

HEARING ON OREGON JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPARENT POLICING AND USE OF FORCE REFORM

Testimony on Uniforms and Gear submitted by Dr. Michael Birzer, Wichita State University.

Greetings members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak before this honorable body.

My name is Michael Birzer and I am a Professor of Criminal Justice at Wichita State University where I specialize in the study of policing. I testify before you today as a proponent of eliminating the militarized police uniform and gear in everyday police work. The militarized uniform with its emphasis on camouflage and/or black colors sends a message of distancing the police from the very communities they serve.

The American police uniform has an interesting history. It starts in London in 1829. It was then that England's Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel introduced the London Metropolitan Police Act, which established the London Metropolitan Police. The Police Act, in part, called for the organization of the London police along paramilitary lines, and that police officers "Bobbies" wear blue uniforms in order for them to be readily identifiable. The blue uniform was to be a sign of security, safety and trust. London Bobbies wore navy blue uniforms to distinguish them from England's Military uniform that was red and white at that time. This is a bit different from the American police experience who more closely emulated military attire and tactics.

American police departments in the 19th Century influenced by Peel's police act, adopted the blue police uniform and organized their departments along military lines. Subsequently, this has become a staple of American policing.

In the 1960's, some police departments, changed the uniform and equipped their officers in blazer jackets to add a business like appearance. At the time, police leaders wanted to know if the new look would have an effect on police officers attitudes toward citizens, use of force complaints, and citizens' view of the police. The research generally mixed, prompted departments to return to the traditional uniform.

Since the 1980's we observed police increasingly adopt the Battle Dress Uniform with a visibly exposed tactical vest. It is a common sight today. The new look was initiated, in part, during the "war on drugs" which prompted an almost obsessive congressional determination to insert military presence in domestic drug law enforcement. Racial minority communities, especially African American communities bore the brunt of the new paramilitary war on drugs and crime for that matter.

When police departments demonstrate a more aggressive militaristic look, coupled with a police training environment that is often conducted in a paramilitary fashion, the result is that police officers may begin to act and think like soldiers. This potentially alienates the police from the community. It is important to note that soldiers at war operate under a code of domination, not service like the American police officer.

As an important symbolic first step, police should downsize their military style clothing and gear, and return to the traditional blue uniform or a softer uniform or sorts.¹ Camouflage and black or near black Battle Dress Uniforms should increasingly be replaced with one that is more representative of service, guardianship, and democracy.

Police departments should try different approaches to the uniform. They should be creative and experiment, and discover what works best. Establishing a new body of research on the police uniform and its effect on the police and the community seems to be most appropriate. An important consideration, is what uniform can the police fashion that presents a less threatening appearance while at the same time offer comfort and practicability for police officers who will wear them?

One of the most influential police reformers of the 20th Century, the late O.W. Wilson who is largely credited as the lead architect of the professional model of policing, acknowledged in his writings in the 1970s, that police departments were seeking a more professional business look and experimenting with a different look to include the blue business jacket.² We find ourselves at a similar place and time. It is time to take a hard look at the paramilitary Battle Dress Uniform and move towards one that foster a sense of service, guardianship, and democracy.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have regarding my testimony. Thank you.

¹ See: Paul, J. P., & Birzer, M. L. Birzer (2004). Images of power: An analysis of the militarization of police uniforms and messages of service. *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 32(2), 121-128.

² See: Wilson, O. W., & McLaren, R. C. (1977). *Police administration* (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill Book Company.