

Favorite Son of a Gun

When Aiming for the White House, Phil Gramm Counts on the NRA

By Charles Lewis

FORMER PRESIDENT George Bush may have resigned from the National Rifle Association, stating that the group's inflammatory rhetoric "deeply offends my own sense of decency and honor." But if Texas Sen. Phil Gramm gets elected president in 1996, it will be the wildlife, not the gun zealots, of America, who will be feeling the heat.

"We haven't had a dedicated, committed hunter in the White House since Theodore Roosevelt," Gramm told 20,000 appreciative members of the National Rifle Association at their national convention in Phoenix last weekend. "I tell you, it's been too long."

No presidential candidate has embraced the NRA more tightly throughout his political career than Phil Gramm. In the past two decades, no elected official has received more money from the NRA than Gramm. Although the NRA has not endorsed anyone for president, its 3.5 million members and organization are important to his presidential hopes in 1996.

Charles Lewis is executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit think tank that studies the role of money in politics. Margaret Ebrahim and Douglas Weber of the center assisted in research.

Gramm has received \$442,035 from the NRA since 1979. By comparison, Bob Dole, the front-runner for the 1996 GOP presidential nomination and supporter of many NRA causes, has received a total of just \$58,074 from the NRA in all of his senatorial and presidential campaigns in the same period.

In February, several NRA leaders, including Wayne LaPierre, the group's executive vice president who wrote (and has apologized for) the "jack booted thug" line, attended a \$1,000-a-plate Dallas fund-raising dinner for Gramm. The event raised \$4.1 million for Gramm's presidential campaign.

In the 1996 Iowa caucuses, Gramm will rely heavily on the NRA's state organization and membership. The chairman of his campaign in Iowa is Kayne Robinson, a duck-hunting buddy and a member of the national executive board of the NRA. In January, Gramm spoke at the annual banquet of the Iowa Sportsmen's Federation, which is affiliated with the NRA. The event was promoted as a casual affair where members could "have fun and talk with our speaker" who was described as "the leading supporter of the Second Amendment in Congress. Gramm is an avid hunter and shooter—in short, one of us."

In New Hampshire, the first presidential primary state, several prominent conservatives and gun activists have lined up behind Gramm, including Al Rubega, the head of Gun Owners of New Hampshire, a group considered even more aggressive on gun issues than the NRA. Former governor Meldrim Thompson, a longtime NRA supporter who writes a column for the state's largest

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newspaper, the Manchester Union Leader, has endorsed Gramm. So has Sen. Robert Smith, another NRA supporter.

Gramm, in fact, has become something of an NRA favorite. He appeared on the March 1995 cover of American Rifleman, the NRA's official magazine, with a smiling LaPierre. The caption below their smiles reads "Freedom Fighters,

the 104th Congress Convenes . . . and the NRA Is There to Greet Them.”

The alliance goes back at least to 1984 when Rep. Phil Gramm, a recent convert to the Republican Party, ran for Senate. The NRA established its own Gramm for Senate office in Texas and spent \$337,752 on behalf of Gramm's successful campaign.

Since winning his Senate seat, Gramm has not disappointed the NRA. He has introduced, sponsored or voted the NRA line on 18 key bills concerning gun issues over the last decade. He has also returned the favor by soliciting contributions for the NRA on NRA stationery. In 1987, for example, Gramm wrote a letter telling potential contributors that if they donated \$1,000 they would become members of the "Madison Eagles," an exclusive group of contributors. He explained that becoming a member would provide an "opportunity to develop a special relationship with civic leaders from around the United States, celebrities, Senators and Congressmen who are active supporters of our cause."

In 1987 and 1989, Gramm co-chaired the Annual Charleton Heston International Celebrity Shoot, attracting celebrities such as O.J. Simpson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Roy Rogers. The money raised at these events went to the "NRA's Institute for Legislative Action . . . dedicated to preserving the Second Amendment in the legislatures and on Capitol Hill."

Almost every year since 1987, Gramm has taken a trip to California to participate in the NRA's annual celebrity shoots. He's pretty handy with a gun

himself; in 1993 he won a 2nd place prize in a pistol-shooting contest.

The NRA's support for Gramm's presidential ambitions became apparent at the 1992 Republican national convention in Houston where the NRA sponsored a "Red, White and Boots" gala fund-raiser for Gramm. After party-goers contributed \$75 per person (\$500 for VIPs), they drank beer and watched a film about Gramm's life entitled "Phil Gramm: A New Leader for a New America," narrated by Heston.

Gramm, though, doesn't seem gunshy about his alliance with the NRA. In Phoenix, Gramm said "My 82-year-old mama has a .38 special revolver, and she knows how to use it." He said that someone had attempted to break in to her house. He quoted her as saying, "Phil, you reckon with all this meanness, I ought to get me a bigger pistol?"

In his speech in Phoenix, Gramm praised the NRA for its leadership in the 1994 elections that brought the Republicans to power in both houses of Congress. (The NRA political action committee was the biggest in the country in the 1993-94 election cycle, doling out \$3.4 million in contributions and independent expenditures, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.) But Gramm declared the NRA's work is not quite done.

"We are still one election away from getting our money back and our freedom back," Gramm said, "and that one election is beating Bill Clinton in 1996."