

Les AuCoin

Confessions of a Former NRA Supporter

For 16 years in Congress, I have been a 100 percenter in eyes of the National Rifle Association leadership. For the past two decades, the entire Oregon House delegation, regardless of party, has voted with the NRA right down the line. For a long time, it seemed like the right thing to do.

It doesn't any more.

But out west, politicians are still expected to support NRA leadership. The conventional wisdom still is: If you cross the gun lobby, they'll have a silver bullet waiting for you at the next election.

I'm betting that those days are over.

I will vote for the Brady Bill—the seven-day waiting period for persons wanting to buy handguns—and for restrictions on the sale and domestic manufacture of assault weapons.

Don't misunderstand: The NRA has a strong presence throughout my state. Oregon probably has a lot more pickups with gun racks than Volvos with ski racks. A landmark I'll never forget in Newberg, Ore., was a gun store named "Toys for Big Boys." The NRA in Oregon is 62,000 members strong, and there are about 150 gun clubs in the state.

I used to tell myself that gun control isn't crime control and—comforted by that thought—I let my 100 percent NRA rating keep arguments about guns from consuming the time I felt I needed for the issues I came to Congress to advance: jobs, education, family security and social justice.

What has been happening in our streets has changed my mind dramatically. Handguns alone have killed about 50,000 people in the United States since the Brady Bill was last considered by Congress. Oregonians in "safe" neighborhoods face gun violence unthinkable when I was first elected to Congress in 1974. Youth gangs with bulging arsenals cruise up and down Interstate 5 on the West Coast to ply their drug trade in our cities. Just a few weeks ago, a gang knocked

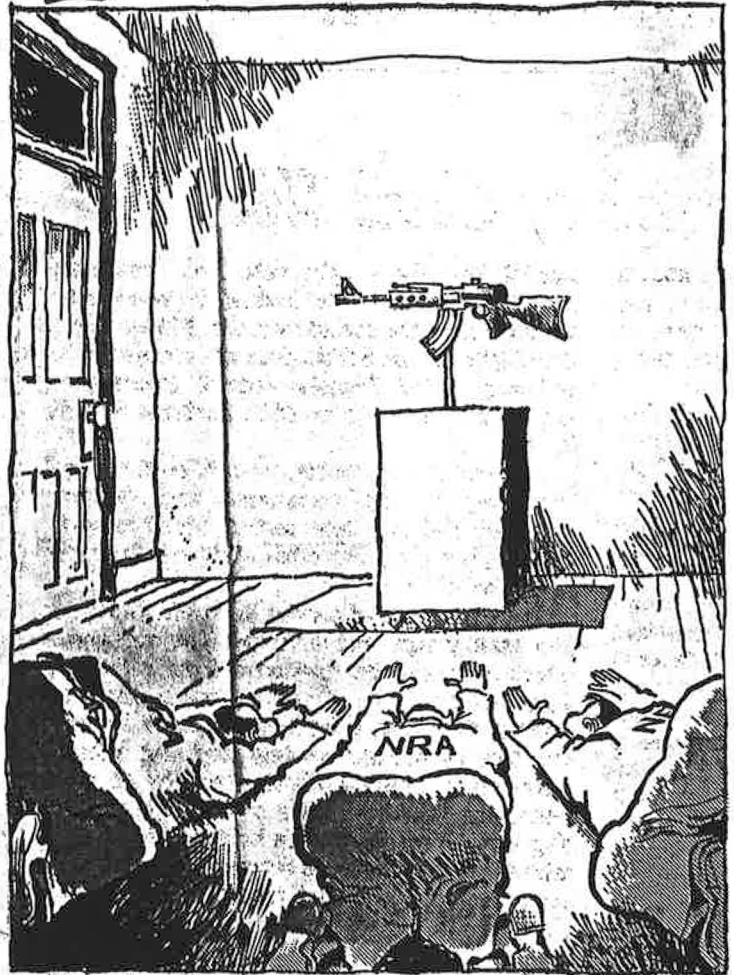
over a gun shop in rural Hood River to steal sophisticated firearms, including assault weapons, apparently intended for sale on the black market. One youth was shot to death during the crime.

The '80s shattered Oregonians' dearly held image of their state as an island in a sea of national crime and violence. When a gunman with a long criminal history blew away five children in a Stockton, Calif., schoolyard two years ago, Oregonians were appalled to discover he'd bought his assault rifle in Sandy, Ore. Even Oregon gun lobbyists privately conceded our state's problems with criminal and negligent use of firearms.

As crime got worse, I discovered what an ideological straitjacket that NRA seal of approval can be. If New Jersey's mandatory background check for handgun purchases has caught 10,000 convicted felons trying to buy handguns, how could I honestly tell myself that gun control isn't crime control? If, as the nation just learned last week, more teenage boys now die from gunshot wounds than from all natural causes combined, how could I continue to separate neatly the increasing carnage in communities from "my issues" of jobs, education, social justice and family security?

I couldn't. A couple of years ago, after listening to my own anti-gun-control spiel one time too many, I realized how threadbare it sounded. I started paying closer attention to the arguments on both sides of the Brady Bill and assault weapon curbs. I lent an ear to some unexpected gun control advocates: a janitor who accosted me angrily after a teachers' meeting in Beaverton; Newberg's police chief, who is also an NRA member; and my own wife, who grew up—as I did—in rural Redmond, where some are fond of saying you learn to shoot before you learn to read.

I used to think I listened; now I've heard. What I've heard convinces me that the conventional wisdom about the NRA's clout is hopelessly out of



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touch—and that the leaders of the NRA are out of touch too. Most of the people I represent are now more concerned about gun violence than they are about whatever inconvenience may be caused by a seven-day waiting period, which can prevent felons, drug addicts and the mentally disturbed from buying handguns. The Brady bill and assault weapon curbs aren't panaceas for crime, but evidence at the state level shows they will help.

My constituents want policies that reduce violent crime, regardless of whether they are labeled "gun con-

trol." The gun lobby guarantees its political irrelevance by denying that. By opposing moderate measures like the Brady Bill—which public opinion research shows 87 percent of gun owners favor—the leadership of the NRA has made its congressional supporters patsies in a game of lethal consequences.

This time, the gun lobby has overplayed its hand: Frankly, I'm sick of it, and I'm sick of gun violence. After too long at the table, I'm ready to do what I can to bust up the game.

The writer is a Democratic representative from Oregon.