IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Under Attack, the NRA Hard-line Makes a Stand

By Frank Smyth

PHOENIX—National Rifle Association President Thomas L. Washington sits in his hotel suite with his stocking feet on the cocktail table, watching CNN. "Look at that guy," he says, pointing to Bill Clinton sporting a camouflage shirt, hunting cap and shotgun on the screen. "Don't believe that crap." Washington goes on, "it's just a photo op. This is the first president in the history of the Republic who's antigun."

With 3.5 million members, the NRA remains America's largest single-issue lobby. But before members gathered at the organization's 124th annual convention in Phoenix, Washington acknowledged that the NRA had been going through "this crisis."

Indeed, the last two months have been tough for the gun lobby. First came the April 19 Oklahoma City bombing, and the subsequent disclosure that main suspect Timothy McVeigh had been an NRA member. Then, once it was established that McVeigh also had ties to gun-toting paramilitary militias, the NRA took even more heat. Finally, backing up its long-held belief that the federal raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco amounted to a massive abuse of power, the NRA sent out a fundraising letter that described federal agents as "jack-booted government thugs."

That letter prompted George Bush to resign as a life member of the NRA, and in turn led Washington to write an open letter to the former president asking him to reconsider his resignation.

This year the NRA's guest banquet speaker was Republican presidential candidate Phil Gramm. He told a story that drew strong applause: "My 82-year-old mama has a .38 Special revolver, and she knows how to use it," Gramm said, adding that she had been threatened and had her house broken into. "And so my mother says to me, 'Phil, you reckon with all this meanness, I ought to get me a bigger pistol?' " But Gramm fell short of promising to repeal gun control legislation, or to investigate alleged federal abuses against gun owners, as the NRA faithful had hoped.

Though Washington is NRA president, the fundraising letter was signed by Executive Vice President Wayne R. LaPierre Jr., the NRA's most visible leader, who manages its daily affairs. LaPierre defended his rhetoric for three weeks. But then, on the eve of the convention, he apologized, saying that he had painted law enforcement authorities with too broad a brush. Washington supported this apology. But because of it, dozens of more hard-line NRA figures at an open "Town Hall" meeting in Phoenix harshly criticized LaPierre. "We don't want to be portrayed by anybody as stepping back," NRA board director T. J. Johnston told the *Voice*. Similarly, explained Second Vice President Neal Knox: "I don't think it was an apology. It was a clarification."

Knox, 59, himself has compared the NRA leadership to the politburo, and today wields more power than any other figure over the gun lobby. For decades Knox has been one of the gun community's most widely read magazine columnists, writing frequently about the NRA. Candidates for its board of directors are elected nationally, and it usually takes over 40,000 votes to win. Knox regularly endorses—or buries—candidates of his choosing. For example, this year his slate took 28 out of 28 open seats. "We won 'em all," gloats incumbent director Robert K. Corbin.

Johnston agrees. "The majority of the board are Mr. Knox's allies," he says. Even Knox's opponents now openly concede this point. "That's always a bad situation, when you have somebody that has a group that more or less, if he just raises his hand, they wait till he does, and they're gonna vote that way," says director Joe Foss, a past president, South Dakota governor, and decorated World War II marine, who is widely regarded as the NRA's elder statesman.

Like Foss, Washington represents the traditional wing of the NRA, which was originally formed to improve marksmanship skills among the New York National Guard, and later evolved into an organization of sportsmen. Washington himself is an avid hunter, who has long defended right-to-hunt legislation in his own state of Michigan. But beyond that, Washington has an environmental record respected by the Sierra Club and others. Since 1974 Washington has been executive director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, which, in 1976, helped lead the fight to pass one of the first bottle bills in America.

Such soft issues, however, have little appeal for Knox, a self-described "Hard-corps" advocate. He even writes that last year's first White House shooting, as well as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy, may all have been the work of a fantastic gun control conspiracy. "Is it possible that some of those incidents could have been created for the purpose of disarming the people of the free world?" reads the November 1, 1994, Neal Knox Report. "With drugs and evil intent, it's possible."

Most of the NRA's critics ignore the differences between leaders like Washington and Knox. But they are important at a time when an increasing number of NRA members are openly defending their right to armed struggle. And even more important at a time when a number of armed groups are reaching out to the NRA.

Take this year's general assembly in Phoenix. As NRA leaders publicly reaffirmed their 31-year policy not to associate with any organization that advocates either extremism or violence, members of a group calling itself the National Alliance, based in West Virginia, were distributing pamphlets to selected individuals in the audience.

"There is hardly a more significant difference than that which exists between the people who want gun control and those who don't," the pamphlet begins, striking a note that never fails to resonate with NRA members. Then it picks an example that NRA members themselves often use: "This divide becomes deeper and wider by the day. A Black with an uncontrollable hatred of Whites opens fire on a crowded subway train in New York, killing five Whites and injuring 17 more. Gun control advocates see this massacre as support for their position."

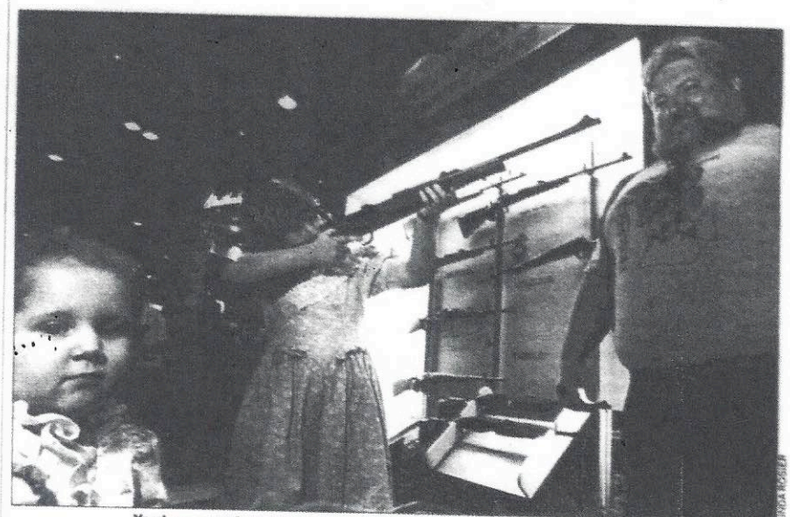
But then, it takes a stronger tack. "The names of the principal anti-Second Amendment legislators—Feinstein, Metzenbaum, Schumer—tell part of the story, and the anti-gun lobbying organizations, of which the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith—the ADL—is the more powerful, tell the rest. "When Blacks and other non-Whites were released from their ghettos and came flooding into the White world they brought their lifestyle of drugs, crime, and violence with them."

It concludes by saying, "Keep your firearms out of sight, but within reach. The day will come for using them. The day for a great cleansing of this land will come. Until that day, keep your powder dry." This last phrase is a favorite slogan among NRA members. The author of this National Alliance essay is Dr. William L. Pierce, the organization's chairman, and the author of the *Turner Diaries*, long considered a bible of the Far Right.

NRA spokesman George Walker, or "Chip," is one of a few dozen African Americans I saw in Phoenix (along with NYC's Roy Innis of the Congress for Racial Equality, who is also one of 76 NRA directors) among an estimated 20,000 people. Chip says the NRA bears no responsibility for the National Alliance, much in the same way that the NRA denies any responsibility for McVeigh. NRA leader Tanya K. Metaksa says the organization does not support any racist groups. "[But] we also have an open meeting," she adds. "People have passed out literature, they could pass out literature for the communists. It doesn't mean we support communism."

Metaksa is a longtime Knox protégé who, with his blessing, was appointed early last year to be the NRA's chief lobbyist as executive director of ILA, its Institute for Legislative Action. "We stand for the Constitution, the rule of law, and freedom," she says. Metaksa also says she abides by the NRA's traditional policy not to associate with extremist organizations. But Metaksa herself has met with leaders of one armed group, the Michigan Militia, who both Timothy McVeigh and another bombing suspect, Terry Nichols, have reportedly been associated with.

This month, ABC's *Nightline* reported that Metaksa had met with former Michigan Militia "com-



You're never too young to exercise your Second Amendment rights.

TV NRAtion

YOU NEEDN'T WAIT for Wayne LaPierre's next fundraising letter to witness the NRA's latest shot in the foot. Just watch him on NRA-TV. Broadcast in prime time every Wednesday on National Empowerment Television, a conservative, cable-satellite network run by the Free Congress Foundation, NRA-TV outdoes LaPierre's "jack-booted thugs" rhetoric with re-creations of "illegal" ATF raids, interviews with celebrity gun owners, and reports on NRA membership dollars at work. It's the next best thing to being on the shooting range.

Just another TV show

One of nearly a dozen "associate broadcasters" on NET (others include Newt Gingrich's Progress and Freedom Foundation and the Christian Coalition), the NRA pays $150,000 to rent their weekly slot. In turn, it takes commercials from the navy and air force, the *Quarterly Journal of Military History*, and from Sears, who were "certainly surprised" to find their spots in such a forum.

Each installment begins with "newscasts" chronicling the federal government's latest violations of gun owners' rights, figured on by President Clinton's "go-ahead to harass, intimidate, even murder law-abiding citizens," one segment argues. ATF agents have stomped kittens to death and slammed a pregnant woman into a wall, causing her miscarriage. "It's really the American version of the Gestapo or the SS," said a bullet manufacturer whose factory was inspected by the ATF. As for journalistic rigor, don't expect much—the ATF never gets its say. An NRA-TV spokesperson said the purpose was not to get the whole story, but give ATF victims a platform. "If what they're saying is true, then the ATF is doing some pretty outrageous things. Files should be opened, and there should be some investigation." Just so you'll never forget what you're watching, the NRA-TV insignia—a gun sight—is lodged in the screen's lower-right corner.

For now, the audience for NRA-TV remains limited by NET's spotty availability, reaching some 11 million households nationwide, at best. This past January, however, NET announced an affiliation agreement with TCI, the country's largest cable operator, which should put NRA-TV on the air nationwide sometime next year. Which could well make NRA-TV as effective a selling tool as its notorious parent lobby.

—THOMAS BOYD

manders" Norman Olsen and Ken Adams in February of this year. They claim she initiated the meeting—Metaksa says they called her.

Adams told *Nightline*, "I got the opinion from Tanya [Metaksa] that yes, Tom [Washington] was a problem to the NRA, and that, I also got the impression that she didn't feel that he would be around after the next election."

Metaksa denies such a conversation. "I don't talk internal board politics with people I don't know. And I had no knowledge that that would happen and would have never said it," she tells the *Voice*.

No knowledge? Metaksa participated in the NRA's 1994 directors' meeting in Minneapolis, when Knox and his allies tried to prevent then First Vice President Washington from assuming office. This was in direct violation of a decades-old NRA tradition, with leaders serving two years each as second vice president, then first vice president, and then president, in an established order of progression. Explains elder statesman Foss: "Once you're in line, you're elected. That's it."

Last year, T. J. Johnston of the nominating committee nominated another Knox ally, then second vice president Marion P. Hammer, to leapfrog over Washington to the presidential post. Why? "I was critical of Tom's stand on the Second Amendment [right to bear arms], that he was not as fervent as I wanted him to be," Johnston says. But this breach of mores was so offensive that even hard-line gun advocates like Robert K. Brown, the publisher and editor of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, stood up and proclaimed: "This is nothing more than a total power struggle. It's a palace coup." (See "Crossfire," the *Voice*, June 21, 1994.)

Because the hard-liners then had less support than they thought, this coup was defeated by a secret ballot of 40 to 31. But after sweeping the latest directors' election, Knox and his allies had more than enough votes this year in Phoenix to push Washington out. Yet, this election couldn't have been more inert.

"You have an entirely different atmosphere," said one director, who supports Washington, the day before the vote. The combination of the Oklahoma bombing, LaPierre's letter, and *Nightline*'s report "raised Washington's profile to the point where they couldn't take him out," the director explained. Indeed, this year's vote very much resembled an old Politburo election. All the NRA's executive officers including Washington were reelected to finish their expected terms—unanimously, every one, without one word of dissent or even discussion.

Beneath this veil of harmony, however, divisions persist. And there is still ongoing tension over how closely the NRA should ally itself with paramilitary organizations. "I don't have much use for this militia stuff," says one director who is clearly in Washington's camp. "I was asked to represent the militia in [my state], and I thought it was a conflict of interest." He goes on, "I'm just not very comfortable with people who, for some reason, feel that they have to arm themselves in groups."

But most other NRA directors today seem comfortable with armed civilian organizations. Take director Johnston, an instructor in both firearms safety and martial arts from Anaheim, California. He is a member of a group there calling itself the Orange County Corps. Johnston says it is merely "a citizens' preparedness organization" needed by the bankrupt Orange County, in case the suburb (65 per cent white) of L.A., suffers another earthquake. "What we're trying to do is to organize citizens on a city by city basis to be prepared," Johnston explains. But where, then, does firearms training fit in to this work? Says Johnston, "Understand that in any defense program firearms have to be an essential part." He refuses to characterize his group as a militia, saying, "We're not paramilitary, we don't wear uniforms, [and] we don't drill in military [fashion]. All we're trying to do is prepare our homes and environments for a disaster, whether it be civil or man-made."

Johnston describes himself as a "zealot" on the NRA's board, and, like everyone in Knox's camp, takes a strictly fundamentalist view of the Second Amendment. Knox, has long advocated this view, even opposing the Gun Control Act of 1968. It regulated the interstate sale of firearms and banned fully automatic weapons or machine guns. This legislation passed in the wake of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., and, at that time, the NRA leadership supported it.

But Knox and other hard-liners disagreed and soon tried to take power. By 1978 they succeeded, with Knox assuming the same chief lobbying post that his protégé Metaksa holds now. But in 1982 Knox was fired by his own former allies who found both his militancy and tactics too abrasive.

Ever resilient, however, Knox returned, and in 1991 he and his slate of allies won 11 seats on the NRA's board of directors. Now, with clear control of the board, Knox's goal is nothing short of making machine guns legal again. At this year's convention in Phoenix, one NRA member from the floor proposed this as a formal resolution. And the rank and file NRA activists who spent the time and money to travel to Phoenix might have passed it. But before members had a chance to vote, Knox used his authority to put it off—for now. He told the floor: "This resolution does not say do it tommorow. But I promise you it will be on tomorrow's headlines and that's all that will be reported.

"I do not want to kill this motion. I don't want to vote against it because that would be voting to strike down a piece of my rights. But there is a time and a place for everything. . . . And what I move is that let's, at this moment, simply table it, and when the time is more opportune we will then pass it."

This promise to fight for the relegalization of machine guns goes far beyond the NRA's traditional position. I asked one director who has strongly defended Washington in the past, Lee Purcell, whether she thought fully automatic weapons should be legal. The petite, auburn-haired actress, who has played roles in television, film, and theater, has been shooting, sometimes in competition, since she was a child. "I have to think about this," she says, pausing. "I just don't think that, I can't see any reason for them to want one."

If there is one issue, however, that unites every NRA director and the vast majority of its rank and file members, it is alleged abuses by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). In NRA President Washington's letter to President Bush, published this May in both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the NRA called upon Congress to "investigate serious allegations of abuse by federal agencies and to recommend steps that must be taken to reduce constitutional and human rights violations by federal law enforcement personnel."

But in making this demand, the NRA is joined by nine other civic organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). It doesn't necessarily support all the cases cited by the NRA. But the ACLU does support at least seven specific cases "in which the following problems have been evident: improper use of deadly force; physical and verbal abuse; use of paramilitary and strike force units or tactics without justification; use of 'no knock' entrances without justification; inadequate investigation of allegations of misconduct [and] entrapment."

I could quote from a countless number of NRA activists I've met who firmly believe these accusations. But I'd prefer to tell you about Bob, an inactive NRA member I met on the plane on the way home. Although he was in Phoenix for business, Bob didn't even bother to drop in on the convention. "I just pay dues," he says, "and I don't give them a penny more."

Bob says he also doesn't have much time to read NRA publications any longer. But he's nonetheless noticed that in recent years the rhetoric has grown more strident. "But I think that's necessary," he says. "You know, these ATF agents, they really are out of line. I know of cases of real abuses, confiscating property, kicking in your door. That's not what this country is all about."

Today, you can have that conversation in any gun shop, or on any target range in America. This kind of widespread anti-ATF feeling, as much as the Brady Law, the Assault Weapons Ban, or any other gun control legislation, is only fanning the hate and paranoia of groups like the Nationalist Alliance and the Michigan Militia. At the same time, it strengthens the hand of Neal Knox to direct the NRA.

"The hard-line's got a point," says Bob. "That's why I'm still a member." ■