



## **Disturbing book chronicles militarization of police**

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Promoted by presidents from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the War on Drugs has done little or nothing to stop, or reduce, serious crimes in the United States.

Yet that "war" continues to cost taxpayers tens of billions of dollars to pay police officers, to prosecute people and to imprison them, typically for nonviolent crimes.

Perhaps even more important, the War on Drugs continues to erode and destroy civil liberties.

Police are typically allowed to violate the freedom of Americans to maintain their homes as places of safety, privacy and sanctuary. The growing drug wars undermine the long-held "Castle Doctrine" embodied in the Fourth Amendment of our Constitution.

The War on Drugs has created SWAT (Specialized Weapons and Tactics) teams throughout the country. Those teams repeatedly target innocents -- breaking unfairly into private homes and violently assaulting, sometimes killing, people who have done nothing wrong.

The victims of questionable SWAT raids routinely include older people, women and children.

"The overwhelming majority of SWAT deployments today are to break into private residences to serve search warrants for nonviolent crimes," Radley Balko writes in his disturbing new book "Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces."

For Americans who care about their core political liberties, Balko's book is a must-read. A wide range of groups share Balko's concerns, from the American Civil Liberties Union to the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Many victims of the ongoing War on Drugs are people who smoke or grow marijuana -- an activity clearly no worse than drinking beer or wine.

SWAT teams have often detained and assaulted cancer and AIDS patients who use medical marijuana to reduce their pain, even in states that have legalized its use.

Yet despite widespread violence by SWAT teams, the ongoing drug wars have done little, or nothing, to cut drug usage.

Yet many people, especially politicians, are afraid to challenge the growing paramilitary police system, fearing they will become victims of smear campaigns.

Many police leaders express themselves bluntly.

"Officers' safety comes first," said Philadelphia Police Department Spokesperson Fran Healy. "Not infringing on people's rights comes second."

## **The War on Drugs**

Richard Nixon's law-and-order presidential campaign in 1968 naturally led to the blossoming War on Drugs.

Many Nixon administration leaders believed drug use was a "common denominator" shared by groups including low-income black Americans, the anti-Vietnam War movement and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, Balko writes.

Sen. Sam Ervin, D-N.C., one of Nixon's major political opponents, played a major role pursuing the Watergate charges that forced him to resign.

Ervin also became "the angriest, loudest and most powerful critic of Nixon's crime policy," Balko writes.

The prominent Southern Democrat actually preserved the Castle Doctrine for another decade before the renewed War on Drugs in the 1980s undermined it. Ervin played a major role getting the Senate to repeal a federal "no-knock" law that permitted police to break into homes without even first knocking on their front doors.

But Ervin's victory was temporary. "Ervin's wins," Balko writes, "were important, but ultimately ephemeral."

Did Nixon's war on drugs and crime succeed?

"Under Nixon," Balko points out, "violent crime in the country as a whole went up 40 percent and property crime rose 25 percent."

Disliking Nixon's drug wars, President Jimmy Carter cut back on militarized assaults on supposed drug users and others. But under Reagan, things quickly reversed.

After Reagan moved into the White House in 1981, Balko points out, the U.S. Justice Department stepped up efforts to kill pot fields by spraying them with herbicides.

Reagan "put far more emphasis on enforcement and far less on [patient] treatment, and, perhaps most radically of all, enlisted the military in the war on drugs."

Most Democratic leaders raised few, or no, questions. In 1982, Sens. Joe Biden, D-Del., and Hubert Humphrey, D-Minn., introduced a bill of their own that passed the Senate.

"The Humphrey bill gave Reagan everything he wanted," Balko writes.

The number of mistaken drug raids and deaths increased during the coming years.

Richard Elsass, 43, was sleeping in a trailer near a truck stop in Ripon, Calif., where he worked. During a predawn drug raid on Oct. 20, 1989, one member of a black-clad SWAT team used a flashlight to smash through a window in his trailer.

When he looked inside, a frightened Elsass shot and killed him. Other SWAT officers then immediately killed Elsass. They found no drugs in his trailer and no evidence linking him to any drug crime.

"The police conducted a violent, volatile drug raid on the home of an innocent man, killed him, and got one of their own killed in the process," Balko writes. "Raiding and killing innocent people is an acceptable outcome of drug policing."

Five years later, a jury awarded his family \$175,000 in damages.

The Elsass death is one of many similar incidents Balko documents throughout "Rise of the Warrior Cop," including an 11-year-old boy accidentally shot while lying on the floor with other family members during a raid by a SWAT team that had no evidence the family had done anything wrong.

Walter and Rose Martin, a Brooklyn couple in their 80s, had their home "wrongly raided more than 50 times between 2002 and 2010." The New York City Police Department finally figured out their address had been used "as a dummy address to test the department's new computer system."

During the past 30 years, courts around the country frequently issued arrest warrants for alleged drug violations with little or no evidence that their targets were guilty.

Most warrants, Balko stresses, continue to "give police permission to mete out extraordinary violence on people still only suspected of nonviolent crimes."

## **Ancient Rome**

The growth of SWAT teams was sparked "almost exclusively" by the War on Drugs.

"Today in America, SWAT teams violently smash into private homes more than 100 times per day," Balko writes. Many SWAT teams are trained by special forces units like the Navy Seals or Army Rangers.

What happened in the Roman Empire has some similarities to what is happening today.

"Even in ancient Rome, the public was acutely sensitive to the threat of militarized policing," Balko writes.

"As conquest and empire became central tenets of Roman society, the day-to-day lives of Romans became infused with militarism. Soldiers and generals began to be held in higher esteem than scholars and statesmen. ...

"About 1,800 years would pass before the world would see another metropolitan police force as centralized and organized as those that Augustus first established in Rome."

Yet most liberal and conservative political leaders support the continuing militarization of our police departments.

"It's rather remarkable that domestic police officers are driving tanks and armored personnel carriers on American streets, breaking into homes and killing dogs over pot," Balko concludes.

"And there's been barely any opposition or concern from anyone in Congress, any governor or any major of a sizable city. That, more than anything, is what needs to change."