



# Dangerous and Deceptive

## *The State of the Gun Lobby in 2017*

This week, the National Rifle Association (NRA) will host its annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. Americans for Responsible Solutions, the gun violence prevention organization founded by former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and Navy combat veteran and NASA astronaut Captain Mark Kelly, created this report, *Dangerous and Deceptive: The State of the Gun Lobby in 2017*, to show the dangerous agenda the gun lobby is advancing with Congress and the Trump Administration.

In 2016, the NRA spent more on political campaigns than ever before, securing dangerous dividends for American citizens and law enforcement. In return for the NRA's \$30 million backing of President Donald Trump, his Administration is already at work scaling back reasonable firearm regulations currently on the books, making our country less safe. Later this week, President Trump will mark the first 100 days of his presidency by speaking at the NRA's annual meeting, the first president in 34 years to do so. He will headline a list of conference speakers known for their outrageous and offensive rhetoric, including those who have falsified research, blamed the Holocaust on gun violence prevention laws, and politicians who defend the NRA after horrific gun violence tragedies in our country while simultaneously pocketing their campaign cash.

***Dangerous and Deceptive: The State of the Gun Lobby in 2017*** will detail how the NRA is attempting to push through its dangerous agenda with an acquiescent President Trump and a Congress filled with politicians beholden to its special interests. This report also illustrates the NRA connections to Russian President Vladimir Putin and associated criminal syndicates.

### **The NRA's Record \$54 Million of Political Spending in the 2016 Election**

The National Rifle Association spent over \$54.2 million in the 2016 election cycle to support candidates. This is the most the NRA has ever spent in an election, dwarfing the less than \$20 million spent in the 2012 election and the nearly \$30 million spent in the 2014 election. The NRA's spending—making it one of the top ten spenders nationally—included over \$30.3 million to elect President Donald Trump. The NRA's support came after the group's earliest ever presidential endorsement of Trump.<sup>1</sup>

The NRA's huge investment in Trump's candidacy was spent alongside almost \$24 million to elect anti-gun reform candidates in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The group spent a record \$6.2 million to defend incumbent Richard Burr in North Carolina—the most ever spent by the NRA in a down-ballot race—and millions more to defend friendly incumbent senators in tough races like Senators Rob Portman, Marco Rubio, Roy Blunt and Todd Young.<sup>2</sup>

NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre has called the election an "historic moment to go on offense and defeat the forces that have aligned against our freedom once and for all."<sup>3</sup> Since the election, the NRA has enthusiastically backed the Trump Administration while also pushing the organization's priorities in Congress, relying on aggressive campaign spending, support from the members they helped elect, and alliances within the Trump family.

## **Trump Administration Pushing NRA Agenda as Group Spends Big to Support Nominees**

In the early months of the Trump presidency, the NRA has showed itself to be an active ally of the Administration by battling to confirm NRA-backed nominees. In exchange, the Administration has rubber-stamped the NRA's agenda.

The group ran a \$1 million ad campaign to pressure Democratic senators to oppose a filibuster of Supreme Court nominee Judge Neil Gorsuch, and spent an additional six-figures to promote the nomination of Attorney General Jeff Sessions.<sup>4</sup> Those ads were running while the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, infamously responded to a question from Senator Chris Murphy during her confirmation hearings about guns in schools that "there's probably a gun in the school to protect from potential grizzlies."<sup>5</sup>

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke also received the NRA's blessing, with the organization praising his confirmation as "the end of a hostile era towards hunters and sportsmen."<sup>6</sup> In March, just one day after his confirmation, Secretary Zinke withdrew Director's Order No. 219, overturning the ban on lead ammunition in national wildlife refuges—a move praised by the NRA and opposed by environmental groups.<sup>7</sup> Zinke received high ratings from the NRA as a member of the House of Representatives, and his campaign benefited from \$4,000 in contributions from the NRA.<sup>8</sup>

After his confirmation in February 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions directed the Justice Department to lower the standard for fugitives attempting to buy guns.<sup>9</sup> Now under the new rules, more people with outstanding arrest warrants will be able to buy firearms.<sup>10</sup> From 1998 through 2017, the FBI, which runs the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), had adopted a broader definition of the term "fugitive" in the Brady Act, and blocked sales to anyone with an outstanding arrest warrant.

This rule change has already had an impact: 500,000 records identifying individuals with outstanding arrest warrants have been removed from NICS as the FBI works to determine if those individuals meet the new standard or if they simply have outstanding warrants. The real threat of this policy change is apparent: more individuals, even if they have outstanding warrants for serious crimes, will be able to buy guns. And as the FBI works to determine which individuals are felons, guns could end up in the hands of those that are still prohibited under the new rule. This is already an issue as default-proceed sales, or the legal sale of a firearm to someone after three days even if their background check is not complete, has allowed dangerous people to purchase firearms. In April 2015, shooter Dylann Roof obtained his firearm through a default-proceed sale after an examiner was unable to access his arrest record. Roof went on to use that weapon in his deadly shooting at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine black parishioners.<sup>11</sup>

## **NRA's Agenda Being Pushed Forward by Allies in Congress, Despite Threats to Public Safety**

While the NRA has been placing friends and allies in the Trump Administration and getting favors in return, it has also been relying on relationships with legislators and even President Trump's own family to push its legislative goals in Congress.

NRA allies in Congress and the White House have already delivered some quiet victories for the gun lobby that will endanger public safety. In February, Congress passed and President Trump signed legislation behind

closed doors that eliminated a President Obama-era rule that prevented mentally impaired individuals from accessing firearms.<sup>12</sup> The rule had required the inclusion of records into the NICS background check system of recipients of Social Security disability benefits who also required a fiduciary representative to manage their benefits because of a disabling mental disorder.<sup>13</sup>

And in March, the House of Representatives passed legislation that would make it harder to keep guns out of the hands of veterans with severe mental illnesses by effectively *prohibiting* the Veterans Administration from sharing those records with NICS while also removing the 174,000 records already included in the system. This will put the veterans who most need our support at increased risk of doing harm to themselves or others. The most recent statistics available from the VA found that an average of 20 veterans per day die from suicide.<sup>14</sup>

While these are early victories for the NRA, their real agenda is focused on policies that would undermine law enforcement and put public safety at risk, making communities across the country less safe.

### *Federally Mandated Concealed Carry*

Federally mandated concealed carry would mandate that each state to recognize concealed carry permits from every other state, forcing states with strong gun laws to comply with extremely lax state laws, effectively allowing the states with weakest concealed carry permitting laws to dictate gun safety for Americans everywhere. It would also undermine the work of law enforcement who would have trouble verifying that those who are carrying a concealed weapon are legally allowed to because there are 50 different states' concealed carry laws.

Federally mandated concealed carry is strongly opposed by all major law enforcement organizations such as the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Major Cities Chiefs Association because it would make American communities less safe.<sup>15</sup> However, it is the NRA's top legislative priority and their goal is to pass it "as quickly as it can be written and signed."<sup>16</sup> The bills introduced in Congress have attracted 36 cosponsors in the Senate and 188 cosponsors in the House. Many of those cosponsors are fresh from receiving major NRA financial support in the 2016 election, including top House recipient Representative Lloyd Smucker and major Senate recipients such as Senator Rob Portman and Senator Marco Rubio.<sup>17</sup> While the NRA is prioritizing this legislation as part of their efforts to promote more guns in more places, Americans are overwhelmingly opposed to this, with 78 percent believing that we should have some restrictions on where guns are carried.<sup>18</sup>

### *Deregulating Silencers*

Deregulating silencers would put both the public and law enforcement at risk by allowing criminals and other dangerous people to commit crimes undetected. Silencers, along with machine guns, have been effectively regulated under federal law since the 1930s, but gun lobbyists have sought to eliminate these regulations, including the individual registration of silencers, as gun sales have plummeted after Trump's election in November.<sup>19</sup> Deregulating silencers would mean that overnight the 900,000 silencers currently registered under the National Firearms Act would be available for sale without a background check due to the loopholes in our laws. This dangerous move would give criminals a new tool in avoiding law enforcement and eluding gunshot detection systems—allowing them to commit a shooting and escape before the surrounding community is even aware.<sup>20</sup>

The NRA-endorsed Hearing Protection Act has 13 cosponsors in the Senate and 137 in the House.<sup>21</sup> While President Trump hasn't yet taken a position on the bill, the NRA has found an advocate in his son, Donald Trump Jr. who has said that silencer deregulation is "where we should be going."<sup>22</sup> In a lengthy 38-minute video released by Salt Lake City-based SilencerCo during the presidential campaign, Trump Jr. told Joshua Waldron, the CEO of SilencerCo: "It's just a great instrument. There's nothing bad about it at all. It makes total sense."<sup>23</sup> Waldron was later named to the Trump campaign's "Second Amendment Coalition."<sup>24</sup>

### *Eliminating Gun-Free School Zones*

Repealing the Gun-Free School Zones Act, as President Trump proposed on the campaign trail,<sup>25</sup> would pose a clear threat to students, teachers and communities. Laws making schools gun-free reduced gun violence and resulted in dramatically lower school-associated homicide rates.<sup>26</sup> Prohibitions keeping guns off college campuses have resulted in significantly lower gun violence rates. Studies have shown that stripping regulations for carrying guns in public places, like the elimination of gun-free zones, resulted in a 12 to 18 percent increase in crime over 10 years.<sup>27</sup> It's clear that these policies would only put students and teachers at risk. The NRA has also named eliminating gun-free zones as a key priority—which President Trump pledged to do on his first day in office. While that promise was left unfulfilled,<sup>28</sup> longtime NRA ally Rep. Thomas Massie has introduced legislation to repeal the Gun-Free School Zones Act, calling the ban "unconstitutional" and "ineffective."<sup>29</sup> Currently this bill has five co-sponsors in the House and similar legislation has not been introduced in the Senate.<sup>30</sup>

### **NRA Apologists Gather at the Annual Meeting and What We've Heard from Them Before**

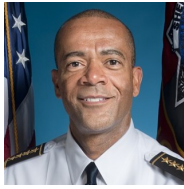
While NRA leadership aggressively pushes its agenda in the halls of Congress and the White House, their members are preparing for the 2017 Annual Meeting. This year's forum features some familiar faces who already have reputations for their outrageous and inaccurate rhetoric.



**Former Congressman Allen West** will be a featured speaker at the forum. West—now a board member of the NRA—has previously blamed gun violence prevention laws for the Holocaust, saying "In 1930, there was a gentleman in Germany who took away private gun ownership and you know what happened to that population" in 2010.<sup>31</sup> "You must be well informed and well-armed, because this government we have right now is a tyrannical government," West said comparing the Obama Administration to Hitler.<sup>32</sup>



Frequent speaker **Senator Ted Cruz** will also make an appearance. Cruz, an unwavering opponent of gun safety, brought his failed presidential campaign to a shooting range and joked about defining gun laws as "hitting what you aim at" just days after the shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina that left nine dead.<sup>33</sup>



**Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke Jr.** will make a return to the conference, after last year using his platform before NRA members to suggest that a semi-automatic weapon be added to the Great Seal of the United States.<sup>34</sup> Clarke first made waves in 2013 when he told his constituents that calling “911 is not our best option,” and recommended to “point that barrel center mass and pull the trigger.”<sup>35</sup>



Newcomer **Rick Scott, Governor of Florida**, earned the NRA’s praise when he signed more pro-gun legislation during his first term than any Florida governor in recent history.<sup>36</sup> Days after the deadly shooting in Orlando left 49 killed at a nightclub, Scott said the issue wasn’t gun reform, and that it wasn’t “about the Second Amendment.”<sup>37</sup>



Finally, the NRA annual meeting will also feature a an educational seminar on “The Truth About Guns,” led by **discredited researcher John Lott**, described by the NRA as a “world-recognized expert on guns.”<sup>38</sup> While Lott has become a favorite voice for the gun lobby, his shoddy reports have been repeatedly debunked and criticized. Lott’s findings that higher gun ownership translates to better safety was repudiated by a National Research Council panel.<sup>39</sup> He became the subject of an ethics inquiry for potentially fabricating research, and has been caught modifying research when his claims were questioned.<sup>40</sup> Lott is no longer affiliated with any university, and his organization—the Crime Prevention Research Center—does not produce studies for peer-reviewed journals.<sup>41</sup>

### Trump and the NRA’s Exchange of Loyalties

President Trump will once again be a featured speaker at the NRA’s annual forum—the first appearance from a sitting president in more than 30 years, since President Ronald Reagan addressed the convention in 1983.<sup>42</sup> Trump used his 2015 appearance at the forum to complete his transformation from a supporter of moderate gun reform to a full-throated spokesman for the NRA’s agenda in exchange for the NRA’s endorsement. The group’s “virtually unprecedented” early endorsement of Trump was responded to with a backlash from grassroots members, who questioned Trump’s loyalty to their cause.<sup>43</sup>

The NRA’s LaPierre said the organization’s “courage was tested” by the “deceitful media” throughout the election, but they remained unflinchingly loyal to Trump.<sup>44</sup> And in the first few months of the Trump Administration, the organization has continued working to prove itself as the president’s “strongest, most unflinching ally,” declaring itself the leader of the “counter resistance” against Trump’s critics.<sup>45</sup>

In January, before President Trump was even sworn in, LaPierre made the NRA’s new mission clear, warning members that the “forces that conspired to keep Donald Trump out of the White House are coming together to sabotage his administration,” seeking to “inflict their revenge.”<sup>46</sup> A month later LaPierre compared anti-Trump protestors to “terrorists” and joined Trump’s attacks on “leftist media” and the “fake news.”<sup>47</sup> LaPierre and NRA-ILA Executive Director Chris Cox are both slated to speak alongside Trump at the NRA’s annual meeting.<sup>48</sup>



## Trump and the NRA's Russian Connection

The NRA's claimed position as the Trump Administration's top ally and defender has extended to dismissing questions surrounding Trump's ties to Russia. LaPierre mocked the media for being "all afret over the Russian-American equation."<sup>49</sup> He criticized "co-conspirators" in the intelligence community for leaking information, saying that in the past those officials would have been "hanged for treason."<sup>50</sup> A spokesman on NRA News, the gun industry-backed internet channel, claimed that the allegations stemmed from a "concerted effort with Obama loyalists" to "destroy America from the inside."<sup>51</sup>

But the NRA itself faces questions surrounding the organization's own ties to Russia and President Vladimir Putin allies, even as they dismiss President Trump's obvious connections. Recent reports discovered that an NRA delegation visited Russia in 2015. This group included Sheriff David Clarke, former NRA president David Keene, NRA First Vice President and firearm company CEO Pete Brownell, as well as other NRA donors.

While in Russia, the group met with Dmitry Rogozin, the head of Russia's defense industry and a key Putin ally. Rogozin was sanctioned by the Obama Administration in 2014 in response to the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The NRA group also met with Alexander Torshin, the deputy governor for Russia's central bank who has been accused of laundering money for Russian crime syndicates.

The NRA trip was funded in part by the Right to Bear Arms, Russia's first gun rights group founded by Maria Butina, a Torshin ally.<sup>52</sup> Butina's Russian gun rights group boasts some 10,000 members and makes arguments following tragedies familiar to NRA observers. In 2016, Butina told the Moscow Times that "[m]ore legal guns equal less crime" and criticized gun-free zones following the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012.<sup>53</sup> The 2015 NRA delegation trip came after multiple exchanges between the two allied groups, which should come as no surprise because Putin's ally Torshin is both an NRA Life Member and an honorary member of the Right to Bear Arms.

In fact, both Butina and Torshin have frequently attended NRA events in the U.S. and brag about them on social media.<sup>54</sup> In exchange, the Right to Bear Arms has hosted NRA former President Keene and NRA life member Paul Erickson in Russia.<sup>55</sup> Torshin shared a table with Donald Trump Jr. at the NRA's 2015 annual convention, and Butina and Erickson have apparently become very close socially in Washington, D.C., even forming a company together in February 2016.<sup>56</sup> The groups also have one similar, but curious, agenda: opposing western economic sanctions against Russia.<sup>57</sup>

Butina, a frequent critic of the economic sanctions against Russia, even questioned then-candidate Trump at a July 2015 campaign event in Las Vegas if he would lift the sanctions, and Trump assured her they weren't needed. Butina references the exchange on her social media feed,<sup>58</sup> and various reports document the exchange where Trump said "I don't think you'd need the sanctions. I think we would get along very, very well."<sup>59</sup> The NRA publicly criticized Russian sanctions in 2014 because they included an arms manufacturer.<sup>60</sup> Keene denies that trip to Russia involved talk of Russian sanctions and claims the visit was "nonpolitical," but Butina has since moved to Washington, D.C. and attended a Trump inauguration ball.<sup>61</sup> The NRA has declined to answer questions about the organization's apparently close relationship with Butina and Russia.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

As the NRA, President Trump, and gun lobby allies in Congress push a radical and dangerous agenda this week in Atlanta, it's critical for Americans to remember that, like any other corporate interest group, the gun lobby and its allies will pursue profits at any cost in 2017, regardless of their impact on public safety. Following tragedies like the one at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, gun lobbyists responded with proposals for more guns in schools—because they sell more firearms. Following the Charleston, South Carolina massacre of nine black parishioners, gun lobbyists pushed to make mass murderers like Dylann Roof harder to find—because weakening background checks sells more guns. Throughout 2016, the NRA spent a record \$54 million on campaigns to install allies in Congress and the White House who will support dangerous public safety proposals—all so the gun lobby can sell more guns. The NRA has even gone so far as to cultivate relationships with Russian officials and Putin allies, including advocating for the easing of sanctions on Russia, to better align themselves with President Trump—and influence the policies that will help them sell more guns.

The NRA wants something in return when it spends a record \$54 million electing politicians—it wants unfettered access to change policies that will help their bottom line. Their agenda shows it and this type of rhetoric is what we'll see this week at their annual convention in Georgia. But while the gun lobby is trying to sell the public on bogus claims, Americans for Responsible Solutions will be shining a bright light on the truth of these proposals. We know that the gun lobby's agenda will have a dramatic and harmful impact on the public safety of communities across the country. That's why we'll keep working to expose their lies, defeat their dangerous agenda, and pursue common sense solutions that will make Americans safer from gun violence.

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<sup>5</sup> NBC News, Betsy DeVos Cites Grizzly Bears During Guns-in-Schools Debate, [1/18/17](#).

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