

Sniper 4/20/01

Fifty-caliber rifles

By Dan Baum

To the naked eye, the target is a white speck on a hillside half a mile away. But shimmering in the crosshairs of a thousand-dollar telescopic site, it's a life-size steel silhouette of a goat, freckled with bullet holes. The rifle intended to hit such a faraway target seems made for giants. Its barrel is almost four feet long and as big around as the post on a chain-link fence. Its .50-caliber brass cartridge stands five-and-a-half inches tall, and threading it into the breech is like pushing a small flashlight into a water pipe. Even supported on a bipod, this \$7,000 rifle is so heavy that heaving it into shooting position is like aiming an I-beam.¹

"It'll kick some," says the rifle's amiable owner. "That bullet's got more powder in it than a hand grenade."² At the next bench a man lets fly with a .50 of his own and the muzzle blast, from ten feet away, flutters

¹ Matt Guptill 714-693-7878

² Frank Abramson, 714-520-4600. The hand grenade assertion can be checked with William Atwater, director of the Ordinance Museum at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 410-278-3602

my clothing, pops my sinuses, and, despite high-tech muffs, hurts my ears.

This is extreme marksmanship, a companion sport to extreme snowboarding or extreme mountaineering. The Brobdignagian rifles thundering here at the Angeles Range in the San Fernando valley³ are the biggest firearms you can buy without a special dispensation from the government.⁴ Fifty-caliber rifles shoot ammunition originally designed to chew up armored vehicles, and they're accurate, in the right hands, at a mile or more.⁵ They can shoot through bullet proof glass, through armored limousines, through cinderblock walls, through the engines of climbing airliners, or – from as far away as the Washington Monument -- through the forehead of someone standing on the steps of the Capitol.⁶ And any 18-year-old can buy one with no more paperwork than it takes to buy a .22 at Wal-Mart. Just fill out the form and leave your money on the counter.⁷

³ Angeles Range 800 499-4486

⁴ John D'Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500

⁵ William Atwater, director of the Ordinance Museum at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 410-278-3602

⁶ William Atwater, director of the Ordinance Museum at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 410-278-3602

⁷ John D'Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500

That's what worries U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein⁸ and Reps. Rod Blagojevich,⁹ Henry Waxman,¹⁰ and Carolyn McCarthy¹¹, Democrats all. They are pushing legislation to reclassify .50-caliber rifles as military hardware, which would make them as hard to buy as machine guns, silencers, mortars, and other weapons of war.¹² "Why does an ordinary citizen need a gun that can shoot a mile?" asks McCarthy, who first ran for Congress on the gun-control issue in 1996 after her husband was murdered and her son paralyzed by a lunatic with a pistol on the Long Island Railroad.¹³ Adds Waxman, "this is a needlessly destructive and powerful weapon."¹⁴

For all the rhetorical firepower, however, the threat of .50-caliber rifles is so far theoretical. Several thousand are in circulation, yet after almost two decades of commercial sales nobody in the United States has

⁸ Sen. Dianne Feinstein 202-224-3841 can be reached through press secretary Jim Hock

⁹ Rep. Rod Blagojevich, Matt Devine, press secretary, 773-868-3240

¹⁰ Rep. Henry Waxman 202-225-3976. You can reach him through Chief of Staff Phil Schiliro.

¹¹ Rep. Carolyn McCarthy can be reached through her chief of staff, Jim Messina, at (202) 226-8171

¹² S. 505 To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to regulate certain 50 caliber sniper weapons in the same manner as machine guns and other firearms and for other purposes.

¹³ Rep. Carolyn McCarthy can be reached through her chief of staff, Jim Messina, at (202) 226-8171

¹⁴ Rep. Henry Waxman 202-225-3976

ever committed a homicide with one, according to the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.¹⁵ The Branch Dividians at Waco and the Church Universal and Triumphant outside Yellowstone National Park each had several, but never fired them in anger. Fifties have shown up at crime scenes, and the Irish Republican Army reportedly killed a British soldier with one,¹⁶ but as far as ATF knows, the American criminal record of the .50 is clean.¹⁷ Such highly specialized weapons costing from \$1,500 to \$15,000 apiece¹⁸, and weighing as much as 50 pounds are not likely to show up in bank robberies or drive-by shootings. “There is no crisis,” says John Burt (cq), chairman of the Fifty Caliber Shooters Policy Institute, whose parent organization, the Fifty Caliber Shooters Association, fields about 1,900 members including my host here at the Angeles Range.¹⁹

“That’s what they said about assault rifles,” says Tom Diaz of the Violence Policy Center, the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit that put the .50-caliber bug in Blagojevich and Feinstein’s ears. “When we first started talking about assault rifles in the early eighties, everybody said,

¹⁵ John D’Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500

¹⁶ “One Shot, One Kill” Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles, Violence Policy Center, quoting the Irish Times

¹⁷ John D’Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500

¹⁸ Frank Abramson, 714-520-4600

¹⁹ John Burt, (909) 653-5447, and the Fifty Caliber Shooters Association Fact Sheet

oh, they're so rare, they're so unusual, they're not a problem. And then (assault rifles) became an enormous problem. Once people saw what assault rifles could do, there was a groundswell" of support for restricting them.²⁰

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As my finger closes around the trigger, the rifle kicks me hard in the shoulder, the sight smacks my glasses, and my ears shut down. I feel drained, as though my heart has flown out of my chest through the gun's enormous barrel. Although I've been a deer hunter most of my adult life, ordinary hunting rifles did not prepare me for the exhausting recoil and muzzle blast of the .50.

Fifties are designed to fire the ammunition of the belt-fed .50-caliber machine gun, which was created after World War I to wreck tanks. In addition to regular bullets, the rounds come in three armor-piercing configurations that can blow through armored limousines and bullet proof glass at very long range. The General Accounting Office – Congress's non-partisan investigatory arm -- recently assigned an undercover agent to gauge the civic responsibility of .50-caliber ammunition dealers, and the transcripts of his phone calls are hair-raising:

²⁰ Tom Diaz tdiaz@vpc.org

Agent: If I theoretically wanted to use these rounds to take down an aircraft, say either a helicopter or something like that, I should be able to take a helicopter down, shouldn't I?

Dealer: Yeah, they're not armored. They're not armored to a point that it would stop.

And in another call:

Agent: Okay. Well, I think I'm better off with API (armor-piercing incendiary) because I'm going to be using this against, um, you know, something with an armored limousine and something with ballistic glass, and I just want to make sure I'm going to be able to penetrate. . . . Um, so. All right, so put me on with your assistant there and maybe I can figure out how I can get this shipped to me.

Dealer: Okay, hold on.

In yet another call:

Agent: Um huh. Well, you could say I'm going to be using this for hunting also, but just hunting of a different kind.

Dealer: (laughing) As long as it's noth-nothing illegal.

Agent: Well, I wouldn't consider it illegal.

Dealer: Okay. All right.

And finally:

Agent: Okay. So for sure then they'd go through an armored limousine?

Dealer: Oh, yeah. (laughter)

Agent: Well, you were asking what I want this API ammunition for . . .

Dealer: I don't . . . Hey, I don't ask anybody . . .

You can listen to the calls, and read the transcripts, at <http://www.house.gov/waxman/Guns/50/Audio/audio.html>.²¹ Based on the investigation, Congress banned the manufacture of armor-piercing .50-caliber ammunition for civilians, and stopped the military from selling its surplus armor-piercing rounds to the civilian market.²² But there are hundreds of thousands of rounds still legally circulating.²³

People who protect people for a living differ on just how dangerous the .50 is. John Baerwald Jr., who helps run a Baltimore executive-security firm called Special Response, calls the .50 “a massive threat.”

²¹ <http://www.house.gov/waxman/Guns/50/Audio/audio.html>

²² Patrick Sullivan, GAO investigator, 202-512-7472

²³ Patrick Sullivan, GAO investigator, 202-512-7472

“It’s as if I were to target you with a 7.62 (rifle) and I said, the heck with it, I’m going to get a 105 mm howitzer,” he says. “It could change the game.”²⁴ But Bank Miller, the founding director of the Drug Enforcement Administration academy, who now runs a security school for the company that makes Sig-Sauer firearms, says the .50 is no more of a threat than any other high-caliber hunting rifle and because of its weight and size, not all that useful to a terrorist. “I’d put it on a low point on the list” of assassination techniques, a list he then ticks off in crisp and chilling detail.²⁵

The country’s supreme protection agency, the Secret Service, won’t comment on anything to do with protection and makes you feel guilty for asking.²⁶

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Around me, about a dozen men are blowing off round after round of .50-caliber ammunition at \$1.30 to \$4 a shot. One of them is pounding the hillside with a semi-automatic version of the Army’s .50-caliber machine gun – a six-foot-long \$6,900 behemoth that looks, feels, and sounds like a jackhammer on a tripod. It can shoot a belt-load of armor-

²⁴ John Baerwald, (410) 785-1212

²⁵ Bank Miller, Sigarms Academy 603-679-2003

²⁶ Mark Connolly 202-406-6106

piercing three-ounce slugs as fast as the shooter can tap the trigger, yet it too can be bought as easily as any hunting rifle.²⁷ Darin Prince, a 30-year-old Bruce Springsteen lookalike who sells equipment to electric utilities, has driven 120 miles this morning to shoot his 40-pound Armalite 750. “You can shoot a 7mm Magnum (an ordinary hunting rifle) out to only about 750 yards,” he says, by way of explaining why he sank \$3,000 into the .50-caliber hobby. “My ultimate goal is to shoot out to 1,200 yards and still have enough power to knock down a steel-plate target.”²⁸ Distance, though, is only part of the attraction. “It’s the size, I guess, and the kick, and the boom, and all of it,” says Matt Guptill, a scholarly middle-aged Boeing engineer with a long ponytail. After a lifetime of little interest in shooting, Guptill invested \$7,250 in a black, angular EDM Windrunner that looks like a deck gun from the Battleship Galactica, and likes to calculate how wind might affect the projectile on such a long trajectory.²⁹

If the only people who were ever going to get their hands on a .50-caliber rifle were Guptill, Prince, and the other earnest types gathered here today, the country probably wouldn’t have much to worry about. But alas, the world is full of wackos, and an eerie subculture has developed

²⁷ M2HB 50BMG Belt-fed 50 Caliber, <http://www.50bmgstore.com/m2hb50bmg.htm>

²⁸ Darin Prince, 760-846-5940

²⁹ Matt Guptill 714-693-7878

around snipers. Walk around any gun show,³⁰ and among the target rifles and hunting guns you'll usually find a table devoted to the art of killing people from long range. One lovingly painted scene of a team of Nazi snipers on the Eastern Front appears to be a particularly big seller, because it shows up many gun shows. Instructions for making "Gillie suits" – hairy sniper camouflage – and homemade silencers are commonplace. A score of books – "Inside the Crosshairs," "One Shot War," "Stalk and Kill," "Backbone of the Wehrmacht : Sniper Variations of the German K98k Rifle,"³¹ and more – offers everything from scholarly studies to quasi-pornographic memoir. "Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills," for example (a bigger Amazon.com seller ten years after publication than Charles Frazier's 1998 blockbuster "Cold Mountain")³² contains this typically gruesome passage:

"The bullet's impact separated the man from his rifle and hurled him. . . violently kicking and crashing through the sugarcane. Several Marines . . . peeked over the top and

³⁰ I've been to lots, most recently for the piece I wrote for Rolling Stone last year.

³¹ Sniper titles. This list is from the AK-47.com website's list of sniper-related titles. <http://www.ak-47.net/catalog/sniping.html>

³² See the Amazon sales ranking of the two books

witnessed the gory sight of the man's dead body reeling in uncontrolled acrobatics – whipping, kicking, jumping.”³³

This is no small subculture. Eight years after publication, “The Ultimate Sniper: An Advanced Training Manual for Military and Police Snipers” by John L. Plaster, is a much bigger seller on Amazon.com than John Grisham's mega-hit “The Pelican Brief,” of the same year,³⁴ and a search for the word “sniper” on google.com finds thousands of sniper-related pages.³⁵ Amid reviews of rifles, tips on shooting, and jeremiads against gun control, snipersparadise.com (“One Shot, One Kill”) offers this wisdom: “Training cannot truly prepare (snipers) for having to shoot an unarmed person or political target.”³⁶ Mel's Sniper Page informs us that Nazi snipers who made 150 kills earned a private hunting trip with Heinrich Himmler.³⁷ The Sniper's Hide Site offers lurid pictures of camouflaged men making one-shot kills in Vietnam and a message board where ex-military snipers share tradecraft with wannabes. “The sniper is

³³ Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills, quoted in “One Shot, One Kill” Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles, Violence Policy Center

³⁴ see the Amazon sales ranking of the two books

³⁵ This is an estimate. Google actually comes up with “about 403,000” pages, but not all relate to people who shoot at other people from concealment. Most seem to, however.

³⁶ Sniper'sparadise.com, <http://www.snipersparadise.com/articles/FB.htm>

³⁷ Mel's Sniper Page <http://www.snipercentral.com/tidbits.htm>

often associated with the long range shot from nowhere,” writes the site’s anonymous author. “As a sniper I love to do my part in keeping that fear alive.”³⁸

Snipers no doubt have their place in the military and police, but glorifying them this way isn’t exactly like, say, glorifying fighter pilots. Snipers are by definition ambushers, picking off the unsuspecting from relative safety rather than engaging in kill-or-be-killed single combat. Not everybody who is fascinated by snipers is dangerous; after all, the sniper movie “Enemy at the Gates” is a big hit with more than sniper buffs. But it’s one thing to enjoy the precision and skill of long-range shooting at targets, or a big-budget Hollywood war movie, and quite another to revel in killing people from concealment as the sniper buffs at gun shows and online seem to do. A vigorous sniper culture and the easy availability of guns that can shoot through the bullet-proof windows of the Oval Office are an unsettling combination.

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Gun-rights advocates get lots of mileage from saying the government wants to “ban” guns, but there is almost no such thing as a “banned” firearm under federal law. If you want a rapid-fire 20 millimeter anti-aircraft gun, you can buy it. Thompson submachine gun? Sure.

³⁸ Sniper’s Hide Site <http://members.aol.com/m21sws/sniper.html>

Bazooka? Fine. Silencer? Okay. All you have to do to buy such “Class III” weapons is submit to a thorough investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and BATF, be fingerprinted, get your local police chief to sign a letter saying that the gun won’t violate state or local laws, wait about 90 days, and pay a \$200 one-time federal tax.³⁹ More than 1.1 million Class III weapons – machine guns, silencers, sawed-off shotguns, and explosive-firing weapons -- are legally owned by civilians, according to ATF, which issues the permits..⁴⁰ Enough get sold every year to sustain thousands of businesses that cater to them.⁴¹ Blagojevich’s and Feinstein’s bills would move .50-caliber rifles to Class III,⁴² meaning that under federal law anybody who really wanted such a gun – and didn’t have a blemish on his record -- would still be able to buy it.

State law is another question. John Burt of the Fifty Caliber Shooters Policy Institute says nine states forbid the ownership of Class III weapons,⁴³ and while some might make it more difficult than others, none

³⁹ John D’Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500

⁴⁰ Table B3 – National Firearms Act Registered Weapons by State (Commerce in Firearms)

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⁴² S. 505 To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to regulate certain 50 caliber sniper weapons in the same manner as machine guns and other firearms and for other purposes

⁴³ John Burt (909) 653-5447

makes it impossible. As of 1999 there were legally registered machine guns, silencers, sawed-offs, and explosive-firing weapons in every state, according to ATF records.⁴⁴

The notion of “banning guns” – as in making possession of all guns illegal -- is an idea politically akin to that of “legalizing drugs.” Both are pure fiction, invented by gun-rights activists and drug-war hawks to frighten their constituencies. No serious advocate of drug-policy reform supports legalizing all drugs, and no serious advocate of gun control supports banning or confiscating all firearms. Even the most ardent mainstream gun-control activists don’t want to keep law-abiding people from hunting or target shooting.

What they want is to raise the hurdle for buying guns, so that felons, stalkers, drunks, crazies, dope fiends, wife-abusers, and other villains can’t easily get them. The Brady Law of 1994 – which is supposed to mandate a “background check” before a gun sale – was revealed in March to be laughably weak. A four-month investigation by the GAO found that legal Brady Law background checks only look for criminal records attached to the name the gun buyer gives; they don’t positively identify the gun buyer. As Henry Waxman put it, “The name could be

⁴⁴ Table B3 – National Firearms Act Registered Weapons by State (Commerce in Firearms)

'Bugs Bunny,' and as long as there is no criminal record, the gun can be sold."⁴⁵ GAO agents were able to buy lots of guns with phony IDs.⁴⁶

The number of Americans murdered each year with guns has fallen steadily through the 1990s, but even so, more than 8,000 were shot dead in 1999.⁴⁷ The one type of gun that almost never shows up at crime scenes, ironically, are the most dangerous: machine guns and other Class III weapons..⁴⁸ The kind of lunatics and sociopaths that make it through the Swiss-cheese Brady checks have been weeded out by the fine-tooth comb of the Class III background check. Perhaps handguns would have as enviable a safety record if all handgun owners were vetted the same way.⁴⁹

Gun-control activists want almost all gun sales scrutinized as Class III weapon sales. "We don't hide the fact that we'd like to reclassify all handguns (as military weapons)," says Kristen Rand, legislative director for the Violence Policy Center. "Ideally we'd winnow the population of

⁴⁵ Waxman statement at hearing on Brady Law checks

⁴⁶ Firearms Purchased from Federal Firearm Licensees Using Bogus Identification, General Accounting Office, March 2001

⁴⁷ Table 2.10, "Murder by Weapon," from the Uniform Crime Reports (FBI) website

⁴⁸ John D'Angelo, spokesman for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 202-927-8500 can confirm that this is true.

⁴⁹ Kristen Rand 202-822-8200

easily available firearms down to true sporting and hunting weapons. The .50-caliber is a good place to start.”⁵⁰

For years, the National Rifle Association and its allies have argued that “guns don’t kill people; people kill people,” that cracking down on criminals is a better way to reduce crime than focusing on guns. With the .50-caliber-led strategy of shifting most weapons to Class III, gun-control advocates are calling the NRA’s bluff. Requiring Class III background checks for all guns would differentiate between types of people, not types of guns. An upstanding citizen could still buy any gun he or she wants, from a .22 revolver to a 105 mm howitzer.

To oppose the current legislation, the NRA has to argue that people with less-than-spotless records should be allowed easy access to anti-tank guns, and by extension to all other guns. To insist that people with dangerous records be allowed to own any gun they want is to argue that guns are too sacred to restrict in any way. When the argument is framed this way, guns become the focus, which is what the NRA has never wanted. (NRA spokesmen declined to be interviewed for this article.)⁵¹

Unfortunately, the public probably won’t get to hear the pros and cons of the Democrat bill because the relevant committees likely won’t

⁵⁰ Kristen Rand 202-822-8200

⁵¹ Andrew Arulanandam, 703-267-3820

even consider it. Rep. Blagojevich believes the Republican leadership will go to great lengths to squelch it. “This is going to be a harder Congress than the last Congress, and the last Congress was no picnic,” says Rep. Blagojevich. “All three branches of government are dominated by a political philosophy that is hostile to common-sense legislation to close loopholes in gun laws or restrict weapons that shouldn’t be available to the civilian population.”⁵²

Back at the range, Matt Guptill lays aside his .50 and unpacks his other hobby gun, a semi-automatic version of the short M-16 carbine, small enough to hide under a sports jacket and quick enough to spit 20 shots in as many seconds. “I got this right before the assault-rifle law went into effect, so it’s okay for me to have,” he says, slotting cartridges into a 20-round magazine. “Now of course it’s worth twice what I paid for it. That’s partly why I bought the .50. If the Feinstein law passes, it’ll be worth a fortune.”⁵³

End

⁵² Rep. Henry Waxman 202-225-3976

⁵³ Matt Guptill 714-693-7878