

Why lawmakers want more guns after yet another mass shooting

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After another mass shooting, this time targeting Republican lawmakers, pro-gun politicians argue for more firearms instead of less. [Sierra Smucker](#) explains the thought process behind this argument, its historical foundations and its modern-day implications for policy making around guns in the United States.



Another [mass shooting](#) struck the United States on Wednesday, June 14th. This time Republican lawmakers were the target. Republicans gathered for a morning workout before the annual congressional baseball game when a man walked onto the pitch and sprayed the men with bullets. But instead of seizing on this moment to call for restrictions on gun access in the United States, lawmakers, including some present at the attack, called for Congress to loosen gun regulations.

To citizens of countries with strict gun regulations like the United Kingdom, this response will likely seem paradoxical if not incomprehensible. When countries like Scotland, Canada, and Australia have experienced mass shootings, the immediate response among policymakers was to tighten restrictions on gun ownership. *What explains these American lawmakers response to gun violence?* To understand it, we need to understand the roots of America's unique gun culture.

Historical roots of America's affection for firearms

Perhaps surprisingly, the first organization to press for mass gun ownership in the United States was the [American government](#). Before the National Rifle Association or even the Second Amendment, some [colonial governments required](#) all white men to be armed for fear of Native American attacks. While back in England guns were only owned by the wealthy elite, in the United States, gun ownership became a duty for all men, rich or poor.

Indeed, the arming of colonial militias was an important tactic during the Revolutionary War where a "[rag tag volunteer army](#)" defeated a global superpower. However, these militias were not exceptionally effective against a well-trained British Army. Indeed, without the support of the French and the formation of a better-established Continental Army led by George Washington, the Revolution could have ended very differently.

Moreover, after the war, few Americans bought firearms or maintained the firearms they had. Indeed, despite modern retellings of the link between American history and our unique gun culture, firearm ownership was not especially high in the United States during this time and firearms were not engrained in the social fabric like it is today.

Mass gun ownership in the United States

Demand for firearms came later with the growth of American gun manufacturing. For many years following the American Revolution, the US government struggled to encourage domestic gun production, which lawmakers saw as vital to warding off aggressive foes. Prior to the American Revolution, the colonies relied almost entirely on the British government to provide firearms for protection. Unsurprisingly, after 1774 the British Parliament imposed a complete embargo on firearms and supplies to the American colonies.

But the lack of interest in firearms by the American public made potential gun manufacturers uneasy about investing substantial funds in the enterprise. Americans continued to view firearms as a luxury good, expensive to buy and keep in working condition. Even hunting was not highly regarded as a social activity. The sentiment that hunting for

enjoyment was a silly exploit of the British aristocracy lingered in the colonies after the Revolution.

Linking firearms with a unique American identity

The moribund American gun industry needed a demand for firearms – a marketing campaign that would convince citizens that owning firearms during peacetime was not something the British did, but was uniquely American. In the 1830s and through the Civil War, we finally see the emergence of a unique gun culture linking firearms with American values and history. The brutality and all-encompassing nature of the Civil War meant that most men on both sides of battle needed to own and learn how to use firearms. Following the end of the war, the Union Army allowed their soldiers to take their firearms home with them. The increase in ownership and the rise in American production dove tailed into a strong foundation for commercial gun ownership.

It was during this time that gun magazines and manufacturers began extolling the virtues of gun ownership as a uniquely American endeavor imbued with patriotic meaning as well as higher status. Developing the modern arguments of pro-gun Americans that “[our rifles and our liberties are synonymous](#).” Advertisers, encouraged by the US Government, reframed gun owners as American “gentlemen” who defended citizens’ from tyranny.

To construct this (previously absent) link between firearms and American history, these campaigns recast colonial militia as a respected force that single handedly overthrew the tyrannical King George because of their courage and skill with a firearm. Moreover, linking firearm ownership to western expansion codified the now established idea that firearm ownership was pivotal to enabling the independent American – who could not and would not rely on state provided protection – from hostile forces. Together, [these stories framed gun ownership as uniquely American](#). A weapon that represented the people’s power against dictators and (in modern interpretations) elites as well as a signal of independence and self-reliance, two cornerstones of the American identity.

It was during this time that the National Rifle Association (NRA) was born. With [funding](#) from the United States Government, this group set up shooting ranges that now litter the United States and [form the core of the powerful modern gun rights movement](#); a place where citizens invested in the patriotic notions of gun ownership share information, organize political activism, and enjoy one of their favorite sports. Pulling these ideas together, pro-gun Americans embrace a powerful link between patriotic duty (defending themselves and their country) and pleasure (enjoying a social activity) – a powerful combination that is difficult to unravel. Layer on the political savvy of the modern NRA and you have the most powerful lobbying force in the United States.

Explaining the response to mass shootings

It in this context that American lawmakers are advocating for more guns following yet another mass shooting. In keeping with the popular memory of the relationship between firearms, the American Revolution, and westward expansion, these lawmakers believe that to be American means to take personal responsibility for your own safety as well as the country’s and a firearm is the best weapon for the job.

This response is not based in research or a cost benefit analysis – it is emotional and rooted in nationalism and individual identity. Because of this, those in favor of gun regulation – who often rely on data and research to demand change – are met with immense resistance when seeking policy change. Numbers and facts can have little impact when fundamental rights are perceived to be at stake.

Evoking American values of liberty and freedom are powerful arguments in American politics. Only by first understanding how these ideas were originally linked to firearms, can we understand how another devastating mass shooting could result in calls for more guns, not less.

“[Firearms counter opens at Keesler exchange](#)” by U.S. Air Force, Kemberly Groue

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Sierra Smucker – *Duke University*

Sierra Smucker is a PhD student at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and a former Visiting Research Student the LSE US Centre. Her research, work, and teaching explore the ways in which less-advantaged groups gain access to political power and influence in important policy debates. Focusing on the role of social movements and the political feedback effects of policy making, Smucker looks at the politics of the policy process and how the state can influence who has access to power. She has particular expertise in the politics of gun reform in the United States and policy addressing violence against women.



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