



Why local American police have so much military gear at protests

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Protests continue to take place across the country calling for an end to racism and police brutality following the death of George Floyd while in police custody.

And American cops are using some heavy duty gear acquired through a federal program.

The equipment used by some local police — ranging from tear gas grenade launchers to bayonets — are part of the federal 1033 Program, which transfers surplus equipment from the armed forces to civilian law enforcement agencies.

“This is typically stuff that they weren't buying on their own — they wouldn't consider it a budget priority,” Cato Institute Senior Fellow Walter Olson told Yahoo Finance’s YFi PM (video above). But “once you've got the gear, the temptation is to use it... we have seen the results — we have seen armored vehicles... we've seen grenade launchers, helicopters that turn protests into something closer to a war zone.”

Lawmakers call for 1033 program to be shut down

The tide may be turning against the de facto police militarization.

Earlier this week, former Vice President Joe Biden slammed the program during his speech in Philadelphia, calling for it to be ended among new reforms.

“There are other measures: to stop transferring weapons of war to police forces, to improve oversight and accountability, to create a model use of force standard — that also should be made law this month,” Biden said. “No more excuses. No more delays.”

Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) supported the sentiment, tweeting before Biden’s speech that he planned to introduce an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act to discontinue the program. There is bipartisan support for the effort.

“For a long time, there was bipartisan support for these programs because local police departments like the free stuff, and they have a powerful voice,” Olson explained. “More recently, there has been this partisan divide which Obama and the Democrats have grown skeptical” as citizens point out that the militarized police “changes the dynamic — it changes it from neighbors facing off against neighbors” to local police being more akin to “an occupying army.”

History of the 1033 program

The program was created in 1989 and made permanent in 1996 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

In 2015, after the police in Ferguson, Missouri used military equipment when responding to protesters, former President Barack Obama signed an executive order to improve oversight over this program and prohibited the transfer of items like bayonets, tracked armored vehicles, and grenade launchers

President Donald Trump reversed that order in 2017 and fully restored the program.

The itch to reach for these military weapons gets worse because of the ease of accessibility, Olson said, adding that “we’ve seen tension diffused because the police got out there and talked to demonstrators and they began realizing that that they agreed on things and this was one community together. It’s harder to do that when you’re militarized.”

The Law Enforcement Support Office, which oversees the process, maintains a spreadsheet on its website that details items transferred, many of them run-of-the-mill office expenses such as screw drivers, pens, shirts, bandage kits, sleeping pads.

But some police departments got their hands on some pricey items.

Police departments in Okeechobee County, Florida, Otero County, Colorado, Blount County, Tennessee, and others, were all shipped mine resistant vehicles valued at more than \$700,000 each. A police department West Deer Township in Pennsylvania was shipped an explosive ordinance removal robot worth nearly \$300,000.

It’s not clear if the LESO spreadsheet is missing records of shipments, as noted by Wired recently. And the other issue is that the law enforcement getting the shipments don’t actually have training from the Department of Defense.

Private companies involved in 1033

The 1033 program is not just a relationship between the Department of Defense and local police departments — it also includes private sector partnerships.

AT&T, Verizon, and Harley Davidson are among the companies listed as “Platinum Partners” on the National Sheriff Association’s website. (Verizon is Yahoo Finance’s parent company).

In 2012, Verizon, Panasonic, and another company had outfitted a humvee that the National Sheriff's Association had acquired through the 1033 program with wireless technology.

“The Humvee has been outfitted with modern crime fighting equipment to include Verizon's 4G LTE technology; reliable Panasonic technology for public safety; and Rontan emergency lighting,” the website stated.

Militarizing the conflict erodes a ‘trusted bond’

Though President Trump suggested deploying the military to quell protests across the country, military officials, including former Secretary of Defense James Mattis — who resigned from the Trump administration in December 2018 — condemned the temptation to deploy the military in response to the ongoing protests.

“When I joined the military, some 50 years ago, I swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution. Never did I dream that troops taking that same oath would be ordered under any circumstance to violate the Constitutional rights of their fellow citizens—much less to provide a bizarre photo op for the elected commander-in-chief, with military leadership standing alongside,” Mattis wrote in *The Atlantic*.

“At home, we should use our military only when requested to do so, on very rare occasions, by state governors,” Mattis added. “Militarizing our response, as we witnessed in Washington, D.C., sets up a conflict—a false conflict—between the military and civilian society.”

Olsen stressed that we “never, never want that to be the relationship between ... the police and the populace in the U.S. — that has never what been America aspired to.”