

NRA ANNUAL MEETING

A*pril 2003:* Robert Glock drove the big BMW south on I-75 at a steady eighty-five miles an hour.

It looked like we'd make the normal seven-hour trip from Atlanta to Orlando in less than five. The flowering dogwoods of the Appalachian foothills gave way to flat miles of pulp pines and sprouting soybean. Then the first spiky palmettos of the coastal plain appeared. By 11:30 a.m. we were near the Florida line.

The four of us in the metallic green sedan were on our way to show the Glock flag at the annual convention of the National Rifle Association. The NRA is one of those American icons like the CIA or the NFL, for which an acronym automatically sparks recognition. When most people see the letters, "NRA," they think of the ongoing battle for gun-owners' rights—and the endless struggle to control gun violence.

But during almost twenty years' involvement with the National Rifle Association—both as a senior political agent and then as an executive director and chief lobbyist of the American Shooting Sports Council (ASSC), the firearms industry—my image of the organization had radically changed. Once, I'd naively viewed the association as the resourceful advocate of citizens' Second

Amendment guarantees to “keep and bear arms.” But I’d been forced to recognize that, despite its sacrosanct facade, the NRA is actually a cynical, mercenary political cult. It is obsessed with wielding power while relentlessly squeezing contributions from its members, objectives that overshadow protecting Constitutional liberties.

And now, after a bitter estrangement of four years, I was about to encounter the NRA again. I’d meet the executives, the officials, and the loyalists with whom I had shared so many triumphs, but who had ultimately branded me a traitor. Watching the flat, semitropical landscape roll by, I recalled the analogy former executive vice president Warren Cassidy had used to describe the NRA. People would gain a true understanding of the National Rifle Association, Warren had said, only if they thought of it as “one of the world’s great religions.”

In fact, the fervor of its activist members is just as inflexible as that of Muslim, Christian, or Jewish zealots. But the organization’s present leaders have contemptuously manipulated those passions to consolidate political power and keep the money stream flowing steadily. For loyal rank-and-file members, however, their zeal blinds them to this reality.

But, according to orthodox NRA doctrine, I had committed the heresy of compromise, a sin for which I would be eternally damned. My transgressions were grave: I had openly cooperated with the “jack-booted thugs” (one of the NRA’s favorite epithets) of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF), I had sacrificed at the highest altar of the “gun grabbers” (another favorite NRA slur)—the Rose Garden of the Clinton White House, and I had been tempted to negotiate reasonable settlements to imminent municipal lawsuits against gun manufacturers. The fact that I had valid, practical reasons for all of these actions, which would have strengthened the rights of law-abiding gun owners while dampening the level of acrimony in the great American debate over firearms, just increased my culpability in the eyes of the NRA leaders. They weren’t interested in actually solving problems, only in fueling perpetual crisis and controversy. That was how they made their money.

In a few hours I would be mingling again with those leaders and the throngs of the faithful.

“The Sunshine State,” Robert Glock announced as we sped past the Florida welcome center. “Why, then, is it cloudy?”

Tall and dark-haired, Robert Glock was an urbane Austrian who spoke precise English with a slight Tyrolean accent. Working for his father, Gaston, Robert had taken over the leadership of Glock’s rapidly expanding American operation a few months earlier. I was Robert’s consultant, easing his entry into the often-confusing world of guns in this country.

“Hey, the sun’s coming out up ahead,” Chris Edwards, director of the Glock Sports Shooting Foundation and chief of special projects, said from beside me in the wide backseat.

“Pool time,” Robert’s girlfriend, Carolyn, added cheerfully from the front seat.

I was thinking of how nice it would be to have a frosty Amstel in the Florida sun beside the pool at the Peabody Hotel. But then I felt a chill of apprehension as I recognized the possibilities that pleasant scene might hold. The pool deck was bound to be thick with NRA insiders. Thursday afternoon of the convention week was traditionally a time to relax, a break between the committee meetings and closed-door sessions and the upcoming weekend events for the general membership. The Peabody, just across the street from the sprawling Orange County Convention Center, was the hotel of the NRA “Official Family,” the coterie of committee and board members and senior leaders—including Executive Vice President Wayne R. LaPierre Jr. and Chris Cox, who ran the NRA’s powerful lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA). Many of the people I was apt to encounter at the hotel, such as “the Colonel,” Robert K. Brown, the publisher of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and an NRA board member, hated my guts. In their eyes, Richard Feldman showing up at the Peabody on this pleasant April day would be like Judas Iscariot appearing in St. Peter’s Square on Good Friday.

Or, in the parlance of Long Island, New York, where I grew up, hocking a loogie onto the Ark of the Covenant.

The coming confrontation triggered anxiety and anticipation. I had never shied away from a fight, especially when I was right. And I knew that I had never abandoned the cause of the Second Amendment. Rather, the NRA itself had deserted its fundamental principles

and had willingly jeopardized its members' constitutional rights in order to preserve and further its political and financial power.

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We entered the Peabody's lobby just as the traditional midday duck parade was ending. A small flock of mallard hens and one drake strutted along the red carpet to the beat of a Souza march and flapped into the stone fountain. The crowd around the registration desk regrouped after the show. But a tanned, patrician couple in Mephisto shooting boots and matching tailored khaki shirts with Virginia Tidewater Hunting Club logos stayed where they'd been, watching the paddling mallards with less than benevolent eyes. They looked like old money, NRA stalwarts who probably owned a five-thousand-dollar chocolate Labrador retriever with field champion bloodlines, and who hunted with custom-made Perazzi shotguns worth a lot more than that.

Hunters and gun hobbyists like them, including their middle-class and blue-collar counterparts, once had made up the core membership of the NRA. Before the 1970s, the NRA had been a relatively small, basically nonpolitical association of hunters, shooting sports enthusiasts, and gun collectors. Today, with a membership of around 3 million, the association is probably the single most politically active lobbying group in the country. And the quaint interests of the wealthy and working class waterfowl hunters have become a much lower priority on the National Rifle Association's agenda.

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On the pool deck in search of a beer and a sandwich, I was still feeling apprehensive about the people I might encounter there. As if to verify my bout of nerves, I almost ran straight into Kayne B. Robinson, the first vice president of the NRA. He was dressed in his habitual blue suit, with carefully water-combed short hair and his trademark gold-rimmed glasses. Kayne produced a cold, thin-lipped scowl when he recognized me and strode past silently. That's what the Brits call cutting someone dead. *Jeeze*, I thought, *this is gonna be tough*.

But then, Mary Rose Adkins walked up, smiling. “Hi, Richie,” she said. “Nice to see you again.” We were still friends, and obviously the NRA’s official animus toward me didn’t cut much ice with her. Then Steve Halbrook, an NRA attorney whom I’d known for years, clapped me on the back and said, “It’s great that you’re back, Richie.”

So, I realized that there might be a pattern here. Senior NRA officials like Robinson adhered to NRA dogma that proclaimed me a heretic who must be shunned. But, beyond the Byzantine inner sanctum of the senior association executives, the NRA still had its share of decent human beings with whom I had worked closely for almost two decades.

Maybe I’ll survive this convention after all.

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That evening at the Glock party in the Peabody’s best dining room, I ate with former U.S. congressman from Georgia Bob Barr, and his wife Jeri. I’d moved to an area of Atlanta, which Bob had represented when I’d taken over the fledgling ASSC in 1991, and he’d become one of my strongest supporters. Bob Barr was also known in the media as “the NRA’s representative” in Congress because of his dependable position as a pro-gun advocate. After his defeat in the 2002 congressional elections, Bob continued to easily win election to the NRA’s board of directors. The NRA still valued him highly as an adviser because he had fashioned the House campaign to defeat the extension of the 1994 assault weapons ban when it came up for renewal in 2004. When the NRA members saw that “traitor” Richard Feldman hobnobbing over a fine Merlot with Bob Barr and conferring with Robert Glock—a rising star in the firearm industry—the knickers of more than a few members of the NRA “Official Family” seated around the tastefully decorated restaurant must have twisted.

I glanced at a big table in the corner where several high-ranking NRA women were seated. There was Marion Hammer, immediate past president, seated next to Mary Corrigan, executive assistant to Wayne LaPierre. When their dinner broke up, Mary and several of the women filed silently past our table, avoiding eye contact with me.

But Marion was obliged to pay her respects to the Barrs. She was friendly to them and to Robert Glock but cool and formal to me when she reluctantly shook my hand. The NRA's orthodox canon still prevailed. I had been excommunicated and had become virtually a nonperson in the eyes of the faithful.

After dinner, I noticed Roy Innis, the prominent civil rights leader and chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality, eating alone at a small table. He was the only black person seated in the room; the other African Americans were waiters and busboys. In his late sixties, Roy was fit and vigorous, his neatly trimmed beard and lively, intense eyes gave him the appearance of a charismatic southern preacher or a senior African official in some alphabet soup UN agency. Roy was a longtime NRA board member and the chairman of the Urban Affairs Committee. He and I had worked hand-in-hand in 1985 during the media firestorm that erupted after Bernard Goetz (the "Subway Vigilante") shot four black teenagers who were attempting to mug him on a New York City subway. The fact that Roy was a pillar of the civil rights struggle, and yet was a pro-gun Libertarian and a defender of Goetz, confused a lot of liberal talking heads and TV producers who preferred to categorize people by inflexible simplistic formulas.

"Richie Feldman," Roy proclaimed in his rich baritone voice. "Sit yourself down here and have a glass of this nice wine."

Roy was genuinely pleased to see me, and that went a long way toward smoothing any feathers ruffled by a Kayne Robinson or a Marion Hammer. After Roy filled my glass, he fixed me with his prophet's gaze. "It's *so* good to have you back. You know, with all the work you've done in cities, I really want to have you on my committee."

Obviously, Roy assumed that I was about to don the official cloth of the NRA again. He had no way of knowing I was down here as a consultant and squire to Robert Glock.

"Roy," I said, lifting my open hand. "I'm not really interested in getting back into the NRA's official family. There's just too much bad blood between the senior people and me. It would never work."

Despite his Old Testament persona, Roy Innis possessed an astute and practical political mind. He nodded gravely. "You're right, Richie. But that's a real shame."

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The next day I joined Robert Glock and Chris Edwards in the vast Exhibit Hall of the Convention Center. More than thirteen hundred large corporate pavilions and small booths filled the area. They ranged in size from the wide-open, multimedia displays of major international gun makers such as Beretta U.S.A., Colt's, and Heckler & Koch, all the way down to the inexpensive, narrow cubbyholes for niche advocacy groups and niche marketers. Alongside such renowned manufacturers as Remington and Browning were groups like the Fifty Caliber Shooters Policy Institute, which promoted the ownership of large-caliber, military-style weapons. Next to them, specialized merchants like the Concealment Shop, of Mesquite, Texas, hawked customized purses, vests, and belts to carry hidden handguns.

The Glock exhibit was large and centrally located, staffed by employees in neat black polo shirts with the company logo. As we made our way down the crowded aisles, I greeted industry acquaintances who had been my members and clientele for ten years in the ASSC. They were all glad to see me and pleased to meet Robert Glock. The Glock semiautomatic handgun with its trademark dull black polymer grip and frame was rapidly capturing a huge share of the lucrative American law-enforcement market. In fact, 80 percent of police departments that made the transition from revolvers to semiautomatics chose Glock. Cops loved Glock pistols because they were completely reliable, available in a variety of calibers such as 10 mm and .45, and possessed a unique internal safety system that allowed the shooter simply to raise the weapon and squeeze the trigger to fire. In street gunfights over the years, too many officers had been killed or wounded as they fumbled to release the external safety of their weapon. In the world of guns as throughout industry, success based on a quality product bred respect. And Glock was respected.

As we wove our way among the displays of handguns, rifles, and shotguns, I explained again to Robert that this was a "tire-kicker" event. Companies large and small showcased their products for industry colleagues and NRA members, as well as for the thousands of wannabe "gunnies" who couldn't afford to buy very many but just liked to hoist a collector's edition of a World War II M-1 Garand rifle or a long-barreled .44 magnum ("C'mon, make my day") Dirty Harry revolver. No guns or accessories were sold at the NRA

convention. The exhibitors took no orders. Company prestige and pride were the commodities of trade here.

I followed Robert's lead and wore my best dark, conservatively tailored chalk-striped power suit. I had also defiantly displayed on my left lapel the distinctive burgundy-and-gold NRA endowment member pin. This was a statement: I had not abandoned the association; it had turned its back on me. As we walked the floor, I noted that the visitors we passed differed in subtle ways from the people I had seen at my last convention four years earlier. There were the expected clutches of fellow "suits," firearms industry executives, members of the NRA official family, and ubiquitous consultants—many of them attorneys like me. Then there were large numbers of white middle-class NRA members tastefully but casually dressed, a few wearing polo shirts with the embroidered logos of hunting or gun clubs.

What I did *not* observe were the bunches of walking bumper stickers in provocative T-shirts emblazoned with defiant slogans such as, "From My Cold, Dead Hands" made famous by NRA president Charlton Heston. In years past, inflammatory T-shirts pushing Second Amendment rights to extremes had been much more in evidence. Nor were there many of the often shifty-eyed "camo people" who represented the paranoid world of the militia movement. There'd been a period in the mid-1990s when longtime uncompromising zealot "Toxic Tanya" Metaksa—who at the time was the executive director of the ILA—had reportedly courted the militias in their dubious battle against the New World Order. But Oklahoma City had changed all that. Like all successful power lobbies, the NRA bent in the political wind: and now, the putative warriors of the militias were no longer welcome in the NRA.

But there were still a few bubbas strolling the exhibits, clutching their plastic bags of freebies to their hefty bellies. I was always amazed that there were actual humans inside those mounds of adipose tissue. The media, of course, invariably zeroed in on the camo (camouflage) people and the bubbas to get B-roll footage for the six o'clock news. But that was just professional laziness. These outlandish characters had never been truly representative of the NRA membership. A clean-shaven Wal-Mart assistant manager from Akron or a well-dressed dentist from Sacramento did not provide such archetypical good visuals or reinforce stereotypes.

As we moved through the crowds, I recognized once again that the media analysis of the National Rifle Association invariably missed the mark—to the cynical glee of the NRA’s leaders. They thrived on unfair treatment from the “liberal antigun” establishment media, which provided invaluable fodder for the fund-raising drives in support of the NRA’s semiannual crisis du jour.

The fact was that an interest in and an attachment to guns were definitely not extremist in American society. There were more than 200 million privately owned firearms in the United States. People continued to buy rifles, shotguns, and an ever-increasing number of handguns (the tidal wave of fear generated by 9/11 caused a huge spike in pistol sales, which has only recently subsided). For the millions of law-abiding Americans, the constitutional right to own a gun was a vital facet of citizenship.

But, preoccupied with the demands of contemporary life, people like those mingling among the exhibits did not have the energy to follow the shifts and nuances of complex gun policy at the local, state, and national level. Just as they trusted the National Cancer Institute to invest wisely in productive research, they believed that the professionals of the NRA worked diligently to protect their interests as gun owners.

As LaPierre’s predecessor, Warren Cassidy had acknowledged this belief was akin to religious faith. And as I strolled past the displays of six-shooters and lever-action rifles at the Wild West Guns booth and the replica Civil War muskets at the Dixie Gun Works, I realized once again that an NRA national convention was more like a pilgrimage than a trade show.

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The next afternoon, Chris Edwards met with the chief of Governor Jeb Bush’s security detail to discuss the recent Florida Department of Law Enforcement’s transition to Glock handguns. Chris had helped outfit the governor’s bodyguards with weapons specialized for their particular requirements, and suggested that Robert Glock would like to meet Jeb Bush before the annual members’ banquet, where the governor was to be the keynote speaker.

“The governor would be very pleased to meet Mr. Glock,” the state police captain said.

It was arranged that Robert would pay his respects and have a picture taken with Governor Bush—a standard political grin-and-grip—at the exclusive VIP reception before the banquet.

Robert invited me along as part of the company delegation. Walking across the street from the Peabody to meet him and Chris in the convention center, I ran into Maryann Carter, the widow of Harlon Carter, the father of the modern NRA. He had undoubtedly been the single most influential modern NRA leader. In the 1970s, Harlon had decisively completed the transformation of the association from a confederation of sportsmen and gun buffs into the disciplined political juggernaut it is today. He had been my mentor when I’d gone to work as a young NRA political operative in 1984. Beyond our professional relationship, Harlon, Maryann, and I had become close friends. Now Maryann Carter was the undisputed grande dame of the National Rifle Association. So a lot of heads were turned as we strolled, arm-in-arm, into the convention center.

My renewed confidence wavered, however, when I met Robert and Chris outside the door of the small VIP reception room. This was the *sanctum sanctorum*, the Holy of Holies, of the NRA. Inside were all the people who had made my life hell for the past four years. I really did not want to confront them close up and personal.

“Look,” I said to Robert, “why don’t you and Chris go in, and I’ll just meet you later. I’m too recognizable. I don’t want to cause a scene.”

Robert gripped my shoulder. “No, no, Richard. You come in. You’re part of the team.”

At that point, the tall, rugged, state police captain, who looked typecast for the role, came out smiling and shook Robert’s hand. “This way, sir. The governor is looking forward to seeing you.”

I walked to the right of Robert and Chris. As soon as I entered the reception room, I saw Wayne LaPierre and his wife, Susan, holding court at one end of the white-draped refreshment table. Although the room was small, the lighting was subdued and I couldn’t tell from the doorway whether Susan was wearing one of her designer dresses that had increasingly become her trademark. Her haute couture had

caused a stifled groundswell of discontent among the traditional conservative higher-ups in the official family. It was one thing to make a killing in a nonprofit, membership-funded organization. But it was another thing altogether to flaunt it.

Glancing toward Wayne, who looked like a sleek, well-tailored, and complacent CEO—which of course he was—I wondered what the reaction would be among the Texas oil-patch roughnecks, Oregon Wal-Mart employees, and New Jersey truckers if they learned how much he earned. Would they keep sending their hard-earned thirty or forty bucks every time they received another a fund-raising letter with Wayne's computer-affixed signature pleading for donations to quell some dire crisis if they knew that he was among the highest paid leaders of any tax-exempt organization? His official annual compensation package totaled *only* about \$900,000, but he purportedly received lucrative royalties on the NRA's bestsellers allegedly ghost-written by the NRA's public relations department. And Susan was a well-compensated association consultant.

I was just sizing up Governor Bush's entourage at the other end of the refreshment table when a woman's strident voice cut through the cocktail murmur.

"*He's not allowed in here!*" It was Andra Fischer, Wayne's private office manager and general factotum. Among her responsibilities was ensuring that these ceremonial events ran smoothly, which meant excluding gate-crashers like me. Especially like me. Glaring first in my direction, then at the state police captain, Andra added in the same raspy tone, "This is an *NRA* reception."

The chief of the security detail leaned down, frowning at her, and then nodded at the Glock party. "These people are here at the governor's request. He wants to meet them."

Now, everyone in the small room could hear what was going on, but wouldn't acknowledge the indecorous confrontation. Andra stood her ground, quivering with outrage. "Well, he's not allowed to be here. Richard Feldman can't stay. This is a private reception."

State police captains who command governors' security units are not used to following the orders of civilians. "Look, lady," he said bluntly. "You can take that up with the governor. I'm escorting these people to meet him."

Andra stepped aside but glared at me. It was impossible for the small group of VIP guests not to have heard every word of this unpleasantness.

As Robert and Chris followed the captain to shake hands with Governor Bush, I hung back, not wanting to cause any more trouble than I already had. But in the glare of the photo strobes, I scanned the tense faces of the NRA's hierarchy. Not so many years before, I had been their valued colleague and trusted ally. I had contributed to several of the association's notable public relations and legislative successes. Now I was a pariah. As I stood there, isolated on the thick blue carpet, my mind cast back to the long, improbable train of events that had brought me here.