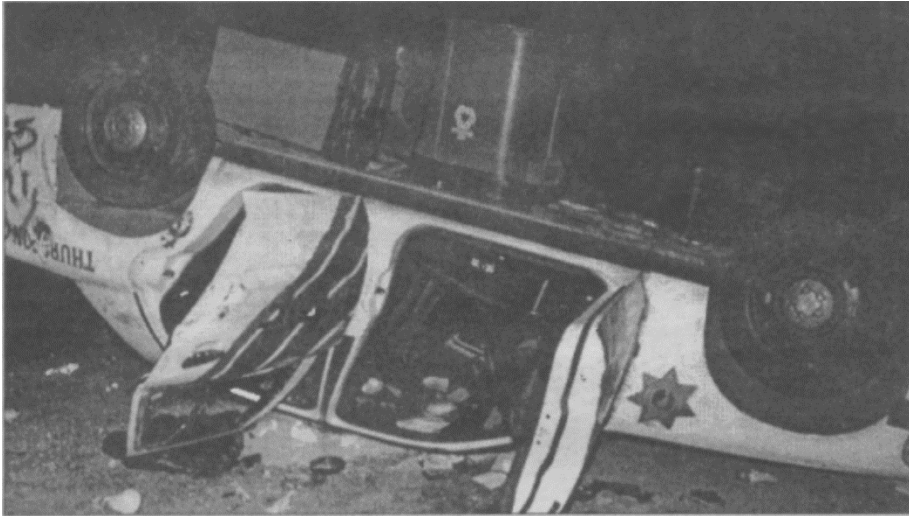


How The Cops Got Their Guns:

The History and Politics of Arming the Evergreen Police



The Evergreen State College (TESC) is renowned for its high degree of political engagement amongst its students and staff. Despite this widely acknowledged reality, a lack of institutional memory means few current students, staff or alumni can reliably recall specific examples of political conflict that preceded their time at the college. This piece seeks, in a limited fashion, to begin to rectify this problem. This writing utilizes primary and second-hand research documents obtained in the Malcolm Stilson Archives and Special Collections at Evergreen.

The question of an armed campus police force is distinct in Evergreen's political history. This issue's longevity has spanned decades, periodically and dramatically surfacing before abruptly disappearing from public view. Students who never knew each other nor attended TESC together thus grappled with the very same question, over and over again. Although TESC Police have been successful in accessing firearms on the job, their attempts were delayed significantly by political backlash that is historically unparalleled on the campus. Moreover, TESC Police have continued, following a limited arming in the mid-1990s, to advocate for further arming. The debate about an armed police force highlights other tensions at Evergreen, from racism to the undemocratic governance of the college.

Before Cops

For approximately 25 years TESC wasn't home to a fully commissioned police force. Instead, the campus hosted a team of security guards. These guards were unarmed and relied on Thurston County Sheriff's Department for police backup. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a movement to arm TESC Security burgeoned, with pressure primarily emanating from TESC security guards themselves and the Washington state legislature. Initially, security guard demands for guns found little support elsewhere on the Evergreen campus, including among the administration, though this would change later.

In Fall 1989 security guards assumed a legal approach, filing a lawsuit with Washington Labor & Industries (L&I), alleging that without firearms or full police powers, they were subject to unsafe working conditions. In Sept. 1990 L&I ruled in favor of the guards and threatened to fine TESC. The TESC administration, cognizant of student positions on armed police and police in general, refused to arm security, instead opting "downgrade" security, altering security's expectations and re-writing security's Standard Operations Manual (SOP). Now security guards could no longer directly intervene in violent interactions but must rely on backup from Thurston County Sheriff's Dept officers.

In parallel to this, multiple bills are introduced to the state legislature, stipulating that all state colleges host an armed police force. As TESC was the only unarmed state college at the time, these bills were seen as highly targeted, and garnered significant student and staff opposition. These legislative attempts failed, with most bills paralyzed in committees.

Limited Arming

In 1992, Evergreen hired security consulting firm, Warrington Associates, to review its security force. The consultants deem Evergreen security dysfunctional and recommended “limited arming.” Specifically, Warrington Associates suggested security guards be equipped with mace and collapsible batons, however, the report bolstered pro-gun attitudes among security guards and set the stage for future conflicts. In Spring 1992, building on the consultants, Interim President Les Purce issued a “Core Recommendations” report that included arming police. Contentious campus-hosted public meetings ensued, during which students, faculty, staff and alumni mobilized against armed police. This timeline roughly dovetailed with the Los Angeles riots of 1992, fueling anti-police sentiment on the campus. This particular battle with Purce highlighted the lack of formal student input regarding school-wide decisions with calls for an unarmed police force mirroring and complementing demands for student governance. Eventually Purce conceded, claiming that police didn’t need to be armed, but that security would be commissioned into a police department. The Board of Trustees concurred, deciding against arming the police for the time being, but recommissioned TESC security into the Department of Public Safety, granting officers greater powers in the process.

Following recommissioning the question of arming didn’t arise again for a few years. Starting in 1995, Thurston County Sheriff’s Department intensified pressure on Evergreen to arm Public Safety; similar calls were issued internally from TESC Public Safety. At this point, community forums were re-organized, with similar dynamics from the last time. Students, faculty and staff mobilized overwhelmingly in opposition, as indicated in campus surveys and comment periods at forums. The administration was slammed for poorly organizing and advertising the public forums while refusing to permit a campus-wide vote on the matter.



With pressure mounting, TESC President Jane Jervis and Vice President of Student Affairs Art Costantino officially express support for arming police. Students launch a more aggressive campaign, utilizing tactics outside of established political channels. Rallies, street theater and popular education are organized on Evergreen’s Red Square, garnering a generally positive reception.

These efforts ultimately failed; in February 1996 the TESC Board of Trustees voted 6-1 in favor of “limited” arming. In the immediate aftermath of the decision, students staged the only significant direct action in the struggle against armed campus police. Students marched from the Library building and blockaded the main entrance to the campus on Evergreen Parkway. Exiting traffic was permitted to pass while incoming traffic was barred. While the action clearly harnessed student anger and energized protesters, it concluded only about an hour and a half after it began.



The administration swiftly sought to deflect student opposition through the formation of a pseudo-democratic Disappearing Task Force (DTF), charged with defining and implementing “limited arming.” DTFs are temporary decision-making and advisory bodies frequently used at TESC to resolve specific policy questions before “disappearing.” This particular DTF was fraught with controversy. While many students were denied positions in the body because they were “biased,” the DTF was headed by none other than President Jane Jervis, herself quite biased in favor of arming the police. The DTF selection process wasn’t democratic but was determined in top-down fashion by Student Affairs, largely excluding anti-gun perspectives. The DTF even closed its meetings to the public in an act of political expediency, but the subsequent public scrutiny compelled a reversal of this decision shortly thereafter.

In May 1996, the DTF released its policy recommendations on arming campus police. Among these recommendations include officers only carrying firearms through the night while stowing them in lockboxes during the day, only drawing weapons if a suspect has already drawn one and firing guns only in “life-threatening” situations. The report also suggested forming a community review board to investigate any firearm use incidents. The latter suggestion was criticized by TESC Police Officer Larry Savage, who claimed only officers, not community members, had the authority to define a life-threatening situation. A month later, Jervis approved the DTF’s recommendations, including the formation of a review board. In October 1997, limited arming was officially inaugurated. Though the TESC administration promised to warn students in advance of the arming date, they only notified students 24 hours prior.

The available historical record indicates that while student resentment regarding the decision to arm police remained high, little organized dissent persisted. A high-profile individualistic protest occurred Oct. 30th, 1997, in which a student entered campus with a rifle visible. The student reasoned that if police had access to weapons, so too should students and other campus community members. This protest received ample media attention but did not involve other students. This lack of collective character probably weakened its effect.

The first major firearm-related incidents both involved TESC officer Bob Bird. On two separate occasions within months in Fall 1998, Bird drew his weapon on a maintenance worker and a student. Bird claims he did so in a “jokingly” manner, though both the maintenance worker and student in the two incidents felt threatened. Bird resigned in Dec. 1998 after it became clear the officer would be terminated from the department anyway. Bird claimed this termination would have been “political” in nature and reported that fellow police officers and college administrators were worried that the improper firearm use incidents would lead to student protest and rioting.

The beginning of the 21st century was accompanied by new challenges and controversies regarding TESC Police Services. In the Fall Quarter of 2000, campus police were found to be violating the limited arming guidelines. Instead, officers had been carrying weapons on their persons throughout the day. When challenged, TESC Police Chief Steve Hunstberry claimed that the limited arming rules were vague enough that officers could reasonably interpret the guidelines to permit 24/7 arming. In effect then, cops were now fully armed, though it still wasn't the official policy of the school. This changed in 2003 when the police union formally requested the officers be armed all day. Just months later, in May 2003, TESC President Les Purce officially implemented 24/7 arming.

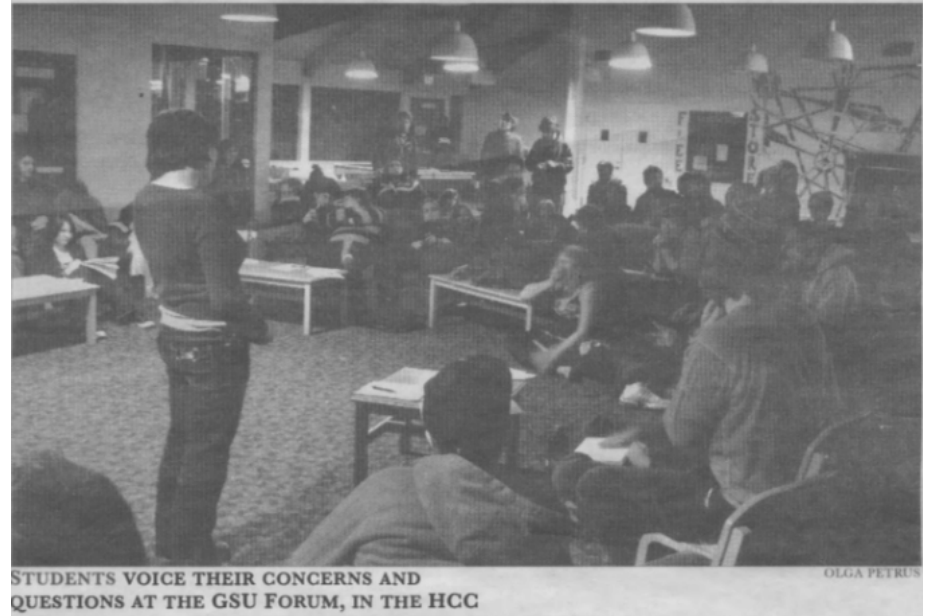
TESC Police also acquired tasers for the first time in 2001. This angered students, but little organized opposition emerged to contest the decision. However, the campus cop's use of tasers during this time period did generate ample resistance.

First Attempt to Procure Rifles

The Dead Prez or Valentine's Day riot in 2008 was perhaps the most notorious anti-police uprising on campus. Campus-wide discussion of police conduct followed in the ensuing weeks. The administration held multiple community forums to discuss the riot. On February 27th, people staged a rally on Red Square protesting police misconduct on the night of the concert and in other incidents.

In the Fall Quarter of 2008, Police Services proposed a \$10,000 purchase of 3 rifles and protective gear. The official reasoning given was concern about school shooters, but many speculated that the unrest of the previous February had much more to do with it. Some felt that the police were scared, not on behalf of students, but scared of the students on behalf of themselves. Students criticized the "audacity" of the police to request rifles for a potential school shooting before any lock-down classroom procedure had been implemented. Some questioned the timing of the proposal--PSCRB wanted all feedback by mid-January, but official discussion did not begin until mid-December. However, community forums about the rifle purchase ended up continuing well into Spring Quarter.

A strong voice of dissent pervaded the tone of every forum. Evergreen was facing a budget crisis and considering a tuition hike in response, students wondered how there could be money to arm the police at such a time. The PSCRB was also criticized for lacking any student representatives until February. A petition against the purchase was circulated by the GSU in late January. PSCRB conducted a survey which concluded in April with overwhelming opposition from students and faculty. In the end, the administration recognized how little support there was for the rifle purchase among the majority of the campus and announced in October that the rifles would not be purchased.



The era in between this failed attempt and the next and final time the school would try to procure rifles was marked by steadfast PR campaigning to improve relations between the student body and the police. This was the beginning of the snack shelf that currently resides in Police Services, when the food bank was moved there from the Health Center in October 2009, as well as hosting a short lived PB&J station. A student group called PASS (Police Awareness and Student Safety) formed in 2011. Their goal was to "convince the community to welcome and support police services," and to these ends they: made a documentary about "the hate that Police Services encounter at Evergreen," coordinated supervised student rides on newly purchased police Segways, and helped design an Introduction to Law Enforcement program, taught by Sgt. Tim Marron. They circulated a petition to arm the police with assault rifles and got Q13 Fox News to interview PASS about their petition on January 23, 2013. When the Fox News truck parked in the bus circle, students organized a spontaneous protest against arming cops at the site of the live interview.

Anti-Racism 2017

Given the far-right reactionary media narrative surrounding the anti-racist groundswell at Evergreen in 2017, the confusion about the movement from outside observers even within Olympia, and infighting among participants, it's hard to paint a clear picture of what exactly went down in spring of 2017. But it is probably fair to say that hostility towards police actions and presence on campus played a bigger role than generally is given credit. It is perhaps a great misfortune that that energy, which reached a critical mass unlike anything since the Dead Prez riot or possibly ever, was not more successfully pinpointed against the militarization of the Evergreen police.

The conclusion of Andre Thompson and Bryson Chaplain's trial on May 18th, which found the brothers guilty, loomed large over racial tensions that had been mounting on campus all year, and would come to a head that very month. At the infamous library barricade on May 24th, 2017, students presented George Bridges a long list of demands, of which about ten percent were concerned with TESC police. They called for Police Services to sell all their lethal and less than lethal weapons, and for TESC to cease the expansion of the police force, instead creating a student collective to develop and implement an alternative to policing. President George Bridges acquiesced in some ways to some of the other demands, but flat out refused to ever disarm or disband the police. He faced harsh criticism for it, but there was a lack of persistence in organizing the manifestation of these demands, as students were swept up in the chaos of the campus becoming a sensationalized topic on a national scale and a dangerous target for both on and offline violence in a matter of days. In fact, Bridges took the opportunity to do the very opposite of students' wishes about the police.



TESCPS Get Rifles

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On August 1st of 2017, then Director of Police Services Stacy Brown sent an email request to Bridges for the purchase of five semi-automatic AR-15 rifles. Bridges approved her request in two weeks later. The following November the school purchased seven Colt LE6920 AR-15 rifles. This was all done under the table. No students or faculty were consulted as they had been in the past, not even the Vice President of Student Affairs, Wendy Endress, who oversaw Police Services at the time. Students were not even made aware of the purchase until October of 2018, when the Cooper Point Journal obtained the emails in a public records request and published the story. The lesson that the administration had learned was clear: transparency and democracy stand in the way of militarizing the police. It was perfectly obvious what the verdict would be if they opened the question to student input, so they did away with such pesky protocols.

When this news finally broke, people were angry but not entirely surprised. Many had suspected that far-right aggression towards the school in 2017 would provide justification to implement further militarization which had never stopped being pushed, and indeed the New Jersey man who had called Thurston County Sheriffs and threatened to shoot up the campus back in May is usually thrown out among the excuses offered by the administration.

Stacy Brown's email contained a number of other requests that Bridges granted, including two new full-time equivalent police officers, crowd control equipment, purchase of a subscription to a policy manual updater called Lexipol, more cameras around campus, new door-locking systems and alarms, modernized radio infrastructure, transition of vehicles to leases, and new laptops. However, the state only approved about a third of the request for necessary funding. There was some organized resistance to the school's attempts to fulfill these requests and hostility toward those that had already been fulfilled, including the rifles, fueled these demonstrations, but ultimately it is unclear what effect, if any, this had on the changes being made.

Faced with rapid escalation and expansion of the campus police force, it's important to remember that things weren't always like this. Students have never wavered from or been unclear about their desire to end armed policing. Every upgrade of police strength has required an equivalent degree of targeted political exclusion by the administration. This reached an unprecedented extreme with the purchase of rifles in 2017.

Evergreeners have been writing this history in Disorientation manuals since 1998. Now more than ever this information needs to be passed on. The college relies on the transient nature of student life to interrupt communication within a continuous opposition. We must learn from the past to formulate dynamic resistance, but first we must remember.