

College police across the US armed with military-grade weaponry

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The deployment of police bearing military hardware against the population of Ferguson, Missouri in August shocked the world. But the paramilitary equipment and tactics used by police in Ferguson is only the most visible expression of the militarization of police that has taken place throughout the United States.

This process has even extended to college campuses. At least 117 campus police departments have been recipients of surplus war materiel from the Defense Department under the 1033 equipment transfer program, according to a report published last month by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The *Chronicle* filed a battery of Freedom of Information requests with state governments to ascertain the extent of military equipment being deployed on US college campuses. Its findings present a picture of American campuses very unlike the traditional admission catalog photographs of smiling students walking through leafy quads.

At least 60 colleges have acquired M-16 assault rifles, apparently the most popular request under the 1033 program. Arizona State has a government-supplied arsenal of 70 M-16s. A wide range of large and small, four-year and community colleges are involved.

Campus police departments have also received a myriad of other military equipment. Central Florida, the second largest college in the US, has received an M-79 grenade launcher. “It is a force multiplier for us,” David Perry, chief of police at the university, told the *Chronicle*. “We are not given budgets comparable to some large cities and municipalities, so we need to find ways to make it reach.” The military hardware is free through the program, and schools pay only for delivery.

Hinds Community College, a school of 12,000 students just north of Jackson State University in Mississippi, also received an M-79 grenade launcher, as well as M-16 rifles. Just a few miles away, Jackson

State was the site of the brutal 1970 killing of two students protesting the Vietnam War.

Lincoln University, a historically black school of 3,000 students in Jefferson City, Missouri, received 20 bayonets. The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences received four 12-gauge shotguns.

Saddleback College, another two-year community college in California, received a Mine Resistant Vehicle, as did Florida International University, New Mexico State University, Ohio State, Texas Southern University, and the University of Texas. These vehicles include a central tire inflation system, an engine-coolant-hydraulic system that can take a direct hit from a 7.62mm machine gun, and are capable of mounting an Mk-19 grenade machine gun or TOW antitank missile launcher.

The report contains the searchable database of military hardware disbursed to colleges secured by the *Chronicle*.

During the hearings held on the 1033 program by the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Peter Kraska, a professor at Eastern Kentucky University, warned that Ferguson and the 1033 program were emblematic of the systemic growth of police militarization.

Far from these events being an anomaly, Kraska said the actions of the Ferguson police were “highly consistent with, and representative of, the U.S. Police—with both ideological and material support from the Federal government—moving rapidly and confidently down the militarization continuum.”

He traced this “militarization continuum” starting with the Reagan administration’s attempt to repeal the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which bars the US Army from domestic law enforcement. Subsequent amendments permitted the “cross-fertilization of

military and police forces.” Then, beginning in the 1990s there was a precipitous rise and mainstreaming of police paramilitary units (PPU), so that by the late 1990s, 89 percent of police departments had SWAT teams or other PPUs.

According to Kraska’s research, there are now an estimated 60,000 SWAT team deployments a year, compared with about 3,000 in the early 1980s. SWAT raids can be profitable, as “asset forfeiture” rules enable the police departments to keep assets seized during raids.

After September 11 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, these programs were substantially augmented, with \$35 billion provided in additional grants to state and local police for the purpose of weapons purchase. For example, Missouri alone has been awarded \$173 million in State Homeland Security Program funding, and the St. Louis Urban Area (of which Ferguson is a part) has received over \$87 million in Urban Areas Security Initiative funds.

Concluding his testimony, Kraska stated, “1033 is perhaps the most visible and obviously most offensive conduit (at least to some)—but it has mostly been federal and local tax dollars—along with asset forfeiture money” that have allowed the police to procure these supplies in massive, yet very difficult to document numbers.” In other words, 1033 equipment accounts for just a small part of the growing police stockpile of military-grade armaments.

The transition from esteemed institutions of higher learning—which aimed at a wide “diffusion of knowledge” in an atmosphere of free debate—to today’s colleges whose police forces are outfitted with advanced combat gear are a testament to the depth of social polarization in the United States.

The ruling elite is deeply cognizant of the fact that political protests on campuses, in the US and internationally, have historically accompanied movements of the working class.

As the US continues its state of perpetual imperialist war under conditions of deep social opposition, the authorities have not forgotten the insurrectionary situation on campuses just over 40 years ago—in the aftermath of the escalation of a previous imperialist war of plunder.

At that time, over four million students struck,

protested and rallied against the illegal expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia and the state killings of student protestors at Kent State and Jackson State in May 1970. In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, 100,000 students took to the streets in Washington in protest. President Richard Nixon whisked to Camp David for two days for his personal protection and his speechwriter declared, “The city was an armed camp.” Students at the University of New Mexico were bayoneted when attempting to lower a flag to half-mast in response to Kent State.

By the end of that deadly month nearly one-third of American colleges were dominated by protests, with the National Guard deployed at many campuses. One of the deepest fears of the government was that the student protest movement would link up politically with the broader struggle of the working class and civil rights movement.

Amid the unceasing growth of social inequality, the political establishment is preparing for renewed expressions of social opposition by militarizing the police, of which the funneling of military hardware to police departments at schools and college campuses is one component.



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