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VOTING FROM THE ROOFTOPS

How the Gun Industry Armed Osama bin Laden, other Foreign and Domestic Terrorists, and Common Criminals with 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles



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The Violence Policy Center is a national non-profit educational organization that conducts research and public education on firearms violence and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, grassroots advocates, and the general public. The Center examines the role of firearms in America, analyzes trends and patterns in firearms violence, and works to develop policies to reduce gun-related death and injury.

This study was authored by VPC Senior Policy Analyst Tom Diaz.

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From 1991 to 1993, Diaz worked on terrorism issues at the National Strategy Information Center in Washington, DC where his responsibilities included editing the quarterly publication *Political Warfare*. Before joining the Violence Policy Center, he was counsel to the Subcommittee on Crime of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1993 to 1997, acting as the lead Democratic counsel on matters involving firearms and terrorism.

Diaz is the author of the book *Making a Killing: The Business of Guns in America* (The New Press, 1999), as well as numerous studies for the Violence Policy Center. He has also consulted with the U.S. Department of Justice on crime and technology, and has authored a study on the criminal use of high technology.

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Executive Summary

Two years ago, in its report *One Shot, One Kill*, the Violence Policy Center warned that the unfettered sale to civilians of military sniper rifles presented a "serious threat to American national security."¹ That report focused particularly on the dangers presented by the 50 caliber heavy sniper rifles, noting that these powerful weapons of war present a "whole new order of threat" by their ability to "knock down aircraft, including helicopters, and punch through concrete block, armored vehicles, and other materials that may be relied upon for executive protection."² These devastating features are exactly why Barrett 50 caliber heavy sniper rifles, for example, are in the armories of U.S. Marine Corps snipers and at least 17 other armies around the world.³

The report sparked an ongoing national debate—with the predictable defense of these weapons by their manufacturers, the National Rifle Association, and other elements of the gun lobby. But civilian sales of 50 caliber sniper rifles have not been restrained. This report documents that—to the contrary—the 50 caliber market has exploded. There is an array of new manufacturers, a proliferation of models, and a dramatic reduction in price. Today, 50 caliber rifles are still easier to buy than handguns: a youth of 18 years can legally buy a sniper rifle, but cannot buy a handgun until age 21. The difference from two years ago is that he now has a much broader choice of guns, and the price has plummeted to within easy range of a modest budget.

Most alarming in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is the 50 caliber's threat as an ideal tool for assassination and terrorism, including its ability to attack and cripple key elements of the nation's critical infrastructure—including aircraft and other transportation, electrical power grids, pipeline networks, chemical plants, and other hazardous industrial facilities. This report documents in detail the following facts and others that underscore the clear and present danger 50 caliber sniper rifles present to all Americans. *It proves beyond doubt that terrorists and other ruthless criminals now have the means, the training, and the motivation to inflict extraordinary harm on America with 50 caliber sniper rifles.*

- ***At least 25 Barrett 50 caliber sniper rifles were sold to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terror network.***⁴ Because sales of 50 caliber rifles are unrestricted and cannot be tracked, there is no way of knowing how many other sniper rifles—whether made by Barrett or one of its many competitors—have been sold to Al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations. However, at least two, and probably more, Barrett 50 caliber sniper rifles were sold to the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which used them to assassinate British troops and Irish constables in Northern Ireland.⁵ The use of the Barrett sniper rifles in a calculated campaign of terror by assassination in Ireland won them the epithet "supergun" in the press.⁶

- ***A fundamentalist Islamic organization offers a two-week training course at a site within the United States entitled "The Ultimate Jihad Challenge," which includes "live fire sniper/counter sniper" and "shooting at, thru & from vehicle"—skills that directly enhance the threat from among any who possess a sniper rifle.***⁷ The "Ultimate Jihad Challenge" course is among several advertised on the Internet web site of Sakina Security Services. The company specifically notes that because of strict firearms laws overseas, the training must be done "in our 1,000-acre state of the art shooting range in the United States." Sakina's web site features "Jihad Links," including a link to *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen*, one of the organizations listed in President George W. Bush's September 24, 2001, order freezing assets of terrorist organizations. The "Ultimate Jihad Challenge," however, is only the most troubling example of the sniper training that gun industry entrepreneurs freely offer to civilians in the United States.⁸
- ***Terrorism analysts have warned repeatedly that terrorists may "attempt to engineer a chemical disaster using conventional means to attack an industrial plant or storage facility, rather than develop and use an actual chemical weapon,"⁹ in other words "to transform a target into a weapon by focusing on facilities that handle explosive, toxic, or volatile chemicals."¹⁰ Fifty caliber sniper rifles are ideal tools for many such scenarios.*** Given the Osama bin Laden terror network's interest in chemical weapon capacity,¹¹ and its vicious use of commercial aircraft as flying bombs, this is a grave threat. The public version of this report documents generally how bin Laden's Al Qaeda and other terrorists who have 50 caliber sniper rifles can turn a chemical target into a weapon of mass destruction, with the potential for thousands of casualties. A restricted appendix that will be made available on request only to Members of Congress, federal officials with anti-terrorism responsibilities, and chief law enforcement officers, examines several specific scenarios and relates the capabilities of the 50 caliber sniper rifle to those scenarios.^a *The VPC believes that it is urgent for the public to understand the danger 50 caliber sniper rifles present. But it does not want to give a "road map" to terrorists, even though detailed descriptions of these weapons' capabilities are already available from manufacturer advertising and widely published sniper cult literature.*

^a The VPC hopes that this restricted appendix will encourage those with law enforcement or counter-terrorism responsibility to "think outside of the box" about the threat that these weapons present.

- A 1995 RAND report for the U.S. Air Force specifically warns of the threat that 50 caliber sniper rifles—like the Barretts obtained by Al Qaeda—present to the security of aircraft on Air Force bases.¹² Applying precisely the same analysis to civil aviation facilities compels the conclusion that the 50 caliber sniper rifles now known to be in the hands of bin Laden and other terrorists are a threat of the highest order to both commercial and private civil aviation.** This threat extends not only to the destruction of scheduled airliners, but also to civil aircraft serving business executives, celebrities, and government officials. The RAND report notes that its logic regarding air base attacks “would apply equally well to strikes against such valuable, and vulnerable, installations” as “satellite downlink and control facilities, oil pipelines, and port facilities—whose destruction could seriously impede U.S. response to crisis or conflict.”¹³
- 50 caliber sniper rifles continue to be found in the arsenals of domestic terrorist and extremist groups, including among others a group in Michigan that planned to kill the state’s governor, U.S. Senator, and federal judges, and another in West Virginia that plotted to blow up an FBI facility.¹⁴** Insurrectionist rhetoric threatening federal officials and public figures is common on a popular bulletin board catering to sniper rifle owners and enthusiasts.¹⁵
- An e-mail threat to “kill a well-known political figure” was received by Sniper Country, one of a number of Internet web sites popular among the growing civilian sniper culture.¹⁶** Sniper Country says it turned the threat over to the U.S. Secret Service, which reportedly found the threat to have been made by a minor. The web site has since posted a “warning to Minors and Militants” advising that it does not support their activities. Nevertheless, the incident is graphic proof of a danger the VPC warned of in its first report two years ago—the ability of widespread “instructional material available in the sniper subculture to roil troubled minds and teach home-grown terrorists or impressionable juveniles how to use the destructive capabilities of sniper rifles to maximum effect.”¹⁷

This dangerous situation exists because the gun industry is the only consumer product industry, with the ambiguous exception of tobacco, whose products are not subject to basic consumer health and safety regulation. Accordingly, the industry is free to design, make, and market these products with no independent review

balancing their benefits against the enormous risk they present.^b

This report discusses in detail the real and growing threats that the 50 caliber sniper rifle in the hands of Al Qaeda and other terror groups can inflict on America in the new age of unrestrained terror in the homeland:

- *Section One—The Capability of the 50 Caliber Sniper Rifle* describes the capabilities of the 50 caliber sniper rifle and the highly destructive ammunition for it, readily available on the civilian market. This section is documented by literature from manufacturers themselves, like Barrett Firearms Manufacturing Company, citations from U.S. military manuals, books and other articles written by acknowledged experts, and experiences of civilian gun owners posted on Internet bulletin boards.
- *Section Two—The Threats* documents the acquisition of 50 caliber sniper rifles by Al Qaeda and other foreign and domestic terrorist and criminal interests. It proves false the oft-repeated claim that no 50 caliber sniper rifle has ever been used in a criminal incident within the United States, and demonstrates the dangerous link between 50 caliber sniper rifles and criminals.
- *Section Three—Tools for Terror* outlines specific dangers that the 50 caliber sniper rifles in the hands of Al Qaeda present to American security. In addition to the assassination danger, which is more or less obvious to the reasonable layperson, this section analyzes the threat that the 50 caliber sniper rifle's anti-materiel capability presents to America's vital infrastructure. The latter threat—designed for war fighting—may be less apparent to the layperson, but it is at least equal to and may exceed the assassination threat, depending on the target of either threat. A restricted appendix to this section is not available to the general public.
- *Section Four—Proliferating for Profit* documents the continuing growth of the civilian market for military sniper rifles, and the 50 caliber sniper rifle in particular. It describes the nexus between military development programs and civilian sales of new guns, and the exploitation of U.S. military resources by the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun groups promoting the 50 caliber sniper rifle. It provides background on the sniper subculture, including information on sniper training schools catering to civilians.

^b See the frontispiece to this report for a list of Violence Policy Center publications examining other consequences of America's unregulated gun industry.

- *Section Five—The Future is Now* describes the likely future of the civilian sniper rifle market, including new models in other heavy calibers with capabilities equivalent to the 50 caliber sniper rifle that gun manufacturers are bringing to market. It outlines a program for action to lessen the danger 50 caliber sniper rifles present, including most importantly bringing them immediately under the licensing and registration regimen of the National Firearms Act of 1934 (NFA). All other weapons of war, such as machine guns, are controlled in the civilian market under the NFA.