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Security comes through policing, not military force

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NCR Today

This Lent I'm writing about our U.S. military, and today I'm considering how we offer security training to foreign governments.

People everywhere have a right to security. Parents should be able to let their girls walk to school alone. Shopkeepers should be free from extortion. The judiciary should make their judgments without fear of intimidation or reprisal. That's the kind of security most nations need, and it's a matter of policing, not soldiering.

But when you have a half-trillion dollar army, every problem looks like a war.

For decades now, the Pentagon has taken diplomatic leadership away from the State Department, using gifts of weapons and troop training as carrots to gain access to foreign government decision-making. Soldiers attend U.S. officer-training classes and study human rights and democratic government as well as operation and maintenance of artillery.

But the essence of soldier training is obeying orders -- immediately. Basic training creates a mind-set that every aspect of military life supports. When studies showed that many troops were not firing their weapons, soldiers were taught to lay down a blanket of fire. It didn't matter if they had an enemy in their sights. If the order came, they fired their weapon.

Police, on the other hand, are in the business of asking questions. Their job is to protect the community, be it on foot patrol, under cover or in the forensics unit. Many police officers never fire their weapon.

Hillary Clinton and now John Kerry have wrested some diplomatic initiative away from the Pentagon, arguing that military gifts don't lead to favorable consideration of U.S. policy. But still in countries like

Guatemala the police are being replaced by soldiers who occupy villages and operate checkpoints in the cities and on the roads.

Another aspect of our confusion about how to use police and soldiers is our decision after 9/11 to identify terrorists as combatants, not criminals. Our decision had taken root in other countries and today protesters like Pussy Riot are easily labeled as the enemy. It's not that Putin would not have cracked down on Pussy Riot. We just made it an easier case to make.

How much money does the Pentagon spend offering arms and training to foreign government? It's hard to say beyond the line item in the budget (which was \$5.4 billion in 2010) because the services routinely pass along used and outdated weapons, existing military training programs are opened to foreign soldiers, and military advisor costs are folded into larger program expenses.

But we would be more secure ourselves, and U.S. business abroad would be more secure if we provided more training to police and less to soldiers.

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