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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# Good Cops Tame the Inner Warrior

Today's officers are prone to see enemies in the public. Warlike speech and symbols are part of the problem.

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By *Karl Marlantes*

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Police officers' tendency to see themselves as warriors is a major driver of police violence. Specifically, three behaviors appropriate in war create immense harm when applied to policing: choosing a side, and therefore an enemy; dehumanizing the enemy; and reacting instead of thinking when threatened. Attempts to reform police departments will fail if they don't tackle the warrior mind-set.

To be sure, warriors and police share characteristics that set them apart from civilians. Both risk their lives in the face of violence, and are willing to inflict violence. But warriors face and inflict violence to protect *their* people. Police must do so to protect *all* people. Warriors choose sides. Police must be on the side of the law.

These distinctions are blurred in the many cases when police departments have adopted a warrior culture. In Ferguson, Mo., in 2014, police wearing military-style combat uniforms and bearing assault rifles amassed in armored vehicles to respond to unarmed civilians protesting the killing of Michael Brown. Ferguson isn't unique: Since 1997 more than 8,200 local police departments have acquired surplus military hardware through a Pentagon program.

America's cities, counties and towns have no clearly defined enemy, but that doesn't stop warrior-minded police from envisioning one. They often choose to be on the side of their unit and treat anyone outside it as the enemy. Police sometimes mark citizens as members

of an enemy camp based on skin color or neighborhood, and become quicker to use force against these people.

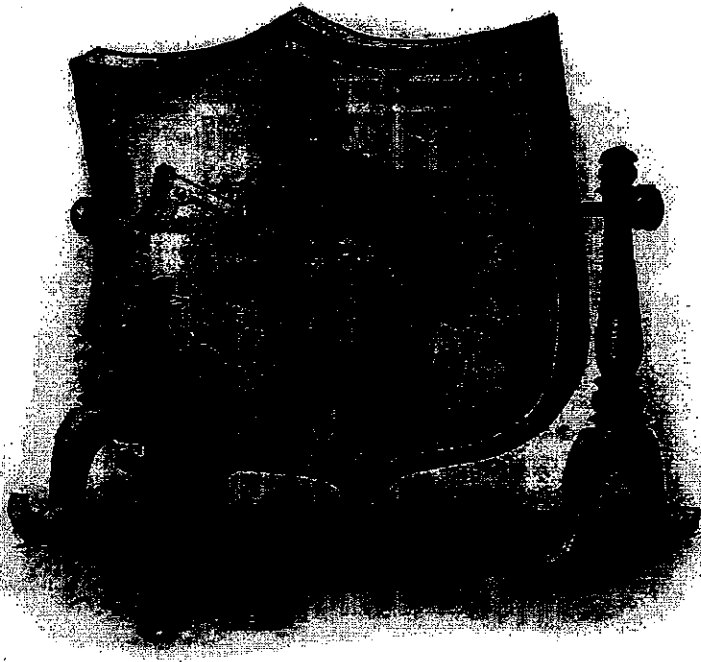


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Constructing an easily identifiable enemy, often by skin color, leads directly to the second key behavior of warriors: dehumanizing, or “pseudospeciating,” the enemy. Young people enter the military imbued with the religious and moral values of a culture that has taught them from childhood, “Thou shalt not kill.” It goes against every bone in most people’s bodies to kill another human being. So warriors learn to employ a kind of psychological trick. They imagine the enemy as members of another species, adopting dehumanizing labels, including ethnic slurs, to accomplish this.

The third distinguishing behavior of warriors is that they learn not to think, but to react. In the intensity of combat, the neural pathways of a warrior’s brain physically change to help him survive. In civilian life, perceptions of threat are usually processed through the cerebral cortex. When civilians hear a sound, they wonder: Is that a falling object? Could it be an animal? This thinking takes time, which can prove fatal.

Experienced warriors sometimes hear a sound and open fire without thinking. The sound input goes directly to their amygdala, which controls the primitive “fight, flight, freeze” reactions, and skips the cerebral cortex, where thinking takes place. Police, who also experience constant fear-induced adrenaline loads, are likely to be similarly wired. How often do we hear people exclaim, when an officer is caught on camera doing something stupidly horrific, “What was he thinking?” Chances are, he wasn’t.

Ideally, police should view force as a tool to be used as minimally as a situation permits, and should be no more “at war” than firefighters or power-line repairmen. Fires and loose power lines are also dangerous threats, but not enemies. To face dangerous people as threats but not enemies requires more maturity and judgment than we require of warriors. Nineteen-year-olds usually make ideal warriors but flawed police officers.

All of these problems are minimized if police don't identify as warriors in the first place. That's easier said than done. Everyone has an inner warrior ready to emerge, particularly when survival is at stake. The gentlest mother's inner warrior will erupt if her child is threatened.

One way to decrease inappropriate slips into the warrior mind-set would be to change or remove the militaristic symbols that currently surround police officers, along with some of the wrongheaded warlike training they currently undergo.

Our inner warriors are a deep and primitive aspect of our psyches. They don't speak English. Their language is symbol and ritual. Symbols that encourage warrior identification should be minimized or removed. Local departments should get rid of gear that makes police look like stormtroopers from “Star Wars” or a Marine unit about to assault Fallujah. Politicians must stop calling parking lots “battle spaces” or using slogans such as “the war on drugs.” In America police still need to be armed because the streets are flush with guns and violence, but openly carrying pistols on the hip encourages warrior identification and rash overreactions. Pistols should be concealed and used only in self-defense, not while making routine arrests.

Today too many police academies try to imitate boot camp, a powerful source of the warrior mind-set, as attested to by numerous documentary films showing sergeants barking orders and meting out physical punishments. In contrast, police training should focus on helping officers identify as servants of their communities. In the 1960s, police “basic school” in Berkeley, Calif., resembled a college program that viewed participants as professionals and students, rather than “recruits.” Graduation was a lunch at the Berkeley City Club.

Good rituals are the surest way to form the human psyche, and traditions like funerals, graduation ceremonies and even saying grace before a meal condition all of us to take the proper attitude toward different aspects of our lives. Police should incorporate rituals

that help them fight the tendency to slip into a warrior mind-set in the presence of every threat.

For example, at the daily “lineup” that prepares officers for their shift, departments should reduce antagonism by avoiding language like “going out there” and reminding officers that only about 0.00008% of police-civilian interactions result in an officer being killed. More symbolically, there might be value in a daily ritual like touching one’s weapon to one’s heart and saying aloud that it is for defense, not offense.

This could be a start to helping officers stay more connected with their communities, and their own civilian souls, while doing one of the world’s toughest jobs.

*Mr. Marlantes is a Vietnam veteran and author of the novels “Matterhorn” and “Deep River” and the autobiographical book “What It Is Like to Go to War.”*

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