

# **Long-Range Fifty Caliber Sniper Weapons**

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**Prepared for:**

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**Ranking Minority Member**  
**Subcommittee on National Security,**  
**Veterans Affairs, and International Relations**  
**Committee on Government Reform**

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**Minority Staff Report**  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This congressional staff report presents the results of an investigation into long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons. The investigation was conducted at the requests of Rep. Rod R. Blagojevich, the ranking minority member of the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, and Rep. Henry A. Waxman, the ranking minority member of the Committee on Government Reform. The investigation included an extensive undercover component conducted by the Office of Special Investigations of the United States General Accounting Office (GAO).

Long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons are among the most destructive and powerful weapons legally available in the United States. The most common model, the Barrett 82A1, was developed in the 1980s and saw extensive use in the Persian Gulf War. This semi-automatic weapon can hit targets accurately one mile away and can inflict effective damage to targets over four miles away. It can also fire specialized ammunition capable of piercing several inches of metal, exploding on impact, or providing tracers for accurate night shooting. According to one leading authority, the manufacturer of the Barrett model 82A1 promoted the weapon as able to “wreck several million dollars’ worth of jet aircraft with one or two dollars’ worth of cartridge.”

Although the general public has little awareness of these weapons or their potential threat to public safety, they are widely available through specialized gun stores and the Internet. In fact, there are fewer restrictions placed on purchases of long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons than on handguns. The GAO investigators found that since the end of the Gulf War thousands of long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons have been sold in the domestic civilian market. By pursuing weapons traces, the investigators further found that some of these weapons have ended up in the hands of suspected terrorist groups, a mentally ill cop killer, and drug trafficking cartels.

During their undercover investigation, the GAO investigators found that long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons are readily available. Posing as potential weapon purchasers, the investigators found that gun dealers in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia were willing to sell them new long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons. The only limitations on sales were that investigators had to present identification showing they were at least 18 years old and had not been convicted of a felony. In comparison, purchasers of handguns must show that they are at least 21 years old. There were no restrictions on sales of second-hand fifty caliber weapons and, unlike handgun regulations, there were no federal restrictions on minimum age of possession.

The undercover GAO investigators also found that the specialized armor piercing ammunition used by these weapons is readily available. Using the Internet, the investigators selected and contacted three sellers of this ammunition. All three dealers were willing to sell the ammunition to the GAO investigators. The dealers continued to offer the ammunition to the investigators even after the investigators informed the dealers that they wanted the ammunition shipped to Washington, D.C., and needed ammunition capable of piercing an armored limousine or “taking down” a helicopter.

## I. DESCRIPTION OF THE WEAPON

Fifty caliber rifles are among the most destructive and powerful firearms sold legally in the United States. These weapons, which weigh approximately 28 pounds, can be used to hit targets over a mile away. The original military purpose of these weapons was to destroy jeeps, tanks, personnel carriers, and other vehicles. Their tremendous force provided tactical advantages for armed forces by enabling a single person to disable multiple vehicles in a matter of seconds. The massive strength of these weapons also allowed them to be used against many objects other than vehicles, such as bunkers, fuel stations, and communication centers.

The term “fifty caliber” refers to the size of the ammunition used in these weapons. The diameter of these rounds is ½ inch (or “.50”), although their lengths vary from about three to six inches. Fifty caliber rifles are “accurate” up to 2,000 yards, meaning they will strike the intended target within this range. These weapons are “effective” up to 7,500 yards, meaning that, although accuracy cannot be guaranteed, the round will cause its intended effect at this distance if it strikes the target. Their effective range of 7,500 yards is equivalent to 75 football fields lined up end to end—a distance of over four miles.

These weapons can penetrate several inches of steel, concrete, or other reinforced substances, making them particularly effective against light armor. In fact, they are so powerful that many ranges used for target shooting do not have sufficient safety features, such as reinforced backstops, to accommodate them.

One text, *The Ultimate Sniper*, provides an account of a Michigan ammunition dealer test-firing his fifty caliber rifle. According to this report, the dealer “test-fired his bullets at simulated wooden frame houses and found they blew completely through six houses—not six walls, *six houses!*”<sup>1</sup> In addition, *The Ultimate Sniper* states:

How can anyone exaggerate the .50-caliber performance? Here’s a bullet that even at 1½ miles crashes into a target with more energy than Dirty Harry’s famous .44 Magnum at point-blank. But tremendous energy can hardly be surprising for a cartridge that’s five times larger than a .30-06—indeed, its 750-grain projectile is almost twice that of many elephant gun cartridges.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Maj. John L. Plaster, U.S.A.R. (ret.), *The Ultimate Sniper: An Advanced Training Manual for Military & Police Snipers*, 215, Paladin Press (Colorado 1993) (emphasis in original).

<sup>2</sup>*Id.*

Although the fifty caliber rifle originally was designed to cause substantial damage to vehicles and other reinforced structures, recent technological advances have vastly improved its accuracy. The gun now is extremely successful as an anti-personnel weapon. As described by *The Ultimate Sniper*, today's "awesome .50-caliber rifles . . . deliver amazing, sniper-grade accuracy."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to improvements in accuracy, manufacturers also have produced weapons capable of firing multiple rounds. Instead of the standard "bolt action" models, which require the user to reinsert additional rounds after each firing, newer models reload automatically to allow the shooter to fire up to ten bullets in rapid succession. In addition, enhancements have been developed to make the rifle easier to fire, such as "muzzle breaks" to greatly reduce the effects of recoil and "sight bases" that can accept almost any optical or electro-optical sight.

The fifty caliber rifle can be made even more lethal through the use of specialized ammunition. Due to its mass, for example, "armor piercing" ammunition can travel with greater accuracy at farther distances to penetrate more deeply than other forms of ammunition. With armor piercing ammunition, these weapons can penetrate several inches of steel and can pierce bullet-proof glass. Even more damaging, "armor piercing incendiary" ammunition explodes on impact and "armor piercing tracing" ammunition leaves a lighted residue trail to increase accuracy during night shooting.

The combination of its power, technological advances to improve accuracy, enhancements to ease use, and specialized ammunition make the fifty caliber rifle one of the deadliest rifles available today. In addition to destroying vehicles, it has been adapted for "sniping" against individuals and could be utilized for the destruction of other targets, such as armored limousines. *The World's Sniping Rifles*, a catalogue of various caliber rifles and accessories, explains how the Barrett Company even promoted the weapon's ability to destroy jet aircraft:

There was a good deal of skepticism at the thought of using such a heavy weapon for sniping but, after Barrett pointed out that the object was to wreck several million dollars' worth of jet aircraft with one or two dollars' worth of cartridge, the whole thing began to make more sense and the idea spread.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

<sup>4</sup>Ian V. Hogg, *The World's Sniping Rifles, with Sighting Systems and Ammunition*, 108, Stackpole Books (Pennsylvania 1998).

## II. ORIGIN AND MANUFACTURE OF THE WEAPON

### A. Development of the Modern Semi-Automatic Fifty Caliber Weapon

Although bolt-action fifty caliber rifles have been available in the United States for some time, the modern semi-automatic version was not developed until the 1980s by the Barrett Company. Barrett's semi-automatic model 82A1, which is the most common semi-automatic fifty caliber rifle in use today, was developed with the military in mind. This model, which saw extensive use in the Gulf War, provided the United States military with the capability to destroy vehicles, aircraft, and bunkers at long range. A description in *Sniper: The Skills, the Weapons, and the Experience* provides an example of how the U.S. military took advantage of its tremendous firepower:

The Barrett M82A1 was used in the Gulf War; a hundred rifles were rushed to the Marine Corps in time to see action in the desert. In one engagement, Sergeant Kenneth Terry of 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, hit and knocked out an Iraqi BMP armoured personnel carrier with two armour-piercing incendiary rounds at a range of 1100 metres. At the loss of the Iraqi vehicle the other two BMPs in the patrol promptly surrendered to the American forces.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to enabling individual soldiers to engage enemy tanks and personnel carriers, the fifty caliber rifle has been promoted as an anti-personnel tool in circumstances in which enemy positions are not even visible. According to another military expert:

It's the .50's tremendous ability to penetrate bunkers and buildings that makes it so deadly, as reflected by the penetration data . . . . This means you can pulverize enemy positions and induce casualties without necessarily seeing an enemy soldier. When firing at positions, don't be thrifty; riddle them with enough bullets to ensure damage.<sup>6</sup>

As the benefits of fifty caliber rifles became evident, they began to be acquired by all branches of the U.S. military, many law enforcement agencies throughout the country, foreign militaries, and other groups as well. For example, these weapons have been used by Irish Republican Army snipers, causing serious security concerns:

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<sup>5</sup>Adrian Gilbert, *Sniper: The Skills, the Weapons, and the Experiences*, 214, St. Martin's Press (New York 1994).

<sup>6</sup>*The Ultimate Sniper*, *supra* note 1, at 222.

In at least two of these attacks a [fifty caliber] Barrett Model 82 heavy sniping rifle was used; capable of piercing light armour, it has a maximum range in excess of a mile. This had serious implications for the security forces patrolling the border areas: armoured Land-Rovers and soldier's body armour no longer afforded their users protection from such a weapon.<sup>7</sup>

The newest trend in fifty caliber rifles is the renovation of the World War I Browning M2 heavy machine gun. This new version, produced by TNW Co., is an update of the infantry model and weighs 84 pounds without its 44-pound tripod. Although it feeds rounds of ammunition through a belt much like a machine gun, this version has been modified to fire with separate trigger pulls in order to bypass federal restrictions against machine guns. This weapon allows uninterrupted firing of all rounds on the belt rather than being limited to a ten round chamber, as in the Barrett model. According to a 1998 review in *Guns & Ammo*, this updated model has been "appropriately blessed" by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for sale in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

## **B. Manufacturers of the Weapon**

There are several domestic manufacturers of fifty caliber rifles. The largest is the Barrett Company, located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Barrett describes its semi-automatic model 82A1 as "Heavy Firepower for Light Infantry."

Harris Gun Works, Inc., located in Phoenix, Arizona, also manufactures these weapons. Harris entered the "heavy gun" market in 1987. Harris sells a single shot M1987 model, a five shot M1987/R model, a reduced length M92 model, and an M93 model that has seen service in Somalia and Bosnia. In addition to these bolt-action versions, Harris produces made-to-order semi-automatics.

Until 1998, Pauza Specialties, located in Baytown, Texas, also sold a semi-automatic Model P50, but it has gone out-of-business. Two other companies, Knight's Manufacturing Co. and the McMillan Bros. Rifle Co., are close to final production of semi-automatic models. Knight estimates an August 1999 production date, and McMillan estimates production beginning early in the year 2000. Several additional companies produce bolt-action fifty caliber weapons, such as the AMAC Company and L.A.R. Manufacturing Ltd., which sells the "Grizzly 50 Big Boar."

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<sup>7</sup>*Sniper: The Skills, The Weapons, and the Experience*, supra note 5, at 167.

<sup>8</sup>*Exclusive: Semi-Auto Belt-Fed .50 BMG*, *Guns & Ammo*, 41 (Jan. 1998).

### **C. Costs of the Weapon**

The cost of a new fifty caliber sniper rifle can range from about \$4,000 to \$7,000. The retail price for a new Barrett model 82A1 with two ten round magazines and an air and watertight case is approximately \$6,800. On the other hand, the cost of a modern second-hand fifty caliber rifle is only about \$3,000. An Internet search conducted by the minority staff revealed the sale of one used fifty caliber sniper rifle for only \$29.95.

## **III. CURRENT DISTRIBUTION AND AVAILABILITY OF THE WEAPON**

Since the Gulf War, fifty caliber sniper rifles have become widely available in the civilian market. The minority staff was able to find multiple advertisements in newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and other sources offering fifty caliber weapons for sale. The advertising techniques used to promote these weapons are highlighted in a report by Tom Diaz of the Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C., which is scheduled to be released on the same day as this report.<sup>9</sup>

In order to assess the availability of these weapons in the U.S. civilian market, Rep. Rod R. Blagojevich, the ranking member of the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, and Rep. Henry A. Waxman, the ranking member of the Committee on Government Reform, requested the Office of Special Investigations of the General Accounting Office (GAO) to conduct an investigation. GAO analyzed databases maintained by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and gathered independent information by contacting manufacturers directly.

In addition, GAO agents went undercover to purchase weapons in various states surrounding the D.C. area. These undercover agents also obtained recordings of telephone conversations they had with out-of-state ammunition dealers to determine the availability of the more lethal specialized ammunition. Finally, GAO investigated law enforcement files to determine what types of individuals have successfully obtained these weapons. The following discussion summarizes information that the GAO investigators have provided to Reps. Blagojevich and Waxman.

### **A. Distribution in the United States Civilian Market**

As a first step, GAO requested and obtained records from ATF about companies manufacturing the fifty caliber rifle between 1987 and 1998. These records show that the Barrett Company manufactured and sold over 2,800 fifty caliber rifles in the domestic civilian market during this period. The majority of these weapons, over 2,200, were sold after the Gulf War in 1991.

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<sup>9</sup>Tom Diaz, *One Shot, One Kill: Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles*, The Violence Policy Center (Washington, D.C. 1999).

Barrett's self-reported data may underestimate the number of fifty caliber weapons it made and sold in the domestic civilian market. The GAO investigators found unexplained discrepancies in Barrett's self-reported data. For example, in its 1997 report, Barrett stated that it exported 240 fifty caliber rifles. However, Barrett reported manufacturing only 60 such weapons during that year. When the GAO investigators sought an explanation, ATF was unable to explain the basis for the discrepancy.

In order to reconcile these conflicting reports, GAO attempted to obtain accurate manufacturing and sales information directly from the Barrett Company. GAO first telephoned Barrett's offices in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and asked the company to provide information voluntarily. GAO requested, for example, the number of fifty caliber rifles manufactured by Barrett, the number sold, and the number exported. GAO also made additional inquiries for any information Barrett might have regarding reports of criminal uses, if any, of the fifty caliber rifles they had produced.

In response, Barrett initially told GAO to send all of its questions in writing, which GAO submitted (Attachment A). Barrett failed to respond to these questions, however, and informed GAO that it would not cooperate in any manner with its attempt to gather this information.

## **B. Availability of the Weapon for Purchase**

### **1. The Minimal Legal Restrictions on Purchase**

Currently, there are three principal categories of firearm regulations in the United States. The most restrictive category applies to highly powerful and destructive weapons regulated under the National Firearms Act (NFA). NFA firearms are particularly destructive devices that impose an unusually grave threat. They may have abnormally high power, be relatively concealable, or fire automatically. Some common examples include sawed-off shotguns and machine guns. Prospective purchasers may buy NFA weapons only through licensed dealers and may not buy such weapons second-hand. Purchasers are required to fill out license transfer applications with ATF and supply fingerprints to be processed by the FBI in detailed criminal background checks. ATF reports that this process takes about 60 days.

The second category, which is regulated under the Gun Control Act, applies to handguns. Under this category, federal law requires potential handgun purchasers to be at least 21 years old. With narrow exceptions, no person under 18 is permitted to possess a handgun. Because federal law also prohibits sales to convicted felons and other categories of prohibited individuals, purchasers are required to go through an instant criminal background check procedure prior to completion of the sale.

The third category applies to "long guns" or rifles. Also regulated under the Gun Control Act, this category is the least regulated. For example, the minimum age for long gun purchasers is 18. Although buyers still must obtain a federal background check, there is no federal minimum age for possession, and there is no regulation on second-hand sales. Although states may regulate these weapons, some allow children as young as 14 to use them.

Although long-range fifty caliber weapons have tremendous destructive force, they are regulated under federal law as “long guns.” This means their purchase and ownership are given the least scrutiny of any firearm. Not only are fifty caliber weapons the most powerful firearms not currently regulated under the NFA, but purchasers and users of fifty caliber rifles are not required to meet the federal requirements even for handgun owners. As a result, an 18-year old high school senior with a few thousand dollars and a valid state driver’s license can emerge from a gun shop with one of the premier military rifles ever made. Moreover, teenagers younger than 18 are allowed to lawfully possess these weapons in many states.

## **2. GAO’s Findings**

The results of the GAO undercover investigation demonstrate that fifty caliber rifles are easily obtainable throughout the United States. In conducting its investigation, GAO sent an undercover agent to licensed gun dealers in Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. In all cases, the agent claimed he was a resident of Virginia who wanted to buy a Barrett model 82A1. The dealers in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia all stated that they would sell the weapon to the agent if the agent provided a driver’s license and a second form of identification to conduct a federal background check.

Many of the dealers urged the GAO investigators to buy their weapons soon because of the possibility that fifty caliber rifles would be banned in the future as a result of their power. For example, according to the GAO investigators, one dealer stated:

You’d better buy one soon. It’s only a matter of time before someone lets a round go on a range that travels so far, it hits a school bus full of kids. The government will definitely ban .50 calibers. The gun is just too powerful.

Maryland was the only state that prohibited the sale of fifty caliber semi-automatic rifles to the undercover agents. Maryland has listed the Barrett model 82A1 as an assault weapon and has restricted sales to in-state residents. In addition, Maryland requires a seven-day waiting period while state police perform their own background check.

In addition to purchasing fifty caliber rifles from commercial dealers with federal firearms licenses, GAO also determined that “used” fifty caliber rifles are easily available from private citizens through the Internet and through ads in gun publications. Since second-hand sales are not regulated in any manner by the federal government, GAO found that private individuals could sell fifty caliber weapons to buyers who would not pass even the federal government’s limited prerequisites, such as the limitation on sales to convicted felons.

### C. Availability of Armor Piercing Ammunition for Purchase

The GAO undercover agents also investigated the availability of various forms of specialized ammunition for the fifty caliber rifle, such as armor piercing (AP) ammunition, armor piercing incendiary (API) ammunition, and armor piercing tracer (APT) ammunition. The GAO investigation found that all forms of this ammunition were easily available for purchase.

GAO found that three of the weapons dealers contacted by the undercover agent regarding the purchase of rifles also offered to order specialized ammunition. According to GAO, the dealers in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia informed the agent that purchasing these kinds of ammunition was not subject to any federal, state, or local restrictions. The dealer in Virginia told the agent that this specialized ammunition was illegal to sell or possess in that state. The dealer in Maryland said he would sell such ammunition only to Maryland residents. Although the GAO investigator told the dealers in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia that the investigator was a resident of Virginia, none of the other dealers warned the agent about Virginia's restrictions.

An undercover GAO agent also contacted by telephone several dealers that advertised specialized ammunition over the Internet. The agent called ammunition dealers in Alaska, Nebraska, and Oregon and recorded conversations in which he purported to be a customer interested in buying ammunition for shipment to Washington, D.C., or Virginia. The agent found that he could secure the purchase of specialized ammunition from any of the three dealers within a matter of minutes.

The dealers in Nebraska and Oregon stated that they could make the transaction when the agent faxed a copy of his driver's license with a signed statement that he was over 21 and was violating no federal, state, or local restrictions on the purchase. Although the agent said he was from Virginia, which bans this type of ammunition, neither dealer expressed a reservation about selling the ammunition to a Virginia resident. According to the GAO investigator, the dealer in Alaska said he had 10,000 rounds of armor piercing ammunition and would sell the ammunition to the investigator. However, the Alaska dealer said the investigator would have to pick up the ammunition in Alaska because UPS did not ship goods from Alaska to the lower 48 states.

The GAO investigator taped the conversations with the three ammunition dealers. These conversations reveal that the ammunition dealers continued to offer to sell special armor piercing ammunition to the investigator even after the investigator said he wanted the ammunition shipped to his work address in Washington, D.C., and needed it to pierce an armored limousine or, theoretically, to "take down" a helicopter.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The dealer in Oregon initially expressed reservations about shipping the ammunition to Washington, D.C., because he was not sure if this was legal. Later in the conversation, however, the dealer agreed to ship the ammunition if the agent faxed a message saying that it was "okay" to ship the ammunition.

For example, the agent's conversation with the dealer in Nebraska included the following interchanges:

*Agent:* Okay, let me ask you this now. This ammo will go through, say, metal, won't it?

*Dealer:* Uh, yeah, it'll go through metal. Yeah, it's incendiary.

...

*Agent:* Okay. Do you think it would go through, like, an armored limousine?

*Dealer:* Oh . . . well . . . I think it would. (*laughing*)

*Agent:* How 'bout like bullet-proof glass?

*Dealer:* Oh, yeah, it'll go through that.

*Agent:* Even if it's ballistic glass, it'll still go through?

*Dealer:* Right.

*Agent:* With the first round, probably?

*Dealer:* Right.

...

*Agent:* Okay. Now, I live on the East Coast, can you send that to me?

*Dealer:* Uh, yeah, we ship it to the East Coast, whereabouts do you live?

*Agent:* Uh, I live in Virginia . . .

*Dealer:* Okay.

*Agent:* But I'd like it shipped to DC.

*Dealer:* Okay.

Later in the conversation, the agent and the dealer discussed whether ordinary "sniper round" ammunition or specialized armor piercing incendiary (API) ammunition would best meet the agent's needs:

*Agent:* Okay. Do you know though, sir, if I got the sniper round instead of the API, would that still go through ballistic glass?

*Dealer:* Uh, yeah. That will still go through—oh, I don't know—I don't think we've tested on ballistic glass. It'll go through three inch aircraft window.

*Agent:* Okay. But then, the—you know, the first round, would probably, the bullet would probably veer off though, would it not?

*Dealer:* Uh, I think—depending, I've never tested it, but I'm pretty sure's anything out of that 50 gun will shoot through ballistic glass.

*Agent:* Okay, but say an armored limousine, though. These sniper rounds may not go through an armored limousine, or . . . ?

*Dealer:* Uh, we've never tested it on that. Because it is a brass, you know what I am saying?

...

*Agent:* Okay. Well, I think I'm better off with API because I'm going to be using this against, um, you know, something with an armored limousine and something with ballistic glass, and I just want to make sure I'm going to be able to penetrate. I don't want to take the risk of getting the sniper round. Um, so. Alright, so put me on with your assistant there and maybe I can figure out how I can get this shipped to me.

*Dealer:* Okay.

The agent's conversation with the dealer in Alaska was similar:

*Dealer:* I have slaprounds, which are armor-piercing . . . slaprounds are special lubricated armor-piercing, they are a steel penetrating tip—.30 caliber tip inside of a .50 caliber— like an old accelerator that Remington used to do.

*Agent:* Right.

*Dealer:* And they'll go through six inches of steel up to a 45 degree angle at a thousand yards.

. . .

*Agent:* Okay. Um, and so you say they'll go up through six inches of steel—they'll penetrate . . .

*Dealer:* Hm mmm.

*Agent:* . . . at a thousand yards?

*Dealer:* At a 45 degree angle at a thousand yards.

*Agent:* Okay. So for sure then they'd go through an armored limousine?

*Dealer:* Oh, yeah. (*laughing*)

*Agent:* No question about that, right?

*Dealer:* No question, fifty will go through any of it.

*Agent:* Okay. Even if I don't get the API, it still would go through an armored limousine?

*Dealer:* Uh, huh. The ball will.

*Agent:* Are you sure about that?

*Dealer:* Oh, yeah. We've played with stuff. I go through four inches, five inches of steel up here easy.

. . .

*Agent:* Yeah, because, I mean, it's very important for me to get this, because there's going to be some day when I am going to need this ammunition, because I'm going to be—I'm going to need to defeat an armored-type vehicle someday, I know that . . .

*Dealer:* Well, then, when them cattle carts come running down your drive, you'd better be able to stop it.<sup>11</sup>

*Agent:* Exactly, but you know, you can think who drives in armored limousines, that's why I'm going to need it someday, those people in armored limousines.

In the conversation with the dealer in Oregon, the dealer said he believed, but could not “guarantee,” that the armor piercing ammunition would penetrate an armored limousine, as the following interchanges indicate:

*Agent:* I'm very much interested to making sure that these rounds can go through like, the bullet-proof glass. Do you think they'll go through bullet-proof glass?

. . .

*Dealer:* Well, in the old days, in the old [??], they used 700 grains, 720 or something. But nowadays they use 660, so they're getting a little more velocity out of it. And, I just can't see glass standing up to that.

*Agent:* How about an armored limousine?

*Dealer:* Yeah, you're using it to test it?

*Agent:* Well, I . . .

*Dealer:* Because we have some people who are testing armored cars. Like 30-06 AP rounds.

*Agent:* Well, I . . . these would be a lot . . . theoretically the .50 cal should be a lot stronger than a 30-06. . .

*Dealer:* Right, right.

*Agent:* AP.

*Dealer:* Right . . . So it should go through.

*Agent:* Well, yeah, I guess you say testing against armored limousines . . . Yeah, I'll be testing against armored limousines. But, but it's gotta work.

*Dealer:* Right.

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<sup>11</sup>The mention of “cattle carts” apparently refers to the vehicles used by ATF personnel in Waco, Texas, during the service of the search warrant against David Koresh.

*Agent:* You know, I don't want to have the chance of it not working.

*Dealer:* Uh, well, there's no way that I can guarantee it. I'm not familiar with the glass they're using nowadays.

*Agent:* But, but, but you've had no complaints from your customers about these being misfires or anything, these rounds are pretty good?

*Dealer:* Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

The Oregon dealer also was confident that the ammunition could be used to "take down" a helicopter:

*Agent:* Right. And then, if I theoretically wanted to use these rounds to take down an aircraft, say either a helicopter or something like that, I should be able to take a helicopter down, shouldn't I?

*Dealer:* Yeah, they're not armored. They're not armored to a point that it would stop. If you look at, uh, a military helicopter that's been through, uh, like the ones that came back from Vietnam, they've got, uh, little plates of metal where they weld up the bullet holes. They just take a little piece of metal and they just weld over the bullet holes. It makes the guy, the next guy, feel more comfortable when he's in there.

*Agent:* I guess so.

*Dealer:* *(laughing)* You don't want to see a bullet hole in there.

*Agent:* Okay.

*Dealer:* So, yeah, it'll go through any light stuff like that.

The final interchange with the Oregon dealer included the following passages:

*Agent:* Good. You know, I'm very happy to see that we'll be able to do business here, because, I'm a little bit concerned, because here on the East Coast when you go to buy ammunition—these large, heavy-duty .50 cal—they ask a lot of questions.

*Dealer:* Oh.

*Agent:* And I don't like people asking me questions why I want this ammunition.

*Dealer:* Well, see, they use them out here for hunting.

*Agent:* Um huh. Well, you could say I'm going to be using this for hunting also, but just hunting of a different kind.

*Dealer:* *(laughing)* As long as it's noth-nothing illegal.

*Agent:* Well, I wouldn't consider it illegal.

*Dealer:* Okay. Alright.

Full transcripts of these conversations are included with this report as Attachment B.

#### **IV. SUSPECT ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS POSSESSING THE WEAPON**

One of the principal proponents of the fifty caliber rifle is the "Fifty Caliber Shooter's Association" (FCSA). According to this organization, the migration of long-range fifty caliber sniper rifles from military to civilian markets has spawned sporting interest in the weapon. FCSA, which is registered in Tennessee and operated from California, sponsors shooting competitions and provides supplier lists and consulting information on fifty caliber rifles and ammunition. It has approximately 1,700 members from 15 different countries. In addition, its webpage indicates that it provides a service to military and law enforcement agencies by assisting with research and instruction. The GAO investigators informed Reps. Blagojevich and Waxman that they had no reason to suspect that this organization or its members were engaged in illegal or suspicious activities. On the contrary, GAO felt

that FCSA and its members appeared to be law-abiding citizens engaged in what they believe is a legitimate sporting activity.

The GAO investigators did find, however, that long-range fifty caliber sniper weapons have been linked to suspect organizations and individuals. As part of its investigation, GAO traced the origins of 28 fifty caliber weapons about which various U.S. law enforcement agencies have filed inquiries. GAO reported that these weapons have been found at the scene of some extremely troubling criminal activities. In particular, the GAO investigators discovered examples of criminal misuse of fifty caliber weapons in connection with known domestic and international terrorist organizations, outlaw motorcycle gangs, religious cults, international and domestic drug traffickers, and violent criminals.

For example, one trace led the investigators to seven suspects involved in an alleged plot to assassinate Fidel Castro by shooting down his airplane using two semi-automatic fifty caliber weapons. The suspects were arrested by the U.S. Coast Guard in the Caribbean and indicted by a federal grand jury. Additional pending cases include several foreign terrorist organizations attempting to smuggle overseas fifty caliber weapons purchased legally in the United States.

The GAO investigators also found a case in Montana in which members of a doomsday religious cult had built underground bunkers and acquired hundreds of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition to prepare for the end of the world. In an ATF crackdown, agents found ten semi-automatic fifty caliber rifles purchased with false identifications. The cult members were convicted of federal firearms violations.

In another case, ATF combined efforts with the IRS to investigate a survivalist/tax protester in Georgia who had stockpiled over 100 different firearms. Two of these weapons were Barrett semi-automatic sniper rifles the suspect was able to purchase with a false identification.

The GAO investigators also tracked down a fifty caliber weapon seized at the home of a mentally ill suspect who shot and killed a police officer responding to a domestic complaint in Michigan. Police found the weapon among 15 other firearms inside the killer's home, although the gun used in the killing was not a fifty caliber weapon. Investigators concluded that, despite his mental illness, the killer was able to purchase the rifles legally because he had no prior felony convictions.

The GAO investigators found numerous other examples of fifty caliber weapons being confiscated during the execution of drug warrants, and they reported that a fifty caliber semi-automatic weapon was recovered by Mexican law enforcement authorities in the aftermath of a shoot-out between members of an international drug cartel in Sinaloa, Mexico. This weapon was traced to an original purchaser in Wyoming, leading the GAO investigators to conclude that the accessibility of these weapons in the United States is becoming known worldwide.