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Cleveland Riot Police Won't Wear Body Cameras At GOP Convention

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In July, reporters, politicians, Republican Party delegates, protesters, and police will descend on Cleveland, Ohio for the Republican National Convention, which will feature as its depressing and grotesque climax the official nomination of Donald Trump as the GOP's 2016 presidential nominee. The police presence in Cleveland is expected to be massive, with an estimated one police officer for every ten people at the convention. Unfortunately, many of the police officers will not be wearing body cameras.

Police from Cleveland won't be the only ones working at the RNC. Thousands of police officers from outside Cleveland will be brought in to assist. These officers will be acting in accordance with the body camera policy of their department. In addition, Cleveland police in "softer" uniforms will be wearing body cameras. However, Cleveland police officers outfitted with riot gear will not wear body cameras. This is especially concerning because of Cleveland's recent history of excessive force — they are currently operating under a federal consent decree because the U.S. Department of Justice found patterns and practices that led to excessive force— and because it's reasonable to expect that many protesters will clash with police during the convention.

According to Cleveland police officials, it would be difficult to attach body cameras to riot gear. Cleveland's invitation to bidders for riot gear included mention of HWI Gear's "Elite Defender" riot suit, which as you can see is a rather formidable piece of kit.

Last year, Taser announced that the Cleveland Division of Police had purchased 1,500 AXON flex and body cameras. The AXON flex is Taser's glasses/helmet mounted body camera. Taser also offers a range of accessories designed to make sure that police can wear body cameras regardless of their uniform. These include magnetic mounts, belt clips, ballistic vest mounts, pocket mounts, and much more.

Perhaps the most striking of these accessories given the concern in Cleveland is the helmet mount, which allows those officers wearing helmets (such as riot police) to wear body cameras. These helmet cameras need to be attached to the camera's controller. On a patrol officer the controller would usually be attached to the uniform somewhere in the chest area. Riot gear does pose challenges to officers who wish to wear body cameras, but given the range of accessories

offered by Taser and the fact that riot gear often includes straps and pockets, it is by no means impossible.

Now, it is possible that police officials in Cleveland do not have access to the funds necessary for these specialized mounts and holsters. It's also possible that the "Elite Defender" doesn't have, or can't be equipped with, any straps, pockets, or vests that could allow users to carry a body camera. However, no one reading the recent news out of Cleveland should be left with the impression that it's impossible for riot police to wear body cameras.

Calls for Cleveland riot police to be outfitted with body cameras have come not only from predictable advocates such as the ACLU but also from Steve Loomis, the president of the Cleveland police union, who originally opposed body cameras.

Loomis rightly identified the RNC as the kind of event where police most need body cameras, saying, "Just when we get used to them and we want them to be around, [the department] tells us, when we probably need them the most, that we're not going to be wearing them." Loomis also said that the decision to not provide body cameras to police was "absolutely irresponsible."

It's not uncommon for accusations of excessive force to arise after protesters meet riot police. Citizens with cellphone cameras and police with body cameras can help ensure that protesters and police are held accountable for illegal activity. Without body cameras it will be harder for protesters and officers to increase law enforcement transparency and accountability during what will likely be a contentious and volatile convention.

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