

# Speaker: Police becoming more militarized

By Mark Lenz

**Daily Telegram**

Posted Sep 14, 2011

ADRIAN, Mich. Police departments increasingly look more like military units today, civil liberties writer Radley Balko told an Adrian College audience Tuesday.

The result, he said, are more incidents in which citizens face treatment both ridiculous and deadly.

Balko, whose research on the subject of “no knock” raids by police has been cited by the U.S. Supreme Court, gave a presentation titled “Militarizing Main Street: The Rise of SWAT Teams in America.”

Balko said the use of heavily armed police units can be traced to the late-1960s in California. They gained national attention in televised shootouts with the Black Panthers and later the Symbionese Liberation Army. SWAT originally stood for “Special Weapons Assault Teams,” but changed to the less militaristic-sounding “Special Weapons And Tactics,” Balko said, citing former Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates’ biography.

“I’m not anti-SWAT team,” Balko said. “I think there’s an appropriate use for them. I don’t think every town of 20,000 needs one. But I think we’ve gone beyond that.”

Balko noted that Lenawee County is among areas that have accepted armored military vehicles. Some areas have even received tanks with .50-caliber machine guns.

Balko said it’s possible that law enforcement officers are being influenced by the rhetoric of agency leaders and especially by politicians. He quoted one police chief who compared the war on drugs to storming the beaches of Normandy during World War II, and quoted President Ronald Reagan likening the war on drugs to the WWI Battle of Verdun.

“I think the analogy was way, way more accurate than Reagan intended,” Balko said — stating that both were futile, largely symbolic and have resulted in massive casualties.

Balko said one researcher reported the number of SWAT raids in the U.S. grew from a few hundred during the 1970s to 3,000 per year in the ’80s and about 50,000 per year by the mid-’90s, when the researcher quit trying to keep track. He noted that equals about 150 SWAT raids per day. Most are for drugs.

“The problem is getting worse,” said Balko, who now writes online for the Huffington Post. “Every sort of excuse that politicians can find to militarize police officers they’re taking advantage of. The latest of course is terrorism. Since (the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001), the DHS (Department of Homeland Security) has been giving out these anti-terrorism grants to buy military equipment, and they’re going to such likely terrorist targets as Eau Claire, Wis., and Canyon County, Idaho.

“You see in these articles all the time the justification is that ‘Terror can happen anywhere,’” and then inevitably a couple of weeks later you read that they’re using their new armored personnel carrier for pot raids and more routine police work.”

Balko said an interactive map he began while with the Cato Institute keeps track of botched raids. The map tracks numerous types of cases, including about 50 in which completely innocent people have been killed. Balko spoke of numerous examples of misguided raids, including:

— Atlanta grandmother Kathryn Johnston, 92, was killed in her home by a SWAT team operating on a bad tip. Narcotics agents were later found to have planted drugs in her basement.

— A Fairfax County, Va., SWAT team killed Sal Culosi, an optometrist, at his home as he held a cell phone. Culosi was suspected of betting on sports. **His family reached a \$2 million settlement with the officer who killed him.**

— **A group of Tibetan monks in the U.S. overstayed their visas.** A SWAT team was sent after them, Balko said.

— The U.S. Department of Education used a SWAT team in June to break into the home of a California man whose three children were present. They were seeking his estranged wife, who was not there. **Officials denied initial reports that the case involved failure to repay student loans, but they did not specify the actual charge.**

— **In Maricopa County, Ariz., actor Steven Seagal was allowed to drive a tank into a home suspected of housing cockfighting.** The SWAT raid killed about 100 chickens and the family's 11-month-old dog, which the owner claims was shot by police. (Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio has said the puppy-killing claim is "without merit.")

— SWAT teams have been used to conduct raids on people suspected of downloading child pornography. Several raids, it turned out, involved innocent people whose Wi-Fi networks had been accessed by others.

— **In Dallas, a SWAT team was used to break up a charity poker game operated by the VFW.**

"We're seeing this more and more. Neighborhood poker games are being broken up by the SWAT team," Balko said. "It's like that saying: When you're a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."