

# The Washington Post

## How the police duty belt went from Officer Friendly to Mad Max in 30 short years

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The modern era of police firepower dawned on Feb. 28, 1997, when 200 Los Angeles police officers armed with pistols and shotguns struggled to slow down two bank robbers carrying fully automatic rifles and wearing 40 pounds of body armor. Outgunned, several officers ran to local gun stores to borrow semiautomatic AR-15s, which they used to bring the gunmen down.

After the Battle of North Hollywood, police across the nation vowed never to be overpowered again. And so they jettisoned the 9 mm pistols, .38 Special revolvers and 12-gauge shotguns that were standard issue at the time, and began replacing them with semiautomatic handguns and the trusty AR-15.

The moment was part of a wider trend: the steady accumulation of new, more accurate and more deadly tools on the U.S. police officer's duty belt and in his patrol car. So far this year, police nationwide have shot and killed more than 900 people, according to a Washington Post database tracking such shootings. As the nation debates the propriety of those encounters, law enforcement experts say the modern police duty belt may play a significant role in an officer's decision to use deadly force.

"The more crap you put on your belt, the more apt you are to use it," said Mark Lomax, executive director of the National Tactical Officers Association.

Not that police didn't have good reason to load up their belts. The ultra-violent crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s led police to fear for their safety, as did the increasing number of criminals who showed up for work armed with military-grade weapons.

"The transition of weaponry in law enforcement over the last 30 and 40 years is the direct result of what the civilian world was carrying," Lomax said.

So the duty belt evolved. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was a leather belt with maybe five attachments, according to Jim Bueermann, president of the Police Foundation: a Smith & Wesson Model 10 revolver, ammunition pouches, Mace spray, a nightstick and handcuffs. Today, Lomax said, there's usually a metal baton, pepper spray, a Taser and a semiautomatic pistol with ammunition.

Here's a primer on the evolution:

### **The gun:**

Police began shifting to semiautomatic handguns in the late 1980s. The handguns replaced revolvers, which require shooters to manually load six bullets into the cylinder. Semiautomatic pistols reload automatically though — unlike fully automatic weapons — they fire just one shot with each trigger pull.

Departments feeling outgunned by gangsters and searching for a new weapon found the perfect solution in the Glock 17, an Austrian weapon manufactured by Gaston Glock, according to Paul Barrett, author of "GLOCK: The Rise of America's Gun." When Glock peddled his cheap, easy-to-use pistol to stations across the United States, police officials were impressed.

Officers actually shot more accurately with the Glock because it only required 5.5 pounds of pressure on the trigger compared to 12 pounds for the Smith & Wesson revolver. But this feature had complicated consequences, Barrett said.

"If you graze the trigger, the gun will go off, which led to safety problems before people were properly trained," Barrett said. "They couldn't have a finger on the trigger until they are actually able to shoot."

### **Pepper spray:**

Revolvers weren't the only weapons needing improvement. Police found tear gas sprays, such as Mace, had little effect on drunks or people high on drugs. So they traded Mace for pepper spray in the mid-1980s, after the FBI adopted the weapon. The active ingredient, found in cayenne peppers, temporarily blinds suspects, burns skin and causes difficulty breathing.

### **Tasers:**

Some new additions to the duty belt were made to solve PR problems. Take the Taser. In the 1960s, news reports described police jabbing civil rights activists with the same three-foot-long electrical poles "usually used for forcing cattle into chutes."

“They didn’t like the optics of using tools meant for animals on people pushing for equal rights, so people started coming up with alternative means of delivering electricity,” said Adam Bates, of the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice.

The first stun guns were marketed as a way to demobilize terrorists, particularly on airplanes, said Darius Rejali, a Reed College professor who studies electric weapons. Later, in the late 1990s, the Taser appeared on police belts after being declassified as a firearm.

Instead of pressing the weapon directly to the skin of an attacker, like a traditional stun gun, a Taser lets an officer fire a pair of electrodes, which remain connected to the weapon by wires, which then deliver the jolt. Tasers are now carried by more than 18,000 law enforcement agencies worldwide.

### **The baton:**

The nightstick, too, suffered an image problem after Chicago police were photographed clubbing African Americans during the 1968 riots, said Massad F. Ayoob, the author of “Fundamentals of Modern Police Impact Weapons.”

The solution came in 1972 with the PR-24, a 24-inch side-handle baton modeled after a Japanese martial arts weapon.

Police grip the perpendicular handle and hold it like a shield across their chests in a defensive stance. While greatly improving police departments’ image problems, the altered training had unintended consequences.

“The offense was very weak because you were swinging rather than striking,” said Dave Young, the founder of ARMA training, a Wisconsin law enforcement academy. “Sure, the public image was greatly improved, but you compromised officer safety.”