

Guns 101
Guest: Larry Pratt
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Larry Pratt is executive director of Gun Owners of America (gunowners.org).

WOODS: In terms of the average person, not somebody who's living in the middle of the wilderness, but the average person in the average house, what kind of a gun does such a person need?

PRATT: If you're in a house, you probably don't want the long gun, because that might bump into things if you have to move it around. Most people settle for some kind of a handgun. Then you're really talking about what is comfortable for the person holding a particular gun. What can they handle when the gun goes off? And the best way to do that is to go to a gun store that's attached to a range. Hopefully they might have a few firearms available for testing, and you can find out what best suites you.

WOODS: Do you also recommend having a gun safe, or how do you recommend keeping it safe?

PRATT: I recommend keeping the guns away from inquiring children, but the guns that I have available for self-defense are readily available away from children. They're not in a safe, which is in the basement, and sometimes I can hardly remember the combination. I certainly would not be able to remember if I were under attack, so my self-defense guns ain't in the safe. Anybody listening? I tell you the truth.

WOODS: That's good to know. As a matter of fact, as long as we're on this, let's go on a little tangent for a minute: what about that statistic we used to hear about people being more likely to wind up injuring somebody in their household than use it in self-defense, so it's counterproductive anyway. Is that even true, and what's the response to that?

PRATT: It's not true. It's a study. Mainly they point to a study done by a Dr. Kellermann, and he defined self-defense as "having killed the attacker." Well, give me a break. From all the available data, self-defense uses of firearms almost never result in killing the attacker. Once the bad guy sees that, "Uh oh, I hadn't figured on this," he leaves. In fact, one of our members told me that he was the subject of an attempted carjacking, and he reached down by his right hip, pulled up his handgun, and when the guy saw that handgun, he said, "Oops, wrong car."

WOODS: Fair enough.

PRATT: That's the right measure of self-defense.

WOODS: I want to get back into my Guns 101. A lot of times people use terms that they assume everybody just knows, but everybody doesn't necessarily know them. I want to give you three terms, and you tell us what they mean. We've got "automatic weapons," "semiautomatic weapons," and "assault weapons." Maybe there's some overlap here, but can you just describe what these things mean?

PRATT: One and three are the same. An assault weapon, a machine gun, is almost always one that has a selector switch on it, so you can choose whether to fire one bullet with one pull of the trigger, which is actually a semi-automatic function, or most machine guns—assault weapons—will have a middle position where you can fire a burst of generally three rounds. Or you can go full auto, so the gun keeps firing until you pull your finger off the trigger or until you run out of bullets, which will happen very quickly at that rate of fire. Most gun owners for a self-defense situation would not chose a machine gun or an assault weapon if they're firing full auto. A 30-round magazine could be empty within a couple or three seconds.

WOODS: When the media is talking about assault weapons, though, are they always being careful to distinguish between automatic and semiautomatic?

PRATT: To ask the question is to answer it. Of course the media are not. They are trying to make it sound as if the average American who has an AK-47 is somehow a Muslim terrorist attacking a busload of Jewish schoolchildren. The truth of the matter is that the so-called assault weapon—the AK-47, the AR-15—only fires one round every time you pull the trigger. If you're going to get it to go bump, bump, bump, you've got to pull the trigger.

WOODS: What makes this semiautomatic?

PRATT: The way the gun is designed in its internal workings, it cannot fire fully automatically. You must reengage the trigger. You must pull the trigger again in that semiautomatic to get another round of fire.

WOODS: How about this kind of objection: "I have no problem if somebody really feels the need to have a handgun in the house, but surely no American needs an AK-47. The gun people like Larry Pratt are being completely unreasonable and maximalist in their demands. Are we going to have people driving down the street in their own tanks?" What do you say to the "an average American doesn't need a weapon like this" argument?

PRATT: Anybody who talks that way has no understanding of a life-threatening situation and how it can come about and what it might be like. The Korean merchants who were defending their businesses in Los Angeles during the riots in the 1990s absolutely needed large magazines with their semiautomatic rifles, because they were fending off mobs of people. This was not Marquess of Queensberry. This was a horrible anarchistic situation, and they were standing in front or on top of their businesses with these rifles, with these large magazines. It's very interesting that where they were, those particular neighborhoods were not torched. Only where stores were undefended.

WOODS: I want to say something about the legislative prospects for gun control. It seems to me that even though you do see the Obama people talking about the use of an executive order, gun-control measures in the legislative branch, which is where serious gun-control measures would have to be introduced, are simply not popular. Weren't there a couple of legislators in Colorado who just got voted out of office over this?

PRATT: That was delicious. The president of the Colorado state senate and the committee chairman, Angela Giron, who had rammed through the ban on many firearms, magazines, over a certain size, and I don't know what else, were defeated on a recall election. Chairman Giron had afforded the opposition something like 50 or 55 minutes, and that was it. Whereas anytime before in the Colorado senate, if enough people were interested in saying something for or against a measure, they had the time. If it took four days, there were times when they had gone that long hearing witnesses.

So the issues on the ballot in Colorado—Republicans, I hope you're listening—were two things. Guns and arrogance, and that's what sank those two legislators. Giron from Pueblo, which is a kind of artsy-craftsy, neat-looking place but über liberal, voted 12 points against Miss Giron. She got smashed by Democrat voters, the so-called Reagan Democrats would be the best explanation, who apparently come out of hibernation when they hear a Republican convincingly sound like a conservative. Then they're all in. Memo to the GOP.

WOODS: Doesn't it seem, though, that Harry Reid's heart wasn't really in it when dealing with gun issues? I think they know these issues are a loser. They might as well expend their political capital on something else. What would you say to a cynical person who would accuse a group like Gun Owners of America or even some lighter gun group like the National Rifle Association of thriving on panicking the population into thinking that gun control's right around the corner when legislatively it doesn't seem to stand a chance? Would you answer that it's precisely these groups exist that these things don't have a chance?

PRATT: During the fight to kill the Toomey-Manchin bill that would have expanded to virtually all sales—the

so-called instant background check—the NRA said nothing. It turned out Manchin said that they were actually undercover working for the measure. They had written the original background check, and now they were trying to enlarge it. The Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms openly endorsed it, so Gun Owners of America was pretty much alone up on the Hill fighting this thing. We were able to convince—before the NSA scandal erupted, this is mid-April—the Congress, the Senate, that the government can't be trusted.

As it turns out, after the NSA it's real easy to explain this. If they want to listen in on what Aunt Susie's talking about with Mary, don't you think they want to have a list of who bought a gun and what kind of gun and where that person lives? I mean, duh. We were able to make that case even before NSA. Now that the NSA scandal has broken out into public attention, I think we've got them. Now the real issue is, "Okay, Congress, when are you going to get rid of the background check altogether?" I think out of like 11 million background checks they've brought cases against not even 40 people. Now that's really a useful crime-fighting tool, wouldn't you say?

WOODS: That answers what I was going to say, which is I think the average person who has no ideological axe to grind one way or the other might think, look, there are interests to balance on both sides. We have liberty and we have safety, and you have to have a little bit of both. But if 40 out of 11 million is the real number, it may as well be zero. That's completely negligible.

PRATT: Yeah, because they don't win all the prosecutions they bring, either, so you are approaching zero. Mathematically it's really a null figure. This is not a crime-fighting tool. Cops know that. The only reason the government does it is that they are nosy. You know what? Instead of them knowing what kind of guns we have, we ought to know which one of them has guns and where their guns are being kept. I think that's more important for us to know.

WOODS: Did you happen to hear about this incident several months ago in Concord, New Hampshire where the local law enforcement was applying for a federal grant for a BearCat, because they said, "We're besieged by the potential for domestic terrorism because of the Occupy movement and because of the Free State Project." Whatever you want to say about either one of those groups, they don't strike me as the types who are going to commit acts of violence. Yet this application went through.

PRATT: The only violent act I've seen of the Occupy movement was to poop on a cop car.

WOODS: Presumably you can deal with that with a spray bottle and some paper towels.

PRATT: It's not a life-threatening activity. That's for sure. I mean you've got to be a lowlife to do something like that, but that's not life threatening. Come on. Take a breath.

WOODS: Isn't it interesting that on the one hand we have all kinds of antigun propaganda on TV, but very, very little—at least in popular culture or on the news channels—about the shocking level of militarization of the local police forces?

PRATT: That is something that has been studied by some, and it's a very concerning matter. We've got police departments that have militarized. Let me make a comparison. When I was in the Virginia legislature in the early 1980s, I decided that it would be a good idea to go around and spend part of a day with a cop. I got in this cruiser, and we rode around. He did various things, and he came to a nice suburban house here in northern Virginia where Gun Owners of America lobbies the Congress, and he said, "Just stay here in the car." He went up to the door. It was around 10:00 AM. Evidently the young man had just gotten up. He certainly looked groggy. The cop said a few words, went into the house, the door closed. I'm sitting here waiting and out comes the young man. I think he was cuffed. But anyway, he put him in the back seat of the car, took him into the cop shop, and booked him on a drug charge.

One cop. I don't even recall that he had his hand particularly close to the holster. I mean, he had his right hand over the holster on his right hip, and I'm sure he was prepared mentally. But he wasn't steroidal about it. Last year, in the county south of where Gun Owners of America's located, still in very suburban Virginia outside of Washington D.C., there's this guy sitting on his front porch, and I think he'd been doing numbers. Of course, the government doesn't like competition with their lottery, so they were going to arrest him. The cops came up on the guy's house, guns out—this is for a numbers charge, right?—and one of the cops criminally had his finger on the trigger, boom, and he kills the guy. What a difference in 30 years.

WOODS: Wow. The thing is that cases like that don't become the national fixation of the country the way we might say more politically correct cases turn out to be.

PRATT: That's right. That's exactly right.

WOODS: We've got ten minutes, and I feel like I really want to do as thorough a job here as I can, so I guess we have to shift gears and talk a little bit about how you deal with the most common objection on the issue of guns. It involves comparisons between countries, and they say, "Look, this other country has very strict gun laws, and everybody's happy. There are no murders, and here we are in the U.S. and it's like Yosemite Sam in the old West." What's the customary response to that?

PRATT: To start with, the old West was the wild West only on the screen. In reality, because virtually everybody was armed, the old West, as you more properly put it, was quite a place under control, peaceful. The shootout at the O.K. Corral was very atypical. Let's go over to Britain, because you pointed to them. In Britain they do have a very low murder rate. But in Fairfax County, Virginia, where Gun Owners of America is located, where people can obtain a concealed-carry permit for a firearm rather easily, and where you've got to assume that there's a whole bunch of folks here in Fairfax County that are armed, we have a murder rate at one per 100,000. Whereas over in peaceful old England, it's 1.7 per 100,000, and their violent crime rate, apart from murder, which admittedly is very low—their violent crime rate ranks them as the fourth most violent country the world after Jamaica, El Salvador, and Honduras. Boy, how's that gun control stuff working out for you now, old Great Brit?

WOODS: You've made arguments like this on TV and of course, people are not prepared for this, because all they know are the talking points on the other side. Can you tell us a little something about your experiences with Piers Morgan, because I don't think a lot of people knew who you were up to then. If they were plugged into the D.C. scene they did, but everybody knew who you were after Piers Morgan. You should be thanking that guy. I'm sure you were.

PRATT: Privately, I have, but I really prefer not to rub it in his face, because I'd like to have him bring me on again. It was so good for membership. Our server crashed three times following his really over-the-top behavior during the interview. "You are a stupid man," he said. When I went on Alan Colmes' radio show a week or so later, Alan off the air said to me, "Larry, you know I agree with everything Piers was saying, but I want to tell you, I was embarrassed."

WOODS: Good.

PRATT: So any time one of our opponents wants to act in such a surly manner, fine. I was 100 miles away from him. He was in no danger of me pulling out a piece and popping him, so if he wants to act like that, that's great. During the interview I began to get a little irritated, to say the least, about his behavior, and by the grace of God, it occurred to me, "Hey, hang onto yourself, bud. This guy's doing great all by himself. You don't need to help him. He's got it all taken care of."

WOODS: Did you guys get a bump up in website visits or phone calls or contacts after that? How could you not?

PRATT: It was amazing. At one point there were, I think, three of the guys using all the available spaces in the office for live media interviews. I had to go out into the parking lot to do a TV interview. That happened twice. It was intense, so Piers Morgan, I hope you're not listening, but if you are we actually kind of like you.

WOODS: I have no doubt. When I had you as a guest on the Peter Schiff show, I gave you an opportunity to explain to people the whole matter of the National Rifle Association and Gun Owners of America, and I think people are curious about this. And I was thinking that maybe you'd be a little shy about talking about it, and you weren't shy at all. Because, of course, the first principle of marketing is differentiation, and you were quite eager to differentiate yourselves. So tell us the difference between somebody going to GunOwners.org, visiting Gun Owners of America, and somebody joining the National Rifle Association. What difference is he going to notice, and what are the origins of those differences?

PRATT: Well, as I mentioned earlier, the NRA was supporting the Toomey Gun Control bill, the expansion of the background check, and they were doing it under the radar. But when Senator Manchin thanked them for their support, we were very publically opposing. It all comes about, I think, as you were asking how we were founded. The NRA was founded 130 some years ago by Union officers following the War Between the States who were appalled at what lousy shots most of the recruits were, and they wanted to improve that. So they developed a civilian marksmanship program, which actually became part of the Department of the Army. Guns were made available at very low prices to members of the public. They did a lot of target practice for people, training, good use of firearms, so they were a handmaiden to the government.

Then you fast forward to the mid 1970s, when Gun Owners of America was formed. We were formed by a state senator who was appalled that the NRA had been playing footsie with the government during the time that the 1968 Gun Control Act had been put down our throat. We were set up to oppose the government, so it's been very difficult. I think they're getting better at it, frankly, but it's been very difficult for the NRA to understand that they need to have an adversarial posture regarding the government that for so long was their bud. They were kind of joined at the hip, whereas we were formed in a period under attack. We were organized to fight back, so that's always been our mentality: to roll back even things that are already on the books.

I normally hear a lot of people from the NRA saying, "Well, if we would just enforce the gun laws that we have...." No, the gun laws we have included ban on guns in the District of Columbia. How did that work out? I would say even today, with their very restrictive gun laws, not a total ban, they've got 17.5 murders per 100,000 compared to Fairfax County, where it's guns galore at one murder per 100,000.