anger and the animus exchanged across the protest lines. What we didn’t see were the hours and hours before and after those moments. We didn’t see the MRAPs and other armored vehicles roll in, one at a time, slowly transforming an American town into a war zone. We didn’t hear the clomp of combat boots on asphalt in the quiet hours of the early morning, interrupted only by fuzzy dispatches over police radio.

It’s one thing to show an MRAP — a vehicle built for war, and for a very specific purpose in a very specific type of war — being misused after a small-town police agency obtained it from the Defense Department. “Do Not Resist” takes you to the base where those vehicles are stored. A camera trained on the window captures hundreds of MRAPs — rows and rows and rows of them — scrolling by, all destined for a police agency somewhere in America. Meanwhile, an Army specialist explains how the troops who use the vehicles get hours and hours of training before they’re entrusted to drive the trucks on a battlefield. The Pentagon then gives the trucks to police agencies to use on U.S. streets with no accompanying training at all. Sometimes, the specialist says, a police agency will find a body part in one of the trucks. They try to avoid that. But after all, these are machines of war.

The film crew then takes a ride with a small-town sheriff as he drives his hulking new MRAP through business districts and quiet neighborhoods — that is, once he figures out how to operate it. The most disturbing thing about this scene isn’t the truck itself, or the striking images of the truck in the town, or even the sheriff’s statement that it will probably mostly be used for drug raids. The most disturbing thing is that it simply doesn’t occur to the sheriff that the footage might be disturbing. He has no problem letting a film crew show this massive contraption built to withstand roadside bombs in a military convoy lumbering through his small town, because the notion that military vehicles aren’t appropriate for domestic policing is foreign to him.

Then there's the drug raid. It's one thing to read about a "dynamic entry" drug raid in which the police mistakenly or intentionally kill someone, or in which someone mistakenly or intentionally kills a police officer. It's awful and tragic and unnecessary. "Do Not Resist" doesn't show one of those. It instead shows the sort of drug raid that's far more common. The movie depicts the raid from the beginning, as the officers from the Richland County Sheriff's Department tactical team are meeting to discuss strategy.

Some are wearing T-shirts with the tactical team's logo. It's a human skull imposed over two crossed AR-15s.

There are no children at the residence, the lead officer assures his colleagues. (There were.) There would be a significant quantity of illegal drugs at the house, another says. (There weren't.) The tactical team then proceeds to raid the home of a black family in Richland County. Most officers storm the front door with their guns while one shatters some side windows as a distraction. Minutes go by. The officers' body language eventually shows signs of frustration as their search for contraband continues to come up empty. Finally, someone finds a book bag with traces of marijuana at the bottom — not enough to smoke, much less sell. They arrest a young black man with long braids for possession.

"I never one time said you're a bad person," the lead officer tells his arrestee, with an odd cordiality. "I just have a job to do, and you happen to be in the middle of it."

The officer also seems to know that the man is a student at a local technical college. He's working toward a degree in construction. The man also runs a landscaping company to help pay for his education. The man later tells the officer that he was on his way to pick up some lawnmowers that morning. Knowing that he's about to be arrested, he asks the officer if he could tell his employee that he was arrested and won't be able to pick up the lawnmowers. He then gives the officer \$876 in cash and asks it to give it to his employee to go pick up the mowers, along with a weed-eater.

Instead, the officer confiscates the money under civil asset forfeiture laws. There is no obvious connection between the money and the pot residue. The man volunteered the cash, mostly because he didn't want his arrest to hurt his business. In doing so, he provided ample evidence that the cash had nothing to do with illegal activity. Still, if unchallenged, the \$876 will go back to the Richland County Sheriff's Department, even if the man is never charged with a crime. The cost of hiring an attorney for such a challenge would likely exceed \$876.

Meanwhile, the man's father asks the officers whether the police would pay for the windows they just shattered. The lead officer tells him that breaking the windows was a tactic, then adds, "The moral of the story is, don't sell drugs from your residence." Perhaps realizing that he had no evidence for what he had just accused the man of doing, he tried to correct himself. "I didn't say you were actually doing it, I just said — said you were associated with ... " and then there's some mumbling.

The striking thing about the footage is, again, the utter mundanity of the raid. A family was just violently raided over an unmeasurable amount of pot. A man was arrested over that pot. The money he needed for his business was taken from him. Yet there's no shame or embarrassment from the officers. There's no panic that the whole thing was captured on video. That's when it hits you. They don't think they've made a mistake.

This is *what they do*. The lead officers later tells the camera, matter-of-factly, that the raid turned up “a personal use amount of marijuana.” Perhaps realizing that he was also on camera back at the police station promising a much larger stash of drugs, he adds, “It happens. Drug warrants are, you know, 50-50.”

The documentary also eschews voice-overs and talking heads and simply lets law enforcement officers speak for themselves. You don’t need a civil rights activist or ACLU attorney to tell you about the threats posed by militaristic, aggressive policing when law enforcement officers can make the point unintentionally — and thus more powerfully and persuasive — when they’re speaking freely.

For example, the directors attended one of the many SWAT competitions across the country. One SWAT cop officer reflected on his first raid. “I was just trying not to smile. I thought it was so fun. I thought it was so cool,” he says. Since then, he says, he always loves to watch the “SWAT pups” (his term for first-year SWAT officers) on their first raid. “They’re always just smiling from ear to ear. They’re just on top of the world.” At risk of stating the obvious, the officers he’s describing are about to stage an armed, potentially lethal invasion of a private residence.

Fittingly, the most chilling scene in the movie doesn’t take place on a city street, or at a protest, or during a drug raid. It takes place in a conference room. It’s from a police training conference with Dave Grossman, one of the most prolific police trainers in the country. Grossman’s classes teach officers to be less hesitant to use lethal force, urge them to be willing to do it more quickly and teach them how to adopt the mentality of a warrior. Jeronimo Yanez, the Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Philando Castille in July, [had attended one of Grossman’s classes](#) called “The Bulletproof Warrior” (though that particular class was taught by Grossman’s business partner, Jim Glennon).

In the class recorded for “Do Not Resist,” Grossman at one point tells his students that the sex they have after they kill another human being will be the best sex of their lives. The room chuckles. But he’s clearly serious. “Both partners are very invested in some very intense sex,” he says. “There’s not a whole lot of perks that come with this job. You find one, relax and enjoy it.”

Grossman closes the class with a (literal) chest-pounding motivational speech that climaxes with Grossman telling the officers to find an overpass overlooking the city they serve. He urges them to look down on their city and know that they’ve made the world a better place. He then urges them to grip the overpass railing, lean forward and “let your cape blow in the wind.” The room gives him a standing ovation.

Later, the documentary crew returns to the home of the South Carolina family that had been raided. The man the police arrested has been released from custody. “I thought they were looking for a terrorist,” says the man’s mother. “They tore down my house, my son went to jail, for a gram-and-a-half of marijuana that they shook out the bottom of a book bag.” In the background, a TV is tuned to live coverage of the funeral of South Carolina state Sen. Clementa Pinckney, one of nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church whom Dylann Roof was charged with murdering in 2015.

Horrific as that South Carolina crime was, such incidents are thankfully rare. Crimes like that, the vicious beatings caught on viral videos and shootings by police officers get most of the attention — and they ought to get more. But it's the mundanities of the drug war, the criminal-justice system and everyday policing that are far more destructive, pervasive and pernicious. And that's what makes this movie so important.

A day with ‘killology’ police trainer Dave Grossman

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A few months ago, [I posted a review](#) of the harrowing documentary “Do Not Resist.” It includes a scene from a class with Dave Grossman, whose classes on policing and the use of force have become hugely popular in the law enforcement community.

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Grossman and Glennon teach the most popular of these classes, but they have competitors. When it comes to teaching cops how to escalate, how to see the world as their enemy and how to find the courage to kill more people, more often, there’s no shortage of options. (The syllabus for one of these courses includes a page of Bible verses relating to when it’s moral and just to kill.) It’s part and parcel with the pseudoscience churned out by [William Lewinski at the Force Science Institute in Minnesota](#), who also preaches that cops should learn to become more lethal (and will testify in court for any cop who takes his advice). I’ve spoken to more than a few sheriffs and police chiefs who want no part of this philosophy, but who also say they can’t really control what their officers do on their own time.