

The GunWST
5/27/72**Kingpin of 'Gun Lobby'
Has a Million Members,
Much Clout in Congress****National Rifle Association
Plays Down Its Influence,
Stresses Sport Activities****As Innocuous as Playing Golf?**

By STANFORD N. SESSER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON — The National Rifle Association, according to a statement last fall by its executive vice president, "concur[s] in principle with the desirability of removing from the marketplace crudely made and unsafe handguns."

Since the NRA is the kingpin of the alliance of hunters, target shooters and gun manufacturers, commonly dubbed the "gun lobby," it would seem that a bill to outlaw the production and sale of "Saturday-night specials"—the cheap handguns used for many murders, frequently on Saturday nights—would sail through Congress. Instead, little progress has been made on such a measure since extensive Senate subcommittee hearings late last summer.

The answer to this puzzle tells a lot about the reasoning of the million-member NRA.

This is the third of a series of articles on guns, where people get them, what people do with them and what people think about them.

Frank C. Daniel, the organization's secretary, explains that the NRA has been unable to support a specific bill because no one has been able to come up with a definition of a Saturday-night special that the group could agree with. He says that handguns can't be banned on the basis of safety because "there's no unsafe firearm in the market to our knowledge today." Prices can't be used, he adds, because the cost of a gun "has nothing to do" with its danger. What about banning those handguns that the NRA's magazine, *The American Rifleman*, refuses to take ads for? Says Mr. Daniel: "It's one thing limiting advertising in a private magazine and another imposing the standards on a whole society."

Finally, the NRA executive complains about the whole notion of singling out certain handguns. "The term itself is meaningless," he states. "What's a Saturday-night special to one person is a highly desirable firearm to someone else."

To the many critics of the NRA, such statements provide insight into the strategy that has maintained the power of the gun lobby. The NRA, they maintain, claims publicly it only opposes measures that hinder the sportsman, while privately it musters its considerable resources to fight every piece of gun legislation, no matter what the intent. "They oppose all legislation because they figure the ultimate step is the confiscation of guns," says Carl Perian, a former professor of criminology who headed the Senate judiciary subcommittee staff that drew up the federal Gun Control Act of 1968. "Their ultimate strategy is, 'If we hold them here, we won't have to hold them there.'" Or as a member of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's legislative staff puts it: "You start talking about stopping criminals, and the NRA immediately says you're trying to take guns away from us."

NRA officials scoff at the notion that their organization wields the tremendous power attributed to it by its critics. They say only about \$100,000 of the NRA's \$7.7 million annual budget goes for legislative activities, with the vast bulk of resources devoted to such activities as staging shooting tournaments, conducting hunting and conservation activities, and publishing *The American Rifleman*, a magazine for NRA members. "Our members do the (legislative) work for us," says Jack Basil, director of the NRA legislative service. "All we do is keep our members advised about what's going on."

But Mr. Perian sees things differently. "The NRA is a very efficient minority," he declares. "Look at their new headquarters building and the money they spread around. If the NRA didn't exist, this country would be equal with all the civilized nations in the world in sharply restricting the use of ammunition and firearms."

A close look at the operations of the NRA indicates there's some truth to both views. No matter what the amount spent on lobbying, the influence of the NRA is demonstrably immense. The organization boasts at least 35 Congressmen as members, a number of sympathizers in the White House and key government agencies, and a 150-member affiliate gun club that operates from the office of the Secretary of Defense (the club's head says none of the highest-ranking Defense Department officials have joined). Altogether, the NRA has 12,000

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affiliated local and state gun clubs around the nation.

President Nixon became an NRA life member in 1957, and, although the White House claims he resigned after the 1968 election, the NRA's Mr. Daniel says that "Nixon's membership is still a matter of record. We never received notification he resigned." While the Pentagon in 1968 ended its long-standing and controversial support of the NRA's national rifle and pistol championships, the Army still quietly lends 10,000 rifles worth \$42 each to local NRA-affiliated gun clubs and each year supplies their members with 8.4 million free bullets worth \$84,000. According to The American Rifleman, President Nixon included NRA Executive Director Louis F. Lucas in a group he briefed on the forthcoming 1970 invasion of Cambodia "before announcing his momentous decision" publicly. (A White House spokesman insists the President discussed Cambodia only in general terms and didn't give away the invasion plans.)

Activism at Grass Roots

As Mr. Basil indicates, the key to the NRA's influence undoubtedly is the activism of its grass-roots membership. The NRA once boasted that an appeal to members could produce half a million letters to Congressmen within 72 hours. Mr. Perian says the Senate Judiciary subcommittee "has letters five feet deep" on the question of Saturday-night specials. The NRA's legislative bulletin to members telling when hearings will be held on state and federal gun-control measures inevitably produce overflow crowds of gun enthusiasts jamming legislative chambers.

But if members provide the strength, coordination comes from the NRA nerve center—the "new" building to which Mr. Perian refers. The sleek, eight-story structure actually dates back to 1957, when the original \$1.5 million building was finished; a \$1.2 million addition was completed in 1963.

The NRA itself uses seven of the floors to house its headquarters staff of 250 (the eighth floor is rented to the National Mediation Board). In the basement is a small firing range, used mainly by Washington-area members, and the building also houses a firearms museum. Most of the 1,000 or so guns were donated by firearms manufacturers.

Much of the staff's time is devoted to putting out The American Rifleman, in overseeing the NRA's extensive activities in firearms-safety training and in overseeing target shooting matches. Six million persons have taken NRA firearms safety classes since 1949, two million of them in the past two years alone, the organization says.

Last year, 3,300 NRA-sanctioned shooting tournaments were held, about evenly divided between rifle and pistol matches. They ranged from local matches to national championships with 106,000 entrants.

The NRA has a 75-member board of directors. Members are eligible to vote for directors (a life membership entitles members to vote) and elected officers. There are two vice presidents—referred to as executive and administrative—but they do get expense allowance. Day-to-day operating responsibility rests with the executive vice president and the executive director, both full-time paid employees.

Underlying virtually all the NRA's activities is a persistent defensiveness on the subject of gun controls—a sense that, somehow, the NRA

and its members are

being unfairly persecuted by those who want stricter gun laws. This preoccupation is evident in conversations with NRA officials and in published materials distributed by the NRA both to its members and to the press and public, and it surfaced frequently in discussions at the NRA's annual meeting at Portland, Ore., last month.

A "Real Shocker"

In one panel discussion on hunting, for example, Dale L. Shaw, a Colorado State University forester and gun enthusiast, reported that a survey of 200 Colorado State students found two-thirds were opposed to hunting. "A real shocker to me," Mr. Shaw added, "was that over half the students from rural areas were against hunting." The reasons for the students' attitude, he said, included general sentiment against killing for sport, unpleasant personal experiences with hunters and the publicity given the killing of endangered species.

The discussion sparked an outpouring of bitterness and suspicion among the 400 people in the room—much of it directed ultimately toward those elements in U.S. society that want tougher gun laws. The chairman of the NRA's hunting and conservation committee called anti-hunting sentiment "a flank attack by the antigun people." One speaker pointed to "the emotional outcry of the apartment-block critics," and Mr. Shaw himself complained that some New York City residents equate hunting with the killing of "puppy dogs and kitty cats."

Finally, one member of the audience rose to point out that the antigun movement gained considerable momentum after the assassination of President Kennedy. Then he asked: "Do you think if this had been an attack on Mrs. Kennedy they would want to emasculate every man in the country?"

As Innocuous as Golf?

The depth of frustration felt by NRA members at talk of tighter gun controls seems rooted in a feeling on their part that owning and shooting guns for sport is as innocuous as, say, playing golf. In fact, a visit to a meeting of the Chabot Gun Club, a San Francisco-area NRA affiliate, turns up striking parallels with golf. Most of the members present are target shooters who spend most of their weekends on the club's shooting range—and make the same sort of jokes as golfers about how their wives sit home. Several members, totally unaware of the irony, even complain about the hazards from golf balls when they drive along a road bordering a golf course. One member says his car was hit by golf balls five times in a single day and adds that he can't understand why authorities seem unwilling to act against errant golfers. "I guess there's nothing we can do about them," he mutters.

Many gun enthusiasts see a conspiracy to penalize the hunter and target shooter while letting the criminal roam free. Their solution to the problem of guns and crime is simple: Pass tough laws providing long mandatory prison sentences to anyone using a gun for a crime.

The antigun conspiracy, they believe, is nurtured by a biased press. A reporter attending a gun club meeting is asked the same question as a preliminary to almost every interview he seeks: "Do you shoot?" When the answer is no, the looks are incredulous, and a second question usually follows: "Well, then, how can you write about guns?"

Surprisingly, several key executives of the NRA would also have to answer that question in the negative. The current president, Fred M. Hakenjos, is involved with guns only through his job with Hercules Inc., the gunpowder maker. Maxwell E. Rich, executive vice president, neither hunts nor shoots at targets; be-

fore his NRA job (a full-time staff position) he was an official of the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce and an adjutant general in the Utah National Guard. Louis Lucas, the executive director, is a certified public accountant and a nons shooter.

Energetic, Nonetheless

NRA officials profess to see little significance in the fact that many key personnel don't shoot; they say the number of shooters varies widely from year to year.

Whether they shoot or not seems to have little effect, however, on the energy with which NRA officials press the organization's cause. Executive Vice President Rich, for one, is a frequent witness in congressional hearings on various gun-control proposals, and other staff members consult often with the aides of Congressmen—both sympathetic and unsympathetic—on gun matters.

Perhaps most effective are the NRA's efforts to keep its members informed about gun-control activities around the nation through its monthly American Rifleman and through the separate mailings of thousands of legislative bulletins.

The legislative bulletins, though they don't urge members to any course of action, often lead to massive campaigns to deluge legislators with mail and to jam legislative galleries and hearing rooms when gun-control matters are discussed. If a state legislative committee, for instance, plans a hearing on a gun-control bill, every NRA member in that state will receive a bulletin with the time and place of the hearing, the text of the proposed measure, and the names and home cities of all the legislators on the committee.

Not So Fire-Eating

The American Rifleman isn't quite so dispassionate. The magazine, which is financed largely through advertising by gun and ammunition makers and is sent free of additional charge to members who pay their \$7.50 annual dues, frequently emphasizes the message that "communism, engaged in a shooting war against young Americans in Vietnam, does not want young Americans in the U.S. to be taught to shoot." It calls interest in guns "universal, usually in direct ratio to intelligence and education," and lashes out at the federal Gun Control Act of 1968 as "a legislative monstrosity saddled upon the people in a period of emotionalism." The 1968 act bans interstate mail-order sales of guns, limits imports of guns and requires gun dealers to demand identification and to keep records of purchasers of firearms and ammunition.

In recent years, however, the editorials seem to have been toned-down from the fire-eating prose that sometimes appeared in the mid-1960s. In 1967 the magazine asked who would guard "the doors of American homes from senseless savagery and pillaging" if the National Guard were overseas fighting a war. The editorial noted that "the armed citizen represents a potential community stabilizer," and, speaking of gun-control bills, concluded: "There is little indication that their sponsors have given any thought to the fate of citizens who may be trapped and beleaguered by howling mobs that brush police aside."

In 1965 an editorial noted that "the taking of a human life is a matter of deepest concern. Nevertheless, our laws rightly recognize the fact that a person may resort to the use of firearms, when necessary, for the protection of himself, his home and his place of business

If he elects to use a gun, that is his privilege.

The important thing is that the individual must have the opportunity to make his own decision, and obviously his decision lacks meaning in such instances if he does not have the right and the opportunity to have a gun to enforce that decision." NRA officials say they still stand behind these editorials.

Not Always So Militant

Surprisingly, some observers on Capitol Hill say the NRA's lobbying efforts haven't always been as militant as the American Rifleman's prose. Franklin L. Orth, who was executive vice president and day-to-day operating head until his death two years ago, was frequently quoted as searching for a compromise on gun legislation. "He was an honest man who would almost cry whenever you'd talk about Jack Kennedy," says Mr. Perian, the former Senate staffer. (President Kennedy's presumed assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, purchased his rifle by mail order from an ad in The American Rifleman.)

According to Mr. Perian, the turning point came in 1969 when Mr. Orth was invited to testify before the Senate's Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee, which considers gun legislation. Instead, the NRA's then-President Woodson Scott, a New York lawyer and a strong opponent of gun controls, showed up. "Orth told me his directors accused him of working with the committee," Mr. Perian states. "He maintained his post but they shoved him in the background. Orth was invited as a witness, and the NRA wouldn't even let him in the room." Asked whether the executive vice president had ever before failed to appear at congressional testimony, William Gilmour, a former NRA public-relations man, stated that "it never happened before, in recent years at least."

Mr. Basil, the NRA's legislative director, denies the organization clamped down on Mr. Orth in order to take an uncompromising line on legislation. "Frank Orth was never at odds with the directors," he says. "He couldn't very well be; he was an employee." Mr. Basil says Mr. Orth was out of town on NRA business the day of the hearing.

To the NRA, the whole controversy over the need for gun-control legislation is vastly blown out of proportion. The American Rifleman, for example, points out that "the handgun is used legitimately by millions of target shooters and hunters as well as for home protection. . . . In itself it is no more inherently criminal than a pair of scissors, a piece of rope or a brick."

The organization's home-firearm-safety instructor's guide takes up the analogy. It tells instructors to "attempt to remove fear if any exists . . . point out the appeal to the senses: fine workmanship, interesting sounds even without firing, cool, smooth, substantial feel, distinctive odor. Be sure to point out the respect due firearms as . . . instruments which have great potential for sport—improperly used, great potential for harm. Point out also, the last is true of a baseball bat, a boat, a fishing rod. Have a baseball bat, fishing rod, roller skate or other rather innocent-looking items that have the double potential."