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Firing blanks with phony gun machismo

Sept. 19, 2004
12:00 AM

Sen. Kerry last week assailed President Bush for doing nothing to extend the now-expired federal ban on assault weapons. In the days afterward, his campaign began trotting out a group of Sportsmen for Kerry and proposed a "Sportsmen's Bill of Rights." The idea, of course, was to appeal to the great majority that favors a weapons ban, without giving offense to all the fine, upstanding Americans the senator is proud to call his fellow hunters.

On the matter of the ban, I am inclined to agree with Sen. Dianne Feinstein that the problem here is "the powerful, selfish National Rifle Association and its brutal lobbying tactics." You would have to search the Washington offices of the American Civil Liberties Union to find a more truculent and sanctimonious group of people - or for that matter to find grievances less deserving of serious attention.

But let's leave that one for another day, and turn instead to the sportsmen of America - all of these model citizens who supposedly stand in contrast to the folks at the NRA.

Sport hunters, in the rhetoric of the 2004 campaign, are nature's noblemen, the object of endless flattery from both candidates because of the importance of rural swing states. In West Virginia a few weeks ago, President Bush declared, "I've come by because first I love to hunt and fish," and now repeats the theme at every rural stop. Sen. Kerry meanwhile was in Iowa, struggling before a skeptical audience to convey his own passion for the blood sports: "I go out with my trusty 12-gauge double-barrel, crawl around on my stomach. . . . That's hunting."

Groveling in word is no longer enough, however, to convince sport hunters you're one of them. And so we now have the dreary ritual in which candidates have to go out and kill

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something, with cameras present to record the moment. Sen. Kerry got the job done in Iowa last fall, summoning the regional media to come along and watch him dispatch a couple of pheasants. Two shots, two birds, five minutes, and it was over, leaving us all so very impressed.

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President Bush took care of matters on a New Year's Day outing with his father in Falfurrias, Texas, shooting five quail. An alert press corps would have noted that this expedition occurred shortly after 19 lobbyists for the hunting industry came supplicating at the White House for a gesture of support.

I don't recall Mr. Bush having hunted before then as president, or having hunted since. Left to himself, without the pleadings of political advisers or hunting groups in need of affirmation, the president seems to prefer more innocent recreations like riding bikes, clearing brush or playing with the dog. I have a suspicion he is actually a bit like President Kennedy in this respect, who had to be dragged along for a deer hunt at the LBJ ranch, and didn't care much for the experience.

The same crowd of hunters and "conservationists" showed up again in Crawford last April for a special tour of the ranch, a reward for their support and political donations. And reviewing the guest list, you begin to see what's gone wrong with sport hunting today.

For starters, there were representatives of groups like Ducks Unlimited, Quail Unlimited and Pheasants Forever - their very names hinting of crass presumption, like store signs promising an endless supply of goods. Far from demonstrating those timeless "rural values" that "urbanites" simply can't understand, these organizations reflect some of the worst traits of modern society - above all, consumerist gluttony and the view of everything on Earth as a commodity, there for the taking.

We saw this outlook taken to the extreme last December in the unfortunate example of Vice President Dick Cheney, when he and some Texas friends made for the Rolling Rock Club in Ligonier Township, Pa. No need for tramping fields and hedgerows at Rolling Rock; like hundreds of other "gentlemen's shooting clubs" in America, it's designed for the prosperous sportsman on a tight schedule. In the hunting equivalent of a driving range, Mr. Cheney and his nine companions simply waited in blinds as gamekeepers released pen-raised pheasants directly in front of them.

A witness to one of the vice president's earlier hunts described to me how gamekeepers shook the cages to dizzy the birds before release, though apparently such measures were unnecessary here. The only challenge of marksmanship, one imagines, was trying to see through a cloud of feathers filling the air as a total of 417 pheasants were shot in a single morning, 70 by the vice president himself. This was followed, after the gentlemen had lunched, by more heroics at the expense of hundreds of tame mallard ducks.

Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, who joined in the mayhem, captured the scene for us, saying it was "kind of how Tyson's and Pilgrim's Pride and other people do it." Angus Phillips, outdoors columnist for *The Washington Post*, described it

best as a case of "wretched excess."

Mr. Cheney is a man of high intelligence, character and, as I have found, personal goodness. But even the finest men have their blind spots, and I'm afraid that was the problem here. Birds are not skeet. They are living creatures, "the fowl of the air," and it is unkind and dishonorable to treat them this way. The sportsman shoots in jest, to paraphrase a saying, but the creature dies in earnest.

Also present in Crawford was a fellow from Safari Club International. Based right here in Arizona, this is a group of 30,000 or so people whose all-consuming passion in life is killing big game, with all sorts of competitions to see who can kill the most and biggest "trophy animals." To win the highest award, for example, you have to kill upward of 360 animals - from an African elephant to an exotic sheep in Russia (yes, there are actually sheep safaris) to some wolf or polar bear minding his own business in the farthest reaches of the Arctic.

Across the Earth, hundreds of thousands of creatures are slain each year for no better reason than to satisfy the demands of these inane competitions. And that's not counting all the wounded and orphaned animals left along the way.

Safari Club is also a window into the hunting subculture. Go to their annual convention in Reno, as I did a few years ago, and you can find, for the right price, hunts offering every conceivable type of game butchery - aerial hunting, hunts employing baits, hunts with sleds and packs of dogs and, of course, the bow hunts that are now a mania among sportsmen, heightening the pleasure of the stalker and the suffering of the victim.

The animals, many inhabiting game parks, are parceled out like so much livestock - an elephant, for example, fetching a trophy fee of \$20,000, or whatever else some rich low-life will pay to shoot him. Here in America, more than 3,000 "No Pay, No Kill" hunting ranches are also doing brisk, year-round business, selling, breeding and even importing animals for captive hunts - never mind all that lofty talk from sportsmen about "fair chase."

The official transcript of that Crawford meeting is filled with unctuous praise for the president, punctuated by vague talk of all the "conservation" initiatives the hunters were seeking. (There are no cold-hearted killers among sport hunters anymore - only really passionate "conservationists.") The president seems uneasy with his guests, and if he looked into Safari Club a little more he'd know why. They are arrogant, merciless people who have no business sitting down with the president of the United States, much less shaping, as they do, the environmental policies of the administration.

To take just two examples, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - one of its deputy directors a former Safari Club lobbyist - sought this year to permit the trophy hunting of endangered species abroad, and will doubtless have another go at it after November. The administration has also opened 60 national wildlife refuges to sport hunters, including a dozen or so last month just in time for the hunting season. So much for the naïve idea that *refuges* were supposed to give refuge.

Sen. Kerry, for his part, actually has good instincts and a respectable record on these matters - co-sponsoring, for instance, a bill to outlaw canned hunting. When the Bush campaign says Kerry "has spent a career in the Senate voting against hunters," they would do better to keep quiet about the whole subject. At least the senator is prepared to uphold some basic standards of decency - the same standards that hunters themselves profess whenever their conduct is called into question.

Sen. Kerry and President Bush would both do well to hold off on any "Sportsmen's Bill of Rights" and instead remind sportsman of their responsibilities. A good start might be that canned-hunting bill now before the Senate. And then maybe we can apply a little compassionate conservatism to those "gentlemen's shooting clubs," to bow hunting, baiting, competitive trophy hunting, and all the other ruthless and cowardly practices so common today - following the general principle that if a man is going to hunt, then let him at least hunt like a man.

Matthew Scully recently returned to Phoenix after serving in the White House as special assistant to the president and deputy director of speechwriting.

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