

25. GUNS, TRUMP, AND THE NRA

By Adam Hochschild, *New York Review of Books*, April 2018

“Welcome, Patriots! Gun Show Today,” says a big sign outside the Cow Palace, a huge conference facility in Daly City, California, just south of San Francisco. 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.

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.

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.

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.

The NRA 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. The magazine *Sports Afield* said 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, when Donald Trump became president, 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 second 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.

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.”

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?
