



## Tanks to Nowhere: Why the US Is Losing the Domestic Investment Game

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My hometown is an idyllic place, a sleepy town of 3,500 set among the cornfields of Story County, Iowa. When I recently drove through it on a hot summer day, the only noises were insects buzzing above cornfields, and distant splashes and screams of delight from the public pool. Kids still ride their bikes by themselves to the pool in the summer and carry their skates down to the pond in the winter. They dress up in little Scandinavian outfits and dance in the street at our yearly town festival, and shyly ask the homecoming queen to sign their programs at the annual homecoming game.

Cute, right? Now that you've got that in your mind, picture what's below rolling out from around the corner.

Like many law enforcement departments around the country, the Story County Sheriff's Office earlier this year acquired an MRAP – a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, designed to survive IEDs and mine attacks. The 11-foot tall armored vehicle, which was previously used by the US military in Afghanistan and is valued at \$733,000, was given to the sheriff's department for free, besides a \$5,000 transportation charge.

It's hard to imagine what kind of dystopian turn of events would have to occur in sleepy Story County in order to make use of such a vehicle. "We should be protected from anything that would be thrown against it," Story County Sheriff Paul Fitzgerald commented about his MRAP, apparently without irony. He did not bring up its efficacy in the event of a zombie apocalypse. The police chief of Keene, a small town in New Hampshire, gave a similarly unimpressive explanation for his department's purchase of a \$286,000 BearCat armored personnel-carrier. He said it would be used to patrol Keene's "Pumpkin Festival and other dangerous situations," according to *The Economist*.

As protests continue over the shooting death of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, attention is focusing on the militarization of American police departments. The Ferguson police have broken out their own BearCat, camouflage, short-barrel rifles, flashbangs, and other combat gear. Commentators observe that the arming of law enforcement officials with military-grade weaponry, tanks, guns, grenade launchers, and other equipment often escalates tensions between the police and the public, endangering rather than protecting both groups.

So why have MRAPs and other heavy-duty equipment suitable for war zones proliferated in tiny towns and counties around the US? And how does the US Department of Defense have the money in these cash-strapped times to simply give \$733,000 MRAPs to law enforcement agencies around the country for free?

The MRAPs have been distributed as part of the “1033 Program,” a section of the National Defense Authorization Act passed by Congress in the 1990s to help law-enforcement officials fight terrorism and organized crime. The program allows the Department of Defense to transfer to Federal and State agencies property, including small arms and ammunition, that it determines is “suitable for use by such agencies in counter-drug activities” and “excess to the needs of the Department of Defense.”

Since 1997, the program has transferred more than \$4.3 billion in equipment to local law enforcement agencies, according to *The Washington Post*. As Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute’s project on criminal justice, told *The Daily* in 2011, “The trend toward militarization was well under way before 9/11, but it’s the federal policy of making surplus military equipment available almost for free that has poured fuel on this fire.”

As military friends have been quick to point out, the MRAP served an important purpose in Afghanistan — protecting troops from the IEDs that were killing and maiming soldiers on a daily basis. But in hindsight, they were built to excess. Beginning in 2007, the Pentagon cranked out 27,000 high-tech MRAPs for a cost of \$50 billion dollars, leading to a global glut of the mine-resistant trucks, the *LA Times* reported. In January 2014, the Army estimated that it would need to spend another \$1.7 billion over the next several years to modernize 8,585 MRAPs and scrap another 7,456.

Of course, that kind of spending is still small peanuts to the US military. These figures are probably familiar, but they bear repeating: The US spends more on its military than the military budgets of the next eight countries combined, and the US military budget totals about 20% of the US federal budget.

The MRAP has created American jobs — factories in York, Pennsylvania; Lansing, Michigan; and Oshkosh, Wisconsin have all played a part in making MRAPs — but at what cost? Not only has the MRAP sucked up vast amounts of taxpayer money that could have been invested in building schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, it could one day roll up to your local pumpkin festival. Our small towns won’t look so idyllic then.