

Take Part

Do Cops Need Tanks and M-16s to Protect and Serve?

A federal program is arming local police forces with military leftovers.

By [Allan MacDonell](#)

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'This Galactic Warrior antimatter rifle and these X-ray goggles are cool, but wait until the surplus Terminator T-1000 reports for duty.' (Photo: Lucas Jackson/Reuters)

When New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg boasted that as boss of the NYPD he is in effect commander of the world's sixth largest army, he was not indulging in political hyperbole. The image of the neighborhood flatfoot tramping through the Five Boroughs chasing neighborhood scamps from opened fire hydrants has been retired. The new face of the New York Police Department is [a militarized set of officers](#) in helmets and flak vests holding military rifles in assault position, capable of delivering the ambiance of a contested Fallujah checkpoint to any midtown subway platform.

Provincial police commanders across the country may envy Mayor Bloomberg his national media platform, but they needn't begrudge him his armory. [The Daily reports](#) that the Department of Defense's "1033 Program" bestowed \$500 million of surplus killing machinery on local police departments in fiscal 2011, charging only delivery fees. So when Occupy protesters confront a line of men in armor-plated blue, anywhere in the country, the demonstrators can expect to be peaceably dispersed by a civilian force equipped with free grenade launchers, helicopters, military robots, M-16 assault rifles and armored vehicles.

Equipping domestic police forces with the tools of occupying armies has unsettled some observers.

The 1033 Program was passed by Congress in 1997 as a response to worry over illegal drug traffic and, to a lesser extent at the time, terrorism. Since 1997, more than \$2.6 billion in lethal equipment has been dispersed to more than 17,000 agencies, and the 1033 Program is only one shop local cops can go to for conflict-quality firepower, at little or no cost. [The Daily cites](#) another source:

Grants from the Department of Homeland Security enable police departments to buy vehicles such as "BearCats"—16,000-pound bulletproof trucks equipped with battering rams, gun ports, tear-gas dispensers and radiation detectors. To date, more than 500 of these tanklike vehicles have been sold by Lenco, its Massachusetts-based manufacturer.

Take a video test drive of the BearCat below.

The sheriff of Richland County, South Carolina, has every confidence in “The Peacemaker,” a machine-gun equipped armored personnel carrier in his department’s motor pool, but equipping domestic police forces with the tools of occupying armies has unsettled some observers. Tim Lynch, [the Cato Institute](#)’s project director on criminal justice, told the Daily, “They acquire the equipment, they create a paramilitary unit, and it starts to creep into routine policing.”

Last week, the United States Senate passed its unwieldy, \$662 billion [National Defense Authorization Act](#), including a provision that grants the United States military powers of “worldwide detention without charge or trial” against suspected terrorists, even if those suspects are United States citizens apprehended on United States soil.

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When local police departments are riding around in the U.S. military’s impenetrable wheeled fortresses, firing mounted machine guns, answering domestic disturbances with M-16s drawn, it’s only a matter of time before sheriffs and police chiefs petition for the same powers as the military—to pick up citizens on mere suspicion, to hold them indefinitely without bail or charge, to incarcerate them with a closed hearing rather than an open trial, and to do this all without a lawyer present to protest.

Arthur Rizer, a Virginia attorney whose resume includes stints as both a military and a civilian cop, sums up the problem [for the Daily](#):

“If we’re training cops as soldiers, giving them equipment like soldiers, dressing them up as soldiers, when are they going to pick up the mentality of soldiers?”

“If you look at the police department, their creed is to protect and to serve. A soldier’s mission is to engage his enemy in close combat and kill him. Do we want police officers to have that mentality?”