

Federal agency conspired with police to keep media out of Ferguson airspace

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The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) worked closely with the St. Louis County Police Department (SLCPD) to restrict news media helicopters from flying above Ferguson, Missouri, during protests against the killing of Michael Brown.

According to phone recordings obtained by the Associated Press (AP) this week, representatives of the SLCPD clearly stated that their concern in a request to the FAA to ban air traffic around Ferguson was to restrict media coverage of the protests. The FAA obliged, and for 12 days in August, news helicopters in a 37-square-mile area around Ferguson were prohibited, although police helicopters and commercial air traffic were permitted.

“They finally admitted it really was to keep the media out,” observed one FAA manager about the request by police in one of the recordings. At another point, one FAA official said that the police “did not care if you ran commercial traffic through this TFR [temporary flight restriction] all day long. They didn’t want media in there.”

Initially, the police had requested that all air traffic be banned from Ferguson. FAA officials, however, persuaded them to modify conditions of the no-fly zone request. According to the telephone recordings, a Kansas City FAA official told the police that a rewording of the order “will still keep news people out.... The only way people will get in there is if they give them permission in there anyway so...it still keeps all of them out.”

The police clearly did not want aerial photography of their massive and militarized response to the protests over the killing of Michael Brown, who had been shot by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9. Brown, 18, was unarmed and, according to witnesses, in the act of surrendering while he was shot in the head. His death

sparked several days and nights of widespread protests by area residents.

Police not only responded with a threatening display of military hardware against the unarmed and peaceful protestors, they also arrested journalists, shot tear gas at camera crews, and prevented journalists and protesters from filming police. One officer was notoriously video-recorded pointing a rifle at a live feed crew and telling them, “I will f*cking kill you.”

As a recent Amnesty International report on human rights violations in Ferguson observes, “From August 13 through October 2, at least 19 journalists and members of the media were arrested by law enforcement, with others subjected to tear gas and the use of rubber bullets.... Reporters for CNN, Al Jazeera America and other outlets report being harassed or physically threatened.”

Police at the time claimed that the flight restriction was necessary for the safety of aircraft, noting that one of their own helicopters had been fired at. But the SLCPD recently confirmed to the AP that there is no evidence of damage of this sort to any police helicopter and no incident report can be found. On the phone recordings obtained by the AP, an FAA official referred to these claims as “rumors.”

In response to allegations of an attack on freedom of speech, St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar continued to claim that the no-fly zone was based solely on safety considerations. In a statement indicative of the arrogant disregard by the police for democratic rights, he added, “Had we just wanted to move the media away from this arena we would have started that on the ground.”

The Obama Administration also defended the FAA’s actions. Press Secretary Josh Earnest told the media: “In this case, what the FAA says is that they took the

prudent step of implementing this temporary flight restriction in the immediate aftermath of reports of shots fired at a police helicopter,”

The revelations about the no-fly zone come on top of the disclosure that the SLCPD has stockpiled tear gas, pepper spray and other anti-riot gear in anticipation of protests in mid-November if a grand jury fails to indict Officer Wilson for the killing of Michael Brown.



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