

Last January the residence of William Pine in Winthrop, Mass., was broken into by fifteen burly men, wielding shotguns and terrifying the family. The intruders, it turned out, were not burglars but state and Federal narcotics agents who had staged their no-knock raid at the wrong address. Mrs. Pine commented: "I didn't know police operated like that in America."

A recent survey in The Times makes it clear that the Winthrop raid was not an isolated episode. It was part of a dark train of similar incidents in the battle against narcotics dealers.

The battle involves tough and dangerous action against a ruthless enemy. But nothing in this essential campaign can justify the lawlessness too frequently perpetrated by local, state and Federal agents. The terror raids have already claimed a number of innocent lives including that of a police officer killed by a woman who fired through the door at the unidentified intruder.

Many of these raids are conducted without warrants, sometimes on the flimsiest of evidence and with inadequate preparation. Agents, often in undercover attire, have failed to identify themselves, after blatantly abusing the "no-knock" authority irresponsibly granted by Congress in 1970. In some instances, the raiders have initiated unauthorized forays.

These outrages are particularly invidious because they have been successfully hidden from public view. They are generally committed against poor or working class homes, out of the limelight of publicity. In some instances, the Government has hushed matters up by negotiating financial settlements.

Mrs. Pine's shocked question how this could happen in America deserves an answer. It can happen here because a few fearful men have undermined the only true foundation of law and order—the constitutional protection of all citizens, even those suspected of a crime, against unreasonable searches and excessive police power. In such an atmosphere, as one official suggested, hunter and hunted become indistinguishable.

In a free society, the police carry out their often dangerous mission under the law. To condone lawless police action is an indication of a drift toward police-state mentality. The illegal terror raids are a danger to constitutional government at all levels.