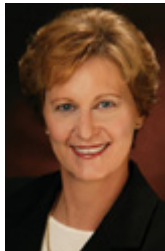


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ON TARGET
SANDY FROMAN



The history of gun control, part 2

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By Sandy Froman

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Until Lyndon Johnson came to the White House in 1963 following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, gun control was simply not a national issue. There were no significant federal gun control laws on the books, and the NRA was a shooter's organization that intentionally shied away from any political involvement.

All of that changed with the 1968 assassinations of Sen. Robert Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King. In the civil unrest that followed, the media found a new whipping boy – America's gun owners. The media blitz against gun rights was unprecedented and became the driving force behind Democrat leaders proposing national gun control.

Although JFK and his brother, Sen. Robert Kennedy, had been NRA Life Members, America's new president, Lyndon Johnson, was a committed gun control advocate. No president ever matched his power and his will when it came to controlling the legislative process. His attorney general and much of his senior staff searched for new ways to restrict gun ownership among the American people. This was part of Johnson's Great Society vision of an all-powerful federal government controlling the lives of ordinary Americans.

(Column continues below)

LBJ also put anti-gun judges on the federal courts at every level. Liberal Thurgood Marshall, an opponent of the Second Amendment, was appointed to the United States Supreme Court. All three branches of the federal government lurched to the left in most policy areas, including firearms.

Keep in mind that up until this time, private ownership of firearms was not in any meaningful way controlled by the federal government. Johnson's administration was the beginning of the federal government superseding state authority in all aspects of people's lives, including ownership and lawful commerce in their private property – in this case, firearms.

The other major factor that created the federal gun control movement was that the NRA, as an organization, was totally unprepared to deal with the media, Lyndon Johnson, or the anti-gun politicians in the U.S. House and Senate. Up until that point, NRA refused even to have a registered lobbyist. In fact, NRA sent mixed signals to the Hill in reference to Johnson's anti-gun legislation.

If NRA had held nominally pro-gun House members' feet to the fire, the 1968 Gun Control Act, or GCA, would not have become law. With no direction from NRA, however, those legislators simply didn't vote. And the worst piece gun control legislation in history was enacted into law.

GCA made many common gun-related commercial activities federal crimes. Suddenly, firearm sales became heavily regulated and restricted. Some supporters of GCA saw it as the first step toward the ultimate goal of ending private gun ownership in the United States. The GCA has served as the basis of virtually every piece of gun control legislation, federal or state, that has been enacted since.

Nothing changed politically for gun owners until former NRA President Harlon Carter, a true visionary and often a lone voice on the NRA board, convinced NRA that gun owners needed a powerful grass-roots lobby focused on saving the Second Amendment.

Following Senate passage of a Saturday Night Special bill, which would have banned one-third of the handgun designs in the United States, Harlon Carter got his way. NRA created the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, or ILA, in 1975.

With the creation of ILA, Carter and his small band of young staffers – talented communicators, lawyers, lobbyists, and grass-roots organizers – turned the battle on its head.

Just months after ILA was created, gun owners celebrated a remarkable victory when ILA helped U.S. Sen. James McClure personally hand Massachusetts anti-gun rights Sen. Edward Kennedy an equally stunning defeat.

Kennedy wanted handgun ammunition banned by the Consumer Product Safety Commission as a "hazardous substance." When it came to a roll call vote, 75 senators – among them a majority of Democrats – voted against Kennedy's gun control scheme. Only 11 senators stood with Kennedy. The dynamic had changed. At last, frustrated gun owners across the country welcomed a real Second Amendment lobby.

With his singular vision of the future, Harlon Carter began recruiting young scholars, writers, researchers and lawyers who fervently believed in the Second Amendment as an individual right. Carter often said that we would see the day when these young men and women would be old and wise and their ideas powerful.

In my next column, I'll talk about what went wrong in the '70s and how grass-roots gun-rights activists worked with NRA to fix it.

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Sandy Froman is immediate past president of the National Rifle Association of America and a longtime member of the NRA board of directors. A practicing attorney in Tucson, Ariz., Froman is an international speaker on the right to keep and bear arms and an advocate for federal judges who will interpret the Constitution according to its original meaning.