

NRA's Membership Takes Aim at Critics

No Apologies as 22,000 Open Convention

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By John Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

PHOENIX, May 19—The spirit of the 22,000 National Rifle Association members who gathered here today for the group's annual convention could perhaps best be described by the hand-scrawled lettering on a sticker on one member's sports shirt: "NRA . . . Not Ready to Apologize."

Characteristically feisty and furious at government intrusion, all the NRA hunters, gun dealers and firearms enthusiasts interviewed here expressed disdain for President Clinton and the anti-handgun lobby. They also strongly support NRA officials, who are under fire

for their harsh denunciations of agents of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms.

"That's why I flew 2,000 miles to come here from Gainesville, Fla., to show faith and support in the NRA," said computer programmer and firearms instructor Jeffrey Dissell. "If anyone has any apologizing to do it's the media, not us."

In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, the 124-year-old gun group may be facing its biggest crisis since the '60s. That's when the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and two Kennedy brothers—as well as news that Lee Harvey Oswald bought his rifle through the

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NRA, From A1

NRA—led to passage of the nation's most comprehensive gun control law, in 1968.

The April 19 bombing brought to light a little understood American subculture of armed militants who fear the federal government wants to take away their guns. While no one believes the NRA was involved in the bombing, its slashing rhetoric has influenced the growth of the citizen militia movement. The two bombing suspects, Timothy James McVeigh and Terry Lynn Nichols, were known to attend militia meetings.

Since the explosion, the NRA has come under attack for using assaults on federal law enforcement in its membership drives and fund-raising

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efforts and in general, contributing to an atmosphere of hate, its critics say. Former Republican president George Bush, a longtime NRA member, recently resigned in protest of what he called its "vicious slander" of law enforcement, and Clinton called Bush to thank him for the move.

Even Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.)—an NRA member and original author of the "jack-booted" phraseology—wrote the NRA to object to the "offensive implication that federal agents are encouraged to commit acts of violence against ordinary citizens . . . this debate divides the nation . . . [and] damages the NRA."

For now, the NRA's leadership is trying to hold its tongue in response to a new Clinton broadside against the group today—his third in two weeks. The president said "anyone who pretends that police officers are the enemy is only giving aid and comfort to criminals."

"I thank the president for his com-

ments . . . but I'm amazed he's still talking about this," said Tanya Metaksa, the head of NRA's lobbying arm, and ordinarily one of its angriest spokesmen.

The group has tried to tone down its rhetoric since Wednesday, when NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre issued a narrow apology. He said that his and other NRA officials' description of "jack-booted thugs" applies only to ATF agents, not to others in law enforcement. "NRA never intended to broad brush all of law enforcement," he said. "If that's the way it's taken, I apologize."

The fact is the NRA's strong language did not start earlier this year with the fund-raising letter containing the "jack-booted" wording. The group has been excoriating ATF for decades, especially since 1991, when a hard-line group led by board member Neal Knox took over.

Since then, it has called federal agents "armed terrorists," "gestapo," "SS" and "intruders" who are "harassing, intimidating and hurting honest citizens," when they raid gun owners' homes and when they keep track of gun sales using agency computers.

Judging by the NRA activists interviewed at its gathering here—milling around the football field-sized convention hall, packed with the offerings of Remington, Smith & Wes-

Paul Hardison, 6, checks out his father's (Mark Hardison, center, aiming weapon) shooting expertise at the air gun shooting range at NRA convention hall.



BY MICHAEL WILLIAMSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

son and other gun manufacturers—the NRA's leadership has read its members well.

"There is a rogue element of jack-booted thugs in ATF," said Dissell, the Gainesville gun instructor. "Political correctness should dictate NRA's words be a little less inflammatory, but what the NRA says is true. . . . I'm proud to be an NRA member."

Dissell said he saw the need for the NRA in 1990, after five college students were murdered in Gainesville, and many residents were panicked because the state's five-day waiting period for buying guns prevented them from arming themselves. During those tense weeks, he said, 2,500 guns were sold in that city.

"The more the left-wing pushes us, the harder we push back," said

Charles Smith, 44, an instrument technician at an Arizona copper mine who is attending the convention. "If anything, the NRA's getting stronger from these attacks where I live. . . . The language the NRA uses is clearly justified."

Smith was wearing an "NRA Patriot" cap and a T-shirt saying, "What Part of 'Infringed' Don't You Understand?" a reference to the Second Amendment's statement that the right to bear arms "shall not be infringed."

Apparently it's not a cause that attracts African Americans. Hardly a single black person was in attendance at the crowded gathering.

The NRA's adversaries are heartened by its political difficulties. "This is one of the most pivotal conventions NRA has ever had," said Richard Aborn, president of Handgun Control Inc., the gun control group. Citing a recent poll that found 42 percent of respondents saying they would be less likely to vote for candi-

dates endorsed by the NRA, Aborn said the group "may be on the verge of marginalization. It's going to get weaker if it continues to delude itself."

"Absurd," said the NRA's Metaksa. She cites the fact that the group has grown by one million members—to 3.4 million in the past five years—and the NRA's key role in helping Republicans win Congress in last fall's elections. Eighty percent of the Congress members it endorsed were elected. Now, 224 of the House's 435 members have an 'A' rating from the NRA.

Its favorite elected official, Sen. Phil Gramm, a Republican presidential candidate, is addressing the group Saturday night.

The NRA also points to recent successes in numerous states—from Arkansas to Utah—in passing laws allowing citizens to carry firearms in public.

But by far its top legislative priority

is repeal of the assault weapons ban, signed into law by Clinton last year.

But GOP congressional leaders have delayed the vote because the Oklahoma bombing could have turned it into a referendum on the NRA that it could lose.

Meanwhile, at the convention, a small group of dissident NRA activists, led by retired Texas engineer Dave Edmondson, appears to be on its way to resounding defeat in its attempts to remove NRA's hard-charging leaders. Edmondson points out that only a tiny fraction of the group's members cast ballots, and adds: "there's a vast scarcity of people willing to take on the NRA like me."

Before the bombing, rumors were rampant that the hard-liners would remove the more moderate president Tom Washington, in part because last summer Washington had reiterated NRA's long-standing rule against associating with armed militias, NRA activists said.

Many militia activists were angry,

and Metaksa in February met with two Michigan militia leaders at a hotel coffee shop in Lansing. "They set up the meeting, and I went because I happened to be in the area," she said. "We were 180 degrees apart, and they left saying they were disappointed."

But Michigan militia spokesman Ken Adams, who was at the meeting, said the NRA, not his group, requested the gathering, and that there was no disagreement.

"Tanya agreed they had a problem with the leadership and Tom Washington and she said he wouldn't be around after the election" at the convention. "Our goals were pretty much the same," he said.

Metaksa said there never was a plan to dislodge Washington, and added that he and other officers will be reconfirmed.

"Getting rid of Washington now," said Edmondson, "would be seen as catering to the militias."