



When Senate Returns From Recess, Ferguson Will Top The Docket

By Ailsa Chang
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The controversy surrounding the police showdown with protesters in Ferguson, Mo., will be coming to Congress. Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri has scheduled a hearing to look into the confrontation, while some lawmakers are pushing to end a program that allows police to obtain surplus military equipment.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

The protests in Ferguson erupted while Congress was away for its long August recess. But senators are already sounding off on what ought to be done when they get back to Washington. Lawmakers are looking to scale back or even eliminate federal programs that have been helping police get military equipment as early as in the 1990s. Here's NPR's Ailsa Chang.

AILSA CHANG, BYLINE: Should the police look and act like the military? That question gave late-night comedians weeks of fodder. Here's John Oliver.

JOHN OLIVER: Why in this photo from Ferguson are they wearing (bleep) camo? They are northwest of St. Louis not northwest of the Amazon.

If they want to blend in with their surroundings, they should be dressed as a dollar store.

(LAUGHTER)

(LAUGHTER)

(LAUGHTER)

CHANG: Now Congress will take over for late-night to keep the questions coming. Do we need police departments to have trucks designed to survive landmines? How are police getting trained on them? And most important, does this sort of show of force actually make people feel safer? Independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont doesn't think so.

SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS: I think what you saw in Ferguson kind of made people look at the police as an occupying army and the people in town - in the city - as, you know, some kind of enemy.

CHANG: Hearings begin as soon as Congress returns next month to look at how three departments - Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security - have been equipping and subsidizing the militarization of police even in small towns.

SENATOR CLAIRE MCCASKILL: I'm willing to bet that the vast majority of this more militarized equipment has sat in a shed or sat on a shelf for most of its time with local and county police officers.

CHANG: Democrat Claire McCaskill of Missouri will convene the first hearing for the Senate Homeland Security Committee. She says it's not about getting the police to demilitarize completely. It's about how much to use and when.

MCCASKILL: There is no question in my mind that some of the escalation that occurred in Ferguson was a direct result of a response that, in Goldilocks' jargon, was too hot. But then I think the first night when the highway patrol took over, it was too cold.

CHANG: There's also the question of money. According to The Center for Investigative Reporting, states received more than \$34 billion in federal grants to purchase military-grade equipment in the 10 years after 9/11. But Walter Olson of the Cato Institute says the way the funds got distributed made no sense.

WALTER OLSON: You would see naturally more money going to a couple of places like Washington, D.C. and New York and a few others. But that's not how Congress works. Congress likes to spread things around so that everyone can get some, even if they're in a rural state with no major targets.

CHANG: McCaskill's hearing is set for the first Tuesday Congress is back. It's certain to be only the first of many Congressional inquiries into what happened on the streets of Ferguson. Ailsa Chang, NPR News, Washington.