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How Bloomberg's Million-Dollar Desire For Gun Control Is Backfiring

By Frank Miniter

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With the midterms just over a month away New York City's former mayor Michael Bloomberg is spending at least \$50 million to make his gun-control agenda part of this election. His gun-control group Everytown for Gun Safety has endorsed more than 100 federal and state candidates. They are also running television commercials, holding events and pushing their studies into the newsrooms of a mostly favorable press.

John Feinblatt, Everytown's president, told USA Today, "We want gun safety to be an issue that people vote on."

John R. Lott, Jr. says he's fine with that statement. He just wants people to know the truth about what really reduces violence before they vote. He says, "I can't find a single study from Bloomberg's groups that aren't loaded with errors. They have an anti-gun agenda and will lie to achieve it."

Before getting to the inside story behind the politics, the piles of money being used to shape public opinion and to how the truth is stubbornly winning the debate despite—or because of—Bloomberg's spin, I'd like to tell you how I first met John R. Lott, Jr. He is an important voice in this debate and this anecdote shows what kind of researcher he is.

In 2006 I was at a cocktail party in Arlington, VA, talking to a liberal journalist about his soon-to-be-released book on Iraq when John Lott joined us. John listened for a moment and then said to the author, "I'm curious. You say you just finished a book on the Iraq war. I always find it so hard to finish a book. I get so deep into the research I have a hard time stopping to write. I'm guessing you had a hard time leaving Iraq. There is so much to investigate and understand."

The author said, "I didn't go to Iraq."

John paused with this quizzical look on his face before asking, "Oh, how did you do your research?"

The author said, “I didn’t have to do much. I mean, I already know what I think.”

They were both so baffled with each other that, after an awkward silence, the liberal author shrugged and moved away.

Lott, of course, entered the national stage in 1998 with his groundbreaking book *More Guns, Less Crime*. The book details his research that found that, despite what people are often told, violent crime rates actually tend to go down when states pass “shall-issue” concealed-carry laws. (Shall-issue laws force a licensing agent to give anyone a concealed-carry permit to carry a handgun as long as the individual passing certain criteria as stipulated by law.)

As soon as the book was published a lot of academics made it their mission to prove Lott to be the fraud they were sure he must be. The thing is, the researchers kept finding that Lott is right.

A study by Carlisle E. Moody and Thomas B. Marvell that was published in *Econ Journal Watch* in January 2009, for example, looked into Lott’s findings and determined: “Many articles have been published finding that shall-issue laws reduce crime. Only one article, by Ayres and Donohue who employ a model that combines a dummy variable with a post-law trend, claims to find that shall-issue laws increase crime. However, the only way that they can produce the result that shall-issue laws increase crime is to confine the span of analysis to five years. We show, using their own estimates, that if they had extended their analysis by one more year, they would have concluded that these laws reduce crime.”

To continue his detailed search for the truth about guns in America Lott founded the Crime Prevention Research Center about a year ago. Lott has held research or teaching positions at the University of Chicago, Yale University, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University and Rice University. He has a Ph.D. in economics from UCLA.

Lott says a few foundations and some individuals donated “a few hundred thousand dollars” to get his foundation started. His nonprofit “has 501(C)(3) status and does not accept donations from gun or ammunition makers or organizations such as the NRA.”

Lott told me, “The NRA and other gun-rights groups are doing a lot of important things, but we decided to fill an influential niche by not taking money from either side.

“Still,” Lott said, “honest research leads to real answers—not the political spin Bloomberg’s groups prefer.” Lott says because of this “the gun-control groups don’t want an honest debate. I’ve challenged Michael Bloomberg’s anti-gun-rights groups [Everytown for Gun Safety and Mayors Against Illegal Guns] to debates many times but they always ignore me.”

I’d found the same thing. While doing the investigative reporting for my book *The Future of the Gun* I spent a lot of time with police officers, gun-rights lobbyists, inner-city gang members, public-health experts, engineers at firearms manufacturers, victims of criminals with guns,

heroes who'd stopped a bad guy with a gun ... but though I tried and tried Bloomberg's group wouldn't even answer an email.

When I told this to Alan Gottlieb, chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms and founder of the Second Amendment Foundation, he said, "If the gun-control groups can't control the messaging they won't even talk to you." Gottlieb knows all about this, as he's been publically asking Bloomberg and others who fund anti-gun-freedom legislation to debate him for years.

The only responses Lott has gotten from Bloomberg's people have been some "snarky Tweets from Shannon Watts," says Lott. Watts is the founder of Moms Demand Action, a campaign funded by Bloomberg's Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund.

Bloomberg's groups might not feel they have to respond because they already have much of the media behind them.

Lott said, "When Bloomberg's group puts out a press release they get huge coverage from the media and little critical analysis of their claims. When we do research that shows Bloomberg's group is blatantly wrong we get coverage from FOX News and some other media, but the networks, CNN, the Washington Post and so on often ignore us. When those mainstream outlets do quote our studies they typically include the views of someone from the gun-control groups. I don't mind that, but why aren't they being as critical of the gun-control groups? Those groups have official ideological agendas."

Meanwhile, the anti-gun groups have found some very wealthy people to fund them. CNN reported that Harvard University's School of Public Health is receiving \$350 million donation to study "gun violence" and other "complex health threats challenging the U.S. and the world" from the Morningside Foundation. The descendants of Hong Kong real estate tycoon T.H. Chan run this foundation. Also, Bloomberg has donated \$350 million to Johns Hopkins University's School of Public Health and, according to the Washington Post, Bloomberg "has committed to spending \$50 million of his personal fortune" to build Everytown for Gun Safety. Meanwhile, the Democracy Alliance, backed by George Soros, is giving millions to a variety of groups that support gun control and other "progressive" causes.

On the pro-gun side most of the money is coming from the grassroots. There are estimated to be 100 million gun owners in America. About 5 million of them are members of the National Rifle Association. Millions more are members of other gun-rights groups and gun clubs. These are the people who fund the NRA and these are the people who vote this issue. Though there are wealthy individuals on the gun-rights side, it's not a stretch to say a few wealthy, out-of-touch billionaires are trying to disarm the people. To accomplish this they have to sway the people to vote away their freedom. This would be democracy at work if it were an honest exchange of ideas leading into another election, but too often the media is simply printing Bloomberg's studies as if they are not from group's with official ideological positions.

Lott said, “Still, the truth does have a way of getting through.”

For example, when anti-gun groups and politicians began saying that 40 percent of gun sales are done without background checks Lott dug into the numbers and found that President Barack Obama got it all wrong when he said, “As many as 40 percent of all gun purchases take place without a background check.”

Lott found that the 40 percent figure comes from a 251-person study covering gun purchases during 1991 to 1994. “Not only is that two decades-old data, but it covered sales before the federal Brady Act that started the National Instant Background Check System took effect on February 28, 1994.”

The many anti-gun groups who used this figure also failed to note that the vast majority of these gun sales involved within-family inheritances and gifts. “And,” Lott said, “That survey also found that all gun-show sales went through federally licensed dealers. If President Obama really trusts the study, he should stop raging about the ‘gun show loophole.’”

In this case the claim was so egregious that Washington Post’s fact checker weighed in and gave Obama and the many anti-gun groups using this 40 percent figure three Pinocchios. The Post cited the problems Lott noted, criticized the loaded wording of the study and a lot more.

Meanwhile, after Bloomberg’s Everytown for Gun Safety put out an info-graphic claiming there had been 74 school shootings since the Sandy Hook massacre in December 2012, Lott and other researchers looked into the claim. They soon found that Everytown inflated the statistic by “including suicides, accidents, incidents related to criminal activity (e.g. – drug dealing or robbery), and incidents that took place outside of school hours or were unconnected to members of any school community,” reported the CATO Institute. For its statistics the CATO Institute relied on numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics’ 2013 “Indicators of School Crime and Safety” report.

There are a lot of other examples showing how often the anti-gun movement misuses and spins data. Lott helped to blow holes in Bloomberg’s groups figures on how many mass killers have mental illnesses; his research has helped to explain how gun control made Chicago’s murder rate skyrocket; and he has shown what the political term “universal background checks” really means.

Lott says, “We’re not just responding to errors and lies propagated by the anti-gun movement; we’re also doing new research to inject truth into this debate. It’s critical that we do. I can’t find a Bloomberg study without a lot of errors. We need to push back with honest research. If we don’t people will believe the trumped-up studies from the anti-gun groups. The result of what could happen then can be seen in places like Chicago.”

As the truth has come out on the statistics and studies being pushed by Bloomberg's groups a lot of mayors have left Bloomberg's groups Mayor's Against Illegal Guns (MAIG). So many, in fact, Bloomberg was compelled to start a new group and pushed MAIG under its umbrella. Bloomberg also lost in Colorado and more recently he failed to unseat Sheriff David Clarke Jr. of Milwaukee County, Wis. In both of those political battles guns were a central issue.

In 2013 gun-control groups outspent gun-rights groups by about 7.4 to 1 on TV advertising. This was largely because of Bloomberg's massive anti-gun war chest. Guns have not been a big issue nationally in this election cycle, but the gun issue is influencing voters in places like Washington State, Colorado, New York and Maryland. These contests will affect the momentum, one way or the other, of how the gun issue affects the next presidential election.