Congress under pressure from left and right to 'demilitarize' police

By Tim Devaney
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Groups on the left and right are uniting behind calls to end what they say is the rise of a "militarized" police force in the United States.

They say the controversial police tactics seen this week in Ferguson, Mo., are not isolated to the St. Louis County Police Department and warn the rise of heavily armed law enforcement agencies has become an imminent threat to civil liberties.

"What we're seeing today in Ferguson is a reflection of the excessive militarization of police that has been happening in towns across America for decades," said Kara Dansky, senior counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

The ACLU is aligned with Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and groups on the right who are calling for an end to a controversial Defense Department program that supplies local police departments with surplus military equipment, such as armored tanks, machine guns and tear gas.

According to the Defense Logistics Agency, more than $4 billion in discounted military equipment has been sold to local police departments since the 1990s.

"Why are those guns available to the police?" asked Erich Pratt, spokesman for the conservative Gun Owners of America. "We don't technically have the military operating within our borders, but they're being given the gear to basically operate in that capacity."

Gun Owners of America and the ACLU are both backing a forthcoming bill from Rep. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.) that would curtail the sale of DOD weapons to local police departments.

Johnson **announced** the legislative effort on Wednesday, telling colleagues in a letter that, "our main streets should be a place for business, families, and relaxation, not tanks and M16s."

"As the tragedy in Missouri unfolds, one thing is clear. Our local police are becoming militarized," Johnson's office said in a statement.

Critics say the Pentagon program is "blurring the lines" between the police and the military in dangerous ways.

"When you begin to confuse and blur the lines between the military and police, you get unnecessary violent confrontations, such as what we're seeing in Ferguson," said Tim Lynch, a criminal justice expert at the libertarian Cato Institute.

But Jim Pasco, the executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, defended the program, saying it has helped law enforcement keep up with criminals.

"All police are doing is taking advantage of the advances of technology in terms of surveillance, in terms of communication and in terms of protective equipment that are available to criminals on the street," Pasco said.

The issue of military-style police departments was thrust into the spotlight this week, as media outlets began broadcasting footage of officers in Ferguson squaring off with protesters.

Police have been using military-style armored tanks and machines guns to deal with the demonstrations, which began after the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was killed by a police officer in a street confrontation.

The images of Ferguson have drawn comparisons to war zones, such as Iraq or Afghanistan. President Obama warned law enforcement officers Thursday to stop "bullying" protesters.

"They're turning Americans into the enemy," said Jeffrey Mittman, executive director for the ACLU's Missouri branch. "We are not the enemy. We are citizens, we are protesters, we are Americans. We don't deserve to be treated like we are at war."

Lynch noted a SWAT team in Atlanta recently threw a flash bang grenade into the crib of a toddler by accident, sending the child into a coma.

"Acting like soldiers in war zones is not appropriate for American communities," Dansky said.

Military style tactics are becoming more and more common for police departments around the country, according to Adam Brandon, spokesman for the conservative group FreedomWorks.

Brandon said he often "can't tell the difference" between police officers and the military.

"When I think of a police officer, I typically think of a guy in a blue uniform. He's got a badge, you can see his face," Brandon said. "But when I see pictures of police today, they look more like special forces units than normal police officers."

"This is an unnerving trend that I keep seeing in American society, where police officers are getting over militarized, their tactics are getting more and more aggressive."

The ACLU's Dansky said the show of strength by police departments tends to escalate the problems that they are trying to contain.

"When people see what looks like a tank in their neighborhoods, they start to think they are under siege," she said. "It's an excessive show of force. It tends to put people in harm's way and exacerbates the risk of violence."