

To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser

---

[salon.com](#) > [News](#) May 2, 2000

URL: <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2000/05/02/swat>

## When cops become combat troops

The controversial use of force to seize [Elián González](#) is just business as usual in the war on drugs.

-----  
BY BONNIE BUCQUEROUX

In the debate over the federal government's use of force to return [Elián González](#) to his father, the left and right have magically swapped sides.

Liberals who protest the excessive use of police force under New York's [Mayor Rudy Giuliani](#) have been quick to defend ferocious INS agents in helmets, camouflage and ninja masks, brandishing assault weapons, arguing that the ends justify the means. Meanwhile many conservatives, some of whom never met a SWAT team they didn't like, are up in arms over the civil-liberties abuses suffered by the Miami [González](#) family.

The debate obscures one fact: The shocking images of combat-ready officers battering their way into a private home are routine in America's cities today thanks to the war on drugs, as well as the war on illegal immigration. All across the country, the SWATification of policing has led to a proliferation of special units trained to rely on aggressive tactics, barging into homes and swooping down on citizens with impunity.

The excesses of the [New York Police Department](#) are finally well known, thanks to the tragic killings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond. Each was killed by a special police division -- Diallo by the notorious and now-disbanded Street Crimes Unit, and Dorismond by the controversial Operation Condor, charged with randomly confronting people on the street and pressuring them for drugs, hoping to identify repeat criminals.

Meanwhile, the CRASH unit in the Los Angeles Police Department's Rampart Division battled gangs by becoming a gang itself, with its own violent initiation rites and "awards" for maiming and killing prey. CRASH has made the headlines, too, thanks to its members' record of murder, stealing drugs and setting up innocent people.

But all over the country, in small and midsize cities, police departments are adopting militaristic, SWAT-like approaches to crime. And thanks to an expanded mandate to combat illegal immigration, INS raids like the

one in Miami are now fairly routine in neighborhoods populated by recent arrivals to the U.S.

It would be wonderful if one side effect of the Gonzalez family tragedy was a new focus on the tendency of police to take a military approach to crime, creating new, hard-hitting special units to handle each new problem, whether it is drugs, guns or gangs.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little public enthusiasm for this debate. That's because few voters live in neighborhoods where gang units are likely to enter their kids' names and photos into the department database merely for wearing their hats backward. Nor do most of us lose sleep worrying whether the police might batter down our doors by mistake in search of drugs.

The tactics used in Miami to extract Elian were shocking to mainstream America, but they have long been commonplace in areas that serve as the battleground for the seemingly never-ending war on drugs. The educated and affluent seem to view policing like making sausage -- better not look too closely or you risk losing your appetite for the end product. As long as crime rates keep falling, who cares?

Yet there is good reason to question the wisdom of the SWATification of policing. Special units operate under the logic that tough problems require aggressive solutions -- zero tolerance, undercover operations, intimidation, deception that borders on entrapment, even though such tactics and procedures make such units notoriously difficult to manage and restrain.

Just take the problem of gangs. The special-unit approach relies on documentation, intimidation, arrest and incarceration. A white sergeant in a major urban center once proudly told me how he had confronted an African-American youngster and demanded that he hand over his blue shoelaces, so that he could show him a "magic trick." "I hid the laces in my hand and cut them into little pieces. Then I threw them in his face and told him that if I caught him wearing gang colors again, he might disappear."

And then we're surprised when studies, like last week's report from the Youth Law Center, show that black and Latino youth are far more likely to be arrested, prosecuted and jailed than whites.

What's the alternative to the military approach to crime? In many cities it's community policing. In Boston, community policing has helped reduce crime even more dramatically than in high-profile New York.

This approach envisions generalist police officers as collaborative, community-based problem solvers. It stations officers on a neighborhood

beat so they can distinguish the gangbangers from the wannabes. It brings together community leaders -- ministers, business owners, school principals -- to work on community problems, including gangs, recognizing that these ills require addressing the underlying dynamics that allow problems to persist.

Arrest is only one tool. But aggressive enforcement tactics that focus on arrest give officers nothing but a hammer, so it's no surprise that every problem begins to look like a nail -- even if it is just a kid wearing blue shoelaces.

Taxpayers have good reason to demand a say in the kind of policing they will support. CRASH unit excesses in Los Angeles will cost the city an estimated \$125 to \$200 million, eating up all or most of the tobacco-tax money otherwise earmarked for public health and children's programs.

In contrast, Leroy O'Shield, founding member of the American Association for the Advancement of Community-Oriented Policing, saved millions of dollars during his tenure as chief of the Chicago Housing Authority Police Department. His dedication to involving the community, which included creating a civilian review board with real power, reduced annual liability claims from 27 lawsuits with a payout of \$1.5 million to one lawsuit settled for \$27,000 within two years. In Boston, too, police brutality complaints and claims have dropped dramatically, thanks to the new approach.

Yes, police must always maintain the ability to respond quickly to crises and to deploy a specially trained tactical unit to handle those rare instances when force and the show of force are the only safe solutions for citizens and police alike. But the pervasive problems of crime and violence also require officers who understand the context in which they occur and who have the department's support for exploring creative, collaborative solutions.

Republican critics of the raid on the Gonzalez home have called for congressional hearings about the government use of force. If they were sincere in their concerns about civil rights, they'd hold hearings about police tactics in the war on drugs, too. Instead, they're playing politics, just like their liberal counterparts who blindly defend Attorney General Janet Reno's show of force, and ignoring the real threat to civil liberties that the military approach to policing represents.

salon.com | May 2, 2000

-----  
**About the writer**

Bonnie Bucqueroux is executive

director of [Crime Victims for a Just Society](#). She was also associate director for the National Center for Community Policing at Michigan State University for almost a decade.

---

[Salon](#) | [Search](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Table Talk](#) | [Ad Info](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Life](#) | [News](#) | [People](#)  
[Politics](#) | [Sex](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Audio](#)  
[The Free Software Project](#) | [The Movie Page](#)  
[Letters](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Salon Plus](#)

Copyright © 2000 Salon.com All rights reserved.