

Obama Administration “Review” Aimed at Systematizing Transfer of Military Arms to Police

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Under the pretense of reining in police militarization in the aftermath of the crackdown on protests in Ferguson, Missouri, the Obama administration has called for a review of the federal government’s programs to transfer military weapons to local police departments. In reality, such a review is intended to regularize and professionalize the militarization of domestic police forces, which has been spearheaded by the federal government.

One senior White House official told the *Washington Post* that the administration’s review, which will take place together with a series of congressional hearings, will assess “whether state and local law enforcement are provided with the necessary training and guidance; and whether the federal government is sufficiently auditing the use of equipment obtained through federal programs and funding.”

Attorney General Eric Holder wrote in a statement provided to the *New York Times*, “It makes sense to take a look at whether military-style equipment is being acquired for the right purposes and whether there is proper training on when and how to deploy it.”

The premise of Holder’s remark is that there is a “right” purpose for the police to be militarized, and thus that the program is entirely legitimate. The concern is that local police departments may be insufficiently trained as to “when and how” to deploy the billions of dollars in military assets that they have been given.

In the aftermath of the Ferguson protests, the police forces involved were publicly criticized by military veterans and even Pentagon officials for what they called unprofessional conduct from a military standpoint. “These guys are idiots—riding around on the top of armored trucks looking like rednecks on a country drive, pointing their weapons at unarmed Americans,” one Pentagon official anonymously told the *Christian Science Monitor*. “Our troops would never do that stuff, even in a war zone,” he said. Notably, one St. Louis police officer was disciplined after he was caught on video pointing an assault rifle at journalists, proclaiming, “I will f*****g kill you.”

The aim of the Obama administration’s review—beyond being a public relations exercise—will be to cut down on such unprofessional displays and make the use of domestic military police more systematic, widespread and regular. In this it will be similar to the administration’s reviews of its domestic spying programs, each of which has only resulted in the extension of illegal spying by the US intelligence agencies.

Far from acting as a restraining influence on local police departments, the federal government has been the most active facilitator of police militarization. In June, the

American Civil Liberties Union released a report entitled “War comes home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing,” which concluded that “the federal government has justified and encouraged the militarization of local law enforcement.”

The ACLU’s report documents the way in which the federal government has actively facilitated the militarization of local police forces, “in large part through federal programs that have armed state and local law enforcement agencies with the weapons and tactics of war.”

The Defense Department’s 1033 Program is the largest such scheme, operating under the motto, “from warfighter to crimefighter.” This program has transferred more than \$4.3 billion in property from the military to local police departments, including nearly half a billion last year. Local police have been provided with combat uniforms, night-vision goggles, belt-fed machine guns, military helicopters, armored vehicles and assault rifles, some of which were on display in the streets of Ferguson this month.

The military program provided law enforcement with \$1 million of military hardware in 1990, \$324 million in 1995, and nearly \$450 million in 2013. The ACLU report notes that the federal government “requires agencies that receive 1033 equipment to use it within one year of receipt, so there can be no doubt that participation in this program creates an incentive for law enforcement agencies to use military equipment.”

Earlier this year, the Pentagon provided the *New York Times* with a database of military assets transferred to local police departments since 2006, which the *Times* published online last week. The statistics are staggering. Police in the Detroit Metropolitan Area, for example, have been given enough assault rifles by the Defense Department to arm a midsize battalion. This does not include rifles purchased by local police departments.

Los Angeles County has been given enough rifles for three battalions. The county has received 3,408 assault rifles, 1,696 pieces of body armor, 15 helicopters and seven armored vehicles. Meanwhile, every county in Connecticut except one, which has the highest per capita income in the country, got an armored vehicle from the Defense Department. More than six hundred such vehicles have been dispensed to local police departments.

Missouri Democrat Claire McCaskill, who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on Financial & Contracting Oversight, will lead one of the congressional inquiries into the programs. McCaskill, according to the *Times*, “agreed that the military equipment had proved valuable,” but that the “government should be able to find a way to ensure officer safety and keep streets safe more strategically.”

Representative Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat, told the *Times* that he would support requiring police to certify that they were trained to use the military hardware they were provided.

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