

Whatever Happened To The White House Police Militarization Review?

Not much — at least not publicly.

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Just weeks after an unarmed teenager was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, President Obama announced a government task force would embark on comprehensive review of the programs that funnel surplus military equipment to local police forces.

But since that announcement nearly three months ago, talk of the task force and its mission has all but vanished.

There's been no big announcements or policy changes that have come from review into the surplus-military equipment program, known as the "[1033 program](#)."

The jam-packed calendar full of foreign entanglements, Ebola, and the 2014 election after Ferguson helped put skepticism about police tactics on the national back burner. The White House appeared to follow the trend: At a fall background briefing with reporters in October designed to outline the White House priorities through the end of the year, a senior administration official didn't have a ready answer when asked by BuzzFeed News about the status of the review.

The task force has been working, albeit without much public fanfare. A Senate source said staff for Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill — who held hearings on 1033 in September — met with White House staff regarding 1033 during the fall congressional recess. An expert at an outside group involved in some task force discussions said after an initial meeting shortly after the task force was announced, the group was not contacted again.

As recently as last month, a long list of White House allies including the ACLU and NAACP were still pressing the administration for more details the status of 1033. A letter from over 40 groups to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on October 27 called on the Pentagon chief to put a [moratorium](#) on military surplus transfers to local police forces while the review continues.

A top administration official said he could not provide any insight into the timing or content of the 1033 task force's findings, and suggested the process could end relatively soon.

“The presidentially directed task force has reviewed the federal programs that support the purchase and acquisition of military equipment by local law enforcement agencies and is preparing a report to present to the President,” said Shawn Turner, deputy White House press secretary.

The only real public update on the review came Thursday, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing on the Defense Department's role in surplus equipment programs. Top Pentagon officials testified about some tweaks to how the surplus equipping system works, but defended 1033 and said the larger review is still ongoing.

Ferguson police drew criticism for their use of military equipment on Aug. 14, five days after protests erupted there following the shooting of Michael Brown. Obama ordered a top-level review of the surplus equipment program less than two weeks later, [on Aug. 23](#).

Activists, who were cautiously optimistic police demilitarization was having its moment after Obama announced the 1033 review, have tempered their excitement.

“There's more pessimism now,” Trevor Burrus, a 1033 expert at the libertarian Cato Institute — which generally advocates for an end to 1033 — said. “I kind of see it not going many places.”

Opposition to 1033 is one of the subsets of the criminal justice movement that connects progressives with the libertarian right. Burrus says Cato has not been included any White House discussions on 1033 since the review was announced. A top expert at the group that has talked to the White House but didn't want to be named shared in Burrus' gloomy outlook about the administration review.

“At this point, I'm skeptical,” the expert said. Activists note Obama could curtail 1033 [with executive actions](#), but hopes that Obama would lead a national discussion about the 1033 program with a flashy task force report rollout are hardening into the belief that whatever is done will be done very quietly.

“I think they might make some changes to the programs without making a formal announcement regarding the results of the review,” the expert said.

Timing is very important, say the activists. With the results of the Ferguson, Missouri grand jury investigation into the shooting of Brown coming within days, there's a worry that television footage of riots could rally Americans behind 1033, just as images of heavily-armed police confronting unarmed peaceful protestors in August helped push demilitarization into the national debate in the first place.

If insight into the review can be gleaned from testimony at Thursday's House hearing, the review seems likely to largely keep the 1033 program in place while making some military equipment

off-limits to local police forces and adding new training requirements to cops seeking some of the more dangerous equipment still available to them.

Vice Admiral Mark Harnitchek, director of the Defense Logistics Agency at the Pentagon, told the committee that the Defense Department already changed the way interagency communication works prior to a department's request for surplus military hardware being approved.

“These changes include notifying the Department of Justice on all law enforcement agencies' applications for enrollment in the program, on all suspended law enforcement requests for inclusion back into the program and on allocations of weapons, armored vehicles and aircraft,” he said. “We have also agreed to notify the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security when a law enforcement agency has been suspended or terminated from the 1033 program.”

Alan Estevez, the Pentagon's top official in charge of Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, hinted that the review could produce some new limits on what kind of military hardware is available to local police forces.

“One of the topics that we're having in the interagency review right now is how can we strengthen the process by which we say this is available or not available and what's the view of — we were talking about this,” he said. “This isn't settled.”

Harnitchek said the Defense Department is in the process of requiring states to provide training programs before requesting certain “specialized equipment” for police forces like the armored trucks originally designed for the battlefield but increasingly [found in police garages](#).

He offered a robust defense of the 1033 program as well. “It enables first responders and others to ensure the public safety and saves lives,” he said, noting “the Department of Defense does not push equipment on any police force.”

At a press conference in August, where he first announced his plan for a review, Obama said a 1033 review was a chance for the parties to come together.

“I think there will be some bipartisan interest in reexamining some of those programs,” he said. With hopes for bipartisanship in the air ahead of the Republican takeover of the Senate in January, Burrus said libertarian demilitarization activists are planning to lobby the GOP takes up the push for 1033 legislation if the White House review proves to be disappointing.

“I do expect Rand Paul to be a leader,” Burrus said, referring to the Kentucky Republican Senator who was [pushing](#) for a post-Ferguson review of 1033 before Obama was. “After Ferguson there is more momentum to do it.”