



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 19, 2010

Drug War Costs Elderly Woman Her Life and Taxpayers \$4.9 Million

On November 21, 2006, 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston of Atlanta suddenly found herself the victim of a home invasion. When several armed men burst into her home with no warning, she did the only sensible thing: She pulled a gun on them.

Johnston got off just one shot from the old revolver, missing all the intruders, before the men fired 39 bullets her way, with five hitting her body.

The home invaders, it turns out, were members of the Atlanta Police Department's narcotics unit. They had broken into Johnston's home on a tip from a man they had arrested earlier on drug charges, who told them they would find a large amount of cocaine in her house. Finding no illegal drugs of any kind, "the officers handcuffed Ms. Johnston and left her to bleed and die on the floor of her own home while they planted marijuana in her basement," in the [words](#) of Radley Balko, writing for Fox News a year after the raid.



The cops had fabricated a story about an informant who had allegedly bought drugs from Johnston on the police department's dime in order to obtain a "no knock" warrant — not that getting such a warrant was very difficult in a city where judges, said Balko, "rather systematically approved those warrants with no scrutiny at all (the judge in the Johnston case literally rubber-stamped the warrant)." After they had killed Johnston and realized their necks could be on the line, they pressured the informant to back up their story.

"That informant — Alex White — refused, and bravely came forward to tell the media what had happened," Balko explained. "Had he given in to the pressure put on him by APD narcotics officers, the world would still likely believe Kathryn Johnston was a drug dealer, and her killing was justified."

Investigations found that "corruption at the Atlanta Police Department was so pervasive, Police Chief Richard Pennington eventually had to replace the entire narcotics division," added Balko.

Furthermore, three of the officers involved are now serving prison time (and were ordered to split Johnston's funeral costs) for their involvement in the episode.

Nearly four years after Johnston was senselessly murdered, her family has finally received some recompense for her death in the form of a \$4.9 million settlement of a lawsuit filed against the city by Johnston's niece, [according to CNN](#). "Initially filed in state court, the suit was moved to federal court,



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where a judge ordered the parties to mediation,” said the report.

Certainly Johnston’s family deserves compensation for her death, yet the justice of the settlement is marred by the fact that it must be extracted forcibly from taxpayers, the same taxpayers who paid for the initial raid, the judge who rubber-stamped the warrant, and the investigations and trials — and who must now also pay to incarcerate the three convicted officers.

Perhaps even worse is the fact that though the APD has, one hopes, improved its narcotics division’s record since Johnston’s death, the unconstitutional war on drugs that cost Johnston her life continues with no end in sight.

The federal war on drugs and the attendant militarization of local police departments are tailor-made to produce just such incidents as this. The corruption the drug war introduces into police departments is unparalleled, though it certainly has precedent in America’s previous attempt to prohibit a politically unpopular substance: alcohol. The intrusion into people’s lives and liberties — and their property via asset forfeiture — is certainly not befitting a supposedly free country. On top of that, the taxes necessary to wage the war, to prosecute the war’s victims (at least those lucky enough not to suffer Johnston’s fate), and then to incarcerate those convicted of drug offenses are astronomical.

Therefore, while some measure of justice has been meted out for the death of Kathryn Johnston, if Americans are serious about preventing such incidents in the future, “reforms” and “reorganizations” of local narcotics units aren’t going to cut it. The only solution is to force America’s drug war-addicted law-enforcement system to go cold turkey. Withdrawal may be painful, but the long-term health of the country depends on it.



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