Federal government programs in the US have turned police into military force

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The military-style police occupation of Ferguson, Missouri this week has demonstrated the readiness of a local police force in the United States to respond to domestic social unrest—in this case, protests triggered by the August 9 police murder of unarmed teenager Michael Brown—with military tactics and weaponry.

Within 24 hours of the killing of 18-year old Michael Brown, hundreds of vehicles, including at least one turreted, armored, "MRAP" vehicle normally used in Afghanistan and Iraq, were summoned to the scene, and SWAT officers toting assault rifles patrolled the streets with attack dogs.

Police arrested more than 50 people, injured many more with tear gas and rubber bullets, assaulted and jailed journalists, and implemented a no fly-zone banning media helicopters.

The events in Ferguson did not arise overnight. Over a period of decades, federal government programs have been implemented to equip local police forces with military gear and incentivize its use. These programs have been vastly expanded under the Obama administration.

The 1990 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) first allowed the "transfer to Federal and State agencies" of "personal property of the Department of Defense (DoD), including small arms and ammunition," if it was deemed "suitable for use" in "counter-drug activities." Later, this provision was replaced with section 1033, which added "counter-terrorism" as an acceptable rationale for military arms distribution. 1033 is operated by the DoD's Law Enforcement Support Office (LESO), whose motto is "from warfighter to crimefighter."

More than 17,000 local and state police agencies receive weapons or other equipment from the Pentagon through 1033. The full list of equipment transfers is not publicly available, but the Missouri Department of Public Safety (DPS) has indicated to the media that the St. Louis County Police have received through the program nine "utility trucks," two "cargo trailers," a slew of laser sights and night vision gear, twelve 5.56 millimeter rifles and six .45 caliber pistols.

Missouri DPS spokesman Mike O'Connell told *Newsweek* Thursday that the MRAP vehicle photographed patrolling Ferguson was not acquired through 1033, and that he did not know where it came from. Ferguson police also participate in the program, however, and, according to *USA Today*, received two unspecified vehicles, a trailer and a generator.

In June, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released an extensive report titled *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing*, which shows that the federal government has spent billions of dollars arming local police forces with military-grade weapons and encouraged their use in day-to-day policing.

The DoD transferred around $1 million of property in 1990, $324 million in 1995, and nearly $450 million in 2013 to local police agencies across the country. The federal government "requires agencies that receive 1033 equipment to use it within one year of receipt, so there can be no doubt that participation in this program creates an incentive for law enforcement agencies to use military equipment," the report states.

About 500 law enforcement agencies have been given MRAPs through 1033, including in such small communities as: Michigan City, Indiana (population 32,000); Neenah, Wisconsin (25,000); Keene, New Hampshire (23,409); Walsh County, North Dakota (11,000); and even the Ohio State University campus police.

According to a *New York Times* article published in

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June, since 2006 at least 533 planes and helicopters, 93,763 machine guns, 180,718 magazine cartridges, and 44,900 pieces of night vision equipment, have also been given to local and state police forces by the Pentagon.

The ACLU report also notes that a number of military drones, shock-cuffs, cell phone sniffers, and facial recognition tools have been distributed to local police in at least eight states.

Besides 1033, other programs for the armament of local police forces by the federal government exist, such as the Department of Justice (DoJ)'s Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) program. In 2014, all 56 states and territories, as well as 1,224 local governments, applied for $290 million in available JAG funding, which, according to the DoJ, may be used for law enforcement.

Local police forces have also received substantial assistance and funding from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which was created in November 2002 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks "to prepare for, prevent, and respond to domestic emergencies, particularly terrorism." It is now the third largest cabinet department, with 240,000 employees and an annual budget of $60.8 billion.

In April 2013, heavily-armed police and National Guard troops locked down the city of Boston, ostensibly to capture one 19-year-old suspected bomber. All residents were ordered into their homes, where they were then subjected to warrantless house-to-house searches conducted by SWAT teams with assault rifles. Turreted, armored vehicles rolled down the streets, and Black Hawk helicopters, used in Iraq and Afghanistan, flew overhead. The exercise was praised in an internal report by DHS.

In June of this year, the Army's Strategic Studies Group released a report titled "Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a complex and uncertain future," which revealed that the Pentagon is preparing for intervention in New York City to address problems arising from "radical income disparity."

Earlier this year in Virginia, the US Army Asymmetric Warfare Group training center opened. Consisting of a mock American town, replete with office buildings, a church, a sports stadium, a subway stop and a train station, the Army said that the $96 million center is designed to realistically "replicate complex operational environments and develop solutions."

All of these measures are aimed at militarizing local police and establishing the framework for the direct intervention of the military itself in domestic affairs—using the "war on terror" as the pretext for the brutal repression of any domestic opposition to the policies of the ruling class.

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