

# BuzzFeed

## Conservative Criminal Justice Advocates Embrace Obama's Police Militarization Move

**Rand Paul and Cato are warily optimistic about Obama's plan to change how programs that disperse military hardware to local cops work.**

Evan McMorris-Santoro

May 18, 2015

Conservative-leaning criminal justice advocates cautiously praised President Obama's [reforms](#) to federal programs that funnel millions in military equipment to local law enforcement Monday, while progressive leaning advocates called the changes surprisingly robust.

"I see no reason why a 20-ton mine resistant vehicle should ever roll down any city in our country. The president can change some of this through executive order and I commend him for doing so," Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul said in response to a question from BuzzFeed News at a press conference following a campaign event in Philadelphia. The libertarian-leaning Republican and 2016 presidential candidate was the most vocal politician to speak out against so-called police militarization in the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri, unrest in 2014.

Paul noted his own [anti-militarization legislation](#) and said he hadn't been briefed on the full details of Obama's plans. But he said "I hope we've removed bayonets from the list of what we are handing out."

Bayonets were among the list of equipment banned from the federal programs by the Obama administration, along with grenade launchers, vehicles with tank-like tracks, large-caliber weapons and several other items. The changes bring an end to parts of the militarization programs that have rankled opponents the most. Most don't object to local law enforcement getting free communications equipment, uniforms, and other non-lethal gear used from the military or new from military contractors with federal government grants. The bayonet was a sort of mascot for opponents of the programs who say they outfit local cops like they're an invading army readying for lethal combat.

But Obama's changes to the programs go beyond the top-line concerns and make changes to the way militarization programs work that were deep on the opponents' wish lists. One change, which ends the policy that allowed local police chiefs to request free surplus military equipment without getting a sign off from their elected governmental leaders, brings a new level of bottom-up scrutiny to police militarization programs recommended by advocates, particularly

conservative-leaning ones. Those advocates have suggested [for years](#) that local elected leaders take a bigger role in police equipment procurement.

The new federal rules make that role a requirement.

“One welcome aspect of the proposals is the inclusion of approval from local civilian government,” Trevor Burrus, a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, told BuzzFeed News in an email. “The citizens of towns, counties, and municipalities should have a say in whether their police are geared up like soldiers.”

Burrus said the changes overall were “a welcome change,” but called on the federal government to take back equipment doled out under the old rules that now would not qualify for distribution.

“It is unclear whether the executive order would apply to military gear already in the hands of police,” Burrus added. “Since \$4 billion in military gear is already possessed by local law enforcement agencies, meaningful reforms need to look not just to future restrictions and oversight, but at the misuse of equipment already in the hands of police.”

The militarization debate is just one end of the larger criminal justice advocacy movement that has united liberals with the libertarian-leaning and evangelical right. On Monday, as details of the White House plan emerged, police leaders [pushed back on it](#), saying the new limits would make their job more dangerous. But there wasn’t much political early backlash to an issue that has increasingly [blurred party lines](#).

Progressive-leaning demilitarization advocates said the changes to the military equipment programs could have a big impact on community-police relations.

“There’s certainly some progress being made, and certainly some progress since Ferguson. Almost a year later, we’re seeing some action on the part of the administration to really hold law enforcement accountable and to really address the violence at the hands of the police that’s going on, especially since Ferguson,” Kanya Bennett, legislative counsel at the ACLU, told BuzzFeed News. “That said, how this is implemented, how this plays out at the state and local level is ultimately what we all will be waiting to see.”