



Violence Policy Center

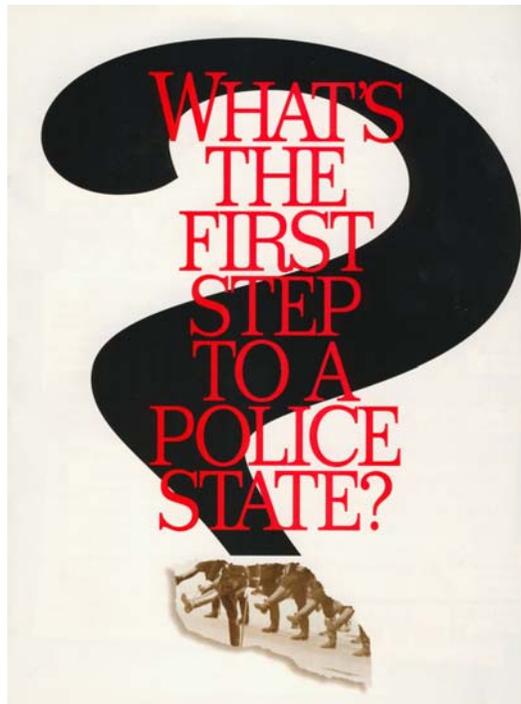
Research, Investigation, Analysis, & Advocacy for a Safer America

The Consequences of the NRA's Violent Rhetoric



Left Chest

NRA Gadsden shirt and cap available from www.nrastore.com



WHEN THE FBI STATES THE RULES.

F.B.I., in Shift, Proposes Backing Gun Control

FBI chief urges Reno to back gun control

Stop The FBI's Political Agenda. Renew or Upgrade Your NRA Membership Now.

For 58 years, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has honored its own policy to stay out of politics. Until now.

In a frightening and unprecedented action, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has proposed immediate adoption of its manifesto against law-abiding gun owners to the U.S. Attorney General and the Clinton Administration. If they get what they want, gun owners like you will be Public Enemy #1.

More incredibly, the FBI also wanted to recommend a complete ban on all handgun ownership, but "concluded that a proposed ban would not receive sufficient support" right now. So you know what's next.

Such abuse of broad investigative powers is the first step toward our Founding Fathers' worst fear: a federal police force disarming the law-abiding populace.

Your first step is to stop it. Renew or upgrade your NRA membership today.

**KEEP THE FBI OUT OF POLITICS.
RENEW OR UPGRADE NOW
1-800-231-4NRA**

NRA ad from the October 1993 issue of *American Rifleman* equating law enforcement with goose-stepping Nazis

Introduction

On April 19, 1995, former National Rifle Association (NRA) member Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168, including 19 children at a daycare center in the building. Until the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Oklahoma City bombing stood as the worst terrorist attack to ever occur on U.S. soil. It remains the most deadly attack in our nation by domestic terrorists.

McVeigh had been an NRA member for at least four years prior to the bombing, an unprecedented period in the organization's history during which it began catering to increasing anti-government sentiment.¹ This animus was evidenced by a growing militia movement spurred by the election of President Bill Clinton, the subsequent passage of federal gun control laws such as the Brady Bill and federal assault weapons ban, and lethal, high-profile confrontations between civilians and federal law enforcement at Waco, Texas, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

During this period, the NRA adopted the anti-government language of the militias and other components of the "Patriot movement," a loose coalition whose adherents are "animated by a view of the federal government as the primary enemy, along with a fondness for antigovernment conspiracy theories."² Offering a soft embrace to many of the conspiracy theories that drove the anger and fear of the Patriot movement, the NRA declared in its official publications that "The Final War Has Begun," equated Federal Bureau of Investigation agents with goose-stepping Nazis, labeled other federal agents "jack-booted government thugs" in its direct mail, and repeatedly warned of conspiracies—allegedly concocted by forces ranging from the Clinton administration to the United Nations—to disarm American gun owners. Presumably undertaken initially to engage and activate its membership while opening the door to a new strata of potential supporters, the NRA's shift in rhetoric and action—as seen in the organization's magazines, public statements, and nascent online efforts during this period—had the ancillary effect of validating the most paranoid fears of the most extreme elements of American gun owner. Eventually, the NRA found itself exploring potential partnerships with militia leaders.

After the Oklahoma City bombing and stung by widespread public criticism including the resignation of Life Member President George H.W. Bush, the NRA acted quickly to make its public face appear more moderate. The anti-government "Final War" trumpeted in the NRA's publications prior to the bombing metamorphosed into the values-based "culture war" as articulated by eventual NRA President Charlton Heston. Through this rhetorical shift, the NRA sought to maintain its ability to tap into the same societal and anti-government anger that often drove the political engagement of many of those concerned with gun rights while appearing to distance itself from attacks on government itself.

Since the election of Barack Obama, this language has resurfaced in the NRA's lexicon. And as was the case with Timothy McVeigh, the risk lays not so much with the organized members of these groups, but with the "lone wolves" who not only embrace their rhetoric, but are willing to act on it with violence.

¹ "NRA becomes militias' beacon; Gun lobby seen as nexus for paramilitarists, hate groups," *The Boston Globe*, August 13, 1995, p.1.

² Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2010, Issue Number: 137, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/spring/rage-on-the-right>.

The NRA Embraces the Gadsden Flag and Accompanying Rhetoric

Faced with a constant demand to engage, activate, and enroll a continually shrinking pool of gun owners as measured by household gun ownership,³ the National Rifle Association routinely presents the presidency of Barack Obama as a virtually apocalyptic threat to not just gun ownership, but to the future of the country itself. In its publications, the NRA has presented a litany of supposed conspiracies being undertaken by federal agencies and targeting gun owners. At the same time, the NRA has once again raised the spectre of a global gun control conspiracy, often involving United Nations or other international treaties, allegedly targeting U.S. gun owners. Such a proposition, says NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre, “boils down to one thing: The power of the American people—of individuals—is crushed by the power of the international super-state.”⁴

In a December 2009 direct-mail letter, LaPierre urged the reader to join an “army whose highest allegiance is not to any individual or any political party but only to the cause of freedom.” In the letter, LaPierre warns of:

...massive armies of anti-gun, anti-freedom radicals marshaling against us for an attack that could make every other battle we've ever fought look like a walk in the park...an attack aimed at completely rewriting our nation's values and the future of our country in ways that you and I won't even recognize.

Everywhere you look, the writing is on the wall—that the next three years will be the most dangerous days of our lifetimes, not just for the Second Amendment but for freedom itself...

We're going to see gun-banners along with the media and anti-gun special interests steer our country far away from our founding principles—and build a “new” America where freedom and privacy and self-defense are things of the past.

And I can guarantee you that in this “new” America—an America unlike anything you can even imagine—your firearms and your Second Amendment rights WON'T be welcome.

The bottom line is this: These next three years are going to decide whether our heritage of freedom will be handed down intact to future generations, or whether citizens like you will be forced to surrender your freedom....

And even though we've been criticized for it by the elitist media and by gun-ban politicians, we're not afraid to say that the ultimate, bedrock guarantee of freedom, for ourselves and for future generations, is the right of law-abiding citizens to keep and bear arms.

³ *A Shrinking Minority: The Continuing Decline of Gun Ownership in America*, Violence Policy Center, April 2007, <http://www.vpc.org/studies/ownership.pdf>.

⁴ See, for example, “The First Step in Trampling Our Rights,” *America's 1st Freedom*, February 2010, pp. 8, 55, and “The OAS Treaty: Blueprint for Dismantling the Second Amendment,” *America's 1st Freedom*, August 2009, pp. 23-25.

This mailing is just one component of a consistent drumbeat of NRA fear-mongering, a constant theme of which has been that the Obama Administration is moving to employ a wide range of government agencies against civilian gun ownership.

One aspect of this has been the introduction during the years of the Obama Administration of NRA clothing products emblazoned with the Gadsden “Don’t Tread on Me” flag.

The description for the NRA Gadsden tee shirt states:

What goes around comes around. In the late 18th century, oppressed American patriots voiced their defiance of tyranny by exclaiming, “Don’t Tread on Me!” Perhaps it’s time once again for Freedom-loving citizens to rally ’round the legendary slogan of the famous Gadsden flag. Our tee is heavy, 6.1 oz., 100% cotton with “NRA” boldly screened on its chest and the “Don’t Tread on Me” coiled rattler splashed across its back. Pair with our wildly popular Gadsden Hat!⁵

The shirt comes in sizes up to 5XL. The description for the NRA Gadsden hat states:

Proudly display your national pride with this hat, featuring an original American icon—the coiled rattlesnake, embroidered with the motto “Don’t Tread on Me.” Featured on many Revolution-era flags, including the first state flag of South Carolina, the image reflects American pride and defiance in the face of tyranny. This hat also features an embroidered NRA logo on the bill and across the back of the hat....Pair it with our matching Gadsden T-shirt. Imported.⁶

Conclusion

According to Aitan Goelma, a former federal prosecutor who was a member of the Department of Justice team that helped win convictions against Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols in the Oklahoma City bombing case:

Anytime you have group-think and this churning of ridiculous ideas back and forth, eventually you’ll get someone like McVeigh who’s going to say ‘I’m going to take the mantle of leadership and fire the shot heard around the world and start the second American revolution...’

Some of this is fantasy. I think the idea that it is kind of fun to talk about a UN tank on your front lawn and the New World Order...but when someone blows up a building and kills 19 kids in a day-care center, it’s not so glamorous anymore.⁷

One of the National Rifle Association’s greatest successes has been its ability to create a disconnect between the potential for violence fostered by its words—the “group think” and

⁵ See <http://www.nrastore.com/nrastore/ProductDetail.aspx?p=CT+275&ct=e>.

⁶ See <http://www.nrastore.com/nrastore/ProductDetail.aspx?p=HT%2024172>.

⁷ “Could the Hutaree militia have spawned a Timothy McVeigh?,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2010/0331/Could-the-Hutaree-militia-have-spawned-a-Timothy-McVeigh>.

“churning of ridiculous ideas” noted earlier—and the actual acts of violence committed by “lone wolves” and others facilitated by the organization’s validating rhetoric.

Consistently exploiting this inexplicable rhetorical exemption, the NRA incites its members and others, offering words that outside of the purported protective bubble of direct-mail and official publications would be chilling, as illustrated by this postscript from an August 2008 direct-mail letter from the NRA’s Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) warning of the threat posed by a possible Obama administration:

Our Constitution and our system of government guarantee that every American has the opportunity to write his or her name in the history books of tomorrow—to leave his or her imprint on the fabric of our nation. But in the end, history is always written only by a select few—the few who sacrifice of themselves to fight for the causes in which they believe.

Such language offers benediction to the most violent of acts. The NRA predictably dismisses criticism of its rhetoric as an overheated reaction to direct mail license. Based on past history, the overriding concern should be that the NRA’s words may, in fact, once again be revealed as violent prophecy.