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Editorial: Two Dogs Dead, a Family Traumatized, Another Day in the Drug War

by [borden](#), August 01, 2008, 12:00am, (Issue #545)

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David Borden, Executive Director

This newsletter has reported or opined on the issue of [paramilitarization in policing](#) many times. This week that outrage struck in my own figurative backyard. At 7:00pm Wednesday, in the tiny DC suburb of Berwyn Heights, a SWAT team from the Prince Georges County, Maryland, police department, stormed a home, killed two dogs, then handcuffed one of the homeowners and his mother-in-law on the floor for hours as the dogs' blood drained around them.

That homeowner happened to be the mayor of the town, a fact which has drawn a lot of attention to the incident. Unfortunately, as reckless as this police squad's actions were, and as tragic the outcome, it is by no means unique. One study has estimated the number of SWAT raids nationwide at about 40,000 per year, and the killing of both dogs and people has occurred many times. One mother and child who lost their dog to a SWAT team spoke out in an [interview with one of our supporters](#) two years ago.



David Borden

The rationale for the home invasion was that a package of marijuana -- 32 pounds of it -- had been delivered to the home. What was mentioned in the reporting, though, but not reflected on, is that the package had actually been brought to the home by the police! The sequence of events is both revealing and nauseating. A drug dog in Arizona smelled marijuana inside a package at the post office, addressed to the mayor's wife. Police brought the package to Maryland, and disguised as postal workers delivered it the house. The box sat outside all day. When Mayor Calvo came home, he brought the box inside, placed it near the door, and went upstairs. The SWAT team then stormed the house, killed the dogs, and locked the people up.

There are plausible ways in which the family can have had nothing to do with the package, despite it having been mailed to them, and Calvo and his wife seem unlikely lawbreakers. Police have yet to file any charges. Still, suppose that someone living in the home is guilty. Would that justify the actions of the police?

Absolutely not. The idea that a man returning to his home and moving a package from his porch to his hallway, should trigger a SWAT raid, by a team that had literally been waiting in hiding to see him move the package, is criminally insane. They didn't wait for the package to go inside because of any tactical purpose. They waited because they wanted to use the action of bringing the package inside as evidence. They had literally all day to figure out some way of being able to search the home without murdering their dogs! They didn't even have to bring the package to the house -- they already had the address with which it had been marked. They could have simply called the individuals in for questioning, or conducted an ordinary search or arrest warrant, waited for Mayor Calvo or his wife to walk up and approach them on the street, almost anything other than what they did.

And as evidence goes, moving the package inside the doorway is worthless anyway, or should be. Would you bring a package that arrived in your mail inside, maybe even open it to see what it contains? Doing so would prove nothing about your knowledge of the contents. So even that weak rationale falls to pieces.

The town's police chief, Patrick Murphy, who was not involved in the raid or informed of it, had wise words to say in the aftermath: "You can't tell me the chief of police of a municipality wouldn't have been able to knock on the door of the mayor of that municipality, gain his confidence and enter the residence," he told the Washington Post. "It would not have been a necessity to shoot and kill this man's dogs." He really wishes the narcs had contacted him about it first, and the tragedy thereby prevented.

But while the fact that this was the mayor's house makes the action even more deranged, it would be a mistake to regard that as *the* reason not to use a SWAT team. The truth is that entering a home in that fashion is unnecessary, and therefore wrongful, almost all of the time. SWAT teams are meant for emergency or other high-intensity situations -- hostage situations and the like -- not routine drug enforcement. But even if there had been 200 pounds of marijuana, or 2,000 pounds, there would still be no excuse. Invading a home in this manner endangers people and animals and property, for no good reason, if there is any other way of dealing with the situation.

Two dogs dead, a family traumatized -- another day in the drug war.

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23 comments

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