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After the Orlando massacre, the National Rifle Association stuck to the script: weapons on the Second Amendment, the real threat the N.R.A. faces is one it doesn't. As it grapples with new demographics, technology, and competition, SARAH ELLISON



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R.A. IS IT?

aren't the problem; government is. But, for all the group's warnings about liberal assaults want to talk about—a widening gap between its leaders and its members. examines the N.R.A.'s shift in allegiance, from the owners of guns to the sellers of guns




MARK PETERSON/CORBIS (HEADQUARTERS); PAUL J. RICHARDS/AP (LOGO); ALL FROM GETTY IMAGES; BY R. J. SANGOSTI/THE DENVER POST/POLARIS (AURORA); © ZUMA PRESS.COM (NEWTOWN)

TRIGGER WARNING

The National Rifle Association's C.E.O., Wayne LaPierre, center.

From the left, the perpetrators of the mass killings in Newtown, Connecticut; Orlando, Florida; Fort Hood, Texas (at rear); San Bernardino, California; and Aurora, Colorado.

I. Under Assault



he packed crowd in the convention hall, lit by red, white, and blue floodlights overhead, listened expectantly to the boyish executive onstage. He asked a question: “If you’re at home and someone kicks in your door and tries to murder you and your family”—the applause was already starting—“should you have the right to defend yourself with a firearm?” Warming to his message, members attending the 145th annual meeting of the National Rifle Association of America, last May, in Louisville, began to roar. Perhaps their feelings were pent up because of the rain outside, or the extra-long lines that had kept them waiting in it, or because the featured speaker of the day, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, was rumored to be running late. But the question, from Chris Cox, the executive director of the N.R.A.’s Institute for Legislative Action, was only the beginning.

“After eight years of dishonesty, corruption, and failure,” he continued, America had become unrecognizable. It had been “twisted” and “perverted” by the mainstream media and politicians. “Who are kids supposed to respect?” he asked the audience. “The media tells them that Bruce Jenner is a national hero for transforming his body” but ignores the veterans whose bodies have been transformed by war. He took repeated aim at Hillary Clinton and told the crowd to “get over it” if their preferred candidate in the Republican primary had not won. The most important thing was to elect a pro-gun president in the coming election, one who would fight for the Second Amendment. As he wound up and prepared to introduce the next speaker, Wayne LaPierre, the long-serving C.E.O. of the N.R.A., Cox offered this message to Hillary Clinton: “You want to turn this election into a do-or-die fight over the Second Amendment? *Bring. It. On.*” Cox received a standing ovation. Later in the day, Donald Trump would receive the N.R.A.’s endorsement.

No such fighting words, or anything remotely like them, had been on offer a few months earlier at another N.R.A. event, this one at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex and Expo Center, in Harrisburg. Set amid the rolling hills and farmland of south-central Pennsylvania, the Great American Outdoor Show presented a more idyllic scene. Attendees could fish in an artificial trout pond, watch archers perform, or go to a session

on “better wild-game cooking.” Children begged their parents for funnel cakes. Couples paged through brochures for hunting cabins. Mennonite teenagers took turns at a small shooting range, where N.R.A. volunteers handed out safety goggles. Rocking chairs offered a place to rest some of the 200,000 people who would visit during the course of the show. The complex is busy year-round with events such as the Penn National Horse Show, the Keystone International Livestock Exposition, and the American Rabbit Breeders Association. This outdoor show seemed of a piece with the others, except for the N.R.A.’s less-than-subtle effort to troll for new members. The N.R.A. took over the organization of the show three years ago, and at the door N.R.A. representatives dressed in hunting jackets stood alongside a sign advertising, in large red lettering, FREE ADMISSION to anyone who bought a \$35 annual membership. Inside, the N.R.A. maintained a booth for its Eddie Eagle program, a safety effort aimed at children. Neither Cox nor LaPierre was in attendance in Pennsylvania to deliver a fiery call to arms.

The difference between the two events—the one in Louisville and the one in Harrisburg—highlights a fundamental characteristic of the National Rifle Association: the vast and widening difference between its activist and angry leadership, on the one hand, and its mostly calm members on the other, many of whom don’t know precisely what the N.R.A. is advocating in their name. It is a characteristic that has been little reported and that could have immense political significance, if gun-control forces start taking it seriously. The N.R.A. today finds itself needing to compete for money, for members, for loyalty, and even for issues and influence.

The group’s very identity is up for grabs. The N.R.A. has historically represented the buyers of guns, not the sellers—that role has been played by another group, the National Shooting Sports Foundation—but its allegiance is shifting. The N.R.A.’s largest donors today are the world’s major gun, ammunition, and firearms-accessory manufacturers. The N.R.A. notes proudly that it receives the bulk of its revenue—in 2014 it was \$310 million—from membership dues (the group claims to have five million members) and from other contributions. It conveys the impression that it is a grassroots operation, like the Bernie Sanders campaign. But according to a 2013 study by the non-profit Violence Policy Center, a significant part of that money is provided by a small core of large firearms-industry donors. The study reported that among the contributors of at least a million dollars each to the N.R.A. were the Italian family-owned gun company Beretta, Smith & Wesson, Brownells, Pierce Bullet Seal Target Systems, and Springfield Armory. MidwayUSA, an online retailer of hunting products, including ammunition and high-capacity magazines, has participated in a program since 1992 that offers customers an option to round up their purchases to the nearest dollar and donate the difference to the N.R.A. Through this program, MidwayUSA and other gun-industry companies have helped build an N.R.A. endowment balance of more than \$14 million.

The N.R.A., headquartered in a mammoth glass office building in Fairfax, Virginia, has earned a fearsome reputation over the years. LaPierre, its C.E.O., is a bookish man who arrived at the N.R.A. in 1978 as a lobbyist—and a very bad shot, though a firm believer in the Second Amendment. He has come to epitomize the organization’s ferocious rhetoric and ruthless tactics. Virtually every time the organization has lobbied to halt or roll back gun regulation in America, it has won. The carrying of a concealed firearm is today legal in all 50 states, up from 9 states in 1986. The N.R.A. has been at the forefront of attempts to expand the places where one can carry a gun—a hospital, a school, a church, a nursing home (but not inside the N.R.A. headquarters building itself, if you are a visitor). It

is pushing now for “open carry” laws in all 50 states. It wields a grading system for politicians—which gun-lovers and politicians alike pay close attention to—and seeks to reward or punish officeholders according to their scores. The organization’s reputation for invincibility got a boost when Bill Clinton, after the disastrous midterm elections in 1994, was quoted saying that “the N.R.A. is the reason Republicans control the House.”

The organization likes to present itself as continually under assault—and the only force that can keep its members from losing their guns. It is indeed under assault, but not for reasons it wants to talk about. There are so-called allies in the “gun freedom” movement who are even more doctrinaire than the N.R.A. These allies are in fact competitors, and they are pulling the N.R.A.’s leadership ever farther to the right even as they entice the more extreme N.R.A. members away. Demographic shifts in the country don’t favor the core constituency of the N.R.A., which is white and male; the group likes to present women as the “fastest growing segment” of its membership, but according to a General Social Survey conducted by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center, since 1980 gun ownership among women has remained largely unchanged. The number of gun-owning households in America is shrinking: from about half in 1977 to about a third in 2015. To keep gun sales rising—as they have been—the gun industry needs to sell more guns to people who already own guns, a practice that gun critics call “hoarding” and that gun enthusiasts call “collecting.” Either way, the industry must produce ever more attractive gun models to sell to fewer people. It is this self-interested agenda on the part of manufacturers, as much as a constitutional concern about gun rights, that lies behind the N.R.A.’s opposition to any form of effective regulation. Meanwhile, technological advances, such as the 3-D printing of guns, which allows anyone with a 3-D printer to build a gun in the privacy of his home, may eventually force the N.R.A. to choose between the interests of its financial backers (gun manufacturers and distributors would hate the idea of 3-D printing, for obvious reasons) and those of some of its most ardent constituents (who love the idea).

The moment to test the N.R.A.—divided, fragile, embattled, and morally corrupt—is now at hand. At around two A.M. on June 12, a man named Omar Mateen entered a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and murdered 49 people. Fifty-three others were wounded. Mateen re-

portedly posted Facebook messages pledging loyalty to ISIS during his attack. Two days later, the N.R.A.’s Cox wrote in *USA Today* that despite renewed calls to tighten gun regulations, “radical Islamic terrorists are not deterred by gun control laws.” He blamed the Orlando attack on “the Obama administration’s political correctness.” NRA News, the group’s information outlet, then posted a video of a veteran Navy SEAL and N.R.A. commentator, Dom Raso, extolling the virtues of the AR-15, the type of rifle initially believed to have been involved in the Orlando shooting. (It was in fact a SIG Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle, manufactured in New Hampshire.) Raso faced the camera and told his audience: “For the vast majority of people I work with there is no better firearm to defend their homes against realistic threats than an AR-15 semi-automatic. It’s easy to learn, and easy to use. It’s accurate, it’s reliable.” One of the sponsors of NRA News is SIG Sauer.

With each new mass shooting, individual details are parsed in the media and on both sides of the gun debate. Every shooting highlights the particularities of its perpetrator. What remains constant is the N.R.A.’s position that guns are not to blame—that they are, in fact, the only solution.

The N.R.A.’s true power has always come from its membership. Today, the group’s hardball tactics and extreme positions are trying the patience of many members. The cracks in the N.R.A. edifice come from more than one source and splay in more than one direction, but they all have the effect of separating the leadership from its base. If N.R.A. officials are nervous, it is because they may remember what happened once before,

ANOTHER WORLD
President Lyndon Johnson signs a gun-control law in 1968—passed with the N.R.A.’s cooperation.



THE N.R.A. IS WEAKER THAN IT WANTS ANYONE TO KNOW.

THE MOMENT TO TEST THE GUN LOBBY IS NOW AT HAND.



FEAR FACTOR
Left, Vice President Dick Cheney with N.R.A. leaders in 2004. Below, Donald Trump speaks to the N.R.A. this year—winning its endorsement.



nearly 40 years ago, when a coup by the membership deposed the men at the top and radically changed the group's course.

II. "Cold, Dead Hands"

The Rifle Association is so familiar that it seems like a fixed object in the political landscape. This is far from the truth. The group was founded in 1871 by two former Union soldiers worried not about gun rights but about poor marksmanship. Its founding principle was to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis." With partial funding from New York State, the N.R.A. set up a practice range on Long Island. By the turn of the century, the N.R.A. had opened multiple ranges, and shooting was increasingly seen as a competitive sport. The organization moved to Washington, D.C., in 1907.

Between the Civil War and the turn of the century, three presidents were killed by guns. Prohibition and the Depression fed violent crime. Franklin D. Roosevelt made law and order part of his New Deal, and—hard as it is to believe—the N.R.A. helped draft the first federal gun-control law, the National Firearms Act of 1934.

The law required that certain types of "crime guns" (machine guns, sawed-off shotguns) and related equipment (silencers) be registered and taxed. During congressional hearings, the president of the N.R.A. at the time, Karl T. Frederick, stated bluntly, "I do not believe in the general promiscuous toting of guns." In 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald bought a rifle he saw advertised in the N.R.A.'s *American Rifleman* magazine and used it to kill President John F. Kennedy. The N.R.A. supported the law limiting interstate mail-order sales of firearms that followed.

The N.R.A.'s leadership during this period consisted mostly of middle-class sportsmen. Guns had yet to become a potent political issue. When they became one, there was at first a racial component. In May 1967, more than two dozen Black Panther party members walked into the California state-capitol building carrying rifles to protest a proposed gun-control bill. They framed the open carrying of weapons as a constitutional right. The protest prompted then governor Ronald Reagan to say that there was "no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons." As urban riots stoked white fears, a restrictive California gun statute was signed into law. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy gave further impetus to regulation: the Gun Control Act of 1968 established a minimum age at which one could buy a gun, required that guns have serial numbers, and made it illegal for drug addicts and the mentally ill to own a gun. The act also made it impossible for anyone but federally licensed dealers or collectors to ship guns across state lines. The N.R.A. leadership at the time saw its role as that of beating back some of the more stringent measures, such as mandatory gun licensing and a national gun registry. But it cooperated in other areas.

This 1968 law would be the high-water mark for gun control. A gulf had opened up between the N.R.A. leadership and the rank and file. According to Adam Winkler's authoritative 2011 book, *Gunfight: The Battle over the Right to Bear Arms in America*, many N.R.A. members had been infuriated by the group's capitulation on mail-order sales of firearms. The alleged behavior of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms was another sore issue. In 1971 the A.T.F. raided the apartment of a longtime N.R.A. member named Kenyon Ballew, whom agents suspected of making hand grenades. According to coverage in *American Rifleman*, the agents broke down the door, shot and seriously wounded Ballew without provocation, and found nothing in his home to support their suspicions. The magazine maintained that Ballew had been taking a bath with his wife. Years later, Ballew sued the government. The suit

was dismissed when a federal court determined that the agents did knock and announce their presence; that Ballew's door was heavily barricaded; that he pointed his gun at the agents when they entered the house; that the woman in the bath was not his wife; and that he was in possession of illegal hand grenades. If one is looking for the moment when the worldviews of gun enthusiasts and gun-control advocates began to diverge, the Ballew case is it.

As Winkler noted, N.R.A. leaders wanted to stay away from political battles. In fact, in the mid-1970s, they were planning to move the N.R.A.'s headquarters to Colorado Springs and invest in outdoorsman activities. In 1975, John D. Aquilino, who worked for the N.R.A.'s newly formed Institute for Legislative Action—the organization's lobbying arm—was sent by his bosses to scout out a New Mexico facility. "At the time, the N.R.A. was a house divided against itself," Aquilino told me. The I.L.A., he explained, was dedicated to pushing gun rights even as the N.R.A. leadership toyed with the idea of taking "rifle" out of the organization's name and turning the group into a publishing empire focused on outdoor pursuits for sportsmen. While Aquilino was gathering intelligence on the New Mexico plans, other activists were meeting with state rifle and pistol associations to encourage them to attend the national convention and vote for a slate of upstart candidates. They turned up en masse at the convention in Cincinnati, in 1977, wearing bright-orange hunting caps. The old leadership was thrown out, and a new face, Harlon Carter, was elected to lead the organization. Carter was a former head of the U.S. Border Patrol who, it was later learned, had once shot and killed a Hispanic youth during a quarrel. He helped create the first big national advertising campaign for the N.R.A., which featured the likes of Chuck Yeager, Roy Rogers, Louis Farrakhan, and even an eight-year-old boy, each holding a gun and speaking the words "I'm the N.R.A."

The campaign was wildly successful in mainstreaming the image of the group even as the N.R.A. adopted a more political stance. Ronald Reagan was a major supporter. In 1986, Congress passed the Firearms Owners' Protection Act, which prohibited the A.T.F. from inspecting a gun dealer more than once a year. It also prohibited the federal government from creating a national gun registry. In the 1990s, the N.R.A. found its most potent spokesman: the actor Charlton Heston. Heston could be relied on to speak out in favor of gun rights even in the wake of the most shocking events. In 1999, days after the shootings at Columbine High School, which took 13 lives, the N.R.A. held its annual convention in nearby Denver. Speaking at the convention, Heston reminded members that the mayor had warned the N.R.A., "Don't come here." He went on to invoke the Everyman quality of N.R.A. members, who could be found, he said, "in city hall, Fort Carson, NORAD, the Air Force Academy, and the Olympic Training Center. And yes, N.R.A. members are surely among the police and fire and SWAT team heroes who risked their lives to rescue the students at Columbine. Don't come here? We're already here." The following year, Heston taunted then presidential candidate Al Gore, saying that Gore could have Heston's gun when he pried it "from my cold, dead hands." In Congress, the N.R.A. would rack up win after win—in many places today it is easier to buy a gun than rent a car. One momentary setback was the assault-weapons ban of 1994; it has since expired. A major victory was the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, in 2005, which barred lawsuits against gun-makers in the event of "misuse" of firearms by others.

This is the N.R.A. that we now take for granted, but it has existed as

such for little more than a generation. And the crucial takeaway from recent history is that the N.R.A. is not a monolith. It is malleable.

III. Thunder on the Right

The gap between the N.R.A.'s current leadership and its base is being widened by several forces. One of them is political: the group is no longer the only game in town. The N.R.A. takes ever more extreme positions out of fear—to accommodate the single-issue diehards. Moderate members look on with dismay. At a major gun show in Las Vegas, where I manned a friend's booth—it was the annual convention of the National Shooting Sports Foundation—one exhibitor told me that the N.R.A. should spend less time talking about guns as protection. Most guns, in reality, are for sport, he said: "Nine hundred ninety-nine out of 1,000 people are going to shoot a piece of paper with a circle on it." The diehards, meanwhile, have other options, such as the Gun Owners of America (which calls itself the "no compromise" gun group) and the National Association for Gun Rights (which calls itself "the fastest growing gun rights group in America").

Larry Pratt, 73, the executive director emeritus of the Gun Owners of America, comes across as a perfectly nice person to talk to until he starts speaking about guns. On the night of December 14, 2012, after that morning's slaughter at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut—in which a young man named Adam Lanza killed 20 first-graders and six teachers and staff with a semi-automatic AR-15 Bushmaster rifle—Pratt issued a statement that blamed the deaths on gun-control laws. He called for teachers to be armed. "Gun-control supporters have the blood of little children on their hands," he said that night.

I spoke to Pratt recently about the goals of his organization. "The difference between us and the N.R.A.," he said, "is that for a hundred years the N.R.A. was big buddies with the government." For Pratt, there isn't a graver insult than being a big buddy of the government's. His own organization is based in a nondescript brick building in northern Virginia, about a 15-minute drive from the N.R.A.'s headquarters. The G.O.A. was founded in the mid-1970s expressly to combat the government. "We had this very different political philosophy from the get-go," Pratt said. "We didn't have any adjustment to make in terms of being an adversary to this government." With some 300,000 members, the G.O.A. is a fraction of the size of the N.R.A., and until recently it had remained largely on the margins of the gun debate. The shootings at Sandy Hook changed all that.

On December 18, well before the N.R.A. had made any public statement about the killings in Connecticut, Pratt appeared with Piers Morgan on CNN. Morgan, who had been outspoken in his support for stricter gun-control laws, asked Pratt why he advocated arming teachers. "The alternative is what we have seen, where people were reduced to waiting to be murdered," Pratt responded, adding that allowing teachers to carry concealed weapons was "obvious." Pratt added that the likes of Morgan were arguing that "it's better that you sit there and wait to be killed" than defend yourself. The interview ended with Morgan calling Pratt "an unbelievably stupid man" and Pratt telling Morgan that Neville Chamberlain was "your role model." Pratt told me later that "people who had never heard of us went to our Web site and they crashed the poor little thing three times."

Three days later, Wayne LaPierre held a press conference at the Willard hotel, in Washington, D.C. LaPierre CONTINUED ON PAGE 144



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 107 had addressed issues of school shootings before. After the Columbine killings, in 1999, he had stood before his members and said, “First, we believe in absolutely gun-free, zero-tolerance, totally safe schools,” which meant, “no guns in America’s schools, period.” (LaPierre allowed that there may be a “rare exception” for trained security personnel to be armed.) Now, goaded by activists such as Pratt, LaPierre took a more aggressive stance. He told reporters that America should protect its schoolchildren the way it protects its president, with brute force. He called on Congress to “appropriate whatever is necessary to put armed police officers in every single school in this nation.” He stated that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”

Today, on the Gun Owners of America Web site, the Orlando shootings are front and center. Against a backdrop of a scene outside the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, where the killings occurred, the G.O.A. warns: THE BEST WAY TO STOP EVIL . . . IS SHOOTING BACK. Not long ago, the group was rallying members in the wake of another mass shooting. “It’s easy to forget the cold, dark days of winter 2013,” Tim Macy, the current chairman, wrote in February of this year. “The horrific tragedy of Newtown had touched the hearts of the nation, and every news outlet.” Macy’s greatest concern was not with those killed at Newtown but with what he saw as misdirected finger-pointing: “Every one was blaming the Second Amendment community for what happened there.” In early 2013, Congress debated the so-called Manchin-Toomey bill, which would have expanded background checks for gun purchases while loosening restrictions on interstate sales. It explicitly outlawed a national gun registry. The proposed Manchin-Toomey legislation, in short, was thin stuff, and not far from what LaPierre himself had acknowledged to be acceptable during congressional testimony back in 1999. The N.R.A. at first seemed willing to come to the table. Even Bill O’Reilly was advocating for background checks. But in the end the N.R.A. opposed the bill and helped to kill it. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader in the Senate, credited the G.O.A. for the outcome. The N.R.A., he said, was “being pushed even further to the extreme” by the competition.

IV. Mission Creep

Meanwhile, the N.R.A. has broadened its activities into political arenas that have little to do with the actual ownership of guns. It has worked to pass bills that prevent pediatricians from speaking to patients and their families about guns they have in their homes. It has lobbied for bills that prevent military counselors from asking enlisted and former military officers about their personal firearms, even if the soldiers appear at risk of doing harm to themselves or others. The N.R.A. opposes micro-stamping, a technology that would help match bullets found at crime scenes to the guns from which they were fired. The organization opposes “smart gun” technology, used in Europe, which permits a gun to be fired only by its owner. The group has lobbied aggressively to prevent the Centers for Disease Control from studying gun violence as a public-health issue, even though the C.D.C. routinely studies the health consequences of many products and technologies, including automobiles.

Increasingly, the N.R.A. is also weighing in on issues that have nothing whatsoever to do with guns. This is a way of expanding a shrinking base. But it also gives official backing to positions that many N.R.A. members do not care about and others may even oppose.

In May 2013, the N.R.A. elected a new president, James Porter II. Five months after Sandy Hook, Porter opened the N.R.A.’s annual convention, in Houston, by declaring that the debate over gun regulations “is not a battle over gun rights” but rather “a culture war”—in other words, a war on behalf of all the issues conservatives care about besides guns. Gun enthusiasts are famous for being one-issue voters, an impression that the N.R.A. has fostered and that serves it well. The group’s expansion into areas that have nothing to do with guns is a sign of weakness. In August 2014, in the run-up to that year’s midterm elections, the N.R.A. launched a multi-million-dollar television advertising campaign that Wayne LaPierre told the conservative *Washington Times* was “a gathering of shared values that gives a sense of right and wrong.” Not one of the 16 ads released as part of the campaign mentioned guns. The first ad in the series asked the question “Do you still believe in the good guys?” Another brought up an alleged I.R.S. tax scandal, in which the agency was accused (falsely, it turned out) of giving extra scrutiny to politically conservative groups: “What kind of country turns its tax collectors into secret police?” Each ad was narrated by an N.R.A. member and featured a range of speakers, including an African-American man, a white man, and a white woman, in an effort to show the apparent diversity within the N.R.A. It’s worth noting that diversity was not on display at any of the gun-related events that I have attended over the past few months, unless you count the women working in the booths.

After the shootings in San Bernardino, Cali-

fornia, in December 2015, the *New York Daily News* ran a front-page headline—GOD ISN’T FIXING THIS—deriding the politicians who offered only prayers for victims of mass shootings rather than any action on gun control. The accompanying story took aim at the N.R.A.’s lobbying efforts, including its resistance to a bill that would prevent people on the terrorist watch list from buying firearms. The N.R.A. responded with a video spot called “The Godless Left.” In it, the conservative radio host and N.R.A. backer Dana Loesch spoke out against those who would “destroy our history and eviscerate our rights.” She went on: “They don’t report on the drug cartels and the human traffickers who have invaded our borders and embedded in every single American city. They buried the unconscionable scandals at the V.A., the weaponizing of the I.R.S., and the disastrous billion-dollar healthcare Web site.” She accused the Godless Left of trying to “demonize Christmas and Christianity.”

Linking up with every right-wing cause imaginable comes at a price. The prominent pro-gun-rights blog *Shall Not Be Questioned* posted a response to the Loesch video: “I get that the prayer-shaming that followed the attack in San Bernardino made that issue tangentially gun-related,” wrote “Sebastian,” the pen name of the blog’s main writer. “But should Obamacare be an N.R.A. issue?” The N.R.A., Sebastian went on, “is tying . . . the Second Amendment to the fortunes of the conservative movement. It may be successful short term, but I worry NRA is shooting itself and the Second Amendment in the foot long term.”

V. The Plastic Revolution

NO advocacy group wants to have to face the skeptical question: Whose side are you on? The N.R.A.’s leadership is running into that question more and more.

In May 2013, not long after the elementary-school shooting in Newtown, a University of Texas law student named Cody Wilson filmed himself firing from a plastic gun printed by an \$8,000 3-D printer. He invited a reporter from *Forbes* along to watch, and posted the video on YouTube; it was viewed 2.8 million times in the two days after its release. Fifteen of the gun’s 16 functioning parts were made of plastic. Homemade guns were nothing new; home tinkerers have long created them out of parts, dismantling and rebuilding firearms in their basements. What was different about this effort was that you could make the parts yourself. Along with his video, Wilson released a digital blueprint for how to manufacture a plastic gun. Two days later, Glenn E. Smith, chief of enforcement for the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, wrote a letter to Wilson, informing him that the instructions he had posted could be “I.T.A.R.-controlled technical data.” (I.T.A.R. refers to the International Traffic in Arms Regulations—rules that control the import and export of weapons.)

The department demanded that Wilson take the instructions down.

Wilson complied, but not before the blueprints had been downloaded 100,000 times and posted on other Web sites. Since then, Wilson has sued the State Department, with the help of the Second Amendment Foundation. For him, the central point is not about guns. It's about how technology renders many debates, as a practical matter, virtually obsolete. If you can make a gun in your home, at the press of a button, then all the talk about background checks, waiting periods, or a gun registry becomes pointless. In January 2013, as high-capacity magazines—those capable of holding more than 10 bullets—became a focus of national gun-control conversations, Wilson used a 3-D printer to create a 30-round magazine. The magazine was designed for an AR-15-style firearm—the kind of automatic rifle used in the mass shootings in Newtown, San Bernardino, and Aurora. He then released another video of himself—in a field, wearing sunglasses, and preparing to fire an automatic equipped with his plastic magazine. He tauntingly asked, “How’s the national conversation going?”

Three-D printing is far enough away from being a mass reality that the N.R.A., for the moment, seems to feel that it can be standoffishly supportive. Most gun-lovers find that 3-D guns are still too expensive, too imprecise, and too fragile to be a real alternative to traditional guns. But the issue will not disappear, and for the N.R.A. it poses a profound dilemma: when forced to make a choice, will the group prove more loyal to its Second Amendment principles or to the needs of its gun-manufacturer donors? In a promotional brochure distributed by the N.R.A.’s “corporate partners program,” Wayne LaPierre promises donors that the N.R.A. “is geared toward your company’s corporate interests.” With statements like that, it’s difficult to tell whom the N.R.A. really represents.

VI. Paper Tiger

There’s one more question the N.R.A. is having trouble addressing: Is it actually good at what it does? In an article in *The New Republic* in 2013, Alec MacGillis argued persuasively that the influence of the N.R.A. had long been overstated. For much of its history, it hasn’t had much of an opposition. Back in 1994, when Bill Clinton was quoted bemoaning the N.R.A.’s power in that year’s midterm elections, he had, in fact, been urging more politicians to fight the N.R.A., according to Tom Diaz, a former N.R.A. member and the author of *The Last Gun* (2013), a book critical of the gun industry. In his comments at the time, Clinton held up then senator Bob Kerrey as a model for countering the gun lobby. After the senator, a Vietnam veteran, was targeted in a Charlton Heston N.R.A. ad, Kerrey created an ad of his own, featuring himself shooting a rifle, and then picking up an AK-47. With the AK-47 in hand, he told the camera that

he had hunted with a weapon like that in Vietnam, and added, “But you don’t need one of these to hunt birds.” Kerrey won re-election.

The 1994 election had much more to do with partisanship and the Clintons than with the N.R.A.: the gays-in-the-military debate that resulted in the creation of “Don’t ask, don’t tell”; the 1993 tax increases; Hillary Clinton’s failed effort at health-care reform; Travelgate; Nannygate; Troopergate. But the N.R.A. was happy to take the credit. It also took credit for Al Gore’s loss in the presidential election in 2000—never mind the impact of Ralph Nader’s independent run that year, the impasse in Florida, and the role of the Supreme Court. The N.R.A.’s LaPierre told the group’s annual meeting, “You are why Al Gore isn’t in the White House.” The impression of great influence has been mutually beneficial. Politicians can blame their own timidity on the N.R.A.’s ruthlessness and power, and the N.R.A. can present itself as a decisive factor in elections.

Richard Feldman, a onetime N.R.A. official and the author of the 2007 book *Ricochet: Confessions of a Gun Lobbyist*, told me that when speaking with lawmakers he knew to be on the fence about important legislation, he would present them with two possible letters that could be sent by the N.R.A. to the lawmakers’ constituents. One version read, in essence, “When push came to shove, your assemblyman was more concerned about what the *New York Times* editorial board was going to say about him than your rights.” The other version read, “When push came to shove, your assemblyman cared more about your rights than what the *New York Times* editorial board was going to say about him.” Feldman told me he would always put the lawmaker in control, saying, “I will put out a letter, but it’s up to you what version of it I send out.” Those politicians almost always chose the N.R.A. over the *Times*.

But that is changing. In 2013, the Democratic pollster Douglas Schoen conducted research funded by co-founder of the Huffington Post Kenneth Lerer to determine the actual power of the N.R.A. in the 2012 elections. The study found that, while the N.R.A. was “technically successful” in defeating or electing the candidates it spent money on in 2012, more than 92 percent of the money spent by the N.R.A. actually went to elections in which the organization proved unsuccessful. When spending more than \$100,000 on a candidate in 2012, it found, the N.R.A. was successful in only three cases, versus 12 elections in which its candidate lost. The report concluded that the N.R.A. takes credit for elections where it has donated a negligible amount of money and backed an obvious winner. The research turned up five victories claimed by the N.R.A. on which the group spent less than \$100. One more finding: 86 percent of N.R.A. members favored universal background checks, a position that is opposed by the N.R.A.’s leadership. Background checks are the single most important step that

government could take to improve gun safety.

That gap between the leadership and the rank and file was cited by Adolphus A. Busch IV, when he resigned from his lifetime N.R.A. membership after the defeat of the Manchin-Toomey bill. “Your current strategic focus places a priority on the needs of gun and ammunition manufacturers,” he wrote, while “disregarding the opinions” of the organization’s individual members.

As for those members, what does that claimed number of five million actually represent? *Mother Jones* has done extensive work analyzing the actual number of members of the N.R.A., a figure the organization guards with extreme secrecy. It appears to fluctuate. Even taken at face value, the number is a tiny sliver of gun owners in America—about 6 percent. And there are good reasons not to take the number at face value. Many of those members are people who signed up in order to get into other events free—such as the people who signed up at the Great American Outdoor Show I attended. Manufacturers such as Beretta, Taurus, Browning, Wilson, and Tactical Combat have, at times, given free memberships to anyone buying one of their products. The N.R.A. itself, according to a 2012 document obtained by Bloomberg News, regards only half of its membership as “active and interested.”

Politicians are becoming more aware of the dynamic—and of the fact that they have nothing to gain by toeing the N.R.A.’s line. In 2008, despite the shootings at Virginia Tech that left 32 dead, Democrats running for office rarely brought up the issue of gun regulation. “People were trying to establish their bona fides as duck-hunters,” recalled John Feinblatt, the executive director of Everytown for Gun Safety. This election cycle, Democratic candidates are openly talking about who has the strongest record fighting the N.R.A. Hillary Clinton seems poised to make it a big issue. Part of the change is due to the willingness of former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg to provide a counterweight, with money and advocacy. Democratic politicians are also beginning to realize that attempts to mollify the N.R.A. are pointless. Senator Mark Pryor, a Democrat from Arkansas, voted against the Manchin-Toomey gun-control bill, arguing to supporters that by doing so he would neutralize the N.R.A. in his upcoming campaign against Republican challenger Tom Cotton. Within a week of Pryor’s vote, the N.R.A. endorsed Cotton anyway, who went on to win. There is no mollifying the gun lobby, in part because the N.R.A. can’t afford to be seen as soft. Referring to the N.R.A., one Democratic senator told me, “It’s my way or the highway every fucking time.”

VII. Freedom Fighters

As the N.R.A. has advanced ever more radical notions of gun freedom, the group has begun to reach the outer boundaries of what it can achieve. One longtime gun-control activist told me that, ever since

N.R.A.

the Cincinnati revolt, in 1979, the N.R.A. had evolved into a group with what he called a *Field & Stream* membership and a *Soldier of Fortune* leadership. The organization has done its best to transform those hunters and fishermen into warriors, and it has its talking points lined up. When I asked Marion Hammer, the first female president of the N.R.A. and an influential N.R.A. lobbyist, how she would describe the culture of the N.R.A., she told me, “I would not call N.R.A. a culture. I would call N.R.A. a group of freedom fighters.” Until recently, one could be forgiven for thinking that the freedom fighters had won. Today’s battles appear to be fought on the N.R.A.’s terms. Shannon Watts, the head of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, an organization that is funded by Michael Bloomberg, told me that her group has aggressive goals for gun safety, but when it comes down to it, “we are fighting for things that the N.R.A. used to support,” such as background checks and keeping guns out of schools. The gun-control advocates also lack certain tools. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence compiles its own N.R.A.-style report card, publicizing a list of Lap Dogs—a member of Congress who “takes treats from the corporate gun lobby and blocks progress on expanding Brady background checks.”

The problem is that gun-safety advocates are typically not single-issue voters. The most extreme members of the “Second Amendment community” emphatically are.

In the wake of the Orlando shooting, bills have been introduced in Congress to try to prevent people who have surfaced on F.B.I. watch lists from purchasing firearms. There are renewed proposals for so-called universal background checks—extending them to gun shows and Internet sales. There are calls for the C.D.C. to finally be allowed to study gun violence, which it has been prevented by law from doing, largely at the instigation of the N.R.A. So far there have been no vocal efforts to properly fund the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the agency that oversees gun regulations, which has seen its funding restricted for decades, again largely thanks to the N.R.A. Meanwhile, to the list of those who stand in opposition to the N.R.A. can now be added members of the highly organized L.G.B.T.Q. community—outraged and grief-stricken by the killings in Orlando. If politicians at the state and national levels faced up to—and stared down—the N.R.A., they would find themselves confronting an organization that is weaker than it wants anyone to know. They would discover that support for effective gun-control measures is far stronger—and opposition to them far milder—than the conventional wisdom would suggest.

After each mass shooting, gun sales spike

because of a culture of fear that is stoked by the N.R.A. Both Wayne LaPierre and Chris Cox sat for televised interviews on the Sunday after the Orlando shootings. During his appearance on *Face the Nation*, LaPierre said that “every American” needs to have a self-defense plan, because “they’re coming and they’re going to try to kill us.”

But this kind of talk masks a deeper reality. The N.R.A., like the Republican Party from which it draws most of its support, is fracturing. Elvin Daniel is an avid hunter and an N.R.A. member who has advocated before the Senate Judiciary Committee for universal background checks, a position vehemently opposed today by the N.R.A. leadership. Elvin’s sister Zina was killed, along with two others, in October 2012 by her estranged husband, who was under a restraining order and would have failed a background check. Instead, he was able to buy a gun off of armslist.com—the Craigslist of guns—and kill three people. Only with his sister’s death did Daniel realize that background checks are not required for online purchases of guns. Daniel told me that most of his friends are N.R.A. members and favor universal background checks. One might argue that today’s N.R.A. leadership is far too professionalized to suffer the kind of organized revolt that it did in Cincinnati in 1977. Until a few months ago, one might have made the same argument about the Republican Party. □

Bill Cosby



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 131 the drink she was served. She says she doesn’t remember when she lost consciousness, only being “walked somewhere” through a “bluish-aqua light. Then I must’ve passed out again, and when I awakened Bill Cosby was in bed with me and the first thing I found myself looking at was his pubic hair. My clothes were off, and he was attempting to push my head toward his erect penis.

“Now, this may sound terribly naïve—I was 22, I was in a relationship with a guy, but I had never done oral sex,” she says. She tells me she ran to the bathroom and retched, found her shoes, and put on her nylons, which had been shredded. Then she walked out of Cosby’s house, carrying that night with her

for 40 years, through marriage, college, law school, and a career on Wall Street.

Two other women came forward in support of Andrea Constand and were willing to use their own names. “Do I want everybody to know that he had his dirty paws all over me? No, but I don’t think it’s right that they’re going to disregard this woman and her allegations,” Tamara Green told the *Philadelphia Daily News* on February 8, 2005. She was a model in the 1970s, hired to help Cosby open a nightclub. She called him from work one day to say she was sick and was going to go home when he asked her to meet him in a restaurant, where he gave her two pills which he said were Contac cold-and-flu pills. Thirty minutes later, she said, “I’m face-down in my salad.” Cosby, she said, drove her home, where he began undressing and groping her. “You better kill me because I’m going to tell everybody I ever meet for the rest of my natural life what you did to me,” she remembered saying, fighting him off until he finally retreated, dropping two \$100 bills on a table on his way out. Soon after the incident, he visited Green’s brother, who was suffering from cystic fibrosis, giving him a portable radio and becoming, she said, “the hero of the terminal children’s ward,” which compelled Green to stay silent about the incident for 30 years. But when

she heard about Constand, along with the district attorney’s press-conference statement that the case against Cosby was weak, Green felt she had a “civic duty and moral obligation” to come forward, first to the legal authorities and then to Constand’s attorneys.

“The first thing you feel is stupid,” Green, who had become a lawyer, told Matt Lauer on the *Today* show, on February 10, 2005, after one of Cosby’s lawyers said Cosby did not recognize her name and that the incident “did not happen in any way, shape or form.” “Then you feel that no one will believe you. This is the great Bill Cosby . . . But the worst thing you feel is stupid. There’s a shame element involved.”

“I am here as one of the Jane Does, one of the courageous 13 Jane Does who came forward in support of Andrea Constand,” said Jane Doe No. 5, Beth Ferrier, last year. A model from Colorado, she had previously been in a consensual relationship with Cosby when one day, she said, backstage at a show of his in the mid-80s, he served her a cappuccino. The next thing she knew she awoke in her car in a parking lot, her bra undone, her clothes in disarray. Immediately upon hearing about Constand’s case, she contacted the *National Enquirer*, which offered her \$7,000, along with a lie-detector test, which she said she passed.

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