



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **End the Other War Too**

**by Sheldon Richman**

The war in Iraq goes on, but we shouldn't let it overshadow the war at home — one that frequently takes the lives of people who don't deserve to die. It's known as the War on Drugs, but it's really a war on people who themselves are not making war against anyone. Too often individuals minding their own business are killed by government officers. In the name of decency, this war must end.

By now many people have heard that an 88-year-old Atlanta woman who lived alone was shot dead November 21 by police raiding her home on the basis of a confidential informant's claim that he had bought crack cocaine from a man at that location. However, according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the unidentified informant says the police told him after the shooting to lie about the drug buy.

Kathryn Johnston, whom the newspaper said was “described by neighbors as feeble and afraid to open her door after dark,” was killed as police, executing a no-knock warrant, forcibly entered her home. Johnston fired on the men with a rusty pistol she kept for protection in her rough neighborhood, wounding three police officers. Returning the fire, the police killed Johnston. The injuries to the police were not life-threatening.

The police story has changed several times, raising serious credibility questions. For example, the police said they found narcotics in Johnston's home, but later they said they found only a small amount of marijuana, which is not regarded as a narcotic. The FBI is investigating.

This sort of thing happens all too often. As Radley Balko documents in the Cato Institute White Paper “Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America,”

“Over the last 25 years, America has seen a disturbing militarization of its civilian law enforcement, along with a dramatic and unsettling rise in the use of paramilitary police units (most commonly called Special Weapons and Tactics, or SWAT) for routine police work. The most common use of SWAT teams today is to serve narcotics warrants, usually with forced, unannounced entry into the home.

“These increasingly frequent raids, 40,000 per year by one estimate, are needlessly subjecting nonviolent drug offenders, bystanders, and wrongly targeted civilians to the terror of having their homes invaded while they’re sleeping, usually by teams of heavily armed paramilitary units dressed not as police officers but as soldiers. These raids bring unnecessary violence and provocation to nonviolent drug offenders, many of whom were guilty of only misdemeanors. The raids terrorize innocents when police mistakenly target the wrong residence. And they have resulted in dozens of needless deaths and injuries, not only of drug offenders, but also of police officers, children, bystanders, and innocent suspects.”

The fact is, without the War on Drugs atrocities such as the killing of Kathryn Johnston wouldn’t be happening. It is the very nature of victimless crimes that pushes the police to use unscrupulous tactics. In a victimless crime, such as an illegal drug transaction, there is no complaining witness, no one with an interest in reporting the crime to the police. After all, the buyer and seller willingly participate in the transaction. Thus, the only way the police can detect the criminal activity is to set it up themselves or encourage informants. But the opportunity for corruption in these tactics is immense. For example, informants looking for a favor from the police have an incentive to provide false information. You have only to read the newspapers to find details of corrupt law enforcement in connection with drug prohibition.

In a free society adults have the right to ingest whatever they want. It’s no business of the government. But if it makes such peaceful private activity its business, law enforcement will inevitably turn to measures that jeopardize the lives of people who have harmed no one else. Let’s end this madness now.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine. Visit his blog “Free Association” at [www.sheldonrichman.com](http://www.sheldonrichman.com).*

**This article was originally published in December 2006.**