

Op-ed: Stop police violence through de-escalation, accountability

By Rocky Anderson January 17, 2015 Publication: Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT) Word Count: 594

In a police state, the rule of law is disregarded and many people live in terror, insecure about whether those whose job it is to protect them will turn against them. In a constitutional republic, government serves the people and everyone is equally accountable under the law.

We can prevent our government becoming more like a militarized police state. When police officers commit unnecessary violence, we must demand they be held to account. Even if violence is not technically illegal, if it could be reasonably avoided it should be prevented and sanctioned. De-escalation should be the rule whenever possible. Tragically, just the opposite has been happening in several Utah cities.

After a police encounter, Darrien Hunt, 22, was killed by Saratoga Springs officers. Darrien did not pose a risk of harm to anyone when he was killed. Rather, the police shot him in the back while he was running away from the officers.

Danielle Willard, 21, was unnecessarily shot to death by a West Valley City policeman. At the time she was killed, she did not pose a threat of death or serious injury to anyone.

Ogden police battered down the door of Army veteran Matthew Stewart's home because he was growing 16 marijuana plants for his own consumption. Matthew had been sound asleep. He suffered from PTSD, depression and anxiety. The reckless raid led to the death of one police officer, the shootings of other officers, and the ultimate suicide of Matthew Stewart ccc the tragic results of a disregard by police of far safer, less extreme measures that could and should have been undertaken.

Only in a two-tiered system of justice can a Salt Lake City policeman escape accountability for killing a 20-year-old unarmed man, Dillon Taylor. Dillon was gunned down after complying with the officer's command to remove his hands from his pants, then lifting his shirt, apparently to show that he was not armed. No one has even contended that Dillon did anything that posed a risk of harm to anyone.

Our beloved pets are also vulnerable. Without a warrant or consent, a Salt Lake City policeman opened a gate and trespassed into the backyard of Sean Kendall's home, where he was confronted by Sean's beloved Weimaraner dog Geist, doing what dogs do—barking and running toward an intruder. Then the officer shot Geist dead. Unnecessary and outrageous.

Recently, James Barker, suffering from a brain injury, was shot dead by a Salt Lake City policeman. Although James initially was polite during an encounter with the officer, he was provoked by the officer's unnecessarily hostile, confrontational manner. Ignoring every opportunity he had to professionally de-escalate the situation, the officer instead escalated the hostility, ignoring the signs of James's emotional imbalance, resulting in his unnecessary, tragic death.

As Salt Lake City mayor for eight years, I dealt with hundreds of police officers, and with families of police officers who died or were injured during their service to our community. Most of them are good, competent people committed to their duty to help make our community a safe, secure place. They deal with dangerous, difficult situations. We should express our gratitude to them for being there when we need them.

However, we must recognize that some officers seriously abuse their power, treat people contemptuously and escalate tense, potentially violent situations rather than exercising the professionalism we expect of them and doing all they can to de-escalate volatile situations.

Better de-escalation training and full accountability will result in greater safety for all and the equal justice we should all expect.

Ross C. "Rocky" Anderson is former mayor of Salt Lake City, lawyer, community activist and 2012 Justice Party presidential candidate.

Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT)

Date: January 17, 2015

(c) 2015 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.