

June 10, 2013



The Media Should Bury NRA's Wayne LaPierre on the Business Pages Where He Belongs

Posted: 12/22/2012 2:51 pm

Imagine what would happen if the top lobbyist for the tobacco industry gave a half-hour speech announcing that "smoking is good for your health" and called on the federal government to subsidize the distribution of cigarettes in every American school.

Would every American media outlet -- television, radio, newspapers, and news magazines -- flock to the speech and cover it as an important "news" event? Would major TV networks interrupt their regular programming to broadcast the speech live, in its entirety, then replay it over and over again throughout the day? Would talk radio stations devote that day's shows to serious discussions of the lobbyist's proposal? Would *The New York Times* and other major newspapers splash the lobbyist's major talking points across their front page the next day?

Of course not. The media would recognize the lobbyist's speech as a blatant and misleading corporate propaganda, ignore it, or at most relegate it to a one-paragraph story in the back pages of the business section.

But on Friday, America witnessed the spectacle of the nation's major news organizations providing the National Rifle Association -- a lobby group for gun manufacturers -- with tens of millions of dollars of free publicity.

Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice president, invited the media to an alleged "press conference" in Washington, D.C. to break its week-long silence after 20 children and six adults were killed with an assault weapon at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

LaPierre stood behind a lectern and ranted for 30 minutes, repeating the NRA's well-worn propaganda that violent video games and movies -- not the proliferation of military-style weapons -- are responsible for the nation's epidemic of mass shootings, called on the federal government to pay for armed guards at every American school, and generously offered to have the NRA train this massive army at taxpayers' expense. Then he repeated a one-line sound-bite that he knew would be repeated on radio, TV, YouTube videos, and newspaper headlines: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

Imagine that! The National Rifle Association, which gets most of its money for gun manufacturers and lobbies against all restrictions on gun sales and ownership, wants more Americans to have guns! Stop the presses!

But that's exactly what happened. Major television and radio networks did, in fact, interrupt their regular programs to give LaPierre a half hour of uninterrupted free publicity that even the NRA couldn't have afforded to pay for if this had been a prime-time infomercial.

Immediately after LaPierre stepped off the stage (after refusing to answer any questions), TV news shows and radio talk shows began serious discussions of his proposal to add armed security forces in America's schools. For example, the morning talk show broadcast on KPCC (National Public Radio's major outlet in the Los Angeles area) devoted an hour to the subject. It invited several academics, and invited listeners to call in, to discuss LaPierre's ideas. The next day, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story about LaPierre's speech under the headline, "NRA Envisions a 'Good Guy with a Gun' In Every School." The front page story in the *Los Angeles Times* was headlined, "NRA Calls For Armed Guards in All Schools."

This is a classic example of what social scientists call media "agenda setting" and "framing," but which most people simply call "changing the subject."

For a week after the Newtown massacre, President Barack Obama and most other policy makers and experts reacted to the tragedy with calls for tougher laws to keep military-style assault weapons -- like the Bushmaster rifle that Adam Lanza's mother had legally purchased and which her son had used to kill 26 people at the Sandy Hook elementary school -- out of the hands of civilians. While the nation was mourning the loss of life and expressing outrage at the slaughter, and while the families of the Newtown victims were burying their loved ones, the NRA stayed silent, even shutting down its Facebook page and its Twitter feed.

On Friday, the NRA issued a brief statement that LaPierre would hold a press event the following day, thus ending its week-long silence. At the appointed time, reporters and camera operators flocked to LaPierre's speech like a herd of sheep waiting for their daily feeding.

They were there to report "news" -- that is, something *new*. But LaPierre said nothing new at all. He repeated what the NRA has been saying for years, including what it has said after every other mass killing in recent years: Any attempt to restrict gun sales

and ownership is a violation of the Second Amendment. The media, Hollywood, and the video game industry is responsible for these massacres. Guns don't kill people; people kill people. We need more guns for self-defense. So let's put more guns in our schools to ensure the safety of our students and teachers.

Why does the media take LaPierre and the NRA seriously? Most editors and reporters would argue that the NRA is a powerful political force and thus the media has a responsibility to inform its readers, viewers, and listeners about what the organization says.

Yes, the NRA is the largest lobby group on behalf of what it calls "gun owners' rights." But although LaPierre likes to portray the NRA as representing grassroots gun owners, the bulk of its money comes from gun manufacturers. LaPierre is a corporate lobbyist. He is a huckster whose job is to sell guns produced by his corporate benefactors. He doesn't speak for most gun owners. The NRA claims to have four million members, although the media have never bothered to verify that figure. Even so, that is a tiny fraction of the nation's 90 million gun owners.

In fact, just like the tobacco industry has seen a dramatic decline of smokers in recent decades, the gun industry has been declining as well. The media has reported that gun sales have increased since the Newtown shooting, and that some gun owners are stockpiling guns and ammunition out of fear that the Obama administration and Congress might soon pass tougher gun control laws. But these short-term trends mask a wider reality. The number of American households that own guns declined from almost 50 percent in 1973 to just over [32 percent](#) in 2010, according to a 2011 study by National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Gun ownership is highly concentrated. Twenty percent of gun owners possess about 65 percent of the nation's guns.

Moreover, a majority of gun owners -- even a majority of NRA members -- do not agree with the NRA's positions on gun control. According to a [survey](#) conducted last May by Republican pollster Frank Luntz, 82 percent of gun owners -- and 74 percent of NRA members -- said they support requiring criminal background checks for gun purchasers. According to the study:

- 74 percent of NRA members believe concealed carry permits should only be granted to applicants who have completed gun safety training.
- 68 percent of NRA members believe concealed carry permits should only be granted to applicants who do not have prior arrests for domestic violence.
- 63 percent of NRA members believe concealed carry permits should only be granted to applicants 21 years of age or older.
- 75 percent of NRA members believe that concealed carry permits should be granted only to those applicants who have not committed any violent misdemeanors.

That survey was done *before* the Newtown massacre. Since then, public opinion has moved even more strongly in favor of tougher gun laws, including absolute bans on the sale of military-style assault weapons and ammunition, and longer waiting periods and background checks before people can buy a gun, and closing loopholes to make it harder to buy weapons at gun shows and over the Internet.

Moreover, the NRA's political influence is overblown. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, since 1990, the gun rights lobby, led by the NRA, has contributed \$29.2 million to candidates for Congress and the White House, 87 percent of it to Republicans. In the most recent election cycle, gun rights groups donated \$3.1 million to political candidates and spent another \$5.5 million in lobbying, all in an effort to oppose legislation to curb guns sales and ownership.

It is true that the NRA spreads its campaign contributions around widely. According to the Sunlight Foundation, just over half ([51 percent](#)) of the members of the new Congress that will convene in January have received funding from the NRA's political action committee at some point in their political careers, an analysis by the Sunlight Foundation finds. Forty-seven percent received money from the NRA in the most recent race in which they ran.

But it is also true that the NRA is more of a paper tiger than most people believe. The Sunlight Foundation reviewed the NRA's track record in the November elections. The NRA failed to achieve its main goal, the defeat of President Obama, despite LaPierre's constant rantings that the president was part of a "conspiracy to ensure reelection by lulling gun owners to sleep" and to "deceive voters and hide his true intentions to destroy the Second Amendment during his second term." LaPierre also warned that everything that "gun owners across America have fought to achieve over the past three decades could be lost" if Obama won a second term.

The NRA also supported the [losing](#) Senate candidate in six out of seven races where it spent more than \$100,000. Over two-thirds of House incumbents who lost their seats in November were endorsed by the NRA. According to the Sunlight Foundation, less than one percent of \$10.5 million spent by NRA Political Victory Fund went to races where the NRA-backed candidate won.

In other words, there is little evidence that the NRA speaks for most gun owners or that it can reliably deliver gun owners' vote at election time.

Yet, as we've seen over the last few days, the media treats the NRA as though it speaks for most gun owners and wields enormous power. Although I have no doubt that many reporters who covered LaPierre's speech think that he is at best a blowhard and at worst a right-wing lunatic, they nevertheless allowed the NRA head to manipulate them. They duly broadcast and reported LaPierre's speech as if they were his hired transcribers.

Yes, some of the TV and radio show, and newspapers, interviewed and quoted politicians, academics, and gun control advocates to provide a different perspective from LaPierre. But they allowed LaPierre to frame the discussion on his terms.

After LaPierre's speech, America was talking about arming school personnel and blaming video games for the country's shocking epidemic of mass killings rather than focusing on the real culprits -- the gun manufacturers who make military-style weapons and ammunition, the Wall Street banks and lenders who invest in them, and the major retailers, like Walmart, that sell

these deadly guns and ammunition to the general public. They are the gun lobby who profit from having weak laws that allow the proliferation of dangerous guns and ammo that result in the United States having the worst record of gun violence of any democracy.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), in 2011 there were 15,953 murders in the United States and 11,101 (30 a day) were caused by firearms. Suicides and unintentional shootings account for another 20,000 deaths by guns each year. Many more people are injured--some seriously and permanently--by gun violence.

This week, as more families in Newtown will be burying their dead loved ones, the media should stop giving LaPierre -- a corporate lobbyist -- a free platform to espouse his predictable pronouncements. It is time for the media to bury Wayne LaPierre where he belongs -- in the business section, not the front pages.

Peter Dreier is professor of politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His new book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books).

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1,081 Fans · fire the laser

The NRA doesn't dictate anything. They are in charge of nothing. They are a filthy lobby firm.9 comments by 6 people

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Please note: Mr. NRA himself, Wayne LaPierre, had 15 (yes that's fifteen) security guards monitoring his "conference" yesterday. Where was his conceal and carry weapon? If someone had started shooting a 100-drum round of bullets at him, surely he could have just sprung into action and protected himself.

Furthermore, he's the guy who says keep big bad government out of our lives--but, oh... [Read More](#)

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1,393 Fans · Mountain Man

The N.R.A is all about money..and believe me they don't get thier money from the Old Man down the road that goes hunting every year....they don't even care about him.. They do send him a magazine full of advertising from the people they really do care about....

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• [fattbastird](#) **Become a fan**

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Wayne LaPierre doesn't even have the support of hios members. 74% say he is full of sh#. That leaves 26% who are obviously baggers.

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In reply to: fattbastird

Ha Ha , please post proof on that one, I have a tinge of doubt. Was that your own research?

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• [fourtruth](#) **Become a fan**

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723 Fans · 9th Ammendment, Bill of Rights

I live in a state with conealed weapans permits. I used to leave whenever I saw someone enter holstering a gun - I have left shopping carts full of food sittng, I have put cash on tables and walked out of restaruants without eating my meal, etc. etc. Now I just don't know.

I have been shot and have had guns pointed at me - and this is the type of "for profit" paranoid culture that the NRA wants to parlay this horrendous taking of little souls into - aremd guards greating our little ones at school every day - Shame, Shame, Shame!

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[RittingsTN](#) **Become a fan**

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In reply to: fourtruth

I had never thought about the whole "walking out of a restaurant/grocery store" but I actually like that. I think if we all did this and chose to remove ourselves from guns, the support of more places for gun control might start to rise.... I certainly applaud your efforts :)

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- [tarj](#) **Become a fan**
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519 Fans · Pablo Picasso never got called an asshole

In reply to: RittingsTN

Yeah - good point, both of you.

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[Lorna Buratto](#) **Become a fan**

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No one could have said it better than Lawrence O'Donnell did on MSNBC and Peter Dreier in this article. This LaPierre creature is almost demonic and has always been a scourge on society. I am deeply upset by the way the media practically paid homage to him by giving him special live airtime as if he were a very important person. It made me want to vomit and I couldn't listen to the end of his "speech".

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95 Fans · Woof

The media needs to stick to reporting news NOT making it

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[car224](#) **Become a fan**

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10 Fans

In reply to: pleasedontboffended

I agree.

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[Carl Caroli](#) **Become a fan**

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Super User · 2,072 Fans · I just don't understand people

They are lobbyists, nothing more. They've managed to convince a bunch of gun enthusiasts to fight for their cause, like so many other lobbyists are doing. Lobbyists are destroying our nation. They don't care about any one or any thing but making their industry more money. We need to get them and their money away from our government.

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[hisashota](#) **Become a fan**

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In reply to: pleasedontboffended

you mean like fox tabloidsthey make up shit all the time...

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• [redfestiva](#) **Become a fan**

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In reply to: Carl Caroli

Actually the NRA is made up of Americans which happen to disagree with you and their money is the money that their American membership sends them to fight Washington's attempt at slowly, methodocally disarming its citizens.

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• [hawkfetish](#) **Become a fan**

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178 Fans · Get outta here!! No, really.

In reply to: redfestiva

Wow! You bought it all hook, line, and sinker.

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[ABBNY](#) **Become a fan**

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"Moreover, a majority of gun owners -- even a majority of NRA members -- do not agree with the NRA's positions on gun control. According to a survey conducted last May by Republican pollster Frank Luntz, 82 percent of gun owners -- and 74 percent of NRA members -- said they support requiring criminal background checks for gun purchasers."

May be it is time for NRA to change its leader!

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[June Conway Beeby](#) **Become a fan**

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Super User · 33 Fans

So many comments here seem unable to spot the venal greed and the evil the NRA has bred in America. Why do they not comprehend its self-centered resistance to any change in its operations? It is no wonder that the NRA has become a powerful, moneyed vicious tyrant in your own backyard..

It's time to root out these political kidnappers who have besmirched your reputation around the world and have connived with the murder of little children, .

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