

RICHARD COHEN

## *It Makes Sense to Join The Gun Lobby*

But I am not in favor of registering rifles or shotguns. My reason for this is pretty basic. You can't keep a rifle in a glove compartment and you can't take it to school in a lunch box and you can't put it in your pocket, walk into a bank and pretend you're making a deposit. A rifle is going to give you away. In other words, I'm not terribly afraid of rifles. It is not a concealed weapon.

But I am afraid of handguns. They can be concealed. Aside from a little target shooting, they are only good for killing people, and the cheaper guns aren't even much good for target shooting. That leaves just one thing, and because of that, handguns

represent a real danger — not a theoretical danger. Lots of people get killed by guns every year, and while it is true that the people who got killed were killed by other people, a lot of them would not have been killed if there had not been a gun around.

Now use your head, NRA. Tell me why it's so terrible to tell people that they cannot have handguns. Okay, make an exception for target shooters. But if I give you that, will you give me the right to say no — no gun — to some deranged person who, like the guy who killed John Lennon, buys a gun and then murders someone? Will you not concede that if people could not buy guns as easily as they do now, that fewer people would die from them?

No — no you won't. I know that. I know the mood you're in from the letter you sent my friend and from the letters I got after I wrote a recent column about gun control. I never got so much mail, and while some of it was nice and reasoned, a lot of

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DEAR NATIONAL RIFLE Association: A colleague gave me the membership offer you sent him, the one that warns about "antihunting radicals" and "gun confiscators" and says that people like me, people who would like handguns controlled, are a small minority of the American population. If it's okay with you, I accept your offer. I'd like to join.

I fear, you see, that your organization has fallen into the hands of zealots. Surely you must know that every single public opinion poll shows that most Americans favor gun control and that if there is a small minority on this issue, it is the gun lobby. Unfortunately, it is politically powerful.

The fact of the matter is that I have never understood your position. I have never understood why you insist on lumping handgun control with an attempt either to register or confiscate rifles, and why you go even further than that and talk about people like me being "antihunting." Now it just so happens that I am sort of antihunting, but I would never think of banning it. It's just not for me.

it was just plain ugly. I'm not sure what my religion has to do with the gun control issue, but plainly it meant something to some of the people who wrote. They questioned my politics, my patriotism, my sanity, my sexual preference and, of course, my ancestry. Boy, it was rough stuff.

In fact, it was worse than the sort of stuff I used to get when I wrote about abortion. Even worse than the stuff I used to get about Edward M. Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. Rough! Rough! I should have expected it, of course. I have heard politicians talk about the power of the gun lobby, how they fear it, how they know it does not represent a majority view but how, when the chips are down and the election is close, it can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

I remember once going up to the mountains of Western Maryland with Joseph Tydings. He was a

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senator then and he had introduced some sort of gun-control bill. It might have cost him his Senate seat, and up in the mountains where we were that day, the people attacked Tydings for his bill. They had it all wrong. They thought it would take their rifles away. Someone had lied to them — sent them a letter like the one you sent my colleague.

So I join. Your organization has fallen into the hands of zealots and absolute nuts. You smear your opposition and try to scare your membership and bend the truth, so I think it's important that people like me join and try to take over the organization from the inside. You people are dangerous.

After all, you're armed.