

Trump to Fully Restore Military Surplus Transfers to Police

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A police officer at an anti-hate protest in Berkeley, Calif., on Aug. 27. President Trump plans to reverse Obama-era limits on the transfer of surplus military equipment to local police departments. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration plans to reinstate in full a program that provides local police departments with military surplus equipment such as large-caliber weapons and grenade launchers, according to a document obtained by The New York Times.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions is expected to announce the changes to the program on Monday when he speaks at a Fraternal Order of Police conference in Nashville. It was not immediately clear why Mr. Sessions would announce changes to a Pentagon program, but he has rolled back several Obama-era policing reforms and helped bolster the Trump administration's support among law enforcement.

President Barack Obama put limits on the program in 2015, when several high-profile cases of police officers killing black men inflamed tensions between law enforcement and local communities.

The shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014 by a white police officer triggered protests and a heavily armed police response that many in the community saw as unnecessary. Images of the police with sniper rifles on top of armored cars or wearing riot gear to watch over protests set off a debate about whether police departments had lost sight of their missions to serve and protect.

“We’ve seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like they’re an occupying force,” Mr. Obama said in announcing that he was placing curbs on the program.

The program was started in the 1990s as a way for the military to transfer surplus equipment to federal, state and local police agencies fighting the drug war. More than \$5 billion in surplus gear has been funneled to law enforcement agencies

Mr. Obama prohibited transfers of weaponized vehicles, certain large-caliber ammunition and other equipment. He also added restrictions on transferring some weapons and devices, explosives, battering rams, riot helmets and shields.

Mr. Trump plans to sign an executive order to reverse those limits, a “policy shift toward ensuring officers have the tools they need to reduce crime and keep their communities safe,” according to the document, which described the president’s coming order and the rationale behind it.

It cited two academic articles that said the program helped reduce crime and did not lead to an increase in police-involved deaths. It also said that a military-style helmet saved the life of an officer who responded to the 2016 shooting that killed 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando.

And it called much of the equipment provided through the program “entirely defensive in nature,” a characterization certain to draw the ire of those opposed to the police deploying certain heavy weapons and vehicles in tense but not clearly dangerous situations.

Mr. Trump’s decision was first reported by USA Today.