



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 8, 2014

Satire's No Match for Federally Funded Armored Vehicles

Having survived a verbal assault by local citizens and the satirical swift swords of cable TV comics, the Ballistic Engineered Armored Response Counter Attack (BEARCAT) vehicle that protects, among other things, the city's annual Pumpkin Festival, will remain in Keene, New Hampshire.

"It appears the city council of Keene wants to continue to be the laughingstock of the world," declared the libertarian blog, FREE KEENE, after the council voted, 11-3, against a proposal by Councilman Terry Clark to return the military vehicle the city obtained through a \$285,933 grant from the Department of Homeland Security in 2012. The federal agency, created by Congress after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has been making surplus military hardware available to communities all over America. The program has received national attention in recent weeks after police in Ferguson, Missouri, a city like Keene with a population of 23,000, turned out in riot gear with assault rifles and armored vehicles in response to the protests and riots that followed the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager during an altercation between the teenager and a Ferguson policeman. The issue of local police armed with Pentagon weaponry has been the subject of both serious and humorous commentary ever since.



Stephen Colbert on Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* noted Keene's military preparedness in reporting on Homeland Security's armament program. "It has done wonders for little towns like Keene, New Hampshire, which obtained a surplus \$286,000 BearCat armored vehicle, which they said is needed because the 'threat is far-reaching and often unforeseen,'" Colbert said. "Keene currently hosts several large public functions to include ... an annual Pumpkin Festival."

The Pumpkin Festival, an annual event that draws as many as 70,000 people to downtown Keene, was also cited by comedian John Oliver on HBO in a mock tribute to the presence of assault vehicles in America's cities and towns. "This has happened on such a scale that it's enabled small towns like Keene,



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N.H., to apply for a BearCat, a military-grade armored personnel truck,” which the city needs to protect the Pumpkin Festival, Oliver announced. “Good luck easily out-maneuvering that, teenagers with baseball bats!”

In public hearings and council meetings, leading up to the purchase, it appears there was little talk about the threat of terrorism in or around the city, the *Telegraph* of Nashua, New Hampshire, reported in a “Politifact” check of Oliver’s comment. “The discussion centered mainly around how the vehicle would be deployed during routine law enforcement procedures, such as evacuating residents during a flood or policing the campus of Keene State College.”

It doesn’t do much for the reputation of relatively peaceful Keene State to say the policing of its campus requires armored military vehicles. Keene’s mayor, Kendall Lane, a city councilor at the time, told the Nashua paper that out-of-context references to unspecified “far-reaching” and “unforeseen” threats and the city’s citing of the Pumpkin Festival in its grant application were accurate but misleading.

“The original reason for filing the grant application was to acquire the piece of equipment in case there was some kind of crisis — some kind of emergency that required the use of that type of equipment,” Lane told the *Telegraph*. “It was humorous,” he said of the satire, “but you know, the implication was that the Pumpkin Fest attracts a few hundred people in a rural part of America that would never be subject to a terrorist act. It was humorous. It was funny, but it was miscast.”

Since the Department of Homeland Security counts preventing and combating terrorism as its primary mission, the citing, however vaguely, of a terrorist threat might be crucial to winning a grant. That is not to say that it pays to lie when dealing with the federal government, but it helps to exaggerate — a lot.

Concord, New Hampshire, the state capital, also has a BearCat, thanks to a \$258,024 grant from Homeland Security. To get it, Police Chief John Duval wrote that while New Hampshire has been spared the scourge of international terrorism “on the domestic front, the threat is real and here. Groups such as Sovereign Citizens, Free Staters and Occupy New Hampshire are active and present daily challenges.”

The biggest challenge, one Chief Duval was unable to meet when that claim became news in New Hampshire, was to show evidence that any of the organizations he cited had posed any threat, let alone a terrorist threat, to the peace and safety of the Granite State. The accusation brought a sharp response and a demand for a retraction from Free Staters, a group of citizens organizing a migration to New Hampshire of Americans from other states interested in preserving and expanding an environment of social, political, and economic liberty in the state that has no general sales or income tax, no seat belt or helmet law, and “Live Free or Die” as its motto. The New Hampshire Civil Liberties Union also voiced its concern over the police characterization of the groups as terrorist threats.

In an interview on New Hampshire Public Radio, Chief Duval said, “I attempted to state a case, it was interpreted that I was calling certain groups terrorist groups.... I do not believe they are terrorist organizations.... I accept responsibility.... I missed the mark in what I was trying to communicate.”

Andrew Becker and G.W. Schulz of the Center for Investigative Reporting wrote in a December 2011 report in the *Daily Beast* that Homeland Security had by then dispensed \$34 billion in grants to provide military hardware to local police forces. Senator Rand Paul, (R-Ky.) has questioned why the Department had spent [\\$8 million to arm police in Fargo, North Dakota](#) with military-style assault rifles, Kevlar helmets to withstand battle-grade ammunition, and an armored truck, complete with rotating turret.



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“And I say if the terrorists get to Fargo, we might as well give up,” Paul said in a recent *Meet the Press* appearance. Fargo’s “menacing truck,” Becker and Schulz reported, was being used “mostly for training and appearances at the annual city picnic, where it’s been parked near the children’s bounce house.”

“Most people are so fascinated by it, because nothing happens here,” Carol Archbold, a Fargo resident and criminal justice professor at North Dakota State University, told the reporters. “There’s no terrorism here.”

The late-night comedians can have their fun, but it appears the weapon of ridicule is no match for the sense of security a federal grant can bring.

“Do I think al-Qaeda is going to target Pumpkin Fest? No, but are there fringe groups that want to make a statement? Yes, and we should prepare for that,” Keene Police Chief Kenneth Meola told the *Telegraph*. “It is a target in the New Hampshire region.”



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