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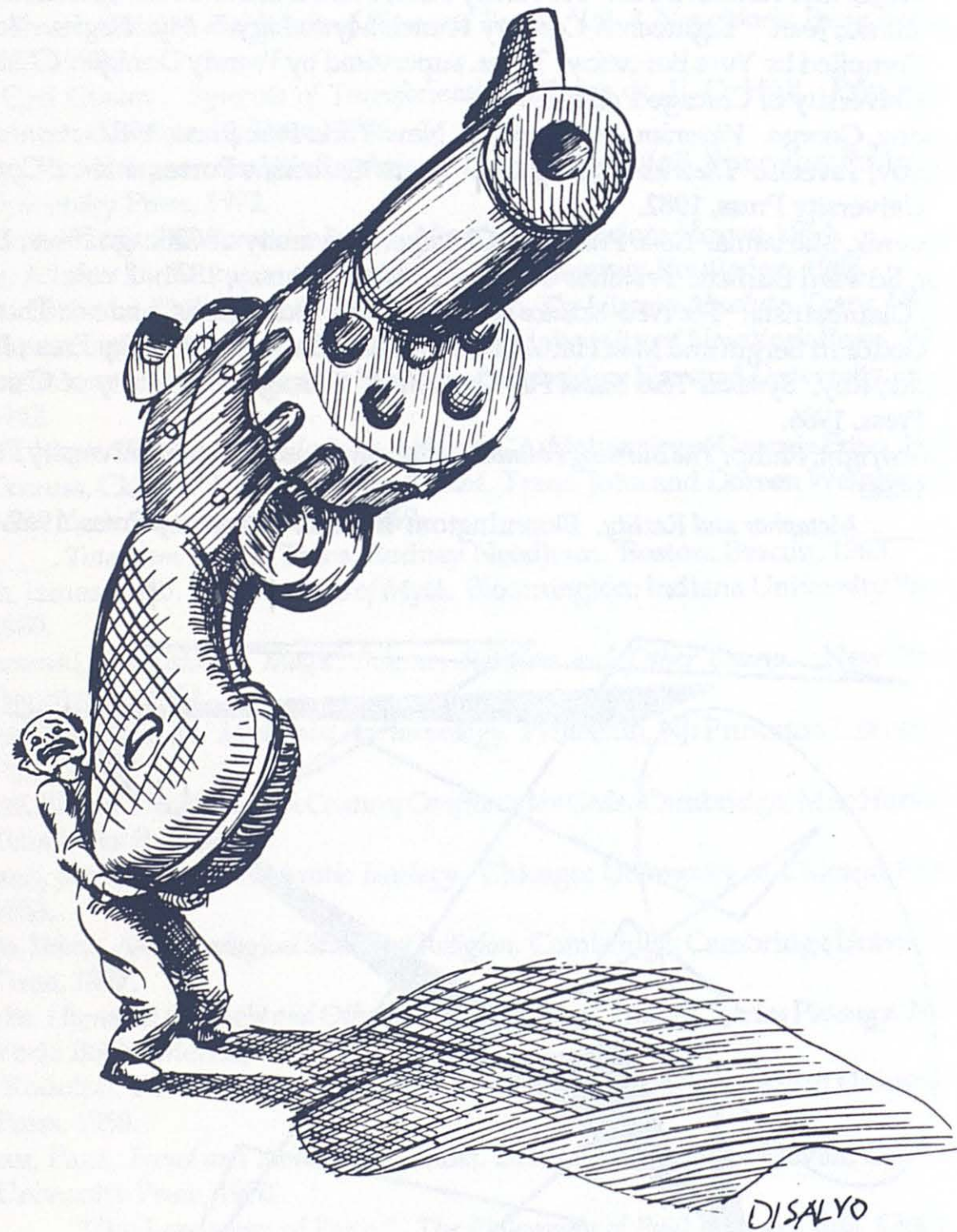
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Personal Weapons and the Constitution of Man as Warrior

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American defeat in the Vietnam War created multiple crises for the United States. Since World War II, the U.S. had been the dominant world power. Defeat signaled the end of this era and raised grave doubts about the ability of the U.S. military to successfully intervene in Third World countries. Domestically, the long, drawn-out involvement in Vietnam fragmented the traditional bi-partisan consensus on foreign policy.

This protracted political crisis was exacerbated by a *cultural* crisis. Victory in warfare had been a major unifying force in American national identity from the time when the first European settlers began the 250-year-long war against the Indians. Historian Richard Slotkin says that this martial tradition formed the fundamental American mythology of "regeneration through violence."¹ Victory in warfare was culturally framed as a sign of cultural and moral superiority over the enemy. Legendary American warriors such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking*, Ned Buntline's "Wild Bill" Cody, and John Wayne all "regenerated" society by infusing it with their strengths and virtues when they defeated their foes.

But in the case of Vietnam, there was no regeneration through violence to redeem the 58,000 American war dead. Nor could Vietnam be readily connected to the heroic tradition with its triumph of American good over evil. Instead, the war was "lost" both literally and culturally. If victory had always been interpreted as a sign of divine favor and moral virtue, then defeat, by definition, raised doubts about the American system. If Americans were not winners, then who were they?

In 1980, Ronald Reagan formulated a political platform to resolve the cultural crisis created by defeat. He called Vietnam a "noble cause," and demanded that the U.S. recover from the "Vietnam syndrome" that had inhibited military intervention during the Carter administration. He vowed to combat the Soviet Union's "Evil Empire" and announced plans for spending over two trillion dollars on the military over eight years.²

As a Hollywood actor, Reagan had specialized in western, spy, and war films. Once in office, he routinely quoted scenes from movies to exemplify his values and his politics. At the same time, the late 1970's and 1980's saw American culture formulate a new version of the male warrior hero who

returns to war to give America the regeneration through violence the country desired.

Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* films are the best-known movies of the "New War," but hundreds of "action-adventure" films have been made over the past fifteen years. By 1989, Don Pendleton's novel character, "Mack Bolan," had starred in over 120 volumes of *The Executioner* series of books, with total sales in the millions. At least thirty other similar novel series followed Mack into the war zone. Mercenaries, vigilantes, and commandos slaughtered their way across continents. These new, imaginary battlegrounds ranged from the Vietnam War to contemporary combat against Arabs, Central Americans, terrorists, drug dealers, Mafioso, and KGB agents, to future guerrilla battles against Russian invaders inside the United States.

In 1975, *Soldier of Fortune: The Journal of Professional Adventurers* began publication with an editorial mix of "I was there" stories from Vietnam, travelogues to war zones in Afghanistan and Nicaragua, and extensive consumer reports on assault rifles, pistols, munitions, and knives. By the mid-1980's, *SOF* was selling over 150,000 issues per month and had half a dozen competitors. Comic books, in turn, imitated the movies, novels, and magazines, turning out crime and war sagas such as *Scout*, *Punisher*, *Vigilante*, *Verdict*, and *The Mercenary*.

Along with this outpouring of images and narratives came a change in the domestic weapons market. In the early and mid-1980's, virtually all of the world's most modern models of sniper rifles, assault rifles, and the submachine guns were available in semi-automatic versions. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms estimated that from two to three million such weapons were sold from the Vietnam War until 1989, when the Bush administration issued an import ban on foreign-made models. Pistols changed, too. The old ".38 Special" lost favor amongst shooters, and was replaced by either new, military-style 9mm and .45 caliber semi-automatics or big, "magnum" caliber revolvers. Just how many combat rifles, shotguns, and pistols there are is not known. But given the attention they have received from manufacturers, distributors, and gun magazines, they must comprise a significant percentage of the estimated 140 million guns possessed by the 47% of American families who own guns³.

Taken as a whole, this reworking of traditional war culture constitutes what I call "paramilitary culture."⁴ The new warrior hero found in this literature is only rarely a member of a conventional military or law-enforcement unit. Instead, the new hero fights alone or with a small, elite group of fellow warriors. By being outside the dominant power structure and bureaucracy, the new paramilitary warrior can overcome forms of legal and political restraint supposedly imposed by elites on their subordinates, and thus

achieve new mythic victories to replace defeat in Vietnam. Moreover, paramilitary culture stresses the warrior role for all men, rather than as an occupational identity limited to soldiers and police; all men, be they bankers, professors, factory workers or postal clerks, can be warriors who are always prepared for battle against the enemies of society.

Paramilitary culture is largely a *fantasy* culture. Few professional mercenaries still exist. And while civilians frequently defend themselves with weapons against criminals, they do not engage in protracted fire-fights with "invaders" or "terrorists" or drug dealers. Instead, paramilitary culture speaks to the fear many men feel in an era of declining American power (and male power), and offers an idealized self—the warrior—as a form of certified manhood and a new way to master the world *in his imagination*.

At the heart of this fantasy culture are the complex relationships between men and their weapons—the warrior is first and foremost *an armed man*. Movies, novels, gun magazine feature articles, and manufacturers' advertisements all present versions of the proper relationships between men and their combat weapons. Together, they create what sociologist Dick Hebdige calls a "spectacular subculture" based on consumption for men to pursue in their leisure time. Subcultures develop expressive *styles* for social groups. Styles, says Hebdige, serve as "coded responses to changes affecting the entire community."⁵ Manufactured commodities such as firearms are always highly encoded with cultural mythologies. There is no such thing as a purely "functional" object, completely divorced from cultural conceptions. As Adrian Forty writes:

Every product, to be successful, must incorporate the ideas that will make it marketable, and the particular task of design is to bring about the conjunction between such ideas and the available means of production. The result of this process is that manufactured goods embody innumerable myths about the world, myths which in time come to seem as real as the products in which they are embedded.⁶

Subcultures are constituted through a dialectical interplay between the social group, the narratives and visual symbols found in a cultural mythology, and the "star" commodities favored by the group. Subculture members play upon what Paul Willis conceptualizes as the "objective possibilities" of the group's principal commodities for developing their identities:

It is the continuous play between the group and a particular item which produces specific styles, meanings, contents, and forms of consciousness . . . it [the object] must help to support, return and substantiate particular kinds of

social identity and the practice and application of particular kinds of sensibility — conscious and unconscious, voluntary and automatic.⁷

Paramilitary culture is both a consumer subculture and a political vision. Its project of regeneration through violence has vast political implications in how Americans conceive themselves and the world. The existence of paramilitary culture also seriously questions the validity of the customary social science distinction between "traditional" and "modern" societies. It draws heavily from deep, archaic domains of pre-modern war mythology for its fundamental concepts. Most pre-industrial societies have what Mircea Eliade calls "cosmogonic" or creation myths that explain how the world came into existence:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells us, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality — an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth only tells of that which *really happened*, which manifested itself completely.⁸

In most cosmogonic myths, society comes into existence only after a protracted *war* between the "good" forces of creation against the "evil" forces of chaos. Paul Ricoeur calls this archaic idea the "theology of the Holy War." From this perspective, "evil is not an accident that upsets a previous order; it belongs constitutionally to the foundation of order."⁹ Evil cannot be reformed; it must be eliminated through the Holy War. Paramilitary culture represents a form of "reciting" this cosmogonic myth; each heroic warrior tale resurrects the "primeval reality" of gods fighting demons and allows the individual viewer or subculture participant to be reborn (fantasy) as the hero. This extraordinary combination of pre-modern mythology together with advanced capitalism's spectacular commodities (weapons) together helps create paramilitary culture's appeal. Analyzing the codes that structure the relationships between man and his weapons helps to understand how war and the warrior are culturally reproduced in private life.

Dirty Harry and the Hollywood Arms Race

The classic Hollywood warriors did not have tremendous physiques, nor did they have special guns to signify their powers. Instead, their power was grounded in their moral character. John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart played virtuous men with highly developed personal codes of honor. Their fighting ability flowed from moral strength. John Wayne carried an ordinary

Colt .45 revolver in all his western adventures. Humphrey Bogart likewise had but a plain .38 special police revolver when he played Sam Spade. Although these heroes won their battles against the evil ones, the gunfights were always secondary compared to the moral victories.

Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* (1971) character began the movie journey into the New War and he brought a special weapon. San Francisco police inspector Harry Callahan carried a huge Smith and Wesson .44 magnum. It was over a foot long, weighed over three pounds, shot flame out the barrel several feet, and had so much muzzle blast that it deafened the shooter. Its recoil was so pronounced that no shooter could recover in time for a quick second shot. These features made it unacceptable as a combat pistol in the real world.

But Eastwood was not fighting in the "real" world. Instead *Dirty Harry* lived inside a vision of America gone bad, a place in which liberal coddling of criminals, selfish politicians, and bureaucratic corruption had permitted the resurrection of the most horrendous forces from the ancient primeval chaos. Inspector Callahan was "dirty" because he alone recognized the absolute reality of evil. He understood that the evil ones feel *pleasure* in killing, raping, and kidnapping.

Eastwood fought alone, outside the paralyzing self-imposed restraints imposed by liberal politicians and police bureaucrats. For the fight he needed "the most powerful handgun in the world." A truly dangerous enemy might recover from the wound of a .38 special (a liberal way of "containing" rather than eradicating evil). Only a .44 magnum could rupture the evil one's body beyond any hope of recovery. Scene after scene focused on the terror expressed by villains as they faced that big .44. The hero's power thus shifted from his virtue to a combination of virtue, technical proficiency, and state-of-the-art weapons technology.

Dirty Harry's great success changed the old Hollywood tradition. All the other film and pulp novel warriors followed Eastwood's lead in going to war with special, "signature" weapons. Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* even developed modern versions of ancient weapons — a huge custom knife and a special bow. Mack Bolan, *The Executioner*, got a custom-made .44 Automag, a pistol far more powerful than the .44 magnum revolver. In *Commando* (1986) Arnold Schwarzenegger started on his rescue mission with a huge combat shotgun called a SPAS, an Uzi 9mm submachine gun, a .45 automatic pistol and a giant knife. With these massive armaments, victory was assured. Heroes merged with their weapons — they became "cyborg," part-men, part-machine.

Since this fusion with the weapon was a difficult art to master, warrior heroes judged men with lesser weapons to be lesser men. In one of the *Dirty*

Harry films, Inspector Callahan looks at the puny snub-nosed .38 carried by another detective and tells him to stay in the station house. "A man should know his limitations," he says. When Mel Gibson and his new partner, Danny Glover, prepare for their first detective assignment together in *Lethal Weapon* (1986), Gibson checks the 15 round magazine in his Baretta 9mm semi-automatic and picks up another four magazines as spares. When he sees his new partner pull out a plain six-shot .38 revolver, he smirks incredulously, "I heard a few old timers still carried those things." The heavily armed warrior is the man of the future; only he can cope with the on-going breakdown of society and function in the emerging chaos.

Film makers know the tremendous importance of the hero's weapons. Mark Lester, director of *Commando*, look at over 200 guns in choosing Arnold's arsenal. To determine the most photogenic weapons, Lester's production crew took pictures of Arnold posing with different guns. Other directors, such as James Cameron and John Milius, have extensive collections of combat weapons themselves and used their experience in choosing guns for *Terminator* (1984) and *Red Dawn* (1986). Less informed action-adventure film makers turned to technical consultants to find esoteric firearms.

A successful movie can make a best-selling weapon. Smith and Wesson introduced the .44 magnum in 1964 for a small hunter market. After *Dirty Harry*, gun dealers reported that they had customers calling and walking in who had never owned a gun, and didn't even know what to ask for other than to say that they wanted the "Dirty Harry gun." Rambo's knife also hit big. Within a year, scores of manufacturers turned out Rambo knives. Some were expensive custom items, others "quality" machine-made knives, and most were \$29.95 or \$19.95 cheap imitations. Stallone subsequently formed special licensing agreements to produce the knives and bows used in his later films.

Rambo's knife has one more important twist. A British Special Air Services commando ordered a custom knife from Rambo's knife maker. He used it on a mission during the Falkland Islands-Malvinas War. The commando then wrote to *Soldier of Fortune* and explained that the saw-tooth design was poor because the saw-teeth got stuck in his victim's rib cage. This failure provoked tremendous excitement and discussion in paramilitary magazines. Looking at a man's knife became a way of telling if he was a "real" warrior or a Rambo "wannabe" warrior. Knife manufacturers then began offering their "combat" designs in two variations, with or without saw teeth.

Feature articles testing and decrying "Hollywood" weapons and fighting techniques became a regular feature. Covers featuring movie stars such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Don Johnson generated far larger news stand sales than did unknown gun men. Inside the magazine, a complex kind of hero worship and film criticism took place. While happy that war and

warriors were in favor, these articles tried to appropriate the star's glamour. By criticizing the hero's poor shooting and fighting techniques, they transferred his romantic mystique to the ordinary men who knew how to shoot and fight the right way – the way described in the magazines. Readers became superior to the film hero; they were modern, "realistic" men who knew which weapons "really" worked.

Joining a Weapons Family for Imaginary Journeys Through History

Almost all combat arms have long histories of use by military and police. As time goes by, a few special weapons come to symbolize all of the battles fought by the armies who used them. For example, the United States Army adopted the Colt single-action .45 revolver in 1873. Although many different revolvers were used in the old west, the Colt .45 was always used in Western movies. It became a true hero's gun, the weapon used by the first American warrior gods as they traveled across the American frontier, fought savage Indians and created the sacred order – America. Jeff Cooper, founder of the prestigious combat shooting school, Gunsite Ranch, once described what holding an old .45 single-action revolver meant: "Just to hold one in your hands produces a feeling of kinship with our western heritage – an appreciation of things like courage and the sanctity of man's word." ¹⁰ To have a Colt .45 revolver is to possess a "time-travel" machine, capable of taking its owner back to the mythic frontier.

In 1911 the U.S. Army adopted another Colt .45, this time a semi-automatic pistol. The Army and the Marine Corps used the .45 automatic in WW I, WW II, Korea, Vietnam and all other U.S. conflicts until the 9mm Baretta was adopted in 1986. To own and shoot a Colt .45 automatic opens a tremendous historical domain for an imaginary traveler. He too can fight with the Marines at Belleau Wood or with their descendants at Iwo Jima or with the third generation at the Inchon Reservoir in Korea or with the great-grandchildren at Khe Sanh in Vietnam. Such a weapon's sacred aura gives the modern paramilitary warrior strength. When he is armed with a .45, the warrior knows that thousands before him have slain their enemies with the same gun. He can summon their spirits to assist him. By owning the gun, its powers are transferred to him. He too is tough as steel, reliable under the worst conditions, and a hard hitter.

Gun manufacturers are fully aware of how important it is to emphasize historical fantasies. Springfield Armory's advertisement for a Colt .45 "clone" (the patents expired) said that it was the "affordable legend." The American Historical Foundation offers a special "commemorative" edition of each major U.S. firearm and knife. Its advertisement for an engraved .45

proclaimed: "If you were born between the late 1880s and 1968, it is the symbol of *your* time, with reverence, as the '.45 Era.'" ¹¹

Those companies offering relatively new firearms and knives must *invent* a fantasy domain for their products. Heckler and Koch, a German manufacturer, advertised its Model 94 9mm carbine as part of a still life featuring a knife, a pistol belt with an H&K pistol, several ammunition magazines and loose cartridges, and most important, a *map* and a *compass*. The carbine was framed as a key to adventure; it would take its owner beyond conventional society to the primordial wilderness. Similarly, a pistol with a radical new design is presented as "Aiming for the 21st century. . . . At GLOCK, we've looked beyond the status quo to respond to the growing security needs of the coming century."

Lastly, some firearms have evil histories. Communist bloc countries have produced over thirty-five million Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles. Thousands of American troops in Vietnam were killed by men (and women) using them. The AK has also been popular with terrorist groups. Hence, the Kalashnikov represents evil's victory over good. The man who owns one must be a truly bad hombre, a man who can take the enemy's power away from him and claim it as his own. Advertising can only allude to this evil symbolism. When the AK-47 (semi-automatic version) was first introduced to America, the ad simply mentioned how "arousing" it was:

The AKM burst on the international firearms scene almost three decades ago. Since then, no automatic rifle has aroused so much curiosity among collectors and shooters for its toughness and versatility. No automatic rifle has aroused so much envy among firearm designers for its simplicity of operation and absolute reliability. . . . Satisfy your curiosity about this new beauty. See it at your sporting arms dealer. Snap one up. Then *you'll* be the envy of your fellow shooters and collectors. ¹²

John Berger once observed that envy was a central emotional dynamic in advanced capitalism; the person who wants to be envied is trying to buy self-confidence and happiness by making another person feel inadequate. ¹³ Mercedes and Porsches and other expensive automobiles are clearly signs of class membership designed to create envy. With combat weapons, membership dynamics are somewhat different. It isn't membership in the modern world that's being bought, but access to the mythic world of combat. Buying a combat weapon is like joining a tribe; each weapon is that tribe's totem. However, men can belong to more than one tribe. The more weapons the warrior owns, the more power he can appropriate from their histories, and the more fantasy adventures there are for him to pursue.

The Concentric Rings of Power: Learning the Limits of Weapons as the Boundaries of the Self

Many societies and social groups have traditionally defined themselves by establishing symbolic and material boundaries and projecting their unwanted, repressed characteristics (what Carl Jung calls "the shadow") upon "enemies" living on the other side of the boundaries. ¹⁴ Paramilitary culture follows this same logic, but with one crucially important difference. Since paramilitary culture sees the government and its organized military and police forces as either corrupt or crippled by liberal do-gooders, then each male warrior is left alone to defend himself and his family. The boundaries of "society" are thus reduced to how far he can kill a potential enemy with a given weapon.

At the same time, a man can change his identity by changing weapons and thus changing his boundaries. In paramilitary culture, man lives alone side what I call the "concentric rings of power," each ring measuring how big he can become and how close are his enemies. Both paramilitary magazines and mainstream gun magazines such as *Guns and Ammo* teach men the lethal range of each weapon.

The first ring of power is arm's reach, where the knife extends the warrior's power only a few inches or a foot at most. Since 1987 various knife-makers and soldiers writing in *Soldier of Fortune* have debated just how long a knife blade should be. One school suggests that men should carry modern Bowie knives with heavy blades 9-12" long, while others think that 6" is long enough to cut a throat, slice an arm, or pierce the enemy's heart.

The second ring of power is about 35 yards from the warrior, the limit where most competent shooters can accurately shoot a "full-size" combat pistol quickly. Thirty-five yards is also the maximum range that the "social" or combat shotgun can group 60% of its buckshot on a human chest. Within this second ring, gun writers debate whether automatics are better than revolvers, which calibers are best, and whether one should use a shotgun instead of a pistol.

At 100 yards the shooter faces his third ring. "Good" shotguns firing solid slugs are accurate at this range. Civilian models of submachine guns (carbines firing pistol cartridges), also reach their limit around 100 yards. Should one buy a "social" shotgun or a carbine? Or should one bypass the third ring and go directly from the pistol to a modern 5.56m or 7.62 s39mm assault rifle, most of which have a 200 yard range.

Beyond 200 yards, the fourth ring of power, just how far a warrior can extend his reach becomes highly controversial. Some gun writers call for heavy-barreled sniper rifles with high-resolution scopes that are accurate to 800-1000 yards. T-shirts favoring this approach parody American Telegraph

and Telephone television commercials with their picture of a sniper and the caption, "Reach out and touch someone." Other gun writers say the military "battle rifles" of the 1950s firing the 7.62 x 51mm NATO cartridge with a 400 yard range are all one really needs. Of course, the "professional" has *all* the weapons, and can pick the appropriate weapons for every social occasion.

At one level, moving out through the rings represents aggression. However, the rings of power also indicate that the warrior is deeply afraid that no matter how many weapons he has, the enemy will penetrate each and every ring. No matter how many enemies he kills with his sniper rifle or his carbine or his combat pistol, he will still be left alone to kill just one more with his knife before he is slain. Combat weapons and the concentric rings of power they project are *defensive* "body armor" that can never fully compensate for the fear he experiences.¹⁵ The warrior can not even risk urinating at a men's urinal in a public rest room:

Standing at a urinal, you are very near helpless. Any mugger knows that a public john is a great place to take wallets. The solution? Don't use the urinals. Use the stalls with doors on them. Sitting down, facing outward, with a door protecting you, you are in a much more tactically sound position, particularly if you use the technique brought back from Rhodesia by Jeff Cooper. Your pistol rests in your shorts between your knees. In that position, it is instantly accessible if someone comes crashing through the door, and is unavailable to the person in the next stall.¹⁶

Hiding the Reality of Killing in Gun and Ammunition Testing Through Technical Discussion

Combat weapons and the ammunition they fire are designed to kill people, but magazines almost always transform killing into a technical discussion about firearms and ammunition. Articles place each new weapon in relation to all its predecessors and contemporaries. *Combat Handguns* introduces each monthly issue with phrases like, "In this issue we find three different interpretations of the Combat Handgun." Guns are texts to be interpreted in relation to the established wisdom.

Peter G. Kokalis, firearms editor at *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, is one of the world's foremost firearm experts. In his monthly features, he masterfully discusses aesthetic and technical properties of weapons with only the barest hint of killing. Frequently this displacement is conducted through writing about killing as if it was a purely mechanical process involving machine operators "producing" hits. Below he reviews the MAC-10 submachine gun (a drug-dealer favorite):

One could live with all of the MAC's minor idiosyncrasies were it not for its major flaw: The cyclic rate in every version is close to 1,200 rpm [rounds per

PERSONAL WEAPONS AND THE CONSTITUTION OF MAN AS WARRIOR

minute]. Submachine guns should ideally fire between 500-600 rpm. A bullet hose serves only the ends defined by movie producers. Only the most highly trained operators can muster the trigger discipline required to produce consistent two-to-three shot bursts with a MAC submachine gun. Hit probability decreases as the length of the burst increases.¹⁷

Kokalis has also mastered the technique of letting the reader vicariously experience kill without making the thrill too blatant. The Italian Red Brigades, along with several other terrorists groups, sometimes used a small .32 caliber submachine gun manufactured in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. A small submachine gun called a "machine pistol." Kokalis's review begins:

It's Ulster, or maybe Beirut, or even Paris. A young assassin waits nervously in the shadows, eyes following a black Mercedes limousine that pulls up to the curb. His victim steps out onto the sidewalk, two bodyguards hovering about him. The terrorist steps out away from the dark wall, fires a three-round burst into his enemy's chest, whirls, and pumps short bursts into the upper torsos of the bodyguards before they can react. All three drop, never knowing they have been felled by a pipsqueak cartridge—the supposedly impotent .32 ACP. The assailant slides back into the night, his commitment to Allah or Marx ended for the evening. His instrument of death? A small black machine pistol with a most appropriate name: the Scorpion.¹⁸

The small man from the small group armed with the small "impotent" .32 can kill or "pump" the big rich, powerful man in his Mercedes, along with his expensive bodyguards. but the rest of the three page article concerns where the gun is made, how it works, how to take it apart, and how well it shoots. He concludes by placing the Skorpion text in relation to its genre:

Machine pistols are highly specialized instruments and fill a very small niche in the modern small arms arsenal. Rugged, reliable and efficient, the Skorpion is one of the very few successful weapons in its genre — despite its use by some unsavory characters.¹⁹

Good technical qualities *overcome* association with the "bad" enemy, and displace the reality of assassination. The reader is left more technically competent; he has "learned" more about weapons. This kind of textual play also occurs in discussions about ammunition. Warriors are concerned about the damage various bullets can do. Military rifle bullets travel from 2400 to 3200 feet per second and almost always completely penetrate the body. Some bullets, especially the M-16's 5.56mm caliber bullet, have a strong tendency to tumble upon impact, causing further damage. Consequently, discussions

on rifle cartridges only rarely focus on raw killing power, instead favoring talk about reliability, accuracy, and range.

But pistols fire far less powerful ammunition than do rifles. Their bullets travel from 750 to 1400 feet per second, depending upon the cartridge's capacity for gun powder and bullet weight. Shooters have a choice between smaller .38 or 9mm pistols which fire bullets at 1000 to 1400 feet per second or larger .44 special or .45 automatics firing much bigger bullets around 800 feet per second. Ammunition manufacturers have designed "hollow-point" bullets for pistol cartridges that expand upon impact. Only the smaller, lighter bullets fired by .357 magnums, .38s and 9mms travel fast enough (over 1000 fps.) for the bullets to expand with some consistency. An expanded bullet has its shaft intact, but the head is folded back into a mushroom. A perfectly expanded bullet bears some resemblance to an erect penis. Those pistoleros who favor the .45 automatic say that its 230 grain bullet makes such a big hole that it does need to expand. They favor military-type ammunition with a full metal jacket called "hardball."

Almost every gun magazine has reports and pictures of bullets that did or did not expand. Bullets are fired into a simulacrum of human flesh called "ballistic gelatin." Sophisticated magazines show graphs contrasting bullet expansion and penetration. They also calculate how many cubic inches of ballistic gelatin each bullet displaces. Drawings of "wound channel" that accompany these statistics look very much like vaginas. According to gunfight statistics, most of the better 9mm, .38 and .45 loads all stop the "adversary" from 62-73% of the time with one shot. These are not secret figures. Hence, the compulsive way these penetration tests are conducted over and over suggest that sexual dynamics are operating.

Ritual Purification of Ordinary Manufactured Guns into Sacred Extensions of the Self Through Customizing

Despite the wonders of combat weapons, most are produced with serious *flaws*. Identifying the flaws and learning how to correct them is a major task facing any potential warrior. Gun discourse establishes the standards of gun perfection, the ways guns fail to meet these standards, and how they can be redeemed. American gun manufacturers reached their peak before World War II, both in terms of design and quality control. Beginning in WWII and continuing afterwards, many sought to reduce labor costs and speed up production by making parts with far higher variances from previous tolerance levels. Accuracy and reliability suffered. Gun work is thus necessary to create a weapon that will perform to its design limits.

But modifying a firearm is not only about technical performance. Modern weapons are mass produced; customizing removes the polluting

stigma of being a commodity available to anyone and transforms the gun into a sacred artifact that symbolizes its owner. Customizing transforms metal into flesh; it makes weapons part of the warrior's body. Customizing is holy work that enables the warrior to make a dramatic statement about who he is and what he can do.

Changing the *appearance* of a weapon is one way of performing this magical transformation. Ruger's Mini-14 looks like an old WWII rifle. To correct this flaw, companies began marketing black plastic stocks, folding stocks, longer magazines holding more cartridges, muzzle-flash hidlers, and other deadly-looking accessories. An advertisement for the "Maxi-14" folding stock reads, "Our new Maxi-14 was designed for the man who is really serious about this weapon. Now you can upgrade your Ruger Mini-14's classic WW II design and make it look and function like a modern combat weapon should."²⁰ To be a *modern* man requires having a modern weapon. Ironically, the "classic" wooden stock of the Mini-14 *saved* it from being outlawed in 1989 when the California State Legislature banned "assault" rifles.

Converting a semi-automatic military rifle or submachine gun back into full-automatic capacity is another way to create a powerful self. A semi-automatic can be fired almost as fast as a full automatic weapon, but it does not have the same deadly aura. Converting a weapon to full automatic without registering the gun with the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms is illegal. To own an illegal machine gun (and an estimated 500,000 men do) is to be constantly reminded of one's willingness to defy authority and live "beyond" the law. Yet there is considerable irony here, in that very few men actually use these automatic weapons in criminal acts. Instead, owning the illegal weapon is the major sign of "badness."

Since modifications do not follow firmly established standards, there is always a significant risk that the modification will fail and the man will appear as a fool to "real" warriors. One writer contrasts the Gunsite Service Pistol (a modified Colt .45 automatic marketed by Jeff Cooper) to fancier, more elaborately customized handguns:

There are no fancy stocks. There are no holes drilled in the trigger. There are no chrome-plated mudflaps, no foptails on the antenna, and no flames painted on the sides . . . This is a gun for saving your life, not impressing your friends. If you wear \$95 jeans embroidered with the names of Italian designers of indeterminate sex, then you won't like the GSP. Let me suggest something in a shiny two-tone, with sharp corners and lovely pearl stocks; if you want a gun that goes bang when it should and hits where it should; if you want a hard-hitting, heavy-duty pistol to carry for the serious business of self-defense, check out the Gunsite Service Pistol.²¹

Finally, there is the risk that not only will the modification not be accepted as "serious," but that an unqualified gunsmith will completely ruin the gun. The publisher of *Handgun Tests* warns his readers:

Gunsmith is a term that many people who drop out of shoemaker school apply to themselves. Currently, many of these 'gunsmiths' are telling everyone to take out the firing pin lock on the series '80 guns . . . Do not let your so-called 'gunsmith' leave the parts out. These 'gunsmiths' are the guys *who are now out of work since abortion was legalized!* Keep them away from your nice Colt.²²

Modifying a weapon creates great risk for the would-be warrior. If he succeeds, he gains immense power through creating new parts of himself and wins the esteem and envy of fellow warriors. But if the newly customized weapon is viewed as foppish by other gun owners, then he will be ridiculed and rejected.

The Warrior's Sexual and Family Relationships with Weapons

Sometimes the male sexuality of combat weapons is explicit. Jay Mallin describes how U.S. Army Special Forces advisors addressed Honduran troops in "Heating Up Honduras: U.S. Troops Train for Nicaraguan Threat":

Members of a 140-man Honduran Army unit lie prone on canvas or palm fronds. Special Forces trainers lean close, giving guidance. One trainer cautions: "Don't yank the trigger. Caress it as if your were playing with yourself." They are receiving training in firing the M16s with which they have recently been equipped.²³

Usually, however, sexuality is presented with more subtlety. John Bianchi manufactures pistol holsters. In one long-running ad in the 1980s, Bianchi appeared dressed in a tuxedo. Next to him stood a beautiful blond woman, wearing a very low-cut black evening dress. Her evening dress was slit up to her hip bone. This picture followed the standard codes of sexual display: namely, the man concealed his body and the woman revealed hers. In the next two photos, he took off his coat and rolled up his two pants legs to his knees. One photo showed him facing front and the other showed his back, revealing 17 pistols, each in a different model holster. Men conceal their sex organs and their armaments; they are both hidden powers and delights.

To make a holster, leather is "wet-worked," meaning that wet leather is stretched over a particular model of gun and then dried to give the holster its shape. Some custom holster makers request that the consumer mail them their gun, so that a holster can be made so tight that it will only accept that

particular gun—not just any Colt 5 inch .45 automatic, but *their* .45 automatic. Such a holster is the ideal vagina, since it firmly grips its owner and rejects all other suitors.

Phallic guns and vaginal holsters do not exhaust the sexuality of weaponry. J.B. Woods writes about his attraction to a customized Smith and Wesson .45 revolver he bought at a gun show:

I am really delighted with my new Smith and Wesson .45 combat revolver. With a little luck I'll talk the Cobra Gunskin people into building me a super shoulder holster in which to carry it. It could be a constant companion for years to come, but then again we gun lovers are somewhat fickle . . . are we not?²⁴

Is J.B. Woods a man wooing his female lover? Or is Woods a typical "fickle" woman who can't make up her mind? Other men write proclamations of their undying love to their female weapons. Robert Lange begins his review of Spanish made "Star" pistols in *Special Weapons and Tactics* magazine with a warning:

I would, though, beg your indulgence this time around, as the primary gun reviewed here is, and has been for years, my personal carry gun. This is a love story. Passion then, must overrule a certain degree of objectivity. . . I am in love with star pistols and I must admit that it is love in the extreme, for all the members of the family.²⁵

Lange loves most the Star 9mm BM, a "simple, traditional fare." She readily became part of him: "Unlike the comfort of say, an old leather jacket, or a pair of well worn Levis, I do not merely wear this pistol; it is as much a part of me as the hand that holds it." The Star BM is like a woman: "Apart from the fact that the thing works every time, the BM's most enduring quality is its feel. Like a woman's, the Star's design was gotten right for the first time." Only once was he tempted to leave her: "At one time, I flirted with its otherwise identical twin sister, the alloy framed BKM which weighs but a mere 25.59 ounces." Lange finally decided he liked the older, heavier woman, because he favored her "more reassuring feel in the hand."

Belle Star was lucky. Cameron Hopkins, editor of *American Handgunner*, interviewed the "front-sight" of Joe's competition .38 Super Wilson Accu-Comp pistol. This unnamed front sight was extremely jealous of Fred, the front sight on Joe's "carry" gun, a .45 ACP Colt Officers Model. The target pistol sight complains of his loneliness:

Every morning Joe retrieves his officers [model .45] from the beside and stuffs it in his Milt Sparks Summer Special [a holster concealed inside the pants]. (Now that pisses me off. I freeze my bluing off very night, while Fred stays warm as

toast in Joe's bedroom.) . . . Joe takes Fred everywhere. Fred snuggles behind Joe's hip pressed tightly into Joe's side and well-concealed under a light jacket. Joe carries factory ammo, Winchester 185 grain Silvertips. Obviously, Fred is instantly locked and cocked. Is there another way to carry the Colt autoloader? ²⁶

Fred is obviously more of a "wife" and the poor unnamed competition front sight is a sometime mistress who's taken for granted and left covered with dried sexual fluids: "he still hasn't cleaned me from the last match and I've got dried-up sight black all over me."

If a man is "firing" a woman-weapon, then in pulling her trigger he makes her have orgasms. To control the weapon is like controlling women's bodies as they move in orgasm. Graphic demonstrations equating women's sexuality with combat weapons began to appear in posters and videotapes featuring women with weapons. Chuck Traynor, the former manager of pornography stars Linda Lovelace and Marilyn Chambers, moved to Las Vegas and opened "The Machine Gun Store." ²⁷ The Machine Gun Store specializes in both selling and renting combat weapons: the store has an indoor range. Traynor staffs his store with beautiful models.

His first major poster, entitled "Bo," shows a half-naked woman with a dangerous look on her face, standing in a swamp with one hand on an Uzi submachine gun and the other resting on a huge knife. She is so "hot" that the swamp behind her is steaming. This poster sold 50,000 copies by 1987. Traynor then made a video tape featuring "Bo" firing an M-60 machine gun in the desert. She fires the weapon naked except for a belt and knife on her waist. As she fires the machine gun, the camera shifts to a slow-motion sequence of her body (particularly her breasts), moving from the recoil.

Additional companies began marketing posters and videos of women firing guns. Each model is introduced along with the weapon she will fire. A graph shows the gun's technical features on one side, together with her height, weight, and breast, hip, and waist measurements on the other. Like the Bo film, the camera shows each model's body moving from recoil as she fires long bursts of 20 to 40 rounds. Models hold the weapon at their waists so that the camera can focus on their breasts. As Traynor explained, "Guns and tits and ass all mix." ²⁸

Lastly, sometimes warriors view their weapons not as lovers, but rather as elders or children. Peter G. Kokalis laments the approaching death of the famous Belgium assault rifle, the Fusil Automatique Leger, used by Western European and Third World armies from the 1950s through the mid-1980s: "Although its death will be many years coming, anyone who wants a FAL should buy a LAR [the current model] now. The FN FAL, one of the 20th

century's grandest dogs of war, will be remembered fondly and mourned mightily by all those who used it in the flame and sweat of battle." ²⁹

While the old perish, the young are held tenderly. When Mack Bolan returned to Vietnam in *The Executioner #123: War Born*, the jungle rain worried him. First he covered his Galil assault rifle with a poncho and then looked down at his waist. Much to his relief, "The AutoMag and the Beretta were safely snuggled in leather." ³⁰

A weapon can shift from being an extension of man to an extension of woman, to an elder or to an infant. In all cases it is a *living being*, an exciting and precious family member who can play virtually any sexual or family role the warrior so desires. The combat weapon represents life that responds to the warrior's will.

Every Weapons Purchase is a Question of Life or Death

In the post-nuclear war novel series, *The Survivalist #3: The Quest*, hero John Rourke and his sidekick Paul Rubenstein finally arrive at Rourke's hidden survival retreat in the Stone Mountains of North Georgia. Like Batman and Robin, they wheel their Harley-Davidson motorcycles inside a granite mountain to a secret cave. When the wall closes down and the lights come on, Rourke guides Rubenstein through rooms filled with supplies he bought in preparation for the Big One. They finally arrive at the gun case:

"Smith and Wesson Model 29 six-inch, Metalifed and Mag-Na-Ported; Smith and Wesson Model 60 two-inch stainless Chiefs .38 Special; Colt Mk IV, Series '70 Government Model; Metalifed with a Deutronics Competition Recoil system installed and Pachmayr Colt Medallion grips. That little thing is an FIE .38 Special chrome Derringer, and the little tubes on the shelf down here are .22 Long Rifle and .25 ACP barrel inserts made by Harry Owens of Sport Specialties. Makes the Little gun able to fire .38 Special, .22 rimfire, or .25 ACP. I've my shotguns, et cetera." Rourke pointed back up to the cabinet. "That gun is a Colt Official Police .38 Special five-inch-Metalifed with Pachmayr grips. Same frame essentially as a Python, so I had it reamed out to .357 to increase its versatility." The Rourke moved to his right to the long guns, racked one over the other. "That's standard AR-15, no scope. That's a Mossberg 500 ATP6 Parkerized riot shotgun, Safariland sling on it. That's an original Armalite AR-7 .22 Long Rifle. Take it apart and it stows in the buttstock, even floats. Had enough?"

Rourke turned, smiling at Rubenstein.

"How much — I mean it's rude, John, I know that but how—"

"Every cent I could scrape together for the last six years, after the cost of the property itself. I gambled. *I'm sorry I won, but I guess it paid off.*" ³¹

In the primeval chaos of dark worlds where violence rules, money is worthless. Weapons and ammunition are themselves the true currencies,

since with them the warrior can obtain everything else and without them, his life is worth nothing. When the warrior goes shopping he is not a frivolous woman shopping for clothes and other vanities. To refuse a purchase means that he values money more than he does his own life, since each purchase will help him face what gun writer and combat shooting instructor Massad Ayoob calls "The Moment of Truth," when he must kill or be killed. The warrior buys and buys, waiting for The Moment to come and transform him.

Conclusions: Mythic Closure and the Limits of Rational Critique

Modernity did not abolish myth, it only destroyed what Richard Stivers says was pre-industrial people's "intuitive sense of the sacred." So the sacred lives on in dreams and other vast realms of unconscious mental life and sometimes it becomes manifest informs like paramilitary culture. Paramilitary culture cannot be effectively delegitimized by analyzing its stark loneliness and indicating how much self-contradictory fear its path to empowerment creates; the values and practices of the culture are not debatable topics for would-be warriors. Attempts to take their guns away would only confirm their deepest fears about the world. Mythologies have ways of creating closure or confirming the myth when challenged. Instead, analysis can only create a map of the culture's symbolic terrain as a guide to how the expressed needs for power, adventure, and meaning might be met in another way.



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