

The stupid party in full retreat

This week the Great National Witch Hunt moved up yet another notch, with the effort of Democrats and the gun gestapo to drag the National Rifle Association — and with it, the whole political opposition to gun control — to the stake. The witchhunters found an ally in ex-President George



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that he was resigning his membership in the NRA because of its fundraising letter describing certain agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms as “jack-booted thugs . . . wearing Nazi bucket helmets and storm trooper uniforms.” Coming from the man who,

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Bush, and the immediate goal of their inquisition was to force the Republicans to break with the NRA and thus resurrect the defunct agenda of gun prohibition.

The hounds began to bay when Mr. Bush made his pompous announcement

as president, rushed to denounce the acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who subdued Rodney King as soon as he heard the verdict and vowed to use federal power to prosecute them again for “civil rights” violations, Mr. Bush’s dud-geon was perhaps just a bit too ripe.

Nevertheless, the Democrats, ever quick to smell blood in the water, jumped on the rejected president’s statement fast. A press release from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee demanded to know “Is George Bush wrong? Or will Phil Gramm tell the NRA that THEY are wrong?”

Mr. Gramm, a Republican presidential candidate, was scheduled to speak to the NRA national convention this weekend, and if the Democrats could force him and other Republicans to rip the NRA, they could expect to weaken the gun-rights forces that dispatched at least 20 Democratic congressmen last year to the same oblivion in which the forgotten Mr. Bush now languishes. Clever, clever, clever.

Of course, the Democratic scheme depended for its success upon one thing and one thing alone: the bottomless incapacity of the Republicans to avoid the traps set for them by their enemies. As a recent precedent, the Democrats knew how the Republicans reacted a couple of weeks ago to attacks on talk show host Gordon Liddy for his

supposed advice to shoot ATF agents in the head if and when they attacked law-abiding gun owners.

Beneath a Democratic battering ram, Republican Sen. Al D’Amato obligingly denounced Mr. Liddy and disinvited him from a high-rolling GOP dinner. Having broken down the Republican gates once over Mr. Liddy, the Democrats no doubt figured they could do it again.

And indeed, you can’t underestimate the stupidity of Republicans.

There has been no commission to investigate these abuses and the ATF.

Not only did the Democrats slip a Republican ex-president in their political pocket but also they came close to picking up Mr. Gramm himself. Quizzed on NBC’s “Meet the Press” last Sunday, “Is George Bush right that the NRA is guilty of vicious slander on good people?” Mr. Gramm refused to give a direct answer and instead danced around the issues of Waco and Randy Weaver.

At last, Mr. Gramm unbosomed himself of the opinion that “I don’t have any trouble saying that that language [of the NRA fund-raiser]

is too strong.” He was soon joined by Majority Leader Bob Dole, who remarked that he too “has concerns over the tone of some of the rhetoric” used in the letter. Now we can wait for follow-up ads and letters from the gun gestapo screaming that “even George Bush, Phil Gramm and Bob Dole refused to defend the extremist language of the NRA.” Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Yet the truth is that the language of the NRA letter, with some allowance for the hyperbole that always attends fund-raising mail, is perfectly defensible. Indeed, as NRA President Tom Washington wrote to Mr. Bush himself, last year his organization along with the American Civil Liberties Union urged President Clinton to appoint a commission to investigate a number of specific federal law enforcement abuses and offered “specific examples of black suited, masked, massively armed mobs of screaming, swearing agents invading the homes of innocents.” Sounds like jack-booted thugs to me.

Mr. Clinton never responded to the letter, there has been no commission to investigate these abuses and the ATF, currently being sued by some of its victims, has offered only the limpest defense of itself. But Stupid Party stalwarts like Mr. Gramm and Mr. Dole seem to know nothing of these horror stories from the federal goon-squad crypt and to care less. With friends like them, defenders of the Second Amendment and other civil liberties trampled beneath the federal leviathan’s jackboots need no enemies.