



## **From "Operation Wetback" to Newtown: Tracing the Hick Fascism of the NRA**

By Mark Ames – 12/17/12

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LAS VEGAS, NV: I've been writing about these rampage murders for about a decade now, but Friday's rampage massacre was Different. So I'm going to approach this piece somewhat Differently than I usually do — I'm going to look at what's most obvious.

For one thing, this massacre had pathos, and I've never really dealt with pathos like this in all my years researching and writing about these rampage killings. I'm used to digging into a story that has no pathos, and finding it where no one bothers looking, usually hidden in all the obvious places.

But there's no point in being clever here. The slaughter of so many little children means approaching this from a more "obvious" angle.

Also, this isn't the sort of rampage massacre I studied for "Going Postal," my book that examined workplace massacres in which employees massacre supervisors and/or coworkers, and "middle America" school shootings where middle-class students attack their schools and fellow students.

Until relatively recently, those types of mass-murder were freakishly rare in America; they only appeared at the end of the Reagan Era. First they happened in the workplace, concurrent with the destruction of labor unions and the transfer of wealth and workplace power into few hands. Then, by the late 1990s, the

workplace massacres had seeped down into the employees' children's schoolyards.

The dead Newtown killer, Adam Lanza, wasn't a student at the school he shot up, nor did he work there. He apparently suffered from mental illness — no shit he did -- and his mother was reportedly a gun enthusiast, a "prepper" who stored up weapons for the end of the world.

There've been other massacres like Newtown in the past — where the killer has no direct relationship or grievance to the victims or the site of the shooting, a lone and severely mentally ill adult for some reason chooses to massacre school children in their school. They're rare and often spectacular. It happened in Stockton in 1989, leading to California's assault weapons ban; it happened in Britain in '96, leading to a total handgun ban; it happens in China more and more lately, the adult attacker always uses a knife rather than a gun, meaning lower to nil death counts, and astronomical numbers of wounded.

Until now, I have largely avoided getting dragged down into the gun control debate, in part because gun proliferation doesn't explain why "going postal" first exploded into the culture in the late 1980s, and has worked its way into the American DNA ever since. Gun control or lack thereof doesn't explain why these kinds of rampage shootings only appeared in the late Reagan era and spread ever since then. And there must have been my own personal prejudices too — I grew up with guns, and despite a couple of bad episodes involving guns and a drunken violent stepfather, I have a reflexive contempt for people who haven't gone shooting and tell you that gun control laws are the answer.

Well, guess what? Their knee-jerk solution is more right than mine.

Passing gun restrictions today probably wouldn't do much to slow down rampage massacres, at least not for awhile — but the politics of sweeping gun control laws

could have a huge transformative effect over time. It's no longer impossible for me to ignore that fact.

Which means it's also no longer possible for me to ignore the National Rifle Association, and its hick fascism politics that've been poisoning our culture ever since the NRA's infamous "coup" in 1977, when the NRA was taken over by far-right fanatics led by a convicted murderer and onetime US Border Guards chief named Harlon Carter — whose previous claim to fame was when he led a massive crackdown on Mexican immigrant laborers called "Operation Wetback." That's not a typo by the way.

Two decades before Harlon Carter led "Operation Wetback" he was convicted of murdering a 15-year-old Mexican American boy, sentenced to a three-year prison term (Harlon was under-age himself), before being inexplicably acquitted of all charges and allowed to walk free as if it had never happened. It probably didn't hurt that Harlon Carter's daddy was himself a ranking Border Guards official, and that his fate was in the hands of the Texas "justice" system.

Also, his victim was Mexican-American.

Two decades after murdering a Mexican-American boy and getting off scot-free, here is how the official Mormon newspaper, the Deseret News, described Harlon's "Operation Wetback" scam, in 1954:

#### Border Patrol Hits Wetbacks For Fare Home

McALLEN, TX (UP) — The border patrol is taking "fare" from 11,000 wetbacks it has rounded up in the lower Rio Grande Valley to take them to El Paso — 800 miles away — for deportation.

Most of the wetbacks live on the Mexican side of the lower Rio Grande Valley, only a few miles from where they were rounded up. But the border patrol is taking them 600 miles to deport them and is charging them "fare" for the bus trip.

One farmer told a valley newspaper that border patrolmen took all but \$1 from one wetback who was working on his farm to pay his "fare" for the 600-mile ride to El Paso.

Harlon Carter, chief of the border patrol... said it is coming out of the wages they made in the United States.

A few years before that, Harlon was in the news bragging about how he'd protected America from half a million alleged illegal immigrants at the border, doubling his deportation total year-on-year. Piggybacking on McCarthyism hysteria, Harlon Carter — nicknamed "Bullethead" because of the shape of his head — oversaw a huge expansion of his border force, which he said was necessary to keep out "subversives" and "undesirables...inimicable' [sic] to the best interests of the country" — singling out "Southern Europeans" in particular, meaning presumably Italians. Like his fellow Texan Vance Muse, it seems Harlan Cater didn't like Catholics much.

It wasn't until 1981 that a Texas journalist found the records of NRA chief Harlon Carter's murder conviction. By then of course that information wasn't worth much except maybe to confirm that yet another violent hick fascist was in charge of a right-wing pillar in the Reagan Revolution, but there was no way to stop it now.

The thing is, Harlon Carter didn't seem possible if you were awake at all in 1979-80. Most people assumed his type had been driven into extinction, that Harlon Carters only existed in Hollywood caricatures or black-and-white reels from pre-1967... but as Dr. Dolan once put it, "The Coelacanth lives." Without any irony, the convicted murder-turned-NRA chief announced,

"You don't stop crime by attacking guns -- you stop crime by stopping criminals."

When Harlon Carter seized control of the NRA in 1977 from the more moderate leader, a Mormon named Maxwell Rich, it wasn't so obvious that these resurrected Coelocanth monsters were anything more than a grotesque yet

passing curiosity, a stark reminder of how rancid America might've been without the cultural revolutions of the 60s and 70s. Little did they know.

An article I found by Watergate investigative reporter Jack Anderson in 1978 gives a sense of the weirdness and dark foreboding right after Harlon Carter took control of the NRA. It's about the takeover by Harlon's "extremists" after the NRA split over whether or not to support a widely popular bill banning the "Saturday Night Special" handgun used in so many violent crimes. The NRA chief whom Harlon Carter overthrew publicly supported the Saturday Night Special handgun ban, telling the Senate in 1972, "On the Saturday Night Special, we are for it [banning] 100 percent. We would like to get rid of these guns."

The NRA nearly imploded in civil war over the leadership's support for the handgun ban. Harlon's fanatics saw it as treason; today's restrictions on Saturday Night Special handguns were tomorrow's Stalinist GULAG camps and the genocide of all gun-owning American patriots.

What the establishment didn't get about Harlon's new souped-up NRA gun-cult until too late — in fact what most still don't get — is that the more batshit disconnected from demonstrable reality your message is, the more fanatical and organized-for-war your organization will be. If you can get people to make that leap of faith —well, then you've got real power. Reagan understood that sort of power well: Pandering to the far-right John Birch Society cult won him California's governor's seat in 1966, and in 1980, he promised to implement Harlon Carter's radical pro-gun agenda as soon as he took office. Unfortunately that pro-gun push got delayed by an assassination attempt on Reagan's life, but nearly bleeding to death didn't change Reagan's mind (or what passed for Reagan's mind).

A speech Harlon Carter gave to the NRA as Reagan lay wounded captures the horribleness of these early Reagan Revolution arachnids, who had no more love for each other than they did for any other living creature on this planet:

"You know, sadly, why President Reagan isn't here. But you heard President Reagan himself advocate no restriction on those who commit no crimes. . . . [He] rejected the maudlin enticements of the press to say something in favor of gun control while he lay wounded by one little man's bullet."

As soon as Reagan could walk again, he pushed the NRA's agenda, first by moving to abolish the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the agency that enforces federal gun laws — and then turning around and rescuing the ATF from extinction after Harlon Carter got word that gun enforcement powers would transfer to the Secret Service. Reagan signed a bill in 1986 rolling back earlier gun regulations passed after JFK's assassination, such as banning mail-order weapons purchases after it was learned Lee Harvey Oswald bought his sniper rifle through a mail-order ad in the NRA's in-house magazine, "American Rifleman." Thanks to Reagan and the NRA, Oswald's liberties were posthumously restored.

The cult strategy worked: Membership soared into the millions, and the NRA's budget swelled to one of the largest budgets in DC outside of the federal government.

But the downside to starting a fanatical cult is the risk that you'll be denounced by your own fanatics — which is exactly what happened to Carter, who was soon denounced as a sellout for suggesting that being respectable had its merits too. Next thing Harlon Carter knew, he was forced into early retirement, and the real Harlon Carter was replaced by a mythologized Harlon Carter for the fanatics to worship, a Harlon Carter who never wavered.

The formula is simple: The more batshit malevolent the gun cult gets, the more power they exert. Just ignore the periodic squeals from the rest of the country, and keep pushing the batshit envelope.

Nothing proved this awesome power of gun cult batshittery more than the controversy in the mid-90s, when ex-President George H. W. Bush resigned from the NRA and published a letter attacking the group, in language that you can tell wants to be scathing, and would've scathed if Bush had allowed an editor to do a once-over, yet still manages to scathe if only because it captures a normally-careful politician in moment of genuine emotional outrage:

May 3, 1995

Dear Mr. Washington,

I was outraged when, even in the wake of the Oklahoma City tragedy, Mr. Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of N.R.A., defended his attack on federal agents as "jack-booted thugs." To attack Secret Service agents or A.T.F. people or any government law enforcement people as "wearing Nazi bucket helmets and black storm trooper uniforms" wanting to "attack law abiding citizens" is a vicious slander on good people.

Al Whicher, who served on my [ United States Secret Service ] detail when I was Vice President and President, was killed in Oklahoma City. He was no Nazi. He was a kind man, a loving parent, a man dedicated to serving his country -- and serve it well he did.

In 1993, I attended the wake for A.T.F. agent Steve Willis, another dedicated officer who did his duty. I can assure you that this honorable man, killed by weird cultists, was no Nazi.

John Magaw, who used to head the U.S.S.S. and now heads A.T.F., is one of the most principled, decent men I have ever known. He would be the last to condone the kind of illegal behavior your ugly letter charges. The same is true for the F.B.I.'s able Director Louis Freeh. I appointed Mr. Freeh to the Federal Bench. His integrity and honor are beyond question.

Both John Magaw and Judge Freeh were in office when I was President. They both now serve in the current administration. They both have badges. Neither of them would ever give the government's "go ahead to harass, intimidate, even murder law abiding citizens." (Your words)

I am a gun owner and an avid hunter. Over the years I have agreed with most of N.R.A.'s objectives, particularly your educational and training efforts, and your fundamental stance in favor of owning guns.

However, your broadside against Federal agents deeply offends my own sense of decency and honor; and it offends my concept of service to country. It indirectly slanders a wide array of government law enforcement officials, who are out there, day and night, laying their lives on the line for all of us.

You have not repudiated Mr. LaPierre's unwarranted attack. Therefore, I resign as a Life Member of N.R.A., said resignation to be effective upon your receipt of this letter. Please remove my name from your membership list.

Sincerely,

[ signed ] George Bush

Scathing or not, it didn't work. A few years later, the NRA was openly bragging that it owned George's son, "a president where we work out of their office." And the ex-president's nemesis, Wayne LaPierre, is still running the NRA.

And we're still stuck hand-wringing, still promising to do something "this time" because "this time it's different" — and still asking ourselves, "How many times will we be asking ourselves 'When will this stop?'"

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So what's really going on here? Why the crazy? It's not exactly a revelation to learn that the NRA is run by hick fascist nutjobs, although we quickly forget just



how toxic they are without constant reminding. But each time you peel off a layer, it's more shocking than you expected it be.

But what's the purpose, what are the deeper ideological politics of that sort of gun-cult fanaticism?

Looking back at Big Business' violent reaction against the New Deal and the political culture that it created: a more "collectivist" political culture, as the libertarians derisively call it, where people were more deeply involved with each other and their communities, and with that involvement in their politics and communities came greater trust in their communities. That political culture — where people were more involved in their politics and trusted government more than they trusted business — was a big problem, according to pollsters and PR experts hired by business lobby groups in the postwar era, groups like the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce.

Much better is to pour arms unrestricted into the population, give them legal cover and political encouragement to take political matters into their own hands with laws like "Stand Your Ground". That way you wind up creating a political culture of atomized, fear-fueled citizens who think they're literally at war with each other, and their only way out is to fend for themselves and their family.

One of FDR's first and most powerful opponents in the 30s and 40s was a New York lobbyist and public relations heavyweight named Merwin K. Hart. He was the brains and organizing force behind far-right big business groups like the American Liberty League, the isolationist America First Committee, and the far-right National Economic Council, fighting labor unions and waging nonstop war on democracy, which Merwin Hart equated with Communism. He also served as PR flak for Spain's fascist dictator, publishing a fawning book on Franco in 1939 titled "America, Look At Spain" completely whitewashing the hundreds of thousands of Spaniards his client the Generalissimo had just finished slaughtering.

Robert Jackson — the Nuremberg Trials prosecutor and Supreme Court Justice — singled out Merwin K. Hart as one of America's most dangerous fascists on the eve of World War Two. After the war, Hart became a leading Holocaust denier. He also helped engineer Joe McCarthy's election victory, and helped spearhead relentless attacks on "collectivism" (in which act together in politics and the workplace, rather than "individually" which is how the bosses prefer it), and against democracy, which Hart claimed was an alien Communist idea subverting American liberty. He proposed "that every person who accepted any form of government help should be denied the right to vote." He also called for impeaching the entire Supreme Court, accusing the justices of being "dedicated to socialism."

In place of democracy and "collectivism" and community activism, Merwin K. Hart promoted "individualism" and fear.

And that naturally led Merwin K Hart into promoting the sort of fanatical gun-politics that shocked the public in his time, but today is accepted as part of the mainstream discourse, as if NRA gun-fanaticism was always in the air, rather than a political project with political ends in mind.

In a 1948 newsletter to his followers later read aloud to shocked House committee members, Hart made a "concrete suggestion" to his members, calling on the head of every American home to "possess himself of one or more guns, making sure they are in good condition, that he and other members of his family know how to use them, and that he has a reasonable supply of ammunition."

And just before he died in 1962, Merwin Hart organized fringe gun groups like the Minutemen -- a Southern California gun-cult that claimed to possess hundreds of automatic weapons and had "information" of an impending invasion by Chinese troops massing on the Mexican border. Together, they successfully killed a bill that would require handgun registration. Hart used language too extreme for that era's NRA: "Any congressman or senator who votes for the Anfoso [gun] bill

knowing its real purpose would disqualify himself from ever again expecting to be called an American."

A little over a year later, Kennedy was assassinated. One of the most famous national columnists, muckraker Drew Pearson (Jack Anderson's boss & mentor), blamed Kennedy's murder on gun fanatics like Merwin K. Hart:

#### Hate Lobbies Killed Anfusio Arms Bill

Washington — If hate groups had not pressured Congress against passage of an Arms Registration Act, President Kennedy might still be alive today.

...When Anfusio introduced his Arms Registration Bill there was a storm of criticism from the right wing and a flood of letters to Congress.

Another opponent was Merwin K. Hart, president of the so-called "National Economic Council" and once described by Justice Robert Jackson as well known for his pro-Fascist leanings.

What motive, ulterior or otherwise, the pro-Fascists had in opposing the registering of firearms with the FBI is not known. At any rate, the pressure on Congress was so great that the Anfusio Bill did not pass.

Back then, Merwin K Hart's gun fanaticism was an ugly freakshow popping out of the political margins, but today it part of the landscape, and the only question is how can we get rid of it, rather than what's it doing there in the first place.

Because it's now so deeply ingrained that owning guns is a form of radical subversive politics, the people who still engage in real politics have the pick of the litter. That first became really clear in the depths of the 2008-9 collapse, when a lot of people who thought of themselves as radicals and anarchists made a lot of feckless noise about how they were arming and preparing for the collapse and revolution. They could've gone out and organized something and maybe

built a politics of people power or even a politics of what they call revolution, a politics that actually changed things. But instead, they locked themselves in their homes and apartments with their guns and fancied themselves political revolutionaries just waiting to be swept up. But no one came. No one bothered or cared. And really, why would any plutocrat or evil government agency bother with the suckers, all harmlessly atomized and isolated and thoroughly neutralized by the false sense of political empowerment that their guns gave them, while you do the real work of plundering budgets, bribing politicians and writing laws even more in your favor?

So while everyone was hiding out in their homes armed and ready for Hollywood finales that never came, in the real world political power was concentrating at warp-speed with zero resistance.

From the oligarchy's perspective, the people were thoroughly neutralized by the false sense of political empowerment that guns gave them. Guns don't work in this country — they didn't work for the Black Panthers or the Whiskey Rebellion, and they won't work for you or me either.

It takes years to cultivate a political mindset that voluntarily neutralizes itself by convincing itself that its contribution to world revolution comes down to purchasing a few guns at K-Mart, then blogging about it. That's what reactionary plutocrats like the Koch brothers understood about the deeper politics of gun fanaticism, and why their outfits like the Cato Institute have been at the forefront of overturning gun regulations and promoting "Stand Your Ground" vigilantism as a substitute for political engagement: That by poisoning the political climate, it poisons the minds, which circulates back to the external environment, and back into the minds, until you lock the culture into a pattern in which you always get more and they always get fleeced, which makes them more fanatical and you more powerful...

This is what I missed or ignored about gun control: The longterm view that the Koch brothers and the Scaifes and everyone backing gun-nuttery understood about how gun laws or the absence of those laws can completely transform the surrounding political climate.