

Ripping Apart Wayne's world

Wayne La Pierre, NRA Executive President of the NRA ignored hecklers and protesters as he outlines the NRA's response to the Newtown 2012 school shooting. At a debate in London a few months earlier WLP had had an even rougher ride in front of a British audience

Watching Wayne La Pierre hectoring the world's media for having the temerity to believe that the NRA might compromise its strong stance on US gun rights in the wake of the Newtown massacre brought to mind a debate, earlier in the year, when things had not gone Wayne's way.

On 21st December 2012, exactly one week following the Sandy Hook school shooting where 20 children and six teaching staff had been shot and killed by a lone gunman with an assault rifle, Wayne La Pierre, spokesman for the NRA used his long awaited press conference to give the assembled journalists a belligerent lecture on American gun rights. The NRA had kept its powder dry for a week; its website promising 'meaningful contributions' to the proposed Obama gun control plan. And now, here it was: armed guards at all schools. In La Pierre's words, echoing the masculine hegemony of a 1950s western, 'the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun'.

Wayne had been at his manic best, forehead shining in the heat of the occasion, coiffured comb-over, flicking forwards with the urgency of his points, especially when protesters, unveiling banners 'NRA KILLING OUR KIDS', interrupted his flow. He would take no questions from the floor. It had been so different a few months earlier when Wayne La Pierre and the NRA's travelling road-show had come to London to film a debate, a remake of their 'Great Gun Debate'. This time the pressing issue was the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and light weapons and an international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

George Bush had been reluctant to sign the USA to a UN programme that, the NRA argued, jeopardised the 2nd Amendment 'right to bear arms'. Bush's negotiators, led by John Bolton, had been blocking and stalling discussions at every point in the first phase of the UN's deliberations. Obama, however, had signed the USA up to the process, and US negotiators were now co-operating more effectively. This was, in the NRA's eyes, a useful card to be able to play in a closely fought election; an election described by David Keene the new NRA leader as '*the most important presidential election, from a 2nd Amendment standpoint, in our lifetimes*'. The president, he claimed, was selling out on the people, giving up a cherished American freedom, 'the right to bear arms' to a foreign power, the United Nations.

And it had worked before. In 2004 La Pierre and his entourage had organised a televised gun debate at Kings College, London. On this occasion Rebecca Peters, of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) debated with him. I was present at the debate and, by any standards of rational argumentation, she clearly held her own, and more. She presented, clearly and concisely, the case for disarmament, demobilisation and reconciliation (DDR), in conflict zones and failed states.

And that, in a sense, was where the problem lay; just like a microcosm of the US gun debate itself. NRA representatives seldom engage in debate, rather they assert. It turned out that this was precisely WLP's debating technique. Reading from a script, he spouted a series of assertions, bumper-sticker slogans all, about guns and freedom, the UN and totalitarianism and

US 2nd amendment rights. WLP subsequently wrote about his performance in this debate in the early chapters of his book *The Global War on Your Guns*, although no-one actually present at the 2004 debate would have recognised it from his less than accurate account. All this was useful, however, when the NRA came calling again with the 2012 presidential election looming, it was handy to know their game plan.

In early 2012 I received an e-mail inviting my participation in a debate to discuss the UN and gun control in London at an upcoming televised debate. I had not supposed for one moment I was their first choice, a relatively obscure British academic was not much of a scalp for the NRA compared with Rebecca Peters, who had been leading IANSA's negotiations at the UN. In any event, however, Rebecca had moved on.

As it happens, a few years earlier I'd participated in a gun rights conference in Washington DC, sponsored by a number of NRA academics at George Mason University Law School in Arlington. The conference was premised upon the human right to self-defence; in American terms, to carry firearms. My 'European' take on this debate was to contrast the individualism reflected by the 2nd Amendment, with a more collective public safety policy.¹ The US right, I argued, was little short of a right to kill; whereas Europeans tended to think in terms of eliminating the need to do so. The NRA academics didn't get it, but the idea was to come in useful.

Phone calls with a few 'gun control' commentators in the UK confirmed that some of them had been approached to participate in the debate and all had passed. Their advice, for what it was worth, was to do likewise; the NRA doesn't 'debate'. Meanwhile, the LA TV company which had made initial contact were themselves being pretty cagey about who the American debater was going to be. They needn't have bothered, I already knew.

Closer to the date, the Apothecaries Hall, near Blackfriars tube station, was confirmed as the venue, while subsequent emails established the rules of engagement and the running order of questions and rebuttals was outlined. Finally, a day or two before the event itself, the identity of my opponent was finally disclosed.

Arriving at the venue on the appointed date, an outside broadcast truck was parked adjacent the hall, inside there were 4 or 5 cameras and associated equipment with the hall laid out with seats for an audience of around 250. As the room began to fill, I began to recognise a number of prominent members of the UK shooting lobby filing in to their seats. The questions we were to debate asked about why the USA refused to be more of a 'team player' on matters of global disarmament; how the media reported gun control issues; the UN's role and achievements in violence prevention; the relationship between the UN programme of action on SALW and, finally, the 2nd amendment and the ability of free people to defend themselves from oppression, the case of Syria being specifically mentioned.

I thought I knew how WLP would play it, and here he was, reading from his script, just as before. I had resolved to attack him, not to debate, every step of the way. In the first exchange I made my point about the 2nd Amendment as a right to kill, suggesting it was a complete anachronism, celebrated by the NRA as a unchanging totem of American faith even though they had fundamentally reconstructed and reinterpreted its very meaning over the course of the last 2 or three decades, packing the Supreme Court to get this new interpretation enshrined in law. WLP

¹ P. Squires, 2006, Beyond the 4th of July: Critical reflections on the self-defence debate from a British perspective. *Journal of Law, Economics and Policy*, Vol 2(2) . George Mason University Law School.

had suggested that the fight for the 2nd Amendment was 'a battle for America's soul'. This was just as well, I replied, because if WLP and the NRA were any indication, the battle for America's brain had been lost long ago.

In the second exchange about the consequences of American 'gun liberalism' for the wider world, I drew attention to the proportions of crime guns intercepted in Canada which originated in the USA (about 50%) and, more alarmingly, how the exchange of drugs North, guns South, meant that as many as 80% of the drug cartel firearms (many of them combat style assault weapons) traced to crimes in Mexico, also originated in the USA.

During the exchange on the third question, I turned on WLP's ambitions for the debate. Much of NRA politics, I said, was about scaring people; usually scaring them so they would buy more guns. But here, in election year, he was trying to scare them about the UN and was on the stump doing a bit of scaremongering for the folks back home about how the nasty UN, aided by the president, the 'liberal' US media and other 'intellectual elites' are trying to subvert the US constitution and ridicule American values. None of this, of course, I added, is true. As the US State Department has clearly confirmed, the proposed UN Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) will not impinge on US 2nd Amendment rights. 'There will be no restrictions on civilian possession or trade of firearms otherwise permitted by law or protected by the U.S. Constitution. There will be no dilution or diminishing of sovereign control over issues involving the private acquisition, ownership, or possession of firearms, which must remain matters of domestic law.' All of this rather tends to confirm a popular view that, while the NRA claim to speak for US gun owners, they speak rather more loudly for the gun industry where the ATT might have some impact.

It was also during this exchange that I drew the audience attention to the fact that, although the event had been billed as a 'debate', WLP was not, in fact, debating at all, but simply reading from a pre-prepared script. 'We don't,' I suggested, 'even know that he wrote it himself'. Wayne began to look visibly flustered, the debate was not going to plan, so in his next contribution he tried to engage more eye contact with his audience and, I assume, had to ad lib from his script a little more. It led to a fatal error. He was rattling off a list of 'UN failures', where the 'international human rights do-gooders' had supposedly failed to avert or prevent genocide and atrocity, or had even, in his view, disarmed or otherwise prevented the victims from protecting themselves. It was a long list, but he included 'Nazi Germany' as one of those occasions where the UN had failed to act on behalf of the oppressed and victimised.

Somewhat surprised by this claim, I pounced, breaking the 'turn-taking' protocol of the debate. It is a little harsh, I suggested, 'to blame the UN for failing to prevent something which took place at least a dozen years before the organisation was established.' The audience even laughed, Wayne looked perplexed and crestfallen: humour trumps concocted pomposity every time. And we sent him packing, with a flea in his ear. The NRA didn't get their result, the film was not made, it couldn't influence the presidential election and, anyway, Obama won. Job done, I think.

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