

# Guns as a Symbol of (Fill-in-the-Blank)

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## Abstract

Guns are symbolic of many things in America, but a critical assessment of these semiotic narratives shows them to be seriously limited in understanding the nature of gun violence in the United States, which has killed 30,000 per year on average for over two decades, 75 times more than all military fatalities in America's "longest war" (in Afghanistan). An additional 70,000 people on average are wounded per year, again for over two decades. Gun violence has been misinterpreted by mass media and many other sources; it should be redefined as the major public health problem it is. Gun violence should be distinguished from the Second Amendment and "gun rights." Politicians and partisans connect these issues for their own purposes, but they are distinct. Future constructive efforts should consciously disconnect these two issues.

## Keywords

guns, gun violence, symbols, culture of fear

I feel certain that guns are an important symbol of something about America and Americans, but in recent years I have started to doubt the orthodox assertions about the "semiotics" of guns in America. It is possible to write many narratives about the symbolic meaning of guns in American culture, and each of these could be supported with compelling evidence and argument, leaving any reader satisfied with having grasped the hidden, deeper, or occluded meanings of this cultural object. As more and more factual evidence continues to mount, however, so do the suspicions that one or more of the semiotic orthodoxies barely scratch the surface of this complicated and problematic phenomenon.

One common narrative places guns within the context of early American history, specifically the American Revolutionary War, when peasant farmers with long guns successfully repelled the imperial British forces, thus securing American independence. This narrative would likely note the beginnings of the American government, specifically the 1789 Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which asserts the rights of state militias to possess guns. The Second Amendment has achieved significant symbolic meaning on its own, and mentioning it is common in contemporary politics of the early 21st century, almost 225 years later. By referring to this context, the argument could be made that guns are a symbol of the early American struggle for independence.

Another narrative might emphasize the 1861–1865 Civil War between the North and South, arguably the most bloody and fatal civil war in all of history, where 640,000 died, and many more wounded. When the war ended in 1865, soldiers from both sides were allowed to retain possession of their guns, which means there were about 40,000,000 guns for

about 40,000,000 citizens. These guns provided the arms for the early Kl Klux Klan, founded in 1866, as well as the first bank robbers (such as the Jesse James gang). They also played a part in the "Wild West" period of U.S. history. By emphasizing the American Civil War context, the argument could be made that guns are a symbol of the collective self-defense which can threaten domestic harmony from within, or perhaps a symbol of regional, racial, or ethnic self-preservation in a society undergoing major changes from agrarian to industrial structures.

The so-called "Wild West" period followed the Civil War, and might found a narrative which emphasizes the perils, dangers, and challenges of the Westward expansion, specifically the so-called "Indian Wars" between U.S. military forces and various groups of indigenous tribes, from about 1865 to about 1890. This period has fueled decades of cultural propaganda, with thousands of cinematic and television "Westerns," over a longer period of time than the actual historical era. Hollywood cinema gained its take-off to popular culture dominance during the 1940s and 1950s, with serial productions starring Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, The Lone Ranger, Lash LaRue, Gene Autry, Tim Holt, Tex Williams, Rex Allen, John Wayne, Johnny Mack Brown, Wild Bill Elliot, and many others. Guns played a prominent role in "Westerns," a symbol of the "good guys"

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defeating the “bad guys” in these midcentury morality plays (which continue 50 years later).

In the historical narratives the gun users are predominantly male, which is true for the contemporary crime situation, leading CNN network host Jane Velez-Mitchell to opine that “a gun is a phallic symbol” (Diaz, 2013, p. 19). Since only about one-third of American households have guns, and the current market for hand guns involves a disproportionate number of female buyers, this gender generalization needs much greater specification.

## The American Delusion About Guns

Guns are used to kill thousands of Americans every year. When criminal killings involving guns (67% of U.S. homicides are completed with guns), are added to suicides involving guns (52% of suicides are completed with guns), and these are added to the gun accidents of adults and children, the average deaths are over 30,000 per year for the last 10 years (Diaz, 2013). This means that 300,000 U.S. citizens have lost their lives during the decade which claimed about 4,000 fatalities for America’s “longest war in history” (Afghanistan), meaning that 75 times more lives are lost to domestic gun violence versus U.S. military fatalities. The popular and mass media coverage would suggest the reverse of reality. In addition to the gun violence fatalities, about 70,000 individuals are shot and wounded per year. Some of these involve minor wounds, but others involving very serious wounds requiring years or lifetimes of recuperation and rehabilitation (Diaz, 2013; Violence Policy Center, 2012).

The United States is the world leader in mass killings, averaging 36 per year for the last two decades, or about one every 10 days. With only minor exceptions (such as Joe Stack intentionally flying his plane into the Internal Revenue Office in Austin, Texas), virtually all of these mass killings involve guns. In any year the United States has more mass killings than all of the other countries of the world combined, significantly related to the easy access to guns. The mass media tend to publicize the more notorious mass killings (such as Littleton and Aurora, Colorado, Tucson, Arizona, the Washington, D.C., Navy yard, Sandy Hook, Connecticut), usually those involving either high body counts or child victims, but they tend to neglect the more common instances involving fewer deaths. For this reason the common “profile” of mass killers as emotionally or mentally disturbed young males receives emphasis, but this neglects the larger problem of U.S. gun violence, which should be defined as a major public health problem quite separately from Second Amendment and “gun rights” issues.

## The Culture of Fear

The idea that American culture is a “culture of fear” has become a commonplace observation since 9/11. The

terrorist bombings of the World Trade Center are seen to be catalyst for many cultural changes, including two wars and several lower-level military operations, the institutionalization of body scans and body searches at airports and many other places, widespread data mining for intelligence and surveillance purposes, vast state expenditures for the development of military hardware and technology, vast expansions of “national security police,” such as the 42,000 officers added to the Arizona segment of the border, and so on. It is a serious error to see the culture of fear as originating from 9/11, however, because much of the cultural ideology and infrastructure was in place before 9/11. It is more accurate to begin the post-World War II culture of fear story with The Cold War, and the vast ideological propaganda which began in the 1950s. When I was a child in school, we had “atomic bomb drills” which involved taking refuge under our frail wooden desks in case The Evil Empire dropped a nuke on Fort Wayne, Indiana. Stop for a moment and imagine how that would make a ten-year old child feel?! And becoming aware of neighbors who were building underground bomb shelters in their back yards?! (Note: What the citizens of Fort Wayne were not told, at least for another 40 years, is that at this very time their city had been chosen for an experiment to test how chemical agents would disperse under various weather and wind conditions.)

The Cold War was the first salvo in a decades-long propaganda campaign about fear, which included claims about how the heartless communists in Cuba, El Salvador, Vietnam, Guatemala, Chile, Nicaragua, and so on sought to undermine our culture, soon followed by child battering, child neglect, childhood sexual abuse, woman battering, marital rape, workplace discrimination and violence, “wilding,” “crack whores,” preschool nursery abuse (e.g., 382 sexual abuse charges in 1982 at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California), courtship and dating violence, grandparent abuse, elder abuse, violence between sports coaches and their players, sexual abuse in the Boy Scouts and Catholic church, and so on. Many of us lived through all of this, and so it is clear that the cultural ideology about fear was well established before 9/11. The 9/11 terrorist bombings just tapped into a pre-existing cultural ideology and framework. This helps explain much about what led slightly more than 300,000,000 people to purchase 300,000,000 guns for their “protection” (Altheide, 2002, 2006, 2009).

Arizona gun culture is consistent with a self-fulfilling prophecy, or how an attempt to prevent something from happening—getting harmed—can actually lead to more harm. Arizona, like much of the United States, chased crime and fear into the future that would see massive gun ownership. Guns are part of the Southwest cultural lore, but that doesn’t fully explain what happened in Arizona; mass media-produced fear does. For 30 years Arizona and especially the Phoenix metropolitan area has been awash in the

discourse of fear, which is defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectations that danger and risk are a central feature of the effective environment, or the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life. Politicians systematically used and promoted this.

News and popular culture coverage of street crime promoted a view of exaggerated crime and danger. This was true in Arizona, and throughout the United States Arizonans and many other Americans ranked crime as their major problem, and they bought guns to protect themselves, despite the fact that many who bought guns were members of demographic groups least likely to be victimized by gun violence, whereas those most likely to be victimized did not have the spare resources to buy guns.

The so-called “gun culture” is so pervasive that elected politicians cannot even discuss the issue. The best example of this comes from Colorado, where two Senators proposed gun restrictions in the aftermath of the Aurora Theatre shooting, only to be defeated in the following elections by the deep pockets of the National Rifle Association (NRA). The NRA surely supports the “rights” of gun owners, but there are arguably other important aspects which are less appreciated (or receive less mass media attention).

### **Guns as Big Corporate Business**

Guns are Big Business. And the United States is the major weapons supplier in the world. If we narrow our interest to hand guns only, a very minor segment of the market, the handgun industry alone exceeds one billion dollars worth of firepower per year, although precise figures are not possible because Glock and Beretta (the two largest handgun suppliers) are privately owned companies, and thus are not required to provide sales information to the public. Selling guns south of the border is a major business in Arizona, and of the 80,000 weapons confiscated by Mexican authorities in recent years, 60,000 of these were traced to 7,500 gun dealers in Arizona, California, and Texas. The leading seller of these weapons was located in Glendale, Arizona, adjacent to Phoenix in central Arizona. There are currently more retail gun outlets in the United States than McDonald’s restaurants (Peck, 2002). In January, 2011, federal agents seized 700 weapons and arrested 34 people in Arizona who were buying and reselling guns to Mexico, including drug cartels. The seizure included AK-47s, 50 caliber rifles, and semi-automatic weapons that had been bought in single-day purchases at gun stores. “Straw buyers,” who are paid by cartels, purchase the weapons and turn them over; several weapons had been seized at border checks, and ownership had been traced back to the buyer’s paperwork. The U.S. Attorney for Arizona stated, “Straw buyers are a huge problem in this state. Drug cartels go shopping for their war weapons here in Arizona.”

Arizonans, like much of the United States, is oriented to negativity, to what might happen, trying to avoid being hurt, victimized, taken advantage of by the government or other people: Arizonans are enmeshed in fear. Many regard themselves as potential victims. This has increased in recent decades, as mass media logic has joined the interests of mass media entertainment formats with politicians and other claims makers seeking more control of the public treasure and agendas. Historically, this was grounded in an anti-urban bias, and especially the sense that more rural states like Arizona—and much of the Southwest—was neglected by “eastern” interests. To get some attention, some of the Arizonans became good political actors, Barry Goldwater at first, and now more recently Sheriff Joe Arpaio—“the toughest Sheriff in the West,” who engaged in political theatre that was broadcast through our entertainment media. This brings us into the era of mass mediated communication and popular culture, and particularly risk communication, or how we convey the symbolic meanings about threats and dangers in mass society. The arguments about gun control and regulations turn on the meaning of defense, and not becoming the victim of another’s force, often a gun. The gun is a phenomenological merry-go-round, with multiple meanings circulating around a shifting center of citizenship and righteousness. The pervasive feelings of gun entitlement/right/privilege display deep fears and selfishness. In no other country in the world are there similar meanings crafted around gun rights. While there are regional nuances about such terms as “ownership,” “use,” and “control of firearms, the gun is the only constitutional right that is concrete and joins symbolic meanings to an actual object, a weapon that can be felt, displayed, bought, and sold. In the cognitive schemes of many Americans, a gun is the self and the truth. It is freedom from fear, although it is grounded in fear. The gun, and the right to own, carry, and use the gun before an audience (actual or virtual), thereby becomes a central act of membership and legitimacy. And these meanings have been exploited by politicians seeking affirmation (and election). Guns help Americans visibly perform and display individuality, independence, and resistance. It is part of a script that is enscribed and reinforced through fear, and serves to gain audience affirmation of virtue and strength.

Pervasive fear extends across the country and defines how the United States does its international business. The U.S. Defense Budget is now greater than the defense spending of all other countries in the world, and our national government and its business connections are responsible for selling arms and military weapons and supplies all over the world. The U.S. culture is itself a “gun culture,” and the current military operations in six foreign countries indicate there is a high level of legitimacy for this, among all current political and party interests. There are powerful economic interests and lobbies involved in

selling guns and weapons, and the discussion of state or regional “gun cultures” obscure this dark underbelly of the violent American culture.

## The Short-Term and Long-Term Future of the Gun Violence Problem

Risks are socially constructed, and all risks are mediated by a social context and the technologies of communication. Positive action and constructive progress on gun violence has been hampered by the interests linking gun violence and Second Amendment gun rights. These issues are not the same, and the failure to distinguish them has led to failures such as President Obama’s bill proposed in the aftermath of Sandy Hook. If future proposals are successful, they will have to distinguish these issues.

Automobile safety is the main example of successful public health policy and action. Between 1966 and 2000, the combined efforts of governmental and private groups reduced the rate of motor vehicle death by 43% (Diaz, 2013, p. 222). But as auto fatalities have decreased, gun deaths and casualties have grown steadily, to the point where gun deaths will likely surpass auto deaths within a year or two.

Progressive or constructive gun laws will not change anything in the short term. The short-term future will be more of the past. There are just too many guns, now over 300 million in the United States. There are too many lax laws, and it takes little devious effort to obtain guns, even illegal guns. Our mental health system is not well developed to detect or treat young men with schizoid or borderline personality disorders . . . to those seeking to “become famous” in some kind of copycat killing spree. At an abstract level it makes sense to increase our detection capabilities, but there are truly immense practical difficulties with this . . . hopefully we will get better as we make small steps of progress.

Recent polls indicate that Americans are increasingly favorable to taking action against gun violence. The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting stimulated various new citizen groups, such as Educational Fund to Stop Gun

Violence, Parent Together, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, and others. There were progressive actions in over 35 states, but still there were 74 pro-gun bills passed in the Congress, in the first year after Sandy Hook, compared with only 66 which were gun-control oriented, most of which failed. Many individuals and groups do learn from their prior miscalculations or mistakes, so hopefully this burgeoning gun-control constituency will gain momentum in the future.

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