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Arms Race Between Cops And Crooks?

By Tom Tiede

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — In the past when a policeman told a suspect to “halt or I’ll blow your head off” he was merely parroting a figure of speech. Today, sadly, it’s more than tough talk.

Hundreds of police departments in the nation have traded their traditional .38 caliber revolvers for awesomely more powerful .357-magnums. In addition, many of the departments are now issuing hollow-nose ammunition, similar to dum-dum bullets, which mushroom on impact and do ghastly things to human flesh. In combination, the new gun and bullet can indeed blow a head from a body.

The Connecticut State Police is one of the latest departments to upgrade its sidearm capability. Tests there indicate the .357 is so atomic it can shoot through an automobile engine block. The hollow-nose, it has been shown, will not pass through a human being with a neat little hole, as with the “weak” old .38, but almost explode on striking so as to confine its massive damage, as a spokesman puts it, “inside the perpetrator.” Connecticut cops are delighted.

But no one else should be. The trend toward larger, more powerful police weapons is dangerous at best, insanity at worst. Police say the new weapons are needed to better protect the citizenry from desperados and that anything that does the job quicker and more effectively is progress. The rationale boggles the mind. Following it, next they will want howitzers mounted on squad cars, for, God knows, a 105mm shell would really do the job more quickly and more effectively.

Certainly the cop must protect the citizenry, and himself. Evil goofs with gats seem around every corner in the nation and, though it’s sickening, the police revolver is often the only defense the good guys have. But the policeman is only human, he can only do so much. The average cop is given 2000 hours of training (vs. about 4000 for the average barber), thus he’s not a weapons expert nor, even a police expert. Giving him bigger and bigger guns and telling him he is therefore better able to stop crime is a noisome hoax.

It would not be a hoax, admittedly, if upon hearing of new police weapons, criminals would all back off in fear. But they won’t. If anything, thugs will get new weapons of their own. “What can result,” says David Steinberg of the National Council for a Responsible Firearm Policy, “is a kind of arms race. Even non-criminals could get involved. We know that many law-abiding minority people, as example, see police as their enemies and actually arm themselves against irresponsible police. If they hear that policemen now have magnum weapons, they may get magnums of their own. Something like this could go on and on. The question is, where does it end?”

Ideally, it could end by the application of federal leadership. Dozens of national agencies exist for the sole purpose of trying to reduce bloodshed in the land. Unfortunately, shockingly, at least one of the agencies — the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration — encourages rather than discourages police arms escalation. The Connecticut police, as example, used an LEAA recommendation as one of the arguments for adopting the hollow-nose bullet. This bullet is so cruel (it’s normally used by hunters to kill large beasts) that a Geneva Convention outlawed its use in war; yet the federal government says it’s perfectly all right, even desirable, to use it in New Haven.

Guns have become one of America’s major social diseases. Statistics indicate there are as many private weapons as people in the land. Fifteen-thousand people are murdered or die accidentally from guns annually, 40 per cent of the fatalities are children between ages 1 and 19. The U.S. gun death rate per 100,000 people is 6.68 as opposed to a mere .10 in Great Britain. Clearly, the national movement should be to limit not escalate such carnage. A nation of Dirty Harry cops, blowing people’s heads off, may satisfy the sadists but it won’t do one damn thing about crime except make it bloodier.