

# Las Vegas Review-Journal

## **Gun lobby threatens our very way of life** The price extracted by guns is simply too high

By JOSH HORWITZ  
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When the National Rifle Association's top lobbyist, Wayne LaPierre, addresses the crowd at "FreedomFest 2005" at the Bally's/Paris Resort in Las Vegas today, he will be preaching a message that has served his organization well: guns equal freedom.

As LaPierre puts it, "The Second Amendment is the fulcrum of freedom in our nation, because freedom and the Second Amendment are mutually interdependent. They are the 'chicken and the egg;' neither can exist without the other."

LaPierre can expect a friendly reception from the right wing activists at FreedomFest. Aggressive support for gun rights provokes none of the intramural squabbling that sometimes threatens to divide social conservatives and their libertarian allies in the GOP.

By framing the gun debate as a choice between protecting liberty and the illusion of safety, the gun lobby has painted itself as a defender of basic American values.

Too often, gun control advocates walk into the trap and concede that values like democracy and independence must be sacrificed to fight gun crime.

"At what point will Americans agree that the price exacted by guns -- the gun lobby's 'price of freedom' -- is simply too high?" asks Josh Sugarmann of the Violence Policy Center.

This formulation is not smart politics, because Americans rightly treasure freedom. More importantly, it fails to hold LaPierre and the gun lobby accountable for a philosophy that is at odds with freedom and the institutions that support it.

The most recent example of the tension came last month, when Florida Gov. Jeb Bush signed a bill that allows people to use deadly force -- including guns -- when faced with a violent threat, even when a confrontation could be avoided by simply walking away. The new law goes far beyond self-defense, which was already a well-established right in Florida, to invite vigilantes to substitute their judgment for the judicial system.

David Kopel, a leading gun rights theorist, acknowledges the potential tension between an expansive right of self defense like the one embodied in the new Florida statute and the rule of law, but dismisses the concern out of hand, arguing that "people's taking the law into their own hands has always been a core principle of the American legal system, and the American attitude toward guns is simply one manifestation of that principle."

This warped conception of popular sovereignty is at the root of the most egregious anti-democratic proposition advanced by the gun lobby: that citizens need to arm themselves to safeguard political liberties against threats by the government.

Kopel has called guns "the tools of political dissent," and LaPierre wrote in 1994 that "the people have a right, must have a right, to take whatever measures necessary, including force, to abolish oppressive government."

As famed legal scholar Roscoe Pound observed, however, "A legal right of the citizen to wage war on the government is something that cannot be admitted. ... [because] bearing arms today is a very different thing from what it was in the days of the embattled farmers who withstood the British in 1775. In the urban industrial society of today a general right to bear arms so as to be able to resist oppression by the Government would mean that gangs could defeat the whole Bill of Rights."

The standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco -- often cited as proof that the government can and does abuse its power -- illustrate why armed resistance is a dead end. Randy Weaver and David Koresh may have had good reasons to distrust the government, but they had no right to use private arsenals to keep the police at bay. Our system includes democratic safeguards, such as juries, that do not rely on the private force of arms.

After the Oklahoma City bombing, the gun lobby toned down its rhetoric, casting an armed citizenry as a deterrent to oppression rather than a potential rebel force against a democratic government. "The Second Amendment is America's first freedom because it is the one right that protects all the others," LaPierre says.

This argument sounds reasonable but is no different in substance that what gun rights absolutists were saying before Oklahoma City. If they believe in the right to take up arms to resist government policies they consider oppressive, even when these policies have been adopted by elected officials and subjected to review by an independent judiciary, then they are opposed to constitutional democracy.

When LaPierre talks about guns and freedom, he wraps himself in a flag that the NRA is simultaneously ripping to shreds. Protecting vigilantes from criminal prosecution and urging citizens to stockpile weapons for a showdown with the government are more than just threats to public safety -- they are threats to our democracy and our way of life.

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# The New Hampshire Union-Leader

## The gun culture and its consequences

By JOSH HORWITZ

Guest Commentary

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A HIGH SCHOOL student in Red Lake, Minn., kills his grandfather and eight other people before turning the gun on himself; a man shoots his ex-wife and a bystander outside a courthouse in Tyler, Texas; a disappointed litigant in a malpractice case kills a federal judge's husband and mother in Chicago; a rape defendant in Atlanta overpowers a police officer, seizes her gun, and shoots three people to death; and a man walks into a church service at a hotel near Milwaukee and shoots 12 people, killing eight.

Instead of reevaluating its dogmatic devotion to guns as the answer to every question, the gun lobby has its story and is sticking to it: If only the victims in these cases had been armed (or in the Tyler and Atlanta cases, more heavily armed), then violence could have been avoided or stopped by a gun-wielding citizen.

The message that more guns will solve our problems has been promoted relentlessly by the NRA and other elements of a fringe culture that believes not only in the right to bear arms as the most important bulwark against violent crime and government oppression, but that every citizen should prepare for armed confrontation.

Writing in the Union Leader online last week, Dave Workman, senior editor of Gun Week, approvingly quoted John Snyder, public affairs director of the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, who said: "When push comes to shove, an ultimate protection against terrorist activity could well be an armed citizenry."

Gun Owners of America, the nation's second-largest gun rights group, is distributing public service announcements "[t]o generate public awareness of the dangers of not having a gun ready for protection." As Erich Pratt, a GOA spokesman, has said, "Passing a law that says everyone in a town must own a gun would be a good thing. It would be like putting a sign on every door saying, 'This home is protected by Smith & Wesson.'"

Vin Suprynowicz, a well-known gun enthusiast and prolific writer, says, "Americans have a strongly implied obligation under the Second Amendment to stand ready to defend our freedoms . . . by owning, maintaining and keeping in good practice with a firearm of 'militia usefulness' — that being, in this day and age, an M-16 or (preferably, in my opinion) a .308-caliber, M-14 combat rifle."

Even among purportedly mainstream gun rights organizations like the NRA, the response to the firearm homicides of recent weeks is essentially that we can just shoot our way out of trouble, and the NRA is backing a variety of state-level legislation designed to roll back restrictions on guns in bars, churches, schools, and just about anywhere else.

With somewhere around 200 million guns in private hands in the United States, our society hardly suffers from a shortage of firearms, and it is not clear why adding millions more would make us safer. In fact, other cultures that have reached this level of individual armament have done so at their own peril.

Think of Somalia or Russia, where even locals are reluctant to travel alone and bodyguards and razor wire are considered necessities for middle and upper class households. In these societies, democracy has taken a back seat to maintaining order.

The United States isn't near this point yet, but turning over responsibility for establishing order to armed citizens has not been the answer in those foreign countries and it will not be the answer here. The privatization of crime control — whether through hired security forces or individuals who mete out justice as they see fit - is the hallmark of a society that has been turned against itself, with devastating consequences for political liberty.

The latest spate of shootings has produced proposals to increase security for judges, offer easier access to concealed carry permits, and pass a new assault weapons ban. These ideas should be debated, but not as a substitute for hard thinking about whether a society where citizens feel they need to be armed to the teeth to go to school, work, or church is really good for our quality of life, our safety, and our freedom.

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