



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on July 28, 2016

Obama Restarts Militarization of Local Law Enforcement

In light of recent unrest, President Obama has decided to go back on his promise to halt the militarization of local law enforcement.

As reported this week by *Tech Dirt*:

The images of police greeting protesters with assault rifles, armored vehicles, grenade launchers, and officers who appeared to mistake the Midwest for downtown Kabul apparently was a bit too much. It looked more like an occupation than community-oriented policing — something every administration has paid lip service (and tax dollars) to over the past few decades while simultaneously handing out grants that turned police officers into warfighters.



Apparently, though, it isn't so much the danger of looting, but the power of lobbying that brought about the president's change of heart.

In an exclusive interview with two "police organization directors" — Jim Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, and Bill Johnson, executive director of the National Association of Police Organizations — Reuters reports that the law enforcement lobbyists met with the president and Vice President Joe Biden on July 11, three days after the tragic murder of five police officers in Dallas.

After the meeting, President Obama ordered the administration's chief legal counsel to review the ban on the transfer of military materiel to police departments and other law-enforcement agencies that the president announced in May 2015.

While speaking at an event in Camden, New Jersey, on May 18, 2015, President Obama announced that in response to the riots in Ferguson, Missouri, the previous August, he was banning the sale of certain military equipment to local law enforcement. "We've seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like they're an occupying force, as opposed to a force that's part of the community that's protecting them and serving them," Obama said at the time.

This policy was in made furtherance of procedures outlined in Executive Order 16388 that Obama issued in January 2015. In that fiat, the president set up a task force of federal officials to prepare a report on the potential use and misuse by local law enforcement of military-grade equipment.

Not surprisingly, within hours of the White House's pronouncement, the police lobby was lobbing criticism at President Obama.

"The nation's largest police union is fighting back against a White House plan to restrict local police forces' ability to acquire military-style gear, accusing President Barack Obama's task force of



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politicizing officers' safety," *Politico* reported in May 2015.

Well, their voice was heard, and the restriction lasted about a year. Now, thanks to the pressure from those police representatives, the pipeline of weapons more suited for waging war than serving warrants is open and flowing freely from the feds to the police.

Specifically, Reuters reports, the lobbyists' warfighter wish list included "helmets, grenade launchers and tracked armored vehicles."

While most stories published by traditional media outlets have focused on the 1033 program — the Defense Department's program that takes decommissioned military gear and passes it to police — that well of war machines and materiel isn't nearly as deep as the one controlled by the Department of Homeland Security. This second source is rarely even mentioned in the context of controlling police access to military equipment, but Radley Balko, the author of books and articles revealing the depth and danger of the militarization of police, uncovers this virtually ignored arrangement between the feds and local law enforcement. He writes in the *Washington Post*,

Since 2003, for example, the Department of Homeland Security has been giving grants to police departments around the country to purchase new military-grade gear. That program now dwarfs the 1033 Program. It has also given rise to a cottage industry of companies that build gear in exchange for those DHS checks. Those companies now have a significant lobbying presence in Washington. I suspect that presence will now only grow stronger. So if the Obama administration really wants to roll back police militarization, this program needs reform, too.

Steadily and speedily, the forces of the militarized police are denying citizens the protections of fundamental civil liberties afforded us by the Bill of Rights. While there remain legions of law-enforcement officers devoted to protecting and serving their fellow citizens, the federal government's proffer of powerful, free (or almost free) weapons, vehicles, gear, and tactical training is making the allure of becoming an unofficial branch of the armed forces irresistible.

The equipment being stricken from the list of items blocked from sale to the police is, the officers' reps claim, necessary "to enhance officers' safety and their ability to respond to violent riots."

Curiously, despite the recent spate of officer deaths, the current rate of such crimes is actually no higher than average and is lower than in recent years.

According to data reported by the National Law Enforcement Officers' Memorial Fund, 31 police officers have been killed this year, putting the country on pace for a yearly total of 59. That is fewer than the number of officers fatally shot in 2007, 2010, and 2011.

Such facts don't support the statist's goal of converting local police into a sixth branch of the U.S. armed forces — a force armed and trained to exert absolute control over the civilian population they were ostensibly created to protect and serve.

The White House, of course, insists that the revision of the year-old policy is standard operating procedure and nothing to do with being leaned on by law-enforcement lobbyists.

Pasco, of the Fraternal Order of Police, told Reuters that President Obama thought that this type of arms and armor "intimidated people," but after their confab he came to see that police couldn't protect and serve without being outfitted with armored personal vehicles and grenade launchers.

One wonders how the goal of reducing violent encounters between police and the public is furthered by endowing the former with firepower capable of killing the latter en masse.



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Moreover, there is something psychologically significant about a police officer being outfitted with a uniform, a helmet, and weapons that were obviously made to protect the wearer — a warfighter — from an enemy and to enable him to kill that enemy.

As TechDirt writes, “Put someone in war gear and they’re going to be pretty sure they’re in a war, rather than serving the public as a trusted member of the community.”

In light of the president’s bowing to pressure to green-light the federal government’s subtle subordination of local police and sheriffs through grants of money and materiel, Americans need to participate in grassroots activism to work to keep local law enforcement under the supervision of local elected officials and free from state and federal control or influence.



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