



‘A Price We Pay’: What the NRA and America’s Gun Debate are Really About

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I have been asked by colleagues in Europe, once again but more insistently, about guns in America. After the latest, horrific school shooting, this time in Florida, they’ve sent me queries. Why are there are so many assault-type firearms in the U.S.? Why do so few limits exist on who can own them and where they can be carried? These colleagues do not ask why such shootings occur. As a German friend noted, “All our societies have angry and disturbed people. America is the one place where they can buy guns as easily as groceries, in volume, at a neighborhood store.” Much curiosity is aimed at the National Rifle Association (NRA), which fights to the death against any controls on gun ownership. How can such an organization exist?

The situation is sufficiently fraught for me to feel anxious about providing answers in print. But they are needed and not mysterious. Moreover, they are not about fetishism, frontier traditions, or protection. They are about ideas and a vision of society that relates to the larger reactionary crisis in liberal democracy we are now living through. This isn’t often noted in discussions, so let me clarify.

During a 2015 speech after a college shooting where 10 students were killed, President Obama posed the question that was on many minds: “Does anybody really believe that more guns will make the country safer?” The NRA, after all, had come forward to deliver precisely this message—if students and faculty had weapons, the shooter would have been quickly stopped. Obama’s question, despite its tone, was rhetorical.

For decades, NRA spokespeople have been appeared on cue and make defending statements after each new horror. The effort to choke any momentum for gun limits has been aggressive, scripted, unapologetic, and effective. This was true even after the appalling murder of 20 young children at a primary school in Newtown, Connecticut. The NRA knows its position makes it appear heartless and cold-blooded. But it sees this as an unavoidable result. Any new gun law, after all, no matter how minor, no matter how locally applied, translates as an attack on the organization’s core mission. Its representatives must, therefore, seize control of the discourse, or at the very least impose a competing language that can divert attention and rephrase the issue in mainstream media.

Consider its routine, public claims. Repeated steadily, relentlessly since the early 1990s, not only by NRA reps but by local and national politicians beholden to the voting power of the organization’s membership, they are now well-known to all Americans. Even media outlets as elevated as the New York Times have felt the necessity to state that the NRA supports “law-

abiding citizens” and “individual rights... for hunting, self-defense, sport.” Wayne LaPierre, the most oft-cited spokesperson for the organization, has been both vituperative and canny in his language, employing aphoristic, bullet-like statements, easy to remember, intended for widespread echoing by the media, to wit: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” “Laws can’t control the lawless.” “It’s not paranoia to buy a gun; it’s survival; it’s responsible behavior, and it’s time we encourage law-abiding Americans to do just that.” Fear of criminals is clearly not what motivates the NRA, however. If it were, there would be little reason to go to war over a federal gun registry or background checks; on the contrary.

The NRA’s actions to fully normalize gun ownership and to weaken or defeat any politician working against this goal, have been pursued at the local, state, and national levels. State laws are a particular focus. Between 2004 and 2013, the organization gained at least **230 victories** in such laws. Opponents are wrong when they attribute such success to campaign contributions. It is simply untrue to say that the NRA has Republican “balls in a money clip,” to repeat **Jimmy Kimmel’s colorful phrase**. In fact, it gives little money to politicians. Instead, it addresses voters directly, spending millions of dollars (the amount rises dramatically under Democratic presidents) to **lobby its own members**, which may number 5 million, using mailings, phone calls, website videos, and more. Why give cash to candidates, after all, when you can work the electorate directly?

While its clout in Congress is less than total, the NRA has nonetheless repeatedly proven an ability in elections to seat and unseat members, especially in the House of Representatives. This is enough to make most Republicans quake in a light breeze. In truth, the NRA’s actual influence reaches well beyond its own membership, to gun-owning conservative voters everywhere. This is because it has installed the question, “How do you stand on the Second Amendment?”, as one of the primary determinants (abortion, of course, being another) of whether a candidate is a “true conservative” or just a RHINO (Republican In Name Only). Over the past three decades, with the rise of more extreme conservatism in the U.S. and the loss of moderate Republican voices in Congress, the NRA’s power has grown.

The impacts have been nothing short of breathtaking—or, if you happen to have kids in school or college, terrifying. Only **a few numbers** are needed to describe how far gun fever has gone. Today, with about 4.4% of the world’s people, the U.S. has half the guns owned by private citizens. Today, there are over 64,000 stores where guns can be bought in America, compared to 11,000 Starbucks. Today, no fewer than 36 states (72% of the country), many of which restrict the sale of fireworks and require a license to drive a car, hunt rabbits, or catch a fish, do no such thing when it comes to buying an AR-15 assault rifle (or a dozen of them), plus enough ammo to invade a small country. From 1994 to 2004 when an assault weapons ban was in effect, massacre shootings (>6 deaths) claimed 47% fewer lives than in the previous decade. But when the ban was allowed to expire in 2004, such deaths over the next ten years **increased by 340%**. The logic of “more guns, fewer laws” thus seems to defy sanity. What, finally, is driving the NRA agenda?

Some hint can be found in the claim that owning guns is a “right enshrined in the Constitution.” Despite all the routine invocations in front of the cameras, the real emphasis here isn’t on the Constitution. Equating guns with rights, therefore with democratic individualism and legitimacy, counts as clever and effective. But it doesn’t stop there. “We are the largest civil rights organization in the world,” LaPierre says. And he means it.

In his most recent **remarks** at the Conservative Political Action Conference, delivered just after the Florida school shooting, he is more direct and revealing. This is likely due to a new and more dangerous opponent—students themselves, who have marched and argued and appeared on media and at the White House demanding change. To counter this, LaPierre not only ranted about arming teachers in every school, he invoked the greatest threat in the lexicon of conservative evils. He warned his audience: “you should be anxious and you should be frightened.” For if Democrats (whose chances look good for the midterm elections this fall) ever win control of the government again, the country will leap into the arms of “socialism.” In that case, “our American freedoms could be lost and our country will be changed forever.”

As a core part of the extreme right, the NRA holds fast to the idea of a direct link between guns and freedom. There exists, and always will exist, a requirement to arm the citizenry against the government, for only a weaponized public can keep federal power in check. By this calculus, a gun becomes far more than a symbol; it is the physical embodiment of individual liberty. Not owning one leaves you either a helpless victim of any tyrant or minion to the same. The murdered children in Newtown, like those in Florida, thereby become sacrifices to freedom, unintended martyrs to an ideological battle that must be kept burning like an eternal flame. “Your dead kids don’t trump my constitutional rights” were **the words** aimed at Newtown parents by Republican poster-boy, Sam Wurzelbacher (“Joe the Plumber”). Their deaths must not be “exploited by gun-grab extremists... The future of our very liberty lies in the balance...”

Moderates and liberals I’ve talked with often dismiss such talk. They hear it as either “mere rhetoric” or voices from the lunatic fringe. They find it hard to believe or accept that millions of people, no matter their conservative outlook, actually treat such ideas seriously. Far more likely, they feel, is the impact of “dark money”, funds given by plutocrats and corporations to the gun lobby and right-wing organizations to buy members of Congress. Seeing guns as freedom seems too “loony”—the word of dismissal glued to far-right conservatives like Barry Goldwater in the 1950s and 60s, whose thinking nonetheless found its time a few decades later. The error of not taking these ideas seriously enough has proved perilous. Naïve incredulity has surely aided the NRA’s success.

In truth, the fundamental concept of a need to protect freedom from government power, physically if need be, has a long history in the US. It appears on a spectrum that begins, as historian **Gary Wills puts it**, with the concept of skepticism toward government, as a “necessary evil,” and ends with Thoreau’s dictum “That government is best which governs not at all.” The NRA is essentially a version of Thoreau, armed and dangerous, standing its ground.

Aggressive fear toward government, in particular, harks back to Thomas Jefferson and the anti-Federalists of the 1780s and 90s. These men saw in government a constant trend toward tyranny: “the natural progress is for liberty to yield, and government to gain ground,” in I Jefferson’s **words**. It is an idea with roots in the Enlightenment struggles against aggressive monarchy and that Jefferson, based partly on his deep learning in classical Greek and Roman writings plus those of “moderns” like Locke and Montesquieu, strongly promoted until he himself became president in 1800. **Jefferson battled John Adams** in 1800 for the presidency, in one of the ugliest elections in U.S. history. Both sides felt the survival of the nation hung in the balance, justifying libelous attacks, personal insults, and newspaper invective of an unrestrained order. Jefferson indeed saw the Federalists as perilous to liberty. Yet once in office, he found his

own principles of weak federalism and a national defense based on local militias impossible. By purchasing the vast Louisiana territory without Congressional support, he overstepped limits on presidential power. He quickly saw, too, that militias were no match for British or French armies in the Napoleonic era, and in 1802 founded West Point to train a professional officer corps.

To the NRA, however, this metamorphosis from small government libertarian to president with expanded powers counts as irrelevant. It is the younger man that matters, he who supplies a good many of the organization's quotations from the founders to prove kinship. The NRA's Institute for Legislative Action even has a webpage devoted to such quotes. It should not shock us that they make no reference to Jefferson's deep learning as a model for today's gun owner, nor his understanding of foreign nations, appreciation for science, or other cosmopolitan elements. Pithy phrases amputated from context make few such demands. Even George Mason, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton **have found utility** as (unpaid) loyalists of the NRA cause. Of course, that such men would join hands to argue that every citizen walking America's streets needs to be armed, preferably with an AR-15, is so far removed from the case as to make one delirious.

In truth, a recurrent focus for colonial thinkers of the Revolutionary era, but for the anti-Federalists above all, was the subject of power, understood to be the dominion of some over others. Bernard Bailyn, in his classic work *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, devotes some space to discussing the deep anxieties these thinkers invested in this concept of power. He writes:

The image most commonly used was that of the act of trespassing. Power...has "an encroaching nature"; "...if at first it meets with no control [it] creeps by degrees and quick subdues the whole"...Sometimes it is motion, desire, and appetite all at once, being "restless, aspiring, and insatiable." Sometimes it is like "jaws...always opened to devour." It is everywhere in public life, and everywhere it is threatening, pushing, and grasping...What gave transcendent importance to the aggressiveness of power was the fact that its natural prey, its necessary victim, was liberty, or law, or right." (p. 56-7).

Compare this excellent description with a passage from Barry Goldwater's **The Conscience of a Conservative** (1960), a work that has served since the 1960s as a gospel text for American conservatism:

Throughout history, government has proved to be the chief instrument for thwarting man's liberty. Government represents power in the hands of some men to control and regulate the lives of other men. And power, as Lord Acton said, corrupts men. [Government, that is,] can be the instrument for achieving undesirable ends...And note, secondly, that the "can" quickly becomes "will" the moment the holders of government power are left to their own devices. This is because of the corrupting influence of power, the natural tendency of men who possess some power to take unto themselves more power. (p. 9-10)

While the anxiety expressed in these two quotes seems quite similar, there is a major difference. Bailyn observes that for the colonists, power existed "everywhere in public life," while for Goldwater it lives, waits, and threatens from a center—Washington D.C.

Goldwater's brand of conservatism harked back to anti-Federalist sentiments but had its edges narrowed and radicalized by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. No great intellectual himself, Goldwater nonetheless produced (via his speechwriter L. Brent Bozell, Jr.) an articulate, hugely

influential platform for conservatives ever since. Its ideas were shared by many on the far-right during the 1950s and 60s, but with the election of Ronald Reagan (heavily influenced by Goldwater) they truly entered the mainstream. Though never so radical and far more pragmatic than Goldwater, Reagan's anti-government language was legendary. If the Soviet Union defined an "evil empire," he also famously stated that the "**nine most feared words** in the English language are, I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." Indeed, the connection here runs deep. As Reagan's "party of ideas," the GOP adopted far-right fears, also fueled by F.A. Hayek's work, that New Deal-type programs would transform the U.S. into the U.S.S.R.

Again, such notions were not really taken too seriously, as a direct attack on the federal government. And in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, there appeared little reason to believe that conservatives on the whole had come to harbor deep fears about the government they themselves were elected to serve. But by 1994, when Republicans took over the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years, their "Contract with America" made clear that an effort was underway not to shrink government so much as to dismantle it. House majority leader, Dick Armey, an author of the "Contract," spoke in words that Goldwater might have claimed as his own: "Between our New Deals and New Frontiers and Great Societies you will find...the same sort of person who gave the world its Five Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward." There was no place in a free society for any government program like social security, worker safety, or environmental protection. All set a country on the greased downward slide into tyranny.

The NRA has its place in this history of growing extremism. Founded in 1871, it began life as a marksman's organization, and for many years taught gun safety and supported rifle clubs nationwide. For the entire first hundred years of its existence, the NRA stood against the bearing of weapons in public and supported the National Firearms Act of 1934, the first law to restrict certain types of weapons (machine guns, sawed-off shotguns, silencers) and require their registration. But in 1977, an insurrection took place. Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, the leadership argued over the future direction of the organization. This intensified after 1968, when a second, more restrictive Gun Control Act passed Congress soon after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy that same year.

Harlan Carter, a past president of the NRA, representing the more extreme, no compromise side of the debate, led a takeover of the leadership, arguing that new gun laws, passed in the wake of 1960s assassinations, were only the beginning of a government program to confiscate all guns. Carter worked for many years as a head official in U.S. southwestern border control. When a teenager, he **killed a Mexican-American youth** by shooting him point blank with a shotgun, after the boy threatened him with a knife, then stepped back and laughed at him. Tried and convicted of murder, Carter served two years before being released on appeal. His stance on guns seems to have hardened in the decades thereafter. When testifying about gun rights before Congress in 1975, **he was asked** whether it made sense to allow violent or otherwise dangerous people to own firearms, he answered, without pause, such was "a price we pay for freedom."

Carter and his associate Neal Knox re-wrote the NRA's bylaws, with the notion of protective "gun rights" in mind. Article II, a core statement of aims, **states** that the primary goals of the NRA are "To protect and defend the Constitution," especially "the inalienable right...to acquire, possess, collect, exhibit, transport, carry, transfer ownership of, and enjoy the right to use arms." People must have the ability to "serve effectively in the appropriate militia for the common defense of the Republic and the individual liberty of its citizens." Implied is the need to be ever

vigilant against forces that would weaken the Republic, whether from without or, more likely, within. The logic of more guns equals more freedom stands here, in plain view.

Since the revolt of 1977, the NRA has remained adamant about threats from government. In concert with Republican conservatives from the 1980s onward, it has fearfully maintained that any restriction on gun ownership was a clear move by Washington (especially under a Democratic administration) to curtail freedom, and that any such law was only the beginning, the crowbar in the door jam. NRA president and actor Charlton Heston spoke in the 1990s of a “looming loss of liberty” due to Clinton Administration’s ban on assault weapons. After Barack Obama was elected in 2008, the organization went on high alert, sending out messages to its members asking them to support “protecting our God-given freedoms,” “opposing the Department of Justice’s stealth power,” “placing boots on the ground to preserve liberty.”

Evidence from other countries that might disprove the connection between guns and freedom does not matter. That nations like Switzerland and New Zealand, with far more restrictive gun laws than the U.S., rank much higher on the Human Freedom Index, published by the libertarian Cato Institute, makes no impression on NRA leaders. Nor does historical reality. That armed insurrection has more often led governments in the last century to increase their power, to centralize and militarize it with a willingness to crush dissent does not seem to matter. Nor does the fact that in the U.S., unarmed civil disobedience has gained the most profound results for change, proven by the women’s suffrage and Civil Rights movements. But such truths are not enough to overcome the vision of an armed populace rising up in patriotic fervor and purpose. We are not, after all, in the lands of evidence-based public policy.

Perhaps the most bald and blunt statement we might expect from this position is Mr. Heston’s own about the Second Amendment. It is, he said, “America’s first freedom,” the most important in the Constitution, because it gives every citizen the ability to defend all the other freedoms granted to them. In a sense, the battle to keep guns in the hands of tens of millions of Americans, with as few constraints as possible, can be called a battle over ideas about the dangers of too much power in too few hands. But to stop there would be monstrously misleading. In the idiom of the NRA, backed by far-right conservatism, the ideas involved have been heated and deformed into a lethal, insouciant extreme. The NRA sees itself as having a distinct role in American history—that of arming the people and thus keeping them free, no matter how many must die because of it.

To answer a question no doubt murmuring in the minds of many readers—yes, this is all quite frightening. Yes, it defines a worrisome reality that a hundred million people in the U.S. now own guns, and that there is a politically powerful organization insisting this is not enough.

And yes, it is no less troubling that this organization continues its extremist stance even though it is beyond obvious that more guns do not make society more safe or polite but more dangerous for men, women, and children. Over **33,000 people** now are killed annually, with 70,000 injured, from gunshot wounds, far greater than the total casualties (approx.. **7,000 dead, 53,000 wounded**) in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. And finally, yes, that such extremism, blind to its own fatal ironies—citizens killing citizens for the sake of liberty...?—has actually become a political and cultural norm for a sizeable part of the U.S. population, reveals beyond any question how deeply astray some part of modern liberal democracy has gone in the nation where it began.

Can the NRA and its followers be called “populist” in the sense this term is employed today? Absolutely. More than a few opponents have also labelled it a center of domestic terrorism. My feeling is that this misses the point. NRA ideas and actions are anti-democratic for other reasons. They seek fear, hatred, and censuring of one party, the Democrats, in a two-party system, thereby granting the other, conservative Republican, absolute right and legitimacy. They promise a return to power by the people while delivering more opportunities for violence. They pledge security by heightening people’s insecurities, vow support for law and order while attacking the legal institutions of government. Of course, paring down democracy to a single political group for the sake of freedom would seem a view destined to die from irony. Yet the very same might be said of a Freedom Party (Austria) or Party for Freedom (Netherlands) whose platform calls for sealing all borders.

In the end, Americans would do well to understand the NRA in its true historical light.

Like the populist parties in Europe, the rise over decades of the National Rifle Association represents an eroded faith in liberal democratic politics and institutions. Reactionary responses appeal to the fears and anxieties that are the natural sediment of such erosion. For complex reasons that remain to be deciphered, these fears are continually replenished today and cannot be swept away. In a world felt to be uncertain and threatening, a gun can help someone feel safer, even as it hugely expands the risk of deadly violence. Such is a reality that has only grown in the new century, as **more and more people** have put faith in firearms to protect the home and the self in public. It is no surprise that reactionary passions in the U.S. have chosen, among other things, to ignite over guns and gun ownership. Yet this hardly compensates for the deeply troubling truth of people arming themselves by the millions against one another and the government. I can see no clear solutions to the threat that now exists, for myself, my wife and two sons, my relatives, friends and colleagues, and, not least, my students. It is my hope that, since the power of ideas can so alter society over time, they can remake it during the next era in a better image.