



SHOOTING BLIND

Press coverage of the "assault weapon" controversy suggests that most journalists know very little about guns—and are not interested in learning.

By William R. Tonso

In a September 1988 report on "assault weapons" that he prepared for the Education Fund to End Handgun Violence, gun control advocate Josh Sugarmann candidly observed: "The weapons' menacing looks, coupled with the public's confusion over fully automatic machine guns versus semi-automatic assault weapons—anything that looks like a machine gun is assumed to be a machine gun—can only increase the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons. In addition, few people can envision a practical use for these guns."

So back in 1988, one of the nation's leading gun prohibitionists was banking on public support for restrictions on "semi-automatic assault weapons," not because Americans were informed about the guns in question, but because they were uninformed and likely to remain so. Sugarmann, now executive director of the Violence Policy Center, could rely on the public's continuing confusion because he knew he would have the help of the nation's leading news organizations. During the next few years the major TV networks, newspapers, and magazines persistently misled the public about the capabilities of "assault weapons," falsely implied that the guns have no legitimate use, and ignored the Second Amendment issues at stake. Given the intensity of this misinformation, it is hardly surprising that polls find some 70 percent of Americans support the "assault weapon" ban approved by Congress last year.

Many members of the current Congress, including Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, favor repealing the ban, although that effort was put on hold in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. In reporting on the continuing controversy, the national press routinely cites strong public support for the ban. The lead of an April 6 story in *The New York Times* is typical: "A group of House Republicans plans to introduce legislation on Thursday to repeal last year's ban on assault weapons, even as national polls continue to show that a majority of Americans favor it." Having whipped up hysteria about "assault weapons," journalists now point to the results of their alarmist reporting as evidence that they were right all along. Although big

journalism's misleading coverage of this issue can be partly explained by a combination of ignorance and arrogance, it seems clear that hostility toward the right to keep and bear arms has played an important role.

From the beginning, stories about "assault weapons" blurred the distinction between semi-automatics and machine guns. Machine guns are automatics: They fire as long as the trigger is held back. The possession of such firearms has been strictly regulated by the federal government since 1934. They have long been banned in some states, and no new automatics have legally entered civilian circulation in the United States since 1986. But semi-automatics, regardless of how much some of them may *look* like machine guns, fire one shot per trigger pull. Civilians have commonly used them for recreation and self-defense since the turn of the century.

True assault rifles were developed by the Germans during World War II and adopted by the major post-war powers. Such rifles combine the spray-fire capabilities of the less-powerful submachine guns and the one-shot-per-trigger-pull, aimed-fire capabilities of more-powerful battle rifles. Assault rifles are less powerful than traditional military rifles, which fire cartridges long used for hunting and target shooting. The assault rifles' smaller cartridges are easier for soldiers to carry in large numbers, and they reduce recoil, so the guns can be controlled during automatic fire.

Domestic and foreign manufacturers offer semi-automatic-only variations of assault rifles, submachine guns,

and other automatic firearms for civilian sale in the United States. Although the label is quite elastic, it is for the most part these high-tech-looking guns that Sugarmann and other gun prohibitionists call "semi-automatic assault weapons." But the hallmark of an assault rifle is a switch that allows the gun to be fired automatically or semi-automatically. A gun that fires only semi-automatically is not an "assault" anything, no matter what people like Sugarmann claim.

So why the confusion? It may be due partly to a misunderstanding of common usage. Until the "assault weapon" hysteria, gun users and gun manufacturers often referred to ordinary civil-

the automatics.

But big journalism's misinformation campaign against "assault weapons" did not hit its stride until after the 1989 Stockton, California, schoolyard shooting, perpetrated by an emotionally disturbed man armed with a semi-automatic version of the Soviet AK-47 assault rifle. The coverage of this and subsequent "assault weapon" developments regularly confused semi-automatics with machine guns.

Coverage by NBC and, to a slighter degree, CNN has been consistently egregious. Since the Stockton attack, these two networks have often shown their viewers demonstrations of machine

guns spewing out bullets at an impressive rate during discussions of one-shot-per-trigger-pull semi-automatics. On several occasions, NBC carried this deception a step further. Over footage of a machine-gun demonstration, a gun control advocate would explain that the semi-automatics targeted by "assault weapon" legislation have no hunting or other sporting uses. The network thereby created the impression that the gun being demonstrated was the type that would be affected by the ban (which it wasn't), that opponents of the ban wanted to hunt with machine guns (which they didn't), and that sport is the only legitimate reason for which Americans need guns (which it isn't).

I have shown these juxtapositions of machine-gun demonstrations with semi-automatic commentaries, which last just a few seconds, to introductory sociology classes. Out of about 250 students,

only 18 recognized that the gun being demonstrated was not a semi-automatic. So how much of that 70 percent public support for a ban on "assault weapons" is actually support for a ban on machine guns, which are already severely restricted?

Last year I called NBC to complain about its latest use of machine-gun footage in a story on semi-automatics. The gentleman who answered that call excused the juxtaposition as a mistake; he hung up when I pointed out that NBC had been making that same mistake for five years. When I called back to get his name, he hung up again. The next day I spoke with David McCormick, NBC's man in charge of broadcast standards, who acknowledged that the network had received complaints about the "assault weapon" stories before and had tried to correct the problem. But he said it was hard to prevent rushed producers from grabbing whatever footage was handy when the topic of "assault weapons" came up. He was quite pleasant, even after I said that sloppiness seemed a lame excuse for the misleading juxtapositions NBC had aired for five years. After all, heads rolled at NBC over a single assisted explosion of a GM truck, but the network has yet to even acknowledge repeatedly misleading the public about "assault weapons." Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, reports that NBC even aired one of these juxtapositions shortly after he spent several hours demonstrating the difference between semi-automatics and machine guns to an NBC crew.

Unlike NBC and CNN, CBS acknowledged the difference between machine guns and semi-automatics early on, during its

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ian semi-automatic shotguns, rifles, and pistols as "automatics." This practice has never confused knowledgeable gun people, but it may have led uninformed journalists astray.

The level of ignorance about basic gun facts among reporters should not be underestimated. Consider a July 10 article from the Associated Press that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* under the headline, "Use of Assault Guns Rising Among Youth, U.S. Says." The story describes a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics on the use of guns in crime and notes that "the report comes while the Republican-controlled Congress is considering legislation to eliminate the 1994 federal ban on 19 assault weapons." Yet despite the headline and the reference to the ban, the findings cited in the story say nothing about the use of "assault weapons." Rather, they indicate "a growing trend toward use of semiautomatic pistols," a category that includes all handguns except revolvers and one- or two-shot weapons.

Still, ignorance alone cannot explain big journalism's treatment of the "assault weapon" issue during the past decade. *Newsweek* helped launch the "assault weapon" scare three years before Sugarmann's report with a 1985 cover story titled, "Machine Gun USA." While the article acknowledged the difference between semi-automatics and machine guns, it implied that the former could be converted into the latter so easily that the difference was of little significance. The story was accompanied by illustrations of several semi-automatic versions of automatic weapons, with captions that cited the much higher firing rates of

March 16, 1989, special live edition of *48 Hours*. Like *Newsweek's* 1985 cover story, however, *48 Hours* made light of the distinction. Semi-automatics can be fired fast enough and with better control than machine guns, noted reporter David Martin as he fired a true assault rifle in the semi-automatic mode after firing it in the fully automatic position. He did not demonstrate (or even mention) more conventional-looking semi-automatic sporting guns that can be fired just as fast as the high-tech-looking semi-automatics and have been widely used by civilians for close to 100 years. Martin also made much of the firepower of guns equipped with large-capacity magazines. He did not mention that magazines can be changed so quickly that three 10-round magazines can produce nearly the same firepower as one 30-round magazine.

Martin also emphasized that a semi-automatic can be converted into a machine gun. But so can almost any other gun. Way back in 1889, for instance, gun designer John Browning converted a lever-action rifle into a machine gun. During World War II, the Australians converted many bolt-action rifles into machine guns. For decades the Pathans of Hindu-Kush have produced automatic weapons from scratch in shops far less sophisticated than those that can be found in countless basements and garages across the United States. Any competent machinist who knows guns can do these things. But the gun prohibitionists claim "semi-automatic assault weapons" can be converted into machine guns more easily than other guns. It's not clear whether that's true, especially since the definition of this category is fuzzy. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, weapons that can be readily converted into machine guns are already regulated as machine guns. In any case, it is certainly illegal to carry out such a conversion. Furthermore, ease of conversion to a restricted configuration could justify banning all rifles and shotguns on the ground that they can be easily converted into sawed-off weapons.

Ignorance may account for Martin's incomplete reporting on these issues. But he went beyond ignorance when he claimed that it took him less than two hours to find a gunsmith willing to convert a "semi-automatic assault weapon" into a machine gun—a job that supposedly took just nine minutes. Viewers saw only about 15 seconds of the alleged conversion, not enough for even the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms to determine if it had actually been carried out, though the BATF did send a letter of reprimand to CBS. In a letter to a complaining viewer, CBS claimed that the conversion had been completed but that the gun had then been immediately converted back to semi-automatic. If the gun was not fired, how did Martin know that it had in fact been converted into a machine gun? Since Martin was shown firing an automatic rifle immediately after the brief conversion footage, viewers were led to believe that they were seeing the results of the conversion—unless they knew enough to recognize that the allegedly converted gun was not an M-16 like the one that was fired.

So we have only CBS's claim as evidence that a conversion was carried out at all, let alone in nine minutes. If it was carried out, CBS violated federal law and received no more than a written reprimand for doing so. If it was not carried out, CBS lied to its viewers. Either way, CBS went out of its way to help demonize "semi-automatic assault weapons" and to further the cause of the gun prohibitionists.

In a later segment of the same *48 Hours* special, reporter Bernard Goldberg interviewed a Florida gun manufacturer. As Goldberg prattled on about the company's guns being used by drug dealers and other criminals, viewers got glimpses of menacing-looking pistols being test fired and prepared for shipment. Most probably did not recognize that the "assault pistols" shown, despite their menacing looks, were chambered for the low-powered .22 cartridge that has been a recreational favorite since the late 19th century. No mention was made of this fact.

Indeed, big journalism's coverage of "assault weapons" has seldom noted that the guns so labeled fire cartridges commonly used for recreation and self-defense. Quite the contrary. More often than not, the coverage has claimed that these guns are extraordinarily powerful. Some journalists have even resorted to fakery to support this false claim. According to sources in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office, shortly after the 1989 Stockton schoolyard attack, a reporter and photographer from the now-defunct *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* asked a deputy to demonstrate AK-47 power by shooting a watermelon with one. The deputy replied that a gun firing the full-metal-jacketed, military ammunition used at Stockton would simply put a hole in the melon, and that is exactly what happened when he

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shot it. The reporter then asked the deputy to shoot a melon with his pistol, which he did. Though far less powerful than the rifle, his 9mm pistol fired an expanding hollow-point slug that splattered the melon impressively. Both the puncturing of a melon by the more-powerful rifle and the splattering of a melon by the less-powerful pistol were captured on film. The *Herald Examiner* then published the photograph of the splattered melon—but cred-

ited the rifle.

About that time, splattered-watermelon demonstrations started appearing on KABC in Los Angeles and other California stations as well as on the national news, but the connection to the *Herald Examiner* fakery, if any, is not clear. It is possible that some of these TV demonstrations were honest. As gun control opponent Neal Knox has shown in a Gun Owners of America video, military-style 7.62x39mm slugs fired from an AK-47 can splatter a watermelon, apparently depending on the melon's ripeness and other variables. Even if these TV splatterings were actually produced by AK-47s, however, the demonstrations were still deceptive unless they also showed what ordinary guns will do to a melon, as an ABC News special did on January 24, 1990. While ABC showed an AK-47 putting baseball-sized holes in watermelons and the Gun Owners of America video featured splattering fruit, both demonstrations also showed common sporting guns vaporizing watermelons.

Despite their destructive capability, no one is calling for a ban on sporting weapons, because hunting and target shooting are still widely considered acceptable reasons for owning a gun. By contrast, military-style semi-automatics are said to be fit only for drug dealers and mass murderers. Yet police figures show that "assault weapons" are rarely used in crimes, and such guns have a number of legitimate civilian uses that could be easily discovered by any journalist curious enough to look for them.

Though American shooters were not immediately attracted by the non-traditional appearance of these otherwise fairly unremarkable guns, their durability and, ironically, their media-generated notoriety have helped increase interest in them. For the first time in our history, American troops are equipped with rifles of a type (automatic or burst-fire) difficult or (in some states) impossible for civilians to own legally. Hence, civilians interested in the military-style rifle matches long supported by the federal government have to use semi-automatic-only variations of our recent and current military rifles. Many farmers and ranchers in sparsely settled areas have accepted certain models of these light but durable military-style semi-automatics as varmint and utility rifles. Boaters off the coast of Florida, wary

of armed drug runners, also seem to have acquired an interest in such guns, and so have collectors and hobbyists. In other words, it is demonstrably false that civilians have no practical, sporting, or recreational uses for these military-style semi-automatics.

But the most important reason American civilians should have access to these guns has nothing to do with recreation or even with defense against criminals. It has to do with the main purpose of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, an aspect of the "assault weapon" story that the national press has almost completely ignored. The Second Amendment states: "A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." This amendment is seldom even mentioned in establishment news coverage of the gun issue, even though it is the main source of opposition to gun controls. With the exceptions of 1983 PBS and 1993 A&E documentaries, a May 22, 1995, *U.S. News & World Report* article, and a few conservative, libertarian, and populist columnists, what little journalistic commentary that does mention the amendment almost invariably claims that its meaning is unclear, that it is outdated and should be repealed, or that it protects only the right of the National Guard to possess guns.

But the meaning of the Second Amendment is very clear to the vast majority of scholars who have examined the paper trail left by the Founders. James Madison's friend Tench Coxe expressed their concerns succinctly in 1789: "As civil rulers, not having their duty to the people duly before them, may attempt to tyrannize, and as the military forces which must be occasionally raised to defend our country, might pervert their power to the injury of their fellow citizens, the people are confirmed by the next article in their right to keep and bear their private arms."

The Founders also made it clear that the "militia" consisted of the whole armed people. *The Federalist Papers* and other writings indicate that they feared large professional military forces and select militias (like the National Guard). Citizens and their privately owned guns were part of the system of checks and balances that the Founders felt was necessary to keep government from drifting into tyranny. Authors of the 50 law review articles that support this interpretation include such prominent, liberal,

non-gun-owning scholars as Sanford Levinson of the University of Texas, Akhil R. Amar of Yale, and William Van Alstyne of Duke.

According to Title 10, Section 311 of the U.S. Code, the National Guard is still only the organized part of a militia that consists of practically all able-bodied males and some females between the ages of 17 and 45 who are citizens of the United States or have declared an intention to become citizens. The only 20th-century Supreme Court ruling touching on the Second Amendment (*U.S. v. Miller*, 1939) acknowledged that militiamen called to service "were expected to appear bearing arms supplied by themselves and of the kind in common use at the time" [emphasis added]. In 1939, American troops were equipped with semi-automatic pistols and were being equipped with semi-automatic

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rifles. Now our troops are equipped with less-powerful but higher-magazine-capacity semi-automatic pistols and less-powerful but burst-fire and higher-magazine-capacity rifles.

American citizens have traditionally had access to rifles and pistols with more power and magazine capacity than those issued to common soldiers. In keeping with the traditional American view of the militia, the Army's Office of the Director of Civilian Marksmanship has long sold surplus pistols, rifles, and carbines, including semi-automatics, to the public at bargain-basement prices. No one claims that Americans have caused problems with these surplus military small arms. Yet since common soldiers started carrying automatic or burst-fire rifles, American citizens have no longer had access to up-to-date military small arms, and federal law now even restricts their access to semi-automatic variations of these guns. So not only do we have the large professional military and select militia that the Founders feared, but there is a movement afoot to get militarily effective small arms out of civilian hands.

Big journalism has not examined the implications of these developments, instead treating the Second Amendment as, at best, an anachronism. In a March 1990 column titled "The Second Amendment Gets No Respect," Mike Moore, then editor of *The Quill*, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, wrote that "in 30 years in the business it's hard to imagine a subject...that has inspired more poor reporting and silly editorial commentary." As I've suggested, much of that poor reporting and silly commentary is the result of ignorance. Ted Gest of *U.S. News & World Report* acknowledged in a 1992 *Media Studies Journal* article that few of today's journalists know much about guns. In an article introducing *USA Today's* extended examination of the gun issue at the end of 1993, Tony Mauro wrote that in his paper's newsroom, "which prides itself on drawing its staff from a cross section of the nation, it was hard to find editors and reporters who had ever pulled a trigger."

But if ignorance explains sloppy reporting and commentary on the gun issue that has been going on for decades, journalists don't seem interested in overcoming that ignorance by learning about guns and the legitimate uses to which they are put by millions of Americans. Moreover, since journalistic misinformation on guns invariably favors the gun prohibitionists, something more than ignorance must be involved.

All but a few leading columnists and editors of major newspapers have taken a strong stand in support of stricter gun controls. Guns are also unpopular among the higher-ups at broadcast-news organizations. Michael Gartner, before he was sacked as president of NBC News over the GM-truck scam, used a guest column in *USA Today* to call for repeal of the Second Amendment.

Journalists have long maintained that they keep their personal views in check when they engage in reporting as opposed to commentary. But some prominent journalists are no longer trying to

maintain that fiction when covering the gun issue. Where guns are concerned, it seems, they seek only premise-supporting evidence. And big journalism's working premise is that the battle over gun control pits the American public, its police protectors, and its responsible representatives, aided by neutral researchers

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and the watchdog press, against the "gun lobby," headed by the NRA and representing no more than the gun industry and other irresponsible vested interests.

Thus in 1989 Bill Peters, correspondent for Los Angeles's ABC-owned station, told the U.S. Senate that "today it is our [journalists'] responsibility—using all the powerful means we have at our disposal...both to inform the public of the danger to society posed by military assault rifles and to help build support for getting rid of them." Gloria Hammond, of *Time's* editorial office, informed readers who complained of bias in that magazine's July 17, 1989, cover story on guns that "the time for opinions on the dangers of gun availability is long since gone, replaced by overwhelming evidence that it represents a growing threat to public safety."

Thomas Winship, a former editor of the *Boston Globe* who now chairs the Center for Foreign Journalists in Reston, Virginia, called for a newspaper crusade against guns in his April 24, 1993, *Editor & Publisher* column. He urged editors, who he assumed share his anti-gun views, to "investigate the NRA with renewed vigor....Print names of elected officials who take NRA funds....Support all forms of gun licensing; in fact all the causes NRA opposes."

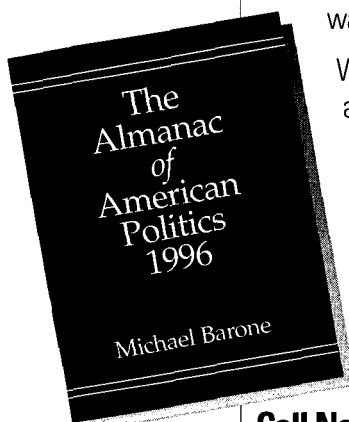
Back in 1988, Josh Sugarmann accurately read big journalism. He and his friends did not have to worry that skeptical, hard-hitting reporting would discredit their cause. When it comes to gun control, big journalism is little more than a purveyor of the conventional wisdom among urban sophisticates who have only a selective appreciation for the Bill of Rights.

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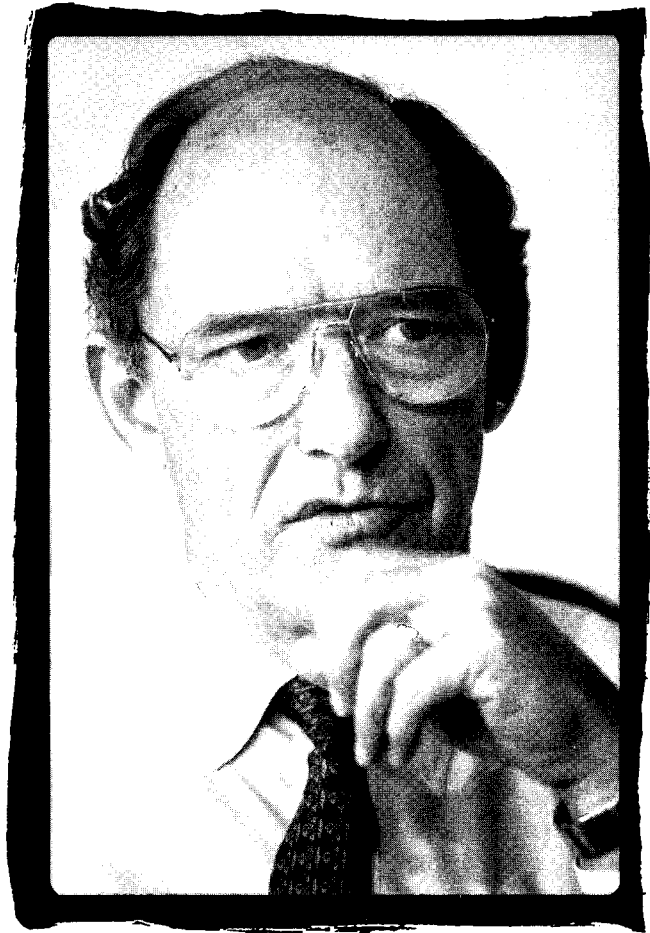
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