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Brady Wrong on Automatic Weapons

by Benedict D. LaRosa

During the campaign season, James Brady, former press secretary to President Ronald Reagan, criticized Illinois Republican senatorial candidate Alan Keyes for defending the right of Americans to keep and bear arms, including machine guns. Brady called Keyes's stand an "insane" call for a return to "the Al Capone days." Brady was partially paralyzed in the assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981, and has been a gun-control advocate ever since.

Mr. Brady, though justifiably bitter over his fate, has allowed it to color his judgment by blaming an inanimate object for the horrible damage done him. He should be reminded that guns are but a tool, and that the actual weapon is the person behind the gun. He should also keep in mind certain facts that contradict his misguided position.

Americans can and do buy all sorts of automatic weapons, including machine guns. True, the government has made it difficult to do so since the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934, which levied a \$200 tax per gun on the purchase and transfer of such weapons, requires a background check for prospective buyers, and registers owners. The Firearms Owners' Protection Act of 1986 then went on to forbid the manufacture of automatic weapons for civilian use, raising the cost of automatic weapons dramatically and placing them out of the reach of most Americans.

Despite these and other impediments, roughly half the machine guns in the United States are owned by civilians; the other half are in the hands of police departments and the military. Texas leads the nation in the number of automatic weapons in civilian hands. The true number is undeniably higher, since official statistics don't account for those unknown to authorities. Yet there is no mayhem in Texas or elsewhere in the nation by civilians wielding automatic weapons. There is no return to the days of Al Capone.

In fact, until recently, when development put the firing range out of business, there was an annual machine-gun shoot in Helotes, Texas, a bedroom community to San Antonio. People from all over the world would bring or rent automatic weapons to shoot at this event.

Gun-control advocates are at least partially to blame for proliferation of automatic weapons among the citizenry. By pushing for restrictive legislation, they panicked individuals who would not otherwise have done so into purchasing such firearms. Prior to the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934, there was no widespread ownership of automatic weapons by law-abiding citizens, despite the fact that in those days Thompson submachine guns could be purchased at hardware stores. Only the military, police, and criminals used them. Even criminal use has been exaggerated by gun-control advocates and Hollywood movie producers. For example, Al Capone's gang owned only two Thompsons. Bonnie and Clyde never used one; they preferred the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) which was not then sold to civilians but was restricted to police and military use. Criminals such as Bonnie and Clyde obtained them by bribery or theft, proving that restrictive laws are no barrier to such people. In fact, since 1934, there has been only one legally owned machine gun used in a crime, and that by a law-enforcement officer!

Other than as a response to restrictive legislation, one can only speculate why so many civilians feel the need to own automatic weapons. Perhaps they share Theodore Roosevelt's view that though he didn't know how to shoot well, he knew how to shoot often.

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