

Author criticizes militarized police

By Rosalie Rayburn
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Radley Balko has spent decades studying police forces nationwide that have increasingly adopted military-style equipment, training methods and tactics that he believes have created fear and animosity in the communities they are sworn to protect.

Balko is the author of “The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces,” which came out last year.

On his first visit to Albuquerque – a city where multiple police shootings provoked a Department of Justice investigation that found a culture of excessive violence – Balko spoke about his research and recommended community members put pressure on elected officials if they really want reform.

“They have to make it a campaign issue. They have to get candidates talking about this stuff during the campaign,” he said in an interview. “You have to let them know that there could be political consequences to not making the right decisions on these issues.”

City officials announced a settlement with the Justice Department last week that requires the Albuquerque Police Department to overhaul its use of force policies, recruitment, training, internal affairs procedures and field supervision of officers.

Balko cautioned that other cities that have undergone DOJ investigations and agreed to implement reforms have not had a “huge track record of success” because of resistance from police organizations and politicians.

“The Justice Department can draw attention to Albuquerque, they can point out that there are problems,” he said, “but I think that the change is going to have to come locally, not being imposed nationally.”

Balko was scheduled to speak Thursday at the South Broadway Cultural Center at the invitation of police reform advocacy organization APD Forward and local bookstore Bookworks.

Balko spoke to the **Journal** before his talk and outlined how he became interested in police militarization while working as a policy analyst for the Cato Institute several years ago.

He traced the roots of the shift toward militarization to the 1980s and the “War on Drugs” launched under the Reagan administration.

“That’s really where you start to see the transfer of surplus military equipment and federal anti-drug grants,” Balko said. “And that’s really where you start to see the explosion and frequency of SWAT (special weapons and tactics) teams.”

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon boosted that trend with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which began giving grants to police departments to buy new military equipment, he said.

“We’re not even talking about surplus now. We’re talking about creating a new industry that exists to build this new military-grade gear for police departments in exchange for these DHS grants. So that’s contributed to the problem,” he said.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan made other types of equipment available to city police departments such as the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles built to protect military convoys, he said.

APD received a free MRAP from the military but subsequently decided it wasn’t suitable for its purposes, according to a **Journal** story published in July.

“There’s no domestic application for an MRAP,” Balko said.

He has also studied police training methods extensively.

“It used to be when you taught cops how and when to use lethal force, the primary emphasis and focus was on de-escalation and conflict resolution,” Balko said. The emphasis has shifted to how officers can justify force, he said.

Balko attributes the change to the increased use of military equipment and a “mindset issue.”

Civic officials have helped create a “paranoid battlefield mentality” by talking about the dangers officers face in encounters with the public, he said.

“We should take steps to make police officers feel as if they are part of the communities they are policing,” he said. “Involvement in the community, getting to know the residents, makes officers take a different approach to using force. It makes their job easier if the public trusts the police instead of fearing them.”