

**WTE column Sept. 15, 2014. Editor's headline: "NRA is simply a shill for the gun makers."**

Something for legislators' attention regarding the National Rifle Association: These days, most of its funding comes not from membership dues but from contributions by gun makers.

"Major firearms manufacturers such as Smith and Wesson and Beretta have given millions of dollars to the NRA," writes Carl Hiaasen. "Sturm, Ruger & Co. donated a dollar for every gun sale to the organization from May 2011 to May 2012, raising \$1.25 million." The NRA has become "a coldhearted lobby for the gun industry." This, in a Miami Herald column of April 2013. An earlier column described the NRA as "corporate shill": between 2005 and 2011, firearms manufacturers donated a whopping \$39 million to the NRA. The industry does get its money's worth, Hiaasen added soberly. In Florida, gun legislation is all but written by the NRA.

An award-winning novelist and essayist whose weekly columns have appeared in the Miami Herald for some thirty years, Carl Hiaasen lampoons Florida's legislators along with their federal counterparts. His latest book-length collection of columns targets congressional doings as "Dance of the Reptiles."

Most gun owners, including Hiaasen, aren't NRA members. The organization claims 4.3 million members, yet that number represents only a tiny fraction of American gun owners, of whom there are at least 146 million: "[M]ore than 97 percent of legal gun owners in this country . . . don't belong to the NRA." Plus, the vast majority don't keep assault rifles or military-style semi-automatics of the type used on the moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado, or the children in Newton, Connecticut. These attacks shook up even some NRA backers.

A conservative pollster reports that more than 70 percent of NRA members support criminal background checks on gun buyers, and banning firearm ownership by anyone on the FBI terrorist watch list. But "the paranoid droolers" who run NRA turn apoplectic at the mere hint of reform. Hiaasen quotes from NRA leader Wayne LaPierre that "The future of your freedom is at stake. Gun-ban politicians and their media allies are on the attack . . . And they will not stop until they BAN hundreds of commonly owned firearms."

Hiaasen's book includes scathing criticism of past Governor Jeb Bush and current Governor Rick Scott. The latter's legal losing streak sets "a pathetic record for unconstitutional bills," he wrote in July 2012, as "Docs vs. Glocks," a law intended to muzzle physicians, was struck down by a federal judge. Inasmuch as one out of every 25 children delivered to pediatric trauma centers arrives with a gunshot wound, "Doctors who see children bearing bullet holes on a regular basis can be very powerful advocates" of gun control.

The NRA also wrote Florida's so-called "stand your ground" bill, signed into law by Jeb Bush in 2005, which Hiaasen then called "half-baked" and "bogus" and cooked up "by the nitwits in Tallahassee." The law allows people to start shooting "wherever they happen to be, whenever they happen to feel threatened." By expanding the so-called castle doctrine to include public spaces, the law, which is on the books in several other states now, doesn't

make the streets safer; on the contrary. It encourages armed citizens to “stand their ground” when they could get away. Thus it invites tragedy for crime victims and bystanders alike. Inadvertently it produces assaults and homicides as acts of self-defense.

In 2012 Hiaasen followed up with a piece on Traynor Martin’s death, the unarmed black teenager shot by George Zimmerman, a white man who subsequently evoked the law in his defense and was acquitted. As he shadowed the youngster (who had no criminal record), the police dispatcher with whom he talked urged him to quit following Martin; on the tape, Zimmerman is heard hastening his pursuit. Still, when Special Prosecutor Angela Corey announced second-degree murder charges, Hiaasen deemed it unlikely she’d obtain a conviction, wondering why she had not charged manslaughter. “To win a conviction for second-degree murder, prosecutors must convince a six-member jury that Zimmerman acted in a manner that was ‘evincing a deprived mind.’ Suspicion, unfounded or not, isn’t inherently malicious. Nor is reckless judgment a sure sign of mental depravity.”

Another harebrained Florida law, NRA-engendered in 2011, allows gun owners to bring loaded weapons to beaches, parks, libraries, city halls, school-board headquarters, even the Capitol. When lawmakers realized what their gaffe portended for them, they demanded panic button on their telephones. “Until a few months ago, law-enforcement officers asked all pistol-packing constituents to leave their weapons in a lockbox before entering the Capitol.” No more. Florida legislators, who didn’t bother to read the bill they pushed, now face the prospect of being confronted in their offices with disgruntled constituents who bear firearms to make a point.

Wyoming lawmakers, take note. The NRA offers campaign contributions with the aim to sell guns. No matter to whom, no matter the consequences.