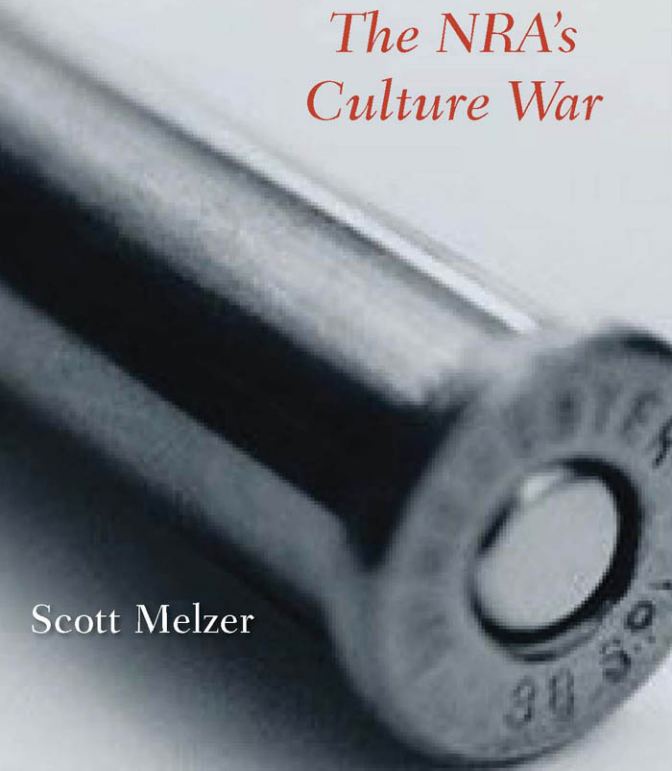


Gun Crusaders

*The NRA's
Culture War*

Scott Melzer



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*For Tina, Dan, and Mom,
my three pillars*

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Preface

I grew up in middle-class neighborhoods within South Florida's suburban sprawl, where guns had little impact on our lives. My family and friends neither participated in a rural gun culture nor had to deal with the high rates of gun violence so prevalent in urban areas at the time. Like so many boys, I shot BB guns as a kid. I'm sure some of our neighbors kept guns in their homes, and, as a teenager, I had friends and acquaintances who owned guns but they had little relevance in our world. Gun control and gun rights were not bitterly contested, and guns were not celebrated as symbols of freedom or derided as symbols of death. They existed much like a Florida alligator sunning itself by a golf course lake—appearing only occasionally and drawing lukewarm interest when doing so. If guns played virtually no role in my youth, then the political activities of the National Rifle Association probably crossed my mind about as often as those of the American Association of Retired Persons.

Masculinity, however, colors nearly every one of my childhood memories. From the role my athleticism played in making friends and avoiding being ostracized, to the endless rituals of questioning others' masculinity and having my own questioned, to the palpable daily fear of violence at the hands of bigger boys, masculinity mattered. Popularity and pecking orders were established largely based on athleticism and physicality. I earned enough cultural capital from sports and a quick mouth to prevent being a victim of boyhood violence, despite my small size. Even though my personal encounters with violence were as rare as my handling of guns, I almost never thought about guns but regularly feared getting hit by peers, often those whom I considered friendly acquaintances. Guns and masculinity are intricately linked in so many ways, but for my own childhood they only came together on television or in the movies. My friends and I could see the connections between guns and masculinity, but we didn't live these connections.

My interest in the NRA arises from my ongoing interest in masculinity. More specifically, I am interested in men's responses to actual and perceived threats to their status and identities. My earlier work includes an examination of the impact of men's jobs on their use of violence against women partners. Men working in women-dominated occupations, such as clerical support jobs, have the highest rates of violence against women partners among employed men. These men doing "women's work"—much like men who are unemployed or have women partners who earn most of the couple's income—may compensate for their diminished breadwinner status and masculine identities by using violence against women to reassert authority within the home.¹ When I began this project I conceptualized the NRA as a men's movement, or at least a movement centered on a particular form of masculinity. Only after analyzing NRA literature and speaking with NRA members did I fully come to understand the gun rights movement as a form of collective action in response to perceived challenges to conservative men's status and identities. At the individual level, some men use violence against their wives in response to perceived threats to their status and identity in intimate relationships. At the group level, some men join social movements that offer a masculinity politics promoting a similar, though more generalized fear of men's loss of status, identity, and power to other social groups (such as women).

When I began this study, little research on the NRA existed through the lens of gender or of social movements. My aim in this book is to show that the NRA incorporates both an explicit and subtle masculinity politics and that these political views and messages, and the responses to them, have fueled the NRA's extraordinary transformation into a potent conservative culture war force. Given the NRA's large membership and the singular political power it wields in Washington and across the country, the organization and its members are worthy of further study. In short, I want to know what makes them tick.

Introduction

“From my cold, dead hands!” shouted Charlton Heston. The audience roared its approval for their President and charismatic leader. Heston was the only person defiantly holding a rifle over his head, but, as I scanned the room, everyone appeared ready to take up arms in the gun wars. Forty thousand strong attended the 2002 National Rifle Association (NRA) annual meeting in Reno, Nevada. They came for the guns. To hold them, talk about them, celebrate them, and, most important, defend them.

Unlike millions of other gun owners, the NRA and its faithful members believe that “gun rights” are under attack. They are also distinct in their belief that threats to guns are threats to *all* individual rights and freedoms. Take away gun rights, they say, and all other rights are sure to follow. An unarmed population will be unable to defend itself against a tyrannical government. Committed NRA members support the organization, because they agree with the NRA’s interpretation and defense of the Second Amendment to the Constitution. My conversations with committed NRA members reveal their profound love of the United States and their belief that gun rights are one of many that free citizens enjoy. But love is not the emotion that drives the NRA. Love is not what transformed this former group of gun enthusiasts into a four-million-member conservative social movement organization (SMO) and political lightning rod. Listening to NRA leaders and speaking with members, their most palpable emotion is *fear*.

They feel threatened by a gun culture on the decline, gun control organizations, “anti-gun” politicians, and any gun control legislation. They fear the government having the power to tell them how many and which kinds of guns they can own, if any, when and where they can shoot them or carry them, how and from whom they can buy them, and even under what circumstances they can be used for self-defense. They fear losing their guns, and they fear losing their freedoms.

Just beneath the surface of these fears lies the politics of gender and race. Freedoms and rights, after all, mean different things to different people. For the NRA and its supporters, overwhelmingly older, conservative white men, “freedom” means that the government is out of their lives. They believe that we should rely on ourselves, not the government, for basic needs like food, shelter, love, and protection. This, they argue, is how the country was founded and what made it great. Government involvement in citizens’ lives—or, worse, control over their lives—is a threat to American values and freedoms. Others see it differently, as NRA members are quick to point out. They argue that gun control advocates want the government to protect you; feminists want the government to take care of your children; affirmative action groups want to give your jobs to unqualified minorities; and welfare proponents want the government to take your hard-earned tax dollars and give them to those who are too lazy to support themselves.

Today’s NRA sees threats. Big government, or “nanny state,” policies, NRA members warn, are part of a broader culture war threatening gun rights, individual rights and freedoms, the values of self-reliance and independence, and, ultimately, white men’s status and power—all issues the NRA pushes and its members fear. To them, guns are the first line of defense. If lost, all other rights will be jeopardized and, ultimately, the political Left will have undermined American democracy and replaced it with a socialist, communist, or fascist government. NRA leaders portray themselves and their members as 21st-Century freedom fighters, fending off liberals instead of the British: *“From my cold, dead hands!”*

I’ll Fight for Freedom

Upon landing at the airport in Reno, Nevada, to attend the 2002 National Rifle Association meeting, I and other NRA attendees were greeted with a sign welcoming us to the “Biggest Little City in the World.” Billboards declaring “I’ll Fight for Freedom!” had been peppered throughout the city by the NRA, announcing its presence and the theme of that year’s meeting.

The next morning I turned on the television in my hotel room as I ate a quick breakfast before heading to the NRA’s events. It was Friday, April 26, 2002, and something terrible had happened. A news anchor referred to that morning’s tragic shootings as the “German Columbine.” Seventeen people in Erfurt, Germany, were dead, including the shooter, a former student at the school where the carnage took place. Students were crying and

hugging one another. Later that evening NRA President Charlton Heston would make the cable news rounds, politely but forcefully repeating the same line of reasoning the NRA has argued for decades: guns don't kill people, people kill people. Just three years earlier, nearly to the day, the American Columbine took place. That year the NRA annual meetings had not yet begun in nearby Denver, and the fifteen shooting deaths resulted in the NRA holding an abridged meeting schedule. Erfurt, Germany, is a long way from Reno, however, so no similar outcry to cancel the NRA meetings was heard. Rather than rhetorically jousting with the local media and mayor, as Heston had done after Columbine, NRA speakers did not mention the German shootings and Reno's mayor embraced the NRA at its welcoming ceremony.

The 2002 ceremony theme was "A Day for Heroes," as 9/11 had occurred less than a year ago and was on the minds of the NRA and its members. Groups of all political interests have honored the first-responders who risked their lives that tragic day. For the NRA, the task is effortless. Virtually all their ceremonies are awash in red, white, and blue. They see great overlap between the heroes of 9/11, the heroes throughout U.S. history, and the NRA-labeled heroes in the audience for the ceremony—all are American patriots fighting for freedom. The NRA's top officer, Executive Vice President (EVP) Wayne LaPierre, hosted the event. Despite having the unenviable task of regularly sharing the stage with the charismatic Heston and his salt-of-the-earth appeal, the stiff, bespectacled LaPierre generally receives enthusiastic standing ovations from NRA crowds. He was applauded because his long and steady leadership (along with Heston as figurehead) has helped the NRA reach its zenith. Four million members, serious political clout, and \$200 million in annual revenue helps NRA members ignore whatever folksy charm LaPierre lacks.

I arrived at the ceremony as the doors were closing, a bit late because I'd spent some time furiously writing notes in the building's only discrete location: a bathroom stall. I managed to talk my way past a security guard, who was turning away all latecomers because the crowd far exceeded the room's seating and standing capacities. The ceremony began with the pledge of allegiance, soon followed by a mini Oak Ridge Boys concert. Between songs, one of the Oak Ridge Boys drew a roar from the crowd when he told us that, when asked to perform for NRA members, his only thought was "lock and load!" They began their set with "American Made" ("My Baby Is American Made, Born and Bred in the U.S.A.") and finished with some gospel music. As I looked around the room, I did not notice

any non-Christian members walk out in anger or appear offended by the religious lyrics.

Soon the mood turned somber as LaPierre called out the names of 9/11 victims, family members, police officers, and rescue workers who were also NRA members. The ceremony was slow and emotional, as LaPierre greeted emergency responders and many of the victims' families on stage. With the terrorist attack still fresh in our minds, and public and political debates about balancing freedom and safety heating up, this tribute to the "heroes of 9/11" fit well with the overall theme of the meeting, "I'll Fight for Freedom." Later, singer Lee Greenwood took the stage and sang several patriotic songs, capped off by his hit song, "God Bless the U.S.A." With the crowd singing along, an NRA member walked from the back of the hall to the stage to shake Greenwood's hand. The member, a man in his seventies, wore a mesh NRA baseball cap and was decked out in red, white, and blue from head to toe. He was draped in a short-sleeve, button-down American flag shirt, shorts with U.S. stars on one leg and stripes on the other, and calf-high red-and-blue-striped socks with white sneakers. On the way back to his seat, an older woman stopped him to give him a hug. LaPierre ended the ceremony exclaiming, "Let's have a great weekend!"

Hotel shuttles, city busses, and a full parking lot of mostly trucks and RVs poured throngs of people into the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. A long row of well-staffed registration booths lined the wall of the main hallway, flanked on the left by an enormous gun show and on the right by meeting rooms for smaller weekend events. The main hallway ceiling was filled with ten-foot banners of famous NRA members and their guns, looming over us like watchful deities. Among those proud and famous members declaring "I'm the NRA" were Heston, fellow actor Tom Selleck, author Tom Clancy, and professional basketball player Karl Malone. Around the corner stood thirty-deep lines of admirers waiting to meet (or just buy books written by) Heston, LaPierre, and NRA Board Member/rock star/*Kill It & Grill It* author Ted Nugent. Another group lined up to purchase an incredible range of products emblazoned with the organization's image. Belt buckles and hats, mugs and bumper stickers, even earrings and infant bibs were gobbled up at the NRA store. The NRA is a brand that sells.

The crowd had a rural feel in Reno, with its profusion of NRA black-and-gold shooter's caps, jeans with suspenders, a lot of facial hair—and, if you never spoke to any of them or if you grew up in urban areas,

perhaps a sense that all of the worst stereotypes of an NRA member are true. Trucks parked outside were covered with bumper stickers sharing members' views on guns, crime, and hunting: "If guns cause crime, then matches cause arson" and "I Love Animals: They Taste Great." T-shirts being sold and worn in the gun show hall displayed similar themes. One read "Nice Rack," with a picture of antlers splashed across the chest of a woman's spaghetti-strapped tank-top. A woman in her twenties passed by me wearing a T-shirt with the words "Feminine Protection" right above a picture of a semi-automatic handgun. Most members wore clothes that fit with stereotypes of poor or working-class rural gun owners: tight blue jeans, cowboy boots, big belt buckles or suspenders, and flannel shirts. But after speaking with dozens of them, it became clear that they are mostly middle class in terms of formal education, employment, and income. A year later when I attended the annual meeting in Orlando, suspenders and blue jeans were largely replaced by khaki pants and polo shirts. A handful of members were in full camouflage, including a seven-year-old boy in Reno who topped off his outfit with a military helmet. Others, virtually all staff and gun-show vendors, wore suits. A disproportionate number of young, blonde, attractive women worked the booths at the gun shows.

The attendees were largely men. Most striking was that over the course of the weekend I could count the number of people of color I saw on two hands—and I had walked by and sat next to thousands of people. The gathering was unquestionably white, and in that regard I fit right in. Though I was somewhat younger than most attendees, I was hardly noticeable in my usual unstylish graduate student outfit—a pair of dark blue jeans, hiking boots, and a plain T-shirt, just another bearded face in the crowd. A year later at the Orlando Board of Directors meeting, the incoming NRA President Kayne Robinson spoke about recruiting NASCAR fans, noting, "They're us and we're them." Knowing their supporters well, the NRA followed up the Oak Ridge Boys and Lee Greenwood in Reno with Toby Keith in Orlando.

On Saturday morning I headed back to the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. The official annual meeting of members session began with a brief prayer, followed by rock concert-like introductions of the NRA officers. President Charlton Heston received a thunderous standing ovation. Continuing an ongoing tradition, Wayne LaPierre located the youngest (age five) and oldest (age ninety-seven) lifetime NRA members in attendance. The oldest one grabbed the microphone and offered thoughts mirroring those of the NRA officer reports to come. He warned his fellow members

about the importance of winning elections. If gun rights candidates lose, he cautioned, the cops will come to our homes and take away our guns. James Jay Baker, the NRA's chief lobbyist, earned a laugh when he told LaPierre that, after eight years of Clinton in office, Baker felt like the NRA's oldest member. This theme carried through the officer reports just as it comes up repeatedly in NRA speeches, mailings to members, and organizational magazines. Bill and Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, the media, gun control groups, and "anti-gun" academics and Democratic politicians (such as New York's Charles Schumer and California's Dianne Feinstein) are ridiculed and booed. They are the faces of gun control, the Left's cultural warriors threatening guns and freedom.

Then second Vice President (and later NRA President) Sandy Froman kicked things off by announcing, "I'm Sandy Froman and I'm proud to be part of the American gun culture." She attacked gun control advocate Josh Sugarmann of the Violence Policy Center as well as historian Michael Bellesiles, who wrote the controversial *Arming America*, which challenged the notion of a U.S. frontier gun culture.¹ Bellesiles was accused of scholarly misconduct by other academics and eventually chose to resign as professor of history at Emory University after an external committee of scholars raised serious concerns about his research. The Bellesiles controversy verified the NRA's suspicions and fears that academics are yet another arm of the anti-gun movement. Froman referred to the "intellectual terrorism" of these authors, and railed against colleges' and universities' "zero tolerance bigotry" against firearms, code for gun bans on campus grounds.

Executive Vice President LaPierre picked up where Froman left off. He accused gun control supporters of attacking freedom, referring to them as "political terrorists." Among those he accused were Americans for Gun Safety's billionaire founder Andrew McKelvey. LaPierre drew an analogy between McKelvey's well-financed attack on freedom through gun control advocacy and Osama bin Laden's well-financed attacks on freedom through terrorism:

In fact, the way Andrew McKelvey's network operates sounds a lot like Osama bin Laden and [Al-Qaida]. A billionaire with an extremist political agenda, subverting honest diplomacy, using personal wealth to train and deploy activists, looking for vulnerabilities to attack, fomenting fear for political gain, funding an ongoing campaign to hijack your freedom and take a box cutter to the Constitution. That's political terrorism, a far greater threat to your freedom than any foreign force.²

For LaPierre the connections are clear: gun control supporters are no better than Al-Qaida, as both want to take away Americans' freedoms. The NRA warns that the Left's culture war is a greater threat to individual rights and freedoms than a real war. The crowd was engaged with LaPierre's strong words and surely looking forward to their President finishing the rhetorical disemboweling of the "anti-gunners." Heston, however, had begun to display the effects of what was later diagnosed as the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Partly in lieu of a member-rallying speech, we were shown a Heston-narrated video tribute to Ronald Reagan, the first sitting U.S. President to attend the NRA's annual meeting and also the first presidential candidate the NRA endorsed, in 1980.

Show Us Your Gun

With free time before an afternoon session on the media, I headed to the gun show and exhibit hall. It was a shooter's paradise. The enormous hall was filled with row after row of guns and gear vendors, offering everything a hunter, sport shooter, collector, or self-defense practitioner desires. Gun enthusiasts wandered the building like kids in a toy store, admiring, touching, aiming, and talking about a vast array of firearms and accessories.

I hoped to speak with NRA members while flying under the organization's radar. I wanted to get a sense of members' backgrounds, their views on gun control and gun rights, how they feel about the NRA, and their broader social and political attitudes. Documenting the official positions of the NRA and its leaders through magazines and speeches is much easier. The NRA meetings attract a variety of members, though most are strongly committed to the organization. Some fly from all over the country to attend, and others only attend the meetings one time simply because it was held near their home. Some attend all gun rights sessions, whereas others only go to the gun show. The gatherings draw tens of thousands of members, but maybe 10% attend the official annual meeting where NRA business is discussed and sometimes voted on. Empty seats were plentiful in Reno and Orlando, suggesting a range of commitment among the attendees and therefore among those whom I spoke with and interviewed.

At the Reno meeting, I found a high foot-traffic area outside to solicit interviews. It was a typical spring day, sunny and mild. The combination of clear skies and a meticulously organized NRA gathering seemed to put everyone in a good mood. A steady flow of people filtered in and out of

the convention center for the NRA gathering. Sign-up sheets in hand, I began obtaining contact information.

A couple in their sixties passed by and I asked if they would be interested in sharing their views on gun control. Big mistake. As they brusquely walked away, the woman turned to me and yelled, “What about people control?!” I refined my approach and avoided language that spoke to members’ gun control fears, instead asking them to share their views on gun rights, the Constitution, and threats to both. I soon was filling my sheets with contact information for in-depth telephone interviews after the meetings.

I joined the NRA in 2001, when I began this research (see appendix for a discussion of research methods and data). By joining the NRA, attending some of its official events, reading countless NRA materials dating back several decades, and speaking at length with members, I can offer an insider’s perspective along with an outsider’s critique. Given the NRA’s distrust of the media and academics, I had to convince many skeptical members that I would not misquote them or twist their words if they agreed to be interviewed. Flashing my membership card was undoubtedly a huge help in obtaining volunteers. Still, this was not enough for some. Three members who could have doubled as Hell’s Angels bikers—big, stocky guys wearing jeans, boots, big belt buckles, leather jackets, and long facial hair—were not impressed. Before agreeing to share their contact information, they asked me to show them my gun. Ironically a sign on the convention center door made it clear that no personal weapons were allowed in the building. Sign or no sign, I assumed these guys could care less about the rules and carried a concealed weapon wherever they damn-well pleased. But I was not packing. Eventually I eased their fears and they warmed up to me, as we swapped stories about California’s concealed carry laws. Complaining about the “Left Coast” poster child of “political correctness,” where “all the Socialists are,” is a favorite NRA pastime.³ By lunchtime I obtained a long list of names that would later result in interviews, all without having to pull out a gun.

Liberals: Evil, Not Stupid

One of the defining characteristics and a key source of power for the contemporary NRA is its status as a top dog for the conservative movement. Gun politics have become increasingly partisan over time, and the NRA has explicitly picked a side by putting nearly all its eggs in the

conservative/Republican basket. Today's NRA is a cultural warrior for the Right, so it is no surprise when fellow conservative cultural warriors are invited to speak at NRA gatherings about the perceived biases of the "liberal media," gun-related and otherwise.

At 1:30 on Sunday afternoon in Reno, a small NRA session on the media was standing-room only. "For The Record: Media Commentators Speak Out!" was moderated by former *Dallas* actress Susan Howard, an NRA Board member. The panel featured four participants: Kellyanne Conway, a regular conservative television commentator and President and CEO of the polling company inc.; Grover Norquist, conservative activist, President of Americans for Tax Reform, and NRA Board member; Debbie Schlusel, conservative political commentator and columnist; and Armstrong Williams, conservative columnist and radio and television host. No members of the "liberal media" would be speaking this day.

As expected at an NRA session of conservative media commentators, talk centered on the "anti-gun liberal media." Susan Howard set the tone for the session, casting conservative activists and media as victimized minorities waging a just battle against the omnipresent liberal media. She pleaded with her fellow members not to fear speaking up against the powerful majority. "When you stand before God, you'll know you did good." Grover Norquist, a major player in the conservative movement since at least the Reagan era, emphasized that gun owners and conservatives were not staring down well-meaning but wrongheaded opponents. Rather, the political Left is waging a culture war that threatens conservative values. "They're not stupid. They're evil" was Norquist's description of liberals and their agendas. He proudly pointed out that, despite the injustice at the hands of the media, "we're [conservatives] winning the elections."

Debbie Schlusel's interpretation was slightly different than Norquist's "evil, not stupid" theme. She tried to capture the NRA audience by arguing, "We're cool and they're the freaks." Schlusel was sick and tired of the "liberal media" repeatedly depicting NRA members as gap-toothed, suspender-wearing rednecks. NRA members, gun owners, and conservative rural Americans are the cool ones, she said. Liberals, or "weirdos" and "wackos," fell into the freak category. Gun control activists and "womb-envy" sensitive guys are "girly-men." They're the freaks. "But I'm a girl and I use a gun," Schlusel said.

The audience could barely stay seated, as one speaker after another told them what they already knew to be true and were happy to hear: they are the real Americans, the patriots, the ones who know what's best for

this country. They must continue to fight, because liberals have gained too much power and influence, particularly over the media. America was losing its way, straying from its original values. Instead, the conservative panelists argued, the “liberal media elite,” with their “chai teas and lattes,” their “gated communities” and “private schools,” are trying to push their own left-wing, anti-gun views and lifestyles onto the rest of the country. Using the not uncommon NRA practice of red-baiting, Kellyanne Conway argued that these “Bolsheviks” privately refer to one another as “comrade” and are conducting a culture war against gun owners. Conservative cultural warriors label anyone supporting some measure of gun control as a freedom-hating Communist.

Armstrong Williams, the only African American panelist, took the microphone and quickly had the nearly entirely white audience riveted. Few of them had likely seen an orator deliver a political sermon such as the one by this self-identified Pentecostal. Williams said that he had to let media members Bryant Gumbel and Ted Koppel know that “I’m American first” and Black second, so they shouldn’t assume otherwise. As other conservative scholars as well as some liberal politicians and activists have done, Williams argued that gun laws are racist, as they prevent African Americans from obtaining concealed carry licenses. These critics point out that law-enforcement officers are less likely to sign off on African Americans’ applications to carry a concealed weapon for protection. Though speaking to a nearly entirely white audience, Williams said that we need to “get minorities to understand that ‘they’ [whites] don’t want ‘you all’ [African Americans] to own guns.” In referencing the need for armed protection, Williams attacked single parents as the primary culprits raising criminals. Liberals and the liberal media are to blame for crime and the denial of the right to self-defense for African Americans, he argued.

Gun control was far from the panel members’ only target, as this is only one of many culture war threats. Kellyanne Conway also attacked gays and lesbians, “pro-abortionists,” and single parents. She told us that though it is “fun” to talk and e-mail gossip about gays and lesbians, in the end it is not an important issue. This followed her attack on “identity politics”—code for political divisions along gender, race, class, and sexuality lines. Do not pay attention to public polling suggesting otherwise, she admonished, because identity politics is unimportant. In one polling-related attack, Conway said that Americans have an easier time naming the Rice Krispies characters than Supreme Court Justices. Though she admitted that Snap, Crackle, and Pop get more face time on television, her

point was that students do not take enough civics courses because they are too busy taking art, physical education, and other less worthwhile (often liberal) endeavors. Conway, half jokingly, expressed annoyance that Americans did so poorly on their Supreme Court quiz. “Come on, at least get the two chicks and the Black guy!” she scorned, as the room of listeners laughed. “Feminists probably didn’t vote,” she said, “because one of [the cereal character’s] names was ‘Pop’” and this was too “misogynistic.” Identity politics does seem to matter for Conway, if only to serve as a source of contempt. She pursued her point in a description of a liberal counterpart who receives more air time than she does on CNN: “She’s Black and has corn rows and the whole thing.” For Conway, her African American colleague is a popular commentator for the liberal media because she represents identity politics.

At the conclusion of the final presentation, the audience rose in a standing ovation. Here were a couple hundred NRA members cheering on the conservative speakers’ attacks on liberal figures and politics. It became clear to me that the NRA is not just fighting for guns. Committed NRA members’ support for gun rights is about freedom, independence, self-reliance, and their American way of life. Though they rally behind and respond to these ideas, beneath all that is *fear*.

The driving force behind these gun rights activists is fear, and not just of gun control foes but also of feminists, criminals, terrorists, gays, and Communists. They perceive that liberals are plotting to take away their gun rights and give women, gays, and people of color not equal but “special” rights. The gun-owning, rural, conservative, straight, white man is the new victim of discrimination, the new minority, they believe. NRA members must fight back before it’s too late. “We should have bombed Berkeley first, then Kandahar,” one audience member said, wishing the culture war of the Right would produce as many casualties in liberal American cities as U.S. military strikes against the Taliban did in Afghanistan.

Playing Offense

The NRA is winning the gun battle. Despite their constant warnings about threats to guns and freedom, the NRA is a powerful social movement organization facing comparably weak gun control associations with modest agendas. The NRA typically errs on the side of fear tactics when deciding between talk of ominous threats and the likelihood of victory. Like many SMOs, they’ve discovered that fear generates more member support.⁴ The

reality, however, is that they have been dominating the gun wars for years, and nothing suggests that this will change soon.

At the modestly attended 2003 annual meeting session, “Women Aiming High,” NRA 2nd Vice President Sandy Froman joined a discussion about Charlton Heston’s positive impact on the NRA. Referring to the NRA’s status, she told the audience: “We’re at our peak . . . it’s only gonna get better.” Similarly, a video recognizing Heston’s contributions rattled off NRA successes to a large crowd of Heston well-wishers. Heston ran for the NRA presidency in 1998 with the goal of quelling the NRA’s internal fighting over financial problems and projecting a better image of the organization. He wanted to increase the membership and the war chest, steer the NRA back into the mainstream, and elect a pro-gun president by the end of the century. Three years later, at the 2000 Charlotte meetings, he reflected on his and the NRA’s incredible accomplishments.⁵ The organization had added one million members to reach four million, increased its budget and controlled spending, and was now in mainstream political debates and helped defeat Al Gore and elect George W. Bush. This was a rare moment when the NRA encouraged its members to focus on the organization’s many victories and, at least momentarily, ignore any threats.

NRA leaders were more likely to share their joy and optimism in relative privacy at the two Board of Directors meetings I attended in Reno and Orlando, both beginning on the Monday after the annual meetings. The NRA’s seventy-six person board far exceeded the number of regular NRA members attending the board meetings, many of whom appeared to be family members of officers and directors. I did not attend any board meetings that did not coincide with the annual meetings, but presumably even fewer regular NRA members would travel to attend just a board meeting. I imagine that NRA members’ lack of attendance at board meetings reflects their satisfaction with the status and direction of the organization. NRA officers’ gloating messages to the board contrasted sharply with their portrayal of threats to gun rights at the members’ meetings. “The bottom line is, we’re on the offense,” Wayne LaPierre proudly announced at the Reno board meeting. By this he meant that the NRA was able to focus on lobbying *for* “pro-gun” legislation rather than *against* gun control legislation. In Orlando a year later he told the board that the NRA is “stronger and more widely accepted than ever.”

Like many organizations, the NRA has a long history of bitter in-fighting that contributed to their varying degrees of effectiveness over time. No such bickering or factionalism was apparent in Reno or Orlando,

only much self-congratulating and back-patting. Officers' reports were met with smiles and applause. Staff members and board members kidded one another. One board member, while nominating someone for a committee, joked, "Unfortunately, she used to be a Democrat." All leadership positions and committee nominations were unanimous. In Reno, Heston warmly referred to LaPierre as the "rock of the NRA." He then accepted what would be his final term as NRA President, saying, "If we can do what we've done over the past year . . . we're in deep clover."

God Gave Us Moses

I walked through the smoke-filled casino floor of my Reno hotel one night, finally escaping the onslaught of blinking and ringing slot machines when the elevator doors closed behind me. Heading up to their own room was a father with an "I'm the NRA" button and his young son. I struck up a conversation with the father, and he excitedly told me about shaking Charlton Heston's hand at the actor's book table. "What a great way to start the day!" the father beamed. The NRA has been around for more than a century and had three million members before Heston's arrival, but it is hard to overstate Heston's contribution to the NRA's success. His commitment to the organization brought it into the political mainstream and spurred a surge in membership and financial resources. NRA members both admire and identify with him, largely, of course, because of his leading role as a defender of gun rights. Beyond this, however, Heston embodies a masculinity born of the frontier. He (and many of the characters he played) reflects the NRA's ideology of individual rights and freedoms, independence, and a fight-for-your-rights attitude. When he enters or exits a room filled with NRA members, Charlton Heston always receives the loudest and longest standing ovation.

The NRA celebrated Heston's last year as President by making the 2003 annual meeting "A Tribute to Charlton Heston." NRA board member Susan Howard reflected upon the NRA's success at a small session on women and the NRA, saying it was "by the grace of God" that the NRA is doing so well and has been moved from out in left field to the mainstream. Panel member Susan LaPierre, the wife of the NRA's top officer, put it simply: "God gave us Moses." Heston, she continued, is the reason the NRA has moved into the mainstream, and they could not have been more fortunate than when he decided to dedicate himself to their cause.

No NRA references to Charlton Heston as Moses, in my experience, were offered tongue-in-cheek or metaphorically. Yes, Heston the actor played Moses in *The Ten Commandments*,⁶ but Susan LaPierre sincerely referred to him as the leader of a people, sent by God to help them. In a tribute to Ronald Reagan, Heston spoke of freedom and faith: “[Reagan] believed in not just freedom of religion, but in the religion of freedom. He believed that’s why God put us here. That fostering freedom is America’s sacred purpose.”⁷ Like many NRA members, Heston believed that the Ten Commandments and Ten Amendments (to the U.S. Constitution) were handed down from God; they can almost see the divine intervention in the construction of the Bill of Rights.⁸ In the minds of NRA members, God gave them two gifts: freedom and Charlton Heston to defend it. Or, as Susan Howard noted in her opening prayer before the 2003 annual meeting of members: “Lord, bless Charlton Heston, as Charlton Heston has blessed us.”

A Friday night tribute to Heston was paired with a Toby Keith concert. After a rendition of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” we watched a film montage of Charlton Heston’s activities with the NRA, clips from his speeches, and even a segment showing him marching for civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr. Earlier in his life, Heston stumped for John F. Kennedy, but, the video’s narrator explained, the Democratic Party had changed and was no longer maintaining its pro-gun roots. The video conveyed Heston’s and the NRA’s argument that it is a nonpartisan civil rights organization, saddened and upset by the Democratic Party’s new gun control agenda.

When Bill Clinton’s face appeared on screen resounding “boooooos” rose from the audience, as Clinton was regularly seen as the most anti-gun president ever. The video contained the usual heavy dose of NRA references to patriotism and freedom, dressed up in images of the American flag. The video and the rollercoaster of emotions it provoked as it followed Heston’s life, his friends, and his enemies ended, and Charlton Heston and his wife ambled onstage. The crowd stood and cheered for a long time. Wayne LaPierre joined them and unveiled a statue of Heston as cowhand Will Penny, the actor’s favorite role, from the similarly titled 1968 Western. LaPierre announced that the statue would be placed at the NRA Headquarters in Virginia as a symbol of Heston’s contributions to freedom.⁹

Before the ceremony ended, we listened to a farewell speech Heston had taped before his health deteriorated. The crowd gave him a final standing ovation as he got up to leave. Members waved good-bye as Heston

gestured his own farewell. Unlike a stadium-sized crowd collectively waving good-bye to a beloved retiring athlete, many audience members appeared to be sending their personal farewells to Heston. They leaned and stretched in their attempts to be singled out for his attention in this crowd of thousands. This scene was repeated the next day at the annual members meeting, where, again in a video, Heston officially handed the President's gavel to his successor onstage and said his final good-bye. NRA members again stood and cheered their outgoing leader. As Heston waved, I noticed a woman standing on her chair, waving enthusiastically. She was far away and hidden from Heston's view, but she stood and waved regardless, as though saying good-bye to a family member who was catching a plane. To many members, Charlton Heston is the NRA's icon, its cowboy hero, its Moses.

Heston's pre-taped messages at his farewell ceremony in Orlando only magnified how frail he appeared in person. Nevertheless, despite suffering from a debilitating disease, he mustered enough strength to lift that Model 1866 rifle over his head one last time before exiting stage left at the annual members meeting. He belted out five final words as an eternal reminder to both his admirers and his enemies that Heston, and four million NRA members, would rather die fighting than give up their guns: "*From my cold, dead hands!*" That was to be Heston's final appearance at an NRA event. He disappeared from the limelight until he succumbed to illness and died five years later in 2008 at the age of eighty-four.

The Gun Movement

Why do Heston's words resonate so strongly with NRA members? Why do four million Americans belong to the NRA? True, many perceive serious threats to their "gun rights," but, as Charlton Heston argues, the gun is just a *symbol*.¹⁰ Former Director of the NRA-ILA (Institute for Legislative Action) Warren Cassidy once told an outsider, "You would get a far better understanding if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world." Indeed, this religion welcomes only true believers. "It was a religious war. You're either with them or against them," an aide to Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini once said about the NRA, after DeConcini tarnished his perfect NRA rating and faced a backlash for supporting gun control legislation.¹¹

NRA members, mostly conservative white men, cast themselves as heroic frontiersmen celebrating a version of American manhood from

decades past. What drives them to join the movement is not pride or celebration, but a dedication to stem the tide eroding their religion of individual rights and freedoms, to defend what I call “frontier masculinity.”¹² Characterized by rugged individualism, hard work, protecting and providing for families, and self-reliance, frontier masculinity is the mythologized dominant version of manhood from America’s frontier past.¹³ Think Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, Charlton Heston in *Will Penny*, or, more recently, Christian Bale in *3:10 to Yuma*.

The contentious debate over guns is provocative in itself, but the NRA uniquely interests me, as a sociologist, because it gained power and influence at the same time as did many other conservative, reactionary movements. The NRA and these other backlash movements are largely responding to earlier gains made by liberal movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and for all of them gender and race are often primary, if implicit, issues. The NRA has contributed to and benefited from a conservative shift in national politics. This swing to the Right has created opportunities for groups such as the Christian Right, the Promise Keepers, and movements pushing for “traditional” families to have enormous influence on national policy and public debates.¹⁴

The NRA, again like its conservative brethren, initially reacted to societal threats to its interests. Recently, however, its agenda has broadened beyond gun rights to conservative politics, and it has ridden the conservative wave to new heights of success. Internal stability and peaks in membership numbers and resources coincided with expanding political opportunities. Yet, the perceived (and often exaggerated) threat to gun rights and the NRA’s idealistic frontier masculinity also persists, and thus the NRA can both enjoy its status as the most powerful single-issue lobbying group in Washington, D.C., while agitating its members into believing that gun rights are at death’s door. The NRA frames threats to gun rights and frontier masculinity as coming from liberal culture war forces, knowing this message resonates with hundreds of thousands, even millions of conservative white men who feel they are under attack by various liberal causes, primarily gun control.

Threats to gun rights, even modest local ordinances, which in turn threaten freedom and frontier masculinity, puts at risk the fundamental beliefs and identities of devoted NRA members. Compromising on gun control is compromising oneself. They would rather die fighting than allow government authorities to confiscate their guns, which protect everything they hold dear. They are the Gun Crusaders.

Two groups comprise the Gun Crusaders: the “Critical Mass” includes the most committed NRA members and, not coincidentally, the most politically conservative; and the “Reserves,” who are somewhat less committed to the NRA and conservative politics but remain largely loyal to both. Critical Mass members tend to have lifetime NRA memberships, are involved, as volunteers, in the NRA’s political and educational activities, place gun rights as their first or second priority, and have far-right political and social views. The Reserves are less likely to be lifetime NRA members, do not volunteer to work for the organization, are much less likely to be single-issue gun rights voters, and hold more moderate conservative views.

A third group of weakly committed NRA members, the “Peripherals,” is not included here. These members are less politicized and politically conservative who join the NRA because they enjoy hunting, competitive shooting, and collecting.¹⁵ No data exist indicating the percentage of NRA members in these three categories. I assume that each group has hundreds of thousands of members, based on the organization’s generally high membership levels, the fact that one-third of the members meet NRA voting eligibility requirements (lifetime or five-year consecutive members), and both large increases and large decreases in membership have occurred during contentious political moments in modern NRA history. The overall one-third NRA voting eligibility rate compares to a roughly two-thirds rate of eligibility among the members I interviewed.¹⁶

I include the Critical Mass and Reserves here but not the Peripherals, because the former two are the heart of the organization, aligning most closely with the leadership and the NRA’s mission. Wayne LaPierre and Charlton Heston did not sign up to lead the organization because of a desire to spread the best technical firearms information possible or a deep passion for hunting. The NRA has staff to provide this information and support these less politicized commitments, thereby serving many satisfied Peripheral members. The top leaders and members who make a lifetime commitment to the NRA and are its grassroots army are the Gun Crusaders. If the NRA permanently de-prioritized gun rights, the Critical Mass and Reserves would join a different gun rights group. The NRA would be left with a large, politically weak group of gun enthusiasts and would no longer be the NRA. If the organization focused solely on gun rights politics, the Peripherals would join other hunting, collecting, and sport shooting organizations. But as the leading gun rights SMO and the largest advocate for the shooting sports, the NRA can both prioritize gun rights and retain and serve large numbers of Peripheral members.

Despite the closing of the frontier and the declining numbers of hunters and gun owners,¹⁷ NRA membership levels remain high. Threats to gun rights and frontier masculinity are met with a formidable backlash. Although gun rights are not so much at risk today as when the NRA first became an SMO and not just a gun enthusiasts' group, the NRA's recent fiery rhetoric still resonates with many gun owners, resulting in a membership surge and unparalleled political power. Kayne Robinson, Heston's successor as NRA President, told his Board of Directors that gun owners respond to gun rights threats by joining or increasing their support for the organization. The NRA, he says, is a "motivational organization" that tries to get the millions of "free-riders" (gun owners and hunters who are not NRA members) to join the "gun movement," the "juggernaut" known as the NRA. Playing to members' fears is working. As top NRA officer Wayne LaPierre points out, the NRA is stronger than ever.¹⁸

The National Rifle Association, more than any other group or individual, defines the terms of the gun debate. For better or worse, SMOs and politicians set the symbolic and legislative parameters of all culture war debates. Leaders of the NRA and those of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, of NARAL Pro-Choice America and the National Right-to-Life Committee, and of the Christian Right and the Human Rights Campaign are the voices in legislators' ears and the faces on television when the culture war topics of gun control, abortion, or same-sex marriage flare up. Culture war leaders engage in the highest-profile, media jousting matches and craft sound bites heard over and over again. True, ultimately the less polarized electorate gives thumbs up or thumbs down to culture war ballot initiatives, and politicians help craft and vote for legislation. Voters have little say, however, in what makes its way onto a state ballot or a congressional bill—the nuts and bolts of any gun, abortion, or marriage legislation. The activists do. And partly thanks to its enormous base of activist support, no other conservative culture war force has been as successful as the NRA.

Even skeptics of the culture war—who argue that most Americans are noncombatants—acknowledge that elites like major politicians and leaders of large social movements (as well as their base of activist supporters) are waging war on one another. The elites drive the cultural discourse and make policy. Those who do not participate in the culture war are still subject to its outcomes. When the battles take place nearby—when mayors try to enact gun buy-back programs or local school boards paste stickers on biology textbooks warning that evolution is just a theory—the same

rhetoric and debate parameters that elites create play out at the local level. With perhaps the weakest opposition for any culture war issue, the NRA and its broad base of Gun Crusaders are the primary determinant of U.S. gun policies. They are also the go-to single-issue group for conservatives and Republicans, waging the most successful battle in the culture wars.¹⁹

Outline of the Book

In the following chapters I explain why and how the National Rifle Association became a conservative social movement organization fighting the culture wars and drawing in millions of members. Part 1 discusses the historical and contemporary events that resulted in the NRA's defense of both gun rights and frontier masculinity. Chapter 1 examines the exaggerated history of a U.S. gun culture, connecting it to the similarly mythologized version of manhood that is frontier masculinity. The NRA was founded just as white men's pioneering on the frontier ended. It was only much later that the NRA relied upon culturally constructed images of frontier masculinity to support its political goals. As I discuss in this opening chapter, the NRA has had very different identities and missions since its inception in 1871, culminating in its transformation to the leader of the gun movement in the 1970s.

Chapter 2 places the NRA's emergence as an SMO in social and political context, analyzing the threats to gun control from liberal rights groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The NRA responded not just to threats to gun rights but also to challenges to frontier masculinity by civil rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, and antiwar movements. This was a peak period for challenges to gender and racial arrangements, whereby many white men saw their status and identities at risk, sparking conservative reactive mobilization and today's culture wars. Gun rights are a key battle in this war for individual rights and freedoms.

Part 2 focuses on NRA's leaders' and members' rhetoric and politics on gun rights and the culture wars. Chapter 3 examines how the NRA has framed gun control and gun rights since the 1940s, focusing on NRA language during both heightened and relaxed periods of threats to gun rights. The NRA's recent warnings of impending threats to gun rights, even in the face of declining objective threats, resonates with members. Membership levels have increased with every newly framed threat. Further, the NRA has skillfully tapped into not only their members' gun control fears but also their concerns about declining individual rights and

freedoms and attacks on frontier masculinity. Today the NRA calls its members “freedom fighters” and pleads with them to continue defending gun rights from the “gun-grabbing terrorists, liberals, and Communists” who threaten American freedom.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to NRA members, examining how their views on gun rights and gun control threats compare to those of the organization. Most members perceive serious and impending threats to gun rights from liberal politicians, gun control groups, and the media. Like official NRA literature, members largely believe that the Second Amendment is the foundation of freedom: if gun rights are lost, all other individual rights and freedoms will soon follow. With few exceptions, NRA members lump together their opponents as Democrats, liberals, Communists, and socialists who seek to destroy the Constitution and the American ethos of self-reliance, hard work, and personal responsibility.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into NRA members’ broader social and political views. Threats to gun rights, the most committed members argue, are part of a broader attack on their conservative political and moral beliefs. The most politically conservative members mobilize in response to a perceived culture war against white men. They believe that they are the victims of affirmative action policies, illegal immigration, and generous welfare programs, all of which, they point out, are part of a broad liberal culture war headlined by gun control efforts and threatening conservative values, white men, and frontier masculinity.

Part 3 analyzes the strong relationship between members’ conservative politics and their commitment to the NRA, as well as the extent to which the NRA is embedded in the conservative movement. Members offer varying levels of support to the NRA. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between members’ levels of commitment to the organization and their political orientations. The most committed members, the Critical Mass, are also the most socially and politically conservative. These are mostly older white men who perceive the strongest threat to gun rights, are more likely to hold positive views of the NRA, and donate the most time and money to the organization. The second category of members, the Reserves, though also committed to the NRA and generally conservative, are younger, have more women members, and are not as strongly aligned with the NRA or right-wing politics as Critical Mass members.

Chapter 7 reveals the views of the two categories of members on contemporary social and political issues. Those comprising the Critical Mass hold uncompromising right-wing political views on issues such as the war

in Iraq, racial profiling, sexuality, and welfare. These highly committed members see the world in black and white, good and evil, just as they see the battle over gun rights. Reserve members offer more mixed and moderately conservative views on contentious social issues, reflecting their more moderate overall politics.

Chapter 8 explores the links between the NRA, the Republican Party, and the conservative movement. Millions of NRA dollars are donated to political candidates, overwhelmingly Republicans, who support gun rights. The NRA's lobby also spends millions of dollars but ultimately derives its status as one of the most powerful and effective lobbies in Washington because of the NRA's grassroots army of support. Over the past fifteen years, NRA staff and leadership have become increasingly connected to the conservative movement and the Republican Party. With the politics of NRA members and the organization shifting to the Right, the NRA is the Republican Party's most potent combination of financial and voter support.