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White House reconsiders military-grade weapons for local law enforcement

Program review follows Michael Brown police shooting, protests in Ferguson, Missouri

By David Sherfinski
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Lawmakers are welcoming the White House's decision to review the program that allows for the transfer of military-grade weapons to local law enforcement in the wake of recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, which is steeling for the Monday funeral of the unarmed black teen killed on Aug. 9.

Rep. William Lacy Clay, Missouri Democrat, applauded Mr. Obama's "quick action" on the matter after he met with fellow Missouri Democratic Rep. Emanuel Cleaver and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel about the program.

"I was so alarmed when I went to Ferguson and walked with the demonstrators and saw this heavily armed police force, tactical units, pointing sniper rifles at my constituents who were there exercising their constitutional right," Mr. Clay said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, likewise welcomed the inquiry, saying it's "appropriate" to review that issue.

"There are times when you need to have protection on bomb units and whatnot, but the bottom line is, it's a good and worthy discussion that we ought to have around the country," Mr. Nixon said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

The White House announced over the weekend it would take a look at the Defense Department program that sends surplus M-16A2 rifles and 40,000-pound vehicles armored to withstand mine blasts to police departments across the country. News of the review was first reported by The New York Times.

Sen. Rand Paul, Kentucky Republican — who had previously called for the demilitarization of local authorities — pointed out a few appropriations to localities he said simply are not necessary.

“Homeland Security gave \$8 million to Fargo to fight terrorism in Fargo, North Dakota. And I say, if the terrorists get to Fargo, we might as well give up,” Mr. Paul said on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” “I say that as a joke, but I mean, it’s like, what are we doing spending \$8 million in Fargo? What are we doing sending a tank — there’s an armored personnel carrier in Keene, New Hampshire.”

The issue of police militarization has the potential to build a left-right coalition, as libertarian-leaning conservatives such as Mr. Paul have been critical of the trend for years and could join minority and liberal Democrats.

This was on further display last week at the Cato Institute, where one of its scholars led a presentation decrying the trend and noting that, before Ferguson, it had been going on with little awareness on the part of the state and local lawmakers who pay and oversee the police and sheriff units.

“Some of these city councils only become aware of what their police have and what they’ve been doing in the wake of a tragedy,” said Tim Lynch, the director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the libertarian think tank.

“Then members of the city council start asking questions that should have been asked initially,” he said. “Does this community that hasn’t had a murder in ten years need an armored personnel carrier?”

In addition to the emotional reaction the militarized local authorities created among many residents, the community is also steeling for the Monday funeral of Michael Brown, who was killed Aug. 9 by officer Darren Wilson.

At a peace festival Sunday in St. Louis, Michael Brown Sr. asked that Monday be a “day of silence.” According to reporters in Missouri, Mr. Brown told hundreds of people gathered in Forest Park for St. Louis for Peace Fest 2014 that he appreciated all the community support his family had received since the slaying.

“Tomorrow, all I want is peace while my son is being laid to rest,” he said. “Please, please take a day of silence so we can lay our son to rest. Please. That’s all I ask. And thank you.”

The families of Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant — two other black males whose deaths at police hands prompted national outcries — also spoke at the rally, which had been planned before the Brown killing.

Mr. Clay said he’s not concerned about the funeral reigniting tensions that have boiled over in recent weeks, but acknowledged that would be a possibility if “we do not bring justice to this situation.”

“I guess what I’m most concerned about — and I made a promise to Michael Brown’s parents that I would do everything to bring all of the resources of the federal

government to this investigation so that it's transparent, so that it's a viable investigation and we get to the truth," he said.

"I'm more concerned that if we do not get to the truth and get to what actually happened and bring justice to this situation, then there's going to be a problem in the street," he said.

A grand jury has been formed to hear evidence about possible charges to be brought against Mr. Wilson, and the U.S. Department of Justice is conducting its own civil rights investigation.

But in a suggestion that some already are seeing the state investigation as tainted, Mr. Nixon was pressed repeatedly to defend Sunday his decision to keep the investigation in the hands of St. Louis County prosecutor Bob McCulloch.

The Brown family and some protesters have said Mr. McCulloch, who is white, cannot be trusted with the investigation because both his parents and other relatives have worked for the St. Louis police and/or because his father was killed in the line of duty by a black crime suspect.

"Well, he's democratically elected by overwhelming numbers, and re-elected, and re-elected," Mr. Nixon said on CNN, while parrying demands from host Candy Crowley for "1000 percent confidence."

Mr. Clay said Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. brought a "calming force" when he visited the area last week.

"And it kind of reinforced people's trust that at least on one track there will be an aboveboard, thorough investigation on the part of the federal government, especially with the FBI here as well as the U.S. Department of Justice," he said on ABC's "This Week."

The White House will send a three-person delegation to the Monday morning service at Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis.