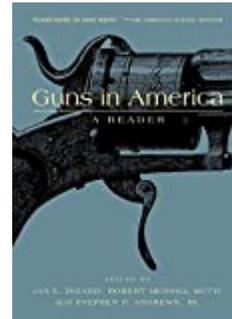




Jan E. Dizard, Robert Merrill Muth, Stephen P. Andrews, eds. *Guns in America: A Reader*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. ix + 517 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-1879-7; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1878-0.



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Published on H-Pol (June, 2000)

The Culture of Gun Control and Gun Rights in the United States

The general theme of this volume concerns the existence of a cultural divide in the United States between those who support gun rights and those who call for greater controls on the ownership of firearms. Although there are many positions on the question, more avid participants tend to divide over the issue in two major ways: those who believe that they are protecting a basic constitutional right against those who would expand government powers into a fundamental area of individual autonomy, versus those who want to maintain social order and responsibility against those who would take individualism to the point of social chaos.

Because the issue of gun rights and gun control has generated a great deal of writing in the last few years, the editors undoubtedly found it a difficult task to select a group of previously published essays for this volume, and any reviewer will certainly find some fault in the choices that have been made. In addition, editors of a volume on such a controversial topic may have difficulty deciding to what extent they wish to intrude into the readings by providing their own commentary on the subject, and reviewers once more can second guess these

decisions. Although the volume is a very good collection for anyone wishing to gain a greater understanding of the gun control/gun rights issue, I will have some of my own second-guessing to do on these points.

The editors have divided the volume into four parts. In the first, entries investigate the historical development and present status of the gun culture in the United States. The second includes essays on the present conflict over the place of guns in American society, including what the editors call pro-gun and anti-gun stances. In the third part, the editors return to explicit cultural themes, referring to guns as the focus for a cultural battleground. These essays deal with the present attitudes toward guns among sub-populations, the role of firearms in the causes and cures of crime, the status of firearms among historically disadvantaged groups, and attitudes toward government in certain subpopulations that apparently militate in favor of gun ownership and against gun control. The final section includes essays that suggest policy proposals from both sides of the gun debate. Although the editors have done a good job of selecting essays to be placed in each category, the subjects of specific

entries tend to cross lines of easy classification (for instance, John R. Lott, Jr.'s, article on the deterrent value of concealed handguns, which appears in the "Cultural Battleground" section, could just as well have been placed along with the pro-gun entries in Part II). Therefore, an index would have provided additional assistance for the reader wishing to investigate a particular topic.

Some of the authors stand out in their special ability to clarify particular aspects of the topic of guns in America. In the first article of Part I, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760-1865," Michael A. Bellesiles convincingly describes an early America in which only a minority of the population had much interest in possessing firearms. Bellesiles's discussion adds support to the claim that public policies can have significant impacts on the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of large portions of the population. Ironically, although gun rights advocates often perceive government as a major threat to their rights, government policies enacted in the nineteenth century to encourage the production of firearms played an important role in spreading gun ownership in the general population. This policy trend culminated with the Civil War when the national government placed firearms in the hands of American soldiers, who kept their weapons after the conflict. Following the war William Conant Church established the National Rifle Association (NRA) in order to improve the marksmanship of Americans in anticipation of future conflict. The organization ultimately became a conduit for distributing surplus military firearms to the population. David T. Courtwright's treatment of "The Cowboy Subculture" offers further insights into the place of firearms in America, specifically during the period of the legendary "old west." The author includes descriptions of violence in cattle towns, the development of vigilantism, and the ultimate creation of the cowboy myth that continues to thrive in popular fiction and cinema.

The pro-gun rights and pro-gun control essays provide glimpses of the nature of the controversy over firearms. The editors include entries from such gun rights partisans as Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the NRA; Tanya K. Metaksa, former executive director of the NRA's political arm, the Institute for Legislative Action; and NRA president Charlton Heston. On the pro-control side, contributors include Sarah Brady, vice chair of Handgun Control, Inc., the most prominent gun control organization; former U.S. surgeon general C. Everett Koop; and Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, two researchers who have for many years investigated the relationship between firearms and violent crime. Even

though the Second Amendment plays such an important role in the discussions of gun control, especially from the pro-gun rights side, few of the essays focus on this central ingredient in the gun control debate.

Only Heston's piece deals explicitly with this element of the Bill of Rights. Readings that focus primarily on the constitutional question of the right to possess firearms, transcending questions about the practical usefulness of firearms to the average citizen or the effectiveness of firearms policies, would have added an important element of the debate over firearms.[1] As a political scientist, I was especially sensitive to the lack of entries treating the actual policy struggles over the passage of legislation, including the tactics and relative strengths and weaknesses of differing interest groups. A focus on the role that bargaining, negotiation, and compromise play in the formation of public policy can lead to a clearer understanding of why a particular policy succeeds or fails.[2]

Although the editors have gathered together pieces by some of the more well-known advocates and researchers, there appear notable absences among the list of contributors. One is Gary Kleck, the University of Florida criminologist who gained wide attention for his research on firearms and crime.[3] Kleck's research led him to the highly controversial conclusion that guns are used by law-abiding citizens in self-defense far more often than by those committing crimes. An entry by Don B. Kates could have added some fireworks to the selections, given Kates's quick wit and avid support of gun rights.[4] On the other side of the gun debate, entries by Philip Cook and Garen Wintemute, researchers whose findings supporting further gun control have been strongly attacked by gun rights activists, might have established more effectively the pro-gun control position and in particular the epidemiological model which has been popular among medical researchers investigating gun violence.[5]

Part III contains several good pieces on American culture, such as Edward C. Hansen's discussion of "The Great Bambi War," a comparison of two very different populations in Putnam County, New York: the poorer "native residents," and the more recent arrivals who work in New York City but reside in this small rural community. Hansen does not focus primarily on guns, although some comments indicate that a firearms tradition is an important ingredient in the cultural gulf between the two subpopulations: "To the woodchuck [native population], deer is meat; to the Keynesian [New York City workers],

it's Bambi." Because these essays were not prepared for this book but are derived from previously published material, the editors might have expanded their introductory comments to explain more fully their understanding of the significance that such cultural discussions have for the core issue related to guns in America.

Some excellent entries appear in the final portion of the book, which concerns possible solutions to the difficulties often seen as originating in the wide distribution of firearms in the United States. Two essays in particular merit special notice. First, a section from David B. Kopel's book *The Samurai, the Mountie, and the Cowboy*, is a thoughtful presentation of what Kopel, a strong supporter of gun rights, concludes are realistic options for a nation which has a number of guns in private hands roughly equal to the total population. Research director for the libertarian Independence Institute, Kopel maintains that the strict gun control policies of other nations, such as Japan and Great Britain, could not succeed in the United States, given the large number of weapons in private hands and the nation's long tradition of individualism. He recommends that state and local governments emphasize responsible gun ownership, perhaps requiring that a prospective gun owner receive safety training prior to purchasing a firearm. Another essay, Wendy Kaminer's "Second Thoughts on the Second Amendment," recounts her attendance at a two-day seminar on guns and the Constitution sponsored by Academics for the Second Amendment, a pro-gun rights group. Kaminer describes her verbal jousting with gun rights advocate Don Kates, who led the seminar, and reflects on the tension between republicanism and liberal individualism within the gun rights position. She notes that gun rights advocates support republican arguments in favor of gun ownership, focusing on firearms as a means of protecting the integrity of the community, while they at the same time emphasize the importance of firearms in maintaining individual autonomy.

What does the future hold for firearms ownership in the United States? Trying to establish secular trends can be a risky business. In the last reading, "Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America," originally published in 1995, James D. Wright states that the percentage of households owning firearms (hovering around 50 percent) has remained constant for approximately 40 years. However, in more recent surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, smaller percentages (declining to about 35 percent) of those interviewed indicated that there is a firearm present in the home. If this trend continues (a big if), it may combine with another

trend – the decline in violent crime rates across the country – to alter the landscape for the debate over gun control and gun rights. A possible scenario involves the declining political salience of the gun issue as the proportion of the population considered a part of the "gun culture" decreases. The adoption of certain gun control proposals, such as limiting handgun sales to one per month and requiring firearms owners to keep their weapons secure in order to prevent inadvertent use by children as well as to discourage theft (which, according to Wright, is a major source of firearms in the illicit market), could reduce the concerns of both sides of the gun rights/gun control debate by keeping guns out of the "wrong hands." Law-abiding citizens would be left to enjoy their gun collections and recreational sports while gun control supporters would declare at least partial victory by initiating moderate steps to keep guns away from those engaged in criminal activity.

This more optimistic scenario perhaps fails to take sufficient notice of evidence – much of which the essays in this volume provide – that the gun rights/gun control issue is deeply ensconced in American culture and political beliefs. Therefore, deep controversies over what firearms policies can be considered "reasonable" may continue for some time in different branches of government within the American federal system.

Notes

[1]. For discussions of the Second Amendment, see, for instance, Garry Wills, "To Keep and Bear Arms," *The New York Review of Books* (September 21, 1995), 62-73, and Sanford Levinson, "The Embarrassing Second Amendment," *Yale Law Journal* 99 (1989), 637-59.

[2]. See, for instance, Robert J. Spitzer, *The Politics of Gun Control* (2d ed.; New York: Chatham House, 1998), for a discussion of the political battles over the gun control issue.

[3]. Kleck, *Targeting Guns: Firearms and Their Control* (Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997).

[4]. Kates, et al., "Guns and Public Health: Epidemic of Violence or Pandemic of Propaganda," *Tennessee Law Review*, 62 (1995).

[5]. See, for instance, Cook, "The Technology of Personal Violence," in Michael Tonry, ed., *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, Vol. 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and Wintemute, *Ring of Fire: The Handgun Makers of Southern California* (Sacramento, Cal.: Violence Prevention Research Program, 1994).

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Citation: Glenn H. Utter. Review of Dizard, Jan E.; Muth, Robert Merrill; Andrews, Stephen P., eds., *Guns in America: A Reader*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

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