

Republicans Refuse To Dance With Who Brung 'Em

June 14, 1988

Never before has such a major political force, one directly responsible for the election of the last two presidents and countless lower positions, been so openly and determinedly kissed off by its beneficiaries.

The Republican Party will rue the day President George Bush, former President Ronald Reagan, California Gov. George Deukmejian and such conservative stalwarts as Barry Goldwater supported banning firearms as a supposed means of controlling criminal behavior. The anti-gun wing of the Democratic Party is as ecstatic as the pro-gun wing of the Republican Party is stunned.

Every political observer in California agreed that Deukmejian, who just signed the primarily Democratic "assault weapon" ban, was elected solely because of the spillover of opposition from gun owners to the Proposition 15 handgun ban.

However, since both President Reagan and President Bush rode into the White House on Electoral College landslides, it may sound ridiculous to contend they also were elected by gun owners. In fact, with just a 3 percent vote switch in key states, Mike Dukakis—not George Bush—would have been in the White House.

Shortly after President Reagan was elected, his pollster Richard Wirthlin, was sitting next to me at a political dinner, and commented to an industry representative that the campaign had mailed "a million pieces" in the last month.

I told him "Big deal, Dick," and outlined the efforts of the NRA Institute, of which I was then Executive Director: In the last month of

the campaign, NRA mailed almost two million magazines with a full-page editorial blasting President Jimmy Carter and another full-page editorial endorsing Ronald Reagan; further, that NRA-ILA mailed another 1.8 million letters to individual members containing the same political endorsement in the Presidential race, and endorsements or ratings in all Federal and some state and local races; finally, that in the last week of the campaign we sent NRA members “get to the polls” postcards in 18 states which were considered “too close to call”—all of which Reagan carried.

That massive effort was coupled with heavy contributions by volunteer phone banks, canvassing and other political efforts at the grass roots for state and federal candidates, and direct contributions to Federal candidates by the NRA Political Victory Fund plus “independent expenditures”—full-blown campaigns not coordinated with the Reagan campaign—in the key states of Texas and Pennsylvania.

Wirthlin was stunned by the immensity of our efforts, and told me that in Pennsylvania his “exit polls”—where voters are asked immediately after they’ve voted who they supported and why—showed that six percent of Pennsylvanians voted for Reagan primarily to protect their guns. Our efforts clearly carried Pennsylvania, for Reagan won by less than one percent.

More than anyone else outside NRA, Dick Wirthlin knew the potential of the “gun issue” as a potent political force, for a never-publicized poll done by his firm for NRA-ILA in 1978 showed that in a “worst case” situation, a candidate’s position for personal firearms ownership resulted in a net four percent gain—which is enough to swing the outcome of most elections. (Voters were asked what issue was most important to them, then asked whether they would vote for a candidate who agreed with them on that issue, but disagreed with them on the gun issue.)

Knowing what the impact would be, we at NRA-ILA did for Ronald Reagan in 1980 what the teachers’ union, the National Education Association, had done on behalf of Jimmy Carter in 1976. In appreciation, Jimmy Carter created the cabinet-level Department of Education for which NEA had long yearned; the Reagan Administration showed its appreciation to NRA by slapping gun owners in the face.

NRA-ILA made only one major request of the Reagan Administration: the appointment of a well-qualified attorney to the post of Assistant Treasury Secretary over the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. That request was pointedly ignored; the job went to a cousin of Vice President George Bush, and there was little change from what the retired “dean of Treasury law enforcement” Mike Acree had testified in 1979 Senate hearings was a “rogue agency.”

The most important thing done for gun owners during the Reagan Administration was when President Reagan personally shut off the demands, from both sides of the political spectrum, for additional gun laws while he was still hospitalized from John Hinckley's bullet wound.

That summer, President Reagan's Attorney General, William French Smith, appointed "Liberal" Illinois Governor James Thompson and Jimmy Carter's Attorney General Griffin Bell as co-chairmen of a "Task Force on Crime" which—after denying NRA an opportunity to testify—recommended a "waiting period" and criminal background investigation upon handgun buyers.

Rudolph Giuliani, then the head of the Justice Department's criminal enforcement, now a candidate for New York City mayor with an anti-gun platform, was asked if the Task Force's recommendation wasn't a reversal of the Reagan Administration's "gun control" position. "Why, no," Giuliani said, "We're opposed to 'gun control' but a waiting period isn't 'gun control.' Oh, really?"

On December 7, 1981—40 years to the day after the Japanese launched their attack upon Pearl Harbor—the Reagan Administration launched an attack upon the McClure-Volkmer bill to reform the Gun Control Act of 1968. It came during a meeting at the White House with Treasury and Justice officials, NRA and the principal sponsors of the bill, Sen. James McClure (R-ID) and Rep. Harold Volkmer (D-MO).

At the beginning of that meeting, called to discuss "certain changes," I asked what there was to discuss, since candidate Ronald Reagan had specifically endorsed that bill, by name and by intent, in letters to each of the firearms organizations and in an article in *Guns & Ammo* magazine. The White House/Justice spokesman replied that "in the hurly-burly of the campaign it sometimes happens that promises are made that cannot be kept."

According to the *Washington Post*, my firing from NRA-ILA four months later was due to a conflict with Presidential Counselor, later Attorney General, Ed Meese. That may have been at least partially true, for I was insistent that the Reagan Administration, and the majority of the House and Senate which had sponsored McClure-Volkmer, live up to the campaign promises that had resulted in our massive political support in the 1980 campaign.

In any event, in 1983 my successor at NRA endorsed a gutting of McClure-Volkmer, which was further watered down—and amended before its 1986 passage by the addition of an outright ban on tightly regulated new machine guns (which have never been used in violent crimes).

At the beginning of the 1988 Presidential campaign, I wrote an assessment of the candidates in which I said that George Bush, who had lost a

Texas Senate race because of his vote for the 1968 Gun Control Act, was nervously respectful of gun owners. It didn't take long for Candidate Bush to prove me wrong; at the Gun Owners of New Hampshire meeting shortly before that state's key primary he waved around a tiny, stainless steel Freedom Arms .22 revolver and called for it to be restricted because it couldn't be detected by airport security devices.

The Manchester Union-Leader proved Bush wrong the following day, and the next day he apologized to Sen. McClure, who had been embarrassed because his letter of endorsement for Bush had been handed out immediately after the Vice President called for a gun ban.

Editor's Note

"We have two political parties in this country, the Stupid Party and the Evil Party. I belong to the Stupid Party."

Senator Alan Simpson

George Herbert Walker Bush, who bought an NRA Life Membership and so made the cover of *The American Rifleman*, would further betray gun owners when he banned importation of a list of semi-auto rifles. He arguably lost his run for a second term when gun owners marked their ballots for Perot or simply went hunting on election day. To this day it seems the Republicans are determined to prove the senator correct.

An Embarrassing Court

July 10, 1992

An abundance of constitutional research in recent years makes it clear that the Founding Fathers considered the right to keep and bears arms a fundamental individual right, not just for protection of the nation, but for protection of self, family and property.

Most recently, in "The Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment," (*Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 101, April 1992, pp. 1193-1284) Yale Law Prof.