**Notes on Gunned Down: the Power of the NRA; PBS Frontline**

**The National Rifle Association (NRA) is regarded as the most feared, most powerful interest group in Washington. The NRA is “the gold standard” for lobbying.**

1. Shooting of Congresswoman Gabby Giffords: 19 victims; 13 dead in 15 seconds; by shooter Jared Loughner.

Reminds country of the effect of weak gun laws. Gun control advocates are angry.

NRA is most powerful lobby in the nation; best equipped; most feared interest group in Washington; NRA is the gold standard for how to do lobbying.

1. Shootings at Columbine High School: 1999. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s friend bought automatic weapons for them at gun show; no background check required: gun show loophole.

Angry gun control advocates protest in Denver: Stop the NRA.

NRA’s base and members “love their country; pure patriotism.”

Following Columbine gun purchases go up and hundreds of thousands of new members join the NRA.

1. Once the NRA was a sportsmen’s group. Through 1960’s focus of the NRA was gun safety education.

Then came assassinations of the 1960s: JFK, MLK and RFK, and urban riots following the assassination of MLK. LBJ announces that crime control is gun control. 1968 LBJ signs into law a bill that bans mail order sales and restricts gun purchases. New gun control law has transformational effect on NRA. **1977 NRA Convention: sportsmen vs. gun rights activists. Gun Rights group takes control** of the organization. Core support for membership and donations comes from conservative Republicans.

1981: Assassination attempt on President Reagan. James Brady takes bullet in head. Reagan does nothing for gun control.

1993, President Clinton signs Brady Bill (Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act) that requires **federal background checks for gun purchase** and a 1994 **federal law that bans assault weapons.**

NRA thrives best in combat: best able to raise money when gun owners are made to feel they are under attack.

**1999 Columbine shooting**: A bill to tighten background checks is introduced in U.S. Senate..Vice-President Gore is called to Senate floor to break a tie-vote; the amendment passes in the Senate. Wayne LaPierre, lobbyist in Washington since 1970s. LaPierre is now executive director of NRA. Quiet guy, not a typical lobbyist – and not a gun enthusiast. He knows “nothing about guns,” but he knows politics. Knew how to navigate between the sportsmen and the gun advocates – the two factions -- in the NRA membership.

LaPierre sends out letters to members calling federal ATF agents “jack-booted thugs”. Many mainstream Republican members of the NRA, including former Pres. George H.W. Bush resign their membership. LaPierre apologizes on national TV.

When the bill to tighten background checks that passed in the Senate is sent to the House, the NRA sounds the alarm among its members, accuses the Clinton administration of having an “anti-gun agenda.” Fear level is high so NRA members flood Congress with calls. **Members of Congress know that NRA members vote.** Bill fails, 22 votes short of passing. NRA claims a victory.

NRA convention in 2000. Charlton Heston, former movie actor and NRA president announces, “NRA is Back.” Al Gore, who broke the tie in the Senate, is running against George W. Bush in 2000 Presidential election. NRA wants to get even. Bush wins in states when NRA has significant membership, including Florida. NRA influence is considered a decisive factor in Bush’s win.

1. The Assault Weapons ban expires in 2004. In 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court decides that there is a constitutional right for individual gun ownership. Gun control movement is left in disarray. **Total victory for the NRA.**

**December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook elementary in Newtown, CT., Adam Lanza shoots and kills 20 children and 6 adults.** Sandy Hook has same effect on Obama as Columbine had on Clinton. Obama directs VP Biden and staff to “make something happen.” If this (shooting of 20 children) isn’t going to do it, what is?”

Even some wives of NRA executives are affected, “You have to do something different…honey.”

LaPierre stages press conference. Assumption is that he is going to throw a bone, or at least some comfort to the Sandy Hook parents. Instead: “Only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun.” LaPierre says that the solution is more guns. **His words are directed at gun owners of America**. NYC press calls him a Gun Nut and the “Craziest Man on Earth.” **Donations flow into the NRA. Message to gun owners: “Obama is the enemy: they want to take away your guns.”**

Sandy Hook parents form an organization they call “Sandy Hook Promise.” Political adviser warns them: “**You are about to wade into the toughest waters in American politics. Nothing is nastier than the gun debate.”**

The parents believe that surely something will change.

Parents want to try for outlawing high capacity magazines. Advisors tell them that there is just not an appetite in Congress for a new assault weapons ban and that there are too many high magazine clips out in the public; clips can be bought for $10 online. Parents are advised that the best they can hope for: **legislation that will mandate expanded background checks.**

White House needs someone from Congress to lead the legislative battle. They locate a **Democratic Senator from W.VA with an A rating from the NRA, Joe Manchin. Manchin introduces a bill that will close the gun show loophole: require background checks at gun shows. Bill has wide public support: 91% of the public support the bill; 80% of homes that include an NRA member support the bill.** Early in the process the NRA is involved in the legislative process and had input into the wording of the bill.

Two smaller gun rights group oppose the NRA’s involvement. Gun Owners of America, with 300,000 members accuses the NRA of compromise. Gun Owners president says, “Gun control kills people.”

**NRA switches gears and goes after Manchin in a personal vendetta in advertisements that characterize him as a traitor to the gun rights cause.**

Gabby Gifford appears at a Senate hearing. Speaking in halting language resulting from her brain injury, she urges Congress to **“Be Bold. The Time is Now.”**

The Sandy Hook families and some survivors of the Giffords shooting are in the Gallery when the background checks bill come up for a vote in the Senate. The crucial votes needed to pass slip away and the amendment is defeated.

A woman who survived the Arizona shooting shouts, “Shame on You!” to members of the Senate who defeated the bill. Vice-President Biden says the families felt betrayed.

**The NRA came out of the Sandy Hook tragedy stronger than ever. The NRA has mastered lobbying and interest group politics in ways that are not illegal or even immoral, just effective.**