America's Police Will Fight the Next Riot With These Stink Bombs

April 29, 2015 By Patrick Tucker

Future protestors in places like Baltimore could be met with a new and disgusting chemical weapon.

CORRECTION: *In the original version of this article, Stephen Rust, general manager of Mistral, a seller of the chemical called Skunk, claimed to have provided the substance to law enforcement agencies in Ferguson, Mo. Ferguson officials, who did not respond to repeated inquiries for comment before publication, contacted Defense One the day after publication and denied they possess Skunk. Subsequently, Mistral ignored repeated requests for clarification by phone and email. At the company's headquarters in Bethesda, Md., when asked to respond to the Ferguson officials' statement, Rust said, "No comment." He went on, "If I have to tell you one more time, I'll have you arrested and taken off the premises. Leave! Leave!"*

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As protestors and police officers clash on the streets of Baltimore and other divided cities, some police departments are stockpiling a highly controversial weapon to control civil unrest.

It's called Skunk, a type of "malodorant," or in plainer language, a foul-smelling liquid. Technically nontoxic but incredibly disgusting, it has been described as a cross between "dead animal and human excrement." Untreated, the smell lingers for weeks.

The Israeli Defense Forces developed Skunk in 2008 as a crowd-control weapon for use against Palestinians. Now Mistral, a company out of Bethesda, Md., says they are providing it to police departments in the United States.

Skunk is composed of a combination of baking soda and amino acids, Mistral general manager Stephen Rust said at the National Defense Industrial Association's Armament Systems Forum on April 20. "You can drink it, but you wouldn't want to," said Rust, a retired U.S. Army project manager.

The Israelis first used it in 2008 to disperse Palestinians protesting in the West Bank. A BBC video shows its first use in action, sprayed by a hose, a system that has come to be known as the "crap cannon."

Mistral reps say Skunk, once deployed, can be "neutralized" with a special soap — and only with that soap. In another BBC video, an IDF spokesman describes how any attempt to wash it via regular means only exacerbates its effects. Six weeks after IDF forces used it against Palestinians at a security barrier, it still lingered in the air.

Mistral says the United States military has expressed an interest in Skunk, if not yet placed an order. "We've demoed it at Fort Bragg. Why? Because they asked about it," said Rust.

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But the military has been experimenting and researching malodorants in various forms for years. A 2008 presentation from defense contractor General Dynamics describes a stink grenade that the company developed with the Army called the XM1063, which can be fired from a 155mm artillery gun. The development of malodorants remains an ongoing research project, according to documents related to Office of Naval Research's fiscal year 2015 budget. Many malodorants currently in research have a toxic acetone base, according to Rust. Skunk, conversely, does not.

In some ways, Skunk is less physically dangerous than tear gas or rubber bullets. It doesn't sting, but rather triggers a flight response in the amygdala. That could make it usable in combat settings where other crowd-control agents like tear gas are forbidden by the Chemical Weapons Convention, or CWC. "If a particular malodorant is disseminated with a concentration that does not activate the trigeminal nerve, it may not require designation as an RCA [riot control agent] under the CWC," Kelly Hughes, a spokesman for DOD Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Program, told New Scientist in 2012.

But what seems like a viable alternative to bullets in a war zone becomes more disturbing in the hands of domestic police forces, particularly those who have soured relations with the communities they serve.

Today, Mistral sells Skunk in a variety of form factors. These include MK-20 canister rounds, which hold 20 ounces of the stuff and deploy out to 24 feet; MK-46 canisters with 60 ounces and a range of 40 feet; a "skid sprayer" that can shoot 50 gallons of Skunk, at 7 gallons a minute, out to 60 feet; and 40mm grenades that can be fired from modified shotguns.

The grenade format is of particular interest to police departments, because it allows for targeted deployment. "I'm going to be able to drill [a specific target in a crowd] with a ... round while I put him in the dirt. I can mark him with Skunk and he will be easy to locate when the crowd disperses," Rust said.

What version might show up at the next protest? In all likelihood, the one with the longest range. Police departments, Rust said, "wanted to be able to provide that stink and really keep law enforcement out of rock-throwing range."

For police forces, there is obvious appeal for means for controlling a situation from a safe distance without causing permanent physical injury. "Large-scale riots are dispersed in minutes and not hours," Rust said.

To those who have been hit with Skunk, the experience is akin to being doused with "shit." in the words of one Palestinian protester, "it makes you feel inhuman."

There's something particularly nightmarish about the use of a weapon like Skunk in the context of an American city. The spraying of feces agents on a crowd of U.S. citizens represents a tangible and absolute reinforcement of social division. There is no more complete way to dehumanize someone than to make that human repulsive to herself.

The poisoning of a place also serves as a ghastly method of desecration, destroying any will to reside, congregate, protest, or even document a location until the owner of the weapon elects to clean it away. It is not only a means of crowd control but also, potentially, a system for maintaining new apartheids.

If it smells like an act of war, it is.