The New York Review of Books

Bang for the Buck

Adam Hochschild
APRIL 5, 2018 ISSUE

Armed in America: A History of Gun Rights from Colonial Militias to Concealed Carry
by Patrick J. Charles
Prometheus, 555 pp., $28.00

Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment
by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
City Lights, 237 pp., $16.95 (paper)

Chosen Country: A Rebellion in the West
by James Pogue
Holt, 304 pp., $28.00 (to be published on May 22)

John Locher/AP Images

Donald Trump speaking at a campaign rally in Las Vegas, December 2015

"Welcome, Patriots! Gun Show Today," says a big sign outside the Cow Palace in Daly City, California, just south of San Francisco, where the Republican National Convention nominated Barry Goldwater for president in 1964. Inside, past the National Rifle Association table at the door, a vast room, longer than a football field, is completely filled with rows of tables and display cases. They show every conceivable kind of rifle and pistol, gun barrels, triggers, stocks, bullet keychain charms, Japanese swords, telescopic sights, night-vision binoculars, bayonets, a handgun carrier designed to look like a briefcase, and enough ammunition of every caliber to equip the D-Day landing force. Antique guns on sale range from an ancient

musket that uses black powder to a Japanese behemoth that fires a bullet 1.2 inches in diameter.

Also arrayed on tables are signs, bumper stickers, and cloth patches you can sew onto your jacket: 9-11 WAS AN INSIDE JOB; THE WALL: IF YOU BUILD IT THEY CANT COME; HUNTING PERMIT UNLIMITED FOR ISIS. Perhaps 90 percent of those strolling the aisles are men, and at least 98 percent are white. They wear enough beards and bushy mustaches to stuff a good-sized mattress. At one table a man is selling black T-shirts that show a map of California in red, with a gold star and hammer and sickle. Which means? “This state’s gone Communist. And I hate to say it, but it was Reagan that gave it to them. The 1986 amnesty program [which granted legal status to some 2.7 million undocumented immigrants].”

If reason played any part in the American love affair with guns, things would have been different a long time ago and we would not have so many mass shootings like the one that took the lives of seventeen high school students in Parkland, Florida on February 14. Almost everywhere else in the world, if you proposed that virtually any adult not convicted of a felony should be allowed to carry a loaded pistol—openly or concealed—into a bar, a restaurant, or classroom, people would send you off for a psychiatric examination. Yet many states allow this, and in Iowa, a loaded firearm can be carried in public by someone who’s completely blind. Suggest, in response to the latest mass shooting, that still more of us should be armed, and people in most other countries would ask you what you’re smoking. Yet this is the NRA’s answer to the massacres in Orlando, Las Vegas, Newtown, and elsewhere, and after the Parkland killing spree, President Trump suggested arming teachers. One bumper sticker on sale here shows the hammer and sickle again with GUN FREE ZONES KILL PEOPLE.

Nor, when it comes to national legislation, do abundantly clear statistics have any effect. In Massachusetts, which has some of America’s most restrictive firearms laws, three people per 100,000 are killed by guns annually, while in Alaska, which has some of the weakest, the rate is more than seven times as high. Maybe Alaskans need extra guns to fend off bears, but that’s certainly not so in Louisiana, another weak-law state, where the rate is more than six times as high as in Massachusetts. All developed nations regulate firearms more stringently than we do; compared with the citizens of twenty-two other high-income countries, Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns. In the last

fifty years alone, more civilians have lost their lives to firearms within the United States than have been killed in uniform in all the wars in American history.[1]

Congress, terrified of the NRA, not only ignores such data but has shielded manufacturers and dealers from any liability for firearms deaths, and has prevented the Centers for Disease Control from doing any studies of gun violence. As of last October—the figure has doubtless risen since then—the top ten recipients of direct or indirect NRA campaign funds in the US Senate had received more than $42 million from the organization over the past thirty years. Funneling a river of money to hundreds of other members of Congress as well, the NRA has certainly gotten what it pays for.

In *Armed in America*, Patrick J. Charles points out that after each horrendous mass shooting, like the one we've just seen at Parkland, not only does the NRA once again talk about good guys with guns stopping bad guys with guns, but gun purchases soar and stock prices of their makers rise. However, only a tiny fraction of the more than 30,000 Americans killed by guns each year die in these mass shootings. Roughly two thirds are suicides; the rest are more mundane homicides, and about five hundred are accidents. Some 80,000 additional people are injured by firearms each year. All these numbers would be far less if we did not have more guns than people in the United States, and if they were not so freely available to almost anyone.

Although not the definitive study of the NRA that David Cole called for in these pages recently,[2] *Armed in America* does cast a shrewd eye on what is probably the most powerful lobbying organization in Washington. For almost a century the NRA has pursued a two-faced strategy. It "would tout itself to lawmakers as the foremost supporter of reasonable firearms restrictions. At the same time, the NRA informed the gun-rights community that virtually all firearms restrictions would either make gun ownership a crime or somehow lead to disarmament." The NRA presents itself to the public as "a voice of compromise" and boasts of its courses in gun safety, but skillfully mobilizes its five million members and annual budget of more than $300 million to make sure Congress never passes any meaningful gun control. The poignant, outspoken campaigning by the Florida high schoolers who survived the Parkland shooting may spur somewhat tightened gun control in a few states, but, at least at the national level, don't expect new laws to be sweeping and significant.

The Koch brothers have been major financial supporters of the NRA because it so reliably turns out right-wing voters on election day. A vocal and militant NRA also helps protect people like the Kochs by encouraging the illusion that the real source of political power in America is gun ownership—rather than, say, great wealth.

Guns were essential tools in our early history, but as the frontier disappeared, a mystique about them grew only stronger. Charles quotes *Sports Afield* from 1912: "Perfect freedom from annoyance by petty lawbreakers is found in a country where every man carries his own sheriff, judge and executioner swung on his hip." Last year, someone who would dearly love to wield such powers against his enemies became the first sitting president to address the NRA in more than three decades. "The eight-year assault on your Second Amendment freedoms has come to a crashing end," Donald Trump told the organization's annual convention. "You have a true friend and champion in the White House."

For more than a century, the NRA and its opponents have argued over the meaning of that amendment: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Gun enthusiasts claim that this protects almost anyone who wants to carry a rifle down the street or a pistol to church, and therefore that gun control violates the Constitution. Liberals, on the other hand, maintain fervently that the rights granted by the Second Amendment refer only to a "well regulated Militia," such as that which fought the redcoats at Lexington and Concord or that makes up the National Guard today.

Charles takes the second position, which he argues at ponderous length, firing salvos at rival scholars and tracing the amendment's ancestry back to Britain's Militia Acts of 1661 and 1662. Yet something feels sterile about this dispute over what the Founding Fathers had in mind. It is tragic that we should still have to battle over the intentions of that assembly of men in frock coats and powdered wigs when, all around us, the carnage from gun violence continues.

And so it was with little appetite that I picked up yet another book that takes the history of guns back to colonial times, but Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Loaded* is like a blast of fresh air. She is no fan of guns or of our absurdly permissive laws surrounding them. But she does not merely take the liberal side of the familiar debate. "Neither party," she writes of that long squabble, "seems to have any idea

what the Second Amendment was originally about." Of course the amendment was written with militias in mind, she says, but, during and after the colonial era, just what *were* those militias? They were not merely upstanding citizens protecting themselves against foreign tyrants like King George III. They also searched for runaway slaves and seized land from Native Americans, often by slaughter.

Loaded quotes former Wyoming senator Alan Simpson: "Without guns, there would be no West." But in this sense, the West began at the Atlantic seaboard, where settler militias were organized from the seventeenth century onward. Before long, members could collect bounties for the heads or scalps of Native Americans—an early case, incidentally, of the privatization of warfare. When the thirteen colonies declared their independence, one grievance was the king's Royal Proclamation of 1763, by which the British, fretting over the expense of sending troops across the Atlantic to fight endless Indian wars, placed land beyond the Appalachian-Allegheny mountain range off-limits to white settlement.

Many well-armed settlers, however, thirsted for that land and crossed the mountains to take it. Among them was the eager young George Washington, who went on to make a fortune speculating in land far to the west of coastal Virginia where he had been born. As settlement expanded across the Great Plains, US Army troops took over the job of suppressing the doomed Native American resistance, but militias had long preceded them.

The militias also kept slaves in line. Dunbar-Ortiz quotes a North Carolina legal handbook of 1860 on such duties: "The patrol shall visit the negro houses in their respective districts as often as may be necessary, and may inflict a punishment, not exceeding fifteen lashes, on all slaves they may find off their owner's plantations…[and] shall be diligent in apprehending all runaway negroes." If a captured slave behaved "insolently" the militia could administer up to thirty-nine lashes. Some militias, such as the Texas Rangers, did double duty, both seizing land and hunting down escaped slaves. After the Civil War, when the South was still awash in guns and ammunition, militias morphed easily into the Ku Klux Klan—and into private rifle clubs; by 1876 South Carolina alone had more than 240.

Cleansed of its origins, some of this history has been absorbed into our culture. Dunbar-Ortiz comes, she tells us, from rural Oklahoma, the daughter of a

"proletarian cowboy," and grew up on romantic stories of bandits like Jesse James who were said to be American Robin Hoods. But who was Jesse James? He was a veteran of a particularly brutal militia, in which he had fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Men like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, Dunbar-Ortiz points out, have been sanitized in a different way, remembered not as conquerors of Native American or Mexican land, but as frontiersmen roaming the wilderness in their fringed deerskin clothing—and as skilled hunters. This has powerful resonance with many gun owners today, who hunt, or once did, or at least would like to feel in themselves an echo of the hunter: fearless, proud, self-sufficient, treading in the footsteps of pioneers. One of those fringed leather jackets (although not deerskin, the salesman acknowledges) is on sale at the gun show, as is a huge variety of survival-in-the-wilderness gear: canteens, beef jerky, buffalo jerky, bear repellent, and hundreds of knives, many of them lovingly laid out on fur pelts: coyote, beaver, muskrat, possum, and the softest, badger.

The early militias are one strand of ancestry Dunbar-Ortiz identifies for gun enthusiast groups like the NRA. Another is the legacy of America's wars—not those with defined front lines, like the two world wars and Korea, but the conflicts in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, Afghanistan.[3] In those wars it was often unclear who was friend and who was enemy, mass killings of civilians were common, and many a military man evoked the days of the Wild West. General Maxwell Taylor, Lyndon B. Johnson's ambassador to South Vietnam, for instance, called for more troops so that the "Indians can be driven from the fort and the settlers can plant corn."

One of the greatest predictors of American gun ownership today is whether someone has been in the military: a veteran is more than twice as likely as a nonveteran to own one or more guns. Among the bumper stickers and signs at the gun show are JIHAD FREE ZONE and I'LL SEE YOUR JIHAD AND RAISE YOU A CRUSADE; the latter shows a bloody sword. Many a vet is strolling the aisles, happy to talk about fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan. The first of the chain of mass shootings that have bedeviled the United States over the last half-century or so, from atop a tower at the University of Texas at Austin in 1966, was by Charles Whitman, an ex-Marine.

The passion for guns felt by tens of millions of Americans also has deep social and economic roots. The fervor with which they believe liberals are trying to take

all their guns away is so intense because so much else *has* been taken away. In much of the South, in the Rust Belt along the Great Lakes, in rural districts throughout the country, young people are leaving or sinking into addiction and jobs are disappearing. These hard-hit areas have not shared the profits of Silicon Valley and its offshoots or the prosperity of coastal cities from Seattle to New York. Even many of his supporters know in their hearts that Trump can never deliver on his promises to bring back coal mining and restore abundant manufacturing jobs. But the one promise he, and other politicians, can deliver on is to protect and enlarge every imaginable kind of right to carry arms.

People passionate about guns often display a sense of being under siege, left behind, pushed down, at risk. One of the large paper targets on sale at the gun show shows a scowling man aiming a pistol at you. On bumper stickers, window signs, flags, is the Revolutionary era DON'T TREAD ON ME, with its image of a coiled rattlesnake. At one table, two men are selling bulletproof vests. For $500 you can get an eight-pound one whose plates—front, back, side—are made of lightweight compressed polyethylene. "They used to use it to line the bottom of combat helicopters," said one of the men. For only $300, you can get one with steel plates, but it weighs twenty-three pounds. Also on sale is a concealable vest that goes under your clothing: medium, large, and X-large for $285; XX-large and XXX-large for $315.

Who buys these? I ask.

"Everybody—who sees the way the world is going."

The most bellicose descendants of the American militias of centuries past are the forces that go under the same name today. We have seen a lot of these camouflage-clad men (and the occasional woman) in the past few years: striding through Charlottesville, Virginia, last August with their rifles and walkie-talkies under Confederate flags, traveling in convoys with gun barrels poking through the windows of pickup trucks and SUVs to camp near the Mexican border and watch for immigrants slipping across, and, most often, tangling with US Forest Service or other federal officials in theatrically orchestrated standoffs over the use of federal land in the Far West. Four hundred armed militiamen were on the scene in 2014 at the height of a standoff in Nevada; one hundred appeared at another in Montana the next year, and three hundred at one in Oregon the year after that. Similar armed confrontations have taken place in New Mexico, Texas, and

California, and a militia leader from Utah was arrested in 2016 after apparently trying to bomb a Bureau of Land Management outpost in Arizona. Between 2010 and 2014 alone there were more than fifty attacks on BLM or Forest Service employees, including two by snipers.

James Pogue's *Chosen Country* is a young journalist's account of spending many weeks with participants in several of these western land occupations. A would-be Hunter S. Thompson, he includes far more than you want to know about his own drinking, smoking, drug use, tattoos, girlfriends, beloved grandmother, and brushes with the law. Nonetheless, there is an extravagant verve to his writing (three armed riflemen at a roadblock "gave us looks sort of like what you'd give a couple of college boys you found at your daughter's slumber party"; young militiamen romanticize "a glossy magical cowboy past") and, more important, amid the overblown gonzo riffs, he has genuine compassion for the suffering of some of those "on the angrier fringes of the rancher subculture."

The Endangered Species Act has thrown both loggers and ranchers out of work, and even though there are good reasons for limiting grazing on federal land (such as preventing erosion or the pollution of drinking water), a new restriction can push a small struggling sheep farmer into bankruptcy. Pogue gets in amazingly deep with these western rebels, even joining a carful of them on a madcap expedition to Salt Lake City to enlist Mormon elders in defusing one standoff. But he is wise enough to know that those who will really benefit from any privatization of the vast federally owned territory in the West are not the militiamen with their "Ranchers' Lives Matter" yard signs but those who have the capital to exploit the land's riches: agribusiness, mining companies, oil and gas drillers. It's no surprise that many of those interests enthusiastically support the militia occupations.

There are rivalries aplenty between various militia groups, but one undercurrent in almost all of them, whether spoken or denied, is white nationalism. The first attempt to plant a private militia on the Mexican border was made by David Duke of the Ku Klux Klan. Of African-Americans, Cliven Bundy, patriarch of the family behind several of the

Alon Reininger/Contact Press Images

Beretta handguns at an NRA convention, San Antonio, Texas, April 1991

western land standoffs, has said, "I've often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton…?" Two of Bundy's sons were among those who occupied federal buildings at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Oregon; one of their collaborators had recently aired a video that showed him wrapping pages of the Koran in bacon and setting them on fire. The Malheur occupiers rifled through a collection of Native American relics, and turned the site of a nearby archaeological dig containing more artifacts into a latrine. It is not hard to see the continuity with the militias of two hundred years ago.

American right-wingers in uniform have been around since the Nazi and blackshirt groups of the 1930s. Later militias came and went; a new wave of them was spurred into being by the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Their ideology tends to echo that of others on the far right: the New World Order and its minions (the Kenyan-born Obama, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, most people in Hollywood, and many others) favor the spotted owl over loggers and ranchers and black people over white, patrol the skies with black helicopters, and are conspiring to flood the United States with immigrants and refugees, install United Nations rule, impose Sharia law, and seize guns from their rightful owners. *As long as I'm alive and breathing*, sings the country and western artist (and Trump supporter) Justin Moore, *You won't take my guns.* One bumper sticker on sale at the gun show says, AMERICA HAS BEEN OCCUPIED BY GLOBALIST FORCES. Militias go farther than other right-wing groups in promising to resist this imposition of the New World Order with arms. "When the ballot box doesn't work," says John Trochmann, founder of the Militia of Montana, "we'll switch to the cartridge box."

Some of this, of course, is hot air. The number of active militia groups actually fell by 40 percent from 2015 to 2016, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors the movement closely. One "key factor" was that when the brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy and their followers seized buildings at Malheur in early 2016, the federal government hung tough, shooting dead one militia leader when he tried to pull a gun on officers at a roadblock, arresting many more, and indicting them on serious charges.

There has been one huge change since then: the election of Donald Trump. A few years before, during an earlier standoff, Trump voiced qualified support for

Cliven Bundy. (He was uneasy about the occupation and suggested Bundy cut a deal with Obama, but said, “I like him, I like his spirit, his spunk, and the people that are so loyal…. I respect him.”) Several friends of the Bundys or supporters of their Malheur occupation became prominent Trump backers, and one, oilman Forrest Lucas, was on the president’s shortlist for secretary of the interior. A judge’s recent declaration of a mistrial was the latest in a series of setbacks the government has had in prosecuting the Bundys. Since the election, militia members have been increasingly visible around the country, providing “security” for right-wing demonstrators and speakers. One such speaker is Cliven Bundy, newly released from jail. And, in contrast to their decline as Obama cracked down on the land occupations, under Trump the number of armed militia groups in the United States has soared ominously, from 165 in 2016 to 273 in 2017.

What happens with them next? I see two dangers. The first is that the next militia standoff over a federal land occupation in the West may end differently. It is hard to imagine Trump’s Justice Department firmly enforcing the law against people who so represent the concentrated essence of his base. Does that mean that the armed seizure of some National Forest land, say, might be unhindered and become permanent? And might that, in turn, encourage dozens of similar land grabs? The rural areas of western states are filled with people—including thousands of county sheriffs’ deputies and other state and local officeholders—who believe no one should tell them where they can’t graze their cattle, hunt game, cut a tree, or dig for gold. And what right do the feds have to own all that land, anyway? Promoting oil drilling in National Parks, Trump clearly feels the same way.

The second danger is this: Trump may well be forced out of office—by defeat in 2020 if not by other means before then. If that occurs, we know it will be a stormy process, in which he will try in every possible way to inflame and rally his supporters, with more dark charges of “rigged” voting if he loses the election. To anyone on the far right his defeat or removal will be virtual proof of a conspiracy to restore the New World Order. Will these gun-toting men in boots and camouflage flak jackets accept his departure from the White House quietly? And, if they can’t prevent it, will they somehow take revenge?

—March 8, 2018

1 If you want to arm yourself with such statistics for arguments with gun enthusiasts, you'll find plenty in *"Guns Don't Kill People, People Kill People" and Other Myths about Guns and Gun Control* by Dennis A. Henigan (Beacon, 2016), although the book's usefulness is hampered by the lack of an index. ↩

2 "The Terror of Our Guns," July 14, 2016. ↩

3 *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* by Kathleen Belew (Harvard University Press, 2018) makes the same point, by tracing the roots of much white racist violence from the 1970s through the early 1990s to the Vietnam War and some of its veterans. ↩

RELATED

The Terror of Our Guns
David Cole

In Love with Guns 🔒
Edmund S. Morgan

Our Moloch
Garry Wills