



REAGAN'S GUN LEGACY

The true story of the conservative icon's contribution to America's public safety.

A report by the
Educational Fund
to Stop Gun Violence

Reagan's Gun Legacy

*The True Story of the Conservative Icon's
Contribution to America's Public Safety*

For months, conservatives have been laying claim to former President Ronald Reagan's legacy. In a June 14, 2004 statement, Chris Cox, Executive Director of the National Rifle Association's (NRA) Institute for Legislative Action, hailed Reagan for having accepted the NRA Honorary Life Membership, the organization's highest honor, in 1983.¹ Pro-gun activists Alan Gottlieb and Joe Waldron called Ronald Reagan "a genuine hero" who "understood the value of gun ownership." And, *Guns and Ammo* brought back into circulation a column penned by the former President, entitled: Ronald Reagan: The Gun Owner's Champion.

Aside from the pro-gun website www.KeepAndBearArms.org, which carried a poll calling Reagan a traitor, the effuse praise for the former President from gun lobby leaders might lead one to believe that Reagan supported their legislative agenda throughout his political career.

To be sure, President Reagan did sign gun lobby-backed legislation that weakened federal gun laws, and was honored several times by the NRA. But a closer look at Reagan's gun legacy offers a more mixed record than the gun lobby would have Americans believe. Consider:

- Ronald Reagan lobbied members of the House of Representatives to support the 1994 federal Assault Weapons Ban. The ban passed by only two votes; at least two House members publicly credited Reagan's direct appeals for their "aye" votes.
- In the early 1990s, President Reagan lobbied Congress to pass the Brady Law, a major gun safety initiative vigorously opposed by the gun lobby.
- During Reagan's tenure as President, bans on cop-killer bullets, undetectable handguns, and the manufacture and sale of machine guns became law.^{2, 3}

In advance of the Republican National Convention, which will no doubt pay homage to President Reagan, this report documents Ronald Reagan's lobbying efforts on behalf of the Assault Weapons Ban and Brady Law, reviews statements he made after he left office, and offers a chronological record of Reagan's positions on gun issues spanning his years as Governor of California until after he had left the White House.

¹ Cox, C. (2004, June 14). Political Report. *NRA-ILA – Articles*. Retrieved June 22, 2004, from <http://www.nra.org/Issues/Articles/Read.aspx?ID=140>

² Pub. L. No. 99-408 (1986). See also, U.S. Lawmakers Ban 'Cop-Killer' Bullets, Reuters. *Toronto Star*. (1986, August 25). Retrieved June 20, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

³ Pub. L. No. 99-308 (1986).

Reagan Supported the Assault Weapons Ban and the Brady Law

After leaving the White House in 1989, Ronald Reagan directly lobbied Members of Congress to pass two of the most well-known federal gun violence prevention laws on the books: The federal Assault Weapons Ban and the Brady Law.

The Federal Assault Weapons Ban

The NRA vigorously opposed the 1994 federal Assault Weapons Ban, which outlawed several types of semi-automatic military-style firearms. Indeed, the gun lobby's current top priority is ensuring the law expires on September 13 of this year.

Despite the NRA's intense lobbying efforts against the legislation ten years ago, the Assault Weapons Ban passed the U.S. House of Representatives by two votes, 216-214. At least two swing House Members credited Reagan's direct lobbying for their "aye" votes.

- Former **Rep. Scott Klug** (R-WI) voted for the Assault Weapons Ban only after a "last-minute plea" from Reagan. According to the Madison, WI-based *Capital Times*, "[f]or Klug, R-Madison, who a day earlier had vowed his opposition to the ban but admitted to being torn, the defining moment came when he received a personal message from former President Ronald Reagan."⁴

For text of the Klug letter, see "Reagan's Rhetoric" below.

- Former **Rep. Dick Swett** (D-NH) also credited Reagan's direct lobbying. According to *The Boston Globe*, "[Swett] made up his mind after being lobbied by the idol of GOP conservatives, President Ronald Reagan."⁵

The Brady Law

In 1993, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Brady Law, which mandated criminal background checks for gun sales through federally-licensed firearm dealers (FFLs).

While the NRA fought the Brady Law with all its might, President Reagan endorsed the bill named for his former Press Secretary, James Brady. At a ceremony commemorating the 10th anniversary of the assassination attempt on his life that left Brady paralyzed, Reagan said:

⁴ Schoenmann, J. (1994, May 6). Klug Bows to Reagan Plea on Ban. *The Capital Times*. Retrieved June 23, 2004 from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

⁵ Milne, J. (1994, May 15). Gun-Control Battle Grows Hotter Still. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved June 22, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

"You do know that I'm a member of the NRA, and my position on the right to bear arms is well known...But I want you to know something else, and I am going to say it in clear, unmistakable language: I support the Brady bill, and I urge the Congress to enact it without further delay."⁶

Since its enactment, the Brady Law has prevented nearly one million illegal firearm transactions from prohibited purchasers, including felons and domestic abusers.⁷

Reagan's Rhetoric

Ronald Reagan was endorsed and honored by the NRA on several occasions. In their current tributes, however, gun lobby leaders highlight some of Reagan's quotes endorsing the Second Amendment as proof that he unabashedly supported their agenda. For example, the Cox statement praises Reagan for once saying:

"The NRA believes America's laws were made to be obeyed and that our constitutional liberties are just as important today as 200 years ago. And by the way, the Constitution does not say Government shall decree the right to keep and bear arms. The Constitution says 'the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.'"

To suggest that Reagan's support for the Second Amendment puts him at odds with those who support gun laws is highly specious. While it is appropriate for the gun lobby to note President Reagan's endorsement of some of its initiatives, such as the 1986 Firearm Owners' Protection Act, a review of Reagan's own words shows he was not a staunch advocate for the gun lobby's agenda, particularly in his later years:

"[The Brady Bill] is just plain common sense that there be a waiting period to allow local law enforcement officials to conduct background checks on those who wish to buy a handgun."

-- Reagan Backs Waiting Period to Buy Guns, *USA Today*, 3/29/91

⁶ Reagan Backs Waiting Period to Buy Guns. (1991, March 29). *USA Today*. Retrieved June 22, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

⁷ Bowling, M., et al., Background Checks for Firearm Transfers, 2002, Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2003 (NCJ 200116).

“[L]isten to the American public and to the law enforcement community and support a ban on the further manufacture of [assault] weapons.”

-- Joint letter from former Presidents Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford, Assault Weapons Ban Appears to Gain, *The Boston Globe*, 5/5/94

“As a longtime gun owner and supporter of the right to bear arms, I, too, have carefully thought about this issue. I am convinced that the limitations imposed in this bill are absolutely necessary. I know there is heavy pressure on you to go the other way, but I strongly urge you to join me in supporting this bill. It must be passed.”

-- Letter to former Rep. Scott Klug (R-WI), Klug Bows to Reagan Plea on Ban, *The Capital Times*, 5/6/94

Reagan’s Record

Ronald Reagan’s legislative record on gun laws is mixed. President Reagan signed gun lobby-backed legislation that weakened federal gun laws. Yet as Governor of California, he signed a law banning the carrying of loaded firearms in public; as President, he signed a measure that banned cop-killer bullets and handguns that could evade metal detectors. A look at Ronald Reagan’s legislative record:

Governor of California (1967-1975)

1969 Governor Reagan signs a law that adds 5 to 15 years to prison sentences for defendants who had carried firearms in the commission of crimes.⁸

President of the United States (1981-1989)

1986 President Reagan signs into law the Firearm Owners’ Protection Act of 1986, which loosened restrictions on gun sellers.⁹

1986 President Reagan signs legislation banning the sale of cop-killing bullets composed solely of specific hard metals that could be used in a handgun.¹⁰

⁸West’s Ann.Cal.Penal Code § 12022. See also, King, W. R. (1981, June 17). Favors Gun Law Rated as Mixed Success. *New York Times*. Retrieved June 19, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

⁹Pub. L. No. 99-308 (1986). See also, Compromise Gun-Control Bill Clears Senate, Goes to Reagan; Some Concerns of Police Are Addressed [Electronic version]. (1986, May 7). *The Washington Post*.

¹⁰Pub. L. No. 99-408 (1986). See also, U.S. Lawmakers Ban ‘Cop-Killer’ Bullet Reuters. (1986, August 15). *Toronto Star*. Retrieved June 20, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.

1988 A ban on the manufacture and sale of machine guns is enacted into law.¹¹

1988 President Reagan signs legislation outlawing firearms capable of passing through detection devices without setting off alarms.¹²

Conclusion

Ronald Reagan's gun legacy is far more mixed than the gun lobby would have Americans believe. While Reagan did sign gun lobby-backed legislation that weakened federal gun laws, and was honored several times by the NRA, he also helped enact two of America's landmark gun safety laws – the federal Assault Weapons Ban and the Brady Law.

More importantly, Ronald Reagan understood that protecting public safety sometimes meant rebuking the gun lobby. Reagan, like overwhelming majorities of Americans – including gun owners – believed that military-style firearms endanger law enforcement, and serve no useful purpose in our society. He also believed that handgun sales should be accompanied by background checks and waiting periods.

As Republicans lay claim to Reagan's legacy at their national convention, it is important to remember what he did to ensure America's public safety. And it is equally important to ask whether the current President has truly followed in the Gipper's footsteps.

¹¹ Pub. L. No. 99-308 (1986).

¹² Pub. L. No. 100-649 (1988). See also, President Signs Legislation Banning Nonmetallic Guns. (1988, November 12). *New York Times*. Retrieved June 20, 2004, from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic database.