

TRUMP AND THE NRA

Arming the culture war has just begun.

by GEORGE ZORNICK





A BEAMING DONALD TRUMP STOOD BEFORE HUNDREDS OF NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS AT THEIR annual meeting in Atlanta this past April. “You are my friends, believe me,” he said, as the crowd hooted and hollered for the first sitting president to appear at the NRA’s national convention in more than three decades.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Back in November, voters were overwhelmingly going to elect Hillary Clinton, easily the most pro-gun-control presidential candidate in history. When Clinton named Tim Kaine, another gun-control supporter, as her running mate, advocates were ecstatic. “This ticket clearly shows that there’s a sea change in the politics of this issue,” Mark Kelly told reporters before his prime-time speech at the Democratic National Convention. Kelly is the former astronaut who co-founded the gun-control group

Americans for Responsible Solutions with his wife, former Arizona representative Gabby Giffords, who was left with a severe brain injury after being shot in the head in an assassination attempt in 2011. They believed that the days when an assault-weapons ban by a Democratic president could cost his party its control of Congress, as happened with the Democrats under Bill Clinton, were over. “Clearly, it’s not 1994 anymore,” Kelly said.

No, it’s 2017, and a triumphant Donald Trump owes the NRA bigly: The organization spent over \$30 million to get him elected, making it one of the biggest pro-Trump groups. And the payoff is coming. In his NRA speech, Trump announced “news that you’ve been waiting for a long time: The eight-year assault on your Second Amendment freedoms has come to a crashing end.”

Over the years, the NRA has steadily transformed itself from a calm advocate for hunters and sportsmen to a primal outlet for hard-right paranoia, and it’s long been treated carefully by Republican presidents. Though Ronald Reagan made a point of addressing the national convention, former president George H.W. Bush quit the NRA after the Oklahoma City bombing, when the group was seen as too close to the right-wing militia culture that produced Timothy McVeigh, and George W. Bush never showed up at the annual meeting as president.

Trump is an entirely different story. Not everyone in the pro-gun movement embraced him at the start of his campaign. When I interviewed gun-rights activists during the Republican primaries, the sober types—those who undertake the mission of expanding gun laws with the same zeal that Grover Norquist displays for cutting taxes—were distrustful of Trump, a longtime Manhattan resident with no policy record on guns, except for supporting an assault-weapons ban when he was flirting with a presidential run in 2000.

But Wayne LaPierre, the NRA’s executive vice president and CEO, and its public face, identified his man immediately. When candidate Trump talked about immigrants from Mexico who might be rapists and drug runners, railed against sanctuary cities, brought the mothers of people killed by undocumented immigrants onto the stage at the Republican National Convention, and spoke in ominous tones about crime overtaking American cities, he seemed a natural part of the movement that LaPierre has been building for decades. And Trump received the earliest presidential endorsement in the NRA’s history.

LaPierre understands the gun-rights movement as a culture war first and a battle over gun laws second. Before Trump spoke at the annual meeting, LaPierre declared:

“Academic elites, political elites, and media elites. These are America’s greatest domestic threats.”

—Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president and CEO of the NRA

“It’s up to us to speak up against the three most dangerous voices in America: academic elites, political elites, and media elites. These are America’s greatest domestic threats.”

The gun industry has been experiencing a dramatic decline in sales—which have declined 10 percent in the six months since Trump was elected compared with the same period last year—so this culture of fear is vital to gin up demand for guns as necessary self-defense accessories, thereby creating a new generation of buyers, and to garner support for radical new legislation that will put “good guys with guns” virtually everywhere. And President Trump is a vital ally in this effort, because he traffics in the same anxieties.

A wave of permissive new gun laws is now being written in Congress and statehouses nationwide, and if they’re enacted, a nation already in the midst of a furious internal arms race will become saturated with even more weapons in even more public spaces. This year, there have been more than 7,407 gun deaths—almost 42 per day—and 168 mass shootings, including the recent attack on congressional Republicans practicing softball by a gunman who shot four people, including House majority whip Steve Scalise. There’s no reason to think the bloodshed will slow down.

Domestic Threats

IN A SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM ABOVE THE EXHIBITION floor at the NRA convention, Steve Tarani is giving a presentation—“Current and Emerging Threats: How It Affects You!”—sponsored by the outdoor-supply store Cabela’s. Tarani presents himself as a former CIA employee who worked briefly on Trump’s security detail, and he wants the members of the assembled crowd

The president’s big bang: Attendees watch Donald Trump address the NRA convention in Atlanta on April 28.





to understand the “active threats” in their daily lives.

“The Department of Homeland Security defines an ‘active threat’ as any bad thing, basically, that can happen to good people,” Tarani says, clicking through PowerPoint slides of terror attacks, protesters clashing violently with police, and a map of “migrant streams” from Mexico with cartoonish red arrows crossing every inch of the southern US border. He tells his audience that “Al Shabab, Al Qaeda, ISIS members, etc., in addition to these capos” from Mexican drug gangs, are traveling along the bright-red routes into “sanctuary cities” across the country. “Let me ask you: Do sanctuary cities contribute to the safety of our communities?” Tarani asks, as people throughout the room shake their heads in response. “Not in any way,” he intones. “Not in any way.”

All of this sounds terrifying and dark, but it’s actually meant as a peppy self-help speech: “It is MY responsibility,” another slide reads. Don’t wait for someone else to confront these active threats, Tarani counsels. Do it yourself. And always be aware.

“If you’re at home, you’re in front of the TV, your alarm is set, you have the three Dobermans on your bed. You have two pallets of ammo. An M4... and an M203.” (The latter is a grenade launcher that can be attached to an M4.) “And two .45s on the other side,” Tarani jokes. “You’re in a pretty secure area.” But the real world is a different story: “President Trump is going to be here in just a matter of hours. Do you think the possibility of an attack is high here? Absolutely,” he warns.

This overwhelming sense of fragility and fear isn’t exclusive to Tarani’s session. Throughout the several days of the convention, the NRA offers its “Refuse To Be A Victim” class, another militant twist on self-care. Attendees are given big glossy books on what kind of security systems to buy and where to properly locate a safe room inside the house, and they’re encouraged to teach this class back home; the NRA has trained about 1,000 citizen instructors nationwide. In Atlanta, the class is being taught by Maj. Ed O’Carroll of the Fairfax County, Virginia, police. He asks how many people are armed, and hands shoot up across the room. Two men up front complain that they would’ve brought their guns, but, one huffs, “we thought we were going to see the president.” (They didn’t get into his speech.) “Other than that, never happens,” the second man says of his currently unarmed state. “Not comfortable.”

One hazard of carrying a gun everywhere on a near-hysterical level of alert is that you might shoot someone and get sent to prison for it. But the NRA conference has a solution: “Carry Guard” insurance, which is promoted absolutely everywhere at the convention. For \$31.95 a month, you get \$150,000 in criminal-defense insurance and \$1 million in civil-liability insurance if you shoot someone in self-defense but lose a court battle over

THIS YEAR IN GUN DEATHS

7,407

American gun deaths in 2017 so far

42

Approximate gun deaths per day in the United States

168

Mass shootings committed in 2017 (with “mass shooting” defined as an incident in which four or more people are shot)

Hired gun: Dana Loesch provides the heavily male NRA with a popular female spokesperson.

it. The plan also offers a 24-hour emergency-help line, immediate access to bail money, and funds for “psychological support and clean-up costs.”

All of this paranoia is focused on a particular set of bad actors. The vast majority of the NRA attendees are white, and the imagined threats at all of the panels—Mexicans, Islamic terrorists from the Middle East and Africa—are not. Studies clearly link gun ownership and opposition to certain gun-control laws with expressions of racism. This is not to say that every gun owner is racist, of course, or that all racists are armed. But using interviews from voters in a 2008–9 panel study, a group of four researchers found that for every one-point increase in symbolic racism—as measured by questions like “How well does the word ‘violent’ describe most blacks?”—there was a 50 percent increase in the chance of that person having a gun in their home, and a 28 percent increase in the odds that they support concealed-carry legislation.

An openly racist and pro-gun candidate like Donald Trump was ultra-compatible with this NRA culture, despite his negligible record on guns. And Trump was the perfect foil for the first Democratic candidate to run on gun control in decades. (Given Barack Obama’s post-Sandy Hook crusade, people forget that he avoided gun control like the plague during his 2012 re-election campaign, even when the theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado, happened right in the middle of it.)

Clinton’s gun-control positions also appear to have hurt her among voters who flipped from Obama in 2012 to Trump four years later. Demos analyst Sean McElwee constructed an index of views on gun policy. Using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, he created a logistical model to predict Obama-to-Trump voting, controlling for race, religion, political party, education, gender, racial attitudes, ideology, and age. Views on guns turned out to be a statistically significant predictor of former Obama voters switching to Trump.

That political affinity is on display throughout the convention: There are “God, Guns, and Trump” shirts everywhere, and more Benghazi-related T-shirt slogans than one might expect six months after Hillary Clinton became a private citizen. When Tarani describes how not to be seen as a “soft target,” he shows side-by-side pictures of a movie-style sniper and a small lamb. “Probably somebody that voted for Hillary,” he says dismissively of the latter.

Gun Capitalism in Decline

THE NRA CONVENTION CAN create a sense of grim wonderment—it’s like a great World’s Fair of guns. There are 15 acres of displays inside the cavernous Georgia World Congress Center, with thousands upon thousands of weapons, ammunition, and all sorts of innovative accessories—laser sights, scopes, and holsters, including one that mounts





beneath your steering wheel just in case you need quick access to a gun while driving. The display weapons aren't loaded, and people are free to pick them up and try them out, creating a constant symphony of metallic clicking as you walk around the floor. (A host for NRATV, a 24-hour online news channel with a remote studio in the middle of the exhibition floor, declares it the "safest room in America." In the presence of all these guns, potentially wielded by people who just purchased insurance that provides instant bail money, I am skeptical.)

The gun industry is almost as old as the country itself; the familiar names of Smith, Wesson, Colt, Remington, and Winchester belong to men who started manufacturing and selling guns well before the Civil War. But contrary to the myth that a love of guns is in our country's DNA, with every red-blooded American naturally feeling incomplete without a personal firearm, it was these same businessmen who created our current gun culture, as the historian Pamela Haag demonstrates in her excellent book *The Gunning of America*. The country wasn't well-armed before either the Revolution or the Civil War, and the populace for many decades wasn't particularly interested in buying guns: Many of the early gun companies failed, or relied on large government subsidies or international markets to survive.

The early gun capitalists—who also manufactured and sold all sorts of items, from men's shirts to sewing machines and cotton gins—created the gun culture largely on their own, employing brilliant innovations and marketing schemes. "The gun culture that exists today in America developed out of an unexceptional, perpetual quest for new and larger markets that had exceptional social consequences," Haag writes. "The tragedy of American gun violence emerged from the banality of the American gun business."

No doubt the 19th-century gun capitalists would have been amazed by the flashy displays and powerful weaponry on exhibit in Atlanta. But these kinds of pageants don't convey the very real stress in the gun industry, which in a broad sense is in decline. Half of American households used to own a gun; now only a third do. Increased development in rural regions is decreasing the number of hunting areas each year, and unusually warm autumns and winters have been disrupting hunting seasons.

As it turned out, the Obama administration provided an eight-year sugar high for the industry, with imagined fears of a nationwide gun-confiscation program fueling sales. Particularly after the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, industry profits boomed: There were 19 straight months of increased year-over-year sales, according to FBI background-check data. (There is no public tracking of gun sales nationwide.) But as soon as Trump was elected, stock prices for the major gun companies plummeted, and they haven't fully recovered. In April, a full third of the outstanding shares in Sturm Ruger, for example, are short bets.

"In the firearms segment, we've experienced the expected slowdown in demand for modern sporting-rifle products and handguns post the presidential election," said Steve Jackson, chief financial officer of the Rem-

Big guns, little kids: At the NRA Youth Day in 2013, a girl shoots an Airsoft gun—with some assistance.

ington Outdoor Company, which now owns some of the biggest gun manufacturers in the country. Speaking to investors in an early April conference call, Jackson noted that inventory levels were problematically high, because "retailers and wholesalers expected a different political climate and hunting season that did not materialize." Most of the publicly traded firearm companies reported similar situations in their first-quarter reports for this year.

As it always does, however, the gun industry has a plan to revive sales. The modern-day gun capitalists have been designing pocket-size concealed-carry weapons that are being marketed as sensible self-defense tools. Annual statements and earnings calls from the major gun manufacturers make it clear that they see small handguns as the innovation that will turn their numbers around. Remington, for example, introduced the RM380 Micro Pistol in 2015 and last year added the "newly enhanced" R51 concealed-carry pistol. A promotional video for the R51 boasts that it has "snag-free sights for an easy draw from concealment." Most other manufacturers are bringing similar products to market.

Seen in this light, the NRA's aggressive campaign for concealed-carry laws—even as it pushes liability insurance for concealed-carry users—reveals it, at heart, to be a trade group whose sole mission is to boost sales for the industry that largely funds it. The same is true of the Trump administration's immediate moves to increase hunting spaces on public lands and to allow the use of lead ammunition there.

Studies clearly link gun ownership and opposition to certain gun-control laws with expressions of racism.

The gun industry now aims to expand its marketing reach beyond the men who reliably purchase its guns. At the Republican National Convention last July, the NRA's top lobbyist, Chris Cox, delivered a prime-time speech about why more women need personal-safety weapons. "Imagine a young mother at home with her baby, when a violent predator kicks the door in," Cox said. "Should she be able to defend herself with a firearm in her own home?" The NRA recently hired Dana Loesch, a highly popular conservative-media figure, as a spokesperson, and she's become a ubiquitous presence on television and social media. The gun-control movement has mainly female leaders, who are often framed as concerned mothers; Loesch is clearly a counter from the NRA, which has never really had a prominent female voice. At the convention in Atlanta, the group also promoted its "NRA Women" program, which offers free training to "female gun enthusiasts of all ages and skill levels," and an NRATV series called *Armed & Fabulous*.

The gun industry also has its eye on the next generation. New lines of weapons designed for young shooters have been rolling off the production



TRUMP AND THE NRA

lines, like the Crickett company's Davey Crickett rifle and other .22-caliber long guns, which often come in bright primary colors and are designed with plastic parts to make them lighter and produce less recoil. *Shooting Sports Retailer* enthused that these weapons "bring the coolness and fun of the tactical rifle to kids and less serious shooters." The NRA also has a "family" branding arm that promotes guns to children on its website, including in "the six- to 12-year-old range."

The Arms Race

THE GUN INDUSTRY'S FAMILY-FRIENDLY PUSH IS in serious tension with its deep current of hard-right paranoia and with the image projected by Trump, who once famously boasted during the presidential campaign that he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose any votes. But buoyed by his NRA supporters, Trump can deliver something that no amount of marketing can: radical changes to American gun law.

The changes began almost as soon as he entered the White House. Trump started with the low-hanging fruit: The Department of Justice issued a memo changing how the FBI defines a "fugitive" for the purpose of placing someone on a no-buy list for federal gun-owner background checks. Until now, the FBI prohibited anyone with an open warrant from buying a gun, but the new DOJ memo defines "fugitive" only as someone who has fled the state where the warrant was issued—so a lot more people with open warrants will be getting their gun purchases approved. Prior to this, from 1998 to 2017, the FBI denied over 175,000 gun sales because of an open warrant.

President Trump also signed legislation that would prevent the Department of Justice from using Social Security records to identify mentally ill people and prevent them from purchasing guns. Obama had added these background checks in 2016, but Congress passed a repeal under the Congressional Review Act. Some mental-health advocates argued that Obama's move stigmatized the mentally ill, but Trump didn't try to make that case; he seemed to understand that making it easier for people with mental problems to buy guns wouldn't be a big PR win. Amid the daily barrage of public bill and executive-order signings early in his administration, the repeal was one of the few things that Trump signed behind closed doors.

The US Army Corps of Engineers, which controls nearly 12 million acres of public land nationwide, has banned almost anyone from carrying loaded weapons or ammunition on this land since the 1970s. But there's a case in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals challenging that prohibition, and the Corps signaled in March that it would be dropping its challenge. And on his first day as Trump's secretary of the interior, Ryan Zinke canceled a ban on the use of lead ammunition by hunters on federal lands, which environmentalists worried would damage their ecosystems. Zinke also directed any agency managing federal land to identify areas where hunting could be expanded.

The biggest victory for pro-gun groups in the early days of the Trump administration was the Supreme Court confirmation of Neil Gorsuch, who enjoyed a million-

dollar ad blitz from the NRA when the Senate was considering his nomination. Notably, Gorsuch doesn't have any real record on gun control, but the NRA seemed sure that Trump had fulfilled his pledge to use gun rights as a litmus test for choosing a Supreme Court justice, which he'd made at a town-hall meeting during the Republican primaries. (Trump also blithely raised the specter of violence—some thought assassination—if Hillary Clinton won and appointed a pro-gun-control justice. "Nothing you can do, folks," he declared at a campaign rally in August. "Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know.")

But these moves are mere appetizers for the NRA. Its top priority now is to get Congress to pass—and President Trump to sign—concealed-carry reciprocity legislation, which would require every state to recognize a concealed-carry permit issued by any other state. In other words, California—a state with a strict permitting process, in which a person must demonstrate the need for a concealed weapon—would have to allow anyone with a permit from, say, South Dakota to carry a weapon around. (In South Dakota, you can get a concealed-carry permit with a half-page application and a \$10 fee; there's no training required, and you're not even fingerprinted.) Under the proposed legislation, if you live in one of the 11 states that don't even require a permit, you'd be able to carry a concealed weapon anywhere you travel.

The NRA presents this as a common-sense bureaucratic fix: You don't have to get a new driver's license to drive through different states, so why do you need a new gun permit? The actual effect, of course, would be to effectively gut more stringent concealed-carry laws nationwide. As the gun debate becomes more polarized, blue states have enacted tough new laws—and concealed-carry reciprocity is an ingenious way around those that the NRA is unable to defeat in state legislatures. The organization is already poised to spend millions on the concealed-carry legislation introduced by Representative Richard Hudson and Senator John Cornyn.

This legislation would be a nightmare for local police, who would have to learn the 50 different state standards for concealed carry and verify that someone with a gun was in compliance with the relevant law. Hudson's bill also contains specific language that allows people to sue police departments or individual officers if their concealed-carry permit is challenged, in order to recoup any legal fees or damages. The clear hope is that officers nationwide will simply stop asking.

The NRA's top priority is concealed-carry reciprocity, which would decimate the strict gun laws of blue states.



The next generation: Young people are crucial to the industry's growth strategy, with new guns being designed for shooters 6 to 12 years old.

Gun-rights advocates are also pushing legislation that would make the ownership of gun silencers commonplace. Right now, you have to spend \$200 in fees and undertake months of registration to buy a silencer, but the so-called Hearing Protection Act would eliminate all that and make silencers as easy to buy as guns or bullets.

The House Committee on Natural Resources had to cancel a hearing on the latter bill because it was scheduled for the very morning that Representative Scalise and his teammates were shot. Needless to say, Republicans didn't embrace gun control after the shooting; instead, some pushed for rule changes that would allow them to carry guns in Congress. Meanwhile, Democrats treaded very lightly on the issue, barely mentioning it at all.

These bills face a heavy slog in Congress, even one controlled by Republicans. (Indeed, the Hearing Protection Act has since been folded into the bipar-

(continued on page 22)

still need to bring a new lawsuit under the act, since it doesn't apply retroactively to their existing case.

Ever since Judge Marvin H. Dukes III denied their motion to dismiss the case, the Allens have been in and out of court. Recently, Matthew Allen and his branch of the family presented a proposal outlining how family members could work together, without intervention from the courts, to solve their conflicts over the land. Meanwhile, the few family members who do want to sell have taken steps to appoint a receiver, who would manage the family's affairs while the land is still in dispute. The majority of the Allen family's members don't want the receiver appointed.

Margarite Washington, Matthew Allen's cousin, has lived on Allen Road her whole life. Behind her home is a small memorial, a two-foot cross with a few flowers planted around it. Nearly five years ago, her 8-year-old nephew was killed by a stray bullet on that spot. "If they take the land, we'll lose all of this," she says, motioning to the memorial. "We would be devastated. Where are we going to go?" ■

(continued from page 16)

tisan Sportsmen's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement Act. And Trump, to the chagrin of many activists, didn't mention concealed-carry reciprocity in his NRA speech.) Quicker change will come at the state level, where Democrats were also blown out in 2016. Arkansas and Georgia have already passed bills allowing students and faculty to carry guns on college campuses, for example. In North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin, legislators are moving to eliminate concealed-carry permits and training requirements; New Hampshire, Michigan, and North Dakota have already done that this year. Texas has passed seven bills expanding gun rights in 2017 alone. Legislators in Kansas scrambled to keep guns out of state mental hospitals and other facilities, but in the face of opposition from the NRA, they failed.

The increasing absurdity of gun legislation is where gun-control advocates see a renewed opening. Dealt a major political loss in November, they point out that the public still broadly agrees with expanded background checks, and they believe that linking Trump directly with the NRA will help defeat both, and thrust ownership of the gruesome accumulation of gun deaths onto an unpopular president.

On an exceptionally windy day in May—so windy that the speakers could barely be heard—several House and Senate members gathered with gun-control activists right outside the US Capitol. "The saddest marker of [Trump's] administration has been the thousands of deaths that have occurred," said Senator Richard Blumenthal. "Donald Trump pandering to the NRA is a mockery of those deaths from gun violence." He was joined by Gabby Giffords, who still has trouble speaking after her own traumatic injury. "Stopping gun violence takes courage—the courage to do right," Giffords said, laboring over each word. "We must never stop fighting. Fight, fight, fight." ■

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