

In His Sights

Will the Obama administration come for your guns?

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

NO ONE REALLY expects business to increase 60 percent in a worldwide economic crisis. Unless, of course, you own a firearms store, online ammo shop, or lease a booth at the regional gun show, in which case business is exploding.

Brad DeSaye's family has been selling guns and ammo since 1946, when his father Joe opened J&G Rifle Ranch in Montana. The business moved in 1977 to Prescott, Arizona, renaming itself J&G Sales. Specializing in guns and ammo for "sportsmen, law enforcement and firearms enthusiasts," J&G has thrived through multiple wars, recessions, and national panics. But sales have never been as high as they are at the moment, DeSaye says. "Business is probably triple more than normal," he tells *TAC*. "It's unprecedented."

He's hardly the exception. Boxes of ammunition of all calibers are reportedly flying off the shelves at double, even triple the normal price in neighborhood mom-and-pops, Wal-Marts, and at gun shows across the country. Big online dealers like Texas-based Cheaper Than Dirt are ordering millions of rounds at a time and slamming up against back-orders of six to eight months.

Meanwhile, Dave Hardy, who blogs at armsandthelaw.com, reports that gun shows are becoming surreal. "The last gun show I went to, ammo prices were close to double what they were six months ago," he says. "I saw three or four people enter with moving dollies, using them to haul out a load of ammo too heavy to carry. I have never seen that before, and I've been attending gun shows since the mid-1970s."

Firearms, especially semi-automatics and handguns, are in high demand. Longtime gun owners are said to be "stockpiling," while another demographic, the rookie, is beginning to make his mark. Ted Novin, spokesman for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, said the organization's introductory gun-safety classes are seeing "an unprecedented level" of attendance. "One of our courses is called 'First Shots'—it's jam-packed," he says.

From November through to March, the number of FBI background checks administered when someone purchases a gun jumped 29 percent to 3.8 million, compared to the same period last year. A survey by industry researcher SportsOneSource found that firearm sales by large retailers such as Wal-Mart are up 39 percent this year.

An unparalleled confluence of events seems to have triggered this run on firearms supplies. The hottest flashpoint by far was the November election, when a largely unknown liberal from Chicago won the presidency, and the Democratic Congress, led by gun-control advocates, emerged with an even more formidable, bulletproof majority.

"I think it's a reasonable reaction," Novin says of the sales spike. "This demonstrates that gun owners are determined to exercise their individual, constitutionally protected, Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms, safely and responsibly."

President Obama has said repeatedly that he supports the Second Amendment. But skeptical gun-rights activists point to his record in the Illinois State

Senate as proof that he would much prefer a world in which only the government has guns. "Obama has a history of supporting a ban on handguns," says Jeff Soyer, a pro-gun blogger who lives in Vermont. "The result has been a run on all types of firearms."

Although the president denies supporting such a move, he did vote to impose strict gun laws as a state senator between 1997 and 2004, including a bill that would limit handgun sales to individuals to one per month and allow victims of handgun violence to sue gun manufacturers. He has also suggested that only police should have the right to carry concealed weapons and that the federal government should raise taxes on firearms and ammo by 500 percent.

In addition to the president, a number of Democrats, including Attorney General Eric Holder and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, have said that they support the reinstatement of the Clinton-era ban on so-called assault weapons. But these politicians recognize that the political winds for gun control aren't blowing in their favor.

Still, gun advocates are not feeling comfortable. They warily read former president Jimmy Carter's recent *New York Times* op-ed pleading that the White House and Congress "not give up on trying to reinstate a ban on assault weapons." They do not discount another Democratic rally against the "gun-show loophole," through which some states still allow unlicensed dealers to sell firearms at shows. They see Obama's pledge to work with Mexico on international gun-running as an ominous sign.

There are more than 20 firearms-related bills pending in the House and at least seven in the Senate. Not all of these measures should be construed as anti-gun, yet fear remains among gun enthusiasts that, when the time is right, the new administration will pounce.

"[Obama] has surrounded himself with people who are not only extreme gun-control supporters, but they have been key leaders in that movement," says Dave Kopel, a gun-policy expert with the Colorado-based Independence Institute. "I think people are right to be concerned."

Yet the Carter and Clinton administrations—the latter saw a "Million Mom March" against guns—and the 2006 Democratic takeover of Congress also prompted nervous gun-buying sprees and no doubt generated profitable waves of political activity for the National Rifle Association and conservative grassroots.

Today is different, however, not only for the sheer volume of merchandise moving across the market but because the latest bout of gun buying is motivated by a larger uncertainty about the future. "There is a desperation to it," says DeSaye, whose business experienced booms following the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban (it expired in 2004), the millennium freak-out over Y2K, and what he gauges as a yearlong survivalist period after 9/11. "This is far bigger than any of the others," he insists. "There is an unknown out there."

That "unknown" is a sense that Washington and Wall Street are completely clueless about how to fix the derailed economy. No one has any idea how long this recession will last or, more darkly, whether government institutions will survive its nebulous passage.

"I grew up in a liberal Democratic family from New York City and never thought I'd ever own a gun," says David, a white middle-aged man from Northern

Virginia working on contract for the U.S. Army, who asked that his full name not be used. A dedicated Republican, he eschewed gun ownership until the November election. Now he owns a Ruger .357 Magnum revolver and a Mossberg 500 shotgun. In late 2008, his concerns about the new president, the economy, and a fear of crime led him to his first gun show. "I wanted to be able to defend myself and my home," he says. He felt that the new administration would later restrict his rights.

"There are a lot of people who think this house of cards is going to collapse," explains DeSaye. "A growing sense that the end is coming and I'd better be prepared."

Combined with right-wing fears of a socialist wealth grab and the apocalyptic bombast delivered by emerging media icons like Glenn Beck—who told his Fox audience in February that "depression and revolution" were coming—you have what some are already calling a panic. It's the infamous Toilet Paper Effect, which refers, of course, to the hysterical reaction to the late Johnny Carson's gag about a looming toilet paper shortage on Dec. 19, 1973. A day later, not a roll was left on the shelves.

Great comedic fare, but it's not so funny when weapons are the punchline. Carson might have had 20 million television viewers, but today the blogosphere can set off a run on a specific brand of ammo overnight with a few well-placed chat room posts about backorders—what DeSaye calls "a real feeding frenzy."

There are sounder, less sexy reasons for the short supply. Some say growing consumption of raw materials like brass, copper, and lead by India and China over the last four years has driven up the price of producing ammo. Others point out that new Homeland Security rules requiring 100 percent inspection of all

aircraft cargo have delayed shipments and increased costs.

Add to this the huge demands of the U.S. military since 2003. In 2007, the Associated Press reported that troops training for and fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan were consuming more than 1 billion bullets a year, "contributing to ammunition shortages hitting police departments nationwide and preventing some officers from training with the weapons they carry on patrol."

Yet activists like Larry Pratt of Gun Owners of America insist that shortages have more to do with a "getting it while you can" ethos, a reflection of the political climate and a heightened fear for safety. "Folks are getting the message. They are literally waiting for the ammo to come into a store, and when it comes in—whack—they leave with their arms full."

While easily dismissed by many Americans as paranoid and partisan, such frenzied consumption betrays a broader, more pernicious anxiety—a realization that within a generation individuals have ceded too much control of their lives to the state. The 9/11 attacks stimulated the enactment of sweeping new law-enforcement powers, while the White House was given *carte blanche* to push its prerogatives to the limit.

Gun restrictions may not be politically expedient now, but just one major violent event in the U.S.—perhaps another case of a man shooting his entire family because he's mired in debt—could set in motion a raft of even tighter controls on the constitutional right to bear arms.

Under the Bush administration, the Left bristled about the onset of a tyrannical government. Now gun owners on the Right are awaking to the same fear. ■

Kelley Beaucair Vlahos is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance reporter.

Beyond the Paleos

Fixing conservatism without adding a prefix

By W. James Antle III

ARLEN SPECTER began the month of April insisting that it was important to keep the Democrats from achieving a 60-vote majority in the Senate. “The only check and balance on the Democratic sweep with the White House and the House is 41 of us in the Senate,” he told *The American Spectator*. “Because if [Pat] Toomey is the Republican nominee and my seat goes, the Democrats get 60 votes.” Specter ended the month by switching parties and paving the way for that 60th Democratic vote.

His hasty departure from the GOP is a good reminder that most arguments made by politicians are based on electoral self-interest. But the reaction to Specter’s flip also revealed the poverty of the debate among Republicans as to how they can start winning again. Some Republican-friendly commentators treated the Specter switch as an occasion to rebuke conservatives for their partisan disloyalty. Others took the opportunity to assure us that, whatever the election results may say, all is well with the Republican Party.

“The Specter defection is too severe a catastrophe to qualify as a ‘wake-up call,’” wrote David Frum. “His defection is the thing we needed the wake-up call to warn us against!” Other posters at his website complained of Republican purges. *Commentary*’s John Podhoretz, while allowing that Pennsylvania’s newest Democratic senator is a “snake of the highest order,” called the conservative campaign against Specter “the most self-destructive act in modern political history.”

Not to be outdone, the anti-Specter conservatives shouted good riddance. Sean Hannity told his viewers that Specter’s new party affiliation “makes no difference.” Rush Limbaugh cheekily advised Specter to take John McCain with him. Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), one of the most active and respected conservative legislators on Capitol Hill, declared, “I would rather have 30 Republicans in the Senate who really believe in principles of limited government, free markets, free people, than to have 60 that don’t have a set of beliefs.”

Obviously, there is a lot of ground between these two extremes. In politics, you often have to accept imperfect allies. But a political movement that aspires to something greater than holding power for power’s sake cannot subordinate all its goals to the whims of its least reliable allies. Understood properly, the loss of Specter at this moment is unfortunate because it further diminishes conservatives’ already severely limited leverage in Washington. A Specter-free Republican Party is not, however, a great tragedy for conservatism.

The Specter flap has also shown that the debate over the Republican future is largely taking place between two camps. One group says that Republicans should imitate the Democrats’ success by imitating Democratic positions, with the non-negotiable exceptions of raising the top marginal income tax rate and pulling out of Iraq. Do whatever needs to be done to keep Arlen Specter and Lincoln Chafee happily affiliated with the

GOP so that we can hang on to enough seats to maybe block a Democratic-sponsored bill someday. Such bold strategic thinking.

On the other side of this debate is a group that in effect maintains that there is nothing wrong with the Republican Party that a 2012 Sarah Palin/Joe the Plumber ticket couldn’t fix. If George W. Bush and the Republican Congress hadn’t spent so much money, especially on those blasted earmarks, conservatives would still be in power. The way back to the Promised Land is to say what Bush said in 2004 even louder and to recruit candidates proficient in Beltway conservative think-tank white papers—especially in the blue states.

Pat Toomey is a smart man who capably represented a swing district in Pennsylvania for four terms. But he and many of the candidates supported by the Club for Growth when he was its president agree with the second assessment of the Republican Party’s fortunes. Arlen Specter is the dream candidate of those who prefer the first: an economic and social liberal who is only reliably Republican on issues pertaining to war and civil liberties. That Toomey is considered the underdog and Specter is reduced to desperation moves to keep a Senate seat he’s held for five terms should tell us something about these two approaches.

Fortunately, there is a third option. There is a flavor of conservatism that has not been discredited by the events of the past eight years. If anything, its criticisms of loose monetary policies, overcon-