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In the War on Drugs, Crime and Terror, We Are All Now Potential SWAT Team Targets

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Tuesday, 17 September 2013 10:02

By Mark Karlin, Truthout | Interview

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To learn more about how American police are adopting and using military tactics, get *Rise Of The Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* with a contribution of \$35 or more to Truthout. Become informed and support corporate-free journalism at the same time. [Click here for the book.](#)

The Economist writes of *Rise of the Warrior Cop*:

Mr Balko manages to avoid the clichés of both right and left, and provokes genuine outrage at the misuse of state power in its most brutal and unaccountable form: heavily armed police raiding the homes of unarmed, non-violent suspects on the flimsiest of pretexts, and behaving more like an occupying army in hostile territory than guardians of public safety. "Rise of the Warrior Cop", Mr Balko's interesting first book, explains what policies led to the militarization of America's police. To his credit, he focuses his outrage not on the police themselves, but on politicians and the phony, wasteful drug war they created.



Radley Balko speaking at the 2013 International Students for Liberty Conference in Washington, DC. (Photo: Gage Skidmore / Flickr).

Law enforcement in the US has been partaking of mission creep for decades, resulting in policing becoming a battlefield on which we all reside.

Truthout talked with Radley Balko about how the friendly police officer walking the streets evolved into the warrior cop.

Mark Karlin: The emergence of the SWAT team in the past few decades has come, in some ways, to symbolize the militarization of local police. How did the SWAT team emerge as a standard component of most police forces?

Radley Balko: It's really due to several policies implemented over the last 35 or so years. The first is a program started during the Regan administration that instructed the Pentagon to start making surplus military equipment available to domestic police agencies, for free, or basically for the cost of shipping. Literally millions of pieces of equipment designed for use on the battlefield have since been given to local agencies for use on American streets. The program was expanded then finally formalized with a new office and budget in a defense authorization bill passed by Congress in 1997.

So these agencies were getting all this military gear, and the logical next step was to use it to form a SWAT team. Reagan and subsequent administrations also encouraged cooperation between the military and domestic police when it comes to training, sharing intelligence and information and even teaming up for some interdiction efforts.

Finally, you have a series of anti-drug grants that then reward police agencies for prioritizing drug raids over other forms of policing. So you now have your SWAT team, and you can either keep it in reserve for one of the emergency sorts of

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situations for which SWAT teams were intended or you can start sending your SWAT team out on drug raids, which could actually generate revenue for your police department.

Mark Karlin: How have the political declarations from various White Houses of a war on crime, a war on drugs and a war on terror, for example, come to symbolize in language police forces becoming legalized paramilitary units in some situations?

Radley Balko: I think rhetoric is very important. For one, declaring war on drugs, crime, etc. conditions the public to be ready to give up some essential rights in order to win the war, as often happens during war. But it also of course has an effect on police, who have come to see themselves as soldiers on a battlefield instead of peace officers.

The war rhetoric has also been accompanied by efforts to dehumanize drug offenders. One Nixon official called them "vermin." William Bennett once floated the idea of public beheading of drug dealers. Daryl Gates once equated drug use with treason. When you tell the public that drug offenders are less than human, the public is more tolerant of treating them that way.

Mark Karlin: What is your response to a police chief who says that I have all this new technology and it can protect my men and women from bad guys, why shouldn't I use it?

Radley Balko: Police officers assume a certain amount of risk when they sign up for the job. That's part of being a cop. (Although, to be honest, policing is as safe today as it was in the early 1960s. You're more likely to be murdered just living in many large cities than while working as a cop.) We should protect police officers to the extent that we can, but not to the point where doing so means violating the rights - or transferring some of that risk onto - the people they serve.

I would also argue that using dynamic, forced-entry tactics to serve search warrants on people suspected of consensual crimes is actually more dangerous than, say, waiting for your suspect to leave the house or apprehending him during a traffic stop. You're creating violence and confrontation. SWAT teams were once used to save lives when a violent person had put them at risk. Today, they're primarily used in a way that puts lives at risk.

Mark Karlin: How have the police become enforcers who suppress political dissent?

Radley Balko: I wouldn't phrase it exactly that way. I think politicians and public officials have chosen to use police in this manner. But I think the general thrust of your question is correct. The police response to protest today is to expect confrontation and to keep protesters as far away as possible from the conference or meeting their protesting. Where cities once assumed protesters would be peaceful, but perhaps kept the riot teams nearby in case things turned violent, today, the riot cops in full robo-gear are the first response. The sad thing is, if both police and protesters go into an event expecting confrontation, it's probably going to happen. But it doesn't need to be that way.

Mark Karlin: Various laws have given the police actual monetary

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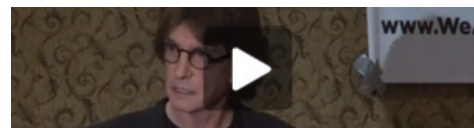
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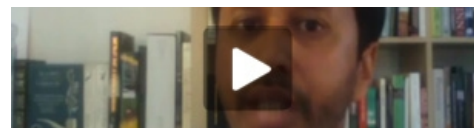
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incentives to seize property - as in the case of suspected drug dealers, and I emphasize the word *suspected*. Don't police forces have financial incentives to become more military in nature?

Radley Balko: Yes, I think so. In addition to the anti-drug grants I mentioned earlier, you now have DHS grants going out to police agencies across the country to buy yet more military gear. You have the civil forfeiture policies you mentioned, where police can seize your property, keep the proceeds and never even charge you with a crime, much less wait for a conviction. And civil forfeiture is overwhelmingly used in drug investigations.

Mark Karlin: Decades ago, the police officer in cities and towns used to walk a beat. Now, the average citizen has no contact with a police officer unless there is a problem of some sort or police action. Does this lack of contact create a lack of respect between police and the public?

Radley Balko: I think it contributes to the "us vs. them" mentality we see in too many police agencies today. If a cop's only interaction with the citizens on his beat is when there's a problem or when he's confronting someone, that's going to create a lot of animosity on both sides. It also creates a pretty miserable workday for the cop. Imagine a job where your only interactions with other people over the course of the day were negative. It wouldn't take long for that to begin to have an effect on your state of mind.

Contrast that to community policing, where cops walk beats, attend community and neighborhood meetings and work to become a part of the communities they serve. They have a stake. So when it does come time to use force, they're seen by the community as one of their own who is using force to protect them, not an outside or occupying force that has been imposed upon them.

Mark Karlin: Are many particularly urban police forces tools of elected officials who have a political agenda?

Radley Balko: I don't know that I can really answer that question. I think policing in general is where it is today because of demagoguery by elected officials at all levels of government. But I don't know that it's any worse in urban areas. There are a lot of nasty county sheriffs and small-town police chiefs, too.

Mark Karlin: What do you say to defenders of disproportionate police overreach? Are you sympathetic to Ben Franklin's much-quoted statement, "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Radley Balko: I'd imagine that the people who disagree with me wouldn't consider the police tactics they support "disproportionate." Oddly enough, in some ways, police are more professional today than they've been in the past. Rogue cops are more likely to be held accountable (although you could certainly argue that it still doesn't happen enough). Today you have civilian review boards and internal affairs departments. The point I try to make in the book is that the amount of force that is allowed, even encouraged, as official policy is much greater today than it has been in the past. Today, we see SWAT teams and SWAT-like tactics used for increasingly less-serious crimes. As I mentioned, overwhelming force is often today the first

reaction to protest. In some jurisdictions, all search warrants are now served with SWAT teams, regardless of the crime. We're also seeing SWAT teams even used to enforce regulatory law or to send a political message.

Mark Karlin: With the emergence of Fusion Centers in the wake of 9/11 - and the growing cooperation between the Pentagon, the intelligence services and local police - are you concerned that law enforcement may become even more aligned with the military and federal priorities?

Radley Balko: I think there's definitely reason for concern. Remember, immediately after 9/11, the federal government started running commercials claiming that casual drug users were supporting terrorism. So they wasted no time capitalizing on the fear and outrage over the attacks and trying to transfer all of that to support for a more aggressive drug war. A few years ago, I believe it was The Atlantic that did a review of how the "sneak and peak" warrants authorized under the Patriot Act were actually being used. The overwhelming majority were being used in drug investigations. Those DHS grants are supposed to be used to fight terrorism, but they're going to some fairly unlikely terrorism targets, like Fargo or Tuscaloosa. Once they have the gear, they're of course going to use it. So it gets used in more routine, everyday police work.

I think we can expect to see more of this. With the DHS grants especially, that money is going to purchase new equipment, as opposed to the surplus gear agencies have been getting through the Pentagon. This has given rise to a cottage industry of companies who build this stuff in exchange for those checks. A new industry means a new lobbying voice. So you now have a police-industrial complex, which will try like hell to make sure this all continues and grows.

Mark Karlin: You are a libertarian who has worked at the Cato Institute and Reason magazine. Is concern over the warrior cop one of those crossover issues that libertarians and progressives should unite in working on?

Radley Balko: Absolutely. The reaction to the book all across the political spectrum has been really encouraging. Not just among libertarians and progressives but also from conservatives. One of the points I make in the book is that in the 1990s, it was mostly the right that was worried about police militarization, with Rub Ridge, Waco, the Elian Gonzalez raid, etc. And it was the left that was mostly defending these police actions - or at least dismissing conservatives' concerns. But when police started cracking down on Occupy protests, the left was up in arms, and it was the right dismissing them and defending the police actions. Given the overwhelmingly positive reception the book has received from both right and left, perhaps both sides are starting to realize when you defend the disproportionate use of force because you don't like the people the force is being used against, you make it easier for the government to use the same sort of force on you and your allies in the future. I hope that's the case. I think there's room here for work from libertarians, progressives and limited-government conservatives.

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If you are in the Chicago area on Wednesday, September 18, 2013, join Balko and a panel discussion of increasingly battlefield-style police action at 6 PM at Roosevelt University. [Please RSVP and learn more by clicking here.](#) The event is cosponsored by Truthout.

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MARK KARLIN

Mark Karlin is the editor of BuzzFlash at Truthout. He served as editor and publisher of BuzzFlash for ten years before joining Truthout in 2010. BuzzFlash has won four Project Censored Awards. Karlin writes a commentary five days a week for BuzzFlash, as well as articles for Truthout. He also interviews authors and filmmakers whose works are featured in Truthout's Progressive Picks of the Week.

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