

Amid push for S.F. police reform, union escalates counterattack

By Vivian Ho | March 24, 2016 | Updated: March 24, 2016 7:00am

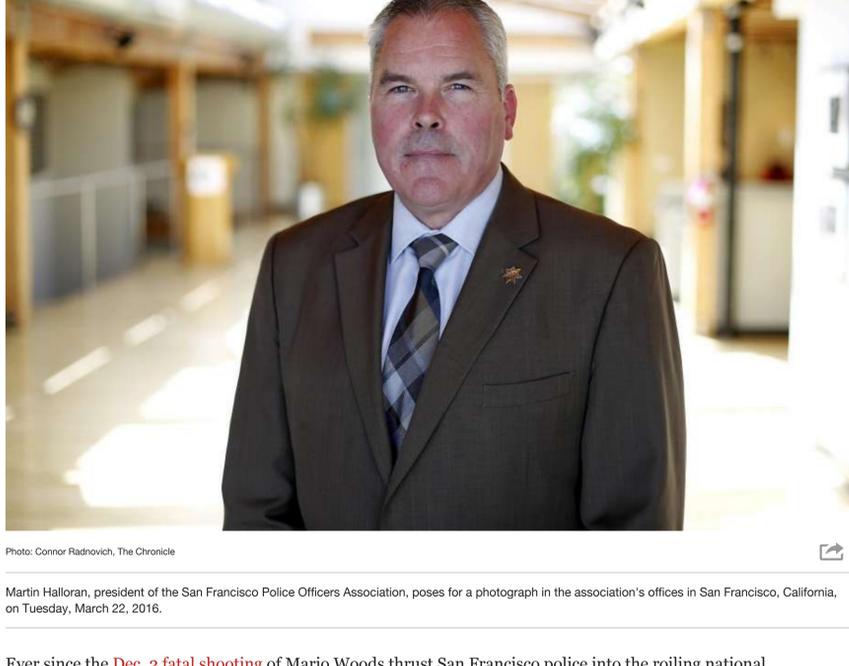


Photo: Connor Radnovich, The Chronicle

Martin Halloran, president of the San Francisco Police Officers Association, poses for a photograph in the association's offices in San Francisco, California, on Tuesday, March 22, 2016.

Ever since the **Dec. 2 fatal shooting** of Mario Woods thrust San Francisco police into the roiling national conversation over use of force, police union leaders here have been waging an aggressive defense — digging in their heels against suggested reforms and lashing out against would-be reformers, a move critics contend could undermine **local and federal efforts** to improve policing in this city.

Union President Martin Halloran has challenged virtually every perceived criticism of the San Francisco Police Department since the shooting, firing off vitriolic letters filled with sharp retorts and biting putdowns. These have been reprinted in the San Francisco Police Officers Association's newsletter, alongside salvos against other perceived enemies of the union.

Last month, the union brought on influential political operative Nathan Ballard, a signal to many city insiders that it was switching tactics and escalating its counterattack. One of Ballard's first tasks was to orchestrate a **highly public attack** against District Attorney George Gascón, the former police chief who has taken a strong stance on law enforcement reform in the city.

During a Board of Supervisors public safety committee hearing on the city's high property crime rate, Ballard fired off a press release titled, "We're No. 1: On Gascón's watch, a 666.9 percent increase in property crime in San Francisco."

That alarming figure has since been disproved, with Ballard admitting that he read the rates incorrectly. But the union has continued using the uptick in property crime to attack Gascón **in radio ads**, attributing the rise to him and the progressive ballot initiative he co-authored two years ago to reduce penalties for low-value thefts and drug offenses.

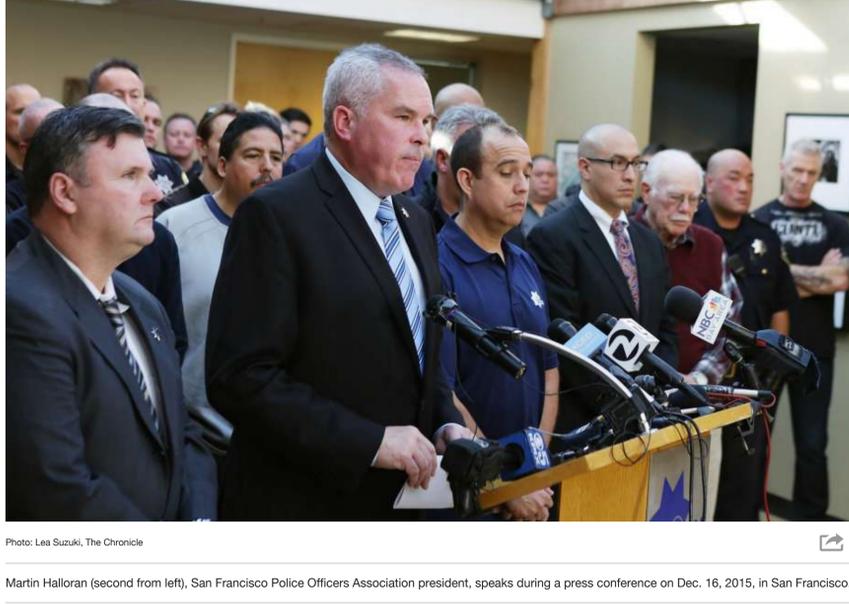


Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

Martin Halloran (second from left), San Francisco Police Officers Association president, speaks during a press conference on Dec. 16, 2015, in San Francisco.

Unexpected animosity

The animosity between two of the main agencies in the city's criminal justice system has disturbed a wide range of city officials, many reluctant to be pulled into the fray.

"People expect us to work together and be collaborative and make sure that the criminal justice system works, and I think reasonable people looking at this around San Francisco are disappointed," said Police Commission President Suzy Loftus. "I think this toxic atmosphere makes doing the work we need to do more difficult, and that's not OK."

But union officials say they're just doing what they're supposed to: standing up for the 2,136 active members they represent in a political climate that is critical of law enforcement.

They aren't against the growing national push for reform, union leaders say — they just want to make sure their officers have the safest working conditions possible in a profession that requires them to put themselves in harm's way.

"A lot of it is being thrust upon us in a very short period of time," Halloran said in an interview. "We have a proposed change in the use-of-force policy, a proposed change in use of firearm policy, a new proposed Taser policy, a new proposed social media policy, a new proposed crisis-intervention training policy. All of these are department general orders that they wanted done yesterday. And it doesn't work that way."

He continued: "Any time there is a little bit of pushback from the POA ... the perception according to certain politicians is that we're the elephant in the room, that we're the obstructionists. We're not. We just want to make sure this is done right."

But to some city observers, the union's actions are an extreme echo of its practices for decades — challenging any criticism, circling the wagons and refusing to acknowledge that anything could be wrong.

"The POA has been the schoolyard bullies for many, many years, bullying their way through elected officials," Gascón said. "We have been dealing with this for the good part of three or four years. This has been a consistent part of our universe."

While the union's stance may not be new, critics call it increasingly tone-deaf coming from a department entrenched in its own share of misconduct scandals in the context of the national call for reform. They characterize it as similar to how police departments in cities like Ferguson, Mo., Baltimore, Chicago and New York have reacted.

Department under review

In San Francisco — where Police Chief Greg Suhr has repeatedly reiterated his commitment to reform, the U.S. Department of Justice's community-policing division is reviewing the department, and elected leaders have voiced support for policy changes and better training — many are concerned that the union's resistance could slow the department's ability to evolve. Suhr declined to be interviewed for this story.

"Right now, I really do not understand the direction of the SFPOA," said Sgt. Yulanda Williams, president of Officers for Justice. Williams drew the ire of the union when she testified about racism in the department in front of an investigative panel Gascón formed after racist and homophobic text messages exchanged among 14 officers emerged last year.

"We need to find some common ground, and find some way to achieve our ultimate mission, which is to have a diverse city that is safe and inclusive of everyone," she said. "But when there's one stakeholder who continues to throw out hurtful statements, we'll never reach the common ground that we say we really want to achieve."

Union President Halloran said all his efforts amount to simply exercising his members' right to be heard. He said that's why the union objected to Suhr's plan to stock patrol cars with riot shields for confronting subjects with edged weapons and to change gun range training to put more emphasis on de-escalation, as it would mean a change in working conditions.

He said accusations that union leaders are against reform are inaccurate, and he wrote an opinion article for The Chronicle last month welcoming the Department of Justice investigation. But his view of what reform should entail is narrower than that of his critics.

"We are not against reforms, if they're sensible, logical and reasonable policies that have proven to work in other jurisdictions," he said. "We're all for it, but it has to be proven."

His version of reform includes full crisis-intervention training for all officers, something the department is already working to make a reality, and equipping the force with tools like electronic stun guns, which many in the community have objected to in the past.

But Halloran said he thinks current efforts to root out issues of systemic bias or a "thin blue line" culture are misguided, because San Francisco is not a place like Ferguson, Mo., where federal authorities have ruled such problems exist within the criminal justice system.

"There are problem officers, and there have been problem officers in the SFPD when the SFPD was formed in 1849 and there will be problem officers in the SFPD in 2049, long after I'm gone," Halloran said. "We don't want them part of the department, and the department is taking steps to address that. But having problem officers does not mean that this entire department has a problem with systemic racism."

"To paint the SFPD with a broad brush that the entire department is somehow involved in systemic racism is just grossly unfair and it is not true."

Testimony dismissed

Anand Subramanian, executive director of the Gascón-created panel investigating racism, said it's tough to determine if there is an issue if the union essentially discourages its members from speaking out. For example, after Sgt. Williams testified to the panel, Halloran fired off a public letter dismissing the experiences she described as a black woman in the department — and the panel saw that as a message to other members to stay quiet.

"While they're trying to categorize these 14 officers as bad apples, the fact remains that these 14 officers were allowed in some way to engage in this behavior," Subramanian said. "Something in the department allowed this behavior to exist and thrive."

The panel — and Gascón in particular — has been a primary point of contention in the union's post-Mario Woods campaign. While the district attorney has billed himself as a reformer, the union views him as leading a witch hunt.

Most recently, the union has looked to the shocking wave in property crime to attack Gascón. It blames the rise in crime on Proposition 47, a ballot initiative Gascón co-authored that passed in November 2014 and reduced six nonviolent felonies to misdemeanors. Union-backed ads have termed Prop. 47 a "get-out-of-jail-free card," though criminologists have said it is too early to assess its effects.

"We are deeply concerned by the dramatic rise in crime," Ballard said. "And Gascón, instead of fighting a war on crime, is fighting a war on the police department."

From the union's perspective, police officers, as the most visible figures in the criminal justice system, often unfairly shoulder the blame for any failings, whether it's a rise in the crime rate or allegations of misconduct. Their members in these past few months, Halloran said, have felt especially demoralized — thus, the union's heated response.

'Wrong side of history'

But Carl Tennenbaum, a retired San Francisco police sergeant who once served on the union board, said the union has gone too far in its characterization of how the public views law enforcement.

"It's Chicken Little and the sky is falling and everybody is against us, us versus them," Tennenbaum said. "Every time Greg Suhr makes some change, what do you hear? 'This is going to endanger us, cop lives are at stake.' What are they basing that on? It's a scare tactic. I'm calling bull—, because I've been hearing it for 32 years."

Tennenbaum, who still pays monthly dues as one of the union's 1,460 retired members, has an extra interest in ensuring San Francisco cops are safe: His son is an officer. At some point, he said, the union needs to realize that reform may actually do more to keep those officers safe than continuing with business as usual.

"We're hiring a smarter, more intelligent, more professional level of police officers who are coming into the job with different skills," Tennenbaum said. "But they will get tainted by this culture they're exposed to, and they will get tainted by the POA telling them that everybody is out to get us."

Tennenbaum continued: "Change is imminent. The policies are going to come through, and this resistance is just going to slow the process down. And Marty and this generation of cops, they are on the wrong side of history."

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