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Armed and Dangerous: The Ascendance of the National Rifle Association

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Alexander Lynch

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Chapter 1

Post-1977 Constituency and the Identification of the Other

Adorned in orange hunting caps, the extremists stormed the Cincinnati stage on May 21, 1977. The goal: turn a bipartisan, fairly apolitical, organization into a radical, politically active special interest group. In all intents and purposes, this was a coup. The usurpers were armed not only with guns, but also the belief that their constitutional rights were in jeopardy. This extremist revolt culminated in the now mainstream, highly influential National Rifle Association (NRA).¹

The National Rifle Association is a single-issue organization; it oversees one of the most formidable lobbying groups in Washington. Spearheaded by a handful of extremists, the NRA derailed from its historical functions of promoting marksmanship, training the National Guard, and hunting to test the waters of radical political action. By tapping into cultural myths and fears, this organization became a Washington powerhouse. No longer could debates on firearm legislation be held in a rational, bipartisan fashion.

Print media was a key player in how the NRA advanced and continues to advance its agenda. Currently, the NRA publishes seven magazines: *American Rifleman*, *America's 1st Freedom*, *Shooting Illustrated*, *Shooting Sports USA*, *NRA Hunter's Leadership Forum*, *NRA Family*, and *American Hunter*. The content of these seven magazines is fairly consistent, but there are some important distinguishing factors. *American Rifleman* is the most well known,

¹Joel Achenbach, Scott Higham and Sari Horwitz, "How NRA's True Believers Converted a Marksmanship Group Into a Mighty Gun Lobby," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2013.

most consumed magazine of the NRA and it is published monthly. It is the main conduit for transmitting the NRA's message. This is the publication where the NRA digs in its heels by focusing more on pro gun polls, editorials, messages from NRA executives, and its one- to two-page series, called *The Armed Citizen*. All of these magazines play host to numerous advertisements boasting newly released guns and gun accessories. The *NRA's Hunter's Leadership Forum* tends to center around poaching, anti-hunting activists, hunting activism, as well as tips and advise apropos hunting. Needless to say, both *Shooting Illustrated* and *Shooting Sports USA* devote more space to guns, shooting, and advertisements for firearms. *America's 1st Freedom* is reminiscent of *American Rifleman* to the extent that it tends to skew more political, focusing on the NRA's lobbying branch, the NRA-ILA.

The NRA publishes additional digital media sources, including the *NRA Woman's Interests*, and *Youth Interests*. Among the links under *Woman's Interests* is a patented program titled *Refuse to be a Victim*®. Upon visiting this link, one is confronted with an image of a nervous looking girl, bundled in a hat and scarf and glancing behind her. Following her line of vision, you are greeted with an ominous, shadowy man in all black with a hood on, completely incognito. Continuing, the website presents three statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the most noteworthy being that there were an estimated 1,248,185 violent crimes in 2016 (around one violent crime per twenty-five seconds). This statistic is most noteworthy for the fear it insights and the clip art attached to the statistic, which displays a person in a dress—presumably a woman—being choked from behind by a man. Interestingly, however, *Refuse to be a Victim*® does not provide firearm or self-defense training. Instead, they claim that they will “improve your personal safety strategies” so that you can “avoid situations where self-defense

might be required.”² Its explicit goal is to make “yourself a more difficult target to prey upon.”³

This anxiety-stoking is one of the tactics utilized consistently throughout NRA publications.

Creating an atmosphere of danger, the NRA presents itself as the last man standing between ever-present criminals and its subscribers. It is only natural to want some type of protection if you also believe that the world is as threatening as it is presented by the NRA.

Although the NRA also adopted more modern forms of lobbying and publication, such as online platforms, their flagship magazine, *The American Rifleman*, is still a surprisingly hot commodity in grocery store magazine aisles. This magazine has changed only slightly since its acquisition by the NRA in 1906. This platform began as an independent but like-minded magazine called *Shooting and Fishing*. After being purchased by the National Rifle Association, it was renamed *Arms and the Man*. Then, in 1916, the magazine was once again renamed to its current moniker: *The American Rifleman*.⁴

Magazines such as *The American Rifleman* are not merely browsing material in the dentist’s office. Print media allows the NRA to reach members and sympathizers who may not have access to the internet or may not be technologically inclined. Print media allows the NRA access to a broader audience, apparent in the fact that its publications are some of the most widely consumed magazines in the country. Pointed political pieces, targeted messaging from NRA executives, scathing rebukes of any person or policy seen as inimical to “conservative

² Refuse To Be A Victim®, <https://rtbav.nra.org/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Arms and the Man,” University of Pennsylvania.

values,” and gun advertisements become widely distributed through these magazines, thus greatly influencing American discourse surrounding firearm legislation and politics.

Among the most consistent aspects of the NRA magazine *The American Rifleman* are excerpts from newspapers nationwide that highlight instances of Americans warding off danger with firearms. Hitting on the nose, these excerpts are titled *The Armed Citizen*. This portion of NRA magazines in particular casts readers into an environment of terror, in which they feel that criminals may leap out at any moment. *The Armed Citizen* provides the opportunity for gun owners who have readied themselves for such a moment to feel heroic, as they are able to utilize their weapons and defend those around them from the danger posed by the proverbial “bad guys.”

These articles encourage a world view in which danger is ever present, inspiring readers to purchase guns to prepare for the looming doom of omnipresent crime. Written in a 1986 publication of *The Armed Citizen*, for example, is this piece:

Harry Thompson was awakened as two of his children leaped across his bed, terrified. “Daddy, there are two men climbing into our room,” one said. Thompson picked up a handgun and confronted one burglar who, despite a warning shot, came at him until the homeowner wounded him and held him for police. Thompson said he is disabled after being mugged seven times in four years.⁵

The absurd ubiquity with which Harry Thompson had been assaulted could only be countered by his ownership of a pistol. Without exception, the implication of *The Armed Citizen* articles is that the fine lines distinguishing victims from heroes are drawn by firearms. Renditions of armed

⁵ “The Armed Citizen,” *The American Rifleman*, July 1986.

citizens having to fend off a multitude of attacks is rather common in these publications. For example, in a February 1976 edition of *The American Rifleman*, Chicago grocer Heriberto Rodriguez is described as having shot and killed a robber for the third time in less than two years.⁶

In these articles, guns are tools that equalize the playing field for people of all ages and health. Diverging from the typical hyper-masculine conversations surrounding heroism, *The Armed Citizen* does not focus solely on young to middle-aged men. Another publication of *The Armed Citizen* from 1986 highlights this:

The 58-year-old Garden Grove, Calif., homeowner, crippled by emphysema, looked like an easy target. But even though the man was dependent on an oxygen bottle, he managed to grab a pistol and kill the burglar who crawled in his kitchen window.⁷

To combat the immense amount of violent crime depicted in NRA publications, NRA pundits suggest stricter punishments for those who are caught committing a crime or are caught with an illegal weapon. This is the alternative approach to the same problem addressed by those who advocate for gun legislation. Instead of damming the flow of guns into the general populace, they argue for extreme punishments for criminals. In an opinion piece by then NRA president Merrill W. Wright titled “A Society too Weak to Punish Violent Crime is Doomed to an Ever-increasing Crime Rate,” Wright writes, “Today we pamper and release and dismiss and parole,

⁶ “The Armed Citizen,” *The American Rifleman*, February 1976.

⁷ “The Armed Citizen,” *The American Rifleman*, April 1986.

and we are up to here in crime!”⁸ In the face of this, however, America easily holds the title of the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world.⁹ The state of Massachusetts alone, which has the lowest incarceration rate in the country, would still hold the ninth highest incarceration rate in the world, if it were a country itself.¹⁰

The NRA underscores the rise in incarceration without interrogating deeper causes for this. It broadcasts the fact that the federal prison population increased 790 percent between 1980 and 2012.¹¹ But the NRA does not examine the discriminatory drug laws that account for this increase, nor the unfair criminal justice system that jails poor people who cannot afford legal representation the way the wealthy can.¹² Nor does the NRA officially recognize that although crime rates have decreased since the 1970’s, the United States still hosts more gun deaths per capita than Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, countries which currently house militant insurgencies such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS.¹³

Misleading articles contained within editions of *The American Rifleman* foment the belief that harsh penal codes, instead of restricting the accessibility of firearms, are the solution to gun violence. For example, in September 1976, the NRA flagship magazine hosted an op-ed titled

⁸ “The Armed Citizen,” *The American Rifleman*, February 1976

⁹ “World Prison Populations,” *BBC News*.

¹⁰ Wagner, Peter, and Wendy Sawyer, “States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2018,” Prison Policy Initiative, June 2018.

¹¹ Fatow, Nicole, “Federal Prison Population Spiked 790 Percent Since 1980.” Think Progress, February 7, 2013.

¹² See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

¹³ Aizenman, Nurith and Marc Silver, “How The U.S. Compares With Other Countries In Deaths From Gun Violence,” *National Public Radio*, August 5, 2019.

“Crime down in town with pro-gun chief.” The chief referred to is Police Chief Francis Abbate, who “consistently maintained that the violent criminal, not the law abiding citizen would benefit from strict gun control legislation.”¹⁴ Abbate continued, arguing in *The Boston Globe* that, “if firearm rights are taken away from the individual, a ‘balance of power’ will rest with the police and military, which in turn can be interpreted as the beginning stages of a police state... what we need is to have our present laws strictly enforced, not additional ineffectual gun laws.” Assuming Abbate is correct, one is forced to wonder if any aspect of life in America as we know would remain in tact, should gun legislation be passed.

The “town with [the] pro-gun chief” is Westwood, Massachusetts. The article compares the crime rates of Westwood to the city of Boston, highlighting Boston’s higher rate of crime and accrediting Westwood’s lower crime rate to the police chief’s stance on firearms. This argument is misleading, if not patently fallacious. Boston, whose police chief is described as “anti-gun,” hosts a much larger population with many more social dynamics at play. In comparison, Westwood is a self-described small, quaint suburb forty minutes outside of Boston proper. Inaccurate comparisons such as this allow the NRA to seed distrust of governmental restrictions on firearms.

This strategy can be viewed in tandem with the consistently misleading polls published in *The American Rifleman*. In an editorial titled “Pro-Gun Poll Comes as Revelation” in the February 1976 edition, staff writers cite a poll that claims that “asked simply what should be done to reduce crime, only eleven percent of the American public, as reflected in an impartial

¹⁴ *The American Rifleman*, September 1976.

scientific study, responded by suggesting new gun control laws.”¹⁵ That statistic does not per se make this a “pro-gun poll” representative of the American populace. Nor does it necessarily mean that it represents mass anti-gun control sentiments. More often than not, crimes are committed without the use or display of firearms, rendering gun control a separate issue altogether. Further, the other options that poll recipients could answer included “improved law enforcement,” “more severe punishment for criminals,” and “swifter justice.” Although these answers might travel hand-in-hand with their own social justice issues, they are clearly more relevant answers to the question that is being asked than “confiscating privately-owned firearms.”¹⁶

The National Rifle Association works to enshrine its stance on firearms in law, as well. The NRA is well known for giving politicians letter grades, such as a student would receive from a professor, contingent on the politician’s eagerness to oppose or support gun legislation. This is conducted by the NRA’s branch known as the NRA-PVF, or the National Rifle Association-Political Victory Fund.¹⁷ These endorsements have immediate payoffs for the NRA agenda. In 1989, for example, New Hampshire Senator Peter Smith sponsored a bill to ban assault weapons. Earlier in his career, however, he promised the National Rifle Association that he would oppose all gun control legislation.¹⁸ The NRA promptly condemned his actions. In response, not only did

¹⁵ American Rifleman Staff, “Pro-Gun Poll Does as Revelation,” *The American Rifleman*, February 1976, 16-17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ see <https://www.nrapvf.org/grades/>

¹⁸ Scott Medlock, "NRA = No Rational Argument - How the Nation Rifle Association Exploits Public Irrationality," *Texas Journal on Civil Liberties & Civil Rights* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 42.

pro-gun advocates shoot his lawn at night, but they also tried to force his mother off the road while she was driving.¹⁹ This campaign of terror—tacitly endorsed by the NRA—proved unsuccessful, as Senator Smith was soon replaced by liberal icon Senator Bernie Sanders.

The NRA portrays itself as an organization concerned with social-welfare by emphasizing the burdens borne by everyday Americans that stem from the federal government. Its *modus operandi* includes painting the federal government as an omnipresent enemy conspiring to confiscate their guns.

More precisely, the National Rifle Association works to seed a distrust of “liberal elites.”²⁰ In 1971, Federal agents shot and paralyzed an NRA member who was stockpiling guns, in violation of the 1968 Gun Control Act.²¹ This was harshly condemned by the NRA, with board member William Loeb referring to the agents as “treasury gestapo.”²² Similarly, the NRA bit and scratched at the federal government after the failed Waco siege and the Ruby Ridge assault. These events involved a gun hoarding religious sect called the Branch Davidians and the extremist militia Weaver family, respectively. The first of these incidents saw seventy-six Branch Davidians killed (including twenty-five children), along with four federal agents. During the Ruby Ridge assault, the son and wife of Randy Weaver, a gun collecting separatist, along with a US Marshall, were killed.²³ The NRA used these events as propaganda to further its anti-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44

²¹ Arica L. Coleman, “When the NRA Supported Gun Control,” *Time*, July 29, 2016.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Martin Patriquin, “Ferguson, the NRA and the Hypocrisy of Silence,” *Maclean’s*, August 14, 2014.

government argument. Along with the NRA, neo-Nazis, far-right militia groups, and the future vice-presidential running-mate of Grand Wizard David Duke also rallied to the defense of the Weaver family. Wayne LaPierre went on to call the agents “jack booted thugs” that had “the government’s go-ahead to harass, intimidate, and even murder law-abiding citizens.”²⁴

The NRA does not reserve its scorn merely for the government and its armed agents, however. Creating a fantasy of fear, the NRA is more than willing to consolidate multiple points of political contention. Subjects such as abortion, irreligiosity, and promiscuity, are tossed around in the same conversation with gun control in what Professor Dan Kahan deems a *Kulturkampf Blitzkrieg* (an overwhelming attack informed by cultural values).²⁵ This tactic is used to insight anger against gun-control, as it enables gun advocates to cast a larger net of support.

The Nation Rifle Association used the moral outrage following the Watergate scandal and also a wave of religious nationalism to bolster its argument. In so doing, the NRA portrayed the American Constitution as a unique pact between God and the American people. Moreover, the Second Amendment was depicted as the vanguard of the rest of the Constitution. By linking the Second Amendment to a broad array of social issues, the right to bear arms became, in practice, code for conservative values.

According to sociologist Philip S. Gorski, moral decline is at the center of the nationalist narrative.²⁶ He continues to argue that the NRA and the New Christian Right—proponents of

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Maxine Burkett, “Much Ado About...Something Else: DC v. Heller, the Racialized Mythology of the Second Amendment, and Gun Policy Reform,” *U of Colorado Law Legal Studies Research Paper* no. 08-11, March 24, 2008.

²⁶ Philip S. Gorski and Gülay Türkman-Derviřođlu, “Religion, Nationalism, and Violence: An Integrated Approach,” *Annual Reviews*, July, 2013.

conservative social values and the use of scripture as a basis for legislation—view this moral decline as the cause of America’s various problems.²⁷ The NRA has managed to include the Second Amendment in this Judeo-Christian moralization of politics. This *Kulturkampf Blitzkrieg* enables the Second Amendment to be interpreted absolutely, as it is, as the NRA argues, the vanguard of conservative values. The importance bestowed upon the right to bear arms is only attainable by connecting “threats to gun rights and broad social and structural changes and cultural representations linked to gender and race relations,” because “if people perceive that their rights, status, and identity are threatened, they will be motivated to act.”²⁸ Interestingly, political affiliation has emerged as one of the most accurate indicators of religious affiliation.²⁹ Professor Jessica Dawson of West Point Military Academy argues that the realigning of political-religious alliances provided a podium for the National Rifle Association to invoke religious rhetoric to connect gun rights to the New Christian moralizing and their perception of the American identity.³⁰

America’s Protestant upbringing holds partial responsibility for this, as Protestant teachings tend to look askance at interpretations of the Bible that are not plain and literal. By grafting this interpretative style onto the Second Amendment, the NRA makes a successful foray into the sphere of American religious-politicization, drafting the Christian Right into their ranks

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Scott Melzer, *Gun Crusaders* (New York City, NY: NYU Press; 2016).

²⁹ Marc A. A. Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2017).

³⁰ Jessica Dawson, “Shall not be Infringed: how the NRA used Religious Language to Transform the Meaning of the Second Amendment,” *Nature*, July 2, 2019.

in the process. Similarly, the Constitution is often referred to as enumerating the “God given rights” of Americans. Doubling-down, the ten original Amendments of the Constitution echo the Ten Commandments given by God.

This religious angle is often utilized by the NRA. After compiling an extensive amount of data on religious rhetoric contained in *The American Rifleman*, Jessica Dawson notes that the use of the phrase “God-given rights” spiked significantly in 2008, the year that heralded Democratic President Barack Hussein Obama.³¹ Exemplar of this is a speech by LaPierre that was recapitulated in the November, 2014 (in the middle of Obama’s second term) edition of *The American Rifleman*, where it is written:

...men and women who care about their safety will never let themselves be shamed, ridiculed or accused of being “unreasonable” for defending their God-given right to defend life and limb. We’ve proven it over and over again, and we’ll do it again on Election Day. So let this be a declaration to America’s leaders: You have no right, no reason and no authority to deny us the protection that the Second Amendment alone guarantees.³²

LaPierre’s final line, “so let this be a declaration to America’s leaders: You have no right, no reason and no authority to deny us the protection that the Second Amendment alone guarantees,” captures the pact between God and the American people wonderfully. By attempting to delegitimize “America’s leaders”—*read*: “Democratic politicians”—the NRA is arguing for the issue of gun control to be tabled. If politicians are barred from affecting any new legislation on firearms, then presumably only divine intervention can change the status quo. Interestingly, the NRA does not view as problematic the restrictions on Free Speech (First Amendment); stop-and-

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The American Rifleman*, November 2014.

frisk policies (violations of the Fourth Amendment, perhaps by virtue that it is enforced almost solely on minorities)³³; partial juries, seen in cases such as that of Curtis Flowers (a black man tried and convicted six times by almost entirely white juries—and is slated to face a seventh trial—for a crime with insufficient evidence, a Sixth Amendment violation); and excessive bail fines, also a problem that disproportionately affects black Americans, as they are incarcerated at almost five times the rate of whites³⁴ (an Eighth Amendment issue); this last point is something discussed further in Chapter three. Why the violation of these four pacts between God and the American people does not deserve the same outrage as the perceived transgressions against the Second Amendment is questionable, but might be indicative of who is accounted for in the NRA’s vision of *who* is an American.

After Charlton Heston’s death in 2008, the NRA released a commemorative video in honor of their champion and former president. The NRA used this eulogy to personify the association—that is, the National Rifle Association—in the image of Heston. Focusing on religion, biased media, patriotism, and a higher purpose, Heston’s *in memoriam* broadcast the larger principles and ethics of the organization. Heston, who portrayed Moses in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, and who therefore became identified in the eyes of certain members of the public with biblical truth, also served as Moses for the National Rifle Association. The ethics and principles of the NRA are underscored by this tribute.

³³ “Stop-and-Frisk Practice Violated Rights, Judge Rules,” Center for Constitutional Rights, August, 2013.

³⁴ “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” NAACP.

Echoing the Ten Commandments given by God, the ten original amendments of the Constitution can be read as a quasi-religious text for subscribers of American exceptionalism. Ultimately, this is an incarnation of nationalism. Unsurprisingly, the NRA actively peddles this narrative, describing the Second Amendment as a “God given right” which shall not be infringed.³⁵ Any attempt to subvert this holy ordained document would be met with hellfire and brimstone. Naturally, the National Rifle Association reaps rewards from this. As author Jessica Dawson argues, guns have increasingly provided a sense of identity for many Americans as religion has become less and less popular. The NRA, in turn, encourages the belief that the Second Amendment is the cavalry defending the rest of the Constitution. If the Second Amendment is not absolute in its interpretation, then every other right is placed in grave danger.

The National Rifle Association aligns itself in direct opposition to “liberal elites.”³⁶ This manifests in distrust of Washington politicians, media, education, and, of course, gun legislation. A compilation of clips of Charlton Heston speaking and of commemorative segments spoken by an unseen narrator, Heston’s commemorative video serves to draw lines connecting the NRA to Christianity, courage, and righteousness in the face of evil. One of the clips in the montage shows the former president of the association quip, “Spike Lee said I should be shot dead... coming from today’s media, that could be construed as a compliment.”³⁷ Heston also propagated distrust of the media by saying, “the gun ban lobby and its media allies know they can’t change history and they can’t change the law, so they’re trying to rewrite history through little lies and

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Medlock, 44.

³⁷ “NRA Tribute to Charlton Heston,” May, 2008.

misrepresentations.”³⁸ By staging the media as untrustworthy, Heston promotes himself—the personification of the NRA—as a bulwark of credibility in a sea of deception. Heston’s desire to be martyred by an untrustworthy media by virtue of his supposed honesty solidified the NRA’s argument that it too is credible, and therefore its stance on gun control legislation alone should be accepted.

By labeling the media as both biased and untrustworthy, the NRA encourages people who in live in areas with low to no gun violence to wholly ignore gun violence altogether. If they themselves have not witnessed gun violence, then it becomes easy to ignore the problem entirely and write it off as another exaggeration by the liberally biased media.

America’s foremost patriot did not just preach against unfavorable news coverage, however. Furthering their crusade against “liberal elites,” Charlton Heston’s eulogy advocated against higher education. In a clip showing him speaking in front of a crowd of Harvard Law School students, the narrator is heard saying that Heston had “courage far too rare, anymore—a virtue he fought for on college campuses, where young minds often learn wrong ideas.”³⁹ The anti-intellectualism of the NRA extends well beyond mere criticism, however. The Second Amendment is usually interpreted in one of two ways. The more widely accepted belief, and the belief assumed by the Supreme Court until 2008,⁴⁰ was the militia-centric (or collective theory) understanding of the right to bear arms. In this interpretation, the Second Amendment only guarantees the right to an armed militia. Alternatively, the view lobbied for by the NRA is the

³⁸ Medlock, 56.

³⁹ “NRA Tribute to Charlton Heston.”

⁴⁰ *DC v Heller*, 554 US 570 (2008).

individual right to bear arms. In this interpretation, the Constitution protects the right of individuals to personally acquire weapons—a one man army instead of an armed militia. Between 1980 and the end of the century, the NRA funded a small number of lawyers who “were able to usher in a flood of individualistic studies so that they outnumbered the total number of militia-centric studies by almost two to one.”⁴¹ This approach might have influenced the decision of *District of Columbia v. Heller* in 2008, the decision that overturned the militia-centric theory. The NRA did not simply preach against academia, polls, and information dispersed by the media, they actively sought to flood debates about the Second Amendment with dishonest studies.

Patriotism reigns in the National Rifle Association. Moreover, this patriotism is fueled by beliefs in U.S. exceptionalism. Charlton Heston, defending his absolutist interpretation of the Second Amendment declared, “...because it’s the Second Amendment of our Bill of Rights, an utterly unique document—no other government in the world has it. And they had it because those wise old dead white guys who invented the United States.”⁴² He continued, claiming that “those wise old dead white guys who invented the United States” wrote the Second Amendment after witnessing the British go house to house confiscating firearms.

Patriotism is a driving force in this organization. Ostensibly independent from America as a nation, the NRA makes its members sign an oath of loyalty to the United States.⁴³ Precisely the act of identifying the constituency, characteristics, and actions of a nationalist ideology

⁴¹ Dawson, “Shall not be Infringed.”

⁴² Charlton Heston, “The Right to Bear Arms,” May, 2010, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wp8Q7biFHoY>.

⁴³ Medlock, 54.

designates, on a much larger scale, the enemies of that “nation.” In the case of NRA endorsed Second Amendment sub-nationalism, “elitism and liberalism have become synonymous with taking away your guns and anti-patriotism.”⁴⁴ Assuming these beliefs, “elites” and “liberals” can thus be wholly disregarded as plausible options for office. Combined with NRA efforts to label media outlets and politicians as unreliable and inimical to its cause, this identification of liberals as the enemy slates voting as a battle between good and evil; a black and white struggle to defend their country—with its divine constitution and special pact with God—from left-leaning enemies. Accordingly, the National Rifle Association deems itself “America’s oldest civil rights organization.”⁴⁵ The NRA’s understanding of American identity is centered around the cult of the gun.

Unlike Charlton Heston—the NRA president in the late 1990’s who had previously championed civil rights—the trappings of hatred and power always had their talons in Harlon Carter.⁴⁶ As a teenager, Carter brutally murdered a hispanic boy because he felt emasculated by his victim’s hubris.⁴⁷ The year was 1931, and Carter’s family vehicle was stolen a few weeks prior. Coming home, he saw his mother was upset because three hispanic children, aged twelve to fifteen, were loitering in front of the Carter family home. Carter exited his house toting a shotgun and soon located the boys— who were not connected to the car theft—and pointed his

⁴⁴ R.J. Maratea, *The Politics of the Internet: Political Claims-making in Cyberspace and Its Effect on Modern Political Activism* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books; 2015).

⁴⁵ “A Brief History of the NRA,” National Rifle Association, see <https://home.nra.org/about-the-nra/>.

⁴⁶ Andy McSmith and Ciar Byrne, “Charlton Heston: As you won’t remember him,” *Independent*, April 7, 2008.

⁴⁷ Laura Smith, “The Man Responsible for the Modern NRA Killed a Hispanic Teenager, before becoming a border Agent,” *Timeline*, July 6, 2017.

weapon at one of them. Outgunned, fifteen year old Ramón Casiano then pulled a knife and challenged Carter to a fight, at which point he slowly pushed the shotgun barrel away from his chest and laughed at the uncertain Carter. Carter, furious that a hispanic peer called his bluff, pulled the trigger, shooting Casiano in the back in cold blood.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, Carter's vitriolic racism inspired him to seek positions of higher power. His career path highlights his guiding principles, as he went on to become the first head of Border Patrol and serve on the Commission on Migratory Labor under the Truman administration. Underscoring his profound desire to manipulate America and its citizenry, he also served on an Olympic committee.⁴⁹ Carter spearheaded the disgustingly named "Operation Wetback," a plan to use the military to confront undocumented immigrants. He described his reign as an "all out war to hurl...Mexican wetbacks back into Mexico."⁵⁰ Carter's xenophobic rhetoric and actions were summed up by his NRA bio, where it read "Several million illegal aliens and hundreds of thousands of criminals have been arrested by officers under my supervision, among them murderers, robbers, narcotics smugglers, etc."⁵¹ His racially charged murder of a Mexican boy apparently did not hinder his cultural and political ascendance.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ John M. Crewdson, "Hard-line Opponent of Gun Laws wins New Term at Helm of Rifle Association," *New York Times*, May 4, 1981.

Before leading the fateful NRA revolt, Harlon Carter lorded over the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action—the NRA's lobbying organization.⁵² One year before he overthrew the standing leadership of the NRA, Carter and the entire staff of the Institute for Legislative Action were fired. The twilight of the days when the National Rifle Association tried to have a semblance of being socially conscious, the NRA planned to move their headquarters to Colorado to be far removed from the political hustle and bustle of Washington, D.C.⁵³ This planned move was the culmination of the string of high profile assassinations in the preceding decade. These events also motivated the recently fired and ever spiteful Carter, along with author and dishonest journalist Neal Knox, to plot their insurrection. After seizing control of the NRA, Carter installed Knox to head the reincarnated ILA.⁵⁴ Knox, who was significantly more conspiratorial than Carter, floated the idea that the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were orchestrated by a gun control deep state.⁵⁵

The inner workings of the National Rifle Association were well understood by Carter and Knox. They weaponized the NRA's more dedicated constituents, mailing newsletters and propaganda to life-long members in order to channel support for their more extreme beliefs.⁵⁶ In

⁵² Smith, "The Man Responsible for the Modern NRA Killed a Hispanic Teenager, before becoming a border Agent."

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Ron Elving, "The NRA Wasn't Always Against Gun Restrictions," *National Public Radio*, October 10, 2017.

⁵⁵ Smith, "The Man Responsible for the Modern NRA Killed a Hispanic Teenager, before becoming a border Agent."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

so doing, they rallied over 225,000 lifetime members to their side, effectively rendering the old NRA guard a captain without a ship.

Soon after perpetrating the 1977 coup, Harlon Carter organized a clandestine group of radicals within the NRA. This group adopted the name “the Federation” and evaluated NRA board members as either “good, swing, or bad.”⁵⁷ Although Carter denied any connection with the Federation, he secretly received a list of the good, swing, and bad members as early as October 1977. Jack Anderson, journalist who helped expose the Federation, writes that the “days are numbered for those” who aren't rated “good.”⁵⁸ The Federation grew powerful enough to counteract Carter's personal decisions; it helped depose of top lobbyist Robert Kukla, who Carter personally hired. This decision came on the tail of Kukla's opposition to a shooting range in rural New Mexico.⁵⁹ Kukla's opposition to the shooting range was practical. He argued that even though the range would be funded by dues paid by members, the range would, in effect, be a private range for NRA elites who held meetings near the rural outpost. Carter's shady behind-the-scenes dealings would set the course for the post 1977 National Rifle Association.

A year after the Cincinnati revolt, Neal Knox gave a statement to the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding the Armed Career Criminals Prosecution Act of 1968 (ACCA).⁶⁰ The NRA lobbyist laid bare the crux of the organization's argument when it is confronted with gun

⁵⁷ Jack Anderson, “National Rifle Association's Sights Said Alarming Off Target,” *Kentucky New Era*, April 11, 1978.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ “Statement of Neal Knox,” submitted to the Subcommittee on Criminal Laws and Procedures of the Senate Judiciary Committee on s. 3216, October 10, 1978.

violence. He took advantage of this opportunity, using the senate floor as a pulpit to promulgate the narrative that only “bad” people cause injuries with firearms, and that, for this reason, firearms should not be limited. The logic of this argument is that only by arming more *law abiding* people can gun violence be curbed. This rationale was echoed by Wayne LaPierre, who famously declared that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”⁶¹ This sentiment can be found in NRA print media as well. In fact, in the August 2016 issue of *The American Rifleman*, *The Armed Citizen* featured the phrase “bad guy” five times on one page alone.⁶²

The Armed Career Criminals Act was a proto-three strikes policy. Under the ACCA, anyone convicted of robbery or burglary three times and is caught possessing, receiving, or transporting a firearm must serve a minimum fifteen years and pay a fine of up to twenty-five thousand dollars. There was no maximum sentence under this law, leaving sentencing up to the judge’s discretion.⁶³ Obstinate criminals reigned in Knox’s description of America, which he provided in 1978. Painting this portrait, he claimed, “following two years of data collection from forty-nine inmates, the results were that repeat criminals are arrested for approximately six percent of those crimes committed while they were still juveniles and twenty percent of those crimes committed when they reached adulthood...in comparison, arrest, conviction and

⁶¹ Wayne LaPierre, December 20, 2016.

⁶² “The Armed Citizen,” *The American Rifleman*, August 2016, 10.

⁶³ Jill C. Rafaloff, “The Armed Career Criminal Act: Sentence Enhancement Statute or New Offense?,” *Fordham Law Review* vol. 56 is. 6.

incarceration remained to the habitual offender, a remote possibility.”⁶⁴ This insufficiently small body of data implies that criminals get away with crimes anywhere between eighty and ninety-four percent of the time. By focusing on recidivism and “career criminals,” Knox overstates the abundance and professionalism with which crimes are committed.

His argument staged, Knox went on to endorse the Armed Career Criminals Act, saying that, “the results of this extraordinary project [ACCA] were that fifty-two of the first sixty defendants were jailed before trial.”⁶⁵ This frightening social justice issue was viewed as a victory by Knox and his organization, perhaps because post-hoc severe punishment for criminals was the NRA’s proposed alternative to limiting access to guns, but also perhaps because the “criminals” referenced did not represent the constituency which the NRA wished to represent. That is to say, in the 1970’s, Washington D.C., where this survey was conducted, was 71.1 percent black,⁶⁶ and policing practices disproportionately affect black and minority groups. The NRA’s portrayal of cities as locations of violent crimes is connected to the idea that cities are pluralistic, whereas rural locations are portrayed as white spaces. This talking point compliments that of *The Armed Citizen*. The intersection of *The Armed Citizen* and Knox’s statement on “career criminals” illuminates the overarching argument of the NRA: that danger and criminals

⁶⁴ “Statement of Neal Knox,” submitted to the Subcommittee on Criminal Laws and Procedures of the Senate Judiciary Committee on s. 3216, 119.

⁶⁵ “Statement of Neal Knox,” submitted to the Subcommittee on Criminal Laws and Procedures of the Senate Judiciary Committee on s. 3216, 120.

⁶⁶ see United States Census of 1970.

lurk in the shadows and that non-criminals should thus arm themselves. After all, in the words Charles Martin, “God made man, but Samuel Colt made them equal.”⁶⁷

Samuel Colt and his colleagues also equalized the president of the United States and gun owners. In June, 1981, roughly three months after President Ronald Reagan was shot in a failed assassination attempt, *The American Rifleman* sought to quell anxieties as to whether the president would continue his pro-gun stance. This edition of *The American Rifleman* in particular displayed the true force of the National Rifle Association. Exactly one page after another two page article titled “Now Uncle Sam Will Help Defend the Second Amendment,” *The American Rifleman* ran an article declaring “President Stands Firm on Gun Law Reform.”⁶⁸ Right off the bat, the article reads, “United States President Ronald Reagan has reaffirmed his administration’s unwavering commitment to American gun owners.” Delivering an olive branch, Reagan sent his Deputy Counsel, Rear Admiral Robert M. Garrick, to be the keynote speaker at the organization’s 110th annual meeting. Reagan proved to the NRA’s constituents that even though the gun used in his assassination attempt was purchased via an NRA magazine, he still welcomed its support.

The main speakers at this event were Senators, Representatives, and the Deputy Counsel to Reagan, Robert M. Garrick. Included in this legislative milieu was NRA lobbyist Neal Knox, who had the opportunity to mingle with and be seen as equal with these politicians who have the final say on gun legislation. In his speech to the audience, Senator Steven Symms from Idaho claimed that crimes such as the attempted assassination of Reagan were “crime problems, not

⁶⁷ Charles Martin, *Thunder and Rain* (Center Street; 2013), 73.

⁶⁸ *The American Rifleman*, June 1981, 58.

gun problems.” Why John Hinkley Jr. chose to shoot the president and not rob an unexpected household—as *The Armed Citizen* articles promote as commonplace—goes unmentioned in Symms’ address, however.

Since this publication came in the wake of such a high profile assassination attempt—that of the first president to be endorsed by the NRA—the National Rifle Association tried to pin blame on crime and also show the support they reap from the common citizen. Following the 1.5 page article declaring Reagan’s unwavering support of guns, *The American Rifleman* exhibits a poll that suggests Americans are overwhelmingly in favor of private gun ownership. Although this poll does not tackle the actual problem at hand—that of the ready accessibility many people have to guns—its claim sends the message that guns are not the reason why gun violence exists, criminals are. This, combined with the features of the typical gun owner being rural and inundated with images of gun violence being endemic to urban settings, results in the nihilistic stance that “bad guys” (*read*: “immigrant,” “poor,” or “black”) are the reason why gun violence exists and therefore criminal punishment and policing need to be strengthened, rendering the problem of the ubiquity of guns unaddressed.

Utilizing print and electronic media, political grand-standing, and evocative excerpts from politicians and pundits, the National Rifle Association managed to hijack the debate surrounding gun legislation. Cultural myths and nationalist ideologies allowed the 1977 deposal of executives, but these trends only increased in the years that followed. One can only speculate: how would America’s relation to firearm legislation look currently if the National Rifle Association had not undergone such a radical transformation in the late 1970’s?

Chapter 2

Cultural Trends, Anxieties, and Race

The NRA was quite different before 1977. Although the traces of individualism, frontier romanticism, and racialism were palpable, the National Rifle Association did not vehemently oppose all gun legislation until after the overthrow of its leaders in 1977. Likewise, the NRA did not invoke the Second Amendment whenever its members felt cornered. Since the late nineteenth century, the NRA has, however, developed a cult of masculinity centered around guns. Marksmanship became a remedy prescribed for the anxieties induced by industrialization and the relative peace during the Progressive Era. The association still promotes this belief today, as it has meshed perfectly with America's frontier mythology and fears of emasculation.

Military, Marksmanship, and the Legacy of the Civil War

As noted on the NRA's website, Union veterans from the Civil War—Colonel William C. Church (1836-1917) and General George Wingate (1840-1928)—founded the organization in 1871. Although commonly perceived of as a distinctly American organization, the National Rifle Association was actually based on its British proto-counterpart, the British National Rifle Association. With the intention of emulating their British progenitors, R.G. Moulton and his cohorts authored a letter to the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, and his cabinet

on June 12, 1861.⁶⁹ Writing from Manchester, Moulton, one of “the loyal Americans abroad,” outlined his proposal to found an American version of the rifle club. He writes that the purpose of this club is to “best serve and maintain that [American] government in its strength and integrity.” The understanding of this letter is that an American National Rifle Association would be founded to further federal war time interests, not to promote private gun ownership. Linking the implications of Moulton’s letter to the later founding of the NRA on November 16, 1871, by Union generals, it is evident that the NRA owes its heritage, in part, to the Civil War.

George Wingate volunteered to serve in the New York Regiment during the Civil War. Later, in 1867, as captain in the New York National Guard, he created riflery guidelines for his company.⁷⁰ William Church also volunteered for the war, serving under General W.T. Sherman in the Army of the Potomac. After being wounded in Williamsburg, Church was given the rank of captain and rapidly climbed the ranks to lieutenant colonel.⁷¹ Church originally called for the creation of an American National Rifle Association in an August 12, 1871, publication of *The Army and Navy Journal*, where he wrote, “Let us have our rifle practice association, also a Wimbledon on American principles.”⁷² Wimbledon—once more looking overseas for guidance—was the name of the shooting range on which the British National Rifle Association practiced.

⁶⁹ R.G. Moulton, “A National Rifle Association; Patriotic Action of Americans Residing Abroad,” *New York Times*, Aug 9, 1861, 8.

⁷⁰ James Barron, “Behind Park’s Name, a Civil War Soldier Who Helped Give the N.R.A. Birth,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2013.

⁷¹ “Church, William Conant,” *Lehigh University*, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://pfaffs.web.lehigh.edu/node/54209>.

⁷² William Church, “The National Guard,” *Army and Navy Journal*, August 12, 1871, 837.

After failing to find suitable marksmanship instruction in the War Department's library, Wingate decided to write the book himself. *The Manual of Rifle Practice*, as he titled it, was completed in 1872 and became the foundational handbook of the National Rifle Association.⁷³ The manual found common cause with Church's declaration that the NRA existed to turn "the [National] Guard into sharpshooters."⁷⁴ Church's call for a marksmanship program began after witnessing firsthand the Union Army's inability to hit their targets in battle. Marksmanship had not been an issue leading up to this point because military tactics still revolved around the use of relatively inaccurate smooth-barrel muskets. However, the Civil War ushered in new technology. The inside of rifle barrels were now spiraled ("rifled"), resulting in a much more accurate shot and rendering the musket style-of-battle of aiming blindly defunct.

The NRA's manifest purpose was to improve the shooting accuracy within the National Guard, the collection of state militias making up the bulk of the U.S. army, but it did not shy away from private partnership.⁷⁵ Church made this point clear when in 1871 he wrote, "It would be better that an association of this character should be organized through the direct

⁷³ Jeffrey A. Marlin, "The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association: Public Institutions and the Rise of a Lobby for Private Gun Ownership," *Georgia State University*, May 10, 2013, 67.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 67.

⁷⁵ The National Guard had its origins in various militias organized at the local level during the colonial period. Following the Revolutionary War, the U.S. Constitution mandated that each state form its own militia or Guard. The name National Guard was not formally adopted until the Militia Act of 1903, and it provided for the federalization of portions of state militias. During the nineteenth century, the National Guard was sometimes called the State Guard Vice Militia. See Marlin, "The National Guard," 57; Department of Defense, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Compensation Background Papers: Compensation Elements and Related Manpower Cost Elements, Their Purposes and Legislative Backgrounds*, Seventh edition (2011), 213-214.

instrumentality of National Guardsmen, and controlled entirely by them; but rather than incur further delay, we would invite private enterprise.”⁷⁶ Funding and grants came primarily from governments, although gifts from the wealthy, such as U.S. President Grover Cleveland, increased the coffers of the burgeoning NRA as well.⁷⁷

In 1879, Wingate presided over the first meeting of the New York State militia, which he called the National Guard. Two years before Wingate’s inauguration of the National Guard, the Wisconsin legislature published a petition, written by the NRA, that called for the “encouragement of rifle practice not only in the regular army and navy, but among the uniformed militia of the various states.”⁷⁸ The uniformed militias referred to by the Wisconsin legislature are exactly what would morph into the unofficial National Guard two years later. This is extremely significant, as the call to coordinate training of state militias was a constitutional power given to state governments; however, they were handing over the reins to a private enterprise. Historian Jeffrey Marlin sums this up well by writing, “The expanded reach of the growing association was placing...congressional authority in the hands of the NRA.”⁷⁹ Later, in 1917, Brigadier General Bird W. Spencer would present Secretary of War Elihu Root with an

⁷⁶ Church, “The National Guard,” 837.

⁷⁷ Marlin, “The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association,” 94.

⁷⁸ *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, October 26, 1877.

⁷⁹ Marlin, “The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association,” 74.

outline of how the board of the National Guard should be structured, illuminating the association's influence in the National Guard and, subsequently, in the federal government.⁸⁰

The emerging NRA was dependent on the National Guard. Wingate's connections as a New York State's National Guard commander gave the young organization leverage in state and federal governments. Through these connections, the young organization was able to court grant money and contracts. On June 21, 1873, the state of New York helped the NRA purchase its first shooting range.⁸¹ This shooting range was established in Creedmore, Long Island. The U.S. army also frequently donated surplus weapons and ammo for training exercises and as prizes for shooting competitions.⁸² Creedmore has since been turned into a psychiatric center after the state of New York reclaimed the land.⁸³

Industrial Unrest and Masculinity in the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era (1897-1920) was a response to the problems and discontents raised by industrialization. The spread of poverty, labor exploitation, and the failings of democratic processes (many political machines tended to work hand-in-hand with big business interests) in

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ "The NRA Wasn't Always Against Gun Restrictions," National Public Radio, October 10, 2017.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Barron, "Behind Park's Name, a Civil War Soldier Who Helped Give the N.R.A. Birth."

rapidly urbanizing areas were symptoms the Progressive Era attempted to address.⁸⁴ The changes that middle-class workers were experiencing from industrialization sparked the progressives to action, with their idealistic vision of a restructured, although still capitalist, society.⁸⁵ Contrasted with the individualism that wallowed in the West, progressives championed collectivism, constraints on big business, and the enlargement of the federal government under popular control with the goal of a more equal distribution of power.⁸⁶ In effect, the Progressive movement was antithetical to the values of the old West, which included unhampered individual freedom, unregulated private enterprise, individual self-making, and limited government.

In its original mission statement, the NRA pledged “to promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis.”⁸⁷ During the Progressive Era, the scientific approach to marksmanship would take on multiple meanings. Following the Civil War, there was a sweeping social movement to blend militaristic tactics of organization with social and economic norms. In theory, this strategy would quell worker strikes by instilling a strict hierarchical system where every worker knew who ranked above and below them. This notion of the military functioning like a well-oiled machine and the subsequent application of this structure to business and society might be the first observable example of the NRA tapping into an existing well of cultural and social phenomena to advance its agenda. Namely, this is illuminated by the National Rifle Association’s relationship with the National Guard.

⁸⁴ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3-39.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, XV.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

⁸⁷ “NRA Explore,” National Rifle Association, <https://explore.nra.org/interests/history/>.

The relationship between the NRA and the National Guard was jeopardized by the labor movements of the early 20th century. As workers went on strike, the National Guard was often called in to quell the disarray and reinstate the militaristic hierarchy of industrial workplaces. Factory owners saw labor unions as unduly collectivist. The NRA and the National Guard became instruments of the courts which saw labor unions as unlawful conspiracies that constrained free trade.⁸⁸ These interactions, at times, led to violence. In fact, National Guard Captain Hart disclosed that he “would not be surprised to hear of an organized labor movement against the National Guard,”⁸⁹ as they were viewed by many as puppets of the factory owners. The NRA struggled to maintain their image of being an “all-American” organization that fought for individuals in local rifle clubs while also training and maintaining close relations with the National Guard. As early as 1887, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* referred to the National Guard as, “a menace to workingmen and used in the interest of oppressive capital and corporations.”⁹⁰

In fact, in Church’s 1871 article calling for the establishment of a National Rifle Association, an anecdote provided by Colonel Porter of the Twenty Second Infantry of the National Guard of the State of New York (NGSNY) is used to provide evidence for the need of better trained guardsmen. Porter’s tale begins:

The lesson of the twelfth of July was sharply illustrated and must not be forgotten. It is necessary of the most exacting discipline; not mere proficiency in the manual of arms, but the habit of unquestioning obedience, the subjection of the wishes, opinions, and will of the individual to the proper authority, at all times and under all circumstances. A battalion thoroughly under the control

⁸⁸ "Legality of Trade Unions at Common Law." *Harvard Law Review* Vol. 25, No. 5 (1912): 465-67.

⁸⁹ Marlin, “The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association,” 101.

⁹⁰ "Labor and the Militia," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 13, 1887.

of one mind is a power to be feared, but, influenced by various and adverse opinions, is little better than a mob.⁹¹

Of course, a “mob” is what caused the sharply illustrated “lesson of the twelfth of July.”

Antagonistically, Protestant Irish Americans paraded through Catholic Irish American areas of

Manhattan to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the crown’s victory at the Battle of Boyne.

Sheer chaos broke loose, resulting in the deaths of around 60 civilians (some of which were shot

after reckless fire from the National Guard), and the injury of 22 Guardsmen.⁹² Such antics are

precisely what inspired the “search for order” that typified the Progressive movement. The

normalized rhetoric of “proficiency,” “unquestioning obedience,” and “the subjection of the

wishes...to the proper authority” are precisely the postbellum phenomena that fueled the

collectivist labor movements of the early twentieth century.

A similar scenario would play out twenty-three years later in Illinois during the Pullman Strike (1894). In response to worsening economic conditions and dangerous work environment,

train workers went on strike. The strike began when switchmen represented by the American

Railway Union went on strike and were promptly fired and replaced with non-union workers.

This precipitated the rest of the union to strike, culminating in one of the largest labor

movements to date. This strike began in April, but by June 30, 1894, some 125,000 railway

employees walked off the job.⁹³ The otherwise peaceful protests took a turn on June 29, when

⁹¹ Church, “The National Guard,” 837.

⁹² Michael A. Gordon, *The Orange Riots: Irish Political Violence in New York City, 1870 and 1871* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 104-148.

⁹³ Melvyn Dubofsky, “The Federal Judiciary, Free Labor, and Equal Rights: A Peculiar Chapter in the History of State and Labor,” in *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor, Politics, and the State* (Wheeling: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

rogue strikers set fire to a federal mail train, leading to the deployment of nine militia (National Guard) companies and, by July 3, federal troops as well. Then came July 7, where, in the presence of 14,100 total troops (federal, state militiamen, police, and deputy marshals), National Guardsmen fired into the rioting crowd and killed between four and thirty union members. As tensions cooled, the Pullman Company agreed to rehire workers on the basis that they would never join an organized labor union again.⁹⁴

Guns, via the National Guard, were used by employers to put down strikes. This culminated in multiple instances of deadly suppression of labor movements. This can be seen in the Pullman Strike, the folly in Manhattan against the rancorous Irish, and the Ludlow Massacre (1914). The Ludlow Massacre was one of the bloodier episodes of labor suppression in American history. On April 20, 1914, the Colorado National Guard set fire to a tent-city settlement of striking coal miners and their families. The families lived in this major tent city after being evicted from their homes—owned by Rockefeller—for demanding a ten cent pay raise, an eight hour work day, and the ability to trade outside of the town.⁹⁵ As residents fled the blaze, the National Guard opened fire, gunning down thirteen in the process.⁹⁶ Ironically, most of these workers were hired a decade or so previously to replace the original workers who were on strike.⁹⁷ The total death count hovered above sixty, including women, who were not employed by

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Ben Mauk, "The Ludlow Massacre Still Matters," *New Yorker*, April 18, 2014.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Id.*

the Rockefeller owned Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, and children.⁹⁸ In the shared interest of authorities and employers, such uprisings necessitated the restoration of order.

Ironically, by advocating for the scientism of late nineteenth century America by encouraging social order, regularity, and precision through riflery and military service, the NRA most likely increased National Guard enrollment. Historian Jeffrey Marlin notes that although states funded National Guard regiments to create a force to handle unrest spurred by industrial growth and social upheaval, many Guard members joined out of an actual desire to participate in the military.⁹⁹ According to Kristin Hoganson, postbellum politics was conducted with the military ever in mind, and it “promoted the idea that the state rested ultimately on soldier-citizens.”¹⁰⁰ The NRA played an active role in promulgating these “scientific” social theories and beliefs.

Masculinity

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, industrialization was accompanied by “fierce discontent[s],”¹⁰¹ not the least of which was the challenge it posed to traditional masculinity.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ Marlin, “The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association,” 102.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 112.

¹⁰¹ Theodore Roosevelt, April 14, 1906.

Military service was highly romanticized during and after the Civil War. Fighting with an army provided a sense of rugged fraternity that was held as the height of masculinity. However, industrialization and American isolationism largely prevented the sort of valor sought after in the army (excluding the wars against Native Americans and the Spanish American War). A sense of emasculation existed in postbellum American society, as men now worked in factories in teams with clear ranks of subordination and exploitation, deprived of the valor their fathers had experienced in the 1860's. The Progressive Era ushered in new attempts to address the challenges posed to American masculinity. The National Rifle Association benefited from the increases in fraternal organizations and the rise of marksmanship as an indicator of physical fitness and mental acuity.

Ars moriendi—the belief that there exists a special nobility in a “good” death (i.e. dying for one’s country)—flourished during the Civil War. *Ars moriendi* emphasized the masculinity and valor of dying in war. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes that during the Civil War, “despite clerical efforts, the boundary between duty to God and duty to country grew increasingly blurred, and dying bravely and manfully came to comprise a significant part of dying well.”¹⁰² In a letter informing Wade Hampton that his son had died in war, General William Preston Johnston (*aide-to-camp* to Jefferson Davis) consoled Wade that, “Your best consolation will I know my dear general be drawn from higher than earthly sources; still, some alleviation of the sorrow is to be drawn from the reflection that Preston died as he had lived, in the path of duty and honor. Young

¹⁰² Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying,” *Journal of Southern History* vol 67, 27.

as he was he had played a man's part in the war."¹⁰³ The perceived masculinity of dying in combat provided a solace to grieving family members akin to that of religion. Even in death—the only thing guaranteed to everybody—masculinity found a role to play.

Industrialization presented new challenges to the American conception of manhood. Many young men migrated from rural communities to the Northeast in search of employment. Having been regaled of the prowess of manual labor on which their fathers were raised, young men quickly grew anxious about their new office and factory jobs. Instead of the physically strenuous farm labor they were acquainted with, it became common for young men to work in a dank office with pen and paper, finagling and haggling over what was considered “brain-work.”¹⁰⁴ With the snowballing loss of specialized labor, masculinity morphed to focus on the body and physical fitness as indicators of character.¹⁰⁵ Social networks were developed for the self-expression of this new masculinity; namely, this manifested in shooting clubs, “boys clubs,” and other organizations created in the spirit of fraternity and physicality.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, courage, dominance, and a propensity for action marked the character of true men in the Progressive Era.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ William Preston Johnston to Wade Hampton, November 6, 1864, in Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying,” *Journal of Southern History* vol 67, 27.

¹⁰⁴ E. Anthony Rotundo, “Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920,” *Journal of Social History* Vol. 16 No. 4 (Summer, 1983), 32.

¹⁰⁵ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 222-246.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 247-283.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) existed to help recuperate early twentieth century masculinity and to tune the bodies and minds of young boys. Scouts were provided the opportunity to perform masculinity in settings similar to—but less adulterous than—the fraternities of their fathers. Jay Mechling writes:

The movement was for the boys who had paid the price of urban civilization and who were far removed from the wilderness experience that fostered manly virtues like self-reliance and physical fitness. Popular ideas drawn from Darwinism informed this notion of an enervated modern youth, but the founders of the BSA also intended the organization to "Americanize" the urban immigrant boys flooding American cities.¹⁰⁸

The NRA and BSA also worked together to normalize rifle use and marksmanship as markers of American masculinity. Marlin claims that there existed “a rhetoric linking rifle marksmanship to responsible democratic citizenship and to masculine virtues of self-control and self-reliance,”¹⁰⁹ precisely the characteristics and values the BSA sought to teach.

At the same time, parental fears of allowing their children access to deadly weapons prevented the BSA from fully endorsing firearm training. In his dissertation analyzing the relationship between masculinity and the BSA, Benjamin René Jordan argues against the notion that scouting practices proved that middle-class white perception of masculinity shifted to center around self-reliant, non-white indigenous groups. Instead, Jordan claims that this was only half of the picture. Since guidance in self-sufficient individualism was fairly useless in an urbanizing society, the BSA supplemented these styles of teachings with Victorian values of “modest manliness.” In practice, the Boy Scouts did not focus on hunting, but instead taught

¹⁰⁸ Jay Mechling, “Boy Scouts, the National Rifle Association, and the Domestication of Rifle Shooting,” *American Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 1 (2014), 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

marksmanship. It was believed that marksmanship was the mark of a virtuous manhood that utilized the scientific efficiency of precision target practice while in an urban-industrial setting.

Marksmanship was one of the first badges a boy scout could be awarded.¹¹⁰ To win this badge, a scout had to “Qualify as a marksman in accordance with the regulations of the National Rifle Association.”¹¹¹ Mechling argues that since its incipience, the BSA and NRA worked together to normalize rifle usage and to make connections between firearms and America’s founding. He describes this process as a collaborative “iron triangle” consisting of the Boy Scouts, the National Rifle Association, and firearm manufacturers.¹¹² This also explains the development and normalization of air guns (or bb-guns) around the same time; they were advertised as a non-lethal, more genteel alternative to achieving the masculine feats of marksmanship, possibly even in one’s own family living room.

In light of these phenomena, marksmanship experienced a boom in popularity. It was seen as the remedy for keeping men masculine and alert all while instilling American values. The NRA capitalized off of the ebbs and flows of the popularity of marksmanship by frequently hosting shooting competitions.

¹¹⁰ Mechling, “Boy Scouts, the National Rifle Association, and the Domestication of Rifle Shooting,” 9.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid*, 7.

Science, Efficiency for the Public Good, and Policy

The NRA was not always an uncompromising special interest group oriented against gun legislation. Until that fateful meeting in 1977, the National Rifle Association largely cooperated with the government to enact legislation. The pre-1977 NRA was willing to compromise. As gun legislation rose in popularity in the 1930's, the NRA was able to inject its opinions into the debate by leveraging its relationship with the National Guard.¹¹³

As global economic hardships mounted, the NRA concerned itself with the more practical side of gun ownership. The National Rifle Association sought to promote safe and effective hunting practices to provide food when money was scarce. This can be seen during the Great Depression and both World Wars. In June of 1915, the NRA also worked in tandem with the War Department to train citizens for the war. This was not simply a recruiting exercise; instead, they trained potential soldiers how to shoot straight and how to survive in a war setting.¹¹⁴ No longer would the NRA only train National Guardsman to put down domestic strife; the emergence of the first World War provided a federal platform for the National Rifle Association.

On June 26, 1934, the National Firearms Act (NFA) was enacted. This bill, written as part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal for Crime," was a direct response to violent gang activity that

¹¹³ Marlin, "The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association: Public Institutions and the Rise of a Lobby for Private Gun Ownership," 37.

¹¹⁴ "Training Citizens for War," *Daily Star*, June 19, 1915, 2.

flourished during and following Prohibition.¹¹⁵ The NFA placed a tax on the production, importation and distribution of certain firearms and their accessories, including shotguns and rifles with barrels under 18 inches in length, machine-guns, silencers, and mufflers.¹¹⁶ According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Congress had more intentions in enacting this bill than mere revenue collection. Functionally, the NFA was designed to eliminate the transaction of firearms which fell under the scope of this legislation. The tax placed on the sale or transfer of these weapons (weapons which were more practical for wartime purposes than for hunting or marksmanship) totaled two-hundred dollars, whereas some rifles and shotguns subject to this legislation could sell for as little as five to ten dollars.¹¹⁷ Former president of the NRA, Karl T. Frederick, testified in support of the National Firearms Act.¹¹⁸ Referring to firearms in general, Frederick stated, “I have never believed in the general practice of carrying weapons. I seldom carry one.” He continued, “I do not believe in the general promiscuous toting of guns. I think it should be sharply restricted and only under licenses.”¹¹⁹ This trend of supporting gun control legislation would continue for roughly another forty years.

In a June 6, 1947, newspaper column, the NRA can be seen advocating for the safe handling of “war trophies of the explosive nature.” C.B. Lister, the secretary treasurer of the

¹¹⁵ Sarah Gray, “Here’s a Timeline of the Major Gun Control Laws in America,” *Time*, April 30, 2019.

¹¹⁶ “National Firearms Act,” Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, April 7, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Angel Shamaya, “NRA President’s Testimony during Congressional Debate of the National Firearms Act of 1934,” March 4, 2004.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Id.*

association, wrote, “The sportsmen of the United States, whom we are honored to represent, are fully aware of the responsibilities that go with the American right to own and use firearms. We are cognizant of the dangers of careless gun handling and are proud to cooperate in this safety campaign.”¹²⁰ Similarly, an October 11, 1953, upstate New York newspaper advertised hunting license courses for youths in the Mechanicville area. The NRA maintained a positive public presence and worked with governments, state and federal, to work for what they believed would benefit American society at large.

The NRA was able to map popular concepts of science and efficiency onto its platform. It reached this end by working with the government to enact practical legislation, utilizing its connections to the National Guard, and by exploiting domestic anxieties of emasculation and physical perfection. As an organization, it has always captured the trends and anxieties of the zeitgeist well. The ubiquity of NRA sponsored shooting competitions illuminates the organization’s ability to tap into this deep well of social forces. In times of hardship (i.e. World Wars and economic depression), marksmanship felt a surge in popularity for its role in performing and perfecting masculinity.

¹²⁰ “Snyder Appoints Emergency Committee,” *Millbrook Round Table*, June 6, 1947, 5.

Individualism and the Frontier Legacy

It is important to note that the vast majority of gun owners are unaffiliated with the National Rifle Association. According to the Washington Post, only around nineteen percent of those surveyed who owned guns participated in the NRA.¹²¹ Tellingly, this relatively small percentage of the greater population has managed to hijack discourse surrounding gun rights by exploiting creation myths and cultural identities that were mulling around American society in the mid- to late-twentieth century. These myths attempted to hoist the firearm as the guardian of American democracy. Specifically, the legacy of the American frontier was promoted by the NRA as a means of identifying guns as the creator of modern America. This tactic has been apparent since the Progressive Era but became ever more normalized through frontier mythologizing.

American society perceives law abiding gun owners as valued citizens, a social construct that can be traced throughout American history.¹²² Professor Jonathan Obert describes the phenomena of armed citizens being important peacekeepers as being “related to an older form of civic obligation, particularly prevalent in the South in the form of slave patrols and militia membership, that ‘linked private effort [with] public order.’”¹²³ This belief was echoed by Wayne

¹²¹ Christopher Ingraham, “6 things the NRA will hate in Pew’s new gun survey - and 6 things it will love,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2017.

¹²² Jonathan Obert, *The Six Shooter State: Public and Private Violence in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, October 18, 2018), 148.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

LaPierre following the Sandy Hook mass shooting in 2012, where he infamously declared, “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”¹²⁴ On the tail of mass shootings, states with Republican control typically experience a seventy-five percent loosening of gun control legislation.¹²⁵ The NRA appropriates frontier mythology to normalize the role and history of firearms in America.

These beliefs were cemented in American society by the cultural lore that surrounds Westward expansion. Areas that were being *settled* by Americans were viewed as clean slates for actualizing a new, individualistic society that escaped the yoke of city corruption.¹²⁶ Unsatisfied with the wheeling and dealing of cities, the West was portrayed in twentieth century media (television and movies) as fresh ground where a more ideal America could be created. The West was instilled in the American psyche as a haven where an alternative industrial structure could be established, allowing for the perceived evils and corruption of long established urban settings to be obviated.¹²⁷ In turn, this belief confirmed the romanticized image of nineteenth century pioneer self-sufficiency that is inextricably linked to gun ownership and rurality. This intense Jeffersonian desire fueled the stardom of actors such as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, both immortalized for playing morally acceptable “bad guys” in the old west.

¹²⁴ Katy Steinmetz, “The NRA Responds to Newton: America needs more ‘Good Guys’ with Guns,” *Time*, December 21, 2012.

¹²⁵ Mahita Gajanan and Sanya Mansoor, “‘Good Guys With Guns’ Can Rarely Stop Mass Shootings, and Texas and Ohio Show Why,” *Time*, August 7, 2019.

¹²⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Gun Fighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 88.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 145.

The prominence of the romanticization of the frontier is reflected in the rise in popularity of Westerns in literature and film that coincided with the increase in television sets and movie theaters. These Westerns glorify the subversion of established laws and norms by an armed, morally acceptable law breaker. Take, for example, white male historical icon Jesse James. James is the embodiment of the trope of the morally acceptable criminal who subverts immoral laws and counteracts big city politicians, although he rose to stardom after committing a slew of reprehensible murders and robberies—including the execution of twenty-three unarmed Union soldier captives in 1864.¹²⁸ Sculpted in the image of an American Robin Hood, James' train and bank robberies were viewed by many as justifiable, as corporate exploitation was also equated with immorality. James' crimes were seen, ultimately, as confronting this exploitation. He left in his wake a romanticized vision of the West as a place where corporate evils were confrontable and fatalistic individualism—the very spirit of *ars moriendi* and American masculinity—was more useful than an office or factory salary.¹²⁹

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) juxtaposed industrial centers and democracy, the latter of which he relegates to smaller communities. He writes that the old West “may yet show that its training has produced the power to reconcile popular government and culture with the huge industrial society of the modern world. The democracies of the past have been small communities, under simple and primitive economic conditions.”¹³⁰ Likewise, the

¹²⁸ Richard Polenberg, “Jesse James” in *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry," and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 113.

¹²⁹ Polenberg, “Jesse James,” 112-121.

¹³⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, 155.

pioneers “honored the man whose eye was quickest and whose grasp was strongest...it was ‘everyone for himself.’”¹³¹ Only by returning to the type of civilization provided by the frontier could the woes of industrial capitalism be curbed and equality be found.

On top of this, Historian William Katz argues that westerns depicting cowboys, such as the stories of Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and the fictional Deadwood Dick, serve to bond white Americans by “establish[ing] exactly who built the country and who didn’t.”¹³² This romanticization of the “frontier spirit” of cowboys and white settlers is reflected by the current statistic that sixty-one percent of gun owners are white men—a demographic which is only thirty-one percent of the larger US population.¹³³ This connection between whiteness and gun ownership within NRA messaging will be discussed further below.

The NRA engages in the “white frontier” mythologizing commercially via its magazines. It is not insignificant that the NRA advertises the sale of items commemorating events and figures that are historically important to the identity of the NRA member. For example, in an edition of *The American Rifleman* published four months after the Cincinnati putsch, a whole page is dedicated to the advertisement of belt buckles exhibiting a Confederate flag, an American flag, the Liberty Bell, the word “US,” and a stereotypical depiction of a Native American. “Frontier pistols” also adorned some belt buckles. In turn, the way in which Western heroes were portrayed fed off of the conquest narrative that was incubating in American mythology.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 153.

¹³² William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (Touchstone, February 7, 1996), xiii.

¹³³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishing, 2018), 93.

The conquest narrative was a popular belief among Americans that held as gospel an expansionist ideology. This manifested in westward expansion, extending the country's boundaries towards the Pacific. This was accomplished by the use of force—namely, the armed annexation of indigenous lands. The crux of this belief is the right to bear firearms and was justified through both religiosity and nationalism.¹³⁴ The conquest narrative argues that the Second Amendment defends the right of “true Americans” to defend themselves against tyrannical actors, embodied by big government, city corruption, and general threats to personal (or mutual) security.¹³⁵ It is in this spirit that Billy the Kid (1859-1881), the outlaw gunslinger who killed eight men before he was twenty-one years old on a spree that stretched over the New Mexico-Arizona territory, achieved popularity through contemporary newspaper coverage of his exploits, and earned his position as an American cult hero.¹³⁶

The conquest narrative has clear links to the belief that the Second Amendment is a God given right. Reminiscent of Manifest Destiny—where expansionist policies were viewed as divinely ordained—it is also predicated on a special relationship between God and the American nation.¹³⁷ Likewise, it also glorifies individualism. This belief legitimized the displacement of the native occupants of the land and was the crux of American pioneerism. The vitriolic distrust of government led followers of the conquest narrative to one conclusion—travel West to the frontier where the man responsible for upholding the individualist's moral code (moral in terms

¹³⁴ Jessica Dawson, “Shall not be infringed: how the NRA used religious language to transform the meaning of the Second Amendment,” *Nature*, July 2, 2019.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Frederick Nolan, *The West of Billy the Kid* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2015).

¹³⁷ Obert, *The Six Shooter State*, 149.

of the perceived absence of urban corruption) may also be a criminal. If frontier mythology were a religion, the conquest narrative would be its scripture.

In his *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Frederick Jackson Turner claimed in 1893 that, “the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.”¹³⁸ Jackson posits that the very essence of America would be lost as the frontier disappeared. He writes, “Gradually this society [the West] loses its primitive conditions, and assimilates itself to the type of the older social conditions of the East; but it bears within it enduring and distinguishing survivals of its frontier experience.”¹³⁹ The frontier was perceived of as a site in which freedom reined and individualism was all one needed to succeed.

The frontier was a bedrock of American national mythology. Outside the confines of exploitative urban factories, white settlers’ main concern was the survival of their families. Critics of city life noted that as cities grew, family life dissipated from the center of the nation’s identity. Urban areas incubated corruption and restructured society into a series of social hierarchies while the West enabled a more democratic, egalitarian society for those bold enough to shirk off the restrictions of industrialism and get back in touch with their nation’s colonial roots for a simpler, less regulated way of life.

¹³⁸ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 49.

¹³⁹ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 205.

The Frontier Legacy in Modern America

The legacy of the frontier pervades the NRA even today. Published in 1976—the year of the American bicentennial—two pages advertising “frontier revolvers” can be found sandwiched between multiple editorials celebrating the founding of the American country.¹⁴⁰ This sequence exposes the connection NRA publicists attempt to draw between America’s founding through armed rebellion and the armed annexing of lands, both events having been accomplished by white historical figures, assuming the white, nationalist American narrative that wallows in popular culture. By invoking the old West, they attempt to bolster the argument that guns, via the Second Amendment, built the foundation on which America rests. Guns are the quintessential American symbol, right next to the bald eagle and lady liberty. Pointedly, the logo of the National Rifle Association depicts an eagle perched on a shield boasting the American flag with two rifles and, ironically, an olive branch in its talons. Perhaps the olive branch suggests that only with a gun can order be assured.

The lore surrounding the West as a place where government corruption is addressed by anti-social, armed gunslingers informs the NRA’s stance that gun owners’ very way of life is threatened by an omnipotent government. In her publication *Drawing a Virtual Gun*, professor Katherine Gregory argues that the lifestyle that the NRA promotes—that is, the rural, self-sufficient hunter—is organized to contrast with urban environments, which are viewed as bastions of big government. The roots of this argument lay in frontier. It is in this spirit that over a century after Frederick Jackson Turner declared the era of the frontier over, the Bundy Ranch

¹⁴⁰ John A. Kopec, “Frontier Revolvers,” *American Rifleman*, September 1976, 32-33.

demonstrators believed they could morally point guns at federal agents. The agents, who posed no danger to life or limb, were viewed as menaces because as representatives of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, they symbolized advanced society—a threat to the frontier cattle grazing rights the protestors demanded.¹⁴¹ Historian Maxine Burkett claims, “the debate over the right to bear arms is not grounded in constitutional interpretation, but in cultural values and cultural myth.”¹⁴² The cultural beliefs of Bundy and his supporters—informed by frontier mythology—reflects Burkett’s assertion. It did not matter that their actions were fundamentally illegal, as they were defending their deeply held cultural values.

The romanticized lifestyle of the rural hunter or farmer is “connected to nature and a slower passage of time often equated with a pre-digital world.”¹⁴³ Such a lifestyle boils to activities such as sitting on the porch, raising animals, hunting, herding, and farming and is highly reminiscent of the old west in American lore, where self-sufficiency was the default and political corruption purportedly lived in exile. This culture is justified by America’s idolized frontier legacy.

Recently, in Donald Trump’s 2020 State of the Union address, he boasted that, “this is the country where children learn names like Wyatt Earp, Davy Crockett, and Annie Oakley.”¹⁴⁴ For those unfamiliar with these names, they were gun toting sharp shooters whose actions are seen as

¹⁴¹ Jaime Fuller, “Everything You Need to Know About the Long Fight Between Clive Bundy and the Federal Government,” *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2014.

¹⁴² Burkett, “Much Ado About...Something Else,” 59.

¹⁴³ Katherine, Gregory, “Drawing a Virtual Gun.” In *Open Fire: Understanding Global Gun Cultures*. Berg, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Donald Trump, State of the Union Address, January 20, 2020.

characteristic of the old west. The fact that a president casually recalled such figures in a State of the Union address exemplifies the depth to which old West mythology has permeated the American psyche. Trump continued, “our ancestors braved the unknown; tamed the wilderness; settled the wild West; lifted millions from poverty, disease, and hunger; vanquished tyranny and fascism.” The rhetoric of “taming the wilderness” and “settling the wild West” are clearly well engrained in nationalist lore. What exactly he meant by vanquishing tyranny and fascism and rescuing people from disease and poverty apropos the old West is unclear, however. The same day of his 2020 State of the Union speech, Trump tweeted, “I will NEVER [sic] allow our great Second Amendment to go unprotected, not even a little bit!” Unsurprisingly, the NRA spent thirty million dollars on Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign (for comparison, they invested thirteen million dollars into Romney’s 2012 presidential bid).¹⁴⁵

Historical narrative can be used to represent a form of judgment on a society.¹⁴⁶ By including particular descriptions into a given narrative, the authors of a history also omit events that would contradict the story they are shaping. A more obvious example of this is the old West, where white Americans are credited with settling dangerous and uninhabited lands. In reality, a multitude of indigenous groups had resided in these territories for centuries and established vast trade networks and kinship ties. This, however, is not typically noted in the conventional American rendition of westward expansion, as it would be an obstacle impinging fantasies of white American exceptionalism.

¹⁴⁵ Luke Johnson, “NRA’s 2016 Donation to Trump’s Campaign Pays Off,” *Fortune*, August 21, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 18 No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), 81.

Race

The narrative of the gun toting self-sufficient frontiersman of the American West is set against the Native American occupants of the land. Native Americans occupy a dichotomy of images in American society: hostile or eager for *civilizing*. Typically, they are depicted in western mythology as drunken, mischievous guns salesmen, or as “savage” tribesmen whose irresponsibility prevented them from “settling” the land and forming communities that would resemble the Euro-American communities of the East. This depiction was (and still is) so commonplace that it helped legitimize westward expansion, as American democracy was revered by Americans as a cure-all. Alternatively, the “uncontaminated” indigenous inhabitants of the West were portrayed—similar to the land itself—as clean slates asking to be Americanized. Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick writes, “The image—the noble, happy, pristine, uncontaminated Indian—had always been a great deal easier to live with than the diverse and complicated human beings who had come to be known as Indians.”¹⁴⁷ She continued, noting that the picturesque portrayal—the uncontaminated portrayal—was both “a lesson and reproach to civilization,” as it embodied both the rugged individualism that was projected on the West and also the willingness to be saved.¹⁴⁸ In effect, both portrayals of Native Americans justified the violence that pioneers perpetrated against them.

Squads of rangers and other military units systemically massacred and relocated Native Americans in the West. This resulted in the belief that the West was an unpopulated land

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (W.W. Norton & Company, January, 1987), 185.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 186.

formerly inhabited by indigenous peoples that was now waiting to be settled. In some western settlements, professional bands of scalp hunters were established to both kill Native Americans and also sow terror among the surviving populace. In Minnesota in 1862, for example, the U.S. government paid twenty-five dollars per indigenous scalp that an *ad hoc* militia brought back.¹⁴⁹ This tactic spread across all of the prairie governments as well. Historically, militias—precisely the groups of soldiers that would morph into the National Guard—were deployed against Native Americans. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues that the Second Amendment is predicated on the ability of settler-colonists to use their guns against Native Americans, an argument directly in the face of conventional American lore that this amendment was a response to the British crown’s authoritative overreach. Even gun rights activist Steven Halbrook explained, “To be sure, colonial authorities sought to disarm blacks and Indians.”¹⁵⁰ Historically, gun ownership enforced a social hierarchy with white men at the helm.¹⁵¹

Even many American colonies specified that all white men should be armed at public expense.¹⁵² Contrary to the myth that the Second Amendment arose from the ashes of the Revolutionary War to protect future Americans from a tyrannical government, the true roots of the right to bear arms grew from the very nature of American settler-colonialism, seizing the land of Native Americans to “settle” white Americans upon, and also to reinforce the power dynamic

¹⁴⁹ D.G. Hewitt, History Collection, <https://historycollection.co/governments-used-to-pay-for-native-american-scalps-which-made-scalping-a-booming-business/2/>.

¹⁵⁰ Burkett, “Much Ado About...Something Else,” 63.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁵² Michael C. Dorf, “What Does the Second Amendment Mean Today,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76, no.1 (2000), 51.

between enslaved peoples and their *owners*.¹⁵³ Take Kansas for example, where the number of Euro-American farms grew from 10,000 to 239,000 between 1860 and 1880.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Texas' population nearly doubled from 1.6 million to 3 million between 1880 and 1890.¹⁵⁵ This transfer of an armed populace enshrined firearms in the American psyche as a tool for “settling” land.

Reconstruction ushered in a new era of gun control regulations. The whirlwind of anxiety that Freedmen would arm themselves and seek retribution, combined with the real wanton violence white Americans perpetrated against them, led to legislation restricting gun ownership in many forms. In the antebellum South, it was not rare to see armed “slave patrols” on the street. Given the nature of American slavery, these patrols—which would lay the foundation for modern policing practices—were overwhelmingly white. Disgruntled, many of these same men refused to serve under a Republican Reconstructionist governor, leading southern governments to fill their militias (in this case, the militia served as an interim law enforcement agency) ranks with black men. Ironically, but not particularly surprisingly, these peace-keeping missions fueled white insurrection and interracial tensions. The concerns about the racial compositions of militias forced changes in militia laws.

As early as September 1, 1866, the Department of the South issued General Order no. 7, outlawing “organizations of white or colored persons bearing arms, or intended to be armed, not belonging to the military or the naval forces of the United States.”¹⁵⁶ In response to violence in

¹⁵³ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded*.

¹⁵⁴ “Post-Civil War Westward Migration,” Lumen Learning.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁶ Carole Emberton, “The Limits of Incorporation: Violence, Gun Rights, and Gun Regulation in the Reconstruction South,” *Stanford Law and Policy Review* vol. 17, May 21, 2006, 621.

Mobile, Alabama, the editor of the local newspaper called for “all good, law-abiding citizens” to “lay aside all deadly weapons like brave men.”¹⁵⁷ Majority black state sanctioned militias contrasted sharply with the antebellum South, as free black Americans were often denied the Second Amendment rights that their white counterparts enjoyed.¹⁵⁸

For much of American history, gun ownership functioned as a symbol of citizenship. As mentioned previously, free black Americans were often denied the right to bear arms in antebellum America. In Florida, for example, the Act of February 17, 1833, allowed “white citizen patrols” to search the houses of black Floridians—enslaved or otherwise—and seize any weapons that could not be “properly explained.”¹⁵⁹ Any person who offended the statute was to be “severely punished” by “moderate whipping, not to exceed 39 strokes on the bare back.”¹⁶⁰ Florida was not alone in their selective denial of the Second Amendment. States such as Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi maintained similarly racially motivated legislation. Likewise, many of these states kept free black Americans in a state of disenfranchisement.

In 1857, the Supreme Court upheld slavery under the pretense that black people residing in America were not citizens. This infamous case, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, saw Chief Justice Taney argue that even though Dred Scott was enslaved and fled to a state where slavery was illegal, he was still technically enslaved and thus had no right to even appeal his case. His argument relied on the exclusion of “the African race” from citizenship, as black people would

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Dorf, “What Does the Second Amendment Mean Today,” 336.

¹⁵⁹ Steve Ekwel, “The Racist Origins of US Gun Control: Laws Designed To Disarm Slaves, Freedmen, And African-Americans.”

¹⁶⁰ State of Florida, Act of Feb. 17, 1833, §§ 15, 17.

then be exempt from the special “police regulations” they endured.¹⁶¹ He continued, “it would give to persons of the negro race...full liberty of speech...to hold public meetings upon political affairs, and to keep and carry arms wherever they went.”¹⁶² Gun ownership, limited mainly to whites, was inextricably tied to citizenship.

Another clear instance of the Second Amendment being a right used to enforce racial hierarchy can be seen in the views of Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware. Saulsbury was a vehement racist who held the office of Delaware Attorney General from 1850 until 1855, then senatorship of the same state from 1859 to 1871, until he lost his position to his brother, Eli.¹⁶³ As a senator, he opposed a civil rights bill that would forbid the confiscation of Freedmen’s weapons, all the while invoking the Second Amendment and calling for “the whole white population to arm themselves and organize into militias.”¹⁶⁴ Saulsbury’s career entailed no shortfall of shameful moments empowered by gun ownership. In a full display of drunken vitriol, he derided Abraham Lincoln on the Senate floor as “an imbecile” and eventually brandished a revolver when the sergeant at arms attempted to escort him from the podium.¹⁶⁵

The Second Amendment was not applied universally. Its applicability was predicated on race. This becomes glaringly apparent in the landmark gun rights case *US v. Cruikshank*. This case, presided over in 1875, held that the constitution does *not* guarantee the right of “bearing

¹⁶¹ Chief Justice Roger Taney, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

¹⁶² *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

¹⁶³ “Saulsbury, Willard Jr.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*.

¹⁶⁴ Burkett, “Much Ado About...Something Else,” 91.

¹⁶⁵ “The Battle of the Three Brother,” *United States Senate*.

arms for a lawful purpose.”¹⁶⁶ In the face of the Fourteenth Amendment, the decision of this case specified that the Bill of Rights was not applicable to private actors or state governments—a pointed attack on the rights of Freedmen.¹⁶⁷ The defendant in this case, which arose from the Colfax Massacre, was a Klansmen by the name of William Cruikshank. This massacre took place in Colfax, Louisiana, and was the result of a hotly contested gubernatorial race which culminated in white Democrats murdering well over one-hundred of their black counterparts.¹⁶⁸ Cruikshank was one of only three men charged in this event, and his crime was not murder. Instead, he was found guilty in state court for violating the 1870 Enforcement Act—legislation established to curb racialized violence conducted by the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁶⁹ Cruikshank was “indicted for banding together with the intent to injure, oppress, threaten or intimidate two citizens of African descent.”¹⁷⁰ Dealing the majority opinion, Chief Justice Morrison Waite found Cruikshank to be not guilty of his charges, deeming the constitution a responsibility that only the Federal government is required to uphold. In practice, this decision allowed violations of the Bill of Rights so long as the perpetrator was not federally employed—a decision aimed at the rights of Freedmen. In essence, *US v Cruikshank* stated that the federal government could not deprive Freedmen of rights, but the same deeds by non-federal actors is not per se unconstitutional.

¹⁶⁶ *US v. Cruikshank*, 109 U.S. 3 (1883).

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Danny Lewis, “The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era: One of the worst incidents of racial violence after the Civil War set the stage for segregation,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 13, 2016.

¹⁶⁹ 1870 Enforcement Act, 16 Stat. 140-146.

¹⁷⁰ *US v. Cruikshank*, 109 U.S. 3

Although race ostensibly no longer plays a role in citizenship, the link between race, enfranchisement, and the right to bear arms still exists. This grew from New Deal legislation in 1934, where the Roosevelt administration banned all violent felons from owning firearms.¹⁷¹ Later, in 1968, the Gun Control Act expanded this prohibition to everyone who had been convicted of a felony, regardless of whether the felony was violent or not.¹⁷² The implications of the Gun Control Act combined with the “tough on crime” ideology of the Reagan era and the 1994 Crime Bill, both of which vastly increased the number of black Americans who were convicted felons, have been to illegalize gun ownership among blacks.¹⁷³

The NRA endorsed the Gun Control Act of 1968, but took issue with its proposed universal firearm registry. Today felons are only allowed to own firearms after undergoing an extensive process of getting their record expunged or their crimes pardoned. In eleven states, felons are currently denied their right to vote indefinitely (in practice, their right to vote is seldom restored). Excluding Maine and Vermont, the thirty-seven remaining states restrict voting rights either while the sentence is being served, or until the end of probation or parole.¹⁷⁴ The NRA intentionally does not represent these people. By portraying gun violence as being contingent on the number of criminals and not the ubiquity of guns, the NRA relinquishes its responsibility to represent ex-felons. This sentiment is captured by the now common talking point and bumper sticker, “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”

¹⁷¹ “How Can a Convicted Felon Receive Firearm Rights?,” Jobs for Felons.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press, January 2012), 56.

¹⁷⁴ “How Can a Convicted Felon Receive Firearm Rights?,” Jobs for Felons.

The racial dimensions of the NRA's stance on gun ownership were prompted by reactions to radical, militant black politics of the late 1960s. Similar to how the NRA was modeled after the British National Rifle Association, the American National Rifle Association was not the first modern guns rights movement. Holding that title is the Black Panther Party (BPP), which championed the Second Amendment as a means of self-defense against police brutality perpetrated against blacks. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's produced multiple arguments for how people of color could best achieve equality in the United States. Two of the main civil rights leaders were Martin Luther King Jr. and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, better known as Malcom X.¹⁷⁵ To drastically oversimplify, they championed nonviolent civil-disobedience and self-defense, respectively. Surprisingly, Martin Luther King Jr. was known to carry a pistol at times for self-protection.¹⁷⁶ X, on the other hand, promoted the armed self-defense of black people in America in order to provide protection from racist policing and social practices. Although he made explicit that his motivations were purely preservationist, American media purposefully misquoted X to paint him as a race warrior who aimed to overthrow white hegemony. Malcolm X's teachings meshed well with those of the Black Panther Party. Underscoring its manifest purpose, the BPP originally went by the name the Black Panthers for Self-Defense.

¹⁷⁵ After a falling out with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X changed his name to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, the name he would eventually take to the grave. Since el-Shabazz's platforms that I reference, and which are often misinterpreted, are more commonly thought of as being the words of "Malcolm X," I will continue to refer to el-Shabazz as Malcolm X in order to provide a clearer understanding of the platform of armed self-defense and its intentional misrepresentation by the white-controlled media.

¹⁷⁶ Mark Engler and Paul Engler, "When Martin Luther King Gave Up His Guns," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2014.

Predominately rural gun owners—being inundated with American mythologizing of the frontier spirit—appropriated BPP discourse surrounding the preservation of rights from an intrusive federal government via firearms. The overlap in rhetoric surrounding gun rights between the Black Panther Party and the National Rifle Association is significant.

On May 2, 1967, the BPP launched the first modern guns rights movement when they entered the California Statehouse toting guns.¹⁷⁷ It was a sunny day, actor and future president Ronald Reagan was governor, and the racially motivated Mulford Act was garnering an increasing amount of support. This act, introduced by Representative Don Mulford earlier that same year in response to members of the Black Panther Party employing their right to openly carry weapons, easily passed after this event. The Mulford Act became known in legislative circles as “the Panther Bill.”¹⁷⁸

As the Panthers entered the statehouse, Bobby Seale (co-founder of the BPP) spoke to a mob of reporters on the buildings steps, delivering his organization’s executive mandate. The Panthers understood how the media and legislators would respond to the widely distributed image of black men entering the statehouse brazenly carrying rifles and shotguns; it was a spectacle meant to illuminate the discrepancy in treatment by law enforcement of black citizens acting within their rights. In planning this, the BPP intended to protest the police by highlighting law enforcement’s more extreme response to black citizens. Seale and the rest of the Panthers

¹⁷⁷ “The Black Panther Party: The Advent of the Modern Gun Rights Movement,” *The Price of Safety*.

¹⁷⁸ Nick Wing, “Here’s How The Nation Responded When A Black Militia Group Occupied A Government Building,” *Huffington Post*, January 6, 2016.

were charged with conspiracy to disrupt a legislation session, a felony they would later plead down to misdemeanor.

The BPP's actions on May 2, 1967 were conducted in response to the Mulford Act, which repealed California laws permitting public carrying of guns. Tellingly, the bill was not introduced for white Californians who openly carried their firearms. Bobby Seale commented on the Mulford Act by saying:

The American people in general and black people in particular must take careful note of the racist California legislature aimed at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless. Black people have begged, prayed, petitioned, demonstrated, and everything else to get the racist power structure of America to right the wrongs which have historically been perpetuated against black people. The time has come for black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late.¹⁷⁹

Although the NRA's platform grew from seeds planted by the Black Panthers, the NRA still supported the Mulford Act—endorsing gun legislation.¹⁸⁰

Point 7 of the BPP's October 1966 platform reads:

We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self defense.¹⁸¹

Under California state law, this was completely legal, but the sight of armed black men carrying guns to “police the police” rattled the California legislature to its core. Historian Adam Winkler notes that “the Panthers would stand on the sidelines with their guns, shouting out directions to

¹⁷⁹ Bobby Seale, “October 1966 Black Panther Party: Platform and Program,” October, 1966.

¹⁸⁰ Arica L. Coleman, “When the NRA Supported Gun Control,” *Time*, July 29, 2016.

¹⁸¹ Seale, “October 1966 Black Panther Party: Platform and Program.”

the person. That they had the right to remain silent, that they were watching and that if anything bad happened that the Black Panthers would be there to protect them.”¹⁸² This was completely legal and helped obviate the racially motivated crimes perpetrated by the police. Although the cops functionally had immunity while harassing or harming people of color, the Black Panther’s vigilantism was a significant obstacle to police brutality.

The Black Panther’s occupation of the California statehouse was widely publicized, and was used as propaganda to expedite the Mulford Act. Although this was a nonviolent political act, the sight of armed black men occupying the capitol frightened the NRA, as the pro-gun platform they were pushing did not account for non-white public displays of weaponry.¹⁸³ Interestingly, Ronald Reagan responded to the Panthers by stating that he saw “no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons,”¹⁸⁴ and that this was a “ridiculous way to solve problems that have to be solved among people of good will... Americans don’t go around carrying guns with the idea of using them to influence other Americans.”¹⁸⁵ Reagan went on to be the first presidential candidate to be endorsed by the NRA.¹⁸⁶ Ironically, the Mulford Act was the catalyst that triggered rural white conservatives’ fear of gun control.¹⁸⁷ With a finger on

¹⁸² Thad Morgan, “The NRA Supported Gun Control When the Black Panthers Had the Weapons,” *History*, August 30, 2018.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Id.*

¹⁸⁵ Burkett, “Much Ado About... Something Else,” 98.

¹⁸⁶ Elving, “The NRA Wasn’t Always Against Gun Restrictions.”

¹⁸⁷ Morgan, ““The NRA Supported Gun Control When the Black Panthers Had the Weapons.””

this pulse, the NRA opposed gun legislation for the first time in 1968, where they worked to block the implementation of a national registry of all firearms.¹⁸⁸

The 1960's were tempestuous with gun violence, seeing figures such Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Robert Kennedy, and President John F. Kennedy assassinated. Tellingly, John F. Kennedy was killed by a mail-order Italian military surplus rifle ordered through a NRA magazine by Lee Harvey Oswald.¹⁸⁹ This fueled a wave of public resentment about the ease with which a gun could be obtained. Simultaneously, the violence and rising crime rates also inspired many to purchase firearms.¹⁹⁰ The coup of 1977 rode the tide of America's gun anxieties.

Today, the similarities between the arguments of the BPP and the NRA are more apparent than ever. According to historian Rod Bush, the Black Panthers ran for national office and maintained their own political party on the ballot: the Peace and Freedom Party. The civil rights group also ran large get-out-the-vote campaigns targeted at underrepresented people of color. Another large part of their activities centered around "survival programs pending revolution."¹⁹¹

The NRA emulates these Black Panther survival programs. Take, for example, an NRA blog post from May 8, 2019, advertising its upcoming "personal protection expo," scheduled for the 6th through 8th of September, 2019.¹⁹² Their website describes the personal protection expo

¹⁸⁸ Coleman, "When the NRA Supported Gun Control."

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Elving, "The NRA Wasn't Always Against Gun Restrictions."

¹⁹¹ Rod Bush, *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006), 60.

¹⁹² NRA Staff, "NRA Personal Protection Expo Scheduled For Sept. 6-8, 2019 in Fort Worth, Texas," NRA Blog, May 8, 2019.

as being “a three-day educational and interactive experience dedicated to individuals interested in increasing their knowledge and skills of personal protection, concealed carry and home defense.” Held in Ft. Worth, Texas, this event attracted more than 15,000 participants.¹⁹³ Special guests included Lt. Col. David Grossman, who is most known for directing the Killology Research Group, publishing a “perennial bestseller’ [o]n killing,” and speaking at length on “the terrorist threat” in the wake of September 11.¹⁹⁴ Unsurprisingly, this expo was sponsored by Kel-Tec and Ruger, two major firearm and firearm accessory manufacturers, where they were provided a platform to sell their product.¹⁹⁵

In his famous speech *In defense of Self-Defense*, Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, said, “when a mechanic wants to fix a broken down car engine, he must have the necessary tools to do the job. When the people move for liberation, they must have the basic tool for liberation: the gun.”¹⁹⁶ One can easily imagine these words being spoken by Wayne LaPierre, Harlon Carter, or Dana Loesch, a spokesperson for the NRA. Take, for example, when Loesch claimed, “we must heed the call of action and, with courageous steps and humble hearts, work against tyranny.”¹⁹⁷ Even the computer algorithms of the poignantly named brainyquotes.com recognized the resemblance of this argument to that of its predecessor. The website, from where I pulled this quote, has a “related authors” section which includes Malcom X, Cesar Chavez, and

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, “Killology Research Group,” accessed March, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Staff, “NRA Personal Protection Expo,” <https://www.nrablog.com/articles/2019/5/2019-nra-personal-protection-expo/>.

¹⁹⁶ Huey P. Newton, “In Defense of Self defense,” *The Hampton Institute*, 1967.

¹⁹⁷ see https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/dana_loesch_895154.

Angela Davis, all of whom shared a focus on civil rights and equal opportunity with the BPP. However, it is the concept of a smaller group fighting back against a larger group—in both cases, against the government—and not their stances on social justice issues that is reflected in Loesch’s rhetoric.

The public presence of armed citizens proved effective for the Black Panthers, a result which the larger American populace noticed. In the infamous 2014 Bundy Standoff, rancher Cliven Bundy and his followers confronted Bureau of Land Management workers, who had a court order to impound Bundy’s cattle which had been illegally grazing on federal land for twenty years.¹⁹⁸ In a hubristic display of privilege, a coalition of over 1,000 armed men showed up and threatened a shoot out, should the federal agents not back down. Thankfully, federal agents stepped down, obviating a blood bath.

Executive Director of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, Josh Horwitz, claims that these antics were “a direct result of decades of propaganda from the National Rifle Association and other gun lobbies; propaganda that (perversely) informs Americans that they have an *individual right* under the Second Amendment to shoot elected officials, law enforcement officers, and military service members if they sense our government has become ‘tyrannical.’”¹⁹⁹ This cavalier sentiment was summed up well by current NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre, when he declared to members of the Conservative Political Action Committee Conference in 2009 that “the guys with the guns make the rules.” Whether LaPierre is referencing the racialized power dynamics enforced by guns throughout American history, or if this was simply a bold quip to encourage

¹⁹⁸ Josh Horwitz, “Is Cliven Bundy the New NRA Poster Child?,” *Huffington Post*, April 23, 2014.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

gun ownership, is unclear. Regardless, the NRA learned this mode of counteracting law enforcement from the Black Panthers.

Identity Politics in the NRA

Rather pointedly, the NRA kept mum during the riots that followed the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, an unarmed black man in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson while responding to an alleged theft. The NRA's lack of outrage is unquestionably deliberate, as the organization rarely fails to capitalize off of images of "jack-booted" federal agents. This can be seen in the NRA's responses to the Randy Weaver confrontation, the Waco siege, and the Bundy ranch debacle. The protests in Ferguson were not spontaneous flukes, either. Decades of systemic racism and violence against black citizens provided the foundation for the protests. The egregious violations committed through the Ferguson police department—who was proven to show racial bias²⁰⁰—the justice system, and general inequality ostensibly fit into the narrative of thuggish and draconian federal agencies that the NRA actively peddles; however, these factors did not qualify as the type of offensive big government overreach that the organization marks as the enemy of democracy. The factors that fueled the unrest and the response by the government seemed like an NRA fever-dream. Tellingly, no outrage in support of the demonstrators ever came.

²⁰⁰ "Justice Department Announces Findings of Two Civil Rights Investigations in Ferguson, Missouri," The United States Department of Justice, March 4, 2015.

Described by Martin Patriquin, “the resulting images [of Ferguson] are a gun-obsessed paranoiac’s nightmare made flesh.”²⁰¹ Detailing the situation on the ground further, Patriquin writes, “phalanxes of flak-jacketed police officers line the streets, firing tear gas and pointing assault weapons at unarmed citizens, often with tank-like police vehicles behind them. Dozens of people have been arrested, including journalists and municipal politicians, and a media camera crew had its camera forcibly turned off and its equipment torn down. The ‘jack-booted thugs’ haven’t just stormed a private residence or seized a compound—they’ve taken over an entire city.” On top of the visceral images of the government’s failed response, a curfew was implemented, a state of emergency declared, placing more immediate response power in the hands of the government, and the National Guard was deployed.

Contrasted with Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the Cliven Bundy standoff, two main differences become clear. The first divergence is who is being affected by the action being protested. In Waco, Ruby Ridge, and the Bundy standoff, the affected persons were overwhelmingly white, rural, gun owners. The Ferguson protests, however, were in direct response to the killing of an unarmed black man—Michael Brown—by a white cop. This event was not the singular cause for the unrest, though, as the protests were more broadly a call for social justice reform, mainly oriented against discriminatory policing practices and the failures of the Ferguson government to look after the basic needs of all citizens equally.

The factor that solicited this difference in NRA outrage is connected to the first point, but is rooted more deeply. Identity politics played a leading role in the media coverage of the Ferguson protests. The unrest was portrayed as a struggle between the city government (and

²⁰¹ Patriquin, “Ferguson, the NRA and the Hypocrisy of Silence.”

eventually the federal government) and the black residents of the city. Although race based discrimination and inequality were certainly precipitating factors leading up to the protests, the protests were by no means a capricious attack on governmental forces by disenchanted black citizens. Still, this event was problematically portrayed by the media as a “race riot.” This factor played a leading role in why the NRA stayed hushed during such a lucrative spectacle, with all its potential for anti-big government propaganda. Patriquin argues that as a black man, “[Michael Brown] doesn’t fit the profile of the typical NRA member and, apparently, doesn’t warrant the group’s paranoid rage it has displayed in the case of Randy Weaver, a known racist who was armed to the teeth at the time of the standoff.” It is no coincidence that the NRA did not seize this opportunity to deride governmental failings.

Any ambiguities surrounding the NRA’s response to the Michel Brown murder and the following unrest become clarified by analyzing its reaction to the riots that followed the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore during April of 2015. Gray was a twenty-five year old black man arrested for carrying a knife which was completely legal under local and federal law. Gray’s spinal cord was severed at some point following, or during, his arrest, resulting in a week long coma that culminated in his premature death. Video footage was also released of Gray yelling for the police to stop as the officers dragged the injured man into a police van. Gray was clearly not resisting and the police were clearly abusing their power. This led to a string of protests against racialized police brutality and inequality in general, similar to those of Ferguson.

The riots began on April 27, directly following Gray’s funeral and the refusal of authorities to release information regarding the investigation into his death. The police responded to the crowds by firing tear gas and pepper spray. A 10 PM curfew was also implemented on the

city and the National Guard was once again mustered. Reacting to the riots, the Baltimore Police Department invested two million dollars more into equipment to supply them with “the best civil disturbance equipment available.”²⁰² The government of Baltimore doubled-down following the riots. Four of the six offending officers were charged; however, they were all ultimately acquitted. The situation in Baltimore, similar to Ferguson, had all the ingredients required by the NRA to create an anti-big government spectacle.

NRA spokeswoman Dana Loesch released a short, irate video in June of 2017 in response to such protests and criticisms of Donald Trump’s presidency. The organization she represented took offense to how the citizens of Baltimore exercised their First Amendment rights. The video consists of Loesch contorting her face in disgust while delivering a monologue over a montage of clips from the Baltimore protests, flag burnings, and other scenes of disarray. The video is not so much an attack on protesters or protests, but is instead a thinly veiled attempt to amplify conservative fears of the increasingly plural society and of “liberal elites.”

The video begins with a scathing indictment by Loesch of non-conservatives who label the actions of others as offensive, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, etc. She continues, decrying the non-pro gun media for “teaching children that their president [Donald Trump] is another Hitler.” After laying out her defense of the weaponization of conservative values, Loesch went on the offensive, insinuating that the protests and unrest were surreptitiously incited by the liberal media and Obama (referred to here as “their ex-president”) and not by the very real dangers and inequalities that the residents of the cities were facing. This was not the NRA’s first

²⁰² Gary Gately and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Baltimore Police Assailed for Response After Freddie Gray’s Death,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2015.

reference to Obama that was clearly a thinly veiled reference to his race. Two years prior, during its 2015 annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, Wayne LaPierre cheered the end of Obama's final term in office, saying, "eight years of one demographically symbolic president is enough."²⁰³ One of the stills shown in the montage is of a bloody, bandaged man lying on a medical gurney and wearing a *Trump: Make America Great Again* shirt. It is not a coincidence that this pointed image falls between shots of predominately black and brown protestors throwing rocks, burning flags, and otherwise airing their discontents.

Highlighting the inherent message of this video is what it leaves out: any mention of the causes of these protests. Loesch certainly, however, condemned the protests, saying that, "they will continue until the only option left is for the police to do their jobs and stop the madness. And when that happens, they'll use it as an excuse for their outrage." One cannot imagine the NRA advocating for the police forces who were present during the Bundy stand-off, where law enforcement found itself on the wrong end of thousands of guns. Loesch awkwardly ends the video by declaring that, "the only way we stop this, the only way we save our country—our freedom—is to fight this violence of lies with a clenched fist of truth."²⁰⁴

Her language is evocative, if not fallacious. The images shown and the rhetoric used in Loesch's diatribe help decode what is meant when she says, "the only way we stop this, the only way we save our country—our freedom." The NRA is actively endorsing race baiting as a means to drum up business for conservative politicians, which, through the NRA's grading system, intensive lobbying efforts, and conflation of conservative values with a pro-gun agenda,

²⁰³ Wayne LaPierre, NRA annual meeting, April 11, 2015.

²⁰⁴ Dana Loesch, National Rifle Association, June 12, 2017.

translates directly to a dearth of gun control legislation. This also goes hand-in-hand with the apocalyptic rhetoric endemic to most NRA publications. To them, the protests were not a matter of equality, they were a challenge to the very foundation of what American identity presupposes. What goes omitted from the national creation myths of white settlers and cowboys suddenly becomes vocalized through both the NRA's silence during the Ferguson protests and by Loesch's cutting video—that of the subjugation and violence against indigenous, black and brown Americans by whites. In her depiction of the chaos wrought by the protests, the country built by “those wise old dead white guys” has fallen and has become a haunt for demons and a cage for every unclean spirit.

The hectic city is the counterpoint to the calm way of life of rural settings. Urban areas are portrayed as sites where crime flourishes and criminals are trained.²⁰⁵ Katherine Gregory argues that this is a form of coded racism, or at very least anti-pluralism.²⁰⁶ The same way that American frontier mythology casts white settlers as the true founders of the country, rurality is portrayed as a white-space. Although there are obviously non-white rural residents, small towns and countrysides are depicted in American society as areas of white rule. The intersection of these two NRA endorsed arguments—that of the white, rural self-sufficient hunter-farmer and of crime being endemic to cities and not small towns—is that crime is somehow a non-white phenomena. By casting itself as a protector of rural gun ownership, the NRA also attempts to assume the role of protector of white hegemony. The National Rifle Association's values are

²⁰⁵ Gregory, “Drawing a Virtual Gun,” 106.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 103.

fundamentally antithetical to those of the urban, predominately black and brown protesters of Ferguson or Baltimore.

The NRA acted consciously in its responses, or lack thereof, to the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore. The federal and local responses culminated in a spectacle of militarized big government—imagery highly sought after by the National Rifle Association. The NRA's failure to exploit this imagery is telling of the deeper cultural values it represents. Tacitly commenting on the Baltimore riots, Dana Loesch's polemic against everything not directly supporting her cause reveals the reason for the NRA's failure to condemn militaristic police overreach against black protesters. The rural, white, gun owning victims of Ruby Ridge and Waco fit the image of the NRA constituent more readily than those who participated in protests against systemic violence in Ferguson and Baltimore.

Chapter 3

Corporate Sponsor of Grassroots Hero?

The National Rifle Association first found influence in the federal government through its partnership with the National Guard and by hiring high ranking government officials, such as Ulysses S. Grant. National Guard regiments were, in essence, state militias, resulting in the young NRA having influence over state governments rather than over Washington. Following the 1977 coup, the new, more radical officials of the NRA exerted more influence on the federal government. By virtue of its non-profit status, it is able to donate large amounts of money without always disclosing the recipients or the precise amount. Likewise, it can receive unlimited unnamed donations. Money is power and the NRA has money. A 2019 Gallup poll highlights the shadowy influence of the association, as it found that sixty-four percent of Americans support more strict regulations on firearms.²⁰⁷ This begs the question: for whom does the National Rifle Association truly work?

Representation and Capital

When the Second Amendment was written, the American geo-political landscape looked vastly different from today. James Madison, author of the Second Amendment, was a die hard

²⁰⁷ “Guns,” *Gallup, figure 2*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>.

believer in a militia of the whole instead of a militia consisting of a select few.²⁰⁸ In effect, Madison endorsed the collective rights theory (which was the legal precedent until *D.C. v. Heller* in 2008), not the individual rights theory of the NRA.²⁰⁹ This belief may have originated from the American Revolution when an amalgam of small militias defeated the larger British Army. The logic behind the collective rights theory was that a standing militia of everyday citizens armed with hunting rifles and shotguns (i.e. “well armed”) would grossly outnumber a standing federal army. If the government overstepped its authority, this citizen militia could then defend its liberties. Today, however, this argument does not stand up to scrutiny. The government will always have more weapons equipped with better technology. The military-industrial complex and a strengthening of federal powers can be thanked for this.

Superficially, the NRA seems to mirror Madison’s argument. If one were to listen to the NRA diatribe against “liberal elites” and their contempt for an armed populace, they would come to the conclusion that the wealthy fear an armed populace. If one believes this narrative, the Clintons and liberal leaning benefactors such as George Soros are natural enemies of gun owners. This claim, however, is done propagandistically. It comes as no surprise that some of the apostles of “small-government” are distastefully wealthy political influencers, such as the Koch brothers (Charles Koch’s approximate net worth is 43.4 billion dollars),²¹⁰ and even NRA

²⁰⁸ Dorf, “What Does the Second Amendment Mean Today,” 329.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 314.

²¹⁰ “Charles Koch,” Forbes.

executive Wayne LaPierre, whose net worth approximately is ten million dollars.²¹¹ By prescribing a smaller government as the remedy for the danger of gun control, conservative elites disguise their true intentions: limiting the powers the government has to enact corporate restrictions and raise tax rates. The Koch brothers, for example, would benefit disproportionately from a decrease in environmental regulations, as their wealth is tied to coal and petroleum products. By arguing against regulations on firearms and stoking fears of “jack-booted thugs” who plan to confiscate guns, self-interested elites surreptitiously attempt to accumulate more personal wealth by limiting the amount of oversight the government has on them. In fact, the connections between corporate interests and the NRA abound.

For instance, following the 2019 shootings in Dayton and El Paso, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos blocked paid ads for the anti-gun-death book, *The End of Killing*.²¹² Bezos, who holds the title for richest human alive at 114 billion dollars, and Amazon spuriously argued that because the book’s cover displayed a gun, it would be inappropriate to continue advertising. Ironically, gun accessories and non-lethal firearms—made in the image of lethal firearms—continued to find Amazon as a welcoming sales platform. Amazon is also one of the main outlets through which NRA TV is streamed.²¹³ The post-1977 NRA is animated by culture; it represents the paranoid anxieties of its rural white male base. When these concerns intersect with the economic

²¹¹ Katie Warren, “NRA head Wayne LaPierre made \$1.4 million in 2017. Here's what we know, and don't know, about the finances of America's most public gun rights advocate, who can reportedly change Trump's mind on gun policy with a single phone call,” *Business Insider*, August 21, 2019.

²¹² Rick Smith, “Amazon’s Answer to Gun Violence: Ban Ads for Books About Ending Gun Violence,” *Observer*, September 18, 2019.

²¹³ Steven Zeitchik, “Activists Call for Tech Companies to Drop NRA’s Digital TV Channel,” *Washington Post*, February 23, 2018.

interests of gun manufacturers, the NRA eagerly forms a strong alliance. The rifle organization's relationship with Amazon embodies this phenomena.

Through this perspective, big government, which, of course, could implement gun legislation, is not to be trusted.²¹⁴ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz highlights this misleading argument by emphasizing that the gun rights argument is a smokescreen for the broader concern of limiting the government's power to enact economic regulations. She writes, "if you think guns, rather than concentrated wealth, equals political power, then you'd resent government power far more than you'd resent billionaires' power or corporations' hyper-concentrated wealth/power, because government will always have more and bigger guns."²¹⁵ The belief that firearms are the only way to stop encroaching federal regulations is only strengthened by movements such as those led by the Bundys. Apropos influencing gun legislation, the "big government" narrative does not only allow wealthy elites to disguise their true intentions to muster numbers to their libertarian cause, it also allows for the *Kulturkampf Blitzkrieg* discussed by Kahan.

Still, the National Rifle Association offers a significant amount of benefits to its members. For seventy dollars a year, members can receive discounts on health, life, auto, and firearm insurance. NRA members can also receive special deals from a large variety of organizations and companies. For example, partnerships with Lifelock and the First National Bank of Omaha allow for discounts on identity theft protection and a forty-five day interest free loan, respectively. Another major discount granted upon NRA membership is found in hotels and companies reliant on travel and tourism. Tripbeat, for example, offers a twenty-five percent

²¹⁴ Gregory, "Drawing a Virtual Gun."

²¹⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded*, 231.

discount on travel worldwide. Also noteworthy are car rental companies such as Hertz, Avis, Budget, Enterprise, Alamo, and National, which all offer massive discounts. The NRA boasts that “members save up to 65 percent on lodging worldwide,” which seems to just be the tip of the iceberg.

NRA membership provides discounts on most facets of life outside of gun ownership as well as within. For an additional seventy dollars (on top of the seventy dollar membership fee), members can sign up for the NRA Wine Club—in which recipients get two bottles of choice wine per month—and also access to all NRA magazines. The depth and extent of these economic perks indicate two things: the extensive range of major corporations with significant ties to the NRA, and the effectiveness of the tripartite coalition of corporate elites, average middle-class American gun owners, and the more radical members of the NRA.

NRA membership is self-perpetuating, as the fear stoked by its rhetoric leads to a higher demand for guns and gun rights. The NRA accomplishes this by casting itself as the true protector of American citizens. The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICBCS) tends to see a spike in use following mass shootings, indicating an increase in gun sales.²¹⁶ One of the reasons for this increase is the fear that gun sales will be restricted after gun mass-killings, prompting a surge in gun purchases.²¹⁷ Interestingly, use of the NICBCS experienced a bump in use in 2008, following the election of Barack Obama, indicating a sale of

²¹⁶ The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICBCS) is a system created by the FBI to conduct background checks before gun sales. Since there is no national registry of firearms, the NICBCS provides the closest approximation of gun sales. Unfortunately, it is not a completely accurate indicator of gun sales, as prospective gun buyers may fail their background check and be denied purchase, or they may change their mind and not follow through with the purchase.

²¹⁷ Elliot Chau, “The Effects of Mass Shootings on Gun Sales,” College of the Holy Cross, Department of Economics Faculty Research Series, Paper no. 1804, 3.

1.1 million guns in that month alone.²¹⁸ This is presumably a byproduct of the NRA claim that Obama was a tyrannous president who sought to confiscate firearms. Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in January of 2013, a predicted two million guns were sold.²¹⁹ Tapping into the surge in gun sales resulting from the Sandy Hook massacre, the NRA released an app called Shooting Range, which was targeted towards children age 4 and up.²²⁰

By advocating for an increase in firearms after mass shootings, the National Rifle Association casts itself as truly having the interests of the common gun owner in mind. This sentiment is captured by LaPierre's indignant speech following the Sandy Hook shooting, where he derided "another gun ban" and argued:

As parents, we do everything we can to keep our children safe. It is now time for us to assume responsibility for their safety at school. The only way to stop a monster from killing our kids is to be personally involved and invested in a plan of absolute protection. The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. Would you rather have your 911 call bring a good guy with a gun from a mile away ... or a minute away?²²¹

Despite the fact that the shooter (Adam Lanza) and his family were white suburban gun owners, LaPierre indirectly blamed President Obama for this shooting, claiming that violent crime rates have risen for the first time in nineteen years and that federal gun prosecution rates have decreased by forty percent. The overlooking of essential facts by LaPierre and the willingness of

²¹⁸ Gregory Aisch and Josh Keller, "What Happens After Calls for New Gun Restrictions? Sales Go Up," *New York Times*, June 13, 2016.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Bobby Cervantes, "NRA Releases Game for Ages 4+," *Politico*, January 14, 2013.

²²¹ Wayne LaPierre, December 20, 2016.

his supporters to accept this illogical reasoning is a measure of the effectiveness of the NRA's strategy of tapping into the cultural anxieties of its constituency.

Although the general call for increased firearm restrictions rose significantly following this massacre, the NRA's advocacy for the roughly eight percent of polled Americans who wanted more lax legislation paid off;²²² in the face of intense scrutiny, the organization appeared as David fending off the "gun ban lobby" Goliath. Platforms provided by eager news networks and extensive funding from the NRA causes the public to hear more from pro-gun advocates than from the more representative pro-gun-legislation advocates.²²³

The radical unilateralism of the contemporary organization could be more readily explained by its mutually beneficial relationship with gun manufacturers than by its interest in the relatively minuscule percentage of gun rights extremists, however. The Violence Policy Center, a non-profit which advocates for increased firearm legislation, estimates that the firearms industry donated 38.9 million dollars to the NRA between 2005 and 2011.²²⁴ Likewise, the NRA hosts an award ceremony for inductees into *the Golden Ring of Freedom* (an ostentatious ceremony where benefactors receive a golden coat and ring) during their annual meetings. Inductees are typically CEO's of gun manufacturing companies who have donated a million dollars or more to the NRA.²²⁵ MidWay USA, a gun and gun accessory retailer, has allowed customers to round up their bill to the nearest dollar, the difference of which is then be donated

²²² "Guns," *Gallup*.

²²³ R.J. Maratea, *The Politics of the Internet: Political Claims-making in Cyberspace and its Effect on Modern Political Activism* (Lexington books, 2013), 85-98.

²²⁴ Jordan Weissman, "Whom does the NRA really speak for?" *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2012.

²²⁵ "NRA Annual Meetings," Violence Policy Center, <https://vpc.org/investigating-the-gun-lobby/nra-annual-meetings/>.

to the NRA. Since 1992, MidWay has collected well over nine million dollars for the National Rifle Association.²²⁶

The NRA is dependent on corporate donations. It enjoys extensive tax break benefits by virtue of its non-profit status. Since it is legally classified along with other eleemosynary [501(c)3] organizations, the NRA neither has to disclose the amount of its donations nor to/ from whom the donations are directed. Between 2015 and 2016, for example, revenue rose from 343 million to 375 million dollars. This occurred while dues paid by NRA members dropped by more than two million dollars. Its growth that year can be attributed in large part to a thirty-one million dollar increase in non-member donations.²²⁷ Obviously, by *donating* (these donations are functionally *quid pro quo* business transactions) to the NRA—an organization that chose its hill to die on in 1977—gun manufacturers ensure a steady, unrestricted market for their products.

The strange pairing of mass shootings and gun sales is accompanied by an onslaught of coverage in most media outlets. The horror of the death of twenty children in Sandy Hook (which saw twenty-six overall deaths) hardened the ideological divide between gun advocates and those who wished for more restrictions. However, gun legislation rarely, if ever, emerges from such mass shootings. This is accomplished by the intense lobbying efforts of the NRA-ILA.

²²⁶ Weissman, “*Whom Does the NRA Really Speak for?*”

²²⁷ Robert Maguire, “Audit Shows NRA Spending Surged \$100 Million Amidst pro-Trump Push in 2016,” Open Secrets, November 15, 2017.

Government Influence

The National Rifle Association is one of the most successful special interest groups in the United States; no other right is interpreted so absolutely or is defended so vehemently as the Second Amendment. NRA lobbying efforts have tangible and disproportional effects on policy. Likewise, campaign funding provided by the organization frequently swings elections. By donating to the right people, the NRA has managed to place sympathetics and collaborators into high ranking federal positions, including the U.S. Interior Department (DOI), the National Parks Foundation, and the International Wildlife Conservation Council (IWCC). Its effects on elections reach as far as Congress, the Senate, and even the White House.

After six years of deliberation, President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) into law in 1994. At thirty billion dollars, it was and is the largest crime control bill in American history.²²⁸ It was originally written by Senator Joe Biden and was signed into law in the wake of the Waco siege and other high profile violent crimes. In terms of addressing violent gun crime, it is most noteworthy for its federal ban on assault weapons. This proviso banned ammunition clips of over ten bullets, nineteen specific semi-automatic weapons, and a handful firearm accessories. The ban expired quietly on September 13, 2004, and was not renewed by the Republican controlled senate. Although the VCCLEA contained problematic provisions such as the federal three-strikes policy (which recommended that any crime, no matter how minor, committed by someone with two prior convictions for

²²⁸ Jessica Lussenhop, "Clinton Crime Bill: Why is it so Controversial," *BBC*, April 18, 2016.

violent crimes will carry with it a life sentence),²²⁹ funding cuts to prevent low-income inmates from attending higher education during their incarceration, and other policies which contributed to the mass (and racialized) incarceration problem America has today, the bill enjoyed bipartisan support at that time. It did not, however, find common cause with the National Rifle Association.

Coinciding with the proposal of the bill was an election cycle. Scared of the loss in revenue that its corporate partners would experience from the assault weapon ban, the NRA invested seventy million dollars into various Congressional and Senate races during 1994. Seven million dollars was allotted towards targeting Democrats alone. This played no small part in the Democrats' loss of twenty congressional seats.²³⁰ Newt Gingrich, Republican representative from Georgia and incoming Speaker of the House (1995-1999) promised the NRA, "As long as I am the speaker of this House, no gun control legislation is going to move."²³¹ Even President Clinton acknowledged that "the NRA is the reason the Republicans control the House."²³²

The NRA's meddling in this election cycle is underscored by their campaign against Oklahoma Democratic Congressman Dave Mccurdy. In 1993, Mccurdy fell out of favor with the NRA over his vote for the Brady Bill which, enacted in November of 1993, imposed a five day waiting period before an unlicensed buyer can physically receive their handgun.²³³ This bill is named after James Brady, former press secretary for Reagan, who was shot in the head by John

²²⁹ "Three Strikes Basics," Stanford Law School, Three Strikes Project.

²³⁰ Robert Dreyfuss, "Political Snipers: How the NRA Exploited Loopholes and Waged a Stealth Campaign against the Democrats," in *Guns in America: A Historical Reader*, ed. Jan E. Dizard, Robert Muth and Stephen P. Andrews (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 233.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ "Brady Bill," Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, last reviewed July 2, 2019.

Hinckley Jr. during an attempt on Reagan's life.²³⁴ A year later, he found his congressional seat challenged by Republican Jim Inhofe. The NRA invested 150,000 dollars in advertisements aligned with Inhofe (illegal under Federal Election Commission guidelines) and an additional 9,900 dollars directly into Inhofe's campaign.²³⁵ Mccurdy's stance on gun legislation did not take center stage in these attack ads, though. Instead, the NRA parroted Inhofe's strategy of portraying Mccurdy as a "Clinton clone." The NRA understood that overturning the assault weapon ban was fairly unpopular and thus focused on Mccurdy's policies and Democratic ideology—an activist government instead of firearm freedoms. A vote for Mccurdy was not a vote against guns; it was a vote against Republican values.

Democrat Congressman Mike Synar, also of Oklahoma, experienced similar NRA wrath in 1994. Two years previously, the NRA publicly ran a campaign against Synar for his stance on guns. The NRA was hoisted with its own petard, however, as Synar's approach to gun legislation found overwhelming support in his district. The NRA would have another chance to depose of Synar two years later. In 1994, it mounted a fifth column funding strategy by investing in Synar's Democratic primary challenger, Virgil Cooper. Cooper was both a Democrat and NRA member, and was ultimately the recipient of stealthy NRA donations. The NRA once again coordinated with its candidate, echoing the talking points of his campaign instead of criticizing Synar's stance on guns. Its sponsored advertisements did not explicitly reveal that they were paid for by the NRA. Since it staged a shadowy campaign against Synar, no concurrent FEC report revealed the connection between Virgil Cooper and the National Rifle Association. The NRA's campaign

²³⁴ "Brady Bill Signed into Law," History, last updated November 25, 2019.

²³⁵ Dreyfuss, "*Political Snipers*," 237.

contributions to Tom Coburn, the Republican who would challenge the winner of the primary, were more of a red herring than anything else. This deception is evidenced in a *New York Times* article following Cooper's victory in the 1994 primary, where one reporter notes, "[i]t's the funniest thing you've ever seen in your life. The cattle associations, the NRA, the oil companies, they'd all stacked this money as high as an elephant's eye for Coburn to beat Synar. But Coburn doesn't know how to run against this old fellow [Cooper] who speaks in homilies and is just as country and Okie as you could possibly get."²³⁶ By the time the primary was called and Cooper was crowned the victor, the NRA had two horses in a two horse race.

The National Rifle Association progressively spends more money on election campaigns. In the 2016 election cycle alone, it dumped 419 million dollars into electing sympathetic candidates. The 2012 and 2008 election cycles, for comparison, saw respective 261 million and 204 million dollar investments by the NRA. Strikingly, 30.3 million dollars was invested towards electing Donald Trump alone in 2016.²³⁷ This is more than it spent in support of Mitt Romney and John McCain combined. It follows that on April 28, 2017, Donald Trump proclaimed to a NRA gathering, "the eight year assault on your Second Amendment freedoms has come to a crashing end."²³⁸ He continued, telling the lobbying group that it now "ha[s] a true friend and champion in the White House."

²³⁶ Sam Howe Verhovek, "The 1994 Campaign: Oklahoma; Ultimate Outsider Seeking a Seat," *New York Times*, November 3, 1994.

²³⁷ Maguire, "Audit Shows NRA Spending Surged \$100 Million Amidst pro-Trump Push in 2016," Open Secrets.

²³⁸ Ali Vitali, "Trump to NRA: 'Eight-Year Assault' on Gun Rights Is Over," *NBC News*, April 28, 2017.

The National Rifle Association's investment into Trump's election campaign would be paid back in full. Trump quickly moved to nullify a bill approved by Obama that made background checks for people with particular mental illnesses more thorough.²³⁹ Obama signed this bill into law following the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012. Although the NRA is quick to scapegoat the mentally ill for mass shootings, they applauded Trump's move. This, if nothing else, highlights how the National Rifle Association's values support gun sales over its members' interests and safety.

Trump would also go on to appoint NRA familiars to run government agencies. In 2017, Benjamin Cassidy—lobbyist for the rifle group—found himself appointed as Senior Deputy Director for Intergovernmental and External Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior.²⁴⁰ Here, Cassidy held sway in the department, which manages hundreds of millions of acres of federal land—a move that certainly bodes well for future Bundys. He served as a liaison between NRA executives and David Bernhardt, the interior secretary. Cassidy also shaped government policy for hunting big game internationally to match the NRA's wishes. This was exposed in emails between Cassidy and Erica Rhoad, the director of hunting policy at the NRA. After Rhoad recommended two candidates (including herself) to the International Wildlife Conservation Council (IWCC), Cassidy responded positively.²⁴¹

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ "Benjamin Cassidy," Department of Influence, <https://departmentofinfluence.org/person/benjamin-cassidy/>.

²⁴¹ Jimmy Tobias, "Revealed: Top Official did Special Favors on Guns for NRA at Interior Department," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2020.

From his position of power, Cassidy was also able to collaborate with his former NRA colleagues on the decriminalization of sport shooting in the Sonora Desert. DOI planned to restrict sport shooting, as it was destroying artifacts and damaging rare wildlife such as cacti. Cassidy coordinated with the director of the NRA's conservation, wildlife and natural resources program, Susan Recce, consistently until a decision was made. Ultimately, the plan DOI announced would leave about ninety percent of the area in question up to sport shooting, aligning almost exactly with the NRA's proposal. The influence Benjamin Cassidy was able to exert in the federal bureaucracy on behalf of the National Rifle Association ultimately provided grounds for an ongoing investigation into the preference for and collaboration with the NRA that he displayed. After stepping down in 2019, Cassidy moved laterally into the position of director of government affairs at Safari Club International, an organization that promotes trophy hunting at home and abroad.

Another federal interloper who emerged from the National Rifle Association is Susan LaPierre, wife of Wayne LaPierre. With apparently no shortage of nepotistic hiring policies, Mrs. LaPierre was one of the largest individual contributors to the Trump campaign.²⁴² She was appointed by the head of DOI and Trump confidant, Ryan Zinke (who, like Cassidy, has since resigned because of an investigation into unethical backdoor dealings), to be a board member in the National Parks Foundation in May of 2017.

The Obama administration had introduced a bill to curb the hunting of wolves and other predators in national parks in October, 2015. Prior to this, parks were commissioning the hunting

²⁴² Benjamin Kentish, "Donald Trump Appoints Senior NRA Official to US National Park Foundation Board," *Independent*, September 4, 2017.

of predators because they thinned elk and deer herds—popular quarry of trophy hunters. Under LaPierre’s auspices, however, the National Parks Foundation has recommended removing these limitations. Michael Reynolds, director of the National Park Services, objected to LaPierre and Trump’s recommendations about re-allowing the indiscriminate hunting of predators (including mother bears and their cubs), but was promptly overruled.²⁴³

America currently exists in a post-factual state where money trumps reason. The intense lobbying efforts and non-negotiable stance of the modern National Rifle Association certainly played a part in this, although the organization is a symptom of a more invasive malady, not the illness itself. On March 31 of 2020, as non-essential stores and locations were closing their doors due to the corona virus outbreak, Donald Trump declared that gun stores and shooting ranges were essential businesses. This decision came after intensive lobbying by the National Rifle Association.²⁴⁴ Certainly, a decent percentage of the American populace would agree with Trump’s assertion that gun stores are essential businesses. The same paranoia that has informed the fear of “big government” and conspiring “liberal elites,” combined with the individualism learned from frontier mythologizing, understandably leads some to believe that their very survival is reliant on guns. Here again, the link between cultural ideas and big business in a mutually reinforcing relationship is clear. The cultural ideals of the NRA feed the gun industry, which in turn feeds the NRA’s policy agenda.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Zusha Elinson, “Gun Stores Ruled Essential Businesses During Coronavirus Shutdowns: Trump Administration adds Guns to List of Industries like Food and Energy after Lobbying by Firearms Industry,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2020.

However, money—spent on lobbying, advertisements, and funding *scientific* studies—explain Trump’s decision to deem firing ranges and gun stores essential businesses. For comparison, construction sites, labor unions, and restaurants have all either shuttered their windows or have severely revamped how they go about business.²⁴⁵ The late stage capitalistic economy of America dictates that, if an organization can spend 30.3 million dollars to get a president elected, then surely that organization must be essential.

The insistence that shooting ranges are essential during a pandemic certainly would not surprise former NRA lobbyist Richard Feldman. Feldman left the National Rifle Association after coming to the realization that its interests are fundamentally impractical. The organization for which he formerly lobbied turned against him after he cooperated with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, which was considered “the heresy of compromise, a sin for which [he] would be eternally damned.”²⁴⁶ He writes:

The fact that I had valid, practical reasons for all of these actions, which would have strengthened the rights of law-abiding gun owners while dampening the level of acrimony in the great American debate over firearms, just increased my culpability in the eyes of the NRA leaders. They weren't interested in actually solving problems, only in fueling perpetual crisis and controversy. That was how they made their money.²⁴⁷

Money is more enticing to the NRA than moral approval. To deny that it is essential for someone to be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a shooting range during an epidemic is to deny their

²⁴⁵ Irene Jiang, “Here’s the Difference Between an ‘Essential’ Business and a ‘Nonessential’ Business as more than 30 States have Imposed Restrictions,” *Business Insider*, March 31, 2020.

²⁴⁶ Richard Feldman, *Ricochet: Confessions of Gun Lobbyist* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 2.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

American heritage. The frontiersmen who conquered nature (granted, *they* were aided by viruses such as measles and smallpox) instill in subscribers the idea that nature exists to be dominated. At the cultural level, this insistence by the NRA on uninterrupted gun access during the present public health crisis probably taps into racial anxieties about possible looting and other forms of social disorder in urban centers with low-income populations of color lacking access to social and material resources (restricted food supplies, healthcare, proper housing) during the pandemic. It is ironic that, in fact, the opposite is true. Since the present shutdown, it has been the typical NRA supporters—white, conspiratorial, and occasionally flaunting weapons during public protests against the current health lockdown—who are the disorderly ones, flouting official protocols about public behavior. Thinking back to the situation in Sacramento in 1967, these dissidents could be called the *White Panthers*. By their actions, once again the NRA rank and file reveal their claim to being the *true* Americans, the only ones who rightly honor the liberties guaranteed (in their opinions) by the Constitution. The fact that these imagined liberties support the gun industry, which is well represented in high places, explains why gun stores—and not hotels or barbershops, for instance—are “essential.” Gun stores are essential businesses because they are essential to American mythology. These beliefs, coupled with the deep pockets of the NRA and gun manufacturers, has made this distinctly American organization seem not particularly outrageous.

Conclusion

The National Rifle Association established in 1871 differs significantly from its modern incarnation. Since the deposal of its leadership in Cincinnati in 1977, the NRA has adopted a hardline stance that is fomented by frontier mythology, demographic anxieties, and economic opportunity. The NRA's cultural and political ascendance is a product of American national expansion and nationalistic, individualistic ideology. As a gun rights movement, the organization learned the ropes from the Black Panther Party. NRA affiliates still mimic the civil rights group—quite literally—to this day. As recently as May 1, 2020, armed protestors, inspired and informed by NRA anti-government rhetoric, occupied the Michigan statehouse to protest the statewide shutdown that intended to slow the spread of Coronavirus.²⁴⁸ These events come in the wake of NRA funded president Donald Trump's tweet, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"²⁴⁹ Unlike Bobby Seale and the Black Panthers of 1967, however, the armed demonstrators in the Michigan State Senate gallery were not arrested. When Ronald Reagan argued that "Americans don't go around carrying guns with the idea of using them to influence other Americans,"²⁵⁰ he certainly could not have predicted that the NRA's future "true friend and champion in the White House"²⁵¹ would actively encourage that exact same behavior.

The National Rifle Association's platform is predicated on particular cultural ideals. To be precise, the rifle organization represents the interests of rural, predominantly white men. Since its incipience, the National Rifle Association latched on to societal trends and opportunities to advance its agenda. This is evidenced by its endorsement of scientism in the Progressive Era,

²⁴⁸ "Coronavirus: Armed Protestors enter Michigan Statehouse," *BBC News*, May 1, 2020.

²⁴⁹ Donald Trump, Twitter, April 17, 2020.

²⁵⁰ Ronald Reagan, July 28, 1967.

²⁵¹ Vitali, "Trump to NRA: 'Eight-Year Assault' on Gun Rights Is Over,"

frontier romanticization in the 1960's, its conflation of conservative values with the Second Amendment, and its current obstinate approach to firearm legislation. The National Rifle Association made the long trek from relying on National Guard regiments for supplies to being a Washington powerhouse. In so doing, it built a coalition of average middle-class gun owners, libertarian extremists, and gun manufacturers. It has proven that deeply held cultural beliefs can hold more sway than facts. The NRA's "clenched fist of truth" has battered American democratic processes and has left in its wake an army of armed citizens.

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