**The Whitewashing of the Second Amendment**

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April 20, 1999. Two high school seniors arrive at school that day with a mission. A mission to kill. On this day, one of the first major school shootings took place at Columbine High School in Colorado, spurring a national discussion about Second Amendment rights and restrictions. Since the Columbine massacre, hundreds of shootings have happened across America, yet the rhetoric surrounding the gun control debate has become increasingly obscured on both sides, ignoring the root causes and impacts of gun violence. Yet, a fundamental question remains unanswered in the current discourse. If guns have killed so many people, why do they invoke such ardent fervor and adulation? It can be argued that the American desire for guns is not motivated by the actual weapon itself, but rather by the attachment to traditional cultural values that the gun represents.⁠1 Currently, in the often messy Second Amendment debate that has engulfed the country into a bitter partisan divide, the moderate middle has become tainted, sidelining critical alternative approaches to gun control. It is essential that we move past the shallow discussion of the Second Amendment in order to evaluate a history of hegemonic masculinity that perpetuates the underlying desire for the gun. Only then can we have meaningful and substantive reform in this area.

Before engaging in arguments over the Second Amendment, as a country we must first evaluate the symbolic roles guns have played in establishing traditional notions of power. The gun is a symbol that has become increasingly gendered and fundamentally relies on hegemonic masculinity to fulfill the unconscious desire for valiant ideals such as strength, self-reliance, and control.⁠2 Hegemonic masculinity is a system that describes discursive practices that seek to legitimize male domination.⁠3 In the context of guns, males are able to define themselves in contrast to femininity and alternative visions of masculinity because the cherished ideals of being the good husband and protector are ascribed to guns. Power, independence, and authority are essential in playing the role of the “good family man”—one who is empowered to act on the desire to defend his family. In this way, the wife and children become feminized objects necessitating protection from the macho-masculine father figure.⁠4

Hegemonic masculinity plays a critical role in the debate over guns because it fundamentally illustrates the appeal of carrying a gun. Consequently, men are able to identify with hegemonic masculinity though fantasies of self-defense and violence. Out of the six million people who have a concealed handgun license, the vast majority are men, lured by a heightened sense of macho, ego, and power that the gun denotes.⁠5 These cultural values and constructs have culminated in the developing of the warrior ethos, an ethos in which masculinity is militarized though the glorification of physical “toughness” through the use of the gun. This warrior ethos also promotes violence as a legitimate way to protect against the “bad guys”, and yet ironically, it is also fraught with critical contradictions.⁠6

Who are we really protecting ourselves from?

More often than not, it is a minority group. Men, mostly white, see themselves as noble and even chivalrous as they protect their families from the dangerous Blacks and Latinos. It is important to note that race and class are critical in establishing hegemonic masculinity. The image of the “good gun user” promoted by the NRA and other lobby groups use masculine and racist tropes to propagate guns as a mythic symbol of individualism and protection against the racialized “other”. They mobilize citizens to fight for Second Amendment rights, yet disturbingly turn a blind eye towards the deaths of thousands of innocent people of color killed merely because they are street kids living in the ghetto.⁠7 Why do we collectively get so angry when the government tries to restrict our Second Amendment rights, but don’t seem to care when inculpable citizens are being shot? This notion of white male victimization (i.e when the NRA argues that white males are the victims of government restrictions on guns) is particularly harmful because it allows white men to believe that they are artificially disconnected from the system of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, this illicit power allows for hegemonic masculinity to continually remain invisible because it has become the underlying and accepted norm in our society.⁠8

In addition to acknowledging hegemonic masculinity, real and substantive gun policy reform can only be crafted after recognizing the racist conceptions and implicit use of cultural values underlying the gun debate through a historical framework. It is a myth that the Second Amendment applies equally to all Americans; the Second Amendment, for the most part, has applied only to whites. In using a gun, the gun holder is able to transcend their weakness by gaining superiority via the perceived power of their gun. Traditionally, this notion has been used when white slave owners have used guns as a means to secure themselves in the instance of a slave revolt.⁠9 For example, the Southern militia and slave patrols claimed the right to bear arms (invoking their Second Amendment rights) in order to defend against the hypermasculinized, “violent” black slaves.⁠10 In invoking their Second Amendment rights, these groups labeled blacks as criminal, aggressive, and threatening, thereby contributing to racist narratives. Whites gained a fundamental advantage over blacks because of their unfettered access to guns, thus ensuring the normalization of the use of arms against blacks. During the Reconstruction era, whites still retained this advantage as many states limited gun ownership to white men.⁠11 Later, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other “neo-slave patrols” used guns to threaten and intimidate blacks from voting. These groups legitimized their use of intimidation via guns in claiming that they were driven by a patriotic mission.⁠12 In stark contrast, during the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panthers and Malcolm X invoked their Second Amendment rights, yet black use of arms was not tolerated. The state heavily favored whites and even used the fact that blacks were now using violence via guns to legitimize increased police brutality and white backlash against these movements.⁠13 Even today, blacks are not afforded the same Second Amendment privileges as whites. While whites are allowed to own numerous guns because they are considered law-abiding citizens, blacks however, are depicted as “dangerous” when seen with a gun. Therefore, only by deconstructing the implicit racial undertones and historical narrative of the Second Amendment debate, can we begin to formulate policies that will address these issues in a truly honest and constructive way.

Finally, in developing a more salient, contextual grasp of the gun control discussion, we also need to evaluate the myth of the American Frontier/Wild West and the corresponding cultural images surrounding guns that have emerged. Although the NRA pushes its agenda to convince the American public that the gun debate is about the Second Amendment, the bitter debate over gun control is not about the Second Amendment, but rather the implicit American cultural symbols and ways of life attached to it. Historically, the gun has become a prominent rite of passage for children as they are taught that it is emblematic of such undying American values as freedom and individualism.⁠14 Unfortunately, this sentimental connotation of the gun as an ancestral heirloom negates the ways in which guns have been used in colonial genocide against the Natives, and further establishes imperialistic notions. The myth of the gun as a means to establish freedom and independence has been used by the U.S to invade the Wild West (in Western expansion) to bestow “liberty” and “democracy” on the Native, erroneously using the gun as a romantic symbol rather than one of genocide.⁠15 In fact, the gun was essential to the defeat of the Natives, to ensure western expansion and the violent forcing of Natives onto reservations. Therein lies the greatest irony; through moral codes of self-reliance, the gun was revered as a symbol of freedom from state oppression, yet simultaneously, it was used to ensure Native subjugation. Thus, it is essential that we examine our country’s historical myths and longstanding cultural images surrounding guns when searching for current day reforms in this area.

With more and more mass shootings, the gun debate has become increasingly murky and muddled throughout the years, due to the superfluous approach to the Second Amendment. For meaningful reform to happen, rather than solely focusing on the Second Amendment in such a myopic way, we must instead evaluate the structural underpinnings of the amendment through a historical prism. In doing so, we can create potential solutions and develop public policies to eliminate systemic inequalities that leave guns overwhelmingly in the hands of whites, construct programs in the areas of public relations and education to unmask gun rights in the U.S., and protect vulnerable communities from further violence. However, until the very vocabulary and substance of the debate shifts to an understanding of both cultural and historical perspectives shaping gun violence, we will never come up with adequate solutions, and the moderate middle will continue to be ignored.

1 Maxine Burkett, "Much Ado About... Something Else: D.C. v. Heller,\* the Racialized Mythology of the Second Amendment, and Gun Policy Reform," *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, 2008, [Page #], PDF.

2 Angela Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns: Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns," *Gender and Society* 26, no. 2 (April 2012), accessed February 29, 2016, DOI:10.1177/0891243211434612.

3 Levi Gahman, "Gun rites: hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal ideology in rural Kansas," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, October 20, 2014, accessed February 29, 2016, doi:10.1080/0966369X.2014.970137.

4 Stroud, "Good Guys with Guns,"

5 Ibid,

6 Ibid,

7 Burkett, "Much Ado About... Something,"

8 Gahman, "Gun rites: hegemonic masculinity,"

9 Burkett, "Much Ado About... Something,"

10 Ibid

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Gahman, "Gun rites: hegemonic masculinity,"

15 Ibid.