

Patriots, Shooters and Knuckleheads⁴⁷

Highlights of the American Values Leadership Forum at the NRA Annual Meetings

By Barrett Tillman

The 138th meeting of the National Rifle Association was a huge success by any reckoning. The attendance numbers pegged the meter, tentatively reckoned at 65,000 over May 13-17 in Phoenix. Attractions included seminars on concealed carry, sausage making, guns of the Battle of the Bulge, and of course "The Nuge," [Ted Nugent] who not only performed, but also signed everything from guitars to guns. Arizona's own musical contribution was provided by author Alan Korwin and The Cartridge Family Band.

One of the major events was the American Values Leadership Forum, which was moved from the Convention Center to US Airways Center to accommodate the overflow crowd. The 20 or so speakers (live and by video) represented a variety of political and cultural warriors and commentators, and to mention them all would require stuffing 20 pounds into an eight-pound range bag. So we'll limit ourselves to some highlights.

Arizona was represented by Governor Jan Brewer, who succeeded Janet Napolitano, the new Homeland Security chief who had wasted little time alienating veterans as potential "domestic terrorists." (Napolitano's name drew more boos and hisses than anyone else.) Governor Jan opened the ball by declaring, "Arizona is NRA country," noting the centennial of the state rifle and pistol association. She stressed the state's commitment to the right to bear arms by quoting the state constitution, "The right of the individual citizen to bear arms in defense of himself or the state shall not be impaired."

U.S. Senator John McCain also appeared, receiving a generally warm reception though dozens of attendees remained seated during his introduction, some shouting "Loophole, loophole!" McCain's advocacy of closing "the gunshow loophole" was neither forgotten nor forgiven by many.

One of those with the biggest hearts also had one of the biggest wallets as Larry Potterfield of MidwayUSA announced continued NRA donations. The firm's "roundup" program, established in 1992, now has contributed \$4.5 million to the association. *Blue Press* patrons are familiar with Mike Dillon's similar program, offering clients the option of rounding up their purchases to the next highest dollar.

Far more than a foot soldier in the cultural war is Dick Heller of the historic Supreme Court case affirming the Second Amendment as an individual right. Taking the stage with a smile and raised arms, Heller exclaimed "Freedom!" He explained that he and his Bill of Rights Foundation partner, Dane van Breichenruchardt, demonstrated that little guys can

fight City Hall and win. But he left with the reminder, "This gunfight will never be over," adding, "Freedom lovers need to be freedom fighters."

Talk show host Michael Reagan expressed gratitude at having been adopted by the future president and quipped, "Thank God Jimmy Carter wasn't looking for a son to adopt." Reagan emphasized the conservative values of independence and self reliance, insisting that when public services are cut back, people can buy their own fire extinguishers and firearms. Meanwhile, he warned NRA members to remember that termites eat at the foundation of freedom every day.

Several Democrat politicians made video appearances, emphasizing that not all Democrats are anti-freedom "progressives." Two African-American office holders delivered noteworthy speeches including former Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, who said, "You can't fight from the sidelines,

but from the front lines." He stressed political engagement on behalf of the Bill of Rights, stressing "fidelity to faith and principle in America's third century."

Current Republican National Chairman Michael Steele said, "You can't please everyone, but you sure can tick them off, and I've ticked off a lot." He joked that he's had ample

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opportunity as a Catholic conservative African-American Republican. He expounded his theme for Republicans, insisting that the party needs to stop apologizing for past lapses and work for the future. He added that the differences between the parties have never been clearer, stressing that most Americans want a government that empowers people rather than government. In conclusion he shouted, "God bless you, and lock and load!"

A former RNC chairman was Haley Barbour, now governor of Mississippi. He contrasted his state's 2005 response to Hurricane Katrina with Louisiana's, noting that Mississippi never even considered confiscating citizens' firearms. In fact, years previously his brother purchased an M1A based on the pragmatic attitude that if somebody pounds on the door at 3:00 a.m., "I don't want anybody on that side of the door to have what I don't have." In vivid contrast to New Orleans, where looting was rampant, Mississippi announced that looters could be shot: "Guess what? We didn't have much looting."

Treading close on the heels of Steele and Barbour was political commentator Dick Morris, a former Clinton staffer. Pacing the stage, speaking extemporaneously, Morris pulled no punches. "I'm going to get in trouble, but the knuckleheads and

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