



## **Confessions of a Gun Nut**

**Michael R. Weisser**

**Mike The Gun Guy™**

Copyright 2018

## Introduction.

My father's best friend was Harry Plotkin. Harry was an attorney who, like my father, came to DC to work for the government during the War. And if you don't know what I mean when I talk about the 'War,' you are either a post-Boomer or a Millennial or whatever they are calling the latest generation (is it Generation Z?)

Actually, Harry and his wife Esther came to DC before the war, because Harry got a job with a new Federal agency, the FCC. He ended up helping to write the regulations which governed the granting of radio and television licenses, then started his own firm which specialized [representing](#) media companies before the FCC.

Harry was born and raised in Massachusetts, attended both Harvard College and Harvard Law. The furthest West he ever went, besides living for two years in Chicago after law school, was out to Bethesda or Chevy Chase.

But Harry loved cowboy movies, maybe because he had never been out West. So at least once a month he me and his son, Ira, to the RKO-Keiths to see every new cowboy movie that came to town. And if there was no new cowboy movie, we went to see one that we had already seen.

Know how many times I saw Alan Ladd gun down Jack Palance in the town saloon? About as many times as I saw John Wayne tie a yellow ribbon around his neck and go out to chase Indians to protect the wagon trains.

If you were a boy growing up in the 1950's and you didn't play cowboys and Indians with your friends, you didn't have any friends. And the cowboys always won because they had all those guns.

The last Hollywood actor to kick-start a career by killing all the bad guys out West was Clint Eastwood, even if the movies were set in Southern Spain. But what got Clint into the really big time was when he began making those Dirty Harry movies in 1971.

And what made those movies so powerful and the violence so extreme? The fact that Clint (aka Harry Callahan) walked around San Francisco with a 44-magnum gun.

This gun, known as the Model 29, was first introduced into the Smith & Wesson catalog in 1955. The gun sold a bit here and there, but it wasn't about to displace the old, police standby known as the Model 10. First of all, the gun was very large and heavy, so toting it around would usually wind up giving you an aching back. Second, you might get off one shot but certainly not two because the recoil was fearsome which made the gun not so easy or pleasant to shoot.

I shot my first Model 29 in 1968 or 1969 and after 2 or 3 rounds I was all done. I think the gun retailed for \$299, but dealers were happy to discount the item at least 10 percent to move it off their shelves.

This all changed with *Dirty Harry* which was released in 1971 followed by *Magnum Force* in 1973. At the time I was running my great-uncle's Smith & Wesson distributorship and retail store, and all of a sudden, customers came in looking to buy a 'Dirty Harry gun.' Problem was that the last people to learn about this craze were the folks up on Roosevelt Avenue in Springfield, MA, where the gun happened to be made. Overnight, it seemed, we went from trying desperately to take as few Model 29's in our annual product order to trying just as desperately to get more of those guns.

It turned out that right around the time that every Dirty Harry fan wanted to buy a Model 29, the factory in Springfield received an enormous order for one of its police-duty guns known as the Model 66, which was a stainless-steel version of the standard Model 10, except that the 10 was chambered for 30 special and the 66 was chambered for the 357 magnum round.

Although Smith & Wesson's annual production of law-enforcement guns never exceeded 20 percent of the total guns shipped by the factory each year, the company thought of itself primarily as a producer for the cops first and what we referred to as the 'sporting goods' market second. The head of police manufacturing, Dave Simons, walked around the plant like a veritable monarch; his counterpart on the sporting side, Del Shorb, kind of snuck around like a mouse.

Back in those days, the pre-polymer days, it could take as much as 18 months to move and re-set a manufacturing line from one gun to another, particularly if you had to change the steel being used for the gun, the finish, the caliber, the frame and the grips. All of these changes had to be made to move from the Model 66 to the Model 29, which meant we would wait for additional Dirty Harry guns. And when our sales rep, Carl Carson called up to tell us he was coming dropping by, he made a point of saying, "And don't ask me about those damn Model 29's, okay?" I liked Carl so I wasn't about to bust his chops.

The point I am making is that back in those days, popular culture was one thing, guns were something else. The two really had little, if anything, to do with each other, which is a pretty good indication of how things have changed. And if you want to understand the gun business and the place of the gun business in American society now, you have to be aware of when and how those changes occurred, as well as why.

The first time that I ever heard anything about guns as being something which might be considered a risk was after the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. But there was really no talk about how guns were contributing to crime or violence, there was just an idea that we had to do something about regulating guns because Kennedy had been killed with a gun. And worse, the guy who killed him was allegedly involved with the Communists and Castro in some way, and he was able to get his hands on a gun by sending a ten-dollar money-order under a phony name to a sporting-goods wholesaler in Chicago who mailed him a cheap, Italian army carbine to a post-office box which was also not in his name.

When the gun-control law that Senator Dodd introduced in 1963 finally was signed by LBJ in 1968, the text said the law was being put into effect to "provide support to Federal, State and local law enforcement officials in their fight against crime and violence" even though the violent

crime rate in the 1960's was less than half of what it became in the following decade, and one-third of the violent crime rates registered in the decade (1980's) after that.

I'm going to pause the historical narrative at this point because I want to get back to some personal experiences with guns at the beginning of my long involvement with the gun business, as well as first making a general comment about why I am writing this book.

There once was this village in Industan where six blind men lived. And one day they were taken out to the edge of the village where there was an elephant, and they were each asked to touch the elephant and then describe the object as best they could. None of them had ever seen an elephant but they were told that wherever they touched the beast they would be able to describe the whole thing.

The first blind man touched the trunk and said that the animal was obviously a snake. The second out his hand on the elephant's ear and said that obviously the object was a fan. The third touched a leg and pronounced that he was, in fact, leaning against a tree. The fourth touched its side and claimed that he was standing next to a wall. The fifth blind man felt the tail and said it was a rope; the last placed his hand on one of the elephant's tusks, and said he had grasped a spear. Every one of the blind men knew that what he had touched was the whole object for sure. Then an argument broke out between them over who was correct, and this led to a fight.

For purposes of this book, please keep in mind that the gun is the elephant, not outside the Industan village, but in the room. Smith & Wesson may be the second, best-known American brand-name after Coke, but put a gun owner and a non-gun owner in a room together with a gun sitting between them on the coffee table, and you'll get two very different reactions. My father and his friends were veterans of World War II. My father was in the Navy and went ashore in the January, 1944 invasion of the Marshalls atoll known as Kwajalein. He saw lots of dead bodies, he saw lots of men killed or wounded by guns.

In his civilian life my father never owned a gun. It didn't bother him one way or the other that I always owned guns. One Sunday afternoon I walked into his house carrying a Ruger Mini-14 rifle, a gun designed by Bill Ruger to be used as a light hunting weapon even though it looked and felt like the M-1 carbine of World War II fame. As I walked past my father who had been snoozing on the couch, he rolled over, looked up, smiled and said, "Hey, that's the gun I trained with before Kwajalein."

Guns weren't part of my father's life because he had seen enough gun deaths on the beaches of Kwajalein to last his whole life. Plus, he wasn't raised on a farm; he was born and educated in New York City, always lived in an urban environment, always held a high-level management position; in other words, his background was about as far away from the background of the average gun owner as one could get.

Meanwhile, his son (that's me) can be seen in one of my father's 8mm home movies standing on the street twirling my Roy Rogers plastic revolver which I had just pulled out of my Roy Rogers holster and wearing my Roy Rogers hat. I was six years old and you won't find a picture of my as a kid in which I was happier than I was standing there, twirling that gun. Meanwhile, I had an older brother who was born just two years before me and he wasn't interested in guns at all. I don't recall my brother Billy ever going to the cowboy movies which I saw with Harry Plotkin and his son.

I joined the NRA in 1955 when I was eleven years old. Were we living in Topeka, KS or Abilene, TX? No. We were living right in the middle of Washington, D.C. In fact, I could walk downtown along Georgia Avenue and wind up at the NRA headquarters where I would wander through their gun museum and if I had the time, I'd go down Constitution Avenue to the old FBI building and take the tour.

Why did I take the FBI tour about fifty times? Because the highlight of the tour (for me) was when we went down to the gun range and one of the agents shot a bunch of 50-caliber rounds out of the Tommy gun and I could take home the empty shells. I had cigar boxes filled with empty shells.

The reason I joined the NRA was because there was a rifle range in the basement of my brother's junior high school – McFarland Junior High, now McFarland Middle School – and I was a member of the rifle team which practiced and held matches at the range. On Friday afternoon after rifle practice I could put one of the rifles into a cloth carrying sack, walk home with it, clean it, play with it and sleep with it until I brought it back to school.

So here I was, walking through the middle of Washington, D.C. with a real gun at the age of eleven and nobody noticed me and nobody cared. The following Summer I was sent down to Florida to spend several weeks with my great-uncle Nathan because my parents were moving back to New York City and didn't want me underfoot.

On the last day of my sojourn in Florida my great-uncle and I were driving up Highway 441 that runs on a straight line from Miami to Palm Beach. The highway is about 4 miles inland, there isn't a single inch of space which isn't a condo development, a strip mall or some other overcrowded spot, but in 1956, Highway 441 marked the limits of civilization in Dade and Broward Counties – to the east were communities spreading out away from the coast, to the west was nothing but swamp.

At some point we pulled over at one of those stainless-steel diners that are now considered architectural landmarks and went in to get a drink. When we came out, we saw a flea market on the other side of the road with a whole bunch of tables displaying all kinds of junk. We walked across the highway, split up and all of a sudden, I found myself in front of a table with a bunch of royal blue cardboard boxes each box containing a Smith...and...Wesson...revolver! I was overjoyed I was beside myself with glee.

I picked up one of the guns, the old coot behind the table said, "Are you a Florida resident?" He could have cared less about my age. And when I turned my head back and forth sideways he said to me, "Y'all see that ol' boy ovuh there?" Gesturing to another old coot standing a few feet away. I nodded 'yes' and he continued, "You go ovuh there an' give him fifty dollars and he'll give you the gun." My first straw sale.

I happened to have fifty bucks in my pocket, it was spending money that my father gave me when he took me down to Union Station in DC two weeks earlier and put me on the train. So I did exactly what the ol' boy said. Walked down a bit to the other guy, gave him two twenties and a ten and he gave me the gun – a beautiful, K-38 revolver, although I don't remember if the caliber was 38 or 22.

I ended up owning that gun for about 15 minutes because as soon as I walked up to my Uncle Nathan and pulled the box out from under my arm, he grabbed it away and yelled, "You can't

take that back home! What will your parents say if I let you buy a gun?" I don't know what they would have said, but I suspect that within 20 minutes after Uncle Nathan put me on the train the next day back to DC, the gun was in some pawn shop on Biscayne Boulevard waiting to be sold again.

Now here's the point of the brief journey into a life gone by. Between 1956 when I bought that K-38 in Florida until June 26, 2008, when the Supreme Court for the first time granted Constitutional protection to privately-owned guns, I probably bought and sold at least 500 guns. They came in, they went out, some were traded, others either joined or left my collection with the exchange of some cash. During that same 52-year period, the civilian gun arsenal [increased](#) by at least one hundred million guns, probably a lot more. In fact, between wholesaling, manufacturing, importing and retailing, I probably added 50,000 guns to that total, aside from the guns that I bought and sold for myself.

Not a single one of the transactions which involved my personally-owned guns, or the guns I pushed into the civilian market, or all the other guns that ended up in the hands of American gun owners had any Constitutional protection at all. Yet every one of those transactions was completely legal (the illegal transfer only happen after a gun is initially privately owned) and in no case do I recall anyone talking about, or giving a damn about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment at all.

Was there some talk about 2<sup>nd</sup>-Amendment 'rights' in the debates that led up to the first, major gun law in 1968? There was so little talk about those rights that even the NRA only had some timid concerns with the statute and worked with the law's author, Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, to put what the March, 1968 NRA magazine called 'new teeth' into federal gun laws.

Even after the two gun laws signed by Clinton – Brady and Assault Weapons Ban – came into effect, the existence of a specific, Constitutional 'right' to firearm ownership just wasn't something that ever came up in discussions I had with other gun nuts about guns. For that matter, I can recall instance after instance in which I found myself showing someone a gun in the most unlikely places and nobody cared. In 1980 I flew up from South Carolina to visit the Smith & Wesson factory because I had put in an application to become a law-enforcement distributor, which meant I had to have a face-to-face meeting with Dave Simons, who ran the law-enforcement division the way an Indian maharajah might run his private domains.

After I did the required obsequious face-to-face with Simons, I drove down to Connecticut to visit a Colt distributor in Meriden where I bought a beautiful, stainless-steel Python revolver to take back home. I went from the distributor's place in Newington to the airport outside of Hartford, got on line to be ticketed and told the ticket agent that my suitcase contained a gun. Several of the airport cops happened to be standing a few feet away from me and overheard what I said, whereupon they came over, smiling, and asked if they could see the gun.

The cops weren't trying to decide whether I was a good guy or bad guy, they wanted to see the gun. And when I pulled this beautiful, gleaming Python out of its case, one of them grabbed it, held it this way and that, tried the trigger pull a few times and handed the gun to the other cop. Meanwhile, as he was playing with the gun, his partner got on the radio and told announced to the rest of the detail on patrol, "Hey, come see this gun. We're at the Delta counter. It's a 6-inch Python – brand new!" And for the next 20 minutes or so, until I had to check the gun in order to make my flight, I was surrounded by various law-enforcement agents who wanted to play with the gun.

Want another story? Try this one. I'm down in Miami visiting my grandfather in the hospital in 1977. He had suffered a stroke, was semi-comatose and the end was not far away. I showed up to keep my grandmother company, she would stay in his room in the morning, I would take the afternoon shift. One afternoon I left the hospital and drove out into the Glades along Highway 41, aka Alligator Alley, which is the east-west route running from downtown Miami all the way across the swamp until it swings north at Naples and then up the Gulf coast.

Just as you get into the Glades, maybe ten miles from the beginning of the inbound at Miami's International Airport, you pass the Trail Glades Range, a public shooting range, which as far as I'm concerned, is the nicest place in the entire United States to shoot a gun. Not only are the facilities both for centerfire and shotguns just perfect in every respect, but there's a good chance you'll meet other shooters which means you can play a game called 'you shoot mine and I'll shoot yours.'

The day I was out there I happened to have with me two Colt Diamondback revolvers, one in 38 Special and the other in 22. The Diamondback line was one of Colt's premier gun lines, the finishes were mint, they actually glowed. The grips were perfectly cut, and it goes without saying that the guns were accurate as hell. So here I am shooting my guns, and I ended up sharing them with a guy who let me shoot his Browning Hi-Power, another guy had a 1911, on and on.

I ended up leaving the range as it was getting dark, figuring I would get back to my Grandmother's apartment in South Miami Beach (this was before there was something known as South Beach) around 8 P.M. Then disaster struck. As I drove past the Orange Bowl on Highway 41, the car farted a couple of times, sputtered and died. So here I am stuck on the highway, this was long before the days of cell phones, so you just had to wait until a cop or a wrecker came by.

I waited about an hour. Then a police car pulled up, he made a call and took off, but ten minutes later I was standing there, watching my car getting ready to be towed.

The good news was that the two kids who were driving the tow truck figured out what was wrong with my car and announced that we would stop off at some all-night discount store where they would buy the new part and then repair the car at their garage. All fine with me. I sat in the tow truck with these two guys, gave them the money to buy the necessary part, and I then found myself being driven in their truck (with my car being towed) into what I have to say was, without doubt, about the worst part of town.

We were somewhere in Overtown, which is the neighborhood where I-95 bisects I-395, a typical, inner-city neighborhood basically reduced to rubble and garbage-filled lots whenever an interstate highway tears through just about any part of a town. The tow-truck stopped in front of a garage, the guys driving the truck unhitched my car, the garage door opened up and my car was pushed inside the garage to a workspace where several other guys were standing around. This was around 9 o'clock at night.

Two guys started working on my car and a third jumped into the driver's seat, I guess to rev up the motor, and all of a sudden, the guy behind the wheel held up one of my Diamondbacks and yelled, "Hey – what's this?" At which point I realized that I had left my guns on the front seat after driving away from the shooting range, and never thought to put them away after the car broke down.

The guys kept working on my car but at the same time they also set up a little backstop against one wall and took turns firing off the gun. There we were, right in the middle of downtown Miami in a public space and everyone was taking turns shooting the guns. There were even a few side bets made between the guys as they switched back and forth between shooting my guns and fixing my car. An hour or so after they first pulled my car into the garage it was fixed, ran just fine, and my two Colts were back on the front seat minus the ammunition which had all been shot up.

One more quick story, okay? This is from Tuesday before Thanksgiving, 2001. My wife and I flew out to California the previous Sunday to meet my son and drive back across the country with him in his fancy, Honda Sport. First night out we slept in Reno and before leaving town the next morning I walked into a pawn shop and bought a Colt Single Action Army revolver in 22 Mag. I then walked down the street to a drugstore where I bought 100 rounds of ammo for the gun. Out West they sell ammunition in drug stores. Why not?

The reason I could take the gun with me instead of having it shipped back to a dealer in my home state is because I have a Federal Firearms License (FFL) which allows me to buy a gun anywhere in the United States from another dealer, and if I take the gun out of his store, stick it in my car and drive back home, I'm saving him the trouble and me the expense of shipping the gun back to the address on my FFL.

Now in fact, by walking out of the pawn shop in Reno with a gun that I purchased using my FFL whose address is a different state (happened to be Massachusetts at that time) I was violating at least two federal laws and maybe three. Because the law which requires that all handguns be shipped from state to state, dealer to dealer, was passed in 1938, in order to make it more difficult for handguns, as opposed to rifles and shotguns, to just float around. Another regulation requires that interstate gun shipments go by common carrier, meaning FedEx or UPS, and the guns be declared. Last time I looked, my son's Honda didn't have a UPS logo on the door.

So let's say we are driving merrily across the country and get pulled over in Iowa or Illinois by Officer Friendly or maybe Officer Not So Friendly who sees the gun. He'll ask why I have the gun and I'll tell him that it's my personal gun. Except that's not true. Because I live in Massachusetts, the fact that I have an FFL has nothing to do with whether or not I personally own guns. In order to own a gun as a Massachusetts resident, I have to fill out and submit a form which then validates that I hold a gun license issued by the Bay State and can therefore legally own a gun. The Colt Single Action Army that I bought in Reno is now part of my dealer's inventory, which means that it is supposed to be on the premises to which my FFL is issued, which isn't the back seat of my son's car.

How many guns move from one place to another every day and, in the process, probably represent the violation of at least two federal gun laws? Try thousands. There are more than 60,000 FFL's currently held by dealers, pawnbrokers, manufacturers, importers and gun collectors. Any of those licensees can walk into a gun shop and do exactly what I did in Reno; i.e., buy and walk out of the shop with a gun.

If I had a nickel for every time some gun-control group complains about the 'gun show loophole,' or the 'gun trafficking loophole,' or the 'internet loophole' without having the slightest idea of the real loopholes which exist in the legal statutes on which we depend to regulate guns.... Anyway, back to Reno.

The second day out we drove across Nevada and into Utah, our destination being the wonderful Capitol Reef National Park, probably the least-visited and most beautiful piece of park property anywhere in the United States. Just before entering the park, we pulled the car over to the shoulder of State Route 24 to take a break, and my son said, "Hey Dad, let's shoot the gun." So we got out of the car, walked about 50 yards, set up a couple of tin cans that were lying around, backed off and began to plink away.

I doubt if there is a square yard of open range anywhere in the United States which doesn't have at least one empty beer can sitting a few feet from the side of the road. And these cans make perfect plinking targets for a 22 Magnum gun, because if your round hits the can right where the edge of the can is lying on the ground, the can will jump 10 feet into the air. So what you do is simply walk around pulling the trigger and following the can.

We were out there for about 15 minutes, standing maybe 100 yards from our car (with my wife in the back seat peacefully asleep) when a State Highway Patrol car rolled by in the opposite direction. I waved, he waved back, then he made a U-turn, pulled up behind our car and came walking across the sand. Of course what he wanted to do was shoot the gun. "That's some gun," he said, as he gave it back to Billy, thanked us for our hospitality and walked back to his car.

This incident took place about two months after the Twin Towers came down. The country was still in a state of collective shock; after our shooting practice we ended up that night at Aspen where we booked two rooms for \$50 a room since nobody was going anywhere. But the point is that even in the middle of the semi-hysteria following 9-11, with daily stories about this terrorist 'threat' and that terrorist 'threat,' a state patrolman in Utah saw two men whose car had an out-of-state plate standing by the side of the road banging away, and he wanted to join in the fun.

The point of these brief anecdotes, and believe me I could run through fifty more, is that the issue of guns as representing either some kind of threat to community safety or protection from violence and crime was very marginal to the public debate even when the Clinton Administration passed two gun laws in 1993 (Brady) and 1994 (assault weapons ban.) The NRA got all hot and bothered about the Brady bill because the original draft called for a national, 7-day waiting period for all gun purchases, an idea that was eventually scrapped. As for the assault weapons ban, this was hardly a game-breaker when it came to gun regulations, not only because it didn't take assault rifles off the streets, but was tucked into an omnibus crime bill that put 70,000 more cops on the streets, as well as putting thousands of inner-city (read: ghetto or Black) males into jail.

In 1992, following the Los Angeles riots which broke out following the not-guilty verdict in the trial of the cops who beat up Rodney King, gun shops did a brisk business for a couple of weeks, but as soon as the videos of burning buildings in LA disappeared, so did the demand for guns. A couple of years after the LA riots, I was using the basement of a gun shop in Baltimore as a warehouse for guns I was importing into the States, and one day I noticed what appeared to be a veritable stampede of customers in the retail area of the store. It turned out that a rumor was sweeping around Maryland that the State Legislature was considering a bill to ban certain kinds of guns. The story turned out to be entirely false, but it sparked a brief uptick of gun sales beyond anything related to Rodney King.

The defining moment which created the current noise about guns, on both sides of the issue, was the murder of 20 little kids and 6 adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT

on December 14, 2012. Here's the proof of what happened to the public consciousness about guns on that day:



This is the number of Google searches for the term 'gun violence' from 2004 through 2017. Note that after a brief spike at the beginning of 2004, interest in this topic remained steady and fairly subdued until the next big search spike, coincident with the shooting rampage at Sandy Hook. Following the second upsurge searches about gun violence, both the daily average and the subsequent spikes show a much more intense interest in this issue over the last five years.

As the issue of guns moves from the margin to the mainstream of public interest and discourse, so the narratives on both sides of the debate have tried to build more organizational support for themselves by creating arguments which will attract a wider and more committed audience. When the NRA first began aligning itself publicly and noisily with pro-gun political allies, the idea that gun owners were in the front lines of defense of American liberties, which is now the usual pro-gun argument, was never mentioned. On the other hand, an early attempt to build a national movement around the banning of handguns by the group (Handgun Control, Inc.) which later morphed into Brady, also collapsed.

What I am going to do in this book is examine the narratives being used by both sides in the gun debate through the prism of my own experiences and activities for the 50-plus years that I have been connected to the gun business. In this respect, I'm not saying I represent anyone other than myself. But as I began paying attention to what pro-gun and anti-gun activists were saying, I increasingly discovered that very little of the arguments on either side came even remotely close to validating the knowledge about guns which I have accumulated over the past fifty years. So let's begin this discussion with the day that I first started obsessively thinking about guns, which was the day that I first heard about the massacre at Sandy Hook.