Quick Draw History - The NRA, the Politics of Memory & the Great Gun Debate

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

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Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that the National Rifle Association (NRA) is an important actor in the American gun debate. While academic and popular writing on this topic often focuses on the NRA’s lobbying and campaign donations, there is little focus on the group’s mass mobilization efforts that make these formal political endeavors possible. This dissertation explores the questions: how has the NRA become such an influential collective actor? How can we understand the group’s impact on firearms policy in the United States? More specifically, what role do narrative and memory play in understanding this influence? I argue that the NRA both draws upon and shapes historical macro-narratives regarding the role of firearms in America’s and Americans’ pasts as part of its larger effort to expand the gun culture, from which it draws its political support, and influence the gun debate, and thus firearms policy. These narratives are intended to reinforce the idea that firearms have played an integral part in American history, more so than in other countries, and that the United States has a historical tradition of gun ownership. This research is based on thematic analysis of NRA written and online audiovisual material, as well as three months of embedded fieldwork in Indiana and Virginia, which included participant observation at NRA events and firearm safety classes, an analysis of the NRA museum, and interviews with executives and ordinary members.
Acknowledgements

Throughout the process of completing my doctorate I have received a tremendous amount of support and assistance. I would like to thank a few people who have had a particular impact.

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Professor Mira Sucharov, for your endless supply of knowledge, support, and encouragement. You always knew when to challenge me, when to help me, and when to let me follow my heart.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Professor Melissa Haussman and Professor John Walsh for bringing your unique expertise into my project, and for the guidance that you have given me along the way. You have truly shaped the way I see the world.

I want to thank Professor. Kevin Avruch and Dr. Jay Moon from the George Mason University School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution for their guidance and support in the field.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the many fantastic Carleton Political Science faculty members and staff who helped me along in my journey. Professors Scott Bennett and Vandna Bhatia, for showing me the potential of Public Policy analysis. Professors Brian Schmidt and Christina Gabriel for their early guidance and feedback on my proposal. Professors Radha Jhappan and Fiona Robinson for honing my knowledge of critical theory. Professor Jonathan Malloy for everything you have done for graduate students at Carleton. Professor Elinor Sloan, for giving me the opportunity to learn through teaching. Finally, but certainly not least, Brookes Fee for shepherding me through the complex administrative requirements that plague graduate students, and Anne Farquharson for helping my research reach new audiences.

I want to thank the wonderful staff and faculty of the BGInS Department, my second home during my degree. I would especially like to thank Professors Andrew Johnson and Candance Sobers, for your guidance, and the opportunity to present my work to your students. I want to also thank Professor M. Kamari Clarke, for showing me the tremendous power that ethnography offers to shape our understanding of the world.

I want to thank my colleagues, family members, and friends, without whom I would never have been able to complete this project. My father, Ian Schwartz, for teaching me the meaning of hard work, dedication, and the power of networking. My mother, Professor Karen Schwartz, for always believing in me when others did not and for blazing a trail that I hope to follow. My sister Shira, for keeping me humble. My brother Shane, for understanding. My grandmother, Betty, for your love and encouragement. My best friend Nathan, for sticking with me through thick and thin. My compatriots Rob Currie-Wood, Will Little, Mary Coulas, Amanda Roberts, Mark Ashford, Lucas Jerusalemiec, Elsa Piersig and countless others, for making my time at Carleton so enjoyable. And of course, Marie, the love of my life, without whom none of this would have any meaning.

I dedicate this work to my participants. Thank you for sharing your stories, your dreams, and your passion with me. I only hope that I have done them justice.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Great Gun Debate

When asked about statistics released by the American Medical Association on the potential danger of guns in the home, Lt. Jeff Cooper responds:

“I will not accept that; A. In the first place I don’t believe it’s true. I believe my statistics are better than those. But in the second place I don’t think it really matters, because we are not talking about numbers here, we are talking about individual dignity. It’s more important what happens to you than what happens in two out of three cases” (quoted in Broyles, 2018).

On a foggy morning in May, I found myself driving along a backroad highway. The speed limit was 50mph, but the road twisted and turned so often I never got above forty. My GPS was going haywire, alternating between welcoming me to Virginia and West Virginia as the road snaked along the state line, leading me towards the gun club. For me, this line was an arbitrary boundary. For many of my participants who choose to concealed carry firearms it could be the difference between a Sunday drive and a legal headache, depending on the laws of the state into which they crossed. This is the nature of the many-colored patchwork that is American firearms policy.

The sky had cleared by the time I arrived at the National Rifle Association (NRA) firearms safety class. It was being held in a gun club in a rural area. The clubhouse was itself a former dwelling, a two-story home with a beige exterior and brown roof, and the class was to take place in what must have once been the living room. I walked in through a set of double glass doors and shook hands with the instructor. This was back when people still shook hands. We had spoken several times over the phone, and I had explained my project to him. He handed me an unloaded Glock 19 pistol and a holster.

“Put this on. You’ll wear it all day, but no live ammunition in the classroom”.

For the instructor, it was as casual as handing a student a pen. Unloaded, the polymer-
framed Glock 19 weighs a little over one pound and a quarter, but it weighed much more heavily on my consciousness. Every few minutes my hand would slide down, making sure it was still in place; as if it might move of its own volition.

The other students eyed me with suspicion. I could feel the heat from their glances. Who was this bespectacled Canuck in their midst, whose very demeanor oozed urban academia? A few weeks earlier, I had been back in Canada, in the four-person office I share with some of my fellow graduate students. My day had consisted of reading, writing, and teaching; a consistent and comfortable rhythm, punctuated by the occasional latte at the campus café. We debated Kant and Locke, not Colt and Glock. Now I was at the center of one of the most heated debates of the twenty-first century. What had I gotten myself into?

It is widely acknowledged that the NRA is a powerful collective actor in American politics. What is less clear is where that power comes from. Most of the scholarly attention paid to the NRA has focused principally on its congressional and state-level lobbying efforts (J. Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009). Scholars generally explain the organization’s success as largely a result of its Institute for Legal Action (ILA), the organization’s lobbying wing. The scholarly focus on lobbying and campaign financing mirrors the current popular media discourse surrounding the NRA, which frames the organization as a shadowy special interest group funneling money to congressmen to keep them in line. Yet, closer examination shows that the key to the organization’s success is its ability to mobilize supporters. For example, in Florida, where gun control legislation was defeated in the state legislature even in the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, not a single legislator had received campaign money from the NRA (Clark, 2018). Further, examining the NRA’s tax returns demonstrates that the organization actually spends much more on their teaching and communications programs than on the lobbying for
which they are famous (IRS, n.d.).

How has the NRA become such an influential collective actor? How can we understand the NRA’s impact on firearms policy in the United States? More specifically, what role does memory play in understanding this influence? These are the research questions that my project will seek to address.

While it is undeniable that the NRA ILA has won important victories for the organization, there is a missing piece of the puzzle. That is because, until recently, the scholarship has largely ignored the organization’s extensive function as a service group, and its influence on American gun culture. The NRA’s service branch is a major contributor to the gun culture in the United States. This large wing of the organization runs educational programs across the United States, such as the Eddie the Eagle gun safety program in US elementary schools and provides firearms-related training to over 1 million Americans every year (NRA, 2021). But the reach of the organization runs far deeper than the classroom. The NRA also operates three museums: the National Firearms Museum at their headquarters in Virginia; the NRA National Sporting Arms Museum in Montana; and the Frank Brownell Museum of the Southwest in New Mexico. Together, these museums attract about 350,000 visitors every year (Tucker et al., 2018). The organization’s flagship magazine, the *American Rifleman*, regularly reaches over 2 million people (Yamane, Ivory, & Yamane, 2019). Until the summer of 2019, the NRA even had its own online television platform, accessible through the organization’s homepage or various streaming services like Apple TV. NRATV offered a slew of programs including *NRA News*, *NRA Women*, and *Armed & Fabulous*.

My dissertation will examine how the NRA has attempted to influence the perceptions of the American public not just towards their present, but their past. It will argue that the
organization both draws upon and shapes historical meta-narratives regarding the role of firearms in America’s and Americans’ pasts as part of its larger effort to expand the gun culture, from which it draws its political support, and influence the great gun debate, and thus firearms policy. These narratives are intended to reinforce the idea that firearms have played an integral part in American history, more so than in other countries, and that the United States has a historical tradition of gun ownership not just for sporting and hunting purposes, but for civilian self-defense. My dissertation will demonstrate how the NRA portrays this vision of the past through events, like its annual meeting; communications, like *American Rifleman* magazine and NRA TV; and sites of memory, like the National Firearms Museum.

The narratives the NRA disseminates have three intended audiences. The first is existing NRA members, who the organization aims to galvanize and motivate towards further political action. The second group are gun owners who are not currently deeply engaged in gun culture. They may own a single firearm for self-defense, but do not participate regularly in the cultural practices of the gun culture, which are predictors of political behavior (Joslyn, 2020). The final group that the NRA targets with these narratives are the gun curious\(^1\). These people may be open to the idea of gun ownership but have not been introduced to guns or gun culture yet. Recruiting these people is a major focus for the NRA.

While the NRA draws on numerous historical narratives in their communications material, there are a few core historical narratives that are often repeated in NRA material. These narratives are malleable, and often shaped to fit a variety of historical contexts. The first narrative is that of the “Good Guy with a Gun”. This narrative involves a heroic individual using firearms in defense of themselves, others, or the wider community. This narrative is tied to the

\(^1\) This is a term I borrow from American sociologist David Yamane, who practices engaged scholarship by running two public blogs in addition to his academic duties. See: https://guncurious.wordpress.com/
image of the lone hero, which is quite powerful in American culture, and is often reproduced in American literature, film, and television. This narrative is a key pillar of support for policies like the expansion of concealed carry laws.

The second principal meta-narrative that the NRA employs is that firearms are a key tool in the cause of freedom. The retelling of this narrative is often linked to American history, like the story of the American Revolution, or the Second World War. But it is a template that NRA uses to talk about foreign conflicts as well and has been a strategy for the organization to attempt to reach a more diverse background, by emphasizing the role that firearms played in the abolition movement, or in the struggles of Indigenous peoples in American against colonial rule. This narrative helps to buttress the argument that the Second Amendment is a key protection against tyrannical government.

The third macro-narrative that the NRA often disseminates is that firearms are an essential piece of American culture. It does this by linking firearms to personal and public memories and to key ideas like the quintessential American childhood; the American family; American ingenuity and scientific prowess; and American exceptionalism. These narratives are important for establishing that Americans have a special relationship with firearms that does not exist in other countries. They establish firearms as American heritage; something in need of protection.

The proliferation of mass shootings in the United States, and advocacy by the growing pro control movement, have created a shift in the way that large institutions grapple with guns. As a growing number of industries and cultural institutions, from Hollywood to museums, have declared war on the gun culture\(^2\), the NRA realizes that they are fighting a battle over the

\(^2\) This includes major retailers like Dick’s Sporting Goods, who now refuse to carry certain types of firearms, as well as businesses like Lyft and Postmates, who have partnered with the Giffords organization to form the “Giffords
meaning of guns in America, a battle in which identity, memory, and history are important weapons.

Though the focus of this work is on understanding and explaining the role that the NRA’s historical and cultural work plays in their political strategy, it is important to note at the outset that the NRA’s historical narratives are not uncontested. A growing movement of scholars have emerged to challenge the NRA’s vision of American history, and the individual rights interpretation of the Second Amendment. Historians like Atlas (2019), Charles (2018), Haag (2016), and others have attacked this interpretation of American history, just as scholars like Halbrook (2013), Landsford (2016a) and Malcolm (1996) have buttressed it.

My dissertation will make contributions to three distinct literatures. The first is the literature on the policy process. The theories of the policy process were created to better understand how and why policy is made. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is part of this group of theories. It takes as its starting point that policymakers and ordinary people make decisions based on bounded rationality. That is, while human beings attempt to be rational, our world view is heavily influenced by emotion and cognitive biases (Cairney, 2012). As a result, narratives are powerful tools that can be used by actors to sway the opinions of policymakers and the public. I will build on the growing literature on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), bringing in insights from the literature on the politics of memory to help develop the NPF’s analysis of how actors in a policy subsystem influence macro-level cultural narratives; grand narratives shared by a large group of people about that group’s past and identity.

The second contribution my project will make is to the memory studies literature. A large

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Impact Network”. It also includes a growing movement in the museum industry to de-gun the museum, as well as attempts to remove guns from popular cartoons like Looney Toons. Finally, many Hollywood actors and pop stars have been outspoken about their support for gun control, including Chris Rock, Cardi B, Kristen Bell, Amy Schumer, Gal Gadot, Jessica Alba, Zendaya, Justin Bieber and a host of others.
part of the focus of this dissertation will be on how the NRA communicates historical narratives to influence the views of the American public on firearms policy. As a result, my project will focus on historical periods in the American past that most often feature in NRA material, such as the American Revolution, the Civil War and the various global conflicts the 20th century like the Second World War and the War in Iraq. It will also examine how the NRA ties less grandiose collective memories to these meta-narratives, such as attempting to connect members’ childhood experiences of hunting and shooting to a broader American legacy of firearms ownership. In other words, it will focus on how the NRA talks about America’s, and American’s, pasts. As a political science project, the main focus will not be on proving or disproving these historical meta-narratives but on theorizing and observing their influence on how ordinary people and NRA members view the gun debate.

The final contribution my project will make is to the nascent literature on the American gun rights movement, much of which focuses on the NRA. The literature on the NRA, and firearms policy in America more generally, is a strange beast to tame. Less of a cohesive academic literature, it is an assemblage of texts that dance across the border of academic publishers and popular presses. Nor is it contained to a single discipline. American firearms policy has been written about by criminologists, sociologists, historians, and political scientists. Like many issues it exposes the deep cracks in the artificial walls between academic disciplines.

This chapter will focus on unpacking some of the key terms, concepts and debates that will be explored throughout this dissertation. It will begin with an explanation of the parameters of the Great Gun Debate, the public conversation over firearms policy that has emerged in America, and around the world, largely since the 1960s. It will evaluate the utility of the culture wars framework, which is often applied to the debate, before giving the necessary historical
background on the NRA and the Second Amendment to foreground our discussion. This chapter presents three principal arguments. First, in the Great Gun Debate, people’s positions on guns are more often swayed by cultural views than rational evaluations of the facts. Culture shapes how people understand the social world and the objects within it and influences how we perceive risk. It is thus important to examine the role of culture in the gun debate, and the role that the NRA plays in shaping gun culture. Second, throughout the NRA’s history, the ability to mobilize large groups of supporters to participate in the political system has been key to its success. Third, the historical ambiguity surrounding the Second Amendment of the United States Bill of Rights places limitations on the ability of the constitution to solve the gun debate. Instead, political actors draw on American history strategically and instrumentally.

The Great Gun Debate

It would be difficult to find someone who has paid attention to American politics over the last several decades who is not at least peripherally aware of the existence of the Great Gun Debate (J. D. Carlson, 2014); sometimes referred to as the Great American Gun Debate (Kates & Kleck, 1997), the firearms or gun policy debate (Merry, 2016a; Smith-Walter, Peterson, Jones, & Nicole Reynolds Marshall, 2016), the gun control debate (Lacombe, 2019), or simply the gun debate (Cook & Goss, 2014; Kohn, 2004; Melzer, 2009; Wright, 1995). The debate centers around the role that firearms should play in American society. While sometimes latent, it often surges into the headlines after a major focusing event, like a mass shooting. The Great Gun Debate is popularly characterized as a fight over specific policies, with flashpoints in America coalescing around issues like Stand Your Ground laws, concealed carry, and “assault weapons”.

Like many policy issues the Great Gun Debate is not only about facts. This becomes readily apparent as soon as one seriously attempts to study it. That is not to say that facts do not
enter the debate; both sides readily lob data at one another. It is to say that in this debate there are things that matter more than facts. There is culture and the meanings that cultures generate for their practitioners. There are feelings, emotions and affect, whether that be fear of guns or fear of losing them. The debate is not about guns, but about the meanings that both sides attach, or do not attach to them, and the role that culture plays in generating those meanings.

While gun control laws, and debates over those laws, have existed in America since colonial times, the contemporary period of this debate intensified in the 1960s, when the assassinations of prominent figures like John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. raised public concern about gun control (Melzer, 2009). I will thus focus my attention in this dissertation on the debate from that time until the present. The debate sometimes remains latent but remerges and shifts after key focusing events like the Columbine Massacre in 1999, the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in 2012, or the Las Vegas strip shooting in 2017. Within this debate, several key collective actors, foremost among them the NRA, the Second Amendment Foundation, the Brady Campaign, Everytown for Gun Safety, March for Our Lives, and Moms Demand Action have worked hard to influence not just the decisions of policymakers, but the hearts and minds of the public on this issue.

Firearms policies are created at multiple levels of government in the United States. Given the unique aspects of the American federal system, no single level of government has a monopoly on regulating firearms. Unlike Canada, where most firearms policy is taken care of at the federal level, the United States has a patchwork of gun laws. While some laws do exist federally, such as the National Firearms Act (1934) or the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (1994), most firearms policymaking takes place at the state and local level.

The focus of this dissertation, however, will be less at observing the direction influence
of the NRA on specific policies, but rather focused at the level of “ideas”. While this approach will be laid out more clearly in Chapter Two, it is important to specify why ideas are important in the gun debate. At the level of ideas, the Great Gun Debate generally takes place within the media, academic journals, social media, and reports and communications by advocacy groups.

In the past, academics have largely tackled the Great Gun Debate through an empirical lens, focusing on measuring the effectiveness of various gun control laws rather than on understanding how people think about gun control laws. These studies have addressed various iterations of the question, “do more guns make society less safe or more?” This makes sense, as most people who work on this issue genuinely want to see a reduction in violent crime, especially gun crime. Further, generating empirical data that claims to offer policymakers solutions to this complex policy problem is a lot easier to sell to a funding agency than unraveling the complexity and, perhaps the intractability of the problem. In general, however, these efforts have failed to provide a broad consensus on the solution to gun violence in America (Kahan & Braman, 2003), even amongst expert groups (Berg, Lott, & Mauser, 2019). Kahan and Braman (2003) argue that this is because “empirical social scientists just aren’t addressing what members of the public really care about”. That is, they ignore the symbolic function and meaning of firearms for Americans. They argue that “how an individual feels about gun control will depend a lot on the social meanings that she thinks guns and gun control express, not just on the consequences she believes they impose”. Rather than focusing exclusively on evaluations of various gun control policies, “…academics and others who want to help resolve the gun controversy should dedicate themselves to identifying with as much precision as possible the cultural visions that animate this dispute, and to formulating appropriate strategies for enabling those visions to be expressively reconciled by law” (Kahan & Braman, 2003, p. 1294).
The Great Gun Debate is animated by culture. While later chapters will delve more deeply into the impact of gun culture on the debate, it is important to lay out, here at the beginning, the various influences that culture can have on an individual’s political opinions. This will help me to avoid the charge that culture is a nebulous term with little value for understanding policy problems.

The United States has a gun culture shared by the Second Amendment Community. This is a group of people united by their participation in the world of guns through hunting, sports shooting, sharing videos and memes online, and reading pro-gun magazines or books. This culture, as a system of knowledge, symbols, practices, and stories, influences how an individual views gun politics largely because it shapes the meanings, affect, and risk perception that one attaches to guns.

Meanings, one might say, is yet another nebulous term, so I will be more specific. American gun owners attach deep emotional and personal significance to their firearms. That is, firearms mean something to them, they have a significance that goes beyond their practical utility as objects. The bolt-action .308 that a hunter takes into the deer woods every fall is not just a tool for harvesting game meat. It means something to its owner. Maybe it was inherited from her father, who took her out hunting for the first time as a youth. Perhaps the firearm has a particular lineage. Many deer are taken with military surplus rifles from the Second World War, that were sold onto the civilian market, like the Lee Enfield carried by British and Canadian troops into battle during the Second World War. Maybe it was just her first gun, that she spent hours researching in gun magazines and online forums before settling on a model that she liked. She might even see the gun as a political statement, a way of enacting or performing her values. Regardless of the reason, that firearm has been transformed from a simple mechanical
combination of wood, polymer and metal into an object of meaning.

These meanings are shaped by various aspects of the wider American culture (McLean, 2018), from personal memory to frontier masculinity (Melzer, 2009), as well as the gun culture, a term which I will lay out more clearly in Chapter Three. For most Americans, guns have ceased to be tools of survival, like on the frontier, yet the symbolism of that period has clung to them as they shifted from essential objects to tools of leisure (Yamane, 2017). The meanings that gun owners attach to their guns are also shaped by aspects of an individual’s identity. To the African American gun owners that I met and read about, guns were a potential remedy to the systemic disempowerment they felt, and the heightened risk that their identity or zip code placed them in. Many of the women I met saw guns as a tool to ensure their safety in a world of systemic gender violence. Even for white, male gun owners, guns are a form of empowerment. Whether this is empowerment to defend oneself against crime (Carson Mencken & Froese, 2019) or a remedy to the feelings of disempowerment felt by much of rural and middle America in an age of outsourcing, the decline of middle class jobs, and increasingly widening income gaps brought on by neoliberal policies (J. Carlson, 2015).

As durable goods often passed down from generation to generation, firearms often illicit deep memories in those who hunt and shoot. Gun owners attach profound feelings to these objects that for those outside of the gun world are seen as objects of fear. Even newer firearms often evoke the designs of the past, imbued as they are through popular culture and popular memory with profound symbolism. A very modern lever-action rifle evokes for those within the gun culture the memories of hunting with grandpa or watching John Wayne exact frontier justice.

Culture also shapes ordinary Americans views of guns because it influences how people
perceive risk. Social psychologists know that cultural and moral attitudes towards certain activities shape how risky individuals think they are (Freiberg & Carson, 2010; Kahan & Braman, 2003). This is because humans face so many risks in our everyday lives, it is difficult to process each one. If we perceive an activity as normative within our socio-cultural world view, we are likely to downplay the potential risks in our assessment of that activity. If we perceive an activity as deviant, we are likely to overestimate the risks involved. The risks that we take communicate our values. Since societies, governments and political movements are “sites of competing norms”, there will always be public differences over risk assessment. Firearms policy involves weighing risks and benefits, the potential benefits that firearms provide with regards to self-defense or recreation, versus the potential risks they pose to society. Culture thus has a profound influence (Kahan & Braman, 2003, pp. 1295–1297).

The complex role of guns in US history has opened them up to a “multiplicity of social meanings”. Pro-gun people generally see guns as symbols of the values of the western frontier, a symbol of positive and heroic masculinity, and “emblems of state authority”, as well as the ability of the individual to resist state oppression. For pro-control folks, guns are symbols of patriarchy, homophobia and heteronormativity. They focus on the history of racial segregation and the violence done to African Americans by white gun owners. They think about political assassinations like Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln or William McKinley. Looking at gun control through the theoretical prism of the perception of risk helps to demonstrate the lack of connection between crime rates and concerns surrounding gun control. “In fact, numerous studies have found that neither actual crime rates, perceived crime rates, prior victimization, nor fear of victimization strongly correlates with public opinion towards gun control”. This also helps to explain why dramatic and highly publicized shootings like Columbine High School do
not generally result in shifts in public opinion on gun control. People interpret evidence through the prism of culture. “Confronted with competing factual claims and supporting empirical data that they are not in a position to verify for themselves, ordinary citizens naturally look to those whom they trust to tell them what to believe about the consequences of gun control laws”. Most often, this means those who share their cultural outlook (Kahan & Braman, 2003, pp. 1313–1314).

Culture Wars?

How does culture help us to understand the Great Gun Debate? More recent scholarship on firearms policy positions the gun debate within the larger framework of the American “culture wars”. The term culture wars was invented by James Hunter in 1991, and refers to “… the impassioned confrontations between groups within the same society, polarized over so-called hot button issues falling broadly within the realms of race and ethnicity; the body, sexuality and sexual orientation; identity politics; religion; and patriotism and national identity” (Dubin, 2006, p. 477). In other words, the cultural battle between those on the left, who generally tend to live on the east or west coast, or in major urban centers, and those on the right, who tend to live in the “flyover states”, the suburbs, or rural areas. Hunter claimed that the two sides of this debate were divided over who should hold authority in society. Conservatives, Hunter claims, represent the “orthodox” and see the divine, or tradition, as the source of authority in society. Authority thus comes through faith or through tradition. Liberals/Progressives, on the other hand, allegedly hold the individual as the source of authority (Dubin, 2006). In this view, the common enemy provided by Communism held the two sides together during the Cold War, but the culture wars have become more polarized following the weakening and eventual fall of the USSR. The same period also witnessed the continual challenge by minority groups against established groups,
further exacerbating these divisions (Dubin, 2006, pp. 478–479).

Authors who discuss the gun debate often adopt this framework, referring to them within the context of the broader culture wars (Melzer, 2009; Tushnet, 2007) or cultural conflict (Kohn, 2004). Further, they postulate that “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” (Melzer, 2009, p. 18).

Any time that we adopt a categorization or label something, we must create parameters around that label. In essence, we are boxing off some elements of reality as our object of study and excluding others. It is important then, to discuss exactly what is lost and what is gained by these categorizations, with special attention paid to that which falls outside of the box. The culture wars framework is a useful way to conceive of the gun debate, yet it has several problems. First, the Great Gun Debate fits poorly into Hunter’s original conceptualization of the culture wars as a conflict between those who see tradition as a source of authority, the conservatives, and those who see the individual as the source of authority, progressives. The gun debate demonstrates the tension in contemporary American conservatism, and amongst American progressives, between the place of authority and the place of the individual. Here, it is the individual, and the individual’s ability to use lethal force to protect themselves, that takes precedence, rather than the state’s authority to regulate in the interest of public safety. One could argue that by linking this right to the American Constitution, conservatives are indeed appealing to tradition and authority. But what about other civil rights activists who have drawn on the constitution to support the legitimacy of issues like abortion, gay marriage, or Indigenous rights? The gun debate demonstrates that the big tent politics of North America often makes for strange bedfellows and that both liberals and conservatives in the United States hold differing and
sometimes conflicting views over when the authority of the individual should take precedence over the authority of the state.

The second problem with this culture war view of the gun debate is that it is American centric. Given that most literature on the gun debate in America is produced by Americans living in America, it tends to ignore the debates over guns in other countries. When foreign countries are discussed in the debate, it is usually the pro-control camp drawing on them as examples of possible solutions for the U.S. As a dual citizen of Canada and the United States currently residing outside of America, I feel uniquely placed to draw attention to the fact that firearms policy is far from settled in the rest of the world, and that the American debate has global implications.

The Great Gun Debate is a global debate, as every polity must reconcile the role that these potentially dangerous tools play in society. As much as we may wish we could, no society can turn back the march of technology. Firearms, for better or for worse, exist and will continue to exist in some form in all societies, as much as the hubris of modern bureaucratic control allows some to imagine a world free of them. From the emergence of handheld matchlock muskets in the early 15th century, firearms have often been hand-crafted or artisanal goods, made, modified and maintained by craftsmen and ordinary people. Once industrialized, they were created in such large numbers that they flooded the globe, especially after the industrial warfare of the 20th century. Firearms are durable goods and working guns from as far back as the 19th century still circulate on the market today. A quick Google search shows that for less than $500 Canadian dollars, I can legally purchase a fully functional Russian Mosin Nagant rifle that was built during the Second World War. The advent of mass travel, 3D-printing, and ghost guns

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3 For example see: Firearms Outlet Canada [https://www.firearmsoutletcanada.com/mosin-nagant-91-30-7-62x54r-28-3-4.html](https://www.firearmsoutletcanada.com/mosin-nagant-91-30-7-62x54r-28-3-4.html)
have only further complicated the control of the global flow of firearms.

Further, even those countries with restrictive firearms laws usually allow some measure of civilian firearms ownership, prompting debates over firearms policy, especially after key focusing events. The gun debate has recently resurfaced in Canada. The debate was reignited by an increase in gang violence in Toronto⁴ and a deadly mass killing in Nova Scotia. Prime Minister Trudeau, seeing gun control as a wedge issue to rally support, created Bill C-71 (Goodale, 2018), and then an assault-weapons ban, imposing further restrictive measures on firearms ownership (BBC, 2020).

But the Great Gun Debate is not unique to North America. This debate has emerged in places like South America, where Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has fought to change Brazilian gun laws to allow more civilians to own guns (John, 2019). In Europe, the gun debate has taken on new life as anxiety surrounding migration has led to a rise of German’s arming themselves in public (Scally, 2018), just as hate attacks and an increasingly powerful far-right have led the government to tighten gun laws (Budryk, 2019). In Switzerland, a country famous for its widespread civilian gun ownership resulting from mandatory military service, attempts by the EU to impose stricter gun laws following terrorist attacks in Paris resulted in a heated 2019 referendum (Bachmann, 2019), while the pro-gun government of the Czech Republic attempted to fight the restrictions in court (Roth, 2019) and came very close to adding its own version of the Second amendment to its constitution (Zeldin, 2017). In New Zealand, the Christchurch Massacre thrust the gun debate to the center of the political agenda and Prime Minister Ardern swiftly brought in far-reaching measures (Menon, 2019). In Turkey, the government has struggled to control the proliferation of illegal and unregistered guns in a country where one in

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⁴ Between 2013 and 2016 there was a 68% growth in gang related crime in Canada. This was mostly driven by gang crime in Canada’s big cities, with Toronto leading the pack (Firearm-related violent crime in Canada, 2018).
three households owns a gun, and thousands are killed each year (Kayaoglu, 2016; Sharma, 2017). Meanwhile, in Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu has relaxed the country’s relatively strict gun laws to allow more Israelis to carry firearms outside of their military service (Liebermann, 2018). The gun debate is happening all over the world, in places with vastly different cultures, because it touches on universal concerns: fear of crime, the balance between individual liberty and the government’s ability to regulate in the interest of public safety, and the extent to which states enjoy a monopoly on not only the use of deadly force, but the tools of deadly force. Despite this, the gun debate is often framed in American terms, especially by the media, who often refer to America’s gun problem when reporting on guns in other countries.

The final problem with the way that the Gun Debate is framed by academics and the media as a culture war is that it has the unintended effect of presenting this conflict as unending and intractable, and the belligerents as warring parties rather than neighbors and friends. It ignores the complex positions that people can occupy within this series of societal debates, positions that I witnessed firsthand as I talked with gun owners. If we use the language of war to describe this debate, we risk losing the rich nuance that makes it so interesting to study.

Despite these criticisms, the culture wars framework has its uses. Labelling these debates as “culture wars” highlights the role that culture has in shaping a person’s position on gun control. A person’s position on firearms is often determined by her worldview, belief on the role of government in society and belonging to one of several groups. Urban cosmopolitans generally tend to be more supportive of expansive gun control, as well as other government

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5 In the American context, the term urban is often used as a euphemism to describe African American communities that are often clustered in big cities. This is not how the term will be employed in this manuscript. I refer to urban simply in the demographic sense, to describe people (of any and all races, sexual orientations, religions, genders and identities) who live in large urban centers. This is especially important in the gun debate as where a person lives tends to be a powerful predictor of opinions on gun control (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011).
measures, and less supportive of individual armed self-defense. Research shows that people with strong opinions on gun control generally fall into at least a few ideological patterns. Gun control supporters, in general, tend to be more “collectively oriented” and friendly to the idea of government solutions. Gun rights supporters, on the other hand, tend to be more individualistic and skeptical of government interference (Vizzard, 2000, p. 7). A person’s level of exposure to guns can also determine how she feels about them. Generally, the greater her exposure to recreational gun use, especially early in life, the lower the chances that she will support expansive gun control (Vizzard, 2000).

Though I do not reject the term “culture wars” completely, I use the term Great Gun Debate, or sometimes just gun debate for short. This term emphasizes that though the different sides belong to different cultures within the society, they still live amongst one another. I add the term “great” to the usual references to the gun debate (Spitzer, 2015), to emphasize the globality of the phenomenon that is often written out of the story by American centric culture wars accounts. It holds hope that, like any debate, the different sides will come to different compromises, though these compromises may shift over time.

**Gun Control?**

The Great Gun Debate in the United States is characterized by extreme polarization, with the gap between the pro and anti-gun sides being much wider than in other countries. While both groups mobilize an arsenal of statistics and facts to support their arguments, evidence often takes a back seat as each side “…starts from articles of faith it believes to be self-evident but that are completely inconceivable to the other side” (Weir, 1997, p. xiii).

This disagreement is partially a result of the cultural influence mentioned above, as well as the ambiguity of statistics and policy interventions in violent crime. Given the limitations of
statistical analysis, is very difficult to provide conclusive, causal evidence that shows the
influence of specific policies on gun crimes. As a result, most participants in this debate pick and
choose the studies they pay attention to based on their initial position on the issue. “The reason is
that all empirical studies are imperfect, as good social scientists admit”. As a result, those
involved in the debate “…will identify real flaws – that is, flaws that social scientists would
agree are defects – in studies that point to conclusions with which they disagree, and try to
explain away the flaws their opponents identify in the studies that support the policies with
which they agree” (Tushnet, 2007, p. 101).

Further, the firearms policies most often debated in the American context, like assault
weapons bans, are likely to have very small impacts on the violent crime rate compared to other
social issues like poverty or racial inequality (Tushnet, 2007). This is a result of the political
division on the topic, as well as the fact that there are incentives for politicians to support high
visibility programs that generate lots of public emotion but may not be as effective as less-
exciting programs. For politicians on the right, this takes the form of policies like Project Exile in
Richmond, Virginia, which imposed stricter sentences on criminals accused of gun crimes.
While the program’s effects were questionable, the program looked good for politicians who
supported it (Tushnet, 2007, p. 106). On the left, this is manifested by the focus on “assault
weapons bans”, even though semi-automatic carbines⁶ account for a minuscule, though highly

⁶ Semi-automatic carbines are often referred to in the Great Gun Debate as “assault rifles”, “military style assault
rifles”, “assault-style rifles”, “modern sporting rifles (MSRs)” and “Black Rifles”. The term most commonly refers to
variants of the AR-15 rifle, as well as other common semi-automatic rifles available in the United States, such as
civilian versions of the AK-47. The choice of how to label these firearms has been a major source of contention for
me as I have progressed through this project. I have chosen to use the term semi-automatic carbine as, from
where I stand, it seems the most neutral term. The first three terms, which employ the term “assault” or
“military”, seem disingenuous to me. They have been purposefully designed to confuse the listener into
associating civilian weapons capable of semi-automatic fire with the weapons used by the military capable of fully
automatic fire. The fact is that no modern military would send the bulk of their troops into battle with a semi-
automatic carbine, unless in absolutely dire straits. Further, the difference between guns like the AR-15 and many
common semi-automatic hunting rifles is purely cosmetic. On the other side of the debate, the term Modern
visible proportion of overall firearms-related homicides in the country compared to handguns\(^7\) (FBI, 2017), and the there is little evidence supporting the effectiveness of the 1994 assault weapon’s ban at lowering homicide rates (Gius, 2014; Koper & Roth, 2001).

The discourse on firearms policy in the United States is rife with division. Gun rights organizations contend that any compromise on gun control constitutes a violation of their Second Amendment rights. These groups often maliciously characterize their opponents as “… gun grabbers, liberal bleeding hearts, and, until recently, Communists” (Weir, 1997, p. xiii). On the other side, anti-gun groups, politicians, and academics often fail to understand the structural conditions from which gun ownership springs, circulate misinformation about firearms and adopt a somewhat demeaning attitude towards gun owners best captured by Obama’s infamous 2004 “cling to guns or religion” (Pilkington, 2008) comment. They present their opponents as “…thugs, violent and mentally unstable characters, and sexually inadequate males” (Weir, 1997, p. xiv).

This polarized discourse tends to create totalizing categories of pro-gun vs. pro-control, Sporting Rifle (MSR), employed by the NRA, is a deliberate attempt to rebrand these weapons away from their reputation as “the weapon of choice for mass shootings”. Given that the NRA originated as a sportsmen’s group, this seems like a natural rebranding. In all fairness, there is something to this. The AR-15 is one of the most commonly owned firearms in the United States. It is estimated that there are over 15 million AR-15s in the civilian market in America. In 2016, for example, semi-automatic carbines accounted for 61.3% of rifle sales (Heath et al., 2017) yet less than 3% of all firearms homicides (FBI 2017). The overwhelming majority of Americans do use their semi-automatic carbines for sporting purposes. Despite their reputation, these rifles are much less commonly used in crimes than public opinion would account for, largely because they are not concealable. Individuals conducting crimes with assault-weapons generally do not intend to survive the encounter. Yet I still did not feel comfortable using the term MSR. The term semi-automatic carbine refers to the mechanical characteristics of the firearm. Semi-automatic refers to the firearms action, in which a single depression of the trigger produces a single shot. Carbine refers to the length of the firearm. Generally, the barrel of most AR-15 style rifles are shorter than hunting rifles, as they are not intended to fire over long distances.

\(^7\) The origins of the gun control movement in the United States did mostly focus on handguns. Yet, in the late 1980s, led by Josh Sugarmann and the Violence Policy Coalition, the gun control movement shifted its focus to assault weapons (Barrett, 2013). Sugarmann noted that a handgun ban was unlikely to win the support of the majority of Americans, and decided that focusing on assault-weapons was a more achievable goal given: “The weapons’ menacing looks, coupled with the public’s confusion over fully automatic machine guns versus semi-automatic assault weapons – anything that looks like a machine gun is assumed to be a machine gun – can only increase the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons” (Sugarmann, 1988-1989).
and pro-gun vs. anti-gun. People’s opinions are usually more nuanced. An important contention of this dissertation is that political opinions and ideas are often shaped by deeply held values, systems of meaning, and ways of understanding the world. This has been made possible by the contributions of critical scholarship across the social sciences, which has worked to draw attention to the impact of the politics of the everyday on political behavior. This is the primary focus of this dissertation: understanding why a set of ideas appeals so strongly to one group while seeming anathema to their neighbors.

Readers may thus be disappointed that the project does not discuss the impact or potential impact of a variety of gun control measures. That is not to say that my project does not touch on the politics of firearms or have an impact on our understanding of firearms policy. But I believe shifting the focus to the background ideas that make certain political options appeal to groups of people and not others presents an opportunity to view this issue from another angle, and promote a broader understanding that reaches across the table and deescalates the debate.

Yamane (2018), writing from the field of sociology, notes that the overwhelming majority of the literature on firearms across the social sciences tends to focus on the impact of various gun control measures. Within academia, it is not a stretch to say that the study of guns as synonymous with studies in support of gun control. Yamane notes that “Entering the field, I was struck by how hard it is to find scholarship on the lawful use of firearms by legal gun owners… The study of guns is dominated by the criminology and epidemiology of gun violence, which is a very small part of the social reality of guns, in American society at least” (Yamane, 2018, p. 179). The focus on criminal violence with firearms, which makes up a minute portion of the everyday use of firearms in America, impedes scholars from properly understanding the gun culture in the United States and its political impacts. The overwhelming majority of gun owners
will never use their firearm in the commission of a crime. Rather, guns form a part of their everyday life, whether through carrying a concealed firearm, going hunting or going to the gun range. Looking at this reality allows us to understand why so many people in the United States are so deeply attached to firearms, and thus willing to fight so hard to keep them.

My project aims to chart a middle way through treacherous waters. This will not please everyone, and both opponents and proponents of gun control will likely find much to love and much to despise in the pages to follow. I do not attempt to pretend to be neutral on this topic, but an important precondition of this study was that it would set aside prescriptive questions on which specific firearms policies the United States should and should not adopt. Such questions fall outside of the scope of this project. It is my hope that this attempt can help chart the path towards a meaningful compromise on firearms policy, or that it can at least shift the conversation beyond the realm of extremist rhetoric and harmful stereotypes in which it so often dwells.

This represents something of a paradox. To understand the politics of firearms, we must move beyond scholarship that focuses exclusively on the most political elements of firearms use and ownership. My project will seek to bridge this cultural divide, engaging with gun culture on its own terms and providing an opportunity for academics and the public to better understand its construction. This manuscript examines the ways in which the NRA has worked to influence the opinions of its members, the wider American public, and policy makers on issues of gun rights. I have chosen to focus on the NRA for several reasons. First, it represents the largest and most powerful organization within the broader gun rights movement. Second, it is one of the oldest and best-established collective actors in the United States, having been founded in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Finally, the NRA is also amongst the most notorious collective actors in the United States and is often the focus of media attention in the aftermath of mass
shootings. The remainder of this chapter will lay out a brief history of the NRA and the Second Amendment, in order to provide the necessary backstory for our exploration of American gun culture.

The National Rifle Association (NRA)

It is no exaggeration to say that the National Rifle Association (NRA) is the most infamous collective actor in the history of American politics. Well known around the world, the NRA is the key figurehead of the American gun rights movement and has heavily influenced the gun debate. The NRA was founded in 1871 with the mission of improving marksmanship following the American Civil War. Military leaders had noticed that most ordinary Americans were not skilled with a rifle, and sought to change this (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 61). The war also led to a boom in the development of new firearms technologies, as repeating rifles and revolvers became more and more commonplace in North America.

It is a little-known fact that the NRA’s original model was influenced by the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association (DCRA). In the late 1860s, the Canadian government actively encouraged rifle ownership to increase the nation’s military readiness, and protect from potential American attacks. The government maintained a militia of almost 40,000 men, aided by the DCRA which organized sports shooting competitions and established gun ranges. The DCRA was partially funded through government grants, which covered the creation of rifle ranges and other costs. They would become “…the first sports organization in Canada to receive federal funding in the form of annual grants”. This would total “…more than $1.5 million to promote rifle shooting before 1908” (R. B. Brown, 2012, p. 47).

As a consequence, Canadian riflemen in the 1870s gained much international renown, leading the Americans to look north for inspiration (R. B. Brown, 2012, p. 50). When
establishing the NRA, representatives from the American government came to Ottawa and Toronto to meet with their Canadian counterparts, and tour DCRA facilities. This included consultation on the design of the NRA’s first rifle range in Creedmore, NY. Canadian shooters also helped to train American marksmen (R. B. Brown, 2012, p. 50).

Despite its often-anti-government rhetoric, government funding was essential to the emergence of the modern NRA. The NRA struggled in its early years until, in 1905, then-President Teddy Roosevelt provided grants and access to surplus rifles for the organization to host national shooting matches. They would later receive $300,000 in grants in 1916 under the National Defense Act (Spitzer, 2015, p. 91). Improving marksmanship was the major focus of the NRA during this period (Melzer, 2009, p. 36). The 20th century, however, would see the organization shift from a sportsman’s club to a political juggernaut.

Despite its fame within the movement, the NRA was not America’s first gun rights organization. This title belongs to the United States Revolver Association (USRA). Like the NRA, the USRA was not originally intended to be a political entity. Its originally purpose was to foster pistol marksmanship and competition in the same way that the NRA at the time was focused on training riflemen. However, as lawmakers in the United States began to respond to an uptick in gun violence, especially by organized crime groups, the organization became politicized.

The new gun control trend began in 1908 in Chicago which passed laws requiring a license, issued by the mayor, to purchase a handgun. This law was broadly supported by gun owners and non-owners alike and was adopted by other cities like Ohio and DC. In 1911, however, when New York adopted similar measures under Sullivan’s Law, the tone shifted. Accounts of gun violence in the press, and especially two high profile incidents involving an
attempted assassination of the mayor and the successful murder of a famous playwright in 1910 and 1911 respectively, lead for a push for gun control. The new law was sponsored by State Senator Tim Sullivan and would require a permit to purchase a handgun, as well as make it illegal to carry one in public. The law passed and was “...almost unanimously supported...” by his colleagues (Charles, 2018, pp. 176–179).

Sullivan’s law interfered with the USRA’s operations, so the organization became politicized, and it would emerge as the first organization to formally lobby for Second Amendment rights (Charles, 2018, p. 189). The USRA opposed current firearms legislation and put forward its own model to combat gun violence. They started a letter-writing campaign and contacted 47 state governors and over 100 mayors to propose their model legislation, something that no one had thought to do before (Charles, 2018, pp. 190–191).

There is some controversy in accounts of the NRA’s history over when the NRA shifted from a service organization to a gun rights organization. Authors like Melzer (2009), Spitzer (2015), and Carlson (2015) trace the beginning of the NRA’s major advocacy efforts to the events of the 1970s, which we shall discuss later. Charles (2018), however, goes back to 1932 in his exploration of the roots of the NRA’s political genesis. There are two theories on why the NRA would follow in the footsteps of the USRA. The first is that it was concerned that more and more firearms legislation was being introduced at the state level across America. The other theory is that the USRA asked for help. Regardless, it is clear that during this period, both the USRA and the NRA emerged as big players in the proto gun debate.

The two organizations first joined forces for the purpose of fighting the Uniform Firearms Act, which was introduced to respond to the rise in mob violence in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Original versions of this legislation were quite restrictive, but policy makers turned
out to be open to many of the recommendations that the NRA and USRA proposed in their model legislation. The result of their intervention was that the new Uniform Firearms Act was a well-received compromise. It gained the approval of the USRA and NRA, but also the American Bar Association and even the National Anti-Weapon Association (NAWA), which was the first pro-control organization in U.S. history (Charles, 2018, p. 195). The Uniform Firearms Act became the model for state level firearms legislation in several states and the District of Columbia.

Early in its political career the NRA still practiced the strategy of “political straddling” by presenting itself to policymakers as “…the foremost supporter of reasonable firearms restrictions” and thus being able to better influence policy. This helped them to influence the National Firearms Act (NFA) of 1934 and the Federal Firearms Act (FFA) of 1938 that were brought in by then President Roosevelt (Charles, 2018, p. 212). Despite their political efforts to combat gun control, during this period the NRA was quite supportive of certain gun control measures. The organization adopted a sort of “dual persona”, using rousing rhetoric when communicating with supporters but presented a different face to the public. They focused attention on their gun safety programs and during this period politicians and the public generally considered the NRA “…as a sensible voice in the public debate over firearms regulations” (Charles, 2018, p. 223).

On November 22, 1963, the assassination of John F. Kennedy changed everything. The public climate shifted massively towards increased gun control. When the NRA spoke out against this, it was tantamount to choosing sides. Having now committed to an image, the NRA escalated their political battles. In the years following the Kennedy Assassination, the NRA was able to motivate the gun rights community to engage in massive letter writing and pressure
campaigns to help dampen the growing pressure for gun control, and stop more restrictive gun control legislation (Charles, 2018, pp. 246–248).

In 1975, the NRA established its infamous Institution for Legislative Action (ILA), which to this day remains the most visible face of the organization (Spitzer, 2015). Harlon B. Carter, the former NRA president, was chosen as the leader of the new ILA. Carter increased the organization’s ability to reach its members by buying brand new computers for the group, began the tradition of embroiling the organization in electoral politics, and took a much harder and uncompromising approach to dealing with pro-gun control politicians (Charles, 2018).

This stance led to an internal schism between those that felt that the NRA should stick to its tradition of being a sportsmen’s organization focused on firearms training, labelled “the Old Guard,” and those hard-liners who felt the NRA should expand its political role (Melzer, 2009). In 1976, the NRA board was largely dominated by the Old Guard. They took action and fired 74 employees who were known to be supporters of Carter, who would later resign and plot a coup (Charles, 2018). Following the departure, members of the pro-gun community felt that the organization had gone soft. This was not helped by the fact that the board decided to move the headquarters from Washington to Colorado (Melzer, 2009).

On May 20, 1977, at the NRA’s Annual Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, Carter took his shot and orchestrated the Cincinnati Revolt with the help of a loyal group of supporters (Melzer, 2009, p. 37). Carter and his associates used their deep knowledge of NRA meeting rules and procedures to remove whoever they perceived as an obstacle to their new vision of the NRA from the board, replacing them with their own supporters. Slowly but surely, Carter was able to remove the more moderate board members, and replace them with his own supporters, eventually resulting in his own election as NRA President. (Charles, 2018, p. 277). This
revolution cemented the NRA’s change in direction. The NRA subsequently hired almost 50 new lobbyists and researchers who would create a “gun-rights intellectual renaissance…” (Charles, 2018, p. 278). Taking advantage of the rising conservative social movement in the 1980s, the NRA was able to swell its membership and funding. In 1964, the NRA had an annual income of $4.5 million. By 1986 this went up to $80 million. In 2001, it rose to $200 million (Melzer, 2009, pp. 65–66).

The timing of this shift generally coincides with a larger movement in American politics. This movement saw the formation of a number of conservative collective actors, largely in response to the mass mobilization of the Civil Rights movement a decade earlier (Berry & Wilcox, 2018). While much has been made in recent years of this shift within the NRA caused by the Cincinnati Revolt, it is important to recognize that the organization did not suddenly go from a politically neutral entity to a political juggernaut. While the ILA emerged during this period, the NRA has been doing mass politics since the early 20th century. This mass politics, as we will explore in this dissertation, still represents the foundation of the organization’s political power.

Since the Revolt at Cincinnati, the NRA has won several political victories. The NRA helped Georgia to pass its first shall-issue gun carry law in 1976, which means that the state must issue a gun-carry permit to an applicant unless it can provide a significant reason that this person should not have a permit. This began a “gun carry revolution” which has spread across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, from Florida to Montana, Virginia to Oregon. For example, only about ten states had shall-issue gun carry laws in place before 1987.

Galvanized by the Clinton era Assault-Weapons ban the NRA, and other pro-Second Amendment advocacy groups, turned their attention toward pushing for concealed carry laws,
while the gun industry turned its attention toward meeting the increased demand for concealable handguns (Barrett, 2013). As a result, 27 states now have shall-issue concealed carry laws, with an additional 15 states having constitutional carry laws. This means that these states do not require any type of permit for concealed carry. Only nine states still heavily restrict the practice of carrying handguns (“Concealed Carry,” 2020). “More Americans in every region of the United States are now licensed to carry guns than at any other time in history” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 5).

The NRA’s historical success is not mono-causal. It is undoubtedly true that the organization has been successful because of its “access to key decision makers” and the efforts of the ILA and the NRA’s Political Action Committee. But this top-down view of the NRA misses out on the source of the organization’s power, that makes these direct political interventions possible. It is common wisdom that the NRA is effective because they spend money donating to political campaigns. In fact, this idea is “…mostly unsupported by analysis” (Spitzer, 2015, p. 100). Instead, “The key to the NRA’s effectiveness that distinguishes it from other interest groups lies in its highly motivated mass membership and the organization’s ability to bring pressure from that membership to bear at key moments and places” (Spitzer, 2015, p. 101).

It is this mass membership, and the NRA’s relationship with other key actors within the gun culture, that make the lobbying and campaign donations possible. It is this often-overlooked element of the organization’s success, its ability to mobilize a large segment of the American populace behind its policy ideas, that will be the focus of this dissertation.

At the outset of my research I was struck with a dilemma. What do I call an organization as complex and multi-faceted as the NRA? It is common in the media to see the NRA referred to as a lobby group or special interest group. There is truth to this, as the organization’s Institute for
Legislative Action (ILA) is a registered lobbying organization. However, only seeing the organization as a lobby group misses a large part of the picture. For the majority of the organization’s history, it did not serve this function. The NRA was founded in 1871. While the organization did perform advocacy work starting at the beginning of the 20th century, it was still largely focused on firearms training, gun safety and encouraging hunting and the shooting sports until the late 1960s. The NRA did not even officially register as a lobby group until 1968 (Charles, 2018).

The term lobbyist or lobby group carries with it a negative connotation as well and tends to paint over the other important functions that the organization serves, the most important being the NRA’s service branch. This branch of the organization runs extensive training programs across the United States, and trains more than 1 million Americans every year (NRA, 2021). Carlson argues that “… the NRA continues to enjoy favor among many people because they view the organization as empowering Americans with a basic community service (firearms training)”. But this perspective requires a “bottom-up” view of the organization that “…cannot be gleaned from analyses that focus on the NRA lobbying efforts alone” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 22).

If not a lobby group, what do we call the NRA? It is common to see the NRA referred to in the literature as an interest group (Spitzer, 2015), special-interest group, or advocacy group. These terms, however, carry with them a certain amount of linguistic baggage (Montpetit, 2014). Melzer (2009) refers to the NRA as a Social Movement Organization. There is merit to this, as the NRA is an important member of the wider gun-rights movement. Yet the label is usually employed to refer to decentralized and ad-hoc groups that often lack formal structures, which certainly does not fit with the NRA (M. Smith, 2008).
As a result, I have chosen to follow the middle path and refer to the NRA as a collective actor. This term was coined by Miriam Smith (2008) to cover the gamut of organizations that employ collective action, which can be described as “…an alternative to voting and participating in the electoral system…” which “…enables people to pursue and express a broad range of political interests and identities” (p. 15).

Though the NRA has often seemed an invincible force in US politics, recent scandals and legal battles have rocked the organization. In 2019, the NRA cut ties with their advertising firm Ackerman McQueen, who accused the organization of overcharging them. Wayne Lapierre, who has been the executive vice president of the NRA since 1991, has been rocked by a series of personal expense scandals that almost saw him lose his position to an internal coup by then President Oliver North (Hakim, 2020). More recently, the Attorney General of New York has sued the organization and is seeking to dissolve the NRA completely, though this is unlikely to happen (Mittendorf, 2020). In response, the NRA has declared bankruptcy and is re-incorporating in Texas, a state that the organization feels will be more friendly to its goals.

While the ultimate fate of the NRA is unsure at time of writing, understanding why the NRA was so powerful for so long is still useful. It may also add a necessary dose of reality to those who think defeating the NRA would clear the path for large scale policy shifts on gun control in the U.S. As we will see, the NRA is powerful because their large number of highly motivated supporters who are not going anywhere. Any gap left by the NRA will soon be filled by other gun rights groups less institutionalized, and thus less conducive to compromise, than the NRA\(^8\).

\(^8\) Despite being branded as the “no-compromise” gun lobby, the NRA is actually more moderate than many other mainstream gun rights groups like the Second Amendment Foundation or Gun Owners of America. For example,
The Most Controversial 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”. So reads the Second Amendment of the United States Bill of Rights. The positioning of the amendment seems almost poetic in the present context, as it is perched between two rights with very different historical trajectories. The First Amendment, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion, is as relevant today as the day it was written. The Third Amendment, which concerns the quartering of soldiers in people’s homes, seems a quaint relic of America’s revolutionary past. But to which camp does the Second Amendment belong? Gun rights activists argue that the Second Amendment is as relevant today as the day it was written. Opponents seek to consign it to the historical dustbin. Though I will not add any new historical evidence to the debate on the interpretation of the Second Amendment, it is important to provide an overview of the controversy surrounding it. As constitutional scholars have noted, the ambiguity surrounding the Second Amendment makes it unlikely that the constitution provide a definitive answer to the Great Gun Debate (Tushnet, 2007). Rather, political actors on both side of the debate are left to forward their narrative, which largely appeals to their supporters and falls on the deaf ears of their opponents. As is often the case with the past, what matters is not necessary what happened, but how the story is told. This brief exploration of the history of the Second Amendment will help to set the scene for our examination of the NRA’s use of the amendment as part of its political communication program.

Constitutional amendments rarely speak for themselves and must be interpreted. The first
The first step of interpreting any legal text is to look at the language it uses, though text alone rarely solves the problem. This is especially the case with the Second Amendment. The next step is to look at the historical context, or “how the words were understood at the time they were written”. This is called the originalist interpretation. Yet, this too can be difficult given changes in context since that time. The next step then is to look at “…how the way the provision fits into some overall account of why we have a Constitution”, and then how courts have interpreted the text (Tushnet, 2007, pp. 2–3). Since at least the Bush administration, the originalist interpretation of the Second Amendment has gained traction in the courts (Tushnet, 2007, p. 3), something that is unlikely to change given recent judicial appointments under the Trump Administration. This is the model that interprets the Second Amendment to protect the individual’s right to own firearms.

Until the 1960s, the favored interpretation of the Second Amendment was that it refers to arms bearing in the context of a well-regulated militia. This opposing view is called the Traditional Interpretation, which is the one favored by many gun control proponents. This view holds that the amendment protects “collective rights” or “states’ rights” to organize militias. Proponents of this theory believe that: “The Second Amendment is a states’ rights provision that ensures that the national government can’t disarm state-organized militias. It has no bearing whatever on regulation – including prohibition – of gun ownership by people who aren’t members of state-organized militias” (Tushnet, 2007, p. 49). They argue that the National Guard took over the function of the state militias that the founders foresaw, as the new democratic government took hold and there was less fear of the tyrannical despotism the founders had sought to avoid. It also holds that modern police forces have made the individual right to firearms ownership obsolete, as the police provide for defense from criminals (Tushnet, 2007).
There is evidence that the Second Amendment was originally intended to protect the individual right to bear arms, both for personal protection as well as service in the militia (Hallbrook, 2013; Harsanyi, 2018; Malcolm, 1996; Tushnet, 2007). Yet later judicial interpretations of the amendment, up until the *Heller Decision* in 2008, often supported the Traditional Interpretation. I will provide a brief overview of these two important cases.

In 2008 the United States Supreme Court interpreted the Second Amendment to protect the individual right to bear arms in the case of *District of Columbia et al. v. Heller*, hereafter known as *DC vs. Heller* or the Heller decision. The case concerned a DC law that had been in place since 1976, banning the possession of a handgun without a special license from the district’s chief of police. Dick Heller, a special police officer, was concerned for his security and applied for a permit that was rejected (Scalia, 2008). Heller found it illogical that he could carry a firearm while at work providing security for the Federal Judicial Center, but not to protect his own home. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, felt the makeup of the Supreme Court was suitable to challenge certain municipal handgun bans across the country and had been searching for a suitable plaintiff. DC was especially important since as a federal district there could be no argument regarding the applicability of the Second Amendment to cities or states. The Cato Institute paid for Heller’s legal fees throughout the case (Moyer, 2018).

The key to the court’s decision, which was delivered by Antonin Scalia, was examining the Second Amendment’s two clauses, the prefatory clause (“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State…”), and the operative clause (“…the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”). “The Heller decision explained the militia prefatory clause as a motivation for codification of the right to arms, but rejected claims that the

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9 As we will see, there is legal controversy over whether the Second Amendment applies only to the Federal Government, or whether it regulates State and Local governments as well.
‘right of the people’ was limited to the far narrow class designated by ‘militia’” (Johnson, 2016, p. 83). The prefatory clause, the majority argued, states the purpose of the amendment, or can be used to “resolve an ambiguity in the operative clause”, but does not limit the right (Scalia, 2008, p. 4). Though there is no other Amendment like this in the U.S. Constitution, the court looked at various state constitutions from the same period as evidence that the Framers saw the right to bear arms as an individual as well as collective right: “That of the nine state constitutional protections for the right to bear arms enacted immediately after 1789 at least seven unequivocally protected an individual citizen’s right to self-defense is strong evidence that that is how the founding generation conceived of the right” (Scalia, 2008, p. 30).

The majority argued that within the constitution, the phrase “Right of the People” is always used to refer to an individual right, such as in the First and Fourth Amendment. “The court explained that even to the degree that militia concerns animated the codification of the right to arms, a motive for codification does not define the pre-existing right” (Johnson, 2016, p. 83).

The court concluded that the Second Amendment protects the individual right to bear arms outside of the context of militia service, but they did not argue that this right is unlimited. Justice Scalia noted in the majority opinion that much like there are reasonable limits on the First Amendment, there are limitations on the second as well. The court was careful to note that:

…nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms. (Scalia, 2008, pp. 54–55)

More importantly, the court carried over the standard from the older Miller decision that the Second Amendment does not protect “dangerous and unusual weapons”, only those “in common use at the time” (Scalia, 2008, p. 55). The court felt that handguns were commonly used
by Americans for self-defense and struck down the DC Law. Second Amendment advocates were jubilant but realized that there were significant limitations to their victory in *Heller*, as the decision only limited the ability of the federal government to impose limits on the right to bear arms, while most gun control legislation in America happens at the state level (N. J. Johnson, 2016).

The *Heller* decision was a major victory for supporters of gun rights, and the culmination of decades of work by legal scholars like Joyce Lee Malcolm (1996), conservative think tanks like the Cato Institute, gun rights groups like the NRA and Second Amendment Foundation, and unlikely allies like the Black Panthers. Since the 1970s, the individualist interpretation had been slowly gaining momentum in legal scholarship, going from fringe interpretation to mainstream. Organizations like the NRA played a pivotal role in popularizing this interpretation (Tucker, 2019).

The case of McDonald Et. Al. v. The City of Chicago, Illinois, et al., henceforth known as *McDonald v. Chicago*, or *McDonald*, in 2010 expanded on the *Heller* decision. Chicago, like DC, has a history of problems with gun and gang violence and had adopted a municipal ban on the possession of handguns to curb this. The main petitioner, Otis McDonald, was an elderly African American man who lived Morgan Park, Chicago. Like Dick Heller, McDonald asserted that he wanted to purchase a firearm to protect his family. He was deeply concerned by the gang violence in his neighborhood and felt unsafe. McDonald also felt that he was fighting to reclaim rights long denied to African Americans through the Black Codes. He was quoted in an interview saying: “There was a wrong done a long time ago that dates back to slavery time… I could feel the spirit of those people running through me as I sat in the Supreme Court” (quoted in Glanton, 2014). Much like Heller, McDonald was not fighting alone, supported by the Illinois State Rifle
The principal arguments of the petitioners were that Article IV, Section 2 of the constitution, often called the privileges and immunities clause, should guarantee the Second Amendment rights of all Americans. This clause states that: “The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States”. Further, they argued that the Fourteenth Amendment should have incorporated the Second Amendment, meaning that it should apply to States as well. This amendment states in Section 1: “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law’ nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protections of law”. The court had used the Fourteenth Amendment to selectively incorporate certain constitutional rights to the states. The Second Amendment was one of the few rights that had yet to be incorporated (Alito, 2010).

This court decided in favor of McDonald. The majority opinion, delivered by Justice Alito, “…held that the right to keep and bear arms was a fundamental right incorporated as a limitation on the states through the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Johnson, 2016, p. 84).

Both Heller and McDonald have had a profound impact on firearms policy in the United States. Yet, they are not absolute. This is partially because of the flexibility with which the lower courts have interpreted the two decisions (Johnson, 2016, p. 85). Further, the Heller decision was only designed to address one form of gun control, a flat ban on a certain type of firearms, in this case, handguns. The decision created the “common use” test, which says that firearms in common use by civilians are protected under the Second Amendment. However, given that most
gun laws are not flat bans on firearms, but rather attempts to make certain firearms more difficult to own, or limit the places that firearms can be used or carried, this test does not mean that no gun control can be enacted (Johnson, 2016, p. 92-93).

An Ethnography of the NRA

This manuscript looks at narratives; what most people call stories. It is based on the assumption, increasingly shared by academics, that stories and symbols are a powerful form of human communication, both in everyday life and in the political world. Politicians, collective actors, and activists use stories to win hearts and minds for their cause.

Narrative analysis is a useful methodological tool to understand the political world, though there are some distinct challenges. Narratives are forms of communications that are deeply based in culture. Those reading narratives from outside of the culture face the risk of misunderstanding elements of the narrative. This is especially true when we are studying stories belonging to a group of people with whom we disagree. Ethnography is a useful tool to overcome this cultural barrier. If we want to glean meaning from these stories, and the transformative political power they contain, we must endeavor to understand the people who tell them and the people who listen. As a bespectacled, city-dwelling, Jewish academic, descending from a proud lineage of lefties, neither hunting nor sports shooting had been a part of my upbringing. If I was to understand the group of people that I wanted to study, I needed to walk a mile in their shoes, or risk reproducing the tired cliché regularly trotted out on the evening news of a well-dressed, wealthy reporter going “undercover” to show the alleged depravity of American gun owners.\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\) For the quintessential example of the impact that this sort of unethical journalism can have on real people, see the Washington Post’s “Heavily armed millennials of Instagram”
Ethnographic research seemed the most appropriate venue through which to do this. It allowed me not only to understand the people who shared these stories, as well as the world they came from, but to also experience them firsthand.

Though originally the purview of anthropologists, an increasing number of political scientists are choosing to use ethnography to shed light on political problems. Having accepted that “ideas matter” in political science (Béland & Cox, 2011) it is only natural to want to study how these ideas impact the political thoughts and behavior of individuals. After all: “central to the anthropological perspective is the attempt to understand assumptions made by people when they organize their worlds in the ways that they do” (Macdonald, 2013). Understanding the way that people make sense of the world helps us to understand how that worldview influences their decision making.

Political scientists have noted several advantages that ethnographic methods can offer the field of political science. First and foremost, because ethnography involves getting close to research subjects and attempting to gain an insider’s view into their lives, known as the emic perspective, it allows scholars to gain a richer and more detailed understanding of the lifeworlds11 of their subjects (Bailey, 2007; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Glassberg, 1996a; Macdonald, 2013). This can help political scientists to ground theoretical assumptions, explain anomalies, and gain insight into a group’s self-understanding. It is particularly useful for studying group politics, given the role that personal meanings play in motivating advocacy (Bayard de Volo & Schatz, 2004). The immense levels of polarization in the gun debate further

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11 Lifeworld, derived from the German Lebenswelt, is a way of describing the subjectivity of individual experience that comes from Philosophy. It emphasizes that people experience the social world differently, and that these experiences shape their understanding of what constitutes truth (Harrington, 2006).
necessitate the use of methods that involve generating deeper understanding. While statistics and surveys can offer us powerful snapshots into the gun debate, they have trouble capturing the complex thoughts, feelings and meanings that drive political behavior and thus can be well complemented with ethnographic research. For example, statistical accounts that focus on gun ownership amongst white, rural, middle-class men paint over the large minority of liberal gun owners (Yamane, DeDeyne, & Mendez, 2020).

Further, ethnography is a useful tool to understand phenomena that would not have been considered by traditional political science (Brodkin, 2017). This includes the politics of the everyday. Ethnography can help shed light on the fact that for gun owners, the simple choice to go to the gun range, buy a certain type of firearm, watch a pro-gun YouTube video or purchase coffee from a self-proclaimed Second Amendment friendly coffee company can be a political choice.

Using ethnographic methods is not without its challenges and drawbacks. Given that ethnography is a detail-oriented research method, it can be difficult to use one’s findings to craft the sort of broad generalizations, models or laws that mainstream logical positivist political science finds most palatable (Wedeen, 2010). As a result, my project will make no attempt at establishing strict causal claims, but instead try to provide us with a constitutive understanding of the NRA’s influence on the gun control debate to compliment work being conducted elsewhere.

Ethnography works when connected to a solid theoretical framework (Wedeen, 2010). There is a social world that we can access, as intersubjective meanings that are socially constructed are by nature accessible to numerous people. Rather than focusing on uncovering a neutral, objective truth we can discover and evaluate competing truth claims and connect ethnographic observations back to theory. Thus: “An ethnographic interpretation might
underscore the tensions and contradictions of everyday life, but its burden is to maintain theoretical sovereignty over those complications” (Weeden, 2010, 267).

In sum, I chose ethnography as an appropriate methodology for my study of the NRA, as it is the most comprehensive method for getting an insider’s perspective so as to properly understand not only how the NRA communicates narratives about America’s past to its audience, but also how those messages are received and incorporated into the lifeworld of that audience.

A growing group of authors outside of the field of political science have employed ethnographic methods to attempt to better understand both the NRA and the gun culture. This project follows in the tradition of authors like Kohn (2004), Melzer (2009), Stroud (2015) and Carlson (2015). That being said, while these authors focused primarily on issues of race, gender and economics, the focus of my research will be on better understanding the ways in which the NRA communicates narratives about the past to those within the gun culture, how that audience understand their past, and how that influences their perceptions of the present. This does not mean that I will ignore issues of race, class and gender when they are relevant, as doing so would be irresponsible, but they will not be the primary focus of my analysis.

My interest in studying the gun culture began in the winter of 2016, and since then I have spent much of my spare time absorbed in the world of firearms. My prep work began in cyberspace, where I listened to countless hours of firearms related podcasts, like *Gun Guy Radio*, the *Wasted Ammo Podcast, Gun Funny, The Gun Collective* and others. I have also watched innumerable hours of YouTube videos from popular firearms channels, to immerse myself in the online culture, learn the jargon, and familiarize myself with firearms.

But my preparations were not only digital. To become more familiar with the workings of actual firearms I took the Canadian Firearms Safety Course (CFSC), the Canadian Restricted
Firearms Safety Course (CRFSC), and acquired my Canadian Non-Restricted and Restricted Possession and Acquisition License (RPAL/PAL). This was important not just from a safety perspective, but also to help me to gain familiarity handling firearms and participating in the shooting sports, like skeet and trap shooting and target shooting closer to home before heading to my field site. Though I originally participated in these activities as preparation for my project, I will likely continue them afterwards, as like my participants I find them enjoyable, challenging, and paradoxically relaxing.

My observations from engaging with these sources are not explored in detail in my analysis, though they were important tools to help immerse myself in the gun culture. They helped introduce me to the community’s lexicon, its belief systems, ways of making sense of the world, and its various subcultures.

Before departing for my fieldwork, I became an NRA member. You do not need to live in the United States to become a member, nor do you need to provide proof of citizenship, though I am an American citizen. Becoming a member allowed me to attend the Annual Meeting but was also important for gaining participant trust. Given the perceived anti-gun bias in academia, gun owners are naturally skeptical of scholars, something that was noted by Carlson (2015) and Melzer (2009). Becoming a member was thus an important way for me to demonstrate that the intent of my project is to understand gun culture, not vilify it. The membership came with the added benefit of the American Rifleman subscription, which was useful for my thematic analysis.

To first understand how the NRA mobilizes narratives about the past to serve a political purpose, I began by looking at the organization’s major communications material – the American Rifleman Magazine and NRATV. Ethnographers have a long history of incorporating film and video into their analyses, going back as far as Bateson and Mead’s (1942) analysis of rural
Balinese life (Dicks, Mason, & Coffey 1967, 2005; Flick, 2009). The rise of the internet has created the “…rapid emergence of online interactions of dispersed groups of people with shared interests” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 449). Given the ubiquity of technology, the internet, and social media in everyday life, “…human interaction mediated through these platforms has become a locus where qualitative research and digital methods need to be adapted” (Gregory, 2018, p. 1610). Increasingly, social scientists are shifting the methodological insights gained through traditional methods to the digital world to study these online interactions, and the “anthropology of online communities” is a growing field (Fattal, 2012, p. 888).

As a result my research included a thematic analysis of 35 episodes of NRA TV content. NRA TV was one of the organization’s key digital media tools before its abrupt closure in 2019 and offered thousands of hours of online digital content to explore, which helped me to better understand how the NRA communicates narratives about the past to its members and the public through these programs. I also performed a thematic analysis of 100 articles from *American Rifleman* magazine, which are sent every month to NRA members. These analyses will be outlined in detail in Chapter Four.

My fieldwork began in earnest in the spring and summer of 2019. I left Ottawa toward the end of April to first attend the 2019 NRA Annual Meeting in Indianapolis. Over the three days in Indianapolis, I engaged in participant observation at the event, which will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5. Using the “participating-to-write” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 23) approach I took jottings, brief notes which included quotes, descriptions or other important details that often get lost in the frenzy, on my phone during the day. Immediately after the conference, I consulted these jottings as well as my memory to produce more detailed field notes.
Following the NRA Annual Meeting I drove to my primary field site in Fairfax, Virginia. This area was chosen given its proximity to the NRA headquarters and relatively permissive gun laws\textsuperscript{12}. My primary method of access to my research population was through NRA firearms training courses, and those courses offered by NRA certified instructors, making this region ideal. The region around Fairfax contained several shooting ranges that offer NRA courses, and courses by NRA certified instructors. Through participation in these courses, I was not only able to better understand how the NRA communicates narratives about the past to gun owners through its training programs, but also gain access to my target research population.

During these classes I would approach my classmates to attempt to recruit participants for interviews. This often involved getting to know each other over a trip to the shooting range, and then sitting down to coffee and semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked a series of prepared questions\textsuperscript{13}, but based on their responses I would often improvise questions on the fly to probe into the things that they shared with me.

The focus of my interviews was to better understand the gun culture, the meaning of guns to gun owners and to get an idea of how NRA material related to the role of guns in America’s past was absorbed and incorporated into the lifeworld of ordinary people within the gun culture. I have endeavored as much as possible when presenting data from these interviews to preserve what anthropologists call Indigenous meanings, that is “understand and write about what their experiences and activities mean to them” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 16).

As a dual Canadian-US citizen who has spent most of his life in Canada and the UK, I am uniquely placed to study the global nature of the great gun debate. My American citizenship was

\textsuperscript{12} At least until after I left. At time of writing Democratic Governor Ralph Northam has been engaged in an effort to introduce stricter legislation in the state.

\textsuperscript{13} See Annex 1
a major asset for this project. Since the passing of Title IV of the Patriot Act, firearms related training can no longer be provided to non-US citizens. NRA instructors are very careful to enforce this, and most instructors asked that I produce my US passport to prove my citizenship after I self-identified as a researcher from Canada. Without my citizenship, I would not have been able to perform this project.

Though I am Jewish, and of mixed African American and Eastern European heritage, being a white-passing, cisgender male also allowed me to navigate the often male-dominated milieus of the gun culture with relative ease. Self-identifying to participants as a scholar studying the gun culture did lead some participants to initially be distrustful of me and my work. I am sure that some readers will be frustrated that my manuscript does not take a position on the great gun debate, however pledging to maintain neutrality was a precondition to gaining participant trust, and I strongly feel that using this research to promote any position in the current policy debate would be a major betrayal of that trust. Though neutrality is impossible, and I do not pretend to be a purely neutral observer, I have endeavored to as much as possible keep my own views on firearms policy out of this work and apologize in advance for any areas where they may have inadvertently bled through. The normative goal of my project has always been to promote rapprochement, understanding, and dialogue.

The next chapter will lay out the theoretical framework for my paper. In Chapter Three, I will move on to examine the gun culture, so as to define many of the key terms I use throughout this text and make sense of what gun culture is. Chapter Four begins my analysis. I will begin by looking at the NRA’s written and audio-visual material, studying the *American Rifleman* Magazine, and the now-defunct NRATV, since it is through these modalities that most of its supporters likely connect with the NRA. As a result, the chapter will provide a thematic analysis
of these modalities.

It was also important to go beyond these forms of communication and to experience these narratives in the settings in which they are told. I therefore undertook three months of fieldwork in the United States. Chapter 5 will outline the results of my participant observation at the NRA Annual Meeting. Chapters 6 and 7 will then present the results of my participation observation in five NRA firearm safety courses, shooting with participants, attending gun shows and my interviews with members and employees, as well as my analysis of the NRA’s Firearm’s History Museum.

The politics of the Second Amendment in America are contentious. Opinions about guns are heavily influenced by culture, and cultures are built on the stories that members tell. In this chapter, we have been introduced to the Great Gun Debate, and the power of culture in shaping positions in this debate. Culture is important in shaping our worldview because it influences how people make sense of the social world and the objects within it, and shapes how we understand risk in our lives. The NRA is an important actor shaping the gun culture. It shares narratives, especially narratives about America’s and Americans’ pasts, so that it can build and mobilize this community of supporters that are so essential to providing the people power and financial power to run its lobbying and advocacy efforts. Throughout the organization’s long history, the key to its success has been this ability to mobilize large groups of supporters to participate in the political system.
Chapter Two – Narrative and Memory

*Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity... to know what we were confirms that we are.* – Lowenthal, 1985.

The Great Gun Debate is a battle of contested meanings. This includes not only the meanings attached to firearms, but also more abstract ideas like individual liberty, the role of government in society, crime and punishment, and evidence-based policy. This multiplicity of understandings demonstrates that focusing solely on resources and interests is insufficient to fully understand the gun debate or the influence of the actors within it. We must look to the role of ideas, the role of culture in shaping those ideas, and ultimately how key actors within those cultures present the past to craft the present.

The purpose of this chapter is to place my work within two distinct literatures, while simultaneously building a bridge between them. The first is the literature on the theories of the policy process. This literature aims to better understand the processes through which policy is made, rather than evaluating or analyzing specific policies (Hill & Varone, 2017). This will be connected to the literature on memory studies and the politics of memory from the field of history.

This chapter will outline my approach to understanding the influence of the NRA on the formation of firearms policy in the United States. The first part of this chapter will problematize existing explanations of the organization’s influence on policy, which tend to focus on the NRA’s campaign contributions and sideline other important aspects. Instead, it will put forward the argument that the power of the NRA is rooted in its ability to grow, shape, and mobilize the Second Amendment community to support the organization financially, to vote for pro-second amendment candidates or initiatives, or to volunteer their time and effort to engage politically.

I will then lay out my theoretical approach to studying the NRA, which is the Narrative
Policy Framework (NPF). The NPF was selected because it allows scholars to account for the power of ideas at three separate levels: policy solutions, problem definition, and background ideas.

The second part of this chapter will connect these theories to the literature on the politics of memory. This will include unpacking the concept of past presencing (Macdonald, 2013), and examining how history, memory, and heritage can serve as political tools.

Research Puzzle

The NRA is a large organization with many branches. Despite this, much of the coverage in the media, and scholarship, focuses on the NRA’s influence as related to its direct lobbying and campaign spending. From this perspective, the NRA is often presented as the sole barrier to substantive changes to American firearms policy, that subverts the democratic process by lining the pockets of friendly politicians. The reality of the situation is more complex.

First, the NRA enjoys a substantial amount of support. It is estimated that the organization has about 4-5 million active, paying members. On top of this, polling research done by Pew Polls shows that about 20% of America’s 60-70 million gun owners claim to be NRA members. While the discrepancy in numbers shows that many respondents to the poll are not being completely honest about paying their annual dues, it does demonstrate that they identify with the goals of the organization (Yamane, 2018). But why does the organization enjoy so much support? The most parsimonious explanation for this is that the organization’s large following is a result of its legislative success. Over its long history, the NRA has scored enough victories for gun owners that they now see it as a necessary force for the protection of the Second Amendment. This explanation certainly holds some water, as even amidst the current internal divisions within the NRA over executive spending, the organization is still presented as a
necessary bulwark protecting the constitutional rights of gun owners.

Taking a closer look at the NRA’s tax returns presents an interesting puzzle (see Figure 1). Examining these numbers shows that the NRA consistently spends more money on their other programs than the lobbying for which they are famous. These programs include their communications material, their annual meeting, and their education and museum initiatives. This includes certifying its large network of NRA accredited instructors. Even in 2016, a high-stakes Presidential election year, the NRA still spent more on these programs than on lobbying, if only by a small amount.

Why does the NRA devote so many resources to firearms education, communications material and cultural production when its lobbying is so successful?

Further, the existing literature on campaign spending demonstrates that political donations can have mixed results. Baumgartner & Leech’s review of the quantitative and qualitative literature on PAC spending found that the effectiveness of campaign spending at
securing outcomes for interest groups is mixed (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). A similar review conducted by Smith finds that “…the campaign contributions of interest groups have far less influence than commonly thought…” (Smith, 1995, p. 91). Richter et al. similarly conclude that looking at PAC spending alone is not enough to explain interest group influence (Richter, Samphantharak, & Timmons, 2009). Spitzer notes that: “The common assertion that PAC spending buys votes in Congress is one that is mostly unsupported by analysis”. While groups like the American Medical Association or the National Association of Realtors spend the most money donating to candidates, they are often the “biggest losers on Capitol Hill” (Spitzer, 2015, p. 100).

As the data on the NRA’s spending shows, more work needs to be done to provide a three-dimensional picture of the NRA’s influence. Some scholars have begun to do just this. Spitzer, for example, argues that: “The key to the NRA’s effectiveness that distinguishes it from other interest groups lies in its highly motivated mass membership and the organization’s ability to bring pressure from that membership to bear at key moments and places” (Spitzer, 2015, p. 101). This includes things like letter-writing campaigns and voter mobilization. This has been a key strategy for the NRA since they first began large scale political advocacy efforts in the early 20th century. For example, in the 1930s, the organization helped to delay and soften gun control legislation put forward by President Franklin D. Roosevelt by mobilizing the gun rights community in massive letter writing and political pressure campaigns (Charles, 2018). But how is the NRA able to do this so effectively? Tackling this question will involve moving beyond focusing on material explanation and delving into the literature on the power of ideas in public policy.
Materials vs. Ideas and the NRA’s Influence

Early approaches to the study of the policy process, like the Pluralist approach forwarded by Dahl (1961) and his followers, or the Rational Choice approach that was developed following the seminal work of Olson (1971), focused on material factors, like objective economic interests, or the first face of power, to explain political power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Marxist theory also privileged a material understanding of class struggle in its explanation for the development of public policies benefiting the bourgeoisie (Miliband, 1969; O’Connor, 1973). Similarly, the shift of focus towards the new institutionalisms (March & Olsen, 1984) which “brought the state back in” to political science, were dominated by materialist understandings of state power, like the structure induced-equilibriums of rational choice institutionalism (Shepsle, 1989) or the path dependence of historical institutionalism (Fioretos, Falleti, & Sheingate, 2018).

More recently, however, across the various subfields of political science, researchers are increasingly taking into account the role of ideas in the policy process (Acharya, 2009; Béland & Cox, 2011; Jacobs, 2009). Scholars adopting ideational approaches note that “…ideas are a primary source of political behavior” as they give “…definition to our values and preferences…”. In this way, ideas can act as “causal beliefs” that mediate our knowledge of the material world, shaping the way that we perceive our interests (Béland & Cox, 2011, pp. 3–4). While materialist theories posit “underlying, supposedly objective economic interests”, ideational theories instead argue that interests must be “…defined by actors before they become ‘real’”. “Human cognition, therefore, has its own independent force, and the ideas our mental processes create as we interact and communicate with others have much power over our decisions and actions” (Béland & Cox, 2011, pp. 10–11). The ideational turn in political science has been instrumental in allowing researchers to explain political change and address
longstanding problems relating to the agency of actors in the policy system. This is because overly structural or materialist theories limit the ability of theorists to explain change or explore the influence that individuals can have within large systems. Ideational explanations are usually better equipped to handle these theoretical challenges.

Despite the consensus that ideas matter, there has been much debate on the exact mechanisms through which ideas exert an influence on politics. Following the influence of Wendt (1999), much of the focus on the role of ideas in international relations, for example, has looked at the role of norms in structuring international relations (Acharya, 2009). More critical approaches to political science, have examined the role of ideas in upholding hierarchies of class, gender, and race in society. Within this vein, critical scholars of policy have looked at how ideas keep the interests of subordinated groups in society off of the policy agenda (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962), or how powerful groups use ideas to influence how people perceive their own preferences (Lukes, 2005). The following section will delve deeper into the literature on the NRA and the role of ideas in public policy to develop a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the ideational power of the organization.

If the NRA’s material contributions through campaign spending are the most important factor explaining its political victories and thus its success, why does the organization spend almost twice as much in a normal year on its other functions? The material approach to understanding the NRA’s influence does not provide us with a complete explanation for why the NRA would spend so much money operating museums, producing thousands of hours of Second Amendment related content through their online television networks, or regularly distributing magazines full of information on the history of firearms. The perspective that this project employs finds the central locus of the NRA’s power in its relationship with the gun culture.
Recent scholarship on firearms policy in the United States has noted that gun ownership, the gun culture, and gun owner social identity play a powerful role in motivating gun owners to participate politically. Joslyn (2020), notes that membership in the gun culture creates a powerful group identity that motivates gun owners towards political action. This “gun gap” in voting behavior between gun owners and non-gun owners is quite substantial. In the 2016 election, not only were gun owners more likely to vote for Donald Trump, but the more guns a person owned the more likely they were to vote Republican. Those who owned four or more guns were 45% more likely to vote for Trump than non-gun owners (Joslyn, 2020, p. 64). This shows that not only does gun ownership influence political behavior, but the greater an individual’s involvement in the gun culture, the more their behavior changes (Joslyn, 2020).

Further, this gun gap is not unique to men. Women who reported owning guns were more likely to have voted, contacted an elected representative or given money to a gun rights advocacy group than non-gun owning women (Middlewood, Joslyn, Haider-Markel, & Macdonald, 2019, p. 2516).

Lacombe et al. (2019) found that gun ownership has become a unique politicized social identity that can be measured empirically and has an observable impact on gun owner’s political behavior. They note that participation in the gun culture through shooting activities deepens the extent to which individuals feel attachment to the gun owner social identity (Lacombe et al., 2019, p. 2421). Spitzer summarizes the influence of gun culture on political behavior succinctly when he says: “the gun culture unites and motivates gun enthusiasts” and that “no parallel force provides similar unity and motivation for gun control proponents” (Spitzer, 2012, p. 102). But what role does the NRA play in this?

Academics looking at the NRA from the wider social sciences have made great strides in
theorizing this element of the group’s influence. Charles’s (2018) historical study of the NRA locates the organization’s power in its ability to mobilize its membership through magazine publications and columns like the *Armed Citizen*\(^{14}\), letters to its membership, and its network of gun clubs and its ability to foster strong group cohesion. One way that the NRA worked towards creating a group identity was by drawing strong barriers between insiders and outsiders. They worked hard to present gun-control advocates as “…weak, unpatriotic, or purely ignorant of firearms” (Charles, 2018, p. 207). Charles also argues that the NRA’s use of “historicism” was used to “…cast sportsmen, hunters, and gun owners as the patriotic defenders of the nation. The NRA wanted to reinforce the message that the gun-rights community was carrying forth the arms-bearing tradition of the Founding Fathers” (2018, p. 207).

Carlson (2015) also argues that while many authors have studied gun culture in the US, too little attention has been paid to “…the critical role that the NRA has played in shaping this culture- not just through ideological rhetoric but also through the everyday practices and meanings attached to guns” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 65). She looks at how the NRA shapes this culture through its concealed carry classes.

While Spitzer, Carlson, and Charles begin to investigate the relationship between the NRA’s power and its relationship with the gun culture, none of them fully theorize this relationship, as it forms a side point of their arguments. Alternatively, Lacombe (2019) expands on their theories to attempt to do just this. He uses Social Identity Theory to argue that “…the NRA has assiduously and strategically cultivated a distinct, politicized gun-owner social identity over the course of many years, which enables it to influence politics by mobilizing its supporters

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\(^{14}\) First introduced in 1958, the *Armed Citizen* column is still published by the organization today. It features stories about citizens using firearms in self-defense in order to forward the organization’s argument that an armed public makes society safer.
into frequent and intense political action on its behalf” (Lacombe, 2019, p. 1342). Noting that Second Amendment supporters tend to be more “politically engaged” than their opponents, Lacombe explains this by arguing that the NRA draws on ideational power to mobilize its membership to action. It does this through “…alteration of the preferences and behavior of members of the mass public, whose political behavior… then affects policy outcomes”. Gun owners are politically engaged as a result of their “ politicized gun-owner social identity” and the NRA “has played a crucial role in creating this identity, disseminating it, and connecting it to politics” (Lacombe, 2019, p. 1344).

Lacombe’s work is very useful for empirically demonstrating the influence that the NRA has on the gun culture, and how it is able to translate that work into concrete political results. He makes an important contribution, theorizing the ideational power of the NRA. That being said, this analysis deals with only a single medium, the American Rifleman Magazine. This project will expand on this nascent paradigm for understanding the NRA using ethnographic evidence, and work with several of the NRA’s communications mediums to broaden our understanding of this relationship. Further, instead of seeing the relationship between the NRA and gun culture as unidirectional, I will remain attuned to the mutually constitutive relationship between the NRA and the gun culture. This is important given that the gun culture predates the NRA, and that the NRA is but one actor in its construction, albeit an important one.

Instead of aiming to create a neat and parsimonious model, my project will instead fully embrace the complexity of culture and the social world. It will do this by going beyond looking at the overtly political messaging that most researchers focus on when looking at the NRA. Instead, it will tune into the transmission of background ideas that make these foreground political appeals intelligible to their intended audience.
I argue that to understand the ideational power of the NRA, we must look at the relationship between the NRA and the gun culture. While a full explanation of what I mean by the gun culture will be given in the next chapter, for now, suffice it to say that the gun culture is the system of thoughts, ideas, understandings, and meanings shared between gun owners and enthusiasts, who refer to themselves as the Second Amendment community. The NRA emerged from the gun culture in its early development but has since exerted a tremendous amount of influence on that culture, using its various publications and direct points of contact with its membership. The NRA is far from the sole actor shaping this culture, though they are a powerful actor within it.

Much of the NRA’s power comes from their ability to manage their relationship with the Second Amendment community. Thus, we can see the organization going to great lengths to shape the gun culture and grow the community, which it can draw on for political support. This is because individuals within a culture will act to defend their group against perceived external threats. These individuals are easier to motivate towards collective action, given that the threat posed by their opponents could have a profound impact on their everyday lives. It is logical for people to be supportive of legislation that leads to the confiscation of property they do not own, or the restriction of liberties they do not use, to attain a public good. Yet few people would vote to have their property taken by the state, or voluntarily surrender liberties that they enjoy. Belonging to the Second Amendment community and participating in the gun culture provides a powerful incentive for people to become politically active. Going to the gun range, watching pro-gun content on YouTube or through NRATV, attending a gun show or convention; all of these serve as constant reminders to Second Amendment supporters to remain politically active.

Rather than seeing groups like the NRA use these incentives directly to motivate
members to act collectively towards a specific goal, what we see here is the organization working towards the construction and maintenance of the larger gun culture. That is because they know that those involved in the gun culture are politically important for their survival. While the gun culture exists independently of the NRA, given the organization’s long history of contributing to the gun culture, it can draw from it as a resource.

Here it is important to distinguish communities and cultures from networks. The term issue network describes groups of experts and concerned individuals that work together to influence policy. Issue networks are made up of individuals who have an interest in, or who identify with, a particular political cause. They can be made up of ordinary people who participate in the political system, as well as experts and intellectuals who policy makers draw on for expert advice. It is a “shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect (or, as defined by the network, some problem) of public policy”. These groups are difficult to measure as they can remain latent, only to activate later in response to an important event (Heclo, 2010). The idea of the Second Amendment community is slightly different, in that it involves a group of people centered around the gun culture rather than an area of expertise. This community is not intrinsically political but can be activated by interest groups or politicians to oppose or promote a certain policy. The central locus of the Second Amendment community is not in politics, but in practicing gun culture. Members of this community engage with one another through internet chat rooms, social media, events like gun shows, reading firearm related material, meetings on the gun range, or organized shooting sports activities.

The NRA has an interest in developing the gun culture and growing the Second Amendment community for several reasons. First, they understand that there is strength in numbers. The more Americans who are gun owners, the more leverage they have to argue for the
rights of gun owners. Further, the more people become involved in it the more likely they are to support the gun-rights movement. As Suzie Brewster, co-founder of the NRA Women’s Forum says: “People who don’t know vote no” (NRATV, 2013).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that many of those working within the NRA work towards the creation and maintenance of the gun culture for non-instrumental purposes. Many of them are lifelong gun owners who simply want to see the activities and sports that they love grow.

In contrast, the majority of grassroots support for gun control is more diffuse. Every day people concerned about gun violence likely have their attention split between numerous issues. They may become politically mobilized after a particularly captivating mass shooting, but this interest will often wane, although in recent years organizations like Everytown for Gun Safety or the March for Our Lives movement have been becoming more effective at grassroots mobilization. Despite this, since the 1980s studies have consistently demonstrated that pro-gun individuals, regardless of gender, are more likely to take political action in support of their rights than those who support stricter gun control (Lacombe, 2019; Middlewood et al., 2019; Schuman & Presser, 1981). These pro-control groups cannot draw upon the same reservoir of motivation as the NRA, giving gun rights advocates a major political advantage over their pro-control counterparts.

Acknowledging that the NRA is a major player in the construction of the gun culture then leads to the question of how they do this. Here, I believe, the policy process theories can offer some insights when put into conversation with the literature on the politics of memory. To better understand this, I will next delve into the literature on ideational power in public policy, to outline my theoretical framework.
Ideational Power in Public Policy

Scholars of ideas assert that ideas matter in public policy. What is more difficult is establishing how “…ideas go from thought to word to deed…” or how they are “…conveyed, adopted, and adapted…” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309). Different ideational theories have thus proposed different ways of tracing the influence of ideas in public policy. As we will see, ideational theories in public policy carry with them many common assumptions, yet I will argue that the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) provides the best theoretical toolkit to address the question of understanding the NRA’s influence, given the centrality of storytelling to the NRA’s political strategy.

Scholars of ideas in public policy note that ideas impact policy at three analytical levels – policy solutions, problem definitions, and public philosophies (Mehta, 2011). The most basic level is that of policy solutions. At this level of ideas, the problem and objectives are considered to have already been defined, and the ideas represent the solutions proposed to address those problems. Work in this vein attempts to look at why certain policy solutions are adopted and others not (Mehta, 2011).

An example of a theory that works at this level is the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). The MSF is a systems-level approach first developed by Kingdon (1984). This approach argues that “…policies are the result of problems, solutions, and politics, coupled or joined together by policy entrepreneurs during open windows of opportunity” (Zahariadis, 2003, pp. 1–2). The MSF thus breaks the policy world into three separate streams, the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. The policy stream is made up of policy communities, constellations of academics, bureaucrats, and interest groups that organize around a preferred policy area. The political stream is made up of governments and interest groups, whose attention
is split between multiple issues. Finally, the problem stream represents the power of entropy in the social world to force certain issues onto the policy agenda. A natural disaster, mass shooting or political scandal can all have destabilizing impacts on the status quo if actors can mobilize around them. For policy change to occur, policy entrepreneurs must successfully bring at least two of the three streams together to take advantage of what is called an agenda window (Herweg, Zahariadis, & Zolnhofer, 2018).

Within approaches like the MSF, the power of ideas is conceptualized as policy solutions. These policy solutions exist in what the MSF calls the policy primordial soup (Herweg et al., 2018), which is made up of policy thinkers, academics, think tanks, and other groups that propose solutions to the problems faced by politicians. These policy ideas, taken up by agents, then help to explain changes in policy. In the case of the MSF, these agents take the form of policy entrepreneurs whose ideas are thus translated into action by “policy entrepreneurs” who must couple the different streams so that they can exploit the policy window (Herweg et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016, p. 16; Zahariadis, 2003).

The second model for examining the role of ideas involves looking at ideas as problem definitions. Rather than seeing ideas simply as solutions to policy problems, they look at how actors mobilize ideas to shape the very contours of the problems they are trying to solve. Scholars adopting this approach “…reject the idea that political choices are simply the sum of individual, interest group or institutional preferences…” and focus instead on the process of contestation by which policy problems are defined (Mehta, 2011, p. 32). These authors examine “more general programs that underpin the policy ideas” that are important because they “…define the problems to be solved by such policies; the issues to be considered; the goals to be achieved; the norms, methods, and instruments to be applied; and the ideas that frame the more
immediate policy ideas proposed to solve any given problem” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306). How a policy problem is defined is important for shaping the choices of solutions that policymakers have, as well as for deciding whether that issue makes it onto the political agenda.

The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) adopts this view of ideas. It studies why sporadic policy change occurs in the American political system, which is normally quite stable given its conservative design (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 3). Theorists in this framework argue that political pressure can build up in this system, releasing itself like a volcanic explosion when the public image of an issue is changed by a major event or effective advocacy (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2018).

For example, Nuclear Power in the United States enjoyed a policy monopoly from the 1940s until the mid-1960s and 1970s. In the beginning, the Nuclear Power industry had a positive public image, but a shift in public opinion in the 1960s and 1970s destroyed this monopoly. Opponents of nuclear power began to gain strength in the late 1960s and were able to turn public opinion against nuclear power after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Collective actors like interest groups are important players for shifting public opinion in the PET. Where a policy subsystem is dominated by a single group, change is unlikely. When multiple groups compete against one another on an issue there is a greater likelihood for change, as these groups vie to control the framing of the issue. The constellation of interest groups in a policy subsystem can shape how policymakers view an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 190). By shaping the contours of policy problems, rather than simply proposing solutions to those problems, political actors can shape policy.

The third and final level where ideas influence policy is as public philosophies and policy
paradigms (Mehta, 2011). Public philosophies, in this case, refers to “…a view, often voiced by political parties, about the appropriate role of government given certain assumptions about the market and society…”. The concept of public philosophies is similar to that of ideology but without the negative baggage associated with the term. These “background ideas”, or “philosophical ideas”, “generally sit in the background as underlying assumptions that are rarely contested except in times of crisis” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306). They work to impact the makeup of legislatures and the behavior of those within the legislatures. Policy entrepreneurs also work to connect their preferred policies to these background ideas to win support (Mehta, 2011, pp. 40–42).

Within the theories of the policy process, there are only two approaches are appropriate for examining the influence of ideas at all three levels: policy solutions, policy problems, and background ideas. The first is Discursive Institutionalism, put forward by Vivian Schmidt, while the second is the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF).

Discursive institutionalism, as the name suggests, uses the concept of discourse to address the question of how ideas influence public policy. The perspective was largely championed by Vivian Schmidt and has its roots in the institutionalist tradition which it seeks to transform. Schmidt argues that discourse is important because it captures not just the ideas that are being represented but the “…interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed…”, which can help us to better understand “…why certain ideas succeed and others fail…” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309). Discourse in this sense encompasses many “forms of ideas” which include “narratives, myths, frames, collective memories, stories, scripts, scenarios, images, and more” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309).

This separation of ideas into three levels is important for my discussion of the NRA’s
influence, given that most of the attempts to explain the NRA’s power mentioned above focused on the first two levels of ideas – policy solutions and problem definition. Yet, while discourse analysis is a useful perspective for analyzing public policy, it lacks specificity. It can be difficult to operationalize discourse, as it is all encompassing. Further, the focus of this approach is on how discourse impacts institutions, usually the institutions associated with the state. Given that my project aims to look at the relationship between a non-state actor and ordinary people, it does not seem like the most appropriate theoretical lens. The NPF as we will see, does a better job of creating more precise toolkits for research based on a precise operationalization of narrative.

The NPF focuses on how political actors use narratives to win supporters thus influence policy (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaeilli, 2018). The focus of the NPF is to elucidate the precise mechanics by which political actors employ ideas and theorize the relationship between the different levels of ideas. The NPF was developed to establish empirically the power of narratives, asking the question: “Do narratives play an important role in the policy process?” (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 173). Theorists in this perspective focus on narratives because policy debates are made up of narratives, whether told on the floor of the house of representatives or in Twitter debates, and because narratives can impact a policy at all three levels of the policy making process. This approach attempts to build a bridge between positivist and post-positivist conceptualizations of narratives, arguing that “…narratives both socially construct reality and can be measured empirically” (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 174). This is done through the NPF’s precise operationalization of a policy narrative. Policy narratives must contain a setting, at least one character, a plot, and most importantly a politically relevant moral.

Authors who adopt this framework accept that “…all meaningful communication takes the form of a story. The purpose of narratives is to create social meaning of events or actions
between the storyteller and the audience” (McBeth, Shanahan, Hathaway, Tigert, & Sampson, 2010, p. 393). In the context of the policy world the storytellers are stakeholders, including interest groups, who tell stories to citizens and other important actors to shape the contours of the policy problem, sway public opinion and move the status quo in their intended direction (McBeth et al., 2010).

Narratives are made up of three parts: “narrative elements, narrative strategies, and belief systems”. Narrative elements include the characters, who are the heroes, villains, victims and allies, the setting, the plot and the policy prescription or moral of the story. Belief systems are deeply rooted ideas that are shared by allied groups or the wider society. Narrative strategies are the methods that actors use to persuade the public, like expanding or contracting the scope of the conflict (Smith-Walter et al., 2016, p. 1056).

A key narrative strategy is framing (McBeth et al., 2010). The conceptualization of a policy frame was taken from Framing Theory, which is often employed in the social movement literature to trace the influence of ideas on public opinion or support for an issue. Popularized by Goffman (1992) and imported into the social movement literature by Giltin (1980) and Snow & Benford (1992), the study of framing theory is now a popular approach within the literature on collective actors. Frames allow collective actors to highlight a social injustice that they wish to tackle, called the punctuating function of the frame, as well as to identify a culprit or assign blame for the problem and propose a resolution, the diagnostic and prognostic element of the frame (Snow & Benford, 1992). These frames serve to section off reality, drawing attention to certain ideas and events while bracketing off others (J. A. Noakes & Johnston, 2005). Frames are an important part of the second level of ideas, problem formation, as they “help interpret problems to define problems for action and suggest pathways to remedy the problem” (Zald,
In his analysis of the NRA, for example, Melzer focuses on the organization’s use of framing in its communications to mobilize members against a perceived threat to their right to bear arms. He notes that part of their strategy in doing this is to appeal to a type of frontier masculinity popular with their key demographic. This frontier masculinity stresses the importance of conservative values like self-reliance while perpetuating the view that firearms were an essential element of America’s past and thus American culture. For him, this frontier masculinity pre-dates the NRA, and he is agnostic about whether its origins are real or constructed (Melzer, 2009).

These frames, however, cannot exist independently of their cultural context. Culture forms the background ideas that make these frames intelligible. The use of framing in the debate over women’s reproductive rights is a good example of this at work. The phrase “A woman’s body is her own”, is used to frame abortion as a medical issue or issue of bodily autonomy. This frame is only intelligible “…in a cultural discourse that highlights the notions of individual autonomy and equality of citizenship rights…” (Zald, 1996, p. 267).

By incorporating framing into its analysis of narratives, the NPF allows us to understand how these frames fit into larger narrative strategies of organizations. This is important because “…policy narratives contain both narrative elements and strategies that are not included in what constitutes an issue frame…” (Shanahan, McBeth, & Hathaway, 2011, p. 374). This allows us to expand beyond the second level of ideas, how ideas shape the contours of policy problems, and look at how these frames fit together with the third level of ideas, the public philosophies or background ideas of different cultures.

In the NPF, narratives help to explain how ideas translate to action. Politicians, collective
actors, citizens and members of the media use narratives to attempt to sway others and win over allies. This approach is useful because it allows us to look at the specific techniques that actors use to mobilize the power of ideas. To systematically study narratives, the NPF separates them into three separate analytical levels: micro, meso and macro, which map onto Schmidt’s three levels of ideas (2008). Studies of microlevel narratives focus on how narratives impact individuals. These studies are generally more experimental and will examine things like how narrator trust impacts whether or not people will accept certain narratives (Shanahan et al., 2018).

Meso-level NPF studies take the policy subsystem as their unit of analysis and examine how actors within it use narratives to try to achieve their policy outcomes. For example, McBeth et al. (2010) look at how interest groups mobilize narratives to shape how ordinary citizens see a given issue. They use the example of the Buffalo Field Campaign, an interest group that advocated for environmental issues in Yellowstone National Park and was crucial in shaping the debate around that issue, to empirically account for the power of narratives in the public debate.

Two theorists have already applied the NPF to study the NRA, though have focused on the meso-level of analysis. Merry (2016b) examined almost 10,000 tweets from the NRA and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun violence to demonstrate how both organizations use social media to spread their narratives about mass shootings. Similarly, Smith-Walter et al. (2016) completed a content analysis of American Rifleman, as well as the Brady Campaigns Legal Action newsletter to examine the role that evidence played in narrative construction.

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of my project, macro-level narratives are grand narratives shared by broader communities. “These grand policy narratives create socially constructed realities that manifest as institutions, society, and cultural norms” (Shanahan et al.,
These are the background ideas that Schmidt describes.

This conceptualization of grand narratives or meta-narratives was imported into the NPF from the wider social sciences. Crites (1971) referred to these meta-narratives as Sacred Stories, arguing that human beings understand the world through narrative and that our subjective consciousness organizes experiences into narrative in order to make sense of the passing of time. The consciousness must mediate between different types of narratives, what Crites refers to as Sacred Stories and Mundane Stories. Sacred Stories are macro-level narratives that in “traditional cultures” were special stories told during celebrations or momentous occasions. These are the stories that “…live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrants. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of a people to be directly told: they form consciousness rather than being among the objects of which it is directly aware” (Crites, 1971, p. 295). Sacred Stories are sometimes called myths and are important because they shape how societies, groups, and nations see themselves. They become a part of the shared group identity of members. In modern society, these stories are “anonymous and communal”, have no claimed authorship, and are considered to have really happened by those who listen to them. Sacred stories are lived by people, and they “…inform people’s sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience” (Crites, 1971, p. 295). As we will see, different cultures within different societies have their own distinct sacred stories.

Given that micro and meso-level studies lend themselves better to empirical research designs, most research within the NPF has focused on these levels. A few macro-level studies do exist, however. For example, Danforth (2016) draws on the NPF to look at how shifting meta-narratives in educational policy have impacted students with disabilities in the era of the No Child Left Behind policy. Danforth labels meta-narratives as broad narratives, and says that this
term means “…communal, historical narratives that are expansive enough to explain a variety of human events across time and place” (2016: 584). He expands that: “These large-scale cultural tales infuse situational specific activity sequences with social meaning while supplying useful theories of individual identity, moral action, and community life” (Danforth, 2016: 584).

Similarly, in their aforementioned study, McBeth et al. examined how groups like the Buffalo Field Campaign draw upon symbols in order to help their narratives resonate with “…underlying cultural elements characteristic of targeted publics” (2010: 394).

Yet, Peterson & Jones (2016) note that the macro-level of NPF research is currently undertheorized. The literature leaves many important questions unanswered. How do collective actors draw on these macro-narratives to influence public opinion and rally support? Do collective actors simply draw on a given culture’s Sacred Stories, or do they actively influence and shape them? This is the gap in the literature my project will fill, by examining how the NRA not only draws upon but actively shapes historical macro-narratives surrounding America’s past to construct the gun culture, attract and mobilize supporters and ultimately shape American firearms policy.

My project will also add methodological diversity to the NPF’s research program. NPF studies tend to use experimental research (See: Ertas, 2015; Jones & Song, 2014; Niederdeppe, Roh, & Shapiro, 2015), or content analysis (See: Merry, 2016b; Smith-Walter et al., 2016) of collective actor’s communications in order to examine the influence of narratives on group members and ordinary citizens. Ethnographic research has the potential to make an exciting contribution to this research program.

The first half of this chapter has demonstrated that there is a gap in our understanding of the NRA’s ideational influence and determined that the NPF is the most appropriate theoretical
approach to generate a better understanding of the NRA’s community building efforts. Given the undertheorization of the macro-level in the NPF noted above and the importance of macro-level narratives surrounding America’s, and Americans’, pasts, it is important to reach across disciplinary boundaries to supplement this paucity. It is here that I think the literature from the field of memory studies has much to offer my analysis.

The Politics of Memory

The past is gone; irretrievable; forever beyond our grasp. What survives are snippets that we piece together to try to better understand what came before now. These snippets, assembled and carried into the present by human hands, bear the fingerprints of the assembler upon them (E.J. Hobsbawm, 1983). The second half of this chapter will examine how we connect with the past and why this is important for our understanding of the NRA’s ideational influence. As the focus of this manuscript is not historical, I will not concern myself with piecing together the past as it was. Instead, the focus will be on the past as it is remembered and brought into the present. This is important because our understanding of the past heavily informs our understanding of the present. Human beings evaluate current events, construct our identity as individuals and as groups, make choices, and understand the world based on this understanding. Cultures, like individuals, must have a remembered past to have an intelligible present. Yet, unlike with the individual, the remembered past for cultures is constructed by a group of individuals and exists in a constant process of contestation, reinvention, and renewal. While the potential for the reinvention of the past is not unlimited, it is open to reinterpretation.

The NPF provides a powerful theoretical tool to understand how narratives impact the policy process. But, as has already been noted, there is a paucity of development at the macro-level. Shanahan et al. (2018) note, the NPF relies upon imported theories for its
conceptualization of meta-narratives. To fill this void, I propose that we should look to the field of memory studies, a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach that emerged from the field of history but has since been adopted by disciplines like anthropology and sociology. Exploring the politics of memory will help us to better understand how the NRA works towards the social construction of the gun culture by linking firearms not only to larger narratives surrounding America’s past but to the very personal memories in its members' lives.

First, I will look at the purposes that the past serves in the present and unpack the phenomenon that MacDonald (2013) calls past presencing. I will then move on to explore how we know the past, how we experience the past, and how we own the past, to better understand how history, memory, and heritage can be used as political tools.

The Past and Past Presencing

Historians throughout the 20th century have grappled with questions surrounding the nature and uses of the past. This conversation began as an introspection into how history as a discipline explores the past. During this time, authors like Foucault (Foucault, 1977), Anderson (2006), Lowenthal (1985), Collingwood (1946), and Carr (1961) questioned the traditional positivist view of history as a collection of objective facts about the past discerned using the scientific method. These authors instead examined how history is made up of narratives, or stories about the past, and that these stories are often mobilized by the state to achieve its goals. Further, they expanded the conversation regarding how we know the past to include previously ignored or devalued epistemologies such as memory and heritage. These authors acknowledged that knowledge of the past does not exist in and of itself but is brought to light to serve a purpose. Thus, the stories that get told often reflect existing power structures in society.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the field of memory studies emerged, adding new insights to the conversation (Macdonald, 2013). Largely based on a rediscovery of the works of Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist and student of Emile Durkheim (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010a), this field looks at the social construction of the past on many levels, from the individual to larger organizations like the nation-state. It acknowledges that the past is always brought forth for a purpose, and in the public sphere, this purpose is usually political. There is no single history, but multiple competing histories, whose success depends on the power of their proponents. But why does the past matter? Why is it important? Most importantly, why is the past political? It is important to reflect on these questions before moving on.

History and memory serve important purposes for individuals and groups. At its most basic level, they allow us to “…make sense of the present” or “…render the present familiar” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 39). This is important for our understanding of the world. Were it not for the remembered past we would be unable to function. We would not recognize the objects, places, and people in our environment, or be able to perform simple tasks like driving to work or chatting with friends. “Only habituation enables us to understand what lies around us” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 39).

This utility function of memory refers not just to our own experiences but second-hand experiences as well, that we gain through reading, watching videos, or talking to people. For example, when you visit a foreign city for the first time, your thoughts and feelings are shaped not only by the information you have gained first hand through exploring that city, but what you have read about it, seen in movies, learned in class or heard from friends (Halbwachs, 1968; Lowenthal, 1985). As I explored the city of Washington during my fieldwork, I could observe
this at work in my own reactions. The smile snuck on to my face as I caught sight of the Washington Monument for the first time since I had seen it as a child. The excitement I felt walking through the National Mall. The thrill of gazing past the gates of the White House. I caught myself absentmindedly humming the *Captain America* theme tune as I strolled past the Smithsonian. The way that I experienced these places was influenced not only by my own childhood memories, but my memories of watching news programs, documentaries, and Hollywood Blockbusters. These mediated versions of the past, or prosthetic memories (Landsberg, 1995), then changed how I experienced and reacted to the present.

The past is used to reaffirm or validate certain practices or beliefs by referring to historical precedent or tradition. This can work in two ways. The first is preservation, or justifying current practices based on their survival through time. The second is restoration, which is looking back in time to bring something back that is perceived to have been lost or trying to right a historical wrong (Lowenthal, 1985). This is what Trump evoked when he asked his supporters to help him “Make America Great Again”. On the other hand, the past can also be used to aggrandize the present, reminding people that their lives are better now than they were “back then”, or as a form of escape from the present when the past is used to entertain (Lowenthal, 1985).

Both for the individual and group, the past is used to create a sense of identity. On an individual level, our pasts make up our individual stories. Being able to “…recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 41). This can take the form of attachment to a certain place, or objects or relics of our past like photographs. The past is also tied to our sense of worth. People seek links to history to affirm their value or importance. This is why we treasure things like family crests, heirlooms, objects,
or memories that link our personal story to something grander. The same is true for groups, where this past takes the form of communal or national stories and traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983; Lowenthal, 1985). These stories serve the function of “…legitimating a people in their own eyes” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 44).

During my dissertation proposal defense there was a single question that I could anticipate with complete certainty: what does the past have to do with political science? This is because the link between the past and politics is not immediately evident. This is not to say that my committee members were unaware of this, but that they knew articulating this link would be necessary for me to convince others in the field of the value of this project. Like me, they were aware that for most people, the past does not seem political. Like me, they recognized how deeply the disciplinary boundaries that emerged through the evolution of the modern university have created barriers to our thinking.

All of the functions of the past are intrinsically political, and are used to build and maintain political movements, identities and institutions. If the past helps groups to make sense of the present, then controlling the dominant societal narrative about the past can be tremendously important for creating the conditions of political possibility. If the past helps us to affirm and validate practices through preservation or restoration, then it can be a tool for preserving institutions and old practices or rallying movements. If the past helps us to form group identity, then it is essential for the creation of any culture or political movement, which must not only have its own story, but link itself somehow to the story of the broader polity. Finally, if the past provides enjoyment and escape, then it can be used to motivate and incentivize participation, or link those positive feelings to political movements, leaders, or even specific policies.
For the past to become political, it must be brought into the present. Scholars within the field of memory studies have examined how narratives about the past are produced and communicated through different mediums, in different locations and within the context of different social groups, what MacDonald (2013; 2012) calls past presencing. “Past presencing is concerned with the ways in which people variously draw on, experience, negotiate, reconstruct, and perform the past in their ongoing lives”. This term was created to avoid the distinction between history and memory, which often ends up either privileging history as the “established and verified past” or privileging memory as more authentic and populist past (MacDonald, 2012, p. 234). The term also serves as a way of highlighting the fact that memory is a practice, rather than an object. We tend to see public memory as a possession that groups have, when in reality memory is an action: remembering (Macdonald, 2013). For the purposes of this analysis, past presencing will be used as an umbrella term to discuss the various ways in which the past is brought into the present: history, memory and heritage. I will now consider each of these in turn, as they will be important for my analysis of how the NRA mobilizes the past to build the gun culture. This will involve exploring how we know the past, how we feel the past and how we own the past.

How Do We Know the Past? – History and Memory

The field of history enjoys a tremendous amount of respect and attention in the wider society. For most outside of academia, the past is synonymous with history. It is often seen as the most authentic account of past events and impacts multiple facets of public life; trusted in court cases to help determine and interpret the laws of the land, referenced by politicians in debates and important for every discipline in the social sciences and humanities, whether they choose to acknowledge it or not. In the latter half of the 20th century, however, historians started to look
beyond history to interrogate other ways of knowing the past.

This has resulted in the emergence of the field of memory studies. Memory is important to history because: “All awareness of the past is founded on memory. Through recollection, we recover consciousness of former events, distinguish yesterday from today, and confirm that we have experienced a past” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 193). While memory is often thought of as an individual activity, there are both individual and social elements to remembering. Memories are both private and public, personal and collective. It makes public events private. When we think about a major event that occurred during our lives, such as September 11th, 2001, we think of our own experience of it, of how we and those around us felt at the time it was happening. Remembering is a social process, as “…we need other people’s memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 196).

The field of memory studies thus looks at “the social organization of tradition”, or how society communicates its past to its members through numerous vehicles. Scholarly history, in this sense, is seen as one set of narratives competing amongst others (Glassberg, 1996b, p. 9). Memory studies is different from historiography in that rather than seeking to “characterize a single group or institution’s beliefs about its past…” it instead attempts to “…understand the interrelationships between different versions of history in public”. This involves interrogating “the social organization of tradition”, a term coined by anthropologist Robert Redford, who acknowledged that “versions of the past” are disseminated by various organizations in society, both governmental and non-governmental (Glassberg, 1996b, p. 9).

To study memory, scholars have identified multiple types of memory. The first basic distinction is that between individual and collective memory (Assmann, 2008; Lowenthal, 1985; Macdonald, 2013). While individual memory is often thought of simply as a repository of static
remembrances about the past, scholars are increasingly recognizing that remembering is a more dynamic process. This process serves “…not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present…”, helping us to understand our previous experiences and negotiate our identity (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 210).

If individual memory allows people to develop a sense of identity, collective memory functions similarly at the group level. Schwartz (1991a) defines collective memory as: “a metaphor that formulates society's retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting” (1991a, p. 302). Here, scholarly opinion diverges on how to classify collective memory. Assmann (2008) divides collective memory into two levels. The first is the social level, in which memory becomes “…a matter of communication and social interaction”, or communicative memory. The second level is the cultural level, which is concerned with “images” or “cultural objectivations” as “carriers of memory” (Assmann, 2008, p. 110). Cultural memory functions as an institution. This memory is “stored away in symbolic forms…” that are considered “…stable and situation-transcendent”. Cultural memory is preserved in monuments or museums, it “requires institutions of preservation and reembodiment”. On the other hand, communicative memory is transmitted solely through communication with others and thus is limited in lifespan to a few generations (Assmann, 2008, pp. 110–111).

Macdonald (2013) is cautious of the way scholars employ the term collective memory. She argues that, when looking at collective memory, we lump many experiences into one pile, and treat collective memory as functioning in the same way as individual memory. This romanticizing of memory leads to misconceptions, the most important of which is that it leads us to see memory as an object, more specifically a possession, rather than an action, something we
do. Macdonald instead forwards the idea that memory is an action rather than a “treasure” and can take many different shapes depending on the context in which the remembering is taking place (Macdonald, 2013, pp. 11–12).

The relationship, or perhaps rather the distinction, between history and memory is complex. At the origins of the field of memory studies memory was seen as a more authentic and “organic” way of preserving what is still alive, whereas history was an attempt to resurrect what is lost (Macdonald, 2013, p. 13). Authors like Olick, Robbins, and Halbwachs see history as dead memories, to which people no longer have a direct relationship, and that are preserved (Rowlinson et al., 2010a). Authors like Nora (1989a), for example, presented memory as “social” or “organic” and belonging to traditional societies. History, in contrast, is how we “forgetful” western societies attempt to organize and collect the past. In this era, history and memory were positioned as combatants against one another; history having eradicated true, organic memory through the ascendance of modernity. This view held that we only need history because we have become divorced from our traditions and lost memory (Nora, 1989a). More recently, this harsh distinction has been problematized by scholars like Macdonald, who acknowledge that separating memory from history is murky business and often involves value judgements on the part of the author, and assumptions about the nature of truth (Macdonald, 2013, pp. 13–14).

Lowenthal argues that “History extends and elaborates memory by interpreting relics and synthesizing reports from past eyewitnesses” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 210). He acknowledges that the line between history and memory is blurry. Historical facts are seen as empirically testable, usually using eyewitness accounts from the period. Yet, though we are suspicious of present memories we tend to trust those from the past. “History and memory are distinguishable less as types of knowledge than in attitudes toward that knowledge”. What distinguishes history from
memory is the former’s “collective nature” as “…historical knowledge is by its very nature collectively produced and shared; historical awareness implies group activity”. History allows the past to extend beyond the personal recollections of the individual and requires institutions to record it (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 213).

Friedman and Kenney define history as: “…a sustained narrative about the past, a narrative that is neither natural nor scientific, but is carefully constructed to give meaning to past events by selecting some for inclusion, leaving others out, and interpreting the ones that are recounted in order to convey certain conclusions” (Friedman & Kenney, 2005, p. 2).

Assmann attempts to distinguish cultural memory from history through the concept of identity. History is simply information about the past produced by archaeologists and historians, whereas cultural memory relates to “a concept of identity”. While history is characterized by universalism, aiming towards “generalization and standardization”, cultural memory is “…local, egocentric, and specific to a group and its values” (Assmann, 2008, p. 113). Assmann acknowledges that identity is a tricky concept, given that people’s identities are quite multifaceted. Like identity, memory is an “open system”. Yet memory is essential for belonging in a group. “Remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation” (Assmann, 2008, p. 114).

Developing a sharp distinction between history and collective memory is not necessary for this project. For the purposes of my analysis, I will defer to Indigenous meanings when making the distinction. If information is presented as a “history” then I use that term. When discussing individuals’ memories, I will use this term. As Macdonald notes, developing a strict operationalization of the difference is less important than acknowledging that both the production of history and memory are actions, different forms of past presencing. What is
important, for my purposes, is how the past is brought into the present and acknowledging the political nature of this process. This is true of both history and memory.

But what about historical truth? Is our understanding of the past purely instrumental? What about narratives of the past that stand the test of time? Schwartz (1991b) notes two broad and contradictory traditions in the literature on memory studies regarding this question, which disagree on the level of mutability of the past. The first tradition, pioneered by Mead and Halbwachs in the 1960s, and championed by authors like Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) views the past as: “a social construction shaped by the needs of the present” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 221). These authors conceptualize the past as “…precarious, its contents hostage to the conditions of the present” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 222). Authors like Lowenthal (1985) exemplify this tradition. Lowenthal’s principle argument is that the “past is a foreign country”, irretrievable and different from the present.

Schwartz identifies a rival conceptualization, however, forwarded by authors like Shils, Durkheim and Schudson, which emphasizes the role of tradition and continuity in our understanding of the past. This perspective looks at the “enduring memories” that societies hold, those elements of our understanding of the past that remain largely stable over time. This is because “Memories are not credible unless they conform to an existing structure of assumptions about the past…” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 222).

Schudson identifies three factors that limit the ability of actors to reinterpret or change the past. The first is the “structure of available pasts”, which refers to the way that the existing historical record limits the ways that individuals can manipulate the past. While they can always interpret events differently, it is very difficult to invent events entirely. In other words: “There are features of our own pasts that become part of the givens of our lives, whether they are
convenient or not” (Schudson, 1989, p. 108). Further, historical events, once popularized, are difficult for people to ignore. Once an infrastructure of commemoration is created, for example statues and museums are built, it can be difficult to dismantle them, and create large controversies. The controversy over status of Confederate Generals in the American South provides a contemporary example to illustrate Schudson’s point. He notes that sometimes this infrastructure is social rather than physical. For example, a work of literature that is considered a classic and becomes part of an established cannon of literature (Schudson, 1989).

“The Structure of Individual Choice” refers to the way that the past shapes us psychologically, whether we like it or not. This includes past traumas, like the way that Germans must deal with the Holocaust, whether or not it is comfortable for them to do so. It also includes “channels”, or “precedents”, which refer to established ways of doing things within organizations that shape the way that things are done in the future. It also includes “commitments”, how people become invested in certain elements of the past and are reticent to give up their pre-established views on them (Schudson, 1989).

Finally, “Intersubjective Conflicts Among Choosers” refers to the fact that different groups within society are also forwarding their visions of the past, visions which sometimes clash (Schudson, 1989). These three factors can help us understand why certain narratives about the past are resistant to reinterpretation as they possess “self-sustaining inertia” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 222).

Narratives about the past are especially resistant to change when they are protected by powerful institutions. These institutions, like the state or the church, supervise the past through the creation of commemorations, archives, and traditions. These create a sort of historical path dependent process, in which “…the earliest construction of an historical object limits the range
of things subsequent generations can do with it” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 232). Thus, stable beliefs about the past coexist and compete with new ones. “As each generation modifies the beliefs presented by previous generations, there remains an assemblage of old beliefs coexisting with the new…” (B. Schwartz, 1991b, p. 234).

The tension between the post-modern view of the past as infinitely mutable, and the more conservative view of the past, are not irreconcilable. Taken together, they highlight the fact that powerful actors work to shape how people understand the past, but that their power to do this is constrained by existing infrastructures of commemoration. This is important for my project to explore in our discussion of macro-level narratives. By their very nature, the sacred stories of a group are highly resistant to change and reinterpretation. They are deeply institutionalized, with a vast infrastructure of commemoration dedicated to their maintenance. Yet, this does not mean that actors cannot draw on different elements of these narratives to suit their purposes.

Thus far, we have examined how the retelling of the past, past presencing, is a political act. Though the past is not infinitely changeable, the choices that we make concerning which parts of it to bring into the present are political. These choices are limited and constrained by existing institutionalized infrastructures of commemoration. But how are these infrastructures created? The majority of the literature on the political nature of history, sometimes called critical historiography, focuses on the state as the creator of histories, and as history as a tool of nationalism. Historians like Anderson (2006), Nora (1989a), Warner (1959), and Bellah (2005) see “historical imagery” as the mortar that holds diverse societies together, a sort of “civic faith” (Glassberg, 1996a). Other scholars, like Foucault (1977) and Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) see history as a tool for groups within society trying to gain power (Glassberg, 1996a). These scholars demonstrated how government institutions like state education and public
commemoration were used to inculcate values and create national identities (E.J. Hobsbawm, 1983).

The field of memory studies, on the other hand, expands the idea of the mobilization of the past further. Like critical historiography it acknowledges that history and memory are not about what really happened, but how people remember what happened (Rowlinson et al., 2010b). Rather than seeking to “…characterize a single group or institution’s beliefs about its past…”, memory studies instead attempts to “…understand the interrelationships between different versions of history in public”. This involves interrogating “the social organization of tradition”, a term coined by anthropologist Robert Redford. This tradition acknowledges that “versions of the past” are disseminated by various organizations in society, including: “school, government ceremonies, popular amusements, art and literature, stories told by families and friends, and landscape features designated as historical either by government or popular practice” (Glassberg, 1996a, p. 9). Most importantly: “…the new memory scholarship broadens the types of institutions and ideas included in the traditional historiography course, viewing professional historical scholarship as not the only thought about history but one of several versions of the past competing for influence in public in a particular place and time” (Glassberg, 1996a, p. 9). Thus it is important to pay attention to how non-state actors, especially well-connected and powerful non-state actors, contribute to this infrastructure of commemoration.

The central points of this brief overview on the literature of history and memory are this. First, that the past does not exist in and of itself, it must always be brought into the present through the process of past presencing. This can take the form of a variety of mediums, like history, memory, affect, heritage, etc. which will be expanded upon further in the rest of this chapter. The field of memory studies examine this process of past presencing, acknowledging
that differing accounts of the past exist and are often brought into the present for political purposes. Actors who engage in this process do not have unlimited power to shape our vision of the past, however they can emphasize certain parts of the story in order to shape our impression of it. Finally, all forms of past presencing are by nature social activities, as even when done alone they involve relying on a social repertoire of knowledge and imagery. Acknowledging this, the rest of this chapter will focus on how people engage with the past. This will involve first looking at the social groups with which people engage in the act of memory. We will then move on to examine how people experience the past and how people own the past. These are important for understanding the tactics that organizations like the NRA use for past presencing.

How do we experience the past?

History and memory are conveyed through narratives. But they are also experienced. While the affect of an object is felt by an individual, those emotions are communicated through narratives. Going back to the example of my walk through the streets of Washington, D.C. The grand sights that I saw, the White House, the Capitol Building, the Smithsonian Institute, only seem so grand because I have read about them, or heard about them, or seen them in a movie. These social experiences imbued these buildings with affect, which I experienced when seeing them. Discussing how we experience the past is important for understanding the NRA material that we will examine in subsequent chapters. The past is experienced by people in several ways: through our connection to our family, through materiality, through place, and through media.

Family is central to how we experience the past. This was first brought to light by Rozensweig & Thelen who aimed to address a problem that they saw in the field of history: “…that professional historians were painfully unaware of how people outside their own circles understood and used the past” (1998, p. 2). Most historians saw the general public as passive
consumers of history rather than an active producers or interpreters. Studies in the 1980s and 1990s, rather, “…suggested that Americans engaged historical texts (and all cultural forms) in ways molded by their own personalities, experiences, and traditions and that their engagements were often quite different from what producers of these texts had hoped for” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 5).

The authors performed their study of the course of several years. They conducted structured and semi-structured phone interviews with 808 Americans, chosen by random selection. They also performed interviews with 645 African Americans, Indigenous people and people of Latin American heritage. They found that Americans “…make the past part of their everyday routines and turn to it as a way of grappling with profound questions about how to live”. In exploring the past they “…addressed questions about relationships, identity, immortality, and agency” like “where do I come from?” They asked participants about “past related activities” that they engaged in, and found that contrary to popular misconceptions, Americans are very interested in history – just not history as it is presented in textbooks or lecture halls. They chose 10 past related activities to ask the participants about, like looking at old photographs, watching historical movies or tv shows, visiting “any historical museum or historic sites”, etc. The most popular uses of the past were looking at photos and taking “…photographs or videos to preserve memories” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, pp. 16–19).

Respondents felt closest to the past when gathering with family members. “Although respondents described the past as being with them in many settings, they shared the sense that the familial and intimate past, along with intimate uses of other pasts, mattered most”. One respondent, for example, talked about how his family members naturally shared stories about the past at family gatherings, telling family stories or reminiscing about old times. Interestingly,
most respondents trusted family members like grandparents more than teachers as sources of authority about the past (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 21).

Further, when respondents did engage with national history, it was often connected to their personal or family story. “Rather than abstractly discussing the significance of World War II or the assassination of John F. Kennedy, they talked about how such an event had figured into their personal development or the setting in which they heard about it”. The main thrust of what they found is: “Almost every American deeply engages the past, and the past that engages them most deeply is that of their family” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 22).

In 2009, this study was replicated in the Canadian context by Friesen, Muise, and Northrup. Their research was based on a telephone survey of 3,419 Canadians looking at the relationship between Canadians and the past and how history plays a role in their everyday life as part of the larger Canadians and their Past Project (Friesen, Muise, & Northrup, 2009, p. 7). It originally only intended to interview 1,000 people a few special groups but got extra funding and ballooned. Eventually, 1 in 10,000 Canadians filled out this survey (Friesen et al., 2009, pp. 223–224).

Like Rosensweig & Thelen, Friesen et al. noted that family is often the most important place where Canadians engage with the past. Respondents to their survey were quite likely to have engaged in some sort of family history related activity and to consider it important, for example, 83% had looked through a family photo album, 74% were going to pass on family heirlooms and 57% had visited important family landmarks in the last 12 months (Friesen et al., 2009, pp. 228–229).

Like Americans, Canadians connected their personal story to broader, national, and international history through autobiographical memory, often forging connections between their
family history and broader historical events. Autobiographical memory is used to situate who you are, and your group’s place in Canada or the world beyond (Friesen et al., 2009, p. 231).

Family is a consistent theme within NRA communications material. The centrality of family to the act of remembering cannot be understated and helps us to explain why this is such an oft-repeated and impactful strategy by the NRA.

Another way that human beings experience the past is through material objects. Scholars must pay attention to the connection between materiality and memory, looking at “…how materials work on and in us” (Macdonald, 2013, p. 83). This means paying attention to how the meaning ascribed to objects can be both widely shared and particular to certain groups. Affective objects, objects imbued with meaning, take many forms. One such form is relics; objects that serve as evidence of the past. Relics help to bolster the knowledge we gain through memory and history, though they are only useful to us when placed in the context of our existing knowledge about that period (Lowenthal, 1985). To someone who knows nothing about the history or popular representations of the American West, for example, a Colt Peacemaker, the gun carried by most cowboys in western movies, would be meaningless. To those raised on stories of heroic cowboys and lawmen fighting outlaws, it becomes a symbol of chivalry, courage, and masculinity.

The strengths of artifacts are that because they are tangible they seem more real to people than written records. They are a bridge between the past and the present, giving the past a sense of immediacy (Lowenthal, 1985). As we have discussed, how an individual feels about guns will play a large part in their position on the gun debate, since facts are interpreted selectively based on a person’s background, much of which is shaped by culture (Kahan & Braman, 2003). The importance of the materiality of guns as objects of meaning and historical relics in shaping gun
politics cannot be overstated.

The concept of place is also very important for understanding how people experience the past, and how the past can be brought into the present. Place is essentially any physical space imbued with personal or social meaning, feeling, or emotion. It is a physical space that is transcribed with meaning through the process and practices of memory (Walsh & Opp, 2010). A good example of place is the concept of home. The idea of home is an elastic term that expands depending on the scale in which it is employed, from one’s dwelling to one’s homeland (Macdonald, 2013).

Early studies of place focused on the use of place by state powers (Walsh & Opp, 2010). Nora’s concept of *Lieux de memoire* is representative of this. *Lieux de memoire* are physical places, things that take on abstract symbolism, at once material and immaterial. They can be places, events, or objects. They have three basic properties: they must be “material, symbolic and functional”. They are *lieux de memoire* because they were chosen as significant, not by any inherent virtue, and act as a way of freezing time or partially resurrecting a memory. They also serve as a material avatar for a certain idea or concept (Nora, 1989b). This concept was adapted from Cicero’s *loci memoriae*. Yet, Cicero’s conceptualization of these sites was not necessarily political but more about practical memory. Nora’s vision of lieux de mémoire are “extremely ideological, full of nationalism, and far from being neutral or free of value judgements” having been “…created, invented, or reworked to serve the nation-state” (Den Boer, 2008).

Contemporary scholars continue to use the concept to study the construction of national identities. For example, Hebel (2008) looks at the construction of American identity at sites of memory. American sites of memory include museums like the Smithsonian, places of national significance like the National Mall, and places like the American National Parks system. Some
sites of memory have become living memory sites, and are heavily involved with tourism, like Colonial Williamsburg. Commemorative performances are another important way American memory is transmitted. This includes things like the Fourth of July, which in the 19th century competed for attention as the main national holiday with Forefather’s Day, which celebrated the arrival of early pilgrims to Plymouth. Public monuments and national celebrations have become places of historical contestation, such as the controversy over Columbus Day, or the creation in 1998 of a Boston Irish Famine Memorial which represented “…the continued urge of American ethnic groups to claim their spaces on the map of U.S.-American historical memories” (Hebel, 2008, p. 54).

Winter (2008), looks at the commemoration of armed conflict through sites of memory. Winter defines memory as “…a metaphor for the fashioning of narratives about the past when those with direct experience of the events die off”. Sites of memory must be recognized by a group of people as “…both significant and informed by a moral message”. The site of memory is thus a way to “materialize” the message (Winter, 2008, p. 62). Sites of memory can also involve certain rituals, made up of “…gestures and words…”. Winter identifies three stages in the lifecycle of a site of memory. The first is the creation of the site, the second is the “routinization” or “grounding of ritual action in the calendar”. The final stage is the “transformation” or “disappearance” of the site (Winter, 2008, pp. 70–71). Meaning can be imparted via the aesthetic of sites of memory. Images of heroic figures and medieval or classical symbolism characterized 19th-century war memorials, whereas the post-modern aesthetic is used in Holocaust memorials to try to impart a sense of the senselessness nature of the event (Winter, 2008).

There is a schism within the study of sites of memory between the older view of the critical historiographers and the newer approach of contemporary memory studies. The older
view represented by Hobsbawm, Ranger and Nora takes a more, top-down or functionalist approach, that “…emphasizes the usefulness to political elites of public events at such sites establishing the legitimacy of their rule”. It sees these sites as “…a materialization of national, imperial, or political identity” (Winter, 2008, pp. 62–63). The new memory studies approach, on the other hand, attempts to open up the relationship between memory and place to a multiplicity of understandings (Walsh & Opp, 2010). It examines how non-state actors, local communities and subordinate or dominated groups in society can use these events to create counter-narratives to the dominant view. “From this point of view, there is always a chorus of voices in commemorations; some are louder than others, but they never sound alone” (Winter, 2008, p. 64). The battle over the creation and control of sites of memory is a key flashpoint in the broader war to control the infrastructure of commemoration.

We experience the past through material and place, but also the media. In Rozensweig and Thelen’s study of the American public, 81% of respondents had watched a film or television program about the past within the past 12 months (1998, p. 19). Friesen et al. replicated these findings in Canada, where their respondents often engaged with history through mass media: movies, books, television shows, and the internet (2009, p. 239).

Historical material is often dealt with in popular culture and then interpreted by the audience. Audiences must then “negotiate” between the versions of history presented to them and their particular group in society (Glassberg, 1996a). The portrayals of the past contained in mass media are powerful vectors of memory and “…possess the potential to generate and mold images of the past which will be retained by whole generations”. This creates an impetus for scholars of memory studies to look beyond “high culture” and towards popular culture (Erill, 2008, p. 389).
There are several ways that works of fiction present the past. Often they draw on popular historical symbols and engage in the practice of remediation. This refers to the ways that certain iconic images from events are repeated. These images then help to make these events intelligible to people and can also be used to give a fictional representation an “aura of authenticity”. A prime example of this is the iconic image of the Americans raising the flag at Iwo Jima. This image has been repeated through a number of media, including the popular Clint Eastwood film *Flags of Our Fathers*. This use of symbolism is often cumulative. The term premediation refers to the way that “…existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for future experience and its representation” (Erill, 2008, pp. 392–395). For example, politicians and the media used public memory of the experience of total war during the First and Second World Wars to make sense of the massive societal effort required to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Looking at the role that media plays in our understand of the past is important for our discussion of guns in media portrayals of American history. Hollywood producers likely do not intend for their portrayals of gun wielding heroes and villains to serve as a repertoire of cultural imagery for gun rights organizations to draw on, yet this is what happens nonetheless. People experience the past through family, material objects, place and media. Understanding this is important for unpacking and analyzing the NRA material that will be presented in later chapters.

**How do we own the past? – Tangible & Intangible Heritage**

Heritage is history that is owned. It is our heritage. Or your heritage. Or my heritage. Heritage describes or lays claim to, ownership of the past. It is a “…mode of understanding and utilizing the past that is, at its very core, deeply partisan and intensely felt” (Hoelscher, 2006, p.
Heritage “turns the past into something visitable” and lays claims of ownership for one group over another (Macdonald, 2013, p. 18). Since the late 1960s, heritage began to become institutionalized, which has resulted in what scholars call the “heritage industry” (Hoelscher, 2006). This industry has allowed a large bureaucratic and legal framework to develop around heritage, the largest part of which is UNESCO, with its infamous World Heritage Sites (Macdonald, 2013, p. 18).

We can view the rise of heritage in several ways. For example, in the United States, the number of properties registered as heritage sites under the National Register went from 1,200 in 1968 to 77,000 in 2004. Further, the scope of what is considered heritage has also been widely broadened. For example, heritage sites can now include: “environments, artifacts, and activities…”. Heritage is both global and local. On the one hand, heritage sites and practices are always local. Through the heritage industry and bureaucracy, however, they become a global phenomenon, protected by international organizations and promoted across the world (Hoelscher, 2006, pp. 201–202).

There are several ways that state and non-state actors make claims to heritage. Often, this will involve displaying heritage through important objects, practices, or images. This includes things like historical re-enactments or living history museums. It is also done through the use of place, by establishing important historic sites. The relationship between heritage and place is very important since heritage is “spatially constituted”. This is why the placement of historic sites is so important and vital to the creation of meaning (Hoelscher, 2006, pp. 204–205). For example, a memorial to a battle that is not placed on the original battlefield loses some of its authenticity and meaning.

Like history and memory, heritage appears on the surface to be apolitical. It is simply
about the celebration, ownership, and continuity of a people’s historical traditions. However, heritage is deeply political, as it serves to validate political ideologies and identities (Hoelscher, 2006, p. 207). Debates over heritage include prominent controversies like the fight over the meaning of the Confederate Battle flag, or the controversy over removing statues from public places, highlight its political nature. Heritage establishes ownership or claim of something, and is by nature “exclusive and exclusionary”, thus tying into core political debates. If politics is about “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1936), recognition becomes the “what”.

Heritage is an especially powerful version of the past because it is so deeply institutionalized in local, national, and international bureaucracies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) protects heritage sites around the world. There are three categories for UNESCO heritage sites. The first is tangible heritage, such as major historical structures like the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia. There is also natural heritage, which refers to sites of natural importance like the Dead Sea. The final category is intangible heritage, which emerged from the term “folklore”. While this model was initially interested in recording dying traditions, it has now taken on the more ambitious goal of preserving them, expanding the concept of heritage to “…include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters”. This emerged because it was difficult to use existing copyright law to protect traditions that, by their very nature, belong to groups of people rather than individuals (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 53).

UNESCO defines intangible heritage as:

[Intangible heritage] includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, n.d.)
As we will see, the concept of heritage, especially intangible heritage, is important to my project for several reasons. The concept of heritage is often employed by the NRA in their communications material. The NRA works hard to present the traditions associated with firearms’ ownership and the Second Amendment as a heritage that must be protected and passed on to the next generation.

The idea of intangible heritage is relevant because a strong argument can be made that many of these traditions are a form of intangible American heritage. Some practices, like sports shooting or hunting, represent a form of intangible human heritage, given that it has been widely practiced throughout American history.

The concept of heritage and intangible heritage are not without their issues. There is a key tension in conservation work that intangible heritage brings to the fore: while organizations like UNESCO seek to freeze time through the preservation of buildings, artifacts, and now practices, cultures and their associated practices constantly change and evolve (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Those practices that get preserved, and those that are left behind, are ultimately the result of political choices. Thus, like all forms of past presencing, we must not fall into the temptation of seeing heritage as a neutral force. Instead, we must recognize it as yet another political battleground.

When organizations like the NRA emphasize the continuity of cultural practices, like the shooting sports, they are making an unconscious appeal to this intangible heritage. The argument goes: we do it because it is what we have always done. Here the past validates and reaffirms the practice of shooting and gun ownership.

Narrative and Memory – Tracing the Intersections

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that material explanations for the NRA’s influence
are insufficient for properly understanding the organization’s effectiveness. I put forward that we must conceptualize the NRA’s influence as stemming from the group’s relationship with the gun culture. I then explored the literature on ideational power in the field of public policy, to demonstrate that the NPF is the most suitable theoretical lens to understand the NRA’s power to influence ideas at all three levels: policy solutions, problem definition, and background ideas.

When organizations like the NRA disseminate large, macro-level policy narratives about America’s past they are engaged in the process of past presencing, that is they are bringing the past into the present for political purposes. Past presencing is an inherently political concept, as the past is always brought into the present for a purpose. These macro-level narratives draw on material from America’s history and public memory, from the private memories of Americans, and American symbols and heritage. These narratives are not infinitely mutable. To be successful, narratives about the past must conform to existing infrastructures of commemoration. They cannot rewrite the past, but they can tell their side of it.

The NPF provides scholars of policy with a powerful tool to trace the influence of narratives in the political discourse. It is a useful approach because it provides us with a conceptualization and an operationalization of narratives, and an opportunity to account theoretically for the intersections between broad, societal “sacred stories” and everyday policy narratives that are regularly told by policymakers. Yet, as a theoretical tool, it remains unfinished. While the approach was designed to bridge positivist and post-positivist theory, publishing and funding structures have meant that the weight of the theoretical development has occurred on the side of the former rather than the latter. As a result, the macro-level of the NPF remains underdeveloped theoretically.

This project intends to work towards the theoretical development of the macro-level of
the NPF by bringing the policy literature into a discussion with the literature on memory studies and the politics of the past. I will show how the NRA both contributes to and draws from macro-level policy narratives through the processes of past presencing, drawing on history, public and personal memory, and heritage to build a political community of gun owners and sway the public debate on gun control.

The project will not only contribute to the scholarship on public policy but also to the scholarship on memory studies. Though the field no longer sees the state as the sole producer of historical material the majority of the scholarship in this field has been state-centric in focus (Glassberg, 1996b). This is understandable, given that nation-states are often the largest producers or funders of commemoration in a given country. The past is important for states, as it represents a major component of the nation-building project (Friedman & Kenney, 2005). Comparatively little research has examined how collective actors mobilize memory to promote their cause. The memory studies literature and the literature on public policy have much to offer one another. Moreover, the NRA and the Great Gun debate in the United States provides an excellent case study to shed further light on this phenomenon. The NRA is a unique case study in that I can think of no other advocacy organizations that such a sophisticated communications and commemoration infrastructure.
Chapter Three – What is the Gun Culture?

But culturally, guns aren't just a reaction to anxieties. In a way gun control advocates rarely consider, but gun owners may find obvious, they're a meaningful social asset for their owners. In a fragmented society, guns connect people at a time when making connections is ever more difficult – Austin Sarat & Jonathan Obert (2019).

In many ways, 2020 was the year of the American gun. The year witnessed record gun sales and a massive influx of new gun owners. By the end of October, just before the presidential election, an estimated 18.6 million guns had been sold, many of them to new and first time gun buyers (Coleman, 2020). At least 5 million Americans purchased a gun for the first time in 2020 (NSSF, 2020b), including many groups that have traditionally been more averse to gun ownership. In one study of firearms purchases made during the pandemic, 64.8% of first-time firearms owners were women (Lyons et al., 2020).

There has been intense debate about how this will impact gun politics in the United States. Research had demonstrated that gun ownership is a significant predictor of voting behavior. This would lead us to believe that an influx of new gun owners would mean more support for gun rights. That being said, this effect is not equal across all types of gun owners and is much less noticeable in “casual” gun owners. For example, research has demonstrated that the more guns a person owns, the more likely they were to have voted for Trump in the 2016 election. Those who owned three or four guns were much more likely to have voted for Trump than those who only owned a single gun. This suggests that the relationship between gun ownership and political behavior is cultural, rather than simply a function of ownership (Joslyn, 2020). It is the gun culture that accounts for the political effects of gun ownership, yet not all gun owners, and certainly not all Americans are involved in this culture.

Before we can delve into a discussion about the NRA’s mobilization of history and
memory, we must first understand the gun culture from which the NRA emerges. This is important because it helps to unpack the complex relationship between material and ideational factors in public policy analysis. As I noted in the last chapter, scholars in the social sciences have recently directed more attention to looking at how ideas shape seemingly material interests and have come to be understood as “causal beliefs” (Béland & Cox, 2011, p. 3). This has interesting implications for our understanding of the gun culture. Firearms are material objects imbued with complex and contradictory meanings. Understanding the deeply held cultural meanings attached to firearms by those within and outside the gun culture helps us to better understand their political behavior.

Cultures are created and practiced by communities. The community I will be focusing on in this dissertation is the Second Amendment community, sometimes called the Pro-Second Amendment Community or 2A Community. I use the term Second Amendment community rather than community of gun owners because this is one of the prominent ways that the community refers to itself, and is referred to by some scholars (Collins, 2014; Pirelli, Wechsler, & Cramer, 2019). As we will see, the Second Amendment community is far from monolithic and contains within it several different sub-groups like sports shooters, hunters, self-defense enthusiasts, service members, veterans, collectors, and others. Further, as I will show, the Second Amendment community is poorly understood by those on the outside and especially those who vehemently oppose gun ownership, who Tonso (1990) labels the “adversary culture”. This has implications for the discourse on firearms policy, and many gun owners feel that their opinions

15 Throughout the literature on gun owners there are a few ways that the broader community of gun owners are referred to as. Sometimes this is simply gun owners (Joslyn, 2020), the “gun tribe” (Baum, 2013) or shooters (Kohn, 2004). Others simply refer to the gun culture, without specifying the community to which it belongs (J. Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009).
16 For examples, see: (Alcazar, 2020; Noir, 2020; NRA-ILA, 2020; Rieck, 2020; Stuffing, 2017).
are often misunderstood and thus ignored, dismissed, or derided. Whatever one’s opinion on the
gun debate, this represents a serious barrier towards a de-escalation of tensions.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the gun culture is an imagined community
composed of a diverse group of people united around a set of ideas, symbols, and serious leisure
activities. The gun culture is practiced in both physical and digital spaces, through shared
activities like hunting and sports shooting, as well as through online knowledge communities. I
will discuss how better understanding this culture can help us to understand the meanings that
gun owners attach to their firearms, and thus help us to better explain why this community has
been so effective at advocacy.

Before delving into the gun culture, I first want to introduce some of my participants
whose names will appear most often in the proceeding chapters. When conducting ethnographic
research, the focus should be on building relationships with participants to get a deep dive into
their social world, rather than snapshots. My research involved spending the most time with six
participants who I met through attending NRA Firearms Safety Courses. These participants were
then approached for interviews, usually after a trip to the shooting range or over coffee. Their
stories and words will appear throughout this dissertation. All names used are pseudonyms, to
protect their identity.

Susan – I met Susan, a white woman, during my first NRA course in early May. Susan is a
triathlete, and during the course wore a humorous, triathlon themed t-shirt and drank from a mug
with the logo of a local race on it. She was taking the course to become more familiar with and
proficient with her handguns, which she acquired for recreation and self-defense. I went to the
range with Susan three times and met her for coffee to conduct an interview.
**Timothy** – Timothy was also taking the NRA course where I met Susan. He is an African-American man in his late forties, who wore a red baseball cap the times that I met him, small, round glasses and an affable smile. Timothy was taking the course to qualify for the instructor level courses. He is a veteran of the Airforce and now works as a pilot. He is heavily involved in the boy scouts movement and with his church. Given his employment, Timothy is often away from home, but we managed to get to the range together twice and meet over coffee for an interview. Through Timothy, I was connected with his son, Sam.

**Sam** – While his father is large and muscular, Sam’s build is slighter and his skin lighter, yet he inherited his father’s infectious laugh and good humor. Like his father, he is heavily involved with the boy scouts and with his church. I met Sam when I was out shooting with Timothy. Sam joined us for the end of the range session and then stayed to try out his father’s newly purchased AR-15. Sam is a university student studying in Alaska but was home for the summer.

**Bucky** – I met Bucky during my concealed-carry class in late May. He is a grey-haired, white man with a short-trimmed beard in his early sixties. Bucky is also a veteran, but since leaving the military has had considerable success in the private sector and as a government consultant. He is the president and CEO of a consulting business and a manager for a large government agency. After getting to know Bucky a bit during the firearm safety course, he agreed to sit down and chat over coffee with me on his birthday.

**Rick** – A middle-aged white man and father of several children, Rick has brown hair, a stern jaw, and fierce, proud eyes. He is a veteran and his demeanor betrays his military experience. Rick has a thick southern accent and a direct way of speaking. I met Rick because he was the instructor for my NRA rifle course. Given there were only two other students in the class, one of whom was Rick’s father, we got to know each other quite well throughout that day.
Steve – I met Steve while taking his NRA Shotgun Course in southern Maryland. He is a middle-aged white man with a short, grey goatee and a west coast accent. Steve is a veteran of the Navy. The course I took with him was another small group, with only two other students, and we had plenty of time to chat. Steve agreed to sit down and speak with me over video conference from his home in southern Maryland.

What is the Gun Culture?

The term gun culture was coined by historian Richard Hofstadter in the late 1960s, and has become an immensely popular term, generally used by both sides of the debate (Spitzer, 2015). Yet, in the literature, the term is used somewhat inconsistently. The most popular usage, and the way the term was coined by Hofstadter, is to refer to American culture writ large as a gun culture. Pro-gun activist and writer John Lott opens his book with the line “American culture is a gun culture…” (2010, p. 1). Wright (1995), pointing to the high number of US households owning a gun, says “We are, truly, a ‘gun culture’” (p.63). Stange & Oyster make a similar contention, arguing that “Firearms have shaped this society, for better, and sometimes for worse” (2000, p. 22). Cramer argues that the USA can be defined as a gun culture because of the presence of “…widespread private ownership and use of firearms…” as well as “…a belief that they have some significance beyond their immediate practical need…” and the fact that it is popularly acknowledged that “…one has a right to possess them…” (2018, p. vii). This assertion does not solely belong to pro-gun writers. Pro-control academics like Spitzer (2015) and Melzer (2009) also argue that the US is a gun culture.

In this way, the term “culture” serves as a stand in for saying that something is popular, commonplace or even ubiquitous within American society. One could just as easily speak of the US as a car culture, a shopping culture or a reality tv culture. This characterization of America as
a gun culture is of some use, especially for comparative work that looks to compare
contemporary American gun culture to other countries or times in history. Yet using gun culture
in this way is not altogether unproblematic, as is any monolithic characterization of a diverse
society. The definition writes out of existence the large number of Americans who have never
touched a gun in their lives. It ignores those Americans that see themselves as militantly anti-
gun. It papers over the complex geography of gun ownership and gun culture in the United
States.

Research shows that many Americans vastly overestimate the number of gun owners in
the country. In a study conducted by Joslyn & Haider-Markel, for example, 75% of participants
overestimated the number of American gun owners (2018, p. 8). In fact, polls show that most
Americans do not own guns. Though the number is difficult to estimate, 37% of respondents in a
Pew survey disclosed that someone in their household owns a gun (Desilver, 2013) and prior
academic research pegs the total number of gun owners at around 25% of the population (Joslyn
& Haider-Markel, 2018), though it is likely that gun ownership is under-reported due to social
desirability bias.

The second way that the term gun culture is employed in the literature is to refer to the
culture surrounding firearms ownership in the United States. Using gun culture in this way does
not refer to the United States as a whole but recognizes that there is a large gun culture operating
within American society. Using this perspective, we can better understand how this culture is
practiced and constructed by those within it. To do this, it is important to clarify what is meant
by culture. Moving away from using culture as a stand in for race and ethnicity, modern
anthropology has greatly expanded what we consider when we use the term. In this way culture
is seen as “the dimension of difference”. Culture is thus about “…group identity based on
difference…”, or the process of “…naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity” (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 13–15). Cultures are created by, practiced by, and belong to communities. In this case, the gun culture belongs to the Second Amendment community in the United States, a group of people united by their participation in this gun culture as sports shooters, hunters, collectors and self-defense enthusiasts. These people form “a loose-knit fellowship drawn together not by physical space but by shared interests, specifically an interest in guns” (Kohn, 2004, p. 4).

Different cultures, like individuals, have different ways of making sense of the world around them, including abstract concepts and material objects, given that “objects don’t exist in the same way in the sense-making practices of different cultures” (McKee, 2003, p. 7). Looking at gun culture in this way allows us to study the “sense-making practices” of those within this community. It allows us to study the “common language” and “shared values” of those within the gun culture. It allows us to understand how an AR-15 can be seen by an outsider as a terrifying, killing-machine but to an insider as a source of safety, recreation and enjoyment.

Seeing gun culture in this way allows us to move away from seeing the United States as a gun culture, towards seeing the United States as having a substantial gun culture. This helps us avoid the trap of the Hofstadter’s conceptualization of American gun culture, which imagines the United States as a homogenous, monolithic entity. It instead lets us look at the tremendous diversity of American society, and zero in on the construction of gun culture at work.

Looking at gun culture in this way also helps us to denaturalize and examine how American national iconography and symbolism are tied to guns. If America is a gun culture, then it is normal that its national symbolism would be tied to guns. When we see America as having a gun culture we can then examine how the connection between guns and America has been made
to seem normal. This is where the Macro-Level Narratives of the NPF come back into play. I will argue that the essentialization of the gun culture within broader American culture is the product of the strategies of organizations like the NRA. This is not to say that guns have not been prevalent in American society, nor that they have not been important parts of the nation’s history and development. There is significant evidence to show that firearms have been widely used in America since the country’s birth (Cramer, 2018; Halbrook, 2013; Harsanyi, 2018; Lansford, 2016). Rather, it is to acknowledge that in a socially mediated world, these facts do not stand on their own as important. They are important because they become connected to social practices, because they are communicated to others, and because they have become made to seem normal. Thus, I will pay careful attention to the way that the NRA connects itself, and firearms, to the macro-level narratives of American history, symbolism, and nationalism. Yet this relationship is not a one-way street. In connecting themselves to these macro-level narratives, the narratives themselves can be changed.

It should be noted that just because the connections between firearms and American culture is the product of social construction is not to say that it is less real or authentic than other aspects of American culture. All culture is the product of social construction. All culture is contested, remade and rearticulated by those within it.

**Origins of the Gun Culture**

While firearms were plentiful in colonial America (Churchill, 2001; Gruber, 2002; Lansford, 2016b; Lindgren & Heather, 2002; Malcolm, 2001), they were less a symbolic item and more of a tool of everyday life on the frontier (Yamane, 2017). These tools played an important part in the European settlement of the United States, used for hunting, protection, bartering tools, and military weapons. Gun ownership was widespread in this period, though it
“…was not universal and was often determined by class and socioeconomic status” (Lansford, 2016a, p. 6).

Firearms played a large role in post-contact British North America representing not only an important tool of war but an early bartering tool. Though early firearms were less effective than the bows and arrows used by Indigenous people, they had important psychological advantages. Indigenous groups sought to acquire the firearms and would trade with white settlers. Colonial governments attempted to discourage this practice threatening heavy sanctions. For example, in Virginia in 1642, trading guns, bullets or gunpowder with Native Americans would result in the seizure of one’s estate. In Pennsylvania, it could be punished with “…a fine of £500, 12 months in prison, and 39 lashes” (Lansford, 2016a, p. 5). Yet these heavy punishments did not deter determined traders and the trade in guns became an important part of the fur trade and paradoxically increased the dependence of Indigenous people on European settlers.

In the early 19th century, as the frontier shifted westward, firearms began to become both deadlier and cheaper to produce. Inventions like the percussion cap also made them easier to use and more accurate. The number of small arms manufacturers in the United States increased greatly, with manufacturers like Colt emerging. Colt invented their first revolver in 1835, at a time when there were only 11 industrial scale gun factories in the U.S. By 1858, there were 317 employing 1,547 Americans (Lansford, 2016a, p. 23). The mass production techniques of the industrial revolution transformed the gun industry, and firearms shifted from being “craft products” produced by hand to being “industrial products” using “interchangeable parts” made by machines. The expanded capacity to produce firearms lead to new markets for firearms. “As the nation developed, so too did gun culture” (Yamane, 2017, p. 2).
Target shooting competitions as a form of sport and leisure became popular. Some of the early competitions were organized by Swiss and German immigrants, who organized clubs called Schützenbünde. This was not unique to the United States, as rifle shooting was also a growing sport in England and Canada at this time. During this same period, hunting was growing in popularity, especially for wealthy people in cities seeking an escape to nature. Social practices, such as giving a rifle to a young man as a rite of passage, became commonplace. Further, the gun industry began using the techniques of mass advertising to promote firearms, mainly targeting men. It was during this time that guns acquired their special significance, becoming a cultural product rather than simply a tool of the frontier (Haag, 2016; Yamane, 2017).

Subcultures and Practices

Like other cultures, the gun culture is made up of many subcultures, largely centered around different firearms-related activities like hunting, the various shooting sports, firearms collecting, self-defense preparation, historical reenactment, survivalism, the military sub-culture and others. These subcultures are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and individuals often belong to multiple subcultures depending on their interest. For example, many of my participants were ex-military and were introduced to shooting during their time serving their country. They continued this practice after their military careers as sports shooters, concealed carriers, hunters, and firearms instructors. I will give a brief overview of some of the sub-cultures, in order to provide some context.

Recreational target shooters and sports shooters generally enjoy firearms as tools for
leisure or competition. These people might simply enjoy “plinking” in their backyard, if they have a large property, or at the gun range. Surveys indicate that about 52% of American gun owners go to gun ranges semi-regularly (K. Parker, Horowitz, Igielnik, Oliphant, & Brown, 2017). They might also take part in some sort of shooting sports, either recreationally or competitively. These include things like the shotgun sports; skeet, trap and sporting clays, which involve hitting flying clay targets with a shotgun. The shooting sports also includes static target shooting with a rifle or pistol. All of these are also Olympic sports.

Other popular shooting sports of a more recent vintage involve competitions like the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC) or Three-Gun competitions. Adapted from police and military training tools, these competitions involve shooting at a variety of targets in a particular sequence, or “course of fire”. Shooters use three firearms in this competition; a semi-automatic handgun, semi-automatic carbine, and shotgun. These courses try to mimic real-world or “tactical” scenarios, with some simulating things like home invasions (Kohn, 2004). These activities have become increasingly popular and were mentioned by several of my participants.

Other popular shooting sports include Cowboy Action Shooting, which is governed by the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS). Part role play, part shooting match, cowboy action shooters adopt unique cowboy aliases that are registered with the SASS, dress in authentic period clothing and use replicas of the firearms available on the American frontier. Matches involve using single-action pistols like the iconic Colt .45 “peacemaker”, lever-action rifles, and double-barreled shotguns. Like IPSIC matches, the targets and scenarios shift depending on the competition. Generally, shooters fire at pivoting steel targets set up to look like the outlines of animals, the symbols on playing cards or the outlines of cowboy cartoon figures. Tournaments

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17 A colloquial term for casual target shooting, usually using improvised targets like soda cans or inexpensive store-bought targets like clay disks or steel targets.
often take place over a weekend and involve other social events like dances and markets (Kohn, 2004).

Competitive shooters make up a specific subset of the sports shooting community. These shooters generally see themselves as athletes and their guns as sports equipment. Sports shooters often make modifications and improvements to their guns to make them better at a single sport, even if this reduces their utility overall. For example, the rifles used by biathletes during the Olympics look more like crossbows than firearms. “All sports involve sports equipment. Modifying and customizing this equipment to improve performance is an important part of competition. The competitive shooters used guns as sports equipment, to test and develop their talent as athletes” (Stenross, 1989, p. 52). This can be clearly seen in cowboy action shooting, where competitors often heavily modify their weapons to make them cycle faster and shoot rounds with much less propellant powder to lessen the recoil and reduce the possibility of a dangerous ricochet off of a steel target.

Hunters represent another large sub-culture of the Second Amendment community. Pew research shows that around 34% of American gun owners hunt (K. Parker et al., 2017). The division between hunters and sports shooters is a major fault-line in the community. Hunting enjoys much larger social acceptability than certain forms of sports shooting, given that the firearms traditionally used by hunters, like bolt and lever-action rifles or semi-automatics with wooden stocks, are perceived by the public as less threatening. As a result, hunters can be more difficult to mobilize in the defense of Second Amendment causes, as they may perceive that their guns are “safe” from gun control efforts. Further, interviews conducted by prior researchers with some hunters have found that many of them do not really see themselves as gun people, but rather hunters and outdoorsmen. “Hunters defined hunting as a means of putting meat on the
table, a way of connecting with the natural environment, or a mean to obtain trophies” (Stenross, 1989, p. 52). Some hunters are not even that attached to the guns they use, placing more emphasis on the practical utility of the firearm rather than any personal attachment or symbolism (Stenross, 1989, p. 53).

Given that my field work took place in urban and suburban areas, few of the participants that I met were avid hunters. Susan, for example, expressed that she did not personally oppose hunting, and that her father had been a hunter, but did not wish to participate in it herself:

No. I don’t have anything against hunting I just don’t personally wanna kill things. And if people wanna kill things for sport that’s fine, and if people wanna kill things for population control that’s fine, if people wanna kill things to eat them that’s what people did for years and years and years and years to begin with. I just don’t have, uh, a desire really… (laughs sheepishly). (Interview with Susan, May 22, 2019).

For some of my older participants, however, hunting had been one of their entry points into the gun culture. Bucky, for example, grew up in a small town in the Midwest, where “using firearms for hunting and things like that was just part of everyday life” (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019). Though he does not hunt anymore, hunting was a gateway for him into the world of sports shooting. Another participant, Steve, grew up hunting deer with his father in Northern California, a practice that he continues to this day.

Of the participants that I interviewed who grew up in more urban or sub-urban environments, some of them expressed interest in taking up hunting later. Timothy and his son Sam both expressed an interest in hunting, despite barriers like a lack of land access and family knowledge that prevent people who did not grow up in hunting families from taking up the practice. Rick also expressed interest in hunting, however admitted he needed to do some more homework first:

I don’t do hunting. I want to, I just haven’t had the time and I haven’t finished studying and knowing everything I want to know about hunting. Where to go. How to do stuff and do it
properly, where it’s not only safe for me but its humane for the animals as well (Interview with Rick, June 21, 2019).

These examples help to highlight the rural-urban division within the gun culture when it comes to hunting. Shooters from rural areas, where hunting is more commonplace, may have entered and then moved around the gun culture through hunting. Those who enter through the shooting sports, and do not have the traditional knowledge of how to hunt, nor the social ties in rural communities to secure land access on which to hunt, find it harder to move in that direction.

A smaller subset of the gun culture is occupied by firearms collectors. For firearms collectors, guns are seen as artifacts or antiques. Gun collectors often focus on acquiring guns of a particular type or guns from specific historical periods (Olmsted, 1990). Some collectors see guns as objects of art, focusing on firearms with elaborate engravings or distinct features. Others see them as historical objects, collecting “…not only the guns themselves, but also their stories” (Stenross, 1989, p. 54). Finally, others collect firearms for their mechanical value, and enjoy tinkering and modifying their components (Olmsted, 1990). There are some gun collectors who are even reticent to shoot the guns that they collect, as this could reduce their value. Rather they see themselves as “…curators, treating their guns as valuable museum pieces…” (Stenross, 1989, p. 55).

Related to gun collectors are a smaller group of historical reenactors. The most popular period of historical reenactment in the United States is the Civil War period. Tens of thousands of Americans regularly reenact this conflict. Several thousand reenactors are also involved in reliving wars of a more recent vintage, from the First World War to Korea and Vietnam (Thompson, 2010). While none of my interview participants were themselves active reenactors, I spoke to a few reenactors while attending gun shows who expressed their interest in collecting period firearms and getting to experience living history.
Another large segment of the gun owning community are those that own firearms for self-defense. For some, this may involve simply leaving a firearm at home to deal with potential intruders. Others, however, carry firearms regularly. Currently, about 26% of handgun owners carry “most of the time” and 31% carry “some of the time” (K. Parker et al., 2017). As of February 2019, there were approximately 17 million concealed carry permits issued in the United States. Fourteen states do not require a license to carry a concealed weapon and 43 have “shall issue” legal frameworks, which means that the state must grant a permit to anyone who passes the background check and a class or test. Eight states have may issue laws, which require individuals to show a specific need to carry a concealed weapon (“Concealed Carry,” 2020). A larger number of states allow residents to open carry firearms. This refers to carrying a handgun or long gun in a way that is visible, similar to how a police officer would wear their handgun in a belt holster, or a deer hunter would shoulder a rifle while walking through the woods. Only California, Florida, Illinois and DC have blanket bans on open carry. Other states allow open carry with a license, while some restrict the open carrying of handguns but allow rifles, or vice versa. As with most firearms regulations in the United States, there are also a number of localized restrictions, and areas where guns cannot be openly carried, like hospitals, court houses or schools (“Guns in Public: Open Carry,” 2020).

There is noted a rift in the Second Amendment community between concealed carriers and open carriers. Concealed carriers are those that go through special licensing, in most states, to be able to carry a concealed firearm. Open carry, on the other hand, is allowed in many states with no licensing requirement. Open carriers often use public displays of firearms as a political statement. Pictures online of gun rights advocates carrying AR-15s on their back when shopping at Walmart, for example, circulated widely on the internet during the time of my research. In her
ethnography of concealed carriers in Michigan, Carlson found that they “...often viewed open carriers and their actions as offensive, arrogant, pushy, and even dangerous”. Even the NRA sees the open carry movement as “…a fringe element of gun advocacy” (J. Carlson, 2015).

For those firearm owners primarily concerned with firearms as a tool of self-defense, the meanings of these objects vary drastically. For some, it is simply a tool to have around the house in the event of an emergency, often compared to a fire extinguisher. Their firearm is left in a drawer or safe and not often thought about or practiced with. For others, especially those who carry regularly, the gun is a symbol of safety, security, and empowerment. A central metanarrative employed in the Second Amendment community is that of the “sheepdog”. For defensive firearms owners, their carry pistol transforms them into a “sheepdog”, who must defend the sheep, people who choose not to carry guns, from the wolves, who represent criminals or “bad guys” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 66). To be able to carry a gun is then is “…to determine your own fate…” (Kohn, 2004, pp. 80–81).

Statistics on defensive gun use have produced widely varying estimates as to the amount of times firearms are used to defend life and limb. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines defensive gun use as “the use of a firearm to protect and defend one’s self, family, others, and/or property against crime or victimization”. Estimates on rates of defensive gun use vary from lower estimates of 60,000 times per year, up to the higher estimates of 2.5 million times per year. These numbers suffer from several methodological issues, like issues related operationalization, false positives, underreporting, and survey design. Most defensive gun uses do not actually involve a gun being fired, simply brandished. As a result they are often unreported to authorities. At the same time, violent encounters are not always as cut and dry as Hollywood would have us believe, and one person’s “self-defense” can be another’s “act of aggression” (CDC, 2020; Cook,
Research suggests that people who own guns for the purposes of self-defense are the fastest growing segment of the gun culture. Yamane (2017) goes so far as to argue that there has been a shift in the center of gravity of the gun culture from Gun Culture 1.0 to Gun Culture 2.0, which is centered around armed self-defense and the “culture of armed citizenship”. For example, between 1999 and 2013, the number of people claiming that self-defense was a primary motivation for firearms ownership rose from 26% to 48%. This number was even higher, 63% in the 2015 National Firearms Survey. Another way that this shift has been measured is in firearms advertising. Yamane et al. (2018) show the rise of Gun Culture 2.0 by looking at the proportion of ads in the American Rifleman magazine that feature Gun Culture 1.0 themes, like hunting or sports shooting versus the ones that look at Gun Culture 2.0 themes, like self-defense and concealed carry. They note that since the 1990s and 2000s, the proportion of ads featuring hunting and sports shooting has declined, whereas the number of ads targeting self-defense and concealed carry have sharply risen (Yamane et al., 2019, pp. 21–22).

Several of my participants were, or had been, regular concealed carriers, or owned guns for the purposes of self-defense. Though he was not carrying during our interview, Bucky discussed being a regular gun carrier for the past 25 years:

Bucky - … of course it’s not necessarily a nice world out there, and sometimes unfortunately you need to protect yourself from people who would do you harm. Sam Colt said… you know… Or as people would say… How was that exactly said… Like the Colt revolver made all men equal. Remember that quote? It was something…

Noah – G-d created man but Sam Colt made them equal, or something like that?

Bucky – Yeah something like that. So you know that’s certainly a part of it. (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019).
While my participant Rick does not carry now, as he lives in what he describes as a safe gated community far away from the troubles faced by the nearby big cities of Washington and Baltimore, he said that he used to own a pistol for self-defense while living in the south. Though in the military at the time he was living off-base in a rougher neighborhood.

That was strictly… when we were stationed there we weren’t in a nice neighborhood, but it was close to base, so we wanted to be able to go walking. Also, there had been some incidences of some break-ins and things in the area. So I bought a Glock 23, .40 caliber, just for home and self-protection. (Interview with Rick, June 21, 2019).

Given the complex political geography of American firearms regulations, concealed carrying a firearm can create a variety of everyday nuisances, especially for those who regularly cross state or county lines. Given the location of my fieldwork in the DC, Maryland, Virginia (DMV) area, this was especially problematic for my participants, many of whom crossed states lines on a weekly if not daily basis. Bucky described to me the challenges of complying with the patchwork of firearms legislation as part of his daily commute:

But yeah, so it’s a problem, particularly for me because I work in DC, so obviously I can’t, you know, on my normal day I can’t carry obviously. And then on that off chance that you have to go into Maryland for some reason, you know, then you have to be… if you have the firearm on you then you know you have to… well what I do is I stop, take the gun apart, put the ammunition in one place. Literally I will do a basic disassembly of the firearm, so there’s not, you know for some reason a police officer, for whatever reason, might want to… like there’s something wrong with your license and he’s going through the car, he doesn’t find a gun. He may find a barrel, he may find the slide over there, but he’s not going to find a gun. So, I do my absolute best to be sure I don’t violate any jurisdiction’s firearm laws. You’ve got to respect them, whether you agree with them or not, right you’ve got to respect them (Interview with Bucky, May 18, 2019).

One’s ability to take advantage of liberalized concealed or open carry can also be shaped by one’s positionality. While a white, middle-class male may only be impacted by legal boundaries, racialized minorities face deeper, systemic barriers to full participation in the gun
culture. This came out when I asked Sam, who is of legal age to purchase certain firearms, why he had not:

But actually, for Virginia, as an individual such as myself it would be unwise to open carry. Just simply because it is Virginia and unfortunately, I am not white (sarcasm). So that poses a lot of questions. I’m a young… young not white person. So, it’s just unneeded attention. In my family, we are waiting until I turn 21, when I can conceal carry, so it’s one, less noticeable and two, if I do get stopped I have the training, I have the papers, I have the card, so there’s not much in the way of negotiating. Because unfortunately, even me having a pocketknife could be considered a concealed weapon. So, if someone is having a bad day and wants to make my day really bad… I mean just having a pocketknife it could go south (Interview with Sam, June 18, 2019).

Several other smaller fringe subcultures exist within the gun culture. This includes harmless groups like doomsday preppers, and more deviant groups like right-wing militias and white nationalist groups, who have become the focus on increasing attention since the beginning of the Trump Presidency, and especially the riot on Capitol hill in January of 2021. For obvious reasons these groups are difficult to track numerically, though the Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that in 2020 there were about 838 hate groups active in the United States (SPLC, 2021).

The extent to which criminal subcultures and hate groups belong to the broader gun culture is an interesting point of debate. These criminal or deviant subcultures certainly share a certain commonality in that they use firearms, and likely participate in some of the cultural practices of the gun culture. In the criminological and sociological literature the relationship between ordinary gun use and criminality is often left unspoken when talking about criminal violence. Yet, gun violence in the United States is often highly concentrated. Though we make talk about gun violence in broad terms “no one lives in ‘the United States,’ per se”. Rather firearms related violence is “…concentrated among certain people and in certain places”. For example, a study done in Boston showed that “…50% of gun violence takes place on just 3% of streets…” and that “85% of gunshot injuries took place in a network of just 6% of the
population” (Yamane, 2018, pp. 163–164). The geographically concentrated nature of firearms-related violence demonstrates a vast physical and socio-economic gulf between the average firearms user, who is white and middle-class, and criminal users.

Further, attitudes expressed in the gun culture are so adamantly anti-criminal, it becomes problematic to lump the two groups together. Though the line between a good guy with a gun and a bad guy with a gun is arguably thinner than NRA rhetoric would have one imagine, the criminal is always spoken of as the other within the gun culture; as someone outside the law, a shadowy figure lurking in your house, a manifestation of evil, to be shot if necessary.

There are two notable intersections between the gun culture and criminal cultures. The first is when “good guys with guns’ become ‘bad guys with guns’”. This involves the case of most heavily mediatized mass shootings, or situations of intimate partner violence and homicides. In the United States, 55% of female homicide victims are killed with firearms, most by people that they knew (Violence Policy Center, 2017). The second intersection is “…when legal gun owners provide guns to criminals in underground markets”. This second point of intersection is poorly understood in the literature, and merits further exploration (Yamane, 2018, p. 164). Unfortunately, exploring these issues was beyond the scope of this project.

**Gun Ownership as Serious Leisure**

How do we make sense of gun ownership and the cultural practices associated with it? Gun ownership can be understood as a form of what sociologists call serious leisure (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011; Olmsted, 1990; N. S. Schwartz, 2021; Yamane, 2017). This concept was first coined by Stebbins (1982) and reflects the fact that in post-industrial societies, some leisure activities have moved away from simply being a “…happy, carefree refuge from our earnest pursuit of money and social standing…” (Stebbins, 1982, p. 251) and become “…a way of
finding personal fulfillment, identity enhancement, self-expression…” and other benefits (Stebbins, 1982, p. 253). Serious leisure is increasingly important in shaping “the meanings people give their lives” and has expanded the focus of the social science on more traditional indicators of identity formation like “work, family and religion” (Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002, p. 285). Serious leisure is a separate analytical category from casual leisure. Unlike serious leisure, casual leisure is “…immediately intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy”. For example, playing a game, relaxing, watching television, having sex, etc. (Stebbins, 2004, p. 50).

Serious leisure involves things like volunteer work, amateurism and hobbyist pursuits, and is separated from casual leisure by six key characteristics: benefit, effort, perseverance, careers, ethos and identity. The most important is the benefits that serious leisure provides participants: “self-actualization, self-enrichment, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, self-expression, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity” (1982, p. 257). As a result of these benefits, participants expend tremendous effort to gain skills, knowledge and training in their given activity. This involves persevering through difficult conditions like injuries or embarrassments. Participants in serious leisure often have secondary careers within their leisure activities. Finally, serious leisure activities often develop their own unique ethos, or shared “…beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards”. Thus, serious leisure activities become a part of participants social identity (Stebbins, 1982; Stebbins, 2004). Participation in many elements of the gun culture fits Stebbins definition of serious leisure (Olmsted, 1990). Hunters, collectors, target shooters and self-defense shooters often invest a significant amount of effort, personal capital, time and labor into practicing their given activity.
More importantly, firearms owners within the gun culture share an ethos and sense of identity and belonging. They attach significant meanings to the tools that they use and are reticent to surrender them.

For example, a survey of over 5,000 American target shooters showed that respondents demonstrated a deep level of engagement in the activity. 78.8% of respondents had been engaged in the sport for longer than 15 years. Only 10% had been involved for less than 5 years (Murray, Martin, O’Neill, & Gouge, 2016, p. 898). More than 57% of respondents reloaded their own ammunition, a laborious and time-consuming process that takes a significant amount of upfront investment and training, yet ultimately provides high volume shooters with a cost-effective means of producing their own personalized ammunition (Murray et al., 2016, p. 902).

I witnessed firsthand during my field work the level of commitment that shooters have to their serious leisure pursuit. For example, my participant Bucky spent years of his life as an avid Cowboy Action Shooter:

I did Cowboy Action Shooting for about 12, 13 years. I competed not only locally but I competed in the regional events and national championships and the world championships for cowboy action shooting. I was pretty active. I was reloading my own ammunition, that was really the most cost-effective way of participating in that (chuckles). I was reloading about 15,000 rounds a year… So, uh… I was doing a lot of shooting. I would practice one or two days during the week, I would have a shooting event almost every weekend, some days it was two days on the weekend, and of course I’d go to these large events where you would shooting hundreds and hundreds of rounds in just one event... (Interview, Bucky, May 2019).

Though he no longer participants in Cowboy Action Shooting, Bucky says he has moved on to long-range shooting, a popular form of target shooting that involves making shots on targets across massive distances, often over a kilometer (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019).

Since getting involved with guns a few years ago, Timothy and his son Sam have fallen down the “rabbit hole”, purchasing several handguns and now an AR-15 platform rifle. Sam who
got into shooting with his father talks about how addictive this habit can be “…you go down that rabbit hole and you really don’t find a way back up…. You just go deeper and deeper.”

(Interview, Sam, June 18, 2019) Like many engaged in serious leisure pursuits, Timothy is aiming to turn his hobby into a side gig by becoming a firearms instructor. He does not wish to turn a profit from this, but merely use it to cover the cost of his involvement in the shooting sports (Interview with Timothy, June 6, 2019; Interview with Sam, June 18, 2019).

Since retiring from the military, Steve has walked a similar path to the one that Timothy is looking to go down. Steve has also participated across a wide spectrum of shooting sports:

Steve - I would say over the years, the older I got, I’d always pick something up along the way that interested me. And right after I retired, I shot semi-professionally on the west coast. I shot trap and five stand and sporting clays. So I had a real exposure to shotguns probably when I was mid to late thirties. Um… certainly into my forties. And I do a lot of shotgun now. But I do a lot more handgun and rifle and other types of firearms. So its evolved a little bit.
Noah – So you’re all over the shooting sports. You’ve dabbled in all of them?
Steve- Yeah. I’ve done three-gun, I’ve done long range, I’ve done AR, a lot of pistol. So three divisions of hand gun we’ve shot in. IDPA, USPSA and ASI. So we’ve shot in those three divisions. You know and we do shotgun, probably once a month, once every other month on average. (Interview with Steve, July 2, 2019).

Hunting is also a serious leisure activity that forms a significant part of the gun culture. Ethnographic research on hunters has shown that hunting provides enthusiasts a connection to tradition, a sense of comradery and connections to family, friends and the natural world. This was brought out when Steve reminisced about his childhood memories of hunting during our talk:

I think I quickly learned as an adult… I learned that my dad had no idea how to deer hunt. None. I don’t ever remember him getting a deer, as a kid. I think my dad just… that was his way of kind of getting out and having a good time. So, I look back on it with a great deal of fondness… and now I know why. Because it wasn’t about the hunting, it was about being with the kids, and with friends and making memories (Interview with Steve, July 2, 2019).
A collective ethos is an important distinction between serious and casual leisure. Conservation represents a large part of the collective ethos of hunters (Littlefield & Ozanne, 2011, p. 354). Hunters invest considerable amounts of time and capital to several elements of their pursuit and are key actors in wildlife conservation. In fact, for hundreds of years hunters “…have been at the forefront of conservation and land protection efforts”. Hunters contribute to conservation through purchasing tags and licenses as well as through a tax brought about by the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937, which collects 11% on all rifle and ammunition purchases, and 10% on all handgun purchases in the United States. The money collected from the tax is used to fund conservation and represents “…America's largest contributor to wildlife conservation and public access to our natural resource” (MWFP, 2021). Since the act was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the funds gathered from the tax have led to the effective management and repopulation of several species threatened by habitat loss and over hunting, like the white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and wood duck (Schipani, 2018). The NRA is a supporter of this tax (NRA-ILA, 2017).

Serious leisure differs most from casual leisure because of the benefits that it offers participants. Since Stebbins (1982) first coined the term, there has been an explosion in the studies of serious leisure. Stebbins’s original piece “heralded a conceptual shift in how leisure was studied” and launched an entire subfield of sociology devoted to studying leisure (Gillespie et al., 2002, p. 286). Researchers have studied numerous serious leisure activities like dog sports (Gillespie et al., 2002), gardening (Cheng, Stebbins, & Packer, 2017), dancing (C. A. Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008), off-road driving (Rosenbaum, 2013) and participation in the gun culture (Olmstead, 1989; Murray et al., 2016). Research in this domain has demonstrated that participation in serious leisure activities is causally related to things like “personal growth and
happiness” (Yang, Kim, & Heo, 2019), “overall life satisfaction” (Cheng et al., 2017), and the development of their personal and collective identity (Rosenbaum, 2013). Serious leisure participants often reported more satisfaction from these activities than casual leisure participants (Cheng et al., 2017; Stebbins, 2004).

While shooters are often presented in the media as testosterone fueled risk seekers, many of my participants cited relaxation as a reason for participating in target shooting:

Shooting requires you to control your breathing, control your body posture… so and so… the point is you actually have… you cannot shoot tense. So, I’ve never come out of the range being tense, because you have to relax to be able to perform. So it’s a relaxing thing, it’s kind of like therapy, you sit back and you don’t think too much about it… You see instantaneous results, and it’s just you and the paper (target) trying to control the laws of physics (Interview with Timothy, June 6, 2019).

Rick expressed a similar sentiment in his interview when discussing how he had become even more involved in the shooting sports since his retirement from the military:

There are some advantages to it. It’s kind of calming. There’s something about trying to put a little small, inch and a half long bullet into a target, you know, three quarters of a mile to a mile away. That’s pretty calming and relaxing and there’s a lot of studying that goes to it. But it keeps me active. (Interview with Rick, June 21, 2019).

Looking at participation in the gun culture as serious leisure helps us to understand the intense attachment that gun owners have to their guns, sports and hobbies and why members have been so prone to collective action. While traditional collective action was seen to revolve around an individual’s class identity, and later their sexual, religious or political identity, more recent scholarship demonstrates that serious leisure may also provide a motivation for collective action. In essence, when individuals “…ground a sense of self and community in their leisure activities…” they will be more likely to “…take action to protect the foundation of their identity narratives when opposing forces threaten these foundations” (Rosenbaum, 2013, p. 643).

Before moving on it is important to note that there is a tendency in the literature to focus
on gun culture in the United States. This is understandable, given that the US is certainly the

global center of gun culture. But it is important to acknowledge that there are large pockets of the
gun culture outside of the United States; pockets that through globalization are increasingly
becoming aware of and intertwined with one another. Other countries have significant rates of
gun ownership, 5900/100,000 in Canada, in England 1039/100,000; in Australia 3217/100,000
(RCMP, 2016; UK Home Office, 2018; Alpers et al., 2019). The European Commission
estimates that around 5% of European citizens own firearms, with gun ownership going as high
as 13% in countries like Finland (2013). Though scholars may separate them for analytical
convenience, these pockets of gun culture interact in the online environment, which we will
explore more in the next section. In other words, though centered in the United States, gun
culture is moving online and increasingly becoming deterritorialized.

Online Communities & Consumer Culture

As the internet, mobile technology and mass media become increasingly omnipresent,
“… ‘everyday life’ for much of the world is becoming increasingly technologically mediated”
(Murthy, 2008, p. 849). These new communication technologies allow for people from around
the world to connect in cyberspace (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 449). Culture, as a result, has
moved online. Exploring these mediums gives us an interesting window into the social
construction of meaning that takes places in given cultures (Flick, 2009). This creates an
important impetus for researchers to perform online research (Murthy, 2008).

Like other elements of culture in the 21st century, the gun culture is increasingly
accessible via online mediums, where firearms enthusiasts, manufacturers and gun rights
organizations exchange information and content. The content produced by the NRA will be the
primary focus of my analysis later on, however it is important to also discuss the wide variety of
online media circulating within the gun culture that is not produced by the NRA. Some of this content is produced by firearms manufacturers, generally as a means of promoting their products. When looking at the gun culture we cannot ignore that, like many aspects of life in the 21st century, gun culture is intimately tied to consumer culture. In his tongue and cheek video “Why You Shouldn’t Get into Guns”, which has been viewed over 3.5 million times, pro-Second Amendment YouTuber Colion Noir jokes that: “A drug addiction would be cheaper than a gun addiction. The cost of the gun is just the price of admission…” (Noir, 2016). A cursory glance at the price of the ammunition and accessories needed to keep a firearm running certainly drives this home. As a result, those within the firearms industry have taken advantage of these online mediums to sell their product, either through directly produced content or through partnerships between them and “brand ambassadors”. A good example of this is the YouTuber who goes by the moniker 22plinkster, after his favorite firearms cartridge, the .22 long rifle (LR). 22LR is one of the most common calibers on the market, as it is relatively cheap and has very little recoil, making it good for new and young shooters. It is also the caliber used for many traditional and Olympic shooting sports, like Biathlon. 22plinkster launched his channel in 2011 and at the time of writing now has over 677,000 followers on YouTube (“22plinkster,” 2020). He built his fame through making trick shooting videos but was eventually picked up by Henry Repeating Arms and Federal Ammunition as a brand ambassador. On top of his channel, he also produces videos for Henry Repeating Arms’ YouTube channel Henry TV where he showcases or reviews different Henry rifles.

While this may prompt some readers to conclude that the online firearms culture is somehow inauthentic or lesser given the involvement of for-profit corporations in its construction, or that firearms owners are mindless automatons driven by corporate interests, it is
important to remember that reactions to mass media are not mechanical or automatic. Rather:
“…the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony,
selectivity, and, in general, agency”. “Where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where
there is pleasure there is agency” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 7). We can observe this agency at work in
the large amount of online gun content that is created by consumers, bloggers, vloggers and fans.
This includes several well-trafficked YouTube channels and blogs, where vloggers like Hickock
45 and Matt from Demolition Ranch showcase their firearms collections, show off their shooting
prowess, test and review products, tell stories and provide instructional material for new
shooters. There are also innumerable message boards and chat rooms where gun owners debate
their preferred firearm calibers, which gun to use for deer hunting or which local gun range is
best.

How do we make sense of the online gun culture? The literature on media and marketing
offers one vantage point from which to look at them. In this literature, the relationship between
online communities and commercialization has been explored through looking at what scholars
have labelled consumption subcultures, brand communities or in extreme cases brand tribalism.
“In this sense, the brand unites ardent consumers in its own unique, structured, yet non-
geographically oriented social relationship (Taute & Sierra, 2014, p. 2). Taute & Sierra argue
that brands offer more than just a utilitarian value for customers but a “linking value”. “From this
point-of-view, consumers seek self-expression, self-fulfillment, and shared experiences with the
brands, products, and leisure experiences they favor” (Taute & Sierra, 2014, p. 2). While this
perspective is interesting it sees the creator of the brands as driving this culture, ignoring the
agency of the consumers, who are relegated to the position of tribe members. The reality is more
complex.
A more balanced approach can be gained by examining scholars studying online cultures. I argue that the online gun culture can be conceptualized as a knowledge community, a term coined by French cultural philosopher Pierre Lévy (1997) to describe deterritorialized groups that exchange information surrounding a specific interest, in cyberspace.

Jenkins (2006) applies this designation to online communities of science fiction fans. Like shooters, the community of sci-fi fans traditionally consisted of white, middle-class males and both groups are struggling with how to accommodate and make a space for women and racialized minorities in their ranks. Both groups are also stigmatized by wider society. Jenkins notes that sci-fi fans, like Trekkies are much maligned in the media, which often employs “patronizing language” and an attitude of “smug superiority” when describing the activities of Trekkies (Jenkins, 2006, p. 39). Those within the gun culture feel similarly stereotyped, and while the mass popularization of geek culture through the rise of comic book movies and sitcoms like the Big Bang Theory have made nerdery more socially acceptable in the past few decades, the cultural stock of gun owners is falling as an increasing number of cultural industries take on gun culture.

This feeling of stigma is often expressed in the online gun culture. For example, in his video “Conservative Comes Out”, Army Ranger veteran and popular YouTuber MBest11x uses parody to compare coming out to one’s parents as a conservative and a firearms owner to coming out of the closet as a 2SLGBTQ+ person. This popular video has been viewed over 3 million times (MBest11x, 2018).

The video begins with Matt, the protagonist, sitting with his friend in his pickup truck. Matt is visibly nervous, gripping the wheel and looking determined. His friend asks: “You sure you don’t want me to go in”. Matt refuses, saying “I just gotta do it. What’s the worst that can
happen?” Inside he sits down with his father, who is dressed as a parody of white, urban, progressive “hipster” culture complete with a Patagonia vest and a tweed flat cap. His father lights up a small pipe filled with marijuana as they talk. He assures Matt that they will not judge him, after all they are “open-minded”. Matt says that he has “chosen a different lifestyle”. His father thinks that Matt is coming out as gay, and says he is supportive. Matt corrects him, “Dad I’m not gay, I just wanted to tell you that I’m a conservative now and that I value the Second Amendment and our constitutional rights”.

The situation quickly escalates into absurdist parody. His formerly calm father instantly loses his temper, calling Matt a “fascist” and a “Nazi”. The scenario is repeated as Matt’s mother walks in, a glass of red wine in her hand, and asks what is going on. When she finds out Matt’s newly revealed secret, she screams and throws things at Matt, hollering “I want an abortion”. His father accuses him of being a “racist, misogynist, bigot” at which point the camerazooms out, breaking the fourth wall as Matt turns to his African American sound tech, who shakes his head and says, “I don’t know man”. The reactions of Matt’s parents and clichéd millenial brother, who is shown eating a bowl of Tide Pods, become increasingly extreme as the video progresses.

The video is clearly meant to be read as over the top parody. While the premise is insensitive to the very real experiences of persecution and familial abandonment felt by members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, the comparison highlights the way that some members of the Second Amendment community feel that their identity is under attack by the mainstream of society. The popularity of the video demonstrates the extent to which the message resonates with its intended audience.

The gun culture online is a prime example of a knowledge community, an assemblage of information based around firearms and the cultural practices surrounding them. Jenkins describes
knowledge communities as “…voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments”. While these communities are transitory, as “…members can shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time”, they are “…held together though the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 137). In this space, shooters explore their serious leisure pursuit in cyberspace, sharing information, satirical videos, recommendations and reviews.

This online repository of knowledge provides a large storehouse of information for researchers to better understand the gun culture. Yet, while the internet provides a valuable source of data for social scientists, researchers must be cautious when considering who is using the medium and who is not (Flick, 2009). Survey data demonstrates that a significant number of gun owners are consuming firearms related material. Pew Research shows that 39% of gun owners watch tv programs or videos about guns, 35% visit websites about guns, hunting or other shooting sports, 11% listen to gun related podcasts and 10% go on gun related forums on the internet (K. Parker et al., 2017). Popular firearms related YouTube channels see significant traffic. For example a number of the YouTubers I regularly watched as part of the background research for this project have numerous followers: Demolition Ranch (6,474, 289 subscribers), Hickock 45 (3,891,421 subscribers), MBest11x (931, 255 subscribers), The Firearm Blog TV (595,553 subscribers), Paul Harrell (247,775 subscribers), The Yankee Marshall (304, 917), the Lucky Gunner Ammo (159, 082 subscribers).

Looking at the online record also allow us to examine tensions and factions within the gun culture, including the growing schism between the older generation of gun owners,
sometimes referred in a derogatory manner as “Fudds”\(^{18}\) in online communities, who hold a
preponderance of influence in the NRA and younger, more technologically savvy gun owners
largely responsible for content creation in the online space (Yamane, 2017). The candidacy of
Adam Krauter, a Second Amendment Advocate, YouTube celebrity and firearms lawyer, for the
NRA Board of Governors is a good example of this tension. At time of writing Krauter has
launched three unsuccessful attempts at being elected to a seat in the NRA Board of Governors
to counter what he feels is the organizations lack of ability to mobilize young gun owners, and
their willingness to compromise on certain firearms legislation.

The furor over bump-stocks offers another interesting case study of this division. Several
firearms YouTube channels expressed feelings of abandonment by the NRA at their decision to
support President Trump’s ban on bump-stocks, a type of firearm accessory that according to the
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) “allow a shooter of a
semiautomatic firearm to initiate a continuous firing cycle with a single pull of the trigger”
(ATF, 2019). The younger firearms advocates felt that the older generation of firearms owner,
content with owning simple hunting rifles, had thrown them under the bus. These younger
advocates have also used cyberspace to try to lead a movement away from the NRA following
allegations of malfeasance by the organization’s board of directors (Mascia, 2019), though at
time of writing the ultimate implications of this movement are unclear.

The Gun Rights Movement

The Gun Rights Movement is the political expression of the gun culture. It is made up of

\(^{18}\) As in Elmer Fudd, the comically incompetent “wabbit” hunter from the *Looney Toons*. It is noteworthy that while
this project was being conducted, HBO Max rebooted the Looney Toons franchise, and chose to disarm both Elmer
Fudd and Yosemite Sam, saying “We’re not doing guns” (Wallis, 2020).
an umbrella of interest groups and social movement organizations. In the United States the NRA is by far the largest and most famous organization within the movement, but other organizations include older groups like Gun Owners of America (GOA) est. 1976, the Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) est. 1974, to newer upstarts like the Firearms Policy Coalition (FPC), and Open-Source Defense (OSD).

Though the NRA is often thought of as the mouthpiece of the gun industry and receives significant financial support from manufacturers through ad revenue and sponsorships, the arms and ammunition industry has its own trade group, the National Shooting Sports Federation (NSSF), est. 1961. The NSSF lobbies for the industry, produces reports and conducts media relations, and provides support to firearms retailers, manufacturers and shooting ranges.

Like the NRA, some of the groups perform advocacy in addition to an original or primary purpose. This includes groups like the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS), whose primary function is to govern and regulate the sport of Cowboy Action Shooting. A number of hunting groups also perform some firearms advocacy, like Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, the Safari Club International, and others. Other groups crystalize around elements of the activists’ identities that intersect with membership in the gun culture. For example, several marginalized groups have their own gun rights organization, like the Pink Pistols for 2SLGBT+ people, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership the National African American Gun Owners Association (NAAGA), and Black Guns Matter. Many of these groups have witnessed tremendous growth under the uncertainty of the Trump administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2020, the NAAGA grew by 25% to 40,000 members (Perry & Meraji, 2020).
The Meaning of Guns

The debate over firearms policy in the United States and abroad is less about facts than the emotions, symbolism and personal meanings attached to firearms. Objects, like guns, gain meaning through the significance that human beings attach to them. “Through our belongings, we reveal the groups we identify with, the values we hold, and hence, the kind of persons we are, or wish to be” (Stenross, 1989, p. 49). These meanings can be individual or can be shared by wider groups.

Given the intensity of the firearms debate, the meanings attached to firearms are often quite powerful. Those outside of the gun culture often associate firearms with violence, pain, death and criminality, or at the very least an untamable danger best left in the hands of trained professionals. Quotes such as this one, from a University student in Pennsylvania, capture this feeling: “I am extremely uncomfortable around guns because a person can take a gun and pull the trigger and then someone’s life can end… It scares me to think that my neighbors, friends, professors, and people on the street have the ability to end a life that easily” (Hykes, 2016).

Given the urban-rural divide within the gun debate, arguments espousing this view of firearms are most often expressed by individuals living in cities, or politicians representing urban constituencies. Within this view, gun owners are often perceived as ignorant, fearful, or backwards. We can see this expressed in quotes like Obama’s from 2008, describing working class midwestern voters: “They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them…” (Pilkington, 2008). We can further see this in the way terms like

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19 A 2017 Pew Poll shows that gun ownership rates amongst rural Americans are as high as 46%, suburban Americans at 28% and urban Americans at 19%. More populous and urbanized areas of the United States such as the Northeast have lower gun ownership (16%) whereas those with lower areas of urbanization, such as the West, have higher rates (31%) (Parker et al., 2017).
“civilized”\textsuperscript{20}, “civil society”\textsuperscript{21}, and “civilization”\textsuperscript{22} are often referenced in the debate. Then 2020 presidential nominee contestant Kamala Harris, for example, said in a 2018 interview that “Assault weapons should not be walking the streets of a \textit{civilized} country”\textsuperscript{23}. It is common within this viewpoint to cast aspersions on the motivations behind gun ownership. In the summer of 2018, for example, Toronto Mayor John Tory famously asked, “Why does anyone in this city need to have a gun at all?”\textsuperscript{24}.

Given that the most highly mediatized mass public shootings often involve semi-automatic carbines, it is natural that firearms like the AR-15 tend to draw more attention from those outside the gun culture, though they represent a small proportion of overall gun deaths. Between 2013 and 2017 for example, rifles writ-large\textsuperscript{25} accounted for between 2-3\% of overall homicides in the United States, and represented only 3-4\% of firearm related homicides, the overwhelming majority of which were carried out with handguns (FBI 2017). In 2016, the year of the Orlando nightclub shooting which did involve a semi-automatic carbine, for example, there were 11,004 firearm related homicides in the United States. Of these, only 374 were committed with rifles, and it is unclear how many of these were semi-automatic carbines (FBI, 2017).

Even if we look only at indiscriminate, public “active shooter” type attacks, handguns are still favored for their concealability and portability. A database of 200 active shooter attacks between 2000 and 2015 found that pistols were used in 56\% of these attacks, rifles of all types in

\textsuperscript{20} See “Why Gun Regulation Is Uncivilized” (Bell, 2013).
\textsuperscript{21} See “Is American Gun Culture Compatible With a Modern Civil Society?” (Stanizai, 2012)
\textsuperscript{22} See “What the ancient Greeks can teach us about gun control” (“What the Ancient Greeks Can Teach us About Gun Control,” 2018)
\textsuperscript{23} See “Kamala Harris: No Reason To Have Access To Assault Weapons In A Civil Society” (Hains, 2019).
\textsuperscript{24} See“ John Tory’s Actions After Toronto Shooting Were What No U.S. Leader Has Ever Done” (Robins-Early, 2018).
\textsuperscript{25} The FBI does not separate their data between types of rifle, so this statistic is composed of both semi-automatic carbines and more traditional bolt-action and lever-action rifles.
27% and shotguns in 14% (Yablon, 2018). Once again, the category of rifle is not disaggregated by type of rifle. This data is not meant to argue in favor or against any specific policies regarding to the regulation of these rifles. Rather, it is meant to demonstrate that the symbolic importance of semi-automatic carbines in the gun debate is disproportionate to the role they play in gun crime.

On the other side, those within the gun culture “…are likely to associate guns with wholesome recreation and security from and heroic defense against crime and political oppression” (Tonso, 1989, p. 8). These meanings can be associated with group identity but are also deeply personal, as people attach social and personal values to firearms. In many ways, guns are an “…avenue towards a feeling” (Kohn, 2004, p. 13). “The feelings that guns invoke are diverse, but the point is that guns are not enjoyed for themselves but rather for the feelings they engender in the shooter” (Kohn, 2004, p. 13). Personal values that firearms enthusiasts ascribe to their firearms often involve direct experiences, connections to family, and feelings of security. Through their experiences acquiring, caring for and shooting firearms, gun enthusiasts often form deep personal attachments to their guns. These affective objects become intertwined with personal memories of shooting with friends and family members, competing in a tournament or going on a hunting trip. This nexus between memory and firearms will be explored more in the next chapter.

Given that firearms are quite durable goods, they are often passed down from generation to generation. These firearms can become family heirlooms and contain deep personal significance for their owners. Finally, for those gun owners that see their firearms as a form of personal security inside the home, or outside of it, the guns take on an added significance of a potentially lifesaving tool. They are instruments that gun owners feel they may one day need to
use to defend themselves, their family or their property.

Guns are also affective objects in that they become symbols of wider social values, moral politics and political debates. Many of those within the Second Amendment Community link firearms to wider societal values. Gun owners feel that “…guns signify American core values: freedom, independence, individualism and equality” (Kohn, 2004, p. 17). Firearms enthusiasts interviewed by past ethnographers of the gun culture often linked their firearms ownership to these values. Some considered firearms ownership a “form of civic responsibility”, and others linked guns to the ideals of freedom and independence (Kohn, 2004, p. 61). “Shooters in the study stated frequently that freedom is one of the most important core values or symbols that they identify with gun ownership” (Kohn, 2004, p. 62). For example, one of Kohn’s interviewees linked the rise of gun control to the increase in corruption in American politics and thus the loss of traditional freedoms. For another, “…gun ownership defines his notion of freedom itself” (Kohn, 2004, p. 67-68).

To some within the Second Amendment Community, owning or carrying firearms represents the exercising of a constitutional right: “…to purchase a gun was to practice politics, an act of resistance to the authority of the state and its regulatory powers. The regulations were perceived as threats by liberals and the Left to control their lives. Purchasing a gun meant that you could defy the brand of politics you despised” (Burbick, 2006, p. 664).

My research participants expressed very similar views. All of my participants mentioned individual liberty or freedom in reference to firearms at least once during my interviews, regardless of their socio-economic and demographic background or political beliefs. When asked “What does firearms ownership mean to you?” Susan responded, after a short pause, with one word “Freedom”. (Interview with Susan, May 22, 2019). Bucky, framing his answer with a
discussion of the American Revolution, concluded with “So I think to me owning a firearm, not just for me, but I think for people in general, that right is there in order to protect your individual liberty” (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019). Sam noted that: “You can’t own a firearm in a lot of other countries. For America it means a lot because it’s another way for us to show and I guess to show that we have freedom. Really that’s what it means” (Interview with Sam, June 18, 2019).

The participants who answered my online survey expressed very similar ideas. When asked what firearms mean to them, respondents answered things like “Owning a firearm is a symbol of freedom. It means the government trusts you”. Another participant said that firearms symbolize: “Independence, self-sufficiency, and a continual testament to the will of the individual being morally superior to the will of the collective”. This participant later wrote “…honestly, as long as there are authoritarians who want to dictate how I live, why wouldn’t I do everything to frustrate their efforts?”.

Looked at from the perspective of those deeply involved in the gun culture, gun control is seen as a misguided, and often politically motivated, attack on this freedom; an attempt to restrain the behavior of certain elements of society (criminals) by “controlling the behavior of all”. They see firearms as neutral tools and argue vehemently that government should focus on controlling the behavior of criminals rather than attempting to regulate a tool which they use peacefully in their everyday lives (Kohn, 2004). Sam summed this up this view rather concisely at the end of our interview:

Yeah. A firearm is a tool. Just like a hammer, just like a nail gun… just like skis. You can use it for something good, you can use it for something bad, it’s up to the holder to decide what to use it for. Just like you research how you ski, just like you study what a car can do, the same thing comes too with a firearm. You have to study it. You have to know it. I think that’s yeah. Final thought is that a firearm is a tool. It’s not the gun that kills the person it’s the person holding the darn thing (Interview with Sam, June 18, 2019).
Guns are also important to shooters in dictating how the individual interacts with the government. For gun owners, “…being able to own guns is synonymous with being recognized as a full-status person in the eyes of the state”. Shooters believe that “…legal access to guns is a particularly powerful statement of how the state recognizes the power of the individual” (Kohn, 2004, p. 80-81). It is an oft repeated fact amongst firearms enthusiasts that members of an armed society are citizens, while those in a disarmed society are subjects.

Similarly, gun control proposals are often seen through this populist lens. Several gun owners that I met noted how gun control propositions are meant to make firearms ownership either too expensive or too inconvenient for firearms owners, to concentrate firearms in the hands of the elite. There is something to the idea that many firearms regulations do intend to price people out of gun ownership. For example, when asked why he joined the NRA, Timothy responded:

Well I noticed a movement amongst financial elites, people that want to try to strip these rights from us, and I think that… uh… what do you call it… an interesting part is its very disingenuous because they’ll keep it for themselves, they’ll have security guards and so and so… They don’t want us to have it. So you sit back and you go, I’m hoping that the small donations of a large group of people can outweigh the financial power of these few elite people (Interview with Timothy, June 6, 2019).

While proponents of gun control often advocate in favor of relying on police protection as a primary method of self-defense, gun owners argue that there are limits to the power of the state to ensure the protection of its citizens. Some gun owners explain this simply as the result of the fact that police cannot be in all places at all times. They point to the US Supreme Court’s DeShaney v. Winnebago City decision of 1989 which established that “Police and other state authorities are, therefore, not required to intervene in domestic disputes – or, indeed, in any crimes-in-progress – their duty being, rather to apprehend the offender after the crime has been
committed” (Stange et al., 2000, p. 78). Others have a darker view of the state, seeing it as too corrupt or ineffective to police properly (Carlson, 2015: 94).

For most white, middle- and upper-class gun owners these ideas most likely stem more from theorization than direct experience. For those within the gun culture whose identity places them at a higher risk of victimization, this distrust of the state may be more likely to stem from direct experience or stories from close friends and family members. For people of color, or white gun owners who have had negative experiences with police, guns are seen as a potential means of protecting oneself from police overreach (Carlson, 2015).

Non-gun owners quite often discuss the militancy of actors within the Second Amendment community in opposing any form of gun control. Gun owners, however, argue that once policies have been put into place and precedents set, they can be hard to reverse, and often become cumulative. This is easy to dismiss as a slippery slope argument, yet gun rights advocates have many examples both at home and abroad that they can point to, where modest gun control proposals have formed the bedrock for more restrictions moving forward. Such was the case in Canada, where Bill C-51 in 1978, a compromise bill between gun rights advocates and gun control advocates which created a system of firearms licensing, paved the way for more restrictive legislation in 1995 with the passage of Bill C-17 (R. B. Brown, 2012). In the United States, this occurred when the creation of Gun Control Act of 1968 built on the institutions developed by the Federal Firearms Act of 1938 (Wood, 2016).

Much like non-gun owners hold negative stereotypes towards gun owners, the reverse is certainly true. The terms “gun grabber”, “libtard” or “communist” are thrown around quite liberally in the Second Amendment community. Gun owners see proponents of gun control as either misguided and misinformed at best, or pernicious and conspiratorial at worst. Wealthy
benefactors of pro-control groups, like Michael Bloomberg are held in particular contempt. Gun owners often share what I have labelled narratives of suppression. These narratives usually involve a powerful individual, group, or industry that has targeted the Second Amendment Community in some way. This came out in many of my interviews. When sitting down with Bucky in a coffee shop in his local grocery store, he casually alluded to the fact that the grocery store has stopped carrying firearm related magazines: “But like a lot of places don’t carry these magazines. I mean this place here stopped carrying, at least last time I checked, stopped carrying any gun related magazines”. I asked him to expand on this and he said “They used to. But the last time I looked - gone… (pause)… Not a good thing” (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019). Bucky explained that he believed this was part of an increasing number of companies cutting ties with the firearms industry and gun-related groups.

Sam mentioned that in Alaska, where he studies, people are much more used to firearm ownership. I asked if he was able to talk guns with people his age here in Virginia. He replied: “Oh, here in Virginia no I don’t feel… with people my age there is a lot of controversy”. He lamented this fact, explaining that:

I wish it was more open, that people could talk about it, because I actually like hearing other people. Especially if their opinions aren’t (like) mine, they are against my opinion. I like doing that. Because then we get to actually talk and have an educated conversation about why do I support mine, why do you support yours, and hopefully come out with a whole new perspective that’s better (Interview with Sam, June 2019).

Other participants, like Rick, noted that this perceived suppression in the form of “credible threats” by the “previous presidential administration”, were the reason for him purchasing his first AR-15 and getting involved with the NRA:

When you have over restrictive stuff like that that makes zero sense, and these laws and regulations and things that they think are going to stop the violence, they’re dead wrong. It hasn’t worked in Chicago. It hasn’t worked in New York. It just doesn’t work. Because the only people you’re going to restrict are the law-abiding people that are going to follow those restrictions.
Uh… Because of Barack Obama, and his administration, that’s the only reason why I ever went out and bought an AR-15. When he threatened me with not being able to ever own one, I said well I better go get it now, just in case (Interview with Rick, June 2019).

An online participant expressed similar sentiments against wealthy businessmen who have lent support to gun control efforts. When asked why he joined a gun rights group, he answered:

The attempts in recent years by rich people (for example, Mike Bloomberg) to use their money and influence to deny poor people the comforts of security that the rich enjoy. (in other words, a poor person cannot afford a bodyguard, but they can afford a gun) This is just another way in which the rich are willing to victimize the poor for a vision of an (sic) utopia which will never be a reality.

In this chapter I explored the gun culture, and the Second Amendment Community. I argued that America has a larger gun culture centered around a serious leisure pursuit. This community is united by its participation in various serious leisure activities, like hunting, sports shooting, and self-defense preparedness, which it engages with in both physical and online spaces. Though made up of many different subcultures, the Second Amendment Community has demonstrated a significant ability to act collectively in response to legislative threats.

Most importantly, this chapter has argued that the meaning of guns matters, and that meanings are shaped by culture. If you see no value in firearms, if they symbolize fear and death to you, it is completely logical to support expansionist gun control legislation. The argument that a particular gun control policy would be worth if it saved even a single life makes sense. If guns matter to you, however, if they are objects that you use to engage in serious leisure pursuits, discuss online in knowledge communities and imbued with affect from a lifetime of experiences, memories and feelings, then these same arguments make little sense. The Great Gun Debate in the United States is thus a battle over competing understandings of what guns are and what guns
mean. As we will see, a particular view of history helps to determine how these meanings take shape.
Chapter Four – On Paper & Online

“Guns evoke powerful, emotive imagery that often stands in the way of intelligent debate. To the pro-control point of view, the gun is symbolic of much that is wrong with American culture. It symbolizes violence, aggression, and male dominance, and its use is seen as an acting out of your most regressive and infantile fantasies. To the gun culture’s way of thinking, the same gun symbolizes much that is right in the culture. It symbolizes manliness, self-sufficiency, and independence, and its use is an affirmation of man’s relationship to nature and to history.” James D. Wright, *Ten Essential Observations on Guns in America.*

The NRA understands that guns have meaning beyond their immediate function. Much of the print and online content the organization produces is devoted to tapping into these meanings and translating them into political support. The preceding chapters have laid out the theoretical framework for my project. I will draw on the Narrative Police Framework (NPF), and important concepts from the field of memory studies, to evaluate how the NRA use narratives about America’s and American’s pasts to build a political community of gun owners. These narratives are disseminated through the organization’s network of instructors, their communications materials, and through points of contact with the membership. The organization uses these modalities to attract new members and new gun owners and motivate existing members to deepen their involvement with the organization. These members in turn provide the organization with the resources to advance their desired policy agenda. The resources members provide are not just financial. The NRA’s large group of dedicated followers provides them with an important voting block to mobilize, as well as a group of highly energized advocates willing to write letters, volunteer, and take political action on gun issues.

This chapter marks the beginning of my analysis. Here, I will unpack two key NRA communications modalities through which the organization disseminates macro-level policy narratives. As we have explored, macro-level policy narratives are “sacred stories,” important
and foundational background ideas that shape the way that members of a given society think about the world. The focus of this project is to understand how the NRA both draws upon and shapes macro-level narratives about the nation and its citizens’ pasts.

The first medium I will consider is the *American Rifleman* magazine, the NRA’s flagship publication that is delivered monthly to the mailboxes of millions of their members. The second medium I will look at is NRATV, mainly two samples drawn from two very different NRATV programs: *Curator’s Corner* and *Armed & Fabulous*.

I argue that the organization disseminates narratives regarding the role of firearms in America’s, and Americans’ pasts as part of its larger effort to expand and mobilize the gun culture, from which it draws political support, to influence the debate on firearms and thus firearms policy. These narratives are intended to support the underlying argument that guns have played an integral part in American history, more so than in other countries, and that the United States has a historical tradition of gun ownership not just for sporting and hunting purposes, but for civilian self-defense and resistance to tyranny at home and abroad. The organization does this by focusing on key macro-narratives regarding America’s history and culture, and by tying firearms to America’s, and Americans’, pasts.

This chapter is based on a thematic analysis of a sample of 100 articles from the NRA’s *American Rifleman* magazine, as well as 35 episodes of NRATV. Conducting a thematic analysis of NRA written and online material is important for understanding the messages that the organization is trying to send to its members. Later chapters will focus on assessing how these messages are received and incorporated into the lifeworlds of those members.
The American Rifleman

The *American Rifleman* magazine is the organization’s central communication mechanism, delivered directly to the mailbox of NRA members on a monthly basis (Lacombe, 2019). Since its founding in 1885, it has been continually published and was acquired by the NRA in 1916 (Yamane et al., 2018, p. 14). According to the Alliance of Audited Media, as of June of 2017, the American Rifleman’s regular circulation was 2.06 million. This is the largest in the world of firearms magazines, and comparable to many large-scale mainstream magazines in the United States. For example, it is 75% the size of the circulation of *Sports Illustrated* (Yamane et al., 2018, p. 14).

The *American Rifleman* magazine is a mix of political articles, product reviews, and historical pieces aimed at gun owners. Each issue follows a familiar structure. The first third of the magazine contains direct and overt political messages. These include editorials from senior NRA officials, as well as the *Armed Citizen* column, which publishes stories of ordinary Americans defending their lives and their property with firearms. The rest of the magazine contains product reviews and historical pieces, as well as regular smaller columns like “I Have this Old Gun” or “Favorite Firearms”.

The magazine is provided for free with the purchase of an NRA membership, which as of the time of writing costs about $45 USD per year, or $1,500 for a life membership. When purchasing their membership, the buyer has the choice between subscribing to the *American Rifleman* or one of the organization’s newer magazines, like the *American Hunter*. Members can also opt-out of the magazine subscription if they so choose or receive subscriptions to more than one magazine for a small additional fee. The *American Rifleman* and *American Hunter*
The Rise and Fall of NRA TV

The NRA launched its first foray into online news in 2004 in an effort to give itself a broader role in shaping the discourse on firearms policy. The first show on the network was called Cam & Co., and like much of the content that would follow, took the form of a talk show (Gilpin, 2019). In 2016, the group expanded its online offerings, launching NRA TV with the help of its advertising firm Ackerman McQueen (Hargis, 2018). They quickly expanded to offer 39 different programs, that until the summer of 2019 were available online through their website, as well as through several streaming services like Roku, Amazon Fire, and Apple TV (Gilpin, 2019). Hiring more racially and gender diverse spokespeople, like conservative commentator Dana Loesch and lawyer and entrepreneur Colion Noir, their programming seemingly reached out to groups that the organization had failed to court in the past while providing plenty of material for its white, rural base. NRA TV offered many different programs, from news reportage to shows featuring women in the shooting sports, shooting tips, and a host of historical material.

In 2019, as I was in the middle of conducting my fieldwork, the NRA was forced by scandal to abruptly cancel NRATV. Concerns by some board members surrounding the cost-benefit analysis of NRATV, which was allegedly suffering from poor viewership, and a dispute between the NRA and their marketing firm, Ackerman McQueen, over alleged overbilling (T. Gross, 2019), caused Wayne Lapierre to pull the plug on NRATV in June (Folkenflik, 2019).

NRATV garnered a lot of media attention in the three years of its existence. From an episode of the popular progressive political comedy show Last Week Tonight with John Oliver
(Bradley, 2018) to critical commentaries from newspapers and magazines like the *Atlantic* (J. Parker, 2018), or *GQ* (Darby, 2018), the programming generally elicited either mockery or ire from the mainstream media. Despite this, only a few academics have drawn on this treasure trove of digital content for their analyses of the organization. Those that have, like Gilpin (2019), tend to focus on the explicitly political content, ignoring the deeper social meanings lying below the surface. I began to correct this with my gender analysis of NRA’s content aimed explicitly at women (N. S. Schwartz, 2019). This chapter will continue that work.

Method

This chapter is based on a thematic analysis of NRA written and online material. As part of the preparation for my study, I became an NRA member in 2018 and began receiving magazines. My sample of *American Rifleman* articles is thus drawn from issues of the magazine that I received with my membership since that time. Other academics studying the NRA have used the *American Rifleman* magazine as a data source. Academic articles that have analyzed the magazine have focused primarily on the political editorials from the magazine (Lacombe, 2019; Smith-Walter et al., 2016) or on advertisements within the magazine (Yamane et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis involves: “identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2014, p. 10). The researcher involved in thematic analysis attempts to identify and analyzes the patterns that emerge in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the chapter, I employ a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12), given that the identification of the themes was driven by my theoretical perspective, which focuses on examining the use of narrative, specifically narratives surrounding the past.
Articles for this analysis were selected because they relate to three key themes: history, memory, and heritage. The selection of these major themes was driven by theoretical framework and my focus on the NRA’s presentation of macro-narratives about the past. These articles generally comprise half of the content of American Rifleman and yet are completely ignored in the academic discussion of the magazine, which focus on more overtly political messaging. I selected a sample of 100 articles. Each issue of the magazine contains at least one article labeled “Historical”, which covers the use of a particular firearm in a famous conflict, often by Americans or American allies. Other recurring segments included “I Have This Old Gun”, “Favorite Firearms” and “In Memoriam”. Sometimes, product reviews were chosen for selection when the product they were reviewing was a historical firearm.

The selected articles were then scanned and imported into NVIVO 12 for coding and analysis. An initial scan of 20 articles allowed me to develop a coding scheme based on theory and major, reoccurring themes in the data. Three central codes were informed by my theoretical framework: history, memory, heritage. The history theme covered narratives within the magazine that were presented as part of the nation’s past. These included articles about World Wars, the American Revolution, or the Old West. The major theme of memory was used for narratives related to individual America’s pasts. Finally, heritage related to the embodied past, or history that is owned. I was then able to develop sub-codes based on my initial scan, such as American identity, family memory, personal memory (See Table 1).
Table 1 – Themes & Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Memory</th>
<th>Heritage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>American Revolution</td>
<td>Famous Firearms</td>
<td>American Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>First Time Shooting</td>
<td>American Guns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild West</td>
<td>Collecting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World Wars</td>
<td>Hunting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recent History (Post-War to Present)</td>
<td>In Memoriam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invention and Innovation</td>
<td>Sports Shooting</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Defence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sports Shooting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tinkering</td>
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</tbody>
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A key indicator of the importance of a theme is prevalence, which refers to how often a particular theme shows up in a data set. Prevalence can be calculated in one of two ways, either by looking at how often each theme show up in a single text or how often do they show up in the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I decided to focus on the prevalence of themes within the data set (see Table 2). While a theme could show up multiple times in a single issue or episode, it is much more likely to make an impression on the reader if it is repeated across time. Further, my project will not cut off the two communications modalities from their political context. The themes I chose were important because they popped up in other NRA material that I examined in my ethnography, either at the NRA Annual Meeting, during classes or at the NRA museum.

Given that magazines and digital content are visual mediums, I was careful to pay close attention to the meanings that are created or embellished by the combination of text, dialogue, and imagery. The themes contained within these texts are not only expressed in words but images, just as the National Firearms Museum, which I will explore in a later chapter, combines text and artifact to create meaning.

The selection of NRATV data was more complicated. Once again, I focused my case selection on NRATV programs aimed particularly at historical content. This led me to begin my
analysis of Curators Corner. Filmed in the NRA Museum, Curator’s Corner features museum employees telling the stories of important or curious objects from the museum’s collection. To broaden my sample beyond material focused explicitly on history, I decided to include another NRATV show in my analysis, Armed & Fabulous. This program was found under the NRA Women section of NRATV and is quite unambiguously aimed at women. The show profiles important women in the world of shooting, from professional sports shooters to business owners to NRA board members.

Mid-way through my research in June of 2019, both shows were abruptly removed from the organization’s website due to the collapse of NRATV. Despite this, I was able to analyze 15 episodes of Curator’s Corner and 20 episodes of Armed & Fabulous. The process of analyzing these shows was similar to that of the American Rifleman articles. While watching the selected shows, I took careful notes, focusing on the use of narrative and past presencing, and once again using NVIVO 12 to record them. These notes were then coded using the same coding scheme as the magazine articles and analyzed to draw out major themes.

Table 2 – Theme Prevalence (Across total dataset)

| Major Theme   | Code                  | Prevalence
|---------------|-----------------------|-------------
| Memory        | Famous Firearms       | 21          |
|               | First Time Shooting   | 14          |
|               | Collecting            | 51          |
|               | Hunting               | 35          |
|               | In Memoriam           | 8           |
|               | Sports Shooting        | 22          |
|               | Tinkering             | 4           |
|               | Family Memory         | 39          |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>History</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Revolution</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil War</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26 Calculated as # of articles or episodes this theme shows up in, not the number of times it shows up in articles and episodes.
Drawing on both print and online material allowed me to gain a better understanding of the breadth of the modalities the NRA has at its disposal to communicate with members and the general public. Analyzing both of these modalities also helps to ensure that I was drawing from NRA material that would have been consumed by the widest possible demographic of NRA members, given that older members would likely be more likely to read the magazine, and younger members to access the web-based content.

**Politics is Personal – The Importance of Family & Memory**

A key theme that emerged from the data was the importance placed on family memories. This is unsurprising, given that the NRA goes to great lengths to present itself as an organization with strong family values. Further, given what we know about the importance of family to the process of remembering, it is clear that appealing to emotions tied to family is a very impactful form of past presencing. As I discussed in Chapter Two, multiple studies have confirmed that people interact with the past most often with and in relation to their families. This included everything from looking at photo albums to telling stories and even learning history (Friesen et al., 2009; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

This appeal to themes of domesticity and family are strengthened by the way that NRA members consume this material. It is likely that both the magazines and online television content will be consumed in the home. Many of the videos, especially those aimed at women, are also
designed to be shared with family members and friends. These communications materials are not just about family, they are made to be watched and shared by families.

Family memories showed up 39 times throughout my dataset. Of the 100 American Rifleman articles I analyzed, 17% contained narratives that took the form of family memories. These narratives showed up the most in the regular series “Favorite Firearms”. In this series, readers are invited to write in and tell a story about their favorite firearm. These stories are curated and edited by the magazine’s editorial team.

Memories from childhood were a recurring theme, often involving a family member who is now gone. One reader wrote in to tell the story of his first firearm, a military surplus German Luger pistol, which he had purchased as a teenager by selling his comic book collection. His mother had gone with him to buy it and took him to the range to shoot it for the first time. “I shot the Luger a couple of times and could not hit anything with it. Then my mom insisted on shooting it, so I loaded three cartridges into the Luger for her”. The author describes how his mother resoundingly trounced him, hitting their target, a can, three times. The author ends the story with this: “Mom is gone now, but I still have what I call ‘Mom’s Luger’ – my favorite firearm” (Daly, 2018).

Another reader’s submission demonstrates the way in which firearms are powerful objects of memory, that can elicit strong emotions. This contributor opens his story by discussing his youth growing up on a farm in the 1960s. As a young boy, he grew up shooting with his older brother, who would sometimes let him shoot is High Standard .22 revolver. “It made me so proud when he would help me shoot it. I just loved the look of the gun…” Years later, as an adult, the author describes going into a gun shop and seeing a used gun of the same model. “There on display was a gun that instantly took me back to the days of my childhood… I had
finally found the gun that ignited my lifelong passion” (Wagner, 2019).

Yet another reader wrote in about a double-barreled shotgun that had been given to him as a gift by his father-in-law, Jack, shortly after his marriage in 1991. The firearm was a family heirloom, a 1916 Ithaca shotgun, that had been passed down from Jack’s father, Bud. The reader took it on several successful hunts and it quickly became his favorite firearm, not just because of his success with it but because of its connection to Jack. “Being able to carry a little bit of Jack and Bud with me afield makes the firearm that much more special. I hope my future grandchild or son-in-law might cherish it someday, the way we have”. The title of this article “Side-By-Side” is a clever play on words that refers to both the firearm the author describes and his relationship with his father in-law. Double-barred shotguns like Bud’s Ithica come in two forms, side-by-sides and over & unders, depending on whether the barrels are arranged horizontally or vertically (Bates, 2018).

We have already discussed the many functions that the past serves for the present. In brief, the past helps us to navigate the world, serves to validate and reaffirm certain practices and beliefs, to create and affirm individual and group identity, and as a form of escape or entertainment (Lowenthal, 1985). The family memories shared in the Favorite Firearm column, though particular to the individuals in sharing their stories, are universally accessible. They invite the reader to identify with them, conjuring their own family memories. They validate the cultural practices of gun ownership, hunting, and sports shooting by anchoring them in the past of not just America the nation, but individual Americans. They further cement gun owners’ connections to the NRA through the collective practice of remembering.

Further, these stories draw on the material power of family heirlooms as objects of memory. Objects gain meaning through memory, and firearms, as durable goods, have a lot of
time to gather memory about them. The process of ageing is part of what makes relics important objects of memory (Lowenthal, 1985). It is difficult to imagine another piece of sporting equipment that could be used more than 100 years after its making.

The NRATV content, especially the show Armed & Fabulous, drew extensively on family memories to form the central narratives of the episodes. The purpose of the show was to feature famous women in the world of shooting, so as to encourage other women to take up the shooting sports and hunting. As a result, the show walked a delicate tightrope between emphasizing the femininity of the women involved, while also subverting it by showing their participation in the shooting sports, as if to say “you can be a girly girl, and a tough shooter as well”. This is a big part of the NRA’s efforts to expand the gun culture to include women by overcoming deeply entrenched gender norms that discourage women’s participation in the gun culture (N. S. Schwartz, 2019).

Several of the episodes that I analyzed featured personal and family memories surrounding hunting, self-defense, and the shooting sports. Many of these were memories from childhood. Cindy Gregory talks about how she was the oldest daughter and grew up on a farm. Her father and brothers would go out deer hunting, and the kids were always excited when a deer was hanging on the tree outside of the house (NRATV, 2015).

Olympic trap and skeet shooter Kim Rode notes: "Shooting was just something that was a way of life. It was passed down generationally in my family". She talks about her grandfather's use of guns as a houndsman, which he passed down to her father. The episode shows us black and white images of her grandfather and father shooting, hunting, and fishing. Her father says it was natural when she was born that she would learn to hunt and fish. Images of a young Kim holding a shotgun on her father's lap are shown, as well as an image of her with a series of
harvested rabbits holding a shotgun. "Everything we did we did as a family, so we just took Kim with us” (NRATV, 2014c).

Gaye Kelsey talks about how shooting was a big part of her relationship with her father. "My dad just put a gun in my hand when I was 17". She describes how her father entered her into a "Pigeon shoot". "Once you get a taste like that... your hooked". Gaye is described by the narrator as a "Proud Texas gal, born and raised". She is shown, shotgun in hand, walking around her family ranch, the "site of ultimate retreat". Footage is shown of competitors taking part in a clay pigeon shooting competition, which was described as a new sport. She describes her father’s prowess at trap shooting, citing it as the reason for her own success in the shooting sports (NRATV, 2014a).

Yet another woman, Hilary shares stories of hunting as a young girl with her father. She talks about following her dad on a hunting trip, trying to follow along the path that he had tread. She says this is a metaphor for her life, following in her father’s footsteps. She shares stories of hunting trips to Africa with her father. Images of local people in traditional dress flash across the screen, then images of her successful hunts. She talks about her first kill and the pride her father felt in her courage and tenacity. She then talks about the “respect” and “reverence” that hunters have for animals, and how her dad showed her that hunting is about “connecting ourselves with the earth” (NRATV, 2017).

The show places a tremendous emphasis on the women’s romantic relationships as well. The women appeared in the show as cisgender and straight. Most were married. Many of the family memories shared by these women were romantic memories. Some of these focus on how the couples met or began to date, or how one partner introduced the other to shooting, usually the husband. Susan Kriley and her husband Don shared the story of how Don introduced Susan to
shooting in their episode. Don grew up as a hunter and shooter and proposed introducing his wife to the hobby. She reluctantly came along shooting with him. They were shooting shotguns on a course with a variety of stations, an increasingly popular shotgun sport in which each station mimics a common hunting scenario.

Don described not bringing many shells with, thinking his wife would not make it past a few stations. However, she took to shooting and chided him for not bringing enough along. Susan is then shown shooting wearing a purple safety vest and bright pink earplugs. Don then introduced Susan to hunting, taking her on her first big game hunting trip in South Africa in 2011, along with a few other couples. In the video, Don visibly welled up with pride when describing seeing his wife after her first kill. She says that hunting has added another part to her life, other than "cooking and cleaning and family". Don describes how shooting made his wife more assertive. "When Susan puts her mind to something, there's no telling what she can accomplish" (NRATV, 2014d).

The sharing of these personal family memories does several things. The main purpose of the show is to get women involved in the gun culture. By presenting these women as role models, both traditionally feminine yet at ease in the world of guns, the show hopes to attract other women to the sport, and present participation in the gun culture as empowering. But the sharing of these family memories also serves to legitimate the social practices of the gun culture. The NRA realizes that its image as a male-dominated organization is hurting it. It is a testament to the success of the feminist movement, and the increasing diversity of American society, that even deeply conservative organizations must now seek the social legitimacy that diversity provides. By drawing on family memories, the organization hopes to present the gun culture as inclusive, family friendly, and thus legitimate.
Nine of the 20 episodes in my sample feature the sport of big game hunting in Africa, sometimes called trophy hunting. Given that trophy hunting is the sole preserve of the very rich, and the power of social media to spread images further than their creator intended, big game hunting in Africa has become increasingly controversial. This was worsened by the death of Cecil the lion in 2015. Cecil was a lion being researched by biologists who was killed by Walter Palmer, a dentist and big game hunter in Africa. Palmer faced immense social media scrutiny and harassment after the story went viral, introducing many to the sport of hunting exotic African animals.\(^\text{27}\)

The show goes to great lengths to present trophy hunting in a positive light, emphasizing that big game hunting funds many of the conservation efforts in Africa, where governments are unable or unwilling to provide the funding themselves. The shows also emphasized the positive impact on local populations, and how the hunters shared the meat that they harvested with local peoples. One episode in particular, “A Passion for Conservation”, features big game hunter Libby Krottinger. Libby describes herself as an "animal fanatic". She talks about having dogs and cats growing up and says she always felt a connection to animals. She discusses owning horses and how they are "one of the greatest loves of my life". She is shown in the stables taking care of her horses and watching them run in what is presumably her yard. She is wearing cowboy boots. We are shown her horse running through the yard in slow motion, its mane flying in the wind.

Later in the episode, she goes on to describe the beauty of the wildlife in Africa. She tells us that she does photographic and hunting safaris and enjoyed taking photos of animals for 20 years before she started hunting. She emphasizes the physical rigor of the hunts, noting that the

animals for photo safaris are in small areas, while hunting safaris take place in much larger areas, and you can go days without seeing an animal. She notes that hunters are required to hunt on foot, further emphasizing the physical rigor that these excursions demand. Libby goes to great lengths to note the benefits of big game hunting to the local people: providing donated meat for villages, contributing money to the local economy, putting money into conservation efforts in Africa. Near the end of the episode, she directly addresses the paradox of being an animal lover and a hunter. She talks about the ethics of hunting and the large role that hunting plays in local conservation efforts. "I hunt because I do love animals, I hunt because it’s the most ethical thing to do for conservation, and I did not come to that decision lightly" (NRATV, 2018a).

The decision to include African trophy hunting in the series is further evidence of the gap between the NRA and Gun Culture 2.0. Given that the goal of the series is recruiting women into the gun culture, the creators would probably have done better by focusing on the more relatable hunting and sports shooting memories discussed earlier, rather than focus on this controversial sport, which lies outside of the financial reach of the overwhelming majority of Americans. While there is evidence that properly regulated and managed trophy hunting is an important conservation tool in Africa (Di Minin, Leader-Williams, & Bradshaw, 2016; Harris & Pletscher, 2002; Peter A. Lindsey, Frank, Alexander, Mathieson, & Romanach, 2007), especially in important biological areas not considered picturesque enough for mainstream tourism (P.A. Lindsey, Roulet, & Romanach, 2007), it seems like a public relations fight that the already embattled organization is bound to lose, and an ineffective strategy for bringing new gun owners into the fold.

While most of the show’s content focuses on warm, family memories, Armed & Fabulous also draws on darker and more traumatic personal memories to warn viewers of the
dangers of failing to arm themselves. This is a commonly used tactic by the organization. For example, the *Armed Citizen* column mentioned earlier is present in every issue of *American Rifleman*. It recounts stories of ordinary Americans fighting off criminals with firearms. The episodes of *Armed & Fabulous* that feature this narrative take a similar structure. Four memories are presented, each featuring a similar overall narrative structure. Each of the victims was unarmed at the time that they were victimized. For three of the women, this took the form of a home invasion, while another faced a violent male assaulting her in the parking lot of her place of work. In each of the cases, the incident is presented as a wakeup call to the women, who took steps to arm themselves to defend against future predation.

The very first episode of *Armed & Fabulous* features this narrative. Sandy Froman, the NRA’s first female president, was at the time living in Hollywood and working as a lawyer. She describes a man attempting to break into her home, emphasizing that the police did not show up until after he had given up on the lock and fled the scene. She talks about her fear of what would have happened if he had got in. The next day she bought a Colt M1911. "In no time she went from being afraid to being prepared. Guns are presented as a way for women to ensure their safety in an uncertain world. The episode concludes that: "Every woman is entitled to such security" (NRATV, 2014b).

Another of the memories featured in the show is more violent. “All I remember was waking up at 11:45 pm, this guy smashing his gun across my face”. Toni, a small business owner, and a single mother was the victim of a home invasion in 2015. She was home at the time with her boyfriend Mark when masked intruders entered her home. She was held at gunpoint, dragged around the house to her safe, which she was forced to open. The violent intruders took her valuables and traumatized her and Mark, who were left in the closet and told
to count to 300. If they moved, they were told they would be killed. “You don’t know what
you’re gonna do when you’re put in a position that you have to defend yourself, but we have to
protect the Second Amendment to protect our rights”. Toni says that this incident brought the
debate on the Second Amendment closer to home and that she has become a strong Second
Amendment advocate. Her and Mark say that they are permanently scarred by the event, but that
Toni has moved forward through her advocacy (NRATV, 2018b).

These incidents are intended to remind the viewer of what the NRA believes are the
potential consequences of failing to arm oneself. Firearms are presented as a tool for women’s
safety and empowerment. Looked at through the lens of gender, this demonstrates a departure
from more traditional American narratives, which often focus on the male protector role. Here,
women are presented as capable of defending themselves and their partners, if given the proper
tools. We can observe the NRA pushing back against masculinist American cultural norms that
relegate women to the role of protected.

This is driven home particularly by the story of Hilary, who like Toni, was the victim of a
violent home invasion. As the narrator of the show describes the incident, ominous music plays
in the background and a black and white city is depicted. The show first turns to Ben, Hilary’s
boyfriend, who describes the experience. Ben was stabbed eight times during the encounter, had
his Nintendo gaming system stolen as well as Hilary’s phone. Ben says the event changed his life
and that “a part of me died that night”. “Nobody ever thinks this kind of thing could happen to
them. I didn’t have a gun in the house at the time, and the fact of the matter is nobody can
guarantee my safety but me”. Images of dark downtown streets are shown. Sirens blare in the
background as the camera focuses in on an ambulance with open doors, as if to show the viewer
the fate that awaits them should they fail to heed the narrator’s warning.
The camera then turns to Hillary: “I’m proof that it can happen, and the message is find a way to protect yourself”. Interestingly, rather than focusing on Ben arming himself, it is Hilary who is presented as the hero of the story. Hilary is shown walking her German shepherd, who she describes as a fully trained police dog. Following her father’s advice she moved out of the city to a ranch. Her and Ben now have two dogs, alarm systems, motion detectors, and Hilary got her concealed carry license. The narrator notes that she now sleeps with a loaded shotgun and a pistol, which she is fully trained in and proficient with. “I don’t know how having firearms would have changed anything at the time. But I know having one now sure makes me feel a lot safer” Ben adds. Like Toni and Sandy, Hilary also mentions that the incident spurned her towards Second Amendment advocacy. While she had been a life member before the home invasion, she became politically active with the organization afterward (NRATV, 2017).

The cautionary tale is a consistent narrative strategy across NRA material. By drawing on the personal memories of victims of violent crime, the organization emphasizes the urgency of its message. Viewers are told to learn from the protagonists’ pasts and take steps to protect themselves. Personal memories, whether quaint family memories or traumatic ones, are powerful vectors for NRA messaging. Though the viewer is aware that they are being shown material by the NRA, the subjects of these shows bear witness to the organization’s message in a way that makes it seem like it is coming from a neutral source. The viewer is being shown, not told. Given that these communications materials are likely being consumed in the home, the urgency of the message is reinforced. Further, the major themes emphasized in these memories are universal: family, parent-child relationships, romance, and fear of violence. This means that a wide swathe of viewers can empathize and connect with them.

Each of these narrative structures fit the NPF’s operationalization of a narrative as having
characters, a plot, and a policy relevant moral. The stories contain heroes, everyday gun owners like the eagle-eyed mother and her Luger, alongside the celebrities of the gun world, like Olympic shooter Kim Rhode. They contain villains, both the explicit villains like the shady, masked criminals who assaulted Hillary and Ben, and implicit villains that hide in the background of the narrative: politicians who threaten gun ownership. The moral of the touching family stories is that firearms are an essential part of the American family and way of life, while the moral of the cautionary tales is that firearms are a key tool for the physical protection of your family. These morals are both particular, in the sense that they will appeal most to those who share the belief system of those within gun culture, but also universal, as they touch on transcendent themes like family and fear of violence. Either way, these stories send a message to supporters, gun owners, the gun curious, and policy makers: an attack on guns is an attack on the safety and sanctity of the American family.

Grand historical meta-narratives

The most common themes that showed up in the NRA written and online material were references to grand historical meta-narratives. These are macro-level narratives that touch on major events in American and world history. The two World Wars were favorite historical themes in my dataset, showing up 41 times. Articles that included these themes focused primarily on American troops in the Second World War. Narratives surrounding the Wild West were also prevalent, showing up 29 times, and more recent historical events appearing 27 times. This included articles on the Vietnam War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and others. Given the centrality of the Colonial Period and American Revolution in other forms of NRA communications, like the NRA Firearms History Museum and the NRA Annual Meeting, I was surprised that these themes were not more prevalent in my dataset, showing up only 9 times.
Regardless of the period or conflict they covered, each of these articles were focused around either a specific firearm, a specific conflict, or both. Their titles generally went like “On Guard for America: Wartime Winchesters”, “The Arab Revolt and the Guns of Lawrence of Arabia”, or “An American Rifleman in the Battle for Germany”. No matter the characters and setting, the central narrative of each article worked to emphasize the importance of a given firearm in the hands of individuals and groups, mostly Americans, who have forwarded the global cause of freedom.

The third article listed above is a good example of the general structure that these pieces follow. The article tells the story of Private Marsh, an American soldier during the Second World War in Germany who was issued the M1 Garand. Though the story is centered around Marsh’s experiences, the M1 is the true protagonist of the story, while Marsh slides neatly into the archetype of the American hero. The article recounts Marsh’s various adventures with the M1, from violent encounters such as his attacking a German machine gun to allow his troops to move forward, to moments of mercy, where he shared his food rations with two captured German deserters (Foster, 2019).

Another article, “On Guard for America: Wartime Winchesters”, recounts the history of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, focusing on the firearms that they produced for the US military during the war. The article profiles a selection of the different guns, like the M1 Garand previously mentioned, the Model 97 Trench Shotgun, and other famous weapons. Photographs of these firearms are presented alongside black and white and color photos of US military personnel and pictures of vintage Winchester ads from the period (Canfield, 2019).

The *American Rifleman* does not limit the scope of its historical articles to pieces on Americans, but often covers other historical periods, events, and people that it considers to be
part of the broader global struggle for freedom. An article on “The Guns of Lawrence of Arabia” focuses on telling the narrative of T.E. Lawrence’s exploits during the Arab Revolt. While the first half is focused on Lawrence, the second half shifts to telling the story of the firearms he used to achieve his exploits and his influence on the innovative use of technology in warfare. “The equipment used by T.E. Lawrence and his colleagues against the Turks was innovative, as was his untraditional approach to the employment of intelligence, aerial reconnaissance, and mobile gun platforms. His methodologies were game-changers…” (Stejskal, 2018).

Yet another article tells the story of German Mauser rifles in the conflict that Israelis call the War of Independence (Milhemet ha-Atzma'ut), which lasted from either November of 1947 or May of 1948, depending on the starting date one uses, and lasted until early 1949 (Caplan, 2019). The article begins by recounting the Israeli narrative of the state’s foundation, and the crisis that Israel faced following its establishment. The author argues that the newly formed Israeli army did not have enough weapons to arm their soldiers since the Israelis relied on "older independence groups" like the Haganah to fight and that these soldiers were "poorly outfitted" underdogs fighting against "well-equipped armies from Egypt, Iraq and Jordan". According to the author: "It was a fight for survival and a fight against a second Holocaust" (Vanderlinden, 2018)

This article goes on to explain that two of the few nations friendly to Israel at the time were Czechoslovakia and Belgium, both countries with well-established firearms industries that had been left with large quantities of surplus German rifles from the war. "The Israeli War of

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28 Though the purpose of this chapter is to understand and unpack rather than challenge the narratives presented in the American Rifleman, the contentious nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict necessitates special attention. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the view of Israel as the underdog in the War of Independence has been challenged by alternate narratives presented by historians. According to Caplan (2019), historians have established that the Israeli army may have had numerical superiority in the conflict, especially in the early stages.
Independence was, ironically, fought with large quantities of arms manufactured by Nazi Germany. So great was the need for weapons that the Israelis did not even remove the markings on the weapons. Soldiers, especially foreign volunteer fighters, “…were issued wartime German flight suits and asked to fight in German planes. Signs of Nazi Germany were present on much of the equipment” (Vanderlinden, 2018). The Israelis eventually adopted the FN K98 Mauser Rifles as their main battle rifle. They bought thousands of them through Czechoslovakia. The author highlights that the Mauser continued to be used beyond the Six-Day War in 1967, but is now a collector's item. The article concludes: "Seventy years ago, after the atrocities of the Holocaust, men and women from all over the world took the initiative to go to Palestine and fight for an independent Jewish state. Their bravery and determination live on in the tools they used: those Mausers we now cherish as collectibles” (Vanderlinden, 2018).

These narratives contain several commonalities. On their own, they seem like rather innocuous pieces of writing, full of historical minutia to satisfy the curiosity of gun enthusiasts and amateur historians. Yet considered together patterns emerge. Each of the stories emphasizes the role that firearms played in the hands of individuals fighting for what they saw as the cause of freedom. Most often, these individuals are courageous American troops, other times they are ordinary Americans. Sometimes, they tell stories of American allies using firearms towards the same cause. Despite their differences, they each contain the same policy moral, that firearms in the hands of individuals are an important part of fighting for liberty. These articles further add to the mystique of the guns, imbuing these objects with deep meanings. Through the stories of these heroes, the firearms they used, be it Winchester produced M1 Garands or British Lee-Enfield Rifles, these objects are emotively tied to the meanings of these conflicts, in a way that motivates passionate gun owners to collect and shoot these firearms decades later. These articles thus form
an important part of NRA messaging that works to tie firearms to core American values like individual liberty through the use of historical narratives. By choosing macro-level narratives surrounding key points in American history, as the Second World War, the NRA can harness the deep meanings already attached to these events, tying firearms to the existing infrastructure of commemoration. As we discussed, the infrastructures of commemoration limit the ability of actors to change grand historical metanarratives (Schudson, 1989). The NRA does not need to rewrite these macro-narratives to do this, they simply need to emphasize the role that guns played in a part of that story.

The Israeli Mauser article is particularly noteworthy because it furthers the NRA’s oft-repeated messaging that it is not the firearm itself that is evil, but the people using it. In this story, the Mauser Kar98k rifles, marked with the swastika, ends up saving the nascent nation of Israel. Further, these same rifles are now available to collect, allowing the gun owner to join their own story to the history of this firearm.

The episodes of NRATV’s Curator’s Corner also focused on telling more personal stories of firearms in the hands of individuals in American history, though the sample of historical periods the show drew on was more varied than the magazine. Only three episodes were devoted to the Second World War, with others covering the Vietnam War, gangland Chicago, the Wild West, and the colonial period.

While the strategy of tying firearms to grand narratives is often used to connect firearms to values, it can also be used to connect them emotionally. Understanding this involves touching on the thin line between history and memory that was noted in Chapter Two. Oftentimes, our knowledge of historical periods is mediated by popular culture. Few time periods exemplify this as much as the so-called Wild West, the period of American expansion onto the western frontier.
Our understanding of this period has been heavily distorted by Western novels and Hollywood blockbusters. Yet, while distorted, these pieces of popular culture have profoundly shaped how most Americans understand their history. They have introduced important archetypes into the popular imagination: the lone hero, the good sheriff, the robber, the strong frontierswoman, the noble savage. They have also established the key plot tropes of the time; the gunfight, the train robbery, the bank robbery, the hanging, the stagecoach robbery, the Native American attack, and others. The popular understanding of this period, and the feelings and values that it elicits, are an important part of the frontier mentality that permeates American politics and provides a rich symbolism for politicians and movements to draw upon (Melzer, 2009).

The NRA deploys these narratives extensively, emphasizing the importance of firearms as tools of survival and self-reliance in this period. A prime example of this is an episode of Curators Corner, which profiles a silver Colt .45 six-shooter. The firearm is placed on a stand at the center of the table, while the two hosts discuss its design, features, and story. The barrel and receiver of the gun are richly engraved. The ivory handle has a bull’s head carved into it. Behind the hosts, another table with the skull of what appears to be a wildebeest rests atop an animal fur. Further back we see an American flag, however, it is partially hidden by the displays of firearms: guns behind glass cases surrounded by dark wooden frames. The background gives off the appearance of being both a museum and a hunting lodge.

John, the host, opens the episode with a joke, noting that "It almost looks like if I called the props department and said ‘give me something right out of a western’, they would produce a firearm like this, but this... this is not a prop". Jim, the other host, laughs at the joke, noting that the gun in front of them, like others in the museum, were "actually used by the lawmen and outlaws of the old west".
They explain that this particular firearm belonged to an outlaw, Black Jack Ketchum. The audience is shown a black and white photo of Black Jack. He is wearing a suit and bowtie, glaring at the camera, his meticulously groomed handlebar mustache perched atop a frown. "He not only was a bad man, but he was also very bad at being a bad man". It turns out he was, "one of the most bad luck train robbers you'll ever run into". The camera shows bounty posters for Black Jack. Jim also explains that he "ran with the Hole in the Wall Gang", an infamous gang of outlaws made famous by Butch Cassidy. Jim tells the story of Black Jack’s falling out with his brother, who was killed following a botched train robbery. Black Jack tried to rob the same train a month later. The conductor, having been robbed twice before, was armed with a shotgun and shot Black Jack in the arm during the robbery. Black Jack was found by the law the next day and was hung (NRATV, 2018c).

Yet another episode, featuring a Thompson Gun, sheds further light on the thin barrier between history and popular memory, and the organization's efforts to tie popular nostalgia for these periods to guns. The host, Logan, opens the episode by saying: "So I'm holding a typewriter, made in Chicago... ". The hosts laugh at the joke, which alludes to the popular nickname of the Thompson sub-machine gun as the “Chicago Typewriter”. He also calls it: "the gun that made the twenties roar". The hosts explain that the artifact in front of them is considered unique because it still has its original drum magazine, with the same serial number as the gun. A drum magazine is a type of large-capacity magazine so-called because it is circular rather than rectangular, like most firearm magazines. The hosts discuss how iconic the drum magazine was compared to the stick magazine, which was more commonly used with the Thompson.

Jim and Logan then note some of the technical functions of the gun, how it "chugs along" slower than modern automatic weapons. The gun, and the sound it makes, are also described as
"iconic". This is interesting, because it demonstrates the way that gun enthusiasts attach value to certain aesthetic attributes of firearms. This can be a particular accessory, in this case a drum magazine, which despite its noted impracticality is featured in popular representations of the firearm. In this case the sound of the gun is also considered to be iconic, evoking excitement for firearms enthusiasts.

The hosts then switch to telling the story of the Thompson gun. John mentions that the guns were used by law enforcement, the military, and gangsters. He says the gun is not just "iconic" but "practical" given its many uses. Logan jokes that "Regardless of which side of the law you were on, this gun was a good one to have... The bad guys loved it and of course, law enforcement needed it". The audience is shown black and white images of gangsters and police officers holding Tommy guns. They mention the gun’s service in the Second World War. We are shown a picture of Winston Churchill wearing a bowler hat, pinstripe suit, smoking a cigar, and holding a Tommy gun. Logan mentions, though does not show, that there are pictures of Bonnie and Clyde with Tommy guns (NRATV, 2018d).

These examples demonstrate the way that the NRA works to connect the excitement and nostalgia of popular depictions of historical periods towards the guns of that time. Thus, tying guns to grand historical narratives is done not only to draw on the values of the time but on the emotion that this period evokes, due to the exposure of gun owners to popular depictions of guns movies and television series. Popular representations of history are yet another aspect of the infrastructure of commemoration that the NRA is able to mobilize.

The macro-narrative that I labelled innovation and invention is a powerful theme in American culture. The idea of constant progress through science and technology emerged during the industrial revolution and has been a fixture of the American psyche ever since. It has led
Americans to seek technological solutions to every problem imaginable. The history of great discoveries, and the famous women and men who invented them, has made the names of Americans like the Wright Brothers, Henry Ford, Bill Gates, and countless others household names. The NRA taps into this macro-narrative often in its communications, touting the intelligence and ingenuity of the American inventors of the gun world like Benjamin-Tyler Henry, Oliver Winchester, Samuel Colt, John Moses Browning, Eugene Stoner, and Eliphalet Remington. Tying firearms to the narrative of technological progress is important for linking these objects with American identity. Firearms are presented as uniquely American innovations and a symbol of American scientific prowess. This narrative is present in both the NRA’s written and online communications material.

This narrative was one of the most common and showed up in 37 out of the 100 *American Rifleman* articles. Though it was usually conveyed through language, it is often done through imagery as well. For example, the centerfold of the February 2019 issue features a two page-sized image of a Winchester Repeating Arms cartridge board from the late 19th century (“Special Feature: Winchester Repeating Arms,” 2019). The magazine explains that these cartridge boards were used to advertise firearms in a time before catalogs were sent to houses, or people could browse guns on the internet. This is interesting for several reasons. First, it attempts to build the reader's affective ties with Winchester Repeating Arms through nostalgia. The ad, and the context given to it by the editors, evoke a yearning for a simpler time in American life. Further, they emphasize the longevity and American pedigree of the Winchester company. Winchester’s guns and ammunition are positioned as important American artifacts, telling the story of the development of modern American capitalism.

The technique of appealing to a company’s history while touting its innovation shows up
many times in the pages of American Rifleman. A five-page history of Remington’s semi-automatic shotguns in the January 2020 issue demonstrates this at work. The abstract for the article reads: “America’s oldest gunmaker has been building semi-automatic shotguns for more than a century. Today, models such as the Versa Max and V3 join the ranks of the 1100 and 11-87 as proof of Big Green’s commitment to the technologically advanced self-loader”. This abstract does a few things. First, it establishes the strong pedigree of “Big Green”, the nickname given to Remington due to its extensive use of green in its packaging, logo, and promotional materials. The use of this nickname also serves to build the readers affective ties to the company, making them feel like they are not just on a first-name basis, but familiar enough to use nicknames. The article goes on to tout the company’s history of producing shotguns. A header on the first page reads “Everyone’s Got a Remington Story”. The author shares his own story with Remington shotguns, before noting that “no firm in American history has produced more models of shotguns… or more shotguns in total” (Johnston, 2020). The author goes on to note that there is only one company that has produced more shotguns than them, the Italian company Beretta, but points out that the Italians had “a 300-year head start on the New York company founded in Ilion in 1816”. The article provides a detailed history of Remington shotguns and the “evolution” from the pump shotgun to the semi-automatic. The article then profiles the current selection of Remington firearms.

While it would be easy to dismiss this article as a paid puff piece for an NRA sponsor, the structure of the article is quite telling. By carefully establishing the companies roots in America, positioning them against a European competitor, who also regularly supports the NRA in the form of buying ads, the article ties the history of Remington to the American story. This is

29 They even sell green shotgun shells for target shooting.
not just the American tradition of hunting, though the author does share his personal story of
hunting with a Remington, and notes that “Everyone’s Got a Remington Story”, but the “epic”
American story of innovation and technological development (Johnston, 2020).

Though firearms that are perceived to be associated with hunting tend to be less
controversial in the Great Gun Debate, the *American Rifleman* also works to tie more contentious
firearms to the story of American innovation as well. The February 2019 edition featured a full-
page photograph of an American soldier test-firing an AR-15 during the firearms trials with the
Air Force. When the military holds a competition to select the firearms that it will issue to
soldiers, the guns are put through a series of rigorous tests. The design of the semi-automatic
AR-15 would ultimately be chosen by the Air Force, and then the army, and adapted into the
fully-automatic M16 and M4 carbine. A small paragraph gives the reader the context for the
image, concluding that “The results of the tests, which were conducted to determine the rifle’s
competency in replacing the old M1, is now well-recorded in history” (“Opening Shot: The AR-
15’s Initial Testing,” 2019). Given the symbolism of the AR-15 in the gun debate since the
Sandy Hook massacre, this seemingly innocuous black and white photo conveys quite a bit of
meaning. Devotees know what comes next, but like a comic book fan reading the origin story of
their favorite superhero, tracing the foundations is exciting. Further, showing this piece of the
origin story of the semi-automatic carbines helps to weave it into the story of American
innovation and development.

Firearms and the Second Amendment as Heritage

Heritage is the past that is owned. It is a way of claiming ownership over certain elements
of the past and is often intimately linked to political identity and political claims (Hoelscher,
2006). Heritage can be something tangible, like historic sites, sites of natural beauty or objects
and buildings; things that can be touched, felt, experienced, tasted, seen, and heard. Heritage can also be intangible as well, which includes traditions, crafts, social practices, and sports (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Given that heritage is owned, it must, therefore, be cared for and protected. Being able to claim something as heritage or tradition is a powerful tool to justify the preservation of that object, site, or practice. The NRA understands the value of claiming the Second Amendment, private gun ownership, hunting, and the shooting sports as American heritage. It is a technique that they employ often in their written and online material.

Themes related to American Heritage emerged 25 times across the dataset. For example, 10% of the *American Rifleman* articles that I analyzed contained references to the Second Amendment, firearms, hunting, or the shooting sports as American heritage. A further 56 items attempted to tie guns to American heritage (coded as American Guns). Articles focusing on firearms as tangible heritage generally presented the objects as important pieces of Americana, emphasizing that they represented history that you could take home with you, collect, and possess. These articles focused on touting the mechanical innovation of these objects, as well as emphasizing their links to key moments or themes in American history, such as sacrifice. For example, an article on the last Colt M1911 pistols every issued to the military focuses heavily on this theme. The piece notes the long service record of the M1911, having served as America’s principal sidearm in both the First and Second World Wars and into Vietnam. It concludes that the current trend of equipping soldiers with Austrian made Glock’s will soon see the M1911 retired from service “…thus ending a long and historic run for the M1911 and its .45 ACP cartridge”. The article emphasizes, however, that the firearm will live on in the hands of American collectors. “The pistols are exceptional purely as shooters and scarce and significant for several military and historic reasons. We are fortunate that they found their way onto the
The NRA also works hard to present the cultural practices associated with gun ownership as intangible cultural heritage as well. Two examples stand out in this regard. The first is an article on traditional rifle making at Colonial Williamsburg. The article is an overview of the gunsmithing program that operates in Colonial Williamsburg. This program aims to preserve the traditional craft of making the American longrifle, a muzzle-loading single-shot rifle used extensively during the revolutionary period and the initial westward expansion of the U.S. The article provides a brief history of the firearm but focuses mostly on the process of making them. The article notes that the design of these rifles was “adapted to the requirements of surviving on the American frontier”, and that they have been described as the first uniquely North American technological innovation. The process of making these rifles is presented as a key part of American heritage: “With every stroke of the hammer, every pass of the file, the gunsmiths of Colonial Williamsburg are perpetuating the art of handmaking the American rifle”. The article also highlights the musket firing program at Colonial Williamsburg, which allows visitors to experience shooting a musket. The experience is described as “…immersing yourself in a historical context that you not only see but also feel, smell and taste”. It was designed to “put history into people’s hands”. The participant is said to gain a deeper understanding of history through this practice, acquiring “A fundamental understanding of the historic battlefield down to its most basic technology…” and learning “…lessons that can’t be learned from reading a book or looking at objects behind glass”. The article concludes by describing the men whose hands are said to be keeping the tradition alive. “At Colonial Williamsburg, those hands belong to men standing right behind the counter, preserving the history and heritage of gunmaking in America by living it each day, and in the process, reminding us that a rifle can still be built one piece at a
time” (Knupp, 2019). Here we see both the firearm and the process of making it claimed as American heritage.

Further, true to its name, the American Rifleman also presents rifle shooting as an important and unique part of American heritage. In the article Three Traditions of the Rifle, this is made explicit from the very beginning. The article opens with the claim that even the word rifleman is uniquely American. “Many cultures embrace hunting, and quite a few have rifles commonly accessible for defense, but none as populous as ours has such a large and vital following dedicated to real skill at arms with the long gun”. The current practice of rifle shooting is connected to the long history of riflemen in America. “From early colonists with their matchlocks to the present, a continuous thread of cultural association with the rifle and the importance of marksmanship runs through our history”. The article goes on to present three different disciplines of modern rifle shooting: precision shooting, classic shooting, and defensive shooting. While the cover page for this article features a vintage, sepia image of a man firing a wooden stocked, M1 Garand rifle, the images that accompany the explanations of each discipline are much more modern, as are the sporting rifles these images feature. Besides the page devoted to precision rifle shooting, an image features a man in khaki pants and a sports polo kneeling on a set of rocks. The rocks have been spray-painted with the number three, clearly the third station in the competition. The man’s rifle is a bolt action but could easily be mistaken for an AR-15 by someone less familiar with firearms, given its black metal construction and use of modern accessories, like a barrel shroud30. It is adorned with a scope and a silencer. The image next to the section on classic rifle shooting features an Olympic shooter. Wearing a team USA jersey and standing on a laminate gymnasium floor, her rifle is an Olympic style precision rifle. Next to

30 A barrel shroud is a sort of metal cage that goes around the barrel of the firearm to keep the user from burning their hands when handling it.
the section on defensive shooting, we see yet another man, also in a dynamic pose. The man is wearing a sports polo with the logo of his team and sponsors, khaki pants, dark-tinted eye protection, and a backward baseball cap. Rather than center the shot on his face, the center of the image is occupied by his rifle. The rifle is an AR platform rifle, with a low-powered scope mounted on top (J. Dyal, 2020).

The combination of the opening text, descriptions, and images make a series of political claims. First, the article opens by declaring the tradition of rifle shooting, not pistol shooting, to be a unique part of American heritage. This is further supported by the sepia image of the man firing the M1 Garand, the main battle rifle of American soldiers fighting the Second World War. As the article transitions into the modern rifle sports, it connects these sports and the contentious “modern sporting rifles” like the AR-15 to this American heritage of rifle shooting. Positioning modern shooting sports and semi-automatic carbines next to Olympic athletes also serves to depoliticize these tools.

While the strategy of presenting firearms and the Second Amendment as heritage was common in the American Rifleman, it was most pronounced in the NRA’s online television content, especially in Armed & Fabulous. These episodes all directly referred to heritage or used terms that referred to heritage such as preservation, legacy, and conservation. For example, one episode features the Hill family and their large farm. Julie Hill, the protagonist of the episode, describes having been inspired by attending the NRA meeting with her husband. “I want to be able to protect myself, and I fear that those rights are going to be taken away, and I really wanted to help”. She recounts meeting NRA Chief Executive Wayne Lapierre at the meeting, a longtime friend of her fathers. She talked to Wayne about wanting to help the NRA like her father did, carrying on her family legacy. She asked Lapierre how she could help, but he told her that it was
“up to her to choose”. She says this gave her an epiphany of “What the Second Amendment meant to me”, she is shown touching her heart for emphasis when saying this line. “A person who doesn’t hunt… doesn’t really hunt, but believes yes I want to protect myself and I want to protect my family”. This led her to the Women’s Leadership Forum, a sub-organization within the NRA that runs much of the NRA programs targeting women. With the help of Lapierre, she created the “Women’s Leadership Forum Endowment”. “It’s time. It’s time for the women to stand up. All women. Ones that work. Ones that are moms. Moms that having nothing to do with guns at all. Ones that believe in their Second Amendment rights”.

Julie goes on, noting that her friends were surprised that women were involved in the NRA, and scoffing at the fact that the organization is portrayed as an “old boy’s club”. Julie’s daughter Margo is then shown, and talks about how happy she is that her mom is carrying on her family legacy, having donated her massive family farm, complete with a working private railroad, as a hunting ground for the NRA. She describes the farm and the train as part of her grandpa John’s legacy, and how the NRA is connected to this legacy. Julie says: “I really feel this is how I could stand up and fight, by starting this endowment and paying that forward for my children”. Her children Margo and Aidan talk about wanting to join this legacy and protect the Second Amendment. Her husband gets the last word: “We’re gonna carry on the family tradition big time”.

Here we can clearly observe the Second Amendment being presented as heritage, an imperiled tradition in need of protection by the NRA, with the help of “ordinary” families. The concepts of family and the NRA are interwoven into this narrative as well, for maximum emotional impact. Just as the Hill family contributes to the protection of American heritage through the generous donation of their family farm, so too is the NRA positioned as a key
defender of this heritage (NRATV, 2016b).

Janet’s story presents a similar theme. An advocate for trophy hunting in Africa, Janet describes going to Capitol Hill to fight a bill that would have threatened the practice. She talks about being interviewed by a reporter, who had no idea who she was, but asked her how she felt about the NRA being there. She said: “Oh thank g-d they are here. What do you think the NRA is? Buddy, I’m the NRA. That guy over there is the NRA. We’re people. We’re Americans that care about the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights…” As inspirational music plays in the background, the narrator chimes in: “Janet cares deeply about spreading the message about safe, responsible firearms ownership to all, but she has a special place in her heart for sharing the shooting sports with women”. Janet then discusses her efforts teaching women’s-only firearms classes. Other women are shown taking her class and are interviewed singing her praises. Janet talks about how she encouraged women to get over their fear of shooting. She is shown teaching a very old woman to shoot a pistol. She then shifts to discuss her grandchildren and how she wants to leave a legacy of advocacy for them. The episode concludes with a shot of Janet smiling and holding her hunting shotgun. She says that “we all need to stand and fight” (NRATV, 2016c).

Olympic shotgun shooter Kim Rhode, who I had the opportunity to meet in person at the NRA convention, refers to heritage several times in own NRATV episode. She emphasizes the way that the NRA helps women and youth and raising awareness of the shotgun sports. She says the NRA is "one the forefront fighting for our rights and also for our children's rights". She feels that it is important to pass on the heritage of shooting sports to her children, and feels the NRA is a big part of that (NRATV, 2014c). In all three of these examples, we see the NRA positioned as an ally to families, and individual women, seeking to preserve their tradition of firearms.
ownership, hunting, and sports shooting. The language of heritage is directly employed, and it is suggested, though never said allowed, that these traditions are in danger.

The practice of hunting is most consistently presented throughout the series using the language of heritage. Sometimes this is done literally, such as Gaye Kelsey, who describes her fashion sense, a mix of traditional hunting gear with more feminine accents, paying tribute to the heritage of wildlife and hunting (NRATV, 2014a). Others evoke the language of heritage to describe hunting, like Melanie Pepper who says that hunting is in her flesh and blood (NRATV, 2014e).

Given that gender is omnipresent in the Armed & Fabulous series, several of these episodes also make sure to reference the special place that women hold in preserving the Second Amendment and the traditions of the outdoors. Sandra, one of the women interviewed, sums this up nicely in her episode: “A woman doesn’t have to hunt, but if they know the truth about hunting and conservation they can pass that on to their children and encourage them to support it in any way they can” (NRATV, 2016a).

The conclusion of Hilary’s episode features an especially emotional appeal from her father that follows this theme. While video footage of Hilary and her father on various old hunting trips is shown, his voice plays over the screen: “You know I never thought that a daughter would be able to take the place of a son in the world of adventure… She has entered a field which was previously male dominated and has excelled and been a role model for other girls and women”. Hilary interjects: “My voice is powerful. It can be used for something valuable. That’s what I’m here for. That is my purpose”. Her father talks about Hilary being his legacy, and how she is carrying on his ideas into the next generation. “The greatest gift I give to the NRA is my daughter, who can continue the fight and the mission for decades to come, long
after I’m gone”. The video ends with pictures of Hilary and her father (NRATV, 2017). This emotional sequence packs a lot into a short space. Once again, the organization is drawing on the raw emotion of the family bond, a bond that most of us can relate to, and tying it in to the fight to preserve gun rights. Here gun rights are once transformed into heritage, Hilary’s father’s legacy, that supporters are called to defend. Further, defending that heritage is positioned as an act of empowerment for women, who after years of exclusion from the gun culture, and now being called to embrace and defend it.

By claiming ownership over the past, heritage is a powerful tool for motivating supporters. We see many examples of this in the NRA’s written and digital material. The organization very effectively ties the Second Amendment, the shooting sports, hunting and private gun ownership into a unique American heritage that its supporters must protect.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined a sample of 100 American Rifleman articles, and 35 NRATV episodes, to better understand how the organization tells stories about America’s and Americans’ pasts in order to build a political community of gun owners. As we have seen, the organization draws on three forms of the past: memory, history, and heritage. This past presencing is used to connect firearms to American history and identity. Through memory, firearms are personalized. They are transformed from an ordinary object to a family heirloom and family protector. Through history, these objects are tied to the nation’s past, and to the broader cause of freedom considered so central to its dominant narrative. Through heritage, firearms, their associated cultural practices, and the Second Amendment are claimed as uniquely American, things that must be protected by the NRA and the wider Second Amendment Community.
Chapter 5 – Points of Contact: The NRA Annual Meeting

The right of law-abiding citizens to keep and bear arms is a freedom that is at the heart of the American story. Our founders won our independence with the power of their ideas and with the powder in their muskets – Vice President Mike Pence

The following chapters will examine the role that points of contact between the NRA and its active and potential membership play in the organization’s larger political strategy. These will include the Annual Meeting, firearms safety classes, gun shows, and the NRA museum. This chapter will focus on my participant observation at the 2019 NRA Annual Meeting (NRAAM) in Indianapolis, Indiana. Several authors have used participant observation to study the NRA (J. Carlson, 2015; Kohn, 2004), and I am not the first to attend the Annual Meeting as part of my ethnography (Melzer, 2009). Given that the meeting is the largest gathering of NRA members in the United States, it provided an ideal first field site for participant observation.

In this chapter, I will argue that the NRA uses points of contact, like the Annual Meeting, to work towards the social construction of the gun culture in America, which as we have discussed provides it with a foundation of political support. The convention provides an opportunity for the NRA to reach out to the three core groups it aims to attract. First, it allows the organization to deepen its relationship with its existing members, encouraging them to become more involved through purchasing membership upgrades, participating in programs, buying merchandise, and becoming more politically active. For the gun curious, and members of the Second Amendment community who have not yet joined the organization, it uses the lure of a gun show to bring them in, compel them to become members, and encourage them to get active. The chapter will focus on how the NRA uses these points of contact to disseminate narratives about the role of firearms in America’s, and Americans’, pasts.
A key focus of the chapter will be on the NRA’s use of policy narratives. I will explain how three key NPF assumptions, the “primacy of affect”, “narrative transportation” and “the power of characters” can help us to understand the impact of policy narratives on their audience. Finally, we will look at how the NRA works towards the construction and promotion of two key historical narratives: guns as America, and the good guy with a gun.

Showtime

On April 26th of 2019, the National Rifle Association of America (NRA) took over Indianapolis. It was a windy spring day, and I got up early to attend the first day of the NRA convention. After a few days on the road from Ottawa, this would be my first face-to-face contact with the organization. The wind buffeted my car from side to side as I pulled out from the parking lot from my hotel, affordedly located on a highway island near the Indianapolis airport. Driving along the I-70 expressway toward downtown Indianapolis, my eyes locked on a large blue billboard that read “Indy Welcomes the NRA”. I had arrived.

When asked to describe the NRA Annual Meeting (NRAAM) by friends, colleagues, and journalists I find the best metaphor is that of a comic book convention. Perhaps the fact that this resonates with my audience is a testament to my social circle, but I find the comparison conveys the pure frenetic energy of over 80,000 people gathering in a large convention center to engage with something that they are passionate about. At the convention, Second Amendment supporters come together to meet their peers and their idols, from right wing political leaders to YouTube celebrities, Olympic shooters and Hollywood icons. They come to learn more about their serious leisure pursuit, to shop, and to hear and tell stories.

Exiting the freeway into downtown Indianapolis, my phone’s GPS led me to the parking lot I had researched online. Normally reserved for NFL football games, the parking lot had been
taken over by the convention. I was over an hour early for the opening of the event, and the lot was already almost full. I walked past the hulking brick façade of Lucas Oil stadium to make my way toward the convention center. Though it was not set to begin until 11am, hardcore supporters were already lined up to get in to see the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) Leadership Forum, which included President Trump’s speech. Airport style security stations were set up by the entrance to the stadium, staffed by heavily armed and armored secret service agents. A recording of a woman’s voice played over the loudspeaker: “Lucas Oil Stadium is under the control of the United States Secret Services. The following items are prohibited…”. Given security concerns surrounding the VIPs in attendance, the stadium was the only place in the convention where carrying a concealed firearm was not allowed.

Walking past the stadium, I entered Indianapolis Convention Center from a side door, passed the press registration, and emerged into the main thoroughfare, which was already filled with people. I walked up to the visitor registration area, where NRA volunteers standing in front of touch screens were checking membership cards and handing out convention passes. I waited in a short line behind a greying man, dressed in business casual clothes and holding a bag and a lunch box. In front of him stood a couple in their forties or fifties. The man wore a leather biker vest with a section of the Second Amendment stitched onto the back. When I finally reached the front of the line I was greeted by a volunteer, a kindly woman in her 60s with brown hair and glasses.

“Do you have a membership card, dear?” she asked, smiling nervously.

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31 President Trump had spoken at a previous Annual Meeting in Atlanta, where he was the first American President to speak at the NRAAM since Ronald Reagan in 1983.

32 Casual dialogue quoted in the following chapters is paraphrased. Any quotes presented from interviews are accurate according to interview transcriptions.
Unlike the volunteers helping other guests, she did not try to upsell my membership. She seemed to be a bit frazzled getting used to the computer system. Her supervisor, a young man with brown hair wearing a grey suit, did not seem entirely patient with her learning curve as he tried to explain it to her.

Thanking the volunteer, I slipped the lanyard containing my convention pass over my head, and crossed the lobby to yet another line – breakfast. While waiting, I struck up a conversation with a large man with a long, forked salt and pepper beard behind me. Like most people there, he was wearing a t-shirt with pro-gun messaging, and was quite chatty.

“Quite the crowd eh?”, I said. I would have to get better at concealing my Canadian idiosyncrasies.

“It’s going to be a busy day”, he replied.

The experience of being at a convention has interesting impacts on people’s social behavior. Knowing that others around you share a common interest makes convention goers much more likely to strike up conversations with strangers then in normal circumstances. Though I had come to the convention alone, I never wanted for conversational partners.

The exhibition hall doors were not yet open, and the lobby was filling with people milling about and registering. Everywhere I looked I saw camo, cowboy boots, denim, and leather. There were businessmen, friend groups, and families. The average age of most people there was probably in the upper forties. The crowd was certainly overwhelmingly white and male, yet I was surprised by the number of women and people of color in attendance. Though there were a few groups of women who had come alone, most were accompanied by a romantic partner, whereas there were many groups of male friends that had come together. Some people had come as a family and brought with them their children in strollers, harnesses, or walking in
tow. As I scanned the crowd, the most popular items of dress I noticed were camo baseball caps, but a few people also wore cowboy hats and red, Make America Great Again caps as well. Many people sported NRA or firearm related t-shirts or wore polos or tactical clothing like cargo pants and polyester shirts. This is a testament to the recent success of clothing brands like 5.11 Tactical, that cater to gun owners and especially concealed carriers. Clothing items like these are designed to make it easier for the wearer to carry a concealed firearm or other items in what the community refers to as their “everyday carry” (EDC)\textsuperscript{33}, such as pocketknives, first-aid items, multi-tools, etc. These companies also cater to those with an appetite for tactical wear, which is becoming increasingly popular within the Second Amendment community (Robison, Adams-Heard, & Larson, 2020).

The families and groups waiting in the lobby did not want for entertainment as they waited for the show to begin. The NRA shop had opened an hour before the convention. As a result, it was filled to the brim with people killing time. The shop sold a panoply of NRA paraphernalia, like t-shirts, sweaters, and accessories. Customers left with NRA branded wallets, keychains, or bumper stickers; gun gear like cleaning equipment and bags, and objects related to personal security, like a portable door jammer that can be used to secure a room that could not otherwise be locked, presumably in the event of an armed attack. Selling NRA branded swag allows the organization to market themselves and gives members an opportunity to showcase their political beliefs on their person, their car or their house, an increasingly popular trend in

\textsuperscript{33} Everyday Carry (EDC) is an emerging genre, with a host of magazines (see Ballistic Magazine, American Survival Guide Magazine, Skillset Magazine, etc.), YouTube videos and online forums devoted to discussions of everyday carry. A common form of video in this genre is called a “pocket dump” video, where the subject of the video empties their pockets to show the viewer the different items they carry with them on an everyday basis, and explain the rationales behind them. These videos are often sponsored or supported by companies that sell common EDC items, like knife companies.
American society\textsuperscript{34}.

Leaving the crowded shop, I wandered through the convention center lobby, where companies like Remington were already handing out raffle tickets and promotions to try to drive visitors to their booths. One raffle had already begun. The “Wall of Guns” was placed at the intersection of two of the convention center’s main arteries. The wall was made up of a large two-sided glass case filled with an array of rifles, shotguns, and pistols. There were a few bolt action or lever action guns, alongside semi-automatic carbines, and handguns. A speaker system was set up next to the display and the MC was channeling his inner auctioneer trying to convince people to buy tickets: “A 1 in 100 chance ladies and gentlemen! Get your ticket here.”

Passing the wall of guns, I entered the air gun\textsuperscript{35} range, which occupied one of the seminar rooms adjoining the main lobby. Since the Indianapolis Convention Center obviously could not accommodate a live gun range, they had set up an air gun range, sponsored by a major air gun company, in order to accommodate the itchy trigger fingers of attendees. I got in line and quickly moved up, past a woman in a red volunteer vest handing out safety glasses.

“It seems busy”, I said, “How many people have come through here so far?”

“Oh quite a few”, the volunteer replied. She took a quick look at her hand-held clicker counter. “We’ve only been open half an hour and we’ve already had about 100 people”.

When a bench opened up, I was greeted by a range safety officer, wearing a bright yellow safety jacket and NRA baseball cap. He explained how to use the air rifle and helped me load my first shot, a conical lead pellet. The wall had been set up to resemble a shooting stand from a

\textsuperscript{34} An interesting difference between Canadians and Americans that I have noticed is the social practice of bumper stickers. While bumper stickers are not rare in Canada, they are nowhere near as common as in the United States.

\textsuperscript{35} Airguns use compressed air, spring power or gas to launch a small projectile, usually a steel bb, a lead pellet or a plastic bb out of the barrel. While often associated with children’s toys, like Ralphie’s Red Ryder bb gun from \textit{A Christmas Story} (1983), more sophisticated models can launch projectiles with sufficient velocity to hunt small game like squirrels or rabbits.
carnival. There were swinging metal air rifle targets, whiffle balls on strings and even a model train set. I pulled the trigger and hit the target. Using a scoped air rifle at such a short distance made me feel like John Wayne. It was hard to miss.

As the convention opening drew closer, I heard a commotion and joined the throng gathering by the main convention center doors, where Oliver North, on the eve of his exeunt from his position as President, was giving the convention’s opening address. There was such a crowd around the retired lieutenant colonel and former Fox News commentator, that I could hardly see him, and only barely caught the end of his speech.

Following North’s address, the anthem was sung. Everyone removed their hats and sang along, and my voice joined the chorus of bowed heads and solemn faces. I have been to a few sporting events in my life where attendees sing the national anthem at the beginning of the game. Never before, however, had I felt an atmosphere of intensity like the one I experienced that morning. Given the conservative political values I presumed that most of the crowd held, which place a large emphasis on tradition, and institutions like the military, this was not surprising. The NRA attracts many veterans, who wish to continue shooting as a sport or hobby following their retirement from the military. Some people in the room with me had lost loved ones, friends, or sacrificed personally for their country. Some bore their scars on their person or were missing limbs. Others wished to make a visible show of support and enact or express their political values in some concrete way. This is referred to in the social sciences as performativity (Austin, 1975; Butler 1956, n.d.; Lyotard, 1984), and sometimes derided in the public sphere as “virtue signaling” by those on both sides of the political trenches. Yet, just as people in my department perform their political values through the use of language, calling their spouse a partner rather than the vernacular husband or wife, and through ritual, such as beginning a lecture or
conference with a reference to Indigenous land claims, NRA members perform their political values through paying respect to political traditions and the nation state. Including rituals like singing the national anthem allows people at the convention, and the organization itself, to perform their political values. It is also another way that the NRA actively works to tie the organization to American identity.

The use of the term performativity is not meant to suggest that these displays were any less genuine. Standing next to me in the dense crowd there was a family; a blond mother in her late thirties held her infant son in her arms, singing the lyrics of the anthem in his ear. She kissed him on the cheek as the final notes of the anthem rang out and the crowd erupted in applause. The emotional impact of this civic ritual, and this moment of intimacy connected to it, is difficult to convey in writing. Suffice it to say that it makes you feel a part of something larger.

As the final notes died down, North declared the convention open, and the mass of people surged forward towards the bright light at the other end of the showroom doors. I was at the rear of the crowd and it took me almost five minutes of awkward shuffling to get in. It soon became clear that I was not the only one shocked by the size of the crowd. Entering the exhibition hall, I saw a retailer look up from his clipboard and notice that a queue had already formed in front of his booth. “Holy shit” he exclaimed.

The NRA Annual Meeting is made up of several moving pieces. The original purpose of the meeting was just that: a meeting of members. This Annual Meeting of Members still occurs, taking the form of a formal board meeting and allowing members to raise motions and concerns with the board, and allowing attendees to hear senior executives “share a vision of the NRA going forward” (National Rifle Association, 2019). It was at a meeting like this that the revolt in Cincinnati happened, and the NRA old guard was replaced with newer, more militant members,
led by Harlan Carter. Some authors have argued that this event fundamentally changed the nature of the organization from a service group to a political lobby (Carlson, 2015; Melzer, 2009). But a board meeting is not why people come here. They come for the show.

The Exhibition Hall

The exhibition hall at the convention in Indianapolis was 15 acres large, the size of over 11 football fields, and contained over 800 exhibitors. It was so big that the NRA released a convention app to help attendees navigate the massive space. It was not until the third day of the convention that I was fully able to get around the showroom without getting lost.

There are a few reasons that the NRA includes a gun show as part of their annual gathering. The first is that it brings people in. A post-convention survey conducted by the NRA of the meeting shows that 78% of attendees came for the sole reason of attending the gun show (NRA, 2020). The prospect of being able to join in on one of the largest gun shows in the world draws people from around the US to the convention in order to explore new firearms, accessories, and other products and services (Interview with NRA Head of Research Josh Savani, May 23, 2019). The spectacle of the exhibition hall is also a big part of the draw. People come to see new products being announced and released, to meet Second Amendment related celebrities and to feel like they are a part of the zeitgeist. There is something exciting about being where the action is happening, surrounded by people who share the same passion as you. The largest gun show in the world, Shot Show in Las Vegas, is only open to those who work in the firearms and ammunition industry, though many gun owners get a glimpse of it through reading magazine articles or watching videos online. The NRA show, given that it is open to anyone with $45 to buy a membership, gives attendees the feeling of having a peek into an exclusive world, and a sense of belonging.
When talking to participants, a common refrain that came up again and again was a feeling of social exclusion or stigma. This was as true for gun owners that I met in rural, “red” areas like Lynchburg as well as those living in “blue” zones like DC or northern Virginia. Gun owners often expressed feeling the need to hide their serious leisure pursuits from coworkers, family members or friends. The experience of being surrounded by people who you know share your opinions on firearm policy and your enthusiasm for firearms, which are often central or deeply held pieces of a gun owners’ identity, is intensely enjoyable. This is a central reason why conventions exist in the first place, and another parallel between geek culture and the gun culture.

Another major motivation for the NRA to include a gun show as part of the annual meeting is to help fund the meeting, both through driving increased attendance and through fees collected from exhibitors and advertisers. The National Shooting Sports Foundation, the trade association for the firearms and ammunition industry, estimates that the industry is responsible for employing over 330,000 Americans, and has an annual economic impact of over US $60 billion (NSSF, 2020a). Vendors coming to the NRAAM know that they will have access to consumers. The NRA actively promotes the event to vendors by providing statistics on attendees, noting for example that the average visitor to the meeting spent over $100 while at the show (NRA, 2020). Vendors in turn fund the show through renting space at the convention or through sponsorships and advertisements.

The draw of the gun show attracts visitors and people in the industry, creating a point of contact between the Second Amendment community and the NRA. The organization can then use this point of contact to attract new members and engage existing members more in the organization. Certain elements of this are quite material. For example, attending the NRAAM is
free, but you have to be an NRA member. As a result, the organization sells memberships at the
door. This was done using an array of machines set up at the various entrances to the convention
hall, staffed by volunteers helping visitors use the machines. New members were signed up, and
existing members were able to upgrade their membership at a discounted rate. For example, an
NRA life membership usually costs $1200 dollars, however at the convention it could be
purchased for only $600.

The exhibit hall offered an excellent window into the material culture of the gun culture.
As I noted in Chapter Three, gun culture is centered around this material culture. After all, the
gun culture is based around a material object, a gun, though that material object takes on a
variety of symbolisms and meanings. Exploring the exhibition hall gave me a different vantage
point through which to view this culture. No longer was I peering at it behind a laptop screen, or
through a YouTube Video. It was right in front of me. I could pick it up.

Throughout the weekend I often felt dwarfed by the sheer scale of the showroom. It was
an intensely overwhelming experience. The hundreds of booths were filled with firearms, knives,
clothing, gear, accessories, and everything related, no matter how vaguely, to firearms, hunting,
self-defense and sports shooting. Though the convention hall was large, it still managed to feel
crowded, and the main arteries of the exhibit hall were often clogged with people wandering
from booth to booth. Navigating the fracas reminded me of my past travels to the crowded
markets of Bangkok and Beijing as I jostled through the crowd, trying not to bump into people
gazing excitedly at the spectacle surrounding us.

Some of the larger companies in the small arms and ammunition industry, like Smith &
Wesson, Beretta, Sig Sauer and Glock occupied the bigger booths on the showroom floor; some
so large that they had their own stages. These stages were used for raffles, contests, and product
demonstrations or releases. The Glock booth, for example, had a massive back wall, three times taller than a person, dividing off their booth and covered with photos of law enforcement, military and civilians with Glock Handguns. These dividers helped to direct the flow of traffic to their booth and advertise their products.

There were also a variety of smaller companies that specialized in firearms parts and accessories. These were often divided off into different sections of the convention. Some companies were so specialized, their entire business consisted of making triggers for a particular model of firearm. Since the trigger of a firearm can vary greatly in terms of sensitivity, which can then greatly impact shooting performance, many high volume or competition shooters prefer to install custom triggers in their rifles. One of the reasons the AR platform\textsuperscript{36} is so popular is because the gun was designed to be very customizable, and because aftermarket parts are so widely available for it. It is comparable to buying a Toyota or Honda, rather than importing a rare sports car from Europe like a Maserati; you know you will be able to find affordable parts to upgrade it or fix it when it breaks.

Many of the smaller companies, lacking the draw of a famous name or product, tried to use interactive elements to draw in visitors. Several booths had shooting stands set up where visitors could fire replicas of their products fitted with lasers that interacted with a digital display, and CO\textsubscript{2} capsules that cycled the action of the firearm, making the experience more realistic.

Given that this was my first gun show, I was surprised to learn that booth visitors were

\textsuperscript{36} A common misconception among those less familiar with firearms is that the AR-15 is a brand of firearm. This was once the case, as the AR-15 was originally made by Armalite. However, as is the case with most firearms, once the patent expired other companies picked up the design and started making their own. A firearms platform refers to the design on which the firearm was based. Thus, if both Sig Sauer and Colt, for example, manufacture their own version of the AR-15, they are said to both use the AR platform. Other popular platforms include things like the AK platform, which are civilian versions of the popular AK-47, AK-74 and AKM rifles.
free to pick up the unloaded firearms at each booth, most of which were attached to the booth using a metal wire, like a laptop displayed at an electronics store. At first, I was shy to do this, relegating myself to looking. But as it became clear through observation that the logic of appropriateness dictated that one could in fact pick up a firearm to test the sights, cycle the action or even pull the trigger, I joined in. While taking my Canadian Firearms Safety Course and gaining experience with firearms in Canada, muzzle control had been so strictly trained into me that the thought of pointing even a disabled and clearly unloaded firearm in an unsafe direction made me uneasy. At a convention like this, such control was impractical, and I was at first shocked and unnerved to see muzzles pointing in every which way.

It was clear that the nearly 15,000 firearms on the showroom floor had been disabled as they each bore a yellow NRA tag hanging around the trigger guard indicating this. I did not immediately appreciate the scale of this undertaking until I ran into a show volunteer at Subway Sandwiches that evening.

“We were up late last night, I’ll tell you that. We had to remove the firing pins from every single gun in that show room”. The firing pin on a gun is what ignites the ammunition once the trigger is pulled. When removed it renders the gun inoperable, even if someone snuck live ammunition to the show.

As the convention progressed, I got used to the constant clicking of triggers in the background and started to notice the firearms training ingrained in people. Most still instinctively

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37 Muzzle control refers to the importance for shooters to keep the muzzle (end) of the firearm pointed in a safe direction at all times. In the American context, this is one of the four central rules of firearms safety, “never point your gun at anything you are not willing to destroy”. In the Canadian context, this is part of ACTS, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s acronym for safe firearms handling. The C stands for “control the muzzle direction at all times”. This is an important point of avoiding accidental shootings, and gun etiquette. For example, someone at a gun range who accidentally points their firearm at someone while moving it around, called “swiping”, “sweeping”, or “flagging”, even when the firearm is clearly unloaded, will receive a strict reprimand and sometimes be asked to leave depending on the flagrancy of the infraction.
pointed their firearms up or down while handling them, looking down the sights, testing the actions and trying out the triggers. I never saw anyone intentionally point a firearm at someone.

Having a little over a year of shooting under my belt, training I had done in preparation for my fieldwork, I was able to appreciate the differences in sight picture the firearms offered and was beginning to be able to distinguish a good trigger from a bad one.

Other spectacles on the convention floor included the hunting booths, where hunting trips both foreign and domestic were advertised at ornately decorated stalls. Some of the more exotic stalls contained trophies that had been stuffed and mounted, the bounty of successful hunts with their outfit. Highlights included a snarling wolf and a large elk head wearing a red MAGA hat.

As I wandered around the displays, company representatives eagerly gave me tours around their wares. Though the larger booths, like Remington and Sig Sauer, were generally too busy to do this, I struck up many a conversation with the smaller merchants, including a hunting outfitter from Canada who I chatted with affably, and a hunting charity which takes the children of fallen service members and law enforcement on hunting and fishing trips. People were surprised and bemused to hear that I was a researcher, and that I had come all the way from Canada to be at the convention.

Many of these smaller booths sold very specialized accessories for firearms. Like in other retail industries, electronics for example, accessories and merchandising make up a large amount of the firearms industry’s sales every year. Experts in the industry have even gone so far as to

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38 Sight picture refers to how easy it is to line up the sights on a firearm, and thus to aim it accurately. Good sights on a firearm allow the user to be more precise and accurate when target shooting.

39 A large part of being able to use a firearm accurately is being able to manage your body’s movements. Several factors can lead to small, unintentional movement of the firearm, which then impact accuracy. This includes things like breathing, body mechanics and even the shooters heartbeat. A good trigger allows the user to pull it back with consistent pressure so as not to cause an inadvertent jerking of the firearm. For target and sports shooters, good triggers are considered fundamental to their sport, and they will often spend hundreds of dollars on a quality aftermarket trigger.
say that “There’s no money in guns. It’s all in the accessories” (quoted in Barker, 2019). This is because, to keep a gun running, even the most frugal gun owner needs certain supplies. The most basic of these is ammunition, without which a firearm is simply a metal tube attached to wood or plastic. In 2018, it is estimated that 8.7 billion rounds of ammunition were produced to be sold in the American market alone (NSSF Releases Firearms Production Figures, 2019). But guns also need to be cleaned, stored, transported, and maintained. Shooters need eye protection and ear protection to shoot safely. This can be as simple as a pair of disposable earplugs and some safety glasses, though most serious shooters often opt for electronic hearing protection which amplifies softer noises, like talking, while blocking out louder noises, like gunfire.

Entire booths were dedicated to accessories like gun cleaning supplies, with slogans like: “Don’t risk your life using a dirty gun!” Guns become dirty for a few reasons. The first is the powders used to propel the bullet from the gun’s barrel. As the powder ignites, it leaves behind residue in the action and barrel of the gun. The second is the bullet itself. Lead or copper from the bullet can leave behind residue in the barrel. In theory, dirty firearms can cause a malfunction which in extreme circumstances could result in injury or death, though these accidents are very rare. Yet the slogan was catchy and memorable.

Other accessories helped the customer safely store their collection. For example, there were several booths that sold gun safes and storage tools like trigger locks. One booth even had a giant yellow gun safe, twice the height of most of the women and men who stood to get their photo taken in front of it. For a mere $20,000 they would ship the safe right to you.

Then there are the optional accessories. Optics, things like rifle scopes or electronic red dot sights for the firearm, can often cost as much or more than the firearm itself. In fact, serious hunters and sports shooters often spend more on a quality scope than they will on their firearm,
given the impact these accessories have on their performance.

Those more involved in the gun world often opt to accessorize and upgrade other elements of their firearm with ergonomic stocks and grips, performance gun-barrels and much more. To give you an example of just how expensive the gun world can be, consider that a single, mid-range AR-15 with an entry level red dot sight and the equipment needed to safely store it and spend one day at the gun range costs US $1,544.21\textsuperscript{40}. A motivated gun owner can easily spend a small fortune.

In addition to accessories related to the firearms themselves, there are also lifestyle accessories tied in to the Second Amendment community through marketing. This includes clothing lines like the popular 5.11 Tactical. Though focused mostly on the military and law enforcement community, these companies are finding success selling to the growing number of sports shooters and concealed carriers. Much as yoga clothing brands like Lululemon have made money by providing performance products associated with a particular lifestyle, so too have gun clothing companies.

The rise of the material gun culture has also led to a small market in accessories like body armor. I noticed several stalls selling body armor, which is increasingly being marketed as a home defense tool. Most of the body armor is intended to be worn over your clothing and is obviously not intended for everyday use. Rather, these companies cater to doomsday preppers, people attracted to the tactical aesthetic, as well as law enforcement, members of the military, and private contractors.

Body armor is a source of controversy even within the community. Some shooters choose

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\textsuperscript{40} Price is before tax. It was calculated using Brownells.com, a popular American gun retailer. Includes a Colt AR-15 ($1,121.99), an entry level Holosun Red Dot sight ($159.99), a Brownells brand cleaning kit ($28.99), solvent ($6.99), oil ($3.29), an entry level gun cabinet ($149.99), a cheap rifle case ($24.99) and enough ammunition for a day at the range ($47.98).
to go to the gun range wearing body armor. They are sometimes derided by those within the community as “tactards”, and are a source of embarrassment for many sports shooters and older gun owners who see them as giving the community a bad image. For others, however, owning body armor gives them a sense of preparedness, and dressing up in military garb is a sort of cosplay. More recently, this sort of tactical wear has been on display at Second Amendment rallies, the storming of the US Capitol, and by armed business owners guarding their properties during the protests over police violence that took place throughout the summer and fall of 2020.

At one booth, I tried on a plate carrier. This is the outer canvas shell of body armor, which is made to hold a steel plate or Kevlar insert. Consumers can decide on which level of protection they want to opt for and can purchase different sizes and weights of metal plates rated to protect the wearer against different levels of threats. The entry level plates will protect the wearer from common handgun cartridges like the 9mm Luger. The armor was surprisingly affordable, only a few hundred dollars for a vest that will stop most pistol rounds. Armor rated to stop rifle caliber rounds on the other hand is much heavier and more cumbersome, and thus more expensive. I had my picture taken by the friendly booth attendant, a younger man perhaps a few years older than me, with a close-cropped beard and tattooed arms who took me through the ins and outs of buying body armor.

Other booths sold armored plates designed to slide into the laptop pouch on a backpack, a grim reminder of the reality of post-Columbine America. These items also give us a small snapshot into the differences of opinion on solutions to mass shootings between the NRA and the pro-control camp. While pro-control advocates see gun control legislation as a mechanism to reduce gun deaths, the solution proposed by NRA members is free market based and individualistic. For the NRA and many of its members, it is the responsibility of individuals to
protect themselves from threats, not the government.

It was easy, even coming in with an open mind, to become cynical when looking at the crass consumerism on display in the exhibition hall. One booth, tucked away in the corner of the convention center, sold tactical-style electric wheelchairs, complete with tank treads instead of wheels, and camo seats. The devices looked like a Panzer and a Rascal Scooter had collided and been fused together. My first instinct was to scoff at the ridiculousness of such a thing, but it had caught my attention, so I decided to check out the booth. While the booth attendant was talking to an older man sitting in a motorized wheelchair, I watched the flat screen television where a video advertising the chairs was playing on a loop. The video showed clips of people of different abilities enjoying the outdoors, and I noticed that these chairs serve a purpose beyond simply looking “tacticool”\(^4\); they give people with disabilities access to the outdoors, the ability to hike and hunt that they might not normally be able to do. It was an informative moment for me, further illustration of the need to look beyond the facile stereotypes of the gun culture and see things through the eyes of my participants.

In fact, people with disabilities seemed to be the most highly represented visible minority group at the convention, and to its credit the NRA appeared to do a great job of accommodating them. Motorized wheelchairs were available at prominently marked booths. The convention floor was fully accessible to people with disabilities. The NRA even runs their “Adaptive Shooting Program”, which finds ways for people with disabilities to participate in the shooting sports.

Continuing my walk around the convention center I passed a booth specializing in selling suppressors. Suppressors, more commonly known as silencers thanks to clever marketing, are legal to purchase in some states, but are heavily regulated by the National Firearms Act (1934).

\(^4\) This is a term used to describe things that fit within the tactical aesthetic.
Those wishing to purchase a suppressor must pay $200 and submit a series of forms to the
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). There is also a lengthy waiting
period involved. Despite this, suppressors have become increasingly common in the firearms
market, given their ability to reduce the noise pollution associated with firearms use. At the
booth, several consoles had been set up. These machines were designed to help customers
navigate the red tape surrounding getting a permit to purchase a suppressor. Rather than
muddling through the paperwork themselves, the machines helped facilitate the process. The
booths looked very high tech, and even had electronic pads to record the user’s fingerprints for
the form. Like much of the convention, it was a testament to game of cat and mouse between
regulators and the industry.

The deeper I delved into the exhibition hall, the more niche the firearms “accessories”
and lifestyle associations became. The “Affinity Section” of the convention contained several
groups in the larger conservative political advocacy network looking to advertise their programs.
Some companies with a conservative twist also occupied this section, including a cellphone
provider that advertised itself as America’s only conservative cellphone service, highlighting the
tensions between big tech and the gun culture.

As I moved from booth to booth, I noticed that most of the people there were doing
serious business. There were special convention prices on many items, including firearms and
accessories. The companies could not hand out firearms at the convention but would arrange to
ship them to the purchaser’s local Federal Firearms Licensed (FFL) dealer42.

42 This is another major difference between Canada and the United States. In Canada, firearms can be shipped
directly to a person’s home, as long as the shipping address matches the address on record with the Canadian
Firearms Program. In the United States, ordering firearms by mail has been illegal since the gun control legislation
passed in the aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination, when it was revealed that the gunman purchased his firearm
by mail. Those who wish to purchase firearms online in America must have them shipped to a specially licensed
dealer.
It is a common refrain amongst pro-control Americans that when the Second Amendment was written, the founders were referring to muskets. They would likely not be consoled to know that companies at the NRAAM were selling these as well. Several booths in the Exhibition Hall specialized in selling historical firearms. People get into guns for many reasons. For some that I spoke to, working in the military first introduced them to shooting, and they simply kept it going after transitioning to civilian life. For others, it was the hunting or sporting aspect of it. But many gun owners are also lovers of the past. In her ethnography of gun owners in California, Kohn (2004) also noted that many of her participants discussed their interest in American history, especially as it relates to firearms and mainly the colonial and Wild West periods. She feels that history is important because “…history and its implications are an important way that shooters conceptualize their interest in guns now. Guns are rarely understood as objects outside of historical, cultural and social contexts” (Kohn, 2004, p. 11). Gun companies have noticed this too, and a small but significant portion of the industry focuses on selling to these groups.

Some of these companies focus on selling historically accurate replicas of firearms from famous periods in American history; from flintlock muskets that would look at home slung across the back of Davey Crockett, to the lever and wheel guns of the Wild West. Though newly manufactured, these objects serve as relics. Though mechanically they have been rendered obsolete by fast shooting polymer semi-autos, their value comes from their ability to conjure the past in the minds of consumers and users. Relics are specially because of ageing, embellishment and anachronism. While these recreations of old firearms lack ageing, they certainly fulfill the last two criteria. Embellishments work to “…memorialize or call attention to some aspect of the past…”, while anachronism draws attention to the way that these objects “…exhibit or echo
outdated forms or styles” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 241). Seeing these recreated firearms as artifacts is important for our understanding of the emotion that firearms conjure for gun owners. As we have discussed, emotions and feelings, tied to culture, are more important in the gun debate than facts, as these are what make up the minds of the belligerents in the debate (Kahan & Braman, 2003). Artifacts conjure powerful emotions as they are a bridge between past and present. They make the past concrete, something you can hold, touch, load, and shoot.

These historical replica guns vary in terms of their historical accuracy. Those who are heavily committed with try to shoot the same calibers that the guns originally came with, while others will be made to shoot more modern cartridges43. These guns sell well, especially among those who take part in the historical shooting sports, like Cowboy Action Shooters. Other manufacturers will keep the aesthetics of a historical firearm, and the pedigree, but change the internals considerably. One such company is Henry Repeating Arms, which specializes in making modernized recreations of the Henry Rifle, the first lever-action rifle, which was created and introduced during the American Civil War, and used by some Union Soldiers. The Henry was first sold by the New Haven Arms Company that would later become Winchester. With Winchester and Marlin dominating the lever-gun market for much of the late 19th and 20th century, the Henry rifle had gone out of vogue. But Anthony Imperato, a savvy Brooklyn businessman, designed a modernized version of the famous rifle in the late 1990s. Basing his company in New York, his product was inspired by the original Henry Rifle, though it

43 Before I started this research project, I was relatively ignorant about firearm ammunition. Since then, however, I have learned that this is an incredibly complex topic. There are quite literally hundreds of different calibers of ammunition available on the civilian market. Gun companies will often release new proprietary calibers, advertising better ballistic performance for certain tasks, whether that be hunting, personal defense, or long-range target shooting. Though these companies do innovate, the evolution of calibers is often motivated by profit margins. Much like Apple or Android users must upgrade their phones when a significant upgrade is done to the operating system, releasing new calibers of firearms drives consumers to purchase more guns.
functioned quite differently, and shot the popular .22LR cartridge\textsuperscript{44}.

A large part of the company’s success has been its ability to connect its product to American history and nationalism. The company’s motto, “Made in America Or Not Made at All”, clearly demonstrates that nationalism is a large part of its marketing campaign. But the company’s ability to tie its brand to an icon of American gun history, Benjamin Tyler Henry, as well as a key period in the nation’s story, the Civil War, gives its products a tremendous amount of emotional appeal and has made the company incredibly successful. The lever-action rifle, a type of firearm where the action is operated by moving a small lever bellow the trigger, is symbolic as an American icon. These were some of the first repeating rifles in history and saw wide use on the American frontier. They have been a mainstay of popular depictions of western history, and you would be hard pressed to find a western movie that does not feature at least one lever action rifle. These rifles were also a largely American innovation, invented in the United States. They did not see widespread use in Europe, given that most militaries did not find them useful, and preferred bolt action rifles\textsuperscript{45}.

Connecting their product line to the history of the Henry Rifle has been a large part of the Henry Repeating Arms success, demonstrating the way that entrepreneurs recognize the power of identity, history and memory when marketing their products. The company is a major sponsor of the NRA, and often buys advertising space in the \textit{American Rifleman} and at NRA events.

After exploring the Henry booth, I moved on to another purveyor of historical firearms, Cimarron firearms. Based in Texas, this company specializes in importing Italian made replica

\textsuperscript{44}See the Henry USA, “About Us” for more information. \url{https://www.henryusa.com/about-us/about-us/}
\textsuperscript{45}Since the user of a lever-action rifle has to pull the lever down, it is difficult to operate them in the prone position, where the shooter is lying on their stomach. While this is less of a problem for hunting or agriculture, it is a major problem for soldiers. Lying in the prone position gives soldiers the best cover from enemy gunfire as well as a stable platform from which to shoot. Given that bolt action rifles are much easier to operate lying down, they were much more popular with militaries in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
western firearms. Their booth was set up to look like a shop in the Wild West, with gun cases made of dark wood and glass decoratively displaying their firearms. I chatted with one of the young stall attendants, who was dressed in full cowboy attire.

“This gun here, is a replica of the Colt 1851 Navy”, the attendant told me, handing me a black and bronze revolver with a metal snake engraved into the wood handle. “It’s a replica of the gun that Clint Eastwood used in the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. Shoot this and you will feel like a cowboy for sure”.

As we chatted, the booth attendant noted my interest in historical firearms. We discussed many of the working replica pistols and rifles that they sold, made to feel and function just like the original antiques, but for a fraction of the price.

“This one here is a .45 Colt revolver. You can see the silver snake inlaid on the handle. It’s a reproduction of the gun that Clint Eastwood used in the movies. This shorter model over here with the bird’s head grip is just like the one that Doc Holliday had at the O.K. Corral!”

Television and film are important modalities through which ordinary people engage with the past. For example, in Rozensweig and Thelen’s famous study of how Americans engage with the past, 81% of their respondents reported consuming a movie or tv program about the past within the last year (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 19). Popular representations of the past are so crucial in shaping public memory of their nation’s past, that often the two can be difficult people to disentangle.

The attendant took my picture holding a replica Winchester 1873, a mainstay of the western movie genre. Working the lever action, you cannot help but to feel like a cowboy.

“You know, if you really like cowboy guns, you should go around the corner and talk to the people from SASS”, the attendant said. I recognized the name instantly from my research and
headed out.

SASS, the Single Action Shooting Society, is the governing body for the sport of Cowboy Action Shooting. They have over 600 chapters located all over the world, almost 100,000 members and produce the official rule book for the sport, including regulating which firearms can be used, what types of ammunition, and even operating an online registry of cowboy aliases to ensure that each player has a unique nickname. The SASS does partake in advocacy work but is mostly focused on regulating the sport.

At the SASS stall, a posse of volunteers were dressed up in full cowboy attire. I chatted with a young-looking man with brown hair and spectacles to learn more about the sport of Cowboy action shooting. He introduced himself as Jim. Telling him I was from Canada, he looked in their directory, informing me that there is indeed a club in my hometown of Ottawa.


“Yeah, it can be a bit of a doozy starting up. The first thing you’re going to need are your guns. You need two six shooters, most people use some version of the Colt Peacemaker”.

“The gun that won the west?” I replied, echoing the famous Colt marketing slogan turned historical truism.

“Yessir. Then you’re going to need a lever action rifle, and a shotgun. Most people use a double-barreled coach gun, but you can also use a pump-action as long as it’s a historical model, like the Winchester 1897”.

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46 All names used in to refer to participants are pseudonyms.
47 A coach gun is similar to a double-barreled hunter gun, though with a shorter barrel. These firearms get their name from their use on stagecoaches, where they would be carried by guards to dissuade or deal with bandits. The shorter barrels allowed the shot pattern from the gun to expand more quickly in close quarters.
“So, I need four guns just to start off?”

“Correct. Then you need your costume. No modern clothing allowed. You’re going to need your leather as well. A good gun belt, holsters, something to carry around your ammunition. A lot of people buy wooden carts to carry around their guns from station to station during a competition”.

Doing a quick mental tally, we concluded that the cost for the guns alone would be around $3-4,000 USD, if you purchased them new.

Participants in the sport also place a large emphasis on costuming and compete in full western getup. There are even prizes at SASS events associated with costuming. In her ethnography of Cowboy Action shooters, Kohn (2004) details the intense levels of passion, dedication, and financial investment that participants placed in their sport.

Jim’s red-haired boothmate, Beth walked over and joined the conversation.

“Most people don’t buy their gear before they attend their first event. You can just show up and ask to watch. People are pretty friendly, and most will lend out their equipment for new shooters to try. In fact, you should definitely attend a shoot first. I made the mistake of buying everything before I started and ended up regretting some of my choices. Try before you buy!”

Beth tried to sell me a SASS membership, but I said I would have to wait and try it first. Despite my rebuff they were quite friendly, and Jim even exchanged his personal phone number with me in case I had any questions.

SASS was not the only historical association in attendance at the convention. Using the NRAAM phone app, I navigated my way to the section labelled “Collectors” on the map. This area of the convention center was made up of four rows of small booths occupied by different collector organizations. Some of these, like the Contemporary Longrifle Association, are devoted
to certain time periods. Others are organized by geographic area, like the Virginia Gun Collectors Association. Others still are devoted to collecting specific makes and models, like Winchester Repeating Rifles. One booth was entirely devoted to collecting historical flare guns. As with the rest of the convention, these smaller booths made for better conversation. I chatted with the collectors quite a bit as they eagerly showed me their collections, many with quite valuable artifacts.

“This here is a Kentucky Longrifle. It’s a muzzle-loader, so you have to load it one shot at time, from the front”, a hulking bearded man dressed entirely in buckskin, the spitting image of Davy Crockett, eagerly showed me a piece of his collection. “These would have shot a .40 or .48 caliber lead ball. They were more accurate than muskets because they are rifled. The grooves in the barrel make the ball spin, sort of like a football, so it can travel further and straighter. These were used by frontiersmen, settlers, and American revolutionaries”.

“Who makes these replicas?” I asked.

“Say that again”. He was hard of hearing, a common ailment among older shooters, and the convention floor was quite loud. I repeated myself.

“I made this. I made it myself”.

The majority of the collectors were dressed in costumes: there were a few cowboys; my friend in buckskin, and others wearing the military uniforms of various historical armies. In general, the collectors were eager to share their passion for the past with anyone who stopped to talk.

Groups like the SASS and companies like Henry Repeating Arms form important pieces in the gun culture and the gun rights movement. When their sport, or their business, is threatened by regulation, they work hard to mobilize to resist that threat. While sporting groups like the
SASS may seem apolitical, a key part of their mission statement is to protect their members Second Amendment rights. Meanwhile, companies like Henry Repeating Arms provide major support to the gun rights movement, either through buying advertising space at the convention and in the NRA’s publications, or through sponsoring major fundraising events. One such event, the 1000 Man Shoot in 2016, was an attempt to break a world record by firing 1,000 guns at the same time. Henry Repeating Arms donated the 1,000 rifles that were used at the event, which raised money for the NRA.

Looking at groups like the SASS and companies like Henry Repeating Arms allows us to observe the power of selling the past, whether as a product or as an experience. They help us to better understand the complex answer to the question that Kohn (2004) poses at the beginning of her ethnography: “Why are so many Americans so attached to their guns?” They also give us a window into the complex network that forms the Second Amendment community, and how these networks are mobilized by the NRA to pursue their goal of defending and expanding Second Amendment rights.

Entertainment & Education

There were deeper games at play at the NRAAM. Members of the media circulated, some quietly observing and taking pictures, others interviewing heavily made-up reps from the stalls under the gaze of large cameras and bright lights. As I admired a set of western revolvers, a waxed-mustached hipster in a brown waistcoat, whose Press Pass indicated that he was from a major left-leaning news publication, took my picture. I silently wondered what my grandmother would think if she saw a picture like that of me in the newspaper.

Company representatives did not stay chained to their booths. They circulated around the showroom floor, greeting old friends from the gun show circuit and striking deals. While taking
a break from the show at the nearby coffee shop, I witnessed a breakaway business meeting taking place. Later at the convention I heard the representative from a firearms related charity approach the booth of a major retailer, presumably to ask for a sponsorship. After years of gazing at the American gun culture from behind my screen, I was suddenly thrust onto the other side of the camera when I walked past a well-known firearms YouTuber, TFB TV, conducting interviews at a booth. I had seen a number of these interviews from other NRA conventions and Shot Shows and felt that feeling of surrealism that often accompanies gazing behind the media curtain.

Celebrities, both from the real world and the gun world, regularly made appearances at booths to sign autographs, greet fans, and promote brands. Chuck Norris, who had just been announced as a product ambassador for Glock, was signing autographs at their booth, wearing a black and white Glock baseball cap. The line to meet the famous actor and martial artist snaked and coiled its way around the sizeable Glock booth. Those unwilling or unable to brave the line satisfied themselves with crowding around the line cutter and snapping photos with their smartphones. Given that Chuck Norris is now almost as famous among young people for the jokes that poke fun at his supposed invincibility, I heard several jokes being told as I strained to snap a picture of the red-bearded icon.

Colion Noir, the NRA’s most famous African American spokesperson and NRA TV host, commanded what was probably the second longest line at the convention. I had hoped to be able to meet him, but those hopes were dashed when I saw the line to see him was at least 100 people long. I stood in line for ten minutes, but when it barely moved, I gave up my chance, knowing that he would be gone before I reached the front.

Those seeking a break from the exhibition hall did not want for entertainment. On the far
side of the convention hall, there was small stage set up for NRA Country performers. Recognizing their desperate need for allies in the cultural industries, the NRA profiles certain up and coming country artists, giving them a platform to increase their support while also promoting the organization. The backdrop of the stage was set up to look like a western themed canteen. It had a bar, and a faux-red brick backdrop, covered with black and white photos of country stars, an American flag, a Gadson flag and a large red show bill style sign reading “Music City”. The skirt of the stage was covered with the NRA Country logo, which features a guitar whose stem ends in shotgun barrels, with the words Music, Firearms, Freedom circling it. Emerging country star Payton Taylor, a former American Idol contestant, performed on stage to a small crowd. I listened for a few songs, one of which I had heard before though I had not recognized the performers name beforehand.

More popular than the music were the seminars. These small breakout groups took place in the various seminar rooms scattered around the two stories of the convention center. Some were practically focused, tackling topics like how to interact with police officers when carrying a concealed firearm, how ordinary hunters can fight poaching, or advice on reloading ammunition at home. Others were used to promote deeper engagement with the NRA, like an NRA volunteers’ seminar. Some of these seminars tackled historical topics, like the guns of World War II.

These seminars harnessed the participants’ interest in firearms to present certain historical narratives. They attract those with an interest in the history of firearms, as well as firearms collectors, whose interest in guns usually stems from their involvement in history. This focus on the role that firearms have played in key pivotal historical events serves to underscore their importance, thus identifying them as key historical objects worthy of preservation and
protection. It also serves to connect firearms to the key ideas often associated with these conflicts. The Second World War is largely seen as a just war and is often held up as a cautionary tale for non-intervention in political conflicts. The conflict, especially in America, is seen as a fight between liberty and tyranny, freedom and autocracy. NRA historical material often mines the public memory surrounding this period to connect firearms to these ideals.

The Speeches

The exhibition hall is the draw for members to attend the NRAAM and provides the funding for the event to take place, but the NRA-ILA Leadership forum is likely the most important point of contact that the NRA uses to communicate with its members at the convention.

The speeches took place across the street from the convention center in Lucas Oil Stadium, normally the home of the National Football League’s Indianapolis Colts. The stadium was a monolith, its red brick facade blending neatly with its industrial surroundings. Crossing the street to the stadium, which was blocked off by police cars, I headed up to the queue where the security barriers had been erected, walking past a tent where members could check their prohibited items for a small charge.

“Next please. Keep moving folks”.

A woman in a reflective vest scanned my ticket and directed me toward the security line, which was about five people long when I arrived. The security agents were a mix of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Secret Service. As the loudspeaker announcement repeated, the Secret Service had taken control of the stadium. The TSA agents announced to people to prepare to empty their pockets “just like at the airport”. While the procedure was similar to airport security, the level of scrutiny was much higher. Rather than use
an x-ray machine, agents inspected each person’s metal items, looking through wallets, feeling
cellphones and turning on the screens to make sure they worked. The man in front of me, a large
fellow in his late twenties with black hair and thick glasses, had a small multi tool attached to his
key ring; so small it did not even have a knife attachment, but only a few screwdriver heads.

“You can either check it over there at the desk, or we keep it”, the agent informed the man
briskly. He opted for the former.

Passing through the metal detector, a secret service agent passed a wand over each of us.
He was a young man with a clean-shaven head and long blond beard. He wore a bulletproof vest
and a black semi-automatic pistol at his side that matched his no-nonsense demeanor.

Having cleared security, I headed inside. The hulking NFL stadium was bisected for the
event, with the stage and backstage section occupying half. Seating was arranged into three
sections. Seats on the pitch could be purchased for $50 or $30, depending on how close you
wanted to be to the speakers. Seats in the bleachers would run you $10. I had opted for the
middle way and reserved my seats ahead of time, so instead of the cold plastic stadium chairs, I
sat 50 yards from the stage on a cushy blue fold out chair. In front of me there was a couple in
their thirties. The woman was tanned, with bright blue eyes and blond hair. Her partner had a
shaven head underneath his baseball cap, and a long greying blond goatee. Beside me, a middle-
aged man in glasses was talking with his elderly father. I glanced around the stadium and saw
that a greater number of attendees were wearing red MAGA hats than at the exhibition hall. The
crowd was also older and whiter than inside the main convention center. I suspected many had
come just to see the President speak.

A jovial old veteran, both legs lost to war, sitting on a red-white and blue rascal scooter
with an American flag on the back chatted affably with the people next to him in a thick southern
drawl. Though I was over an hour early for the event, the crowd was already starting to file in thanks to announcements inside the convention encouraging people to leave early and avoid long security lines.

The NRA had provided pre-entertainment for the show. The center stage was lit with red, white and blue lighting. The backdrop of the stage was the light blue motif that they had adopted for the advertising material for this year’s meeting. Three jumbo screens played a rotation of ads, some of which were for the event’s sponsors, like Henry Repeating Arms, and others were general NRA ads. An ad featuring then NRA spokeswoman Dana Loesch, received a smattering of applause. This was followed by an ad which showed Trump’s state of the Union Speech, in which he declared “America will never be a socialist nation”. This was greeted with even louder applause. The ads addressed a variety of subjects. Some featured individuals whose cause had been championed by the NRA, or people who had used their guns in self-defense. The ads addressed themes like heritage, emphasized the diversity of the NRA and played cuts of speeches by NRA executives, political allies like the President and spokespeople, including the late Charlton Heston.

The pre-show entertainment also included another country singer, Lucas Hoge, who took the stage, singing a mix of old school country and bluegrass. The announcer introduced him by listing some of his accolades careful to make special mention that he was an NRA member. Hoge played a mix of his own songs and covers of artists like Johnny Cash, who he confessed was a huge inspiration growing up in a small town\(^\text{48}\). His aesthetic seemed aimed at emulating his hero, with his hair swept back in the style of Cash or Elvis Presley. He wore a denim jacket

\(^{48}\) Support for gun rights, and especially the NRA, has been a controversial topic in the Country Music World, especially since the Las Vegas Massacre which targeted a country music festival. Johnny Cash’s daughter, Rosanne, has been outspoken against the NRA, and publicly called for a ban on what pro-control advocates refer to as high capacity magazines (Kornhaber, 2018).
with a white v-neck shirt underneath emphasizing the large cross around his neck. When he completed his set 40 minutes later, he turned over his acoustic guitar to reveal a Trump 2020 bumper sticker on the back.

The speeches began at 11:15am and would run late into the afternoon, though much of the audience left following the president’s speech a few hours in. The first speaker was Chris Cox, then the NRA-ILA Executive Director, though he would be removed a few months later following rumors of an attempted coup against Wayne Lapierre. A naturally charming and charismatic speaker, Cox is of average height with brown hair and blue eyes, and was wearing a suit and purple tie. His speech largely took the form of political comedy, similar to the opening monologue used in shows by comedians like John Oliver or Bill Maher. Cox opened his speech with a joke: “I actually have good news to report of Chicago”. He paused, and the crowd laughed nervously. Chicago is often used by the NRA as a symbol of urban gang violence and chaos that some of the nation’s strictest gun control laws have proven unable to stem. Cox laughed at the crowd’s response, pausing and looking away to regain his composure. “For years we have talked about Chicago’s absolute failure to prosecute its criminals, well they finally did it, they got one. The bad news is they let him go”, Cox turned to the screen where a picture of Jussie Smollett was shown. Smollett is an African-American actor and singer, most famous for his role in the show *Empire*. Days before the convention, he had been charged with hiring two men to stage a fake hate crime, and then filing a false police report, claiming that his attackers had used racist slurs and worn MAGA hats. The incident was big news, especially for those on the right who saw this as an example of a wider Hollywood conspiracy to label Trump supporters as racists.

Cox continued “I don’t know what’s wrong with Jesse, maybe he just needs a hug”. He turned to the screen once again where a picture of an uncomfortable looking Smollett had been
photoshopped to show the then Democratic Presidential nominee candidate Joe Biden behind him, hands on his shoulder, sniffing his hair; a reference to allegations of inappropriate touching that haunted Biden’s presidential candidacy. Cox moved on to admonish present day Hollywood, which: “Used to be filled with cool people who actually did cool things”. As he said this, black and white photos of former Hollywood actors appeared on the screen. “I’m talking real icons, like Charlton Heston”. A black and white photo appeared on the screen with Heston and several civil rights leaders in front of the Lincoln Memorial. “When he wasn’t marching for civil rights, he was off doing what we do, enjoying our Second Amendment freedom. But most celebrities today ridicule us for that”. Cox’s demeanor changed, the humor draining from his voice, replaced with messianic fervor. “Instead they want to lecture us on how to live our lives. They hate us. They hate our trucks. They hate our plastic straws. And yes, they hate our guns. But what they fail to understand is we don’t give a damn about what they think”. His point was punctuated by a color photo of Heston wearing a cowboy hat with a break action shotgun slung across his shoulder.

Cox’s rhetorical style then moved back to humor, addressing the #MeToo scandals as further evidence of the moral failings of Hollywood celebrities. “You know it’s sad because Hollywood used to be filled with people you wanted your kids to emulate. Now, it’s filled with people you wouldn’t want your kids to be around”. The audience laughed. “Let me ask you a question, who would you rather your teenage daughter emulate, this guy…”, a picture of Harvey Weinstein being arrested flashed across the screen, “…or this guy”, the audience is shown a picture of Vice President Mike Pence. The crowd erupted into applause and laughter. He then repeated the formula of the joke, this time with the set up: “Who would you rather your teenage son intern for, this guy…”, the audience was shown a picture of the actor Kevin Spacey, who had
been accused of inappropriate sexual conduct with a much younger man, “…or this guy”, a picture of President Trump flashes across the screen.

The speech took another pivot, taking on anti-gun billionaires like Michael Bloomberg before moving on to address the leftward movement of the democratic party: “The socialist wave we warned was coming, is here. And it’s not just the two coasts that are underwater, it’s hitting the heartland of America”. Cox warned that “socialists” like Nancy Pelosi and AOC are in for “a rude awakening in November, when the real America goes to the polls”.

The most powerful part of the speech, however, was saved for the end.

There’s a single mother living with her kids in a trailer park somewhere near Indianapolis right now. Her husband beat her, so she took the kids and ran. She’s out on her own. Trying to build a new life for her family. She works two jobs. The trailer parks not safe but it’s all she can afford. No one in this room’s ever met her, and the media will never talk about her. She’ll never be famous. Maybe she’s a Republican, maybe she’s a Democrat. Truthfully, she’s got more important things to worry about. But without the National Rifle Association of America, there’s no one in the world waking up to make sure she has the same right to protect herself and her family as elitist billionaires like Michael Bloomberg. That’s who we are. That’s what we do. When you fight for freedom you fight on the most principled ground.

He concluded with a message of hope for his supporters, acknowledging that times were tough but that “we don’t exist for the good times”.

Using stories like these, in this case of a fictitious single mother, was a common theme throughout the speeches, and it was highly effective. Narratives like this draw on cultural understandings. To be considered a policy narrative, the NPF holds that a narrative must have a central character, a setting, a plot and a policy relevant moral (McBeth et al., 2010). In this example, the setting is an impoverished trailer park, the principle character is the single mother, but other characters are brought in as well. The antagonist is Michael Bloomberg in name, though here he is used as a token to represent “anti-gun elites”. The hero of the story is the NRA, who protects the mother’s ability to protect herself with firearms. The moral of this story is that
without the NRA, this innocent woman would be left defenseless, unable to afford the same protection as the wealthy celebrities advocating the removal of her rights.

Three key theoretical assumptions within the NPF help to understand the impact of these narratives. The first is the concept of narrative transportation, the idea that narratives will be more impactful to their audience if “the reader/viewer/listener can imagine him-/herself surrounded by the scene and embroiled in the plot alongside the character” (Shanahan et al., 2018, pp. 185–186). The second assumption is called the “power of characters”. The more that the audience can relate to, and likes, the hero of a policy narrative, the more likely they are to be amenable to the policy moral of that story. Narratives are effective because of their emotional impact, and their ability to connect the political message to wider cultural images and collective memories (Shanahan et al., 2018). A third key theoretical assumption within the NPF that applies to this case study is called the “primacy of affect”. This assumption holds that human beings are driven by emotion, and that narratives that strike an emotional chord with the listener will have a greater impact than those that do not (Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014).

Further, a key assertion of this project is that narratives are more powerful when they are connected by groups or political actors to larger cultural narratives. Though we have not heard this specific story of this woman in the trailer park, it is familiar to us as it draws on cultural tropes. The listener may not know this single mother, but they might know a single mother in their own life, or a victim of intimate partner violence. Perhaps they have read about them in the paper or in fiction or seen depictions on a television drama. This character’s status as a victim of violence and abandonment gives her an inherent virtue. The audience wants to root for an underdog, and here is a clear underdog for them to empathize with.

Vice President Mike Pence, who followed Cox’s speech, embodied another form of past
presencing that the organization uses to present narratives about the past: discussing American history. While Pence’s speech was likely not written by the NRA, it mirrored some of their rhetorical strategies in an attempt to pitch to the supporters. Pence’s speech covered the gamut of conservative and NRA talking points, things like religious faith, freedom, the threat to the rights of law-abiding citizens and others. But he began his speech by grounding these talking points in a discussion of American history, touching on several of the key historical periods often drawn on by the NRA.

“The right of law-abiding citizens to keep and bear arms is a freedom that is at the heart of the American story. Our founders won our independence with the power of their ideas and with the powder in their muskets”. Here once again firearms are connected to liberty, drawing historical gravitas from the image of the founders. This connects to another common NRA refrain that the Second Amendment protects the First Amendment. That is, that free speech cannot exist without an armed populace to keep the government in check. Pence continued: “Our pioneers won the West with their daring, their courage and their Springfields, Winchesters and Colts”. Here was a reference to pioneers and the Wild West, connected directly to the iconic firearms of that era. “Our forebears fought our nation’s wars, defended our way of life with the skills they learned on the rifle range, in the deer stand, at the knee of a father, a mother, a grandparent back home”. The final historical reference here refers to the two World Wars, once again intimately connected to American liberty. These historical narratives are then connected by Pence to the present struggle: “And in our own day, there are no greater champions of America’s tradition of responsible gun ownership then all of you and the 5 million proud men and women of the NRA. Thank you for your stand”. Towards the end of his speech Pence once again pivoted
to the past. He acknowledged that stopping the threat posed by “anti-gun Democrats” would not be easy, “but it never has been”.

Thomas Payne explained during the American founding, that the battle for freedom is always arduous. As he said, quote, ‘the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph’. Then Thomas Payne added ‘what we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly, and that heaven knows how to put a price upon its good. And it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated’. It’s really about freedom that we gather here today. Preserving the freedom that is at the heart of America.

Connecting the struggle of the NRA to the struggle of America’s founders provides their cause with a sense of gravitas and historical continuity. Firearms, the tools that preserve freedom, are positioned once again as a key part of America’s heritage in need of preservation.

As Pence exited the stage to music, waving goodbye, the anticipation in the crowd grew. People began to whisper to one another, sensing that the man that they had really come to see was about to speak. They were not disappointed. Chris Cox swiftly retook the stage in order to introduce the President of the United States. Cox used his introduction to compliment Trump, extolling his sacrifice of becoming president instead of retiring to enjoy a life of success. “Has any President in history ever needed the job less?” He then pivoted to use the introduction as another attempt to attack the mainstream media, noting that in response to his sacrifice, Trump has faced nothing but attacks. “As it turns out, the only collusion in this country is the national news media’s desperate and dishonest scheme to destroy his presidency. But do you know what, he doesn’t give a damn, and it’s not working”. Cox concluded his introduction with another joke: “It’s hard to imagine, but the most vocal, pro-2A president in American history didn’t come from Texas. He came from New York City”.

The crowd, who had cheered wildly during Cox and Pence’s speeches, reached a new climax of excitement as Trump entered to Lee Greenwood’s “G-d Bless the USA”. The energy in the room was palpable as the president’s supporters stood and clapped. There are few issue-
based interest group conventions that both the President and Vice President would speak to
directly. The presence of both of these politicians indicates the important role that the
organization plays in mobilizing voters for the Republican Party. The Republicans recognize the
important role that NRA support can have in mobilizing voters and work hard to cater to the
organization.

Most of President Trump’s speech was a rather characteristic mix of attacks on his rivals
and lauding his administration’s accomplishments. As someone who does not regularly watch
Fox News, it felt like turning on a film halfway through, as I was not familiar with many of the
people the president was attacking, or the incidents he was referencing. The most impactful
portion of his speech was not given by the President. Rather the President’s speech was
interspersed with three guest speakers, likely at the request of the NRA. Though these speakers
came from different parts of the country and ticked different demographic boxes, they all shared
a common characteristic: they were all good guys with guns.

The first speaker, April Evans, was introduced by the President. “April Evans joins us
from Virginia. One night, in 2015 she was home alone with her two-year old daughter when an
intruder broke into her home violently. April took care of it.” Evans walked across the stage
looking nervous but determined. She was a heavy-set, middle-aged woman with long, wavy
black hair. The audience stood up and cheered as she came on. Dwarfed by the President
standing behind her, her head was barely visible above the special podium that POTUS had
brought in for the event. She looked visibly nervous, and spoke with a wavering voice, but her
story was not less powerful for it.

“My husband is a police officer, and he works night shift”, her voice trembled audibly as
she started her speech. “One night he was at work and my daughter and I were home alone.
Someone started banging so hard on the door it broke in two places. He demanded that I let him in”. The audience was presented with the personification of Cox’s hypothetical mother, forced to defend her home against an intruder. “I called 911 and I went to my room to get the gun. I heard a loud crash and when I came out to the hallway to see, he was running towards me with a look in his eyes that I will never forget. I shot him twice, and I held him at gunpoint until the police arrived”. This proclamation was greeted with loud cheers from the audience, many of whom stood up to give the speaker a standing ovation. April smiled nervously. “This event was something that changed my life. I’ve never been more afraid, but I’ve been standing strong and I’ve been telling my story again and again, because with each person I told they stood a little taller knowing that if I could protect myself and my family, that they could too.” She said, transitioning to the moral of the story. “Protecting my family would not be possible without the right to bear arms. It’s an issue that is obviously close to my heart. If these rights had been taken from us, I may not be standing here today, and I may not have a healthy now six-year old daughter”. More applause. “I’d like to thank you Mr. President for your unapologetic stance on our right to bear arms. I truly believe those rights saved my life and the life of my daughter that night”. Concluding her speech April gave the President a hug, then shook his hand. She walked off stage, giving a small, nervous wave to the cheering supporters who once again rose to their feet.

April’s performance stole the show. Not because her speech was particularly polished. Her prose were simple and to the point. Nor was it because of her rhetorical abilities, as she was visibly nervous to be reliving such an awful trauma in front of thousands of people. April’s speech was impactful because of her relatability. Audience members could see themselves, or a loved one, in her story. It reinforced that the threat of criminal violence that they have spent so
much of their lives thinking about is real, not imagined as their political opponents would have them think. It buttressed the importance of their political position, putting a human face on their cause. There were still two more examples to come.

Following April’s exit, President Trump once again took the stage to introduce the next speaker. “Also with us is Mark Vaughn, who owns a meat processing plant in Oklahoma. When an employee began attacking coworkers with a knife viciously and violently Mark drew his gun and ended the assault immediately, saving countless innocent lives.”49 Mark walked onto the stage, waving at the audience. It was instantly obvious that he was much more at ease in front of the crowd than April. Mark was a middle-aged man with short brown gelled hair wearing a grey suit and blue tie. A small American flag was pinned to his left side. His dress, posture and composure gave off the impression of being a polished businessman, someone used to talking in front of big crowds. He warmly shook President Trump’s hands, smiling, and whispered thank you. He removed his speaking notes from his jacket pocket and began:

“I got a call late one Thursday afternoon while sitting at my office. A frantic call from our customer service group, said an attacker with a knife was victimizing people in our office”. The stage is set. Once again, we were presented with a relatable scenario, sitting in our office. That scenario is then transformed by the central action of the narrative. “I ran to my vehicle, ran the 100 yards to the other end of our complex, it was a very chaotic scene. Screaming, crying, blood everywhere. I immediately entered the building, ran down a hallway and saw a man

49 The attack the President was referring to occurred on September 25, 2014. On top of being the COO of Vaughan Foods, Mr. Vaughan was also a reserve deputy. He was at work when a disgruntled former employee who had recently been fired from the business stormed the property with a knife, beheading Colleen Hufford and fatally stabbing Traci Johnson (“Reserve Deputy Mark Vaughan Honored With Award Of Valor,” 2014). The assailant, an African-American man who had converted to Islam, had recently had arguments with the victims which were the reason he was fired by the company (“Gruesome Opening Statements In Alton Nolen Trial,” 2017). He would survive his wounds and was sentenced to death in an Oklahoma courtroom in 2017, despite his lawyers insistence that he was mentally ill and “...believed he was doing the right thing because of his delusional misinterpretation of the Quran” (“Oklahoma man sentenced to death for beheading his co-worker.,” 2017).
attacking a woman in the neck and head with a large knife. I yelled. He stopped, paused for a moment, and ran at full speed before me. At about 18 feet I fired three rounds from my AR-15 carbine…” he paused as the audience cheers loudly. “…Immediately incapacitating the subject. He was a determined attacker, unbeknownst to me, moments before he had decapitated a co-worker and had targeted several others in our operation to be attacked that day”. Like April, he then pivoted to the moral of the story. “I was able to take that action because I had a gun, and I was prepared to use it. These are central missions of the NRA, and I thank you, the NRA for that and everyone here”. Like in April’s story, the NRA is a silent protagonist. The heroes of each story’s central actions are premised on their ability to own and use firearms, which the NRA, we are told, safeguards. “We have but one true thing, one true mission before us today, and that’s to come together like we never have before to preserve our foundational freedom to bear arms in the defense of ourselves, those we love, those we seek to protect and most importantly our liberty”. Mark appealed to the values of the audience. “Lastly I’d like to express gratitude… No other President in our lifetime has stood with us so strongly in defense of our Second Amendment rights⁵⁰. Thank you, Mr. President”. He turned, shook the president’s hand, and walked off stage.

While the first two speakers were relatively unknown outside, and even inside, of pro-gun circles, the organizers had held back the most famous testimonial for last. Shaking Trump’s hand, Mark left the stage and POTUS introduced his final guest. “Finally, Stephen Willeford joins us from Sutherland Springs Texas. The great state of Texas. Where a mass shooter opened

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⁵⁰ This statement is interesting given the controversy within the Second Amendment community surrounding the Trump Presidency. Trump’s main gift to the Second Amendment community has been his resistance to calls for wider gun control after several high-profile mass shootings that happened during his tenure in office. However, many within the community were frustrated by his willingness to compromise by instituting a ban on bump-stocks, and comments that he made disparaging firearm suppressors.
fire at the First Baptist Church, you all read about it, in November of 2017 taking many innocent lives. Wonderful, wonderful people. Stephen heroically risked his life to bring the horrible violence to an end. Stephen please come up and say a few words”51.

Stephen walked onto the stage to the loudest wave of applause yet. A barrel chested and grey bearded man, he wore a black suit, tie and white cowboy hat. His beard was neatly trimmed into a grey goatee and a pair of rectangular black glasses were perched on his nose. On his left side, he wore a pin with the crossed flags of the United States and Texas. He shook the President’s hand, took the podium, and began, thanking the NRA and the President for the opportunity to speak. “On November 5th, 2017 I was home because I normally… I was going to start my on call at the hospital where I work as an emergency plumber and could be called a lot. So, I stayed home from church that day because I wanted to get rest. It wasn’t to happen”. Stephen’s speaking style was an effective mix of the previous two speakers. While not quite as polished as Mark’s speech, his style was more down to earth and relatable. At the same time, he spoke with confidence.

“My daughter came into my bedroom and said ‘dad, doesn’t that sound like gunfire to you’…” Once again, our protagonist begins in an everyday situation, in the home surrounded by family. “My daughter, was an NRA distinguished expert when she was eight years old….I was an NRA instructor. I ran to my safe and my daughter ran outside, ran out to her car, and ran reconnaissance for me. She ran up to the corner and came back while I was getting a gun out of

51 On November 5, 2017 at 11:30am a shooter, a 26-year old bearded, white male (left unnamed for ethical reasons) entered the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Using an AR-style rifle, the shooter killed 26 people and injured 20 others. Among the dead were a pregnant woman, an infant and the 14-year old daughter of the pastor, who was away on vacation. The assailant was a prohibited person who was previously denied a concealed carry license and should not have been able to acquire a firearm. Unfortunately, the Air Force failed to enter the details of his Court Martial into the NICS background check system, and thus he was able to purchase the rifle used in the shooting. The shooter had been discharged from the Air Force after assaulting his wife and child (Hanna & Yan, 2017). A history of domestic abuse is common in mass shooters (Gu, 2020).
my safe and loading it. She said: ‘dad there is a man in black tactical gear, shooting up the
church’. I said: ‘did you call 9-1-1’, she said: ‘I did, they’re aware of it’. Right away that told me
the police were coming, but I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t wait”.

Stephen then pivoted into a common cautionary. “Our Police Department in Wilson
County has some of the best officers in this world, and they were racing as fast as they could, but
my community couldn’t wait for them”. This is a common refrain in NRA material, captured by
the saying “When seconds count, the police are only minutes away”. There is some evidence to
support this talking point. The average police response time in certain communities, especially
rural areas, can be quite long with one study showing the median response time in rural areas at
14 minutes (Mell et al., 2017).

Stephen continued: “I ran out the door and I told my daughter to load another magazine
for me. I gave her busy work. I didn’t want her to be there if I failed and I didn’t want her to be
there for a target for him. The holy spirit took over me at that moment, and as I ran across the
street I yelled out”. This was the first of the narratives to explicitly mention religion or contain
overt religious themes.

“The gunman heard me inside, so did some of the people from the church. So did my
own daughter. He came running out of the church and started shooting at me. I put two shots,
center mass”. This was a reference to aiming for the center of the assailant’s chest. Despite how
easy movies makes it look, hitting a moving target in a high stake situation, when your heart is
pumping frantically and your adrenaline rushing, is incredibly difficult. Law enforcement, the
military and concealed carriers are trained to shoot for the largest target on the human body, the
chest, and that which is most likely to stop the assailant quickly.

“He stopped shooting at me, ran to his vehicle. The two shots, center mass… he had
class-3 body armor on they made no difference. But when he ran and turned around his door to his vehicle, I put one in his side, and one in his legs”. Stephen continued to describe his pursuit of the church shooter, who attempted to make an escape in his truck. “I met up with a man that was just parked and watched the whole thing, and everybody in this world would have driven on. But this is Texas, we aren’t known for our sanity…” The audience laughed, easing the dramatic tension of the story. “I found out later his name is Johnny, and I got in the truck with Johnny and we gave chase and at the end the gunman being the coward that he was, took his own life”.

The action of the story complete, Stephen pivoted to the moral. “Inside the church were more heroes than we can even talk about in a limited amount of time. But I’m here today to talk about the fact that I used my own AR-15 to confront a shooter that had dropped 15, 30-round magazines in my church. He murdered 26 people and injured 20 more. There were only seven people that walked out of that church without a gunshot wound. If it were not for our Second Amendment rights, and the right to carry an AR-15 the same style gun that he had, then I would have been outgunned myself”.

Once gain the NRA joins the narrative as a principal character, albeit offscreen. Further, the AR-15 that Stephen used to fight off the church attacker becomes a character in and of itself, allowing Stephen to accomplish his act of heroism. “I want to thank the NRA, for being relentless in protecting our Second Amendment rights. And I would like to thank this president, for defending the Second Amendment. And I would like to say today, he says Make America Great Again, and he’s including you. You will make America great again with him”. Here the speech took on an almost religious feeling. “But he needs you, he needs your vote, and if you do not get out there and vote for this man, then it’s on you”.

The three narratives contained several analogous elements. First, each of these stories
took place at two levels. The first level, the primary narrative, was made up of the direct action of the story, while the second takes place in the shadows, behind the scenes. Each story contained a setting that would be familiar to their intended audience: the narrator’s homes, their office, their church. The stories all had villains. The villains that appeared in the primary narrative were the violent assailants armed with their fists, knives, and guns. The listener is presented with little information on these villains, other than their malicious intent. We were not told their race, their gender, their motivations, or any of their back story. This is intentional. They are intended to represent evil. The unmentioned villains occupying the secondary narrative of these stories are of course those seeking to disarm the heroes. Though never mentioned, their actions are implied in the background plot of each of these stories. As each speaker indicated, should these true villains prevail, the heroes would be unable to have defended their lives.

The primary heroes of the story are of course the storytellers. They represent not only themselves but take on the status of “good guy with a gun”, a large metanarrative presented by the NRA. This analysis is not meant to belittle these individuals. The three speakers that I saw truly are heroes: people who risked their lives to defend others, and accomplished things that many people would not have the courage or ability to do.

The heroes of these stories’ secondary narratives are the NRA and the President. The common formula of each speech ended with the speaker thanking the organization and the President for their commitment to defending the Second Amendment. They are presented as the heroes that stand up for heroes. This leads to the moral of each story. First, that good guys with guns exist and save lives. Second, that for these heroes to be heroes, they need to be armed. Finally, that the NRA and the President are the key figures keeping these good guys armed.

But how does this connect to history, memory, and heritage? What does it have to do
with the gun culture? In these stories we see yet again the Second Amendment being presented as heritage. As we explored in previous chapters, heritage establishes ownership over parts of the past (Hoelscher, 2006), and the tradition of gun ownership in America is often presented by the NRA as a form of heritage that needs to be protected. Heritage always needs to be owned, guarded, and preserved. The protectors of this heritage change depending on the message the organization is trying to send with a particular narrative. If the organization wishes to mobilize individuals to act, they will often present ordinary people as the defenders of this heritage. In the case of April, Mark, and Stephen’s stories however, the NRA, and their ally President Trump, are positioned as the key guardians of the historical tradition of the Second Amendment.

These stories also highlight the connection between individual memory, collective memory, and affect. It is difficult to convey the emotional impact of these stories in writing, especially to many readers who I assume find the idea of the “good guy with a gun” to be propaganda or a right-wing talking point. Yet the affect associated with these shared memories was an impactful narrative strategy. As NPF scholars note, the “primacy of affect” is an important principle in understanding how narratives influence their audience. Narratives that employ emotion are generally more persuasive, given the importance of affect in “focusing attention in human cognition” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11). In other words, emotions help people to decide what is important. It was evident from their reactions that these stories had a strong emotional resonance with the audience, myself included.

These speeches also give us an interesting opportunity to explore the interplay between meso and macro-level narratives. Macro-level narratives, as we have discussed, are sacred stories exist at the broader societal and cultural level (Shanahan et al., 2018). They shape how a given audience will understand the social world, and thus how they will interpret narratives. The policy
narratives that the NRA is disseminating through these stories make sense in an American context given the macro-level narratives surrounding individuality and heroism in the wider American culture, which often draws on the image of the lone hero saving the day, sometimes with a firearm. It is this Macro-narrative that the NRA connects these stories too through the figure of the good guy with a gun. In each of the three stories, the hero acted alone, or mostly alone, given that help was far away. In Stephen’s case, he rejected the help of his daughter to shield her from danger, though he establishes in his story that she is also proficient with firearms. Most importantly, in each story the hero was armed.

Building the Second Amendment Community

This dissertation seeks to better understand how the NRA uses narratives about America’s and American’s pasts to construct a political community of gun owners. The organization has several points of contact at its disposal to do this; their network of instructors, their communications materials, and, as we explored in this chapter, larger events like the Annual Meeting. The organization uses these communications materials and events to try to attract new members and new gun owners to join the cause, and to motivate existing members to deepen their involvement with the organization. These members then provide the organization with the financial and human resources needed to advance their policy agenda. This helps to motivate the second amendment community, who participate in the culture, to take political action and become further involved with the NRA.

The NRA Annual Meeting is important because it provides spaces for interaction where members of the gun culture come together and deepen their involvement with the organization and its allies in the movement. For the NRA, this is an opportunity to harness the passion of the Second Amendment community and encourage more engaged participation with the
The convention is also an opportunity for the organization to tell stories to its membership. The stories they tell draw from America’s past, as well as the shared the collective memories of its members. These stories connect to key macro-level narratives about American history and culture, like the story of the nation’s founding, or the image of the good guy with a gun. They help to solidify the relationship between the organization and its members, and rally members to support the cause.

Looking at the NRAAM also helps us to elucidate the complex relationship between the NRA and the rest of the gun culture and gun-rights movement. Present at the convention were other sporting and advocacy organizations, like SASS; collectors’ groups, like the Contemporary Longrifle Association; and companies, like Henry Repeating Arms. Political allies, like VP Pence and President Trump, also attended. Cementing these alliances through the convention helps maintain the solidarity of the movement, deepen relationships between the industry and advocates, and create a sense of comradery amongst the membership.

Performing participant observation at the NRAAM also helped to clarify for me the central problem of the popular and academic understanding of the NRA and the wider gun rights movement, and the importance of understanding American gun ownership through the theoretical lens of serious leisure. The claim is often made that people own guns as a result of fear. For example, Melzer (Melzer, 2009, p. 11) says that while gun-rights advocates frame gun ownership using political ideals like liberty: “beneath all that is fear”. It is probably true that fear plays a role in people’s decision to purchase a gun, but to those more deeply involved in the gun culture, it was a passion for their serious leisure pursuit that drove their involvement and their
advocacy.

Gun owners may talk of self-defense as a justification for gun ownership, and many are deadly serious about it, but I do not think it is the primary motivation of those seriously involved in the gun culture. After all, someone concerned with self-defense might buy a gun or two, leave them in their sock drawer and forget about it. If particularly fearful, they may concealed carry a compact pistol that they practice with a few times a year. They are likely part of the half of American gun owners who own one or two firearms (Beckett, 2016). But they will not spend thousands of dollars on equipment and gear, attend conventions, post in chat rooms, and read gun magazines. Those involved with the gun culture, are motivated by the positive meanings and associations that gun owners place on firearms. The fact is that for those within the gun culture, feeling prepared is fun. It gives a person a feeling of empowerment and control over their destiny.

These meanings can be deeply personal or shared. They can relate to a person’s own story, or the story of their political community. When there is fear in this equation, it is the fear of losing this important part of their lives and identities. After all, you cannot fear to lose that which you do not love. The convention allows a space for firearms enthusiasts to come together and feel a sense of community centered on their shared passion for their serious leisure pursuit. It also allows the NRA to try to transform that sense of community, and that passion, into political action.

It was Sunday afternoon, the closing hours of the convention, and my feet were aching from days of walking. The insole of my trainers was almost completely worn away and it was readily apparent that my shoes would not survive my fieldwork. I limped to a nearby table to jot down some notes using my cellphone. Suddenly, I saw Jim and Beth, the couple working the
SASS booth, walking towards me. They were out of costume and holding hands. They greeted me like an old friend, and Jim put his hand on my shoulder.

“I didn’t even recognize you guys at first without your costumes”, I said. They laughed.

Jim smiled, “Yeah, that’s a big problem at cowboy action events”.

“Thanks again for your help before. It was great meeting you”.

“Stay in touch my friend”.

We said goodbye, and I thought to myself how nice it felt to be greeted like an old friend by someone I barely knew.

Conventions serve a purpose for organizations. Like the agora of ancient Greece, they appear on the surface to be a marketplace. In reality they are much more. They allow likeminded people with a shared serious leisure pursuit to gather, to tell stories, and to create a community – a powerful motivation priming attendees towards political action.
Chapter 6 – Home on the Range

“You can’t take someone to the anti-gun range” – John Hauptman

While it may still technically have been spring, no one had told the scorching West Virginia sun. The rays seared any skin I had dared to leave exposed, my sunscreen long since sweated away. I blinked away the perspiration from my stinging eyes and struggled to aim the borrowed Glock handgun at the center of the dark silhouette target in front of me. It was still morning, but the temperatures were in the high eighties. Regardless, our instructor was putting us through a series of rigorous shooting drills. “Draw. Hold. Fire”. These drills were designed to inculcate the critical components of using a handgun to defend your life. We would practice shooting, of course, but would also hone other key skills like reloading on the fly, or drawing and re-holstering the firearm. At the beginning of the class, I had been terrified I was going to shoot my foot while drawing the gun from the holster. By the time we had gone through the motions a hundred times with empty guns, I felt a lot more confident.

I walked up to within five feet of the target, as our next drill was close-range shooting. In Hollywood shootouts, opponents are separated by large distances, but most real-world defensive handgun encounters, we are told, happen within a few feet. I had never shot at such a close distance before. Cleaning off my fogged-up safety glasses with the sleeve of my green khaki shirt, I prepared for the instructor’s call. On his signal, I emptied five rounds into the center of the target. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.

The classroom, the gun range, and the gun show; these are some of the key sites where gun culture is practiced and constructed by those within the Second Amendment community, and

the NRA maintains a strong presence in all three. The purpose of this project is to evaluate how the NRA disseminates narratives about America’s and American’s pasts to build a political community of gun owners. The organization maintains several important points of contact with members and potential members, gun enthusiasts and the gun curious, such as the organization’s network of instructors, their communications materials, and major NRA events. The organization uses these points of contact to attract new members and new gun owners and motivate existing members to deepen their involvement in the cause. These points of contact provide a venue for the NRA to disseminate narratives and frame the gun debate. Gathering and galvanizing members is important for the organization, as the grassroots membership provides them with the financial and human resources that the NRA needs to advance their desired policy agenda.

The NRA understands that participation in the gun culture is a strong motivating force behind the gun rights movement, and that these everyday cultural practices play an important part in this. In the classroom, gun owners learn the skills, knowledge, and values involved with membership in the Second Amendment community. On the range, they socialize, trade stories, and shoot guns. At gun shows, they talk, and engage with material culture: gazing, buying, selling, and trading.

The gun rights movement is successful because of the passion that gun owners, who are standing up for something dear to them, bring to the fight. Gun rights advocates and the NRA understand that bringing people into this culture is an important way to grow the movement. This is because of the major differences between casual gun owners and those deeply involved in the gun culture. Using number of guns owned as a proxy for attachment to the gun culture, Joslyn (Joslyn, 2020) notes that in the 2016 election, the deeper an individual’s involvement in the gun culture, the more likely they are to have voted Republican. For those who only owned one gun,
the probability of them having voted for Donald Trump was 0.49. For those with four or more guns, this number increased to 0.64 (Joslyn, 2020, p. 64). The NRA, and other pro-gun organizations, understand that the key to getting the gun vote is to deepen people’s involvement in the gun culture, and thus, they hope, in the movement.

We have seen this reflected in the recent initiatives put forward by both major and grassroots gun organizations, the NRA included, encouraging gun-owners to bring friends and family members out to the range. This includes things like the National Shooting Sports Foundation’s “Take Your First Shot” program, or the NRA’s various instructional videos that teach gun owners how to initiate new shooters (N. S. Schwartz, 2019). Gun rights activists understand that getting people hooked on shooting will help to win hearts and minds and that this is an advantage that they hold over pro-control activists, who do not have a central activity, sport or culture that their membership can rally around. As Second Amendment advocate John Hauptman says: “You can’t bring someone to the anti-gun range”.

This is also why NRA courses are an important tool for the organization to expand their membership. Given the scale and pedigree of the NRA’s course offerings, it attracts people who want to learn to shoot, either for self-defense, competition, or as a hobby. These individuals are not necessarily NRA members. They may never have fired a gun, but simply be gun curious. NRA firearms safety courses are amongst one of the first points of contact that people will have with the organization, beyond the digital world. These courses seem to be quite popular. Firearms safety courses are not required to purchase a gun in most US states like they are in Canada, but they are required in many states to apply for a concealed carry permit. Other people take these courses out of interest, out of a desire to become more comfortable with guns, or are brought along by a family member or friend.
Gun shows are also an important meeting place for the Second Amendment community. They are a place to meet, trade stories, and trade goods. For gun rights organizations like the NRA, they provide an excellent point of contact with their current and potential membership. This chapter will explore these three key sites where the gun culture is practiced, drawing from my participant observation in five NRA courses, going to the range with my participants and experiencing two gun shows, from both sides of the table. In this chapter, I will show how the NRA leverages these points of contact with its active and potential members to grow the organization and harness the Second Amendment community.

NRA Firearm Safety Classes

For the first half of my fieldwork, in May and June of 2019, I rented a room in a small townhouse in suburban Fairfax through a popular online rental app. The neighborhood was a crescent of several hundred duplexes, mostly filled with blue collar families, retirees, and new Americans. The street was often full of children riding bikes or playing tag. At a nearby park, groups of teenagers would play basketball. The architectural style of the houses was eerily similar to that of the neighborhood I grew up in suburban Ottawa, giving the whole place a strange sense of familiarity.

The evening before my first NRA course, I was walking to the community mailbox to send some postcards I had bought while visiting DC. Ahead of me, a father in his late thirties bent down to check his mailbox. His loose-fitting t-shirt shifted forward as he bent over, revealing a concealed handgun. The moment broke the sense of familiarity, imbuing it with a new feeling of similar difference. A year before, I would have shied away, uncomfortable, but I was deep enough inside the gun culture by that time that my overriding emotion was curiosity. *Was that a Glock or a Smith & Wesson? I can’t tell at this angle. Should I warn him that he is*
showing? I wonder if he would do an interview if I asked him? In the end, I just mailed my letter and walked away, but the experience drove home to me a point that scholar David Yamane often makes in his work. In many places: “guns are normal, and normal people use guns”.

The NRA’s firearms education programs, a key part of the organization’s original mandate from the 1870s, is one of the most often overlooked elements of the organization’s influence. The NRA has an extensive network of training programs offered in most US states and online, and trains over 1 million Americans every year in firearms safety and marksmanship (NRA, 2021). Carlson, one of the few authors who have examined this element of the NRA, argues that this represents a key part of the organization’s success. She notes that: “…the NRA continues to enjoy favor among many people because they view the organization as empowering Americans with a basic community service (firearms training)”. Looking at this training is an important part of “a bottom-up” perspective on the organization (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 22). NRA instructors are certified by the organization through a lengthy qualification process but are mostly self-employed, rather than employed by the NRA. Most of the instructors I met had other jobs, or were retired, and taught not to make money but to share their serious leisure passion with others. Yet these instructors serve an important role within firearms regulations. In several states, Virginia included, taking a firearms course is a necessary prerequisite to obtaining a concealed carry permit. Given that the NRA is often one of the few major outfits in many states to offer firearms training, these instructors often serve as the “…gatekeepers of gun carry” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 59). Carlson is careful to note that these classes not only teach students the mechanics of gun safety but are key points to teach students values and discursive practices, socializing them into the gun culture. NRA classes “Provide a critical space in which to shape gun culture from the ground up” (J. Carlson, 2015, p. 64). This was something that I observed during my
participant observation in five NRA firearms safety classes.

While each class was a bit different, reflecting the personal style of the instructor, they all followed a similar basic format, with half of the day being devoted to theory and dry practice\textsuperscript{53}, and the second half being devoted to shooting. On top of the course fee, which varied but was usually around $200USD, students had to bring their food, ammunition, and equipment.

Framing the Gun Debate

My first course was the NRA Basics of Pistol class. It was held at an underground, indoor gun-range in Northern Virginia. I parked my car and walked into the main lobby, which looked like the front desk of an auto-body shop. “Morning, I’m here for the NRA pistol class?”, I said nervously. The range attendant, an east Asian man in his thirties with a mustache and long ponytail, checked me in, surrounded by gear for sale. Everything one might need for a day at the range, from ammunition to eye protection to targets, minus the guns, which can only be sold by federally licensed dealers. A clear glass window behind the desk gave me a peek of the actual range, though I could not hear what was going on inside thanks to a two-door airlock system that kept hearing levels inside the lobby at a safe level. “Just head down the hall”, the attendant said, pointing me in the right direction.

I was one of the first students to arrive at the class. The room had exactly 10 seats for the 10 participants. It was covered with NRA posters, and two hunting trophies stared down at the students with unmoving, glassy eyes. At the front, there was a projector with a standardized NRA PowerPoint presentation for the course. Though the instructors were self-employed, the

\textsuperscript{53} Dry practice refers to practice handling the firearms in the absence of ammunition. No live ammunition was ever allowed in the classroom. This rule was strictly observed by all instructors. During one class, I had to leave my backpack out in the hall as it contained a box of cartridges for the live fire portion of the class later in the day.
curriculum of the courses was tightly controlled by the NRA. The instructors received PowerPoint decks, books, and exams from the organization.

Walking in, I introduced myself to the instructor, Maggie, and briefly explained my project. There were three rows of tables and I took a seat at the back. While waiting for class to begin I tried to strike up a conversation with some of the people around me. “Hi, I’m Noah”, I said, turning to the woman beside me. Straight to the point. She turned towards me and I saw her travel mug, advertising a triathlon she participated in. She was in her thirties, thin with brown hair.

“Hi, I’m Susan”.

“Is this your first class?”, I asked.

“Yeah! I got a gun from my dad. Figured I should learn how to shoot it”.

Most people in the class were shy in the beginning, and we soon lapsed into an awkward silence that any teacher or student will recognize as the pre-class stupor.

Maggie began the class by canvassing the students on our background and interest in firearms. “Why are you interested in owning a handgun?”, she asked.

“To protect myself”, a man two seats down from me answered curtly. He was older and held himself like an ex-military fellow. He had a short haircut and looked remarkably like a cross between Donald Trump and Martin Sheen. I did not see him smile the entire day.

Most of the other students replied recreation or self-defense. We were then asked about other firearm-related activities we participated in, and I was the only one in the class who had ever hunted. This was unsurprising, given that this was a handgun class and was being held in a suburban neighborhood. Yet this ads further credence to Yamane et al.’s (2019) assertion

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54 A reminder that all personal names used to describe participants are pseudonyms.
regarding the shifting center of gravity in the American gun culture from hunting to self-defense.

As my classmates introduced themselves, I learned a bit more about the people surrounding me. The man next to me, Albert, was a middle-aged computer programmer, with a grey beard and curly hair. During the day I got to know a few people in the class, who I would later go shooting with and interview. Susan, who I had briefly spoken to, introduced herself to the class as an office worker and passionate triathlete.

In my years as a teaching assistant and contract instructor, I have come to notice certain archetypes in every class. Every year there are a few students that stand out as a result of their relentlessly positive attitude and work ethic. Timothy, who sat next to Susan, was one such student. A middle-aged, bespectacled, African American man who I seldom saw without his baseball cap, Timothy worked as a pilot and split his time between Virginia and Alaska. A proud veteran, Timothy is very involved in the Boy Scouts of America and was taking the class, amongst others, to try to qualify for the NRA instructor program so that he could teach with the Boy Scouts. Unlike Canadian scouts, some American Boy Scouts troops still offer firearms training.

John sat a few rows in front of me. He was probably only a few years older than me and worked as a bodyguard for some of Washington’s higher-ups. He was also taking the course to try to qualify to become an instructor. In the middle row was a husband and wife, who looked to be within a decade of retirement. The woman had long, greying brown hair and was all smiles and laughs. Her husband, an Indigenous man, was quiet and pensive behind his large glasses. As the class progressed, we learned that he did not like buying things, but made them himself, like his wallet which he showed us proudly. Finally, in the front row was a father and son. The father looked like a military type, with short-cropped grey hair, impeccable posture, and a stern
demeanor. His son was in his early twenties, a college student, and wore a backward baseball cap. Had I seen him in the streets, I would have guessed that the hacky-sack or skateboard was his pastime of choice, rather than a Smith & Wesson.

The course material itself was mostly focused on firearms safety. The first section was entirely devoted to memorizing the key safety rules. Topics included safely handling firearms, the different types of firearm malfunctions and how to fix them, and gun cleaning. The instructor used a combination of Powerpoint and multi-media to make her point.

“Never point your gun at anything you are not willing to destroy”. Maggie repeated this often, and was not shy about illustrating the point. At one point, she showed a YouTube video where a man came close to blowing his head off because he looked down his shotgun barrel during a hangfire. Luckily, he only ended up with a hole in his baseball cap.

Topics like safely storing one’s firearms were also covered. An NRA image of three children who had blown up condoms like balloons were shown with a caption to the tune of: “If they can find it, they will play with it”. The instructor drove this home further with her lecture.

“You are responsible for your guns 24 hours a day, seven days a week, no matter where you are. That’s a big responsibility. Do not take it lightly”.

Given the popular image of the NRA, I was initially surprised to see the focus on safe storage, considering that the organization is opposed to laws that would require individuals to safely store their firearms. In reality, this is consistent with the organization’s position that firearms responsibility should be managed by the individual, rather than mandated by the state. The NRA, and many gun rights supporters, see laws like safe-storage laws as incremental attacks

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55 A hangfire occurs when substandard or damaged ammunition is used in the gun. It occurs when the firing pin strikes the primer as the user pulls the trigger, but does not cause the gun to go off immediately. If this occurs, the gun may still fire after a few seconds.
on the right to bear arms, rather than safety measures. They would say that safe-storage laws simply punish people after an accident has occurred, rather than prevent accidents.

The course was also used to promote further involvement with the NRA. This included a very brief history of the organization.

“Who knows how the NRA was founded?” Maggie asked. I raised my hand and looked around. I was the only one.

Students were asked whether or not they were NRA members. Some of the class were NRA members, but most were not. Those who were not were encouraged to buy memberships by the instructor. It was emphasized that on top of providing firearm safety training, the NRA was helping to defend people’s rights.

The NRA recognizes the power of language to shape the political debate. Further, given that gun owners enjoy a technical knowledge of firearms as a result of their familiarity with them that the politicians who regulate them often do not, a favorite game of gun owners is pointing out the mistakes in terminology that these politicians make. Maggie had an interesting method of socializing students into the linguistic practices of the organization. We had been instructed by email after registering for the course to bring spare change with us to class. Maggie had a jar on the table, with a label that listed the three forbidden words in the classroom: bullet, clip, and weapon. The first two are common gripes amongst gun owners. The term bullet is often misused by the public to refer to a cartridge. A cartridge is what the user loads into a firearm. A cartridge contains a casing, which is filled with powder and fitted with a primer that ignites the powder when struck by the firearm’s hammer. It also contains the bullet, which is the projectile that leaves the gun once fired. Those less familiar with firearms often accidentally refer to cartridges as bullets.
The second banned word, clip, refers to a short strip of metal that latches on to the grooves at the back of a cartridge, allowing the operator to load multiple cartridges into a gun with a fixed magazine. It is an outdated loading device that is generally only used for older bolt-action rifles and the first generation of semi-automatic firearms. It was mostly used in guns from the First and Second World Wars, like the German Mauser rifles or the famous American M1 Garand that Marines carried in WWII. For some reason, the terminology stuck around even though virtually all modern bolt-action and semi-automatic firearms are not loaded with clips. Gun owners often enjoy mocking the (mostly) Democratic politicians who use the term incorrectly. For example, Breitbart news poked fun at Joe Biden, who during the 2020 Democratic Primary race argued gun owners do not need a “magazine with 100 clips in it”.

Though these distinctions seem rather petty and technical, they represent a political tactic that the organization often uses to delegitimize their opponents. By attacking anti-gun politicians who misuse gun terminology, the organization aims to discredit them and cast aspersions on their ability to regulate objects that they seemingly know very little about. Someone who is pro-choice, for example, might empathize with this by thinking about how they feel about having their reproductive rights legislated away by someone who knows very little about gestation periods or reproductive anatomy.

The final banned word, weapon, was offensive for more overtly political reasons. It was explained to us that the class we were taking was not a defensive shooting class, though passing the class does qualify you to apply for the Virginia Concealed Carry License. What we were learning was target shooting. We were thus not dealing with weapons but tools. This is an important distinction within the NRA’s communications strategy. The argument goes that a

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firearm, like any other object, can be used for a multiplicity of purposes. Much like a baseball bat can be a piece of sporting equipment or a deadly bludgeon, the essential nature of the object is not inherent in its construction, but its use. The counterargument to this, of course, is that firearms were designed to be effective at killing, to which gun owners counter that regardless of this, firearms are used most often by peaceful people for sporting purposes, hunting and self-defense. Further, guns like those chambered in small cartridges like .22LR are not very effective at killing, but excellent target guns. The debate rages on, but what is interesting is the extent to which the organization understands the power of language and knowledge in shaping the debate and uses their firearms safety courses as a medium to help make ordinary gun owners and NRA members into more effective advocates.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) recognizes that framing is an important narrative strategy that actors can use to shape debates (McBeth et al., 2010). Frames serve to highlight sections of reality and bracket off others. Shaping the language that advocates use is an important way to frame the gun debate. It adds to some of the overarching narratives the organization disseminates through its other mediums. Thinking back to the NRA Annual Meeting, and the secondary villains of the stories that Donald Trump’s “good guy with a gun” guest speakers shared, we see how this works. The narratives that the good guys and gals with guns shared involved primary villains, the attackers, but also secondary villains, the politicians and activists operating in the background to try to disarm the heroes. Playing the language game is an important framing strategy that the organization can use to discredit these “villains”.

Following the classroom instruction, we were split into several small groups. While some of us trained on how to safely load and handle dummy firearms and ammunition, the rest wrote the multiple-choice qualifying test. When each group had passed the test and been introduced to
the basics of safe firearms handling, it was then time to head to the firing range. We were all sent back to the front desk to pay our range fees and buy any ammunition we needed. Those of us who were newer to handguns started with small bore, .22LR pistols, while those taking the course as part of their instructor training, who had more experience, had brought their guns from home, mostly 9mm polymer pistols like the Glock 19.

For the live fire portion of the course, we were once again split into groups, each led by a different instructor. Maggie led the first group, while two new instructors joined us to lead the other groups. One was a blond-haired, muscular young man and the other an older gentleman with a camo baseball cap and a long black beard. We were divided into three groups, with Timothy, Susan, John, and I grouped with Maggie. We waited in the lobby as the other two groups went in first. Eye and ear protection on, we continued to chit chat as we waited, struggling to hear one another with our ears plugged.

“So, what got you into guns?”, I asked Timothy.

“What?” he said. I repeated the question. “I started shooting in the Air Force. We all had to be trained in basic firearm use. I realized I enjoyed target shooting and wanted to keep going after”.

“We’re up”, Maggie interrupted our conversation.

She led us into the “sound lock”. Indoor ranges always have two sets of doors. You walk through the first door, make sure that it is completely closed, and then enter the second door. This is to avoid the loud noises going out into the lobby, where they can damage a patron’s unprotected hearing.

Gun ranges tend to look quite similar. Most are concrete structures with thick walls. The range is divided into separate bays separated by steel dividers. These dividers are meant to
deflect some of the sounds of your neighbor’s shooting, and any empty cartridge casings that are ejected from the gun. This is much appreciated, as semi-automatic guns eject the bullet’s casing after every shot, sending it flying out of the side of the gun. Getting hit with someone’s brass, while not painful, can be annoying. Further, if you fail to follow the direction of wearing a tight-fitting, collared shirt, and doing up your top button, hot, ejected brass can easily end up down your shirt, which I am told is an unpleasant experience.

Each shooting bay in the range was outfitted with a table so that the shooter can set down their gun, ammunition, and any accessories they need. The range featured the latest high-tech target system. This allowed the user to electronically adjust the distance that the target would be placed, and to call back the target holder to change paper targets. Paper targets can quickly fill up with holes, making it difficult to remember where your last shot was placed.

My group pulled up chairs behind the firing line, while Maggie took us up one by one to shoot. “For this round”, Maggie shouted over the din of the shooting range, “Just focus on putting your shots on paper”. When it was clear that everyone was able to do this, we were given another practice round, before shooting our qualifications. Maggie stood by each of us as we shot, offering corrections on our stances, and helping us when we hit a snag. If she noticed a student mishandling a firearm or pointing it in a dangerous direction, she was ready to jump in, though she did not end up having to do so with our group.

The NRA has a system for measuring target shooting proficiency. Each level requires being able to shoot the target accurately and consistently from a further distance. Timothy and John were qualifying for their instructor level and had to take the shots from further away, but Susan and I were simply going for our basic-level qualifications. Our shots were taken from 10 feet away, at targets the size of a small tea saucer. You had to shoot each saucer five times
consecutively, and could not miss, or you had to start again.

The experience of the firing range drove home to me the power of these courses as community-building tools. While some students had been chatting politely during the class, the experience of shooting brought our group together. When each of us would go up one by one to shoot, the rest of us would chat. When the person returned, we would cheer them on, high five and fist bump, especially when they were successful. We had gone from strangers to teammates in six hours.

When it was my turn, I walked up to the shooting bay. Maggie had placed the .22LR semi-automatic handgun on the table, the barrel pointing downrange. I had loaded my magazine while waiting and was ready to roll.

“Load the firearm”, she said. I followed her orders and took up the shooting stance; hands extended in front of me, forming a triangle, knees relaxed but slightly bent, leaning forward to absorb any recoil from the gun. “Go for it”. I took my shots, one at a time, slowly. I remembered to fire at the bottom of my breath, so that the movement of chest expanding or contracting would not throw me off target. Pop. A small hole appeared in the black circle. I took another deep breath, waiting for the natural pause between exhaling and inhaling, steadying my hands. Pop. “Good!”, Maggie said. Another breath. Another shot. Another breath. Another shot. This was it. One more to go. I relaxed my arms, keeping the gun pointing down-range, I shook out my shoulders to release some of the tension, then went back into my stance. I lined up my sights, concentrated on my breathing, and fired. Pop. Another hole in the black circle. I had qualified. I felt a rush of exhilaration and a sense of accomplishment and relief. In reality, the stakes could not have been lower for me. I did not need to qualify and when I returned home the certificate would be useless. Yet the experience of the classroom, the social dynamic and perhaps my innate
competitive nature had made me deeply invested. Target shooting is a sport, and it is fun.

Once we had each finished, we were free to leave. Leaving the range through a separate set of doors on the other side of the range, we immediately went to the sink as instructed where we washed our hands and faces to remove any clinging lead particles. I exchanged information with Timothy, Susan, and John who had expressed interest in my project, and we discussed all going shooting together.

“You have to try this range near me”, Timothy said. “It’s state of the art!” We agreed to meet later at Timothy’s home range.

I left the class around four in the afternoon, completely exhausted, yet with the feeling of having accomplished something. I had made contact. I had set up interviews. I was making progress. My next course would prove far more challenging.

**Gun Culture – a Moving Target**

As Yamane et al. (2019) note, while the gun culture in the United States was originally centered around hunting and sports shooting, legislative changes that began in the 1980s have slowly shifted the center of gravity of the gun culture towards self-defense. The primary factor causing this rise was the concealed carry movement. But what was this movement, and how has it impacted the gun culture?

Before the 1980s, the majority of US states operated on a *may*-issue system for granting concealed carry permits. This means that those states had a large amount of discretion in deciding who was granted a permit and who was rejected (J. Carlson, 2015). Only ten states, clustered in the south and west of the country had *shall*-issue laws in place (Barrett, 2013). In a shall-issue system, the state must grant permits to anyone who can meet the basic requirements
set out by the state, often related to training, residency and the ability to pass a background check (J. Carlson, 2015).

Yet, the rising crime rates of the 1970s and 1980s, spurred on by the crack-cocaine epidemic created a moral panic. This led to the creation of a movement to expand concealed carry. In 1987, Florida, which was experiencing higher crime rates than the rest of the country, shifted to shall-issue laws and a number of states soon followed suit (Baum, 2013).

This movement paradoxically gained further momentum following the 1994 Federal assault-weapons ban, which left consumers seeking a new product, and companies working hard to meet the new demand. Seeking to make up lost ground, the NRA led the gun rights movement on an all-out charge to expand shall-issue laws at the state level. Between 1994 and 1995, eleven states brought in shall-issue laws (Barrett, 2013). At the time of writing, only nine states retain a may-issue system, and fifteen states have gone so far as to bring in constitutional carry laws, and do not require any type of permit to carry a concealed handgun (“Concealed Carry,” 2020).

Estimates suggest that as of 2015, 9 million Americans carry a handgun with them every month, and 3 million do so daily (Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2017). This statistic becomes even more impressive when one reflects on the lifestyle changes that carrying a loaded handgun involves. To begin with, choosing to concealed carry generally involves drastic changes to an individual’s wardrobe. On top of purchasing special holsters, concealed carriers need to avoid certain types of clothing. Tight-fitting clothing, for example, does not properly conceal a firearm and can cause a gun to snag when drawing it. As a concealed carrier, ordinary life events like going to the gym or the beach now involve complex logistics. For men, even using a urinal while concealed carrying becomes more complicated.

The patchwork geography of concealed carry legislation is another major obstacle. On
the micro-scale, there are many places where one cannot carry a firearm. From private businesses seeking to signal their opposition to guns by making their office a gun-free zone, to federal buildings and schools, these zones create complex landscapes for gun-carriers to navigate. Encountering such a sign, a gun owner must choose between leaving their gun in their car, not entering the building, or flaunting the rules. Complex differences in state and county laws also pose a barrier. Most of my participants lived in the DMV: the DC, Maryland Virginia area. This means that crossing into states, or a federal district, with vastly different gun laws was an everyday fact of life for them. Finally, gun carry opens up significant legal liability for gun owners, and has led to an entire industry of gun carry insurance that the NRA briefly engaged in.

Given all of this complexity, why do so many Americans choose to carry a gun? The common-sense answer to this question is fear of crime. This is seemingly supported by survey data, which shows that when asked, the majority of respondents noted “protection” as their main reason for carrying a gun (Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2017). Yet, the answer to this question is more complicated than survey data can capture, suffering as it does from a lack of depth, and the problem of social desirability bias.

Authors writing from the field of sociology generally posit that masculinity is a large part of this equation. Though an increasing number of women are choosing to conceal carry, men still make up the lion’s share of carry permit holders. Only eleven states have data available to the public on the gender of carry permit holders, making up a sample of about 5.4 million gun owners of which 26.5% identified as women (J. R. J. Lott, 2019). Melzer (2009) sees the American tradition of “frontier masculinity” as being largely responsible for the existence of the gun culture. Carlson (2015) explains this movement as part of a broader crisis of masculinity
triggered by the erosion of the masculine bread-winner model. This crisis was brought about by neoliberal and post-industrial shifts in the US economy, which have unseated men from their traditional roles, which they then seek to recapture through the practice of firearms carry. I suspect that this is part of the equation, but I think these explanations miss out on other important elements: empowerment, enacting values, and pleasure.

The gun owners I spoke to generally positioned the outside world as dangerous and saw firearms, and the practice of gun carry, as empowering them to deal with the dangers that the world poses. Gun ownership and carry is often rhetorically positioned as another piece of safety equipment, like a fire extinguisher, which one keeps on hand to deal with a possibility, however remote, but hopes to never have to use. This came out in my interviews. Bucky, one of my participants, noted when we spoke about gun carry that “…of course it’s not necessarily a nice world out there, and sometimes, unfortunately, you need to protect yourself from people who would do you harm” (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019). Steve spoke about how firearms empowered people to defend themselves: “As we have evolved as a people and as a human race we have always had this inalienable right to defend ourselves. And… you know if you attacked me, I would have a right to defend myself because I didn’t want to die that day”. Steve is a firearms instructor and told me that a few weeks after the Virginia Beach Shooting, a friend of one of the victims joined his shooting class. When describing her friend: “She said that if… she knew that if he were there, and if he had a gun, he would do anything to protect somebody or even himself. So, we talked about that for a little bit, because I said you know isn’t that just the basic human instinct is to protect yourself”. Discussing a lawsuit against the city government for making the office a gun-free zone, Steve said:

I think hallelujah that somebody has had the brains to challenge that stupidity. Because criminals really don’t give a rat’s (participant self-censors the word ass) about gun free zones. That’s why
they’re criminals. Why do we law abiding citizens have to die to prove that point constantly? I think it’s irresponsible and I think its horrendously disgusting that good people have to die at the hands of bad people who could care less about following the law… I think that Second Amendment has got to be enforced so that we have the right to protect… our right to defend ourselves from criminals who don’t care about our rights. We want to live, and if you look at the number of people who have their concealed carries that are getting arrested every day because they’re breaking the law, its like point zero zero zero zero zero zero four six percent. So that tells me that concealed carry people are for the most part law abiding citizens that are doing the right things and making the right decisions with their guns. So isn’t that what we are trying to promote, law & order? I think that that’s… when you have guns and people choose to keep them for their protection, in this country that’s a necessity. We should have the same right that the criminal does. (Interview with Steve, July 2, 2019).

Just as carrying a firearm was a way to deal with an unfriendly world, it is also a way of enacting certain values. These values relate to the idea of gun ownership as a right. While most countries do not recognize gun ownership as a human right, gun rights advocates see this right as an extension of the human right to self-protection. The logic goes that virtually every society recognizes the right to self-defense. If criminals use firearms, then average people should have the right to defend themselves with equally powerful tools. Just as participants spoke of firearms ownership as the exercising of a right, they often framed gun carry, or the possession of loaded guns in the home for self-defense, as the exercising of that right. In an interview, my participant Susan summed this up neatly:

To me though it just means the right for me to be able to lawfully have a gun and to do what I wish with it as long as it’s lawfully as well. Self-defense, to be able to have one in my house if I want to, loaded, which I don’t keep mine loaded in the house but if I wanted that right to have it. If I wanted to, you know go running with my gun but I also just don’t (Interview with Susan, May 22, 2019)

This quote indicates that Susan’s support for gun carry comes more from her core political values rather than her fear of crime. If Susan were fearful, she would keep a loaded gun in her household, however she notes that she does not. What is important to her is the right to be able to do so if she chose to.

Timothy also spoke of the importance of this right as it relates to self-defense:
…We have the right to provide for ourselves while other nations citizens must depend on the
magnanimous nature of their government. We also have the right to defend ourselves. Again, a
right not enjoyed by citizens in other countries. These other countries (governments) provide
only an illusion to provide security for their citizens, but only really provide it for themselves
(Interview with Timothy, June 6, 2019)

The final reason for gun carry is joy or pleasure. This is probably the most difficult
reason for non-gun owners to comprehend, but journalist and ethnographer Dan Baum captures
the appeal of gun carry when he talks about the pleasure that gun enthusiasts get from handling
firearms. He notes that gun owners derive a distinct pleasure from handling, thinking about or
seeing firearms, in the same way that a car enthusiast enjoys looking at pictures of cars online or
in calendars, tinkering in their garage, or taking a car for a spin. “Most of us, though, seldom
enjoy the pleasure of handling them- perhaps only when we take them from the safe for hunting
season, plus a few sessions of target practice. The rest of the time, we read about them, think
about them, and watch movies full of them. But we don’t handle them. Imagine a musician who
got to touch a guitar for one week a year” (Baum, 2013, p. 29).

This sentiment was echoed by several of my participants. I suspect that it is true that
people who carry do fear crime. But I do not think this is the prime motivation for most gun
owners, especially those from rural areas or middle-class communities where crime rates are
extremely low. As with other passions, from Yoga to music, to skiing, these areas of our life
resist being put away in boxes and seep through into our broader social relations. Anyone who
has ever endured a conversation with a colleague or friend about the benefits of their latest
exercise regime is familiar with this. Concealed carry allows gun owners to incorporate their
serious leisure passion into other parts of their lives, and to embody or perform their political
values. In the same way that Star Wars fans plaster their cars with decals, carrying a firearm
becomes another way of performing the social role of gun-owner and gun-enthusiast.
This came through in my interviews with participants. Though most of my participants spoke of having carry licenses, none of my participants were carrying when we met. When I asked one participant, Bucky if he was carrying he said that though he has had his permit for 25 years, he often leaves his gun at home when running errands in his neighborhood, or when traveling into a different political jurisdiction, which he must do often for work (Interview with Bucky, May 28, 2019). Similarly, Timothy got into guns as a hobby, and then later ended up getting his concealed carry permit, suggesting that fear of crime was not his paramount motivation for gun ownership (Interview with Sam, June 18, 2019). Susan, who often goes for early morning runs, discussed talking with her other running buddies about carrying while running. She described a conversation with a friend who lives in the same neighborhood who chastised Susan for not carrying when running. Susan responded:

I mean I know you run early in the morning, but do you really think that like you’re going to be like you need to carry your gun… Not to say that something couldn’t happen, but I have runner’s mace that I carry with me when its warm, and or I’m alone or its night, I can just spray somebody in the face. I’d rather spray somebody in the face then shoot somebody... You have to worry more about people’s dogs then people usually, based on where we live. It’s not like were running in Southeast DC or in Baltimore (Interview with Susan, May 22, 2019)

Rick discussed how in the past when he had lived in a bad area, he carried a gun for self-protection. Now, living in an upscale gated community far away from the troubles of nearby DC or Baltimore, he sees gun ownership as a recreational pursuit and rarely carries:

It’s more of a hobby now at this point. It’s not quite so much about self-protection because I’m in a fairly decent area. We live in… you know there’s not a lot of crime in this area. I live in an upscale gated community house now, where I’m not having to leave near a base or anything. So it’s really more, after my retirement now, it’s more about a hobby more than anything else. It’s something else for me to tinker with. Whether I’m working on motorcycles or cars or doing stuff around the house. It’s just one more thing for me to fill some time with. It’s something I enjoy. There are some advantages to it. It’s kind of calming. There’s something about trying to put a little small, inch and a half long bullet into a target, you know, three-quarters of a mile to a mile away. That’s pretty calming and relaxing and there’s a lot of studying that goes to it. But it keeps me active (Interview with Rick, June 21, 2019).
None of this is meant to suggest that fear of crime is not an important part of the reason why many people, my participants included, own or carry firearms. Safety or security concerns were often mentioned by participants. Alvin, a participant who answered my online survey, responded to a question on the personal meaning of firearms by saying “Means Safety when carried”. Barry noted, “…it also means security in my hands”. Carl listed “Self-Defense Preparedness” as a key reason for owning a gun.

But fear cannot tell the whole story. Looking at the full responses from the online survey, for example, the Alvin followed up his comment on guns as safety with “It also means fun when used in competition or shot at the range”. Barry’s quote, when presented in full reads: “It’s mostly a sport/hobby, but it also means security in my hands”. For Carl, “Self-Defense Preparedness” was listed six out of his seven motivations for owning a gun behind “Going to the range. Backyard plinking. Sports shooting… Hunting” and followed by “Firearms Collecting”. Fear is not the whole picture.

Appadurai (1996) is careful to note that while structuralist explanations, like masculinity, are important for explaining the context of social action, it is important to be attuned to the agency of participants. Joy and pleasure are areas where we can directly observe the agency of participants at work.

Regardless of the motivations behind it, concealed carry is a big and growing part of the gun culture (Yamane, 2017). Seeking to expand the gamut of training it offers millions of Americans in concealed carry, the NRA had recently revamped their basic concealed carry weapon (CCW\textsuperscript{57}) course. As a result, I was amongst the first wave of students to get a chance to

\footnote{57 The astute reader will note that it was previously mentioned that weapon was a bad word in NRA circles. The lone exception to this rule is in the realm of concealed carry. The reason for this, as explained by my firearms instructor, was that a firearm that you carry for self-defense is intended to be used as a weapon, if needed.}
try the new curriculum.

To get to the class I found myself driving along a backroad highway. Four lane expressways had long since given way to tree lined backroads. I had left behind the mansions and suburban bungalows of Fairfax, for farmhouses, trailers, and humble country homes. The speed limit was 50mph, but the road twisted and turned so often I doubt that I ever got above forty. My GPS was going haywire, alternating between welcoming me to Virginia and West Virginia as the road snaked along the state line. For me, it was an arbitrary boundary, but I could not help but reflect that for many of my participants who choose to concealed carry firearms, it could be the difference between a Sunday drive and a hefty prison sentence, depending on the laws of the state they crossed into. This is the nature of the many-colored patchwork that is US Firearms Policy.

I walked into the class and introduced myself to the instructor, Bill. Bill was an older man, in his 60s, with short grey hair and a wide grin. He wore glasses, Gore-Tex hiking pants and a black polo shirt with a shooting vest over top. We had spoken several times over the phone when I explained my project to him and given that I was the only one in the class that he didn’t know personally, he guessed who I was right away. “You must be Noah”. He smiled at me. “Now you said you don’t have your own gun, right?”

Since I was the only one without my own pistol, Bill was kind enough to lend me one from his collection, along with three spare magazines and a holster. After checking my passport to verify that I was indeed a U.S. citizen, he handed me the unloaded firearm and holster and told me to wear it for the duration of the class. It was a Glock 19, the smaller, concealable version of

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58 Not to be confused with a bullet-proof vest. A shooting vest is similar to a fishing vest, in that it has several pockets designed to hold equipment you might need while on the range, such as boxes of ammunition. Some vests have padded shoulders, in order to help reduce bruising from recoil when shooting shotguns or high caliber rifles.
the Glock 17 that I had tried in my previous class. Once again, no live ammunition was allowed in the classroom, but even having the unloaded gun on my belt I felt the weight of responsibility. It was unsettling at first. I kept reaching my hand down to make sure it had not moved. Slowly, I grew accustomed to it as the day went on.

Bill introduced me to my three classmates. Given that this was a trial run of the new curriculum, the class size was kept small. All were ex-military or had worked in defense-related branches of the US government. All were interested in becoming instructors and approached the course from a pedagogical perspective, since they were familiar with most of the content already, had their CCW licenses, and carried regularly. I was clearly the outsider; a feeling that was only exacerbated after I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student and dual citizen living in Canada.

Given that the day was quickly heating up, even at eight o’clock in the morning, Bill elected to switch the order for the class, conducting our practical training in the morning and leaving the book learning for the afternoon. After a short briefing, we went outside, fetched our eye and ear protection, and lined up along the shooting bench. The row of wooden benches, covered with an awning, was positioned 15 yards from several targets. These targets took the shape of a human silhouette rather than the circular targets that I had shot at the previous weekend during the pistol course. Bill explained that getting into the world of concealed carry was new for the NRA. Until recently, the “w word” (weapon) was completely forbidden. The NRA also refused to use silhouette targets for many years, given their humanoid appearance. As a large and old organization, the NRA is by its very nature conservative in both senses of the word. As such, they have been slower to adapt to the new realities of gun culture 2.0. All this was changing, as the point of aim for the gun culture slowly shifted from recreation to self-defense. If the NRA wanted to keep up with the times, they needed to shed their Fudd
appearance and offer new courses.

The first 30 minutes outside were spent performing dry practice exercises. We practiced being able to draw the gun from the holster, keeping the muzzle of the gun pointed in a safe direction at all times. We had to practice moving aside an article of clothing to get at our concealed firearm, and Bill once again lent me a spare shooting vest to simulate having to clear away a shirt or jacket that I would be carrying the pistol under. Every single movement involved in drawing the gun was drilled into us. Bill walked behind us, checking to make sure our grip was correct, that we were doing the right movements and most importantly that our firearm, even empty, was always pointed in a safe direction.

“Keep your pistol close to your chest when you draw, then extend out. Real self-defense shootings are not like Hollywood, they happen close, and they happen fast. You may not be able to get the gun all the way out if you must shoot, but that’s okay. You can fire from closer in”.

Respect for safety is drilled into gun owners during these courses. A large part of this is due to the nature of the activity. Accidents are rare in the shooting sports, yet when they occur the results can be life-changing, or life-ending. As a result, most gun owners that I know tend to be safety fanatics, and it is not uncommon to see someone being yelled at or kicked-off a gun range for a relatively minor safety infraction. While this respect for safety is likely genuine, some of it is also performative and political, as gun owners know that any mistake that they make is likely to be used as ammunition against their right to own and use firearms.

“Load five rounds into your magazine”, Bill barked. The dry fire was over, and it was time to practice the real thing. I had brought with me several boxes of 9mm Luger ammunition, purchased at a nearby Walmart. Since I did not have a US driver’s license, I had shown the cashier my passport, verifying that I was a US citizen and of age, and he had unlocked the case
and handed me the ammunition. I carefully loaded five rounds into the Glock’s detachable magazine, hand shaking slightly. Standing in front of the target, I slid the magazine into the gun and racked the slide to put a round into the chamber of the gun. There is no manual safety on a Glock, as it was originally designed with law enforcement officers in mind. Its manufacturers found that in self-defense scenarios, manual safeties often created problems for police officers, who would leave them on accidentally or worse, forget that they had not engaged them and act recklessly (Barrett, 2013). As soon as the round was chambered, the gun was ready to go. Arms extended in front of me, forming a triangle, I squeezed the trigger and dotted the silhouette target with five holes.

When we had run through all of the drills, and several hundred rounds of ammunition, it was time to take the test to qualify. “To get your certification”, Bill explained, “80% of your shots must hit within the center zone of the target”. This included the head and most of the torso. At three yards this was easy, but out to seven and then fifteen yards, it became more challenging. Though I am a relatively new pistol shooter, under Bill’s tutelage I was able to pass the course, albeit with the lowest score of the group. At the end of the qualification test, however, one of the more experienced shooters approached me: “You did really well”. He was impressed that this bespectacled and soft-spoken scholar could keep up with seasoned shooters. Though Bill constantly gave me pointers and corrections, he too admitted that I was shooting better than he had expected.

By the time we had finished the test I was sweating buckets and at the brink of heat exhaustion. We cleared and holstered our guns, spent a good ten minutes picking up brass

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59 Clearing the gun is slang for verifying that the firearm is unloaded. To do this, the user removes the magazine from the firearm, checks that the chamber is empty, and ideally verifies that nothing is stuck in the barrel. This is an important safety practice, as assuming that a gun is unloaded when it is not is one of the most common causes of gun accidents.
casings from the ground, and headed inside to the classroom. Post-shooting the mood in the classroom had shifted perceptibly. Though not unfriendly, the other students in the class had largely ignored me in the morning. Now they were chatting more freely. “So, what exactly are you studying?” the man next to me asked. They were curious about gun laws in Canada, and we got into a long conversation about the wide variation of state-level gun laws in America, and what this meant for the Second Amendment. Shooting together, like other sports, creates a bond between people. The shared physical, emotional, and chemical experience of shooting creates a special sense of comradery, and community, amongst those that take part.

The afternoon was spent on the theoretical portion of the course. This included things like choosing the right firearm and different ways of carrying a concealed firearm. To the uninitiated, this probably seems rather pedantic but within the Second Amendment community, it is the topic of endless vitriolic debate.

“Now I hear a lot lately about appendix carry”, Bill said. Bill acknowledged that this new carry fad, where the gun is placed in a holster between the bottom of one’s belly button and one’s pubis, facing downwards. Proponents argue that this one of the most comfortable and concealable carry methods, though I did not try it myself. This kicked off a heated debate in the class.

“I dunno”, one of my classmates noted, interrupting Bill during a pause. “Whenever I think of appendix carrying, I always think of the first rule”. Everyone laughed. He was referring of course to the fact that when carrying appendix your holstered firearm is pointed directly at your genitals, running up against one of the central rules of firearms safety: “Never point your gun at anything you are not willing to destroy”.

The course then shifted to discussing defensive encounters. It covered proper situational
awareness, which refers to changing how you navigate the world around you to be more mindful and aware of potential dangers, as well as how to avoid confrontation. The instructor ran us through some hypothetical situations to practice our situational awareness.

Hypothetical narratives present an interesting case study for scholars of storytelling. At the time of writing, I could find no NPF studies that look specifically at hypothetical narratives in public policy. While perhaps not as impactful as a true story, hypothetical narratives can still have an emotional draw on the listener and have the added benefit for allowing them to imagine themselves more literally in the scenario. These scenarios were often used in NRA courses, and also online discussion that gun owners engage in on topics ranging from home or self-defense all the way to apocalyptic scenarios.

During the class, we were presented with the hypothetical narrative of walking down a dark street when we cross a group of suspicious-looking men. The instructor took us through the escalation of force, emphasizing, like the textbook, that firearms are a tool of last resort, and that there are several steps to consider before using one’s firearm. We were encouraged to cross the street when we saw the strangers approaching us. When the group crossed with us, we were told to try to hide inside a nearby business, in this case, a corner store. Eventually, when the ruffians cornered us, we had no choices left, it was do or die.

Hypothetical narratives and visualization strategies are tools used by professional athletes (Suinn, 1994) and in the 1990s, a special school was set up at Westpoint Academy to incorporate this training into the military (Zinsser et al., 2004). My initial exposure to the gun culture through podcasts and YouTube videos had shown me that these techniques are used regularly in the concealed-carry community as well, likely a result of the links and movement between the military and ex-military community and the gun culture.
These hypothetical narratives are not only useful training tools but effective forms of political communication. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the hypothetical scenario of the single mother defending herself with a gun in the fictional trailer park outside of Indianapolis was an effective narrative strategy employed by Chris Cox during the NRA Annual Meeting speeches. This strategy was effectively coupled with the three real-life testimonials of survivors of self-defense scenarios. This helps bridge the mental gap between the individual and these events.

The final portion of the course covered what to do in the aftermath of a defensive encounter. This included both the legal and the emotional repercussions of a self-defense shooting. When we talked about the body’s physiological responses to danger, other students shared stories of their experiences of adrenaline rushes and other physiological responses to fear. This included a discussion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the importance of seeking help afterward, whether professional counseling or religious counseling.

As the day concluded, we handed in our completed exams and then graded them as a group. We finished up by discussing how to become more involved with the NRA. Bill went over some things that the NRA does for the firearms community and talked about ways that we could get more involved with the organization.

Cautionary Tales

Not all the courses that I took involved putting lead on target. They did not even all involve guns. The NRA’s Refuse to be a Victim Program is the organization’s answer to the increasing popularity of the women’s self-defense class. Though the program is not explicitly aimed at women, it is clearly intended for a female audience. White, middle-class women make up the subject of nearly all of the pictures in the course textbook, for example. In the actual
classroom, I was the only man.

The course was held at a private firearms school in the countryside. It took place in an outdoor portable classroom, evoking memories of my public elementary school education. I met the owner of the school when I arrived. She was a short, African American woman in her fifties, who was dressed like she was about to go play tennis, with the addition of a black, semi-auto handgun strapped to her waist. “Welcome”, she smiled and put her arm around me, as if greeting an old friend. “Just head outside across the parking lot, she’s waiting for you there”.

The instructor, Wanda, was an older African American woman in her early sixties. She was thin and walked slowly and cautiously due to a medical condition. She would have appeared almost frail were it not for the no-nonsense attitude that oozed from her persona. This attitude, however, masked a deep well of kindness. She had a piercing gaze and a facial expression that warned you that she was not someone to be trifled with, but when her smile broke through the tough exterior it was warm and gentle. This contradiction was embodied when she spoke about her grandchildren during the course, which she did often. Her voice when soft when talking about them but hardened quickly when she mentioned what she would do to keep them safe.

There was a wide age range of students in the class, and it was the most diverse NRA class that I took during my fieldwork. The first student to arrive was a middle-aged, African American woman with pink hair, a backward baseball cap, and prominent arm tattoos and piercings. She was a tow-truck driver and arrived with her truck fully loaded with a pickup truck on the back, much to the consternation of the school’s owner. The next to arrive was a younger white woman, probably in her early thirties, with brown hair and an ostentatiously large wedding ring. She wore a red-orange Columbia hiking shirt, not uncommon shooting range attire. She introduced herself to the instructor as an instructor in training, who was supposed to shadow
Wanda as she was the “best in the business”.

Behind me sat a woman in her fifties who had brought along her mother, Betty, a spritely senior citizen whose spunky attitude reminded me distinctly of the characters that Betty White often plays on television. “I’m from New York”, she later told us, “People don’t mess with me”. She was also quite tough and talked about carrying a knife and pepper spray, and what she would do to criminals who tried to cross her. When we were introducing ourselves, Betty said that she had several guns already, but was seeking out more training: “I’m armed to the teeth, but I don’t know what to do with the darned things”. When Wanda later talked about not carrying assisted opening knives, as they are illegal in Maryland, Betty joked: “I’m a little old lady, the cops aren’t going to bother me”, and winked.

The last row was occupied by a larger African American woman with short-cropped hair who came in late, Christina. She would later introduce herself as a parole officer. Finally, next to her and the last to arrive was a woman wearing a colorful floral hijab and black glasses, Salma. She had brought her young son who I estimated would have been no older than 10, raising several eyebrows.

The NRA Refuse to be a Victim Program highlights some of the contradictions in the organization, as it attempts to evolve with the times. On the one hand, the NRA has gone to great lengths to try to rebrand, hiring and prominently displaying diverse spokespeople like Dana Loesch and Colion Noir, and producing many publications and programs focused on getting women, people of color and people with disabilities involved in the shooting sports. The organization recognizes that without expanding its appeal beyond its core demographic of older white men, it will not survive (N. S. Schwartz, 2019). Yet, the Refuse to Be a Victim program seems to contravene this image. Firearms were barely mentioned during the course, as the
curricular designers seemed to assume that women would be less comfortable with armed self-defense and chose to focus instead on prevention and less-than-lethal defense techniques\textsuperscript{60}. Further, the pictures and examples in the textbook and course curriculum focus mostly on middle-class, white women. The instructor supplemented the curriculum, drawing on her own experiences living in low-income inner-city neighborhoods, but the main curriculum is missing out on a large segment of the market for the course.

Wanda began the course by explaining that the Refuse to be a Victim seminar is about being prepared for any situation, using common sense solutions. “This is one of the NRA’s only non-firearms courses”, she said. “This is important, because in a self-defense situation, you usually only have three seconds to react, and sometimes this is not enough time to get to your gun”.

Given the lack of gunplay in the course, narrative and mental training became even more important. Throughout the day, Wanda would often throw scenarios at us to ask how we would react. “You get back to your car in a parking lot to find that a white, unmarked van has parked next to you”. She fixed her piercing glare at me. “What do you do?”. Taken aback, I panicked and said, “I would try to look into the front windows?”.

“Wrong!”, Wanda barked, in her matter-of-fact way.

She explained that in most snatch and grab situations, the criminal will hide in the back seat of the van and grab you from there. The correct answer, provided by Betty, was to ask a friend to escort you out. This was one of the many times throughout the day where I was forced to come to terms with the blind spots that my male privilege had left in my perception of the

\textsuperscript{60} Less-than-lethal is a term used to describe self-defense accessories that focus on stopping or immobilizing an attacker without the use of potentially lethal force. It includes things like pepper spray, tasers, key-chain batons, and an increasing array of tools that are heavily marketed at women.
world. Blushing, I reflected on the fact that it would never occur to me to ask someone to walk me to my car. The risks we were discussing were much more real in the lives of these women than in my own.

Once again, these hypothetical narratives were extremely emotionally impactful. By placing the listener in the driver’s seat of the narrative, the stories are imbued with a sense of realism and urgency.

On top of the hypothetical narratives, the workshop became a space for people to share their own personal narratives of crime and victimization. Crime stories became a major theme of the class, as each of the students shared their own stories of close calls that they or their relatives and friends had experienced. Wanda would sometimes interject, correcting or commending the behavior that the people in the stories had displayed. Quite unusually, I was the quietest student in the class. Occasionally, I was able to share some of my own stories, such as an incident that had happened earlier that week when a man tried to trick me into letting him into my car at a gas station. “Oh, that happened to a friend of mine!”, someone interjected.

I am quite soft-spoken, and my sometimes-feminine demeanor allowed me to blend in as one of the gals. Wanda noted this later during the class when talking about how the way that you carry yourself, and visual cues like eye contact, can communicate subconsciously to criminals that you are a soft target. When commenting on my unconscious communications, Wanda fumbled her words, clearly worried about offending my masculinity: “You… uh… you have a gentle and polite demeanor”. I blushed, more worried that she would worry that I was offended than offended myself.

“What’s your personal space?” Wanda later asked. A few of us gave answers. “About arm’s length”, one student said, most of us nodding in agreement. “Wrong!”, Wanda barked,
“Your personal space is as far as you can see. You are responsible for knowing what is in that space. The best strategy for personal safety is to avoid confrontation. When in doubt, get out”.

Like in the Concealed Carry class, Wanda constantly stressed the importance of situational awareness. “Everybody is walking around outside, distracted all the time. Smartphones, iPods, video games…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

Surprisingly, quite a large portion of the course was taken up discussing non-physical threats, like scams and cyber-crime. Wanda also addressed the influence of technology on people’s behavior. Few people in the class spoke very positively about the digital revolution. “If something happens, you can’t count on people to step in and help you. These days, they’re just gonna pull out their phones and videotape you”. There was, I must admit, quite a bit of truth to that.

The overall themes of the course were vigilance and responsibility. We put these into action later, when our guest speaker came in. Erik was an African American man in his late forties. He was tall and broad-chested, built like a linebacker, but with a long grey and black beard. He was wearing a dark red polo. He introduced himself and explained that he is an ex-US marine and now trains law enforcement in self-defense techniques.

Erik once again emphasized visualization during our practice, talking us through the self-defense mindset. He said that most people do not want to think that bad things can happen to them. “Just like people don’t go to the doctor, because they don’t wanna hear bad medical news”. He took us through a visualization exercise. “Picture someone attacking you, how are you going to respond? Okay, now picture someone attacking someone you love?” We all agreed that we were more aggressive in the later visualization. “Why do you value your own lives so little?” Erik told us that in many cases, people who resisted violent attacks fare better than those who
submit. He shared stories of break-ins, and famous serial killers, and how people would submit to the criminals hoping to be spared. “Why will we fight for others but not ourselves?” He then took us through body mechanics exercises and showed us a few self-defense strategies, before shifting into a conversation about how to pick the right pepper spray.

Toward the end of the class, we finally talked about guns. Wanda noted that the use of firearms as a means of self-protection will depend on your living situation. Most of the women in the room seemed to already have firearms in their homes and began to talk about this. Christina, who works as a parole officer with sex offenders in a rough city, mentioned she lived alone, and that her job puts her at significant risk. She described sleeping with a shotgun and having strategic caches of weapons staged\textsuperscript{61} throughout the house.

This story drove home to me the complex ways that privilege can blind those on both sides of the Great Gun Debate. Though it is working to appeal to new groups, the NRA material is still very much shaped and motivated by the perspective of white men of privilege. This is not a particularly controversial or revolutionary statement to make in an academic text, and I do not expect that it will ruffle the feathers of many readers. What those of us who approach the debate from an academic perspective often fail to recognize, and especially those of us coming at this debate from outside of the United States, is how our own privilege can color the pro-control perspective. I have been guilty of this in the past, skeptical that anyone would need a firearm for self-protection. What my experiences within the gun culture have shown me was the extent to which this view was reflective of having grown up in middle-class Canadian suburbs. Christina’s positionality, and her employment, placed her at considerable risk. For her, firearms were a risk

\textsuperscript{61}“Staging” in the firearms world refers to placing or hiding firearms strategically throughout one’s home in the event of a home invasion. A wide variety of products are now sold to assist with this, such as mirrors, clocks, desks, end tables and even tissue boxes with hidden compartments where firearms can be kept. On the higher end, these products contain biometric locks, which allow the user to open them with their fingerprints.
management tool in an uncertain world. Would she be safer if firearms were less widely available in the United States? If American invested in public institutions to improve policing, fight substance abuse and support those in need? Perhaps. But these questions are academic.

Despite the somewhat macabre topics of conversation, the atmosphere of the class was quite convivial and warm. The group became fast friends as people were eager to share their stories and experiences, to learn from one another and to tell jokes. The school, and the firearms range with which it was associated next store, was a family business, and several people, including Wanda’s brother, popped in and out of the class at varying intervals to smile at Wanda and joke around with us. I once again felt the sense of community that came from a group of like-minded people gathering to talk about a subject that interests them. You could tell that people appreciated the space to discuss a topic that they might not share with others, and how the experience strengthened and reaffirmed their core political beliefs.

The NRA Basic Rifle Shooting Course and the NRA Basic Shotgun Shooting Course took on a similar rhythm to the other courses I had taken. The mornings were taken up with the theoretical portion, where we learned how to own and operate a firearm safely. I must somewhat reticently note that these classes put the Canadian Firearms Safety Course (CFSC)\textsuperscript{62}, which I had completed in preparation for my fieldwork, to shame. While much of CFSC is taken up with complex and counterproductive acronyms and dated material, the NRA courses cover a lot more ground and are updated regularly. For example, the Canadian course offered no instruction for students on how to clean their firearms, a major component of firearms safety. This was covered in depth in the NRA courses. Further, the Canadian course has no live-fire component. Students handle de-activated firearms in class but never go to the range under the supervision of an

\textsuperscript{62} The CFSC is the government mandated course that is required for Canadians to acquire their basic Firearm’s License.
instructor. Students taking the NRA course cannot pass without demonstrating both theoretical knowledge of firearms safety, and the ability to safely handle firearms on the range.

The live-fire portion of the NRA Rifle Course took place at the NRA’s dedicated range. The instructor, Rick, who I would later interview, took us through the qualification, which we completed using his rifles. Afterward, we were invited to stay late and try out a few of Rick’s firearms, including his AR-15. Interestingly, Rick had mentioned in the course that he had never been interested in owning an AR-15 until Obama had raised the idea of banning assault weapons. He saw the ownership of the much-maligned firearm as a form of protest. As a veteran, he was also familiar with the platform, as the controls of the AR-15 are similar to the M4 Carbine used by the US military, though the two guns are functionally different. I had never fired an AR-15 before, and I must admit the notoriety of the firearm made the experience feel taboo in a way that shooting the bolt action .22 had not. At the same time, I could appreciate the qualities that make the rifle so popular. It was easy to handle, the recoil was manageable, and the rifle had been customized extensively.

For the practical component of the NRA shotgun course, the instructor Steve took us to his large property in rural Maryland. He had a Trap Thrower, a machine that launches clay-pigeons into the air, which allowed us to practice skeet and trap shooting. We had completed the theoretical portion of the course in a boardroom in suburban Baltimore which belonged to a small business owner who was a friend of Steve. After lunch, we formed a caravan and drove to his property. Parking our cars, Steve joined us with his fully loaded ATV. We threw our bags in the trailer and walked alongside it to the middle of the field. It was hot, and Steve had loaded the trailer with water bottles and sports drinks, which we chugged between shots.

Once again, Steve took us all through the qualifications to pass the course and then
allowed us to keep shooting together. He gave us tips and pointers on our technique. Unlike the rifle and pistol shooting I had done so far, which had been on static paper targets, clay pigeon shooting involves firing at a moving target. This introduces some different techniques and mental calculations into your practice, making it both more challenging and more engaging.

In both the rifle and shotgun course, the practical portion of the course once again inspired a sense of comradery amongst participants. We had started the day as shy, silent strangers, and finished as fast friends. The cultural practices of the gun culture, target shooting, hunting and self-defense preparedness are *social* practices. Incorporating people into these practices makes it more likely that they will contribute to the gun rights movement. The gun rights movement, and the NRA, understand that bringing people into the gun culture strengthens the movement by giving people a stake in the fight. They use venues like their firearms classes as community-building tools, employing modalities like narratives to build a political community of gun owners.

**Range Days**

The glossy handle of the small revolver made it difficult to grip with my naturally sweaty palms. After a few shots, I decided to put on my leather and nylon shooting gloves to give me more traction. The heavy trigger pull of the revolver rotated the cylinder, lining up a single round of .357 Magnum with the chamber of the gun. As the trigger clicked, the firing pin struck the primer and for a fraction of a section I held in my hands a miniaturized, controlled explosion. I directed that explosion at the paper target 10 yards ahead of me, and then looked up to admire my handiwork. As my participant, Timothy would later describe it, at that moment “…it’s just you and the paper (target) trying to control the laws of physics” (Interview with Timothy, June 6, 2019).
Going to the shooting range is a central cultural practice in the gun culture. During my research, I went to the range four times with my participants, not counting the visits to the range during the NRA courses. Engaging in this practice helped build rapport with my participants, and a trip to the range was often followed by an interview.

I took my first trip to the range after my NRA Pistol Course. I had agreed to meet Timothy and Susan at a shooting range in northern Virginia. We went in the evening, just after dinnertime. Like many indoor ranges, it occupied a fairly non-descript building in a large industrial park. From the outside, the building looked like a FedEx Depot, except for the large sign with the name and logo of the business. I ran into Susan in the parking lot, and we walked in together. This was Timothy’s favorite place to shoot, but neither Susan nor I had been there before.

Entering the lobby, we both looked around in bemusement. “Holy crap”, I said. The facility was part of a growing trend of boutique shooting ranges, dubbed “guntry clubs”, as a play on words with “country club”. These ranges are generally quite upscale, featuring a large pro shop and state of the art amenities like electronic target holders, advanced air filtration systems, and other add-ons.

As Susan and I approached the front desk, we were greeted by two young women wearing black polos with the range’s logo on them. They checked us in, verified our IDs, and had us sign the range’s long liability waiver. Before being able to shoot, we had to watch a safety briefing in a large conference room with a big-screen television. Timothy was already there when we arrived, and greeted us warmly, like an old friend. Timothy is one of those people who has a way of connecting with anyone he meets. His warm smile, genuinely sunny disposition, and positive attitude make him a very difficult person to dislike. We watched the safety briefing
while he arranged our shooting lanes. The video was about ten minutes long and covered the basic dos and don’ts of shooting, as well as rules for the range, like which caliber, ammo type, and type of firearm were approved for use.

Once the video was done, we headed to the counter to pay our range fees. We then put on our eye and ear protection and passed through the two-door airlock and onto the range. This shooting range was much bigger than the one where we had taken our pistol course. The facility was divided into three separate ranges of varying distances, all indoors, divided into separate bays. Heading towards our pre-assigned section, we passed a group of two men and two women shooting together on a double-date. Timothy placed his gun cases on the table and started to unpack the firearms we would be using, careful to place the pistols with the barrel facing downrange. While he set up, I looked around. Next to us, a uniformed police officer practiced drawing from the holster and firing. To our right, at the end of the range, a young couple were taking turns firing a 12-gauge shotgun. The blast of the shotgun was uncomfortable in the indoor space, even with the double layer of ear protection I was wearing.63

“You can borrow my Glock”, Timothy shouted over the din of the range. He gestured to his Glock 17 pistol lying on the shooting table, action open to show that it was unloaded. “Who wants to go first?”

Timothy seemed genuinely excited to have new range buddies, as he often goes shooting alone. He is also a natural born teacher, which is part of the reason he is trying to become a

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63 Hearing protection is the most important piece of personal protective equipment that a shooter wears. A gun firing emits the same decibel range as a jet-engine taking off. Shooting without hearing protection can cause instant and permanent hearing damage. When shooting outside you can usually get away with a single layer of hearing protection, such as foam earplugs. When shooting indoors however, the NRA advises that you double up. When at the range, I always wore my in-ear hearing protection, which I had custom molded to my ears, as well as a set of noise-cancelling earmuffs. The earmuffs are specially designed to filter out unsafe noise levels, while amplifying human voices, so that you can still hear range commands.
firearms instructor. With his children away at university, he was excited to have people to share his knowledge with, and I was very eager for his pointers. He had brought targets, which we clipped into the caddy. Typing seven yards into the computer screen, our target was whisked off downrange.

“Susan, you go first”, I said. She had brought her compact Smith & Wesson semi-automatic pistol, as well as her revolver, which had belonged to her late father. She stepped up to the table, loaded her handgun, and got to it. While she shot, Timothy handed me a Glock magazine to load with 9mm target rounds.

Once Susan was done she made her gun safe and turned to Timothy, who gave her a high five.

“Great group!” he said, always encouraging and enthusiastic.

I stepped up to the booth, with Timothy standing next to me to offer advice. I did well. The Glock fit naturally in my hand and had a very positive grip. After having shot a few Glocks throughout my fieldwork I can understand why the firearm is now ubiquitous in American gun culture. It is like the Mac computers of the gun world. Sleek, simple, and easy to use right out of the box.

“Great job!” Timothy said, “Next time focus on your trigger pull. I could see you anticipating the recoil. Pull back slowly. Remember, you want the bang to surprise you a bit”. When shooting, trigger control is incredibly important. Jerking the trigger too hard causes the muzzle of the gun to move when you shoot and can move where your shot lands by several inches.

We ended up staying until the range closed for the evening, firing at least a hundred rounds of ammunition each. After washing up, we agreed to meet again to go shooting and
would head to the range together a few times during my fieldwork. These visits to the gun range impressed upon me the role that these spaces play in the Second Amendment community. They serve a major function as gathering spaces for gun owners, and the site of one of the most important cultural practices associated with the gun culture: shooting. These ranges also often work like community centers; they have cafes where members can socialize, and they organize events, socials, and classes. While the indoor ranges we shot in were run by private companies, others are run by non-profit associations or conservation groups and operated by volunteers. The NRA even runs several ranges, including the one in their headquarters in Fairfax.

The NRA recognizes that gun ranges are spaces where they can gain access to their potential members and advertise their organization and programs. Some ranges and gun shops, for example, give out NRA pamphlets advertising the organization. Other ranges partner with them, offering discounted range fees or memberships for NRA members. You would be hard pressed to walk into a gun range and not see an NRA logo somewhere in the background.

**Gun Shows**

The gun show is yet another institution and cultural practice of the Second Amendment community. Since the 1930s, gun shows have been “…local gatherings for the display, sale, and exchange of firearms” (Burbick, 2006). They are held anywhere from convention centers to malls, churches to community centers. Though they have a long history, early gun shows were much smaller affairs. In 1986 however, the Firearms Owner’s Protection Act was passed by Ronald Reagan, easing the regulations around where gun business could sell to customers. This led to a boom in gun shows (Burbick, 2006). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) estimates that there are now more than 5,000 gun shows every year in the United States (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: Gun Show Enforcement
Gun shows have been at the center of the gun debate in recent years, due to what is colloquially called the “gun show loophole”. This refers to the fact that some states do not require a background check to be conducted for the private sale of a firearm. While businesses that possess a Federal Firearms License must put all customers through a background check, individuals conducting private gun sales are not required to do so. Pro-control advocates argue that closing this loophole is common sense and would help keep guns out of the hands of mass shooters and criminals.

On the other side, pro-gun advocates note the logistical difficulties that attempting to regulate private firearms transfers could raise. First, they argue that these regulations would only impact people who already want to follow the law, and the ban would be unenforceable. Further, they note that being able to transfer firearms between family members is a part of American heritage and tradition, as many young men receive their first gun from their parents or a family member. Finally, loaning guns to a friend during a time of personal crisis is used as a way to reduce the risk of gun-related suicide in many rural communities (Shaya, 2019).

While gun shows are at the center of the gun debate, it is unclear how much they contribute to the circulation of illicit firearms. A 1999 report conducted by the ATF warns that “…gun shows provide a forum for illegal firearms sales and trafficking”. They note that their investigations “…reveal a diversity of Federal firearms violations associated with gun shows” (Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, 1999, pp. 6–7). Survey data gathered amongst convicted criminals paints a different picture. Criminals, it seems, prefer to source guns through family members, friends, or illicit networks. A survey of prison inmates conducted by
the U.S. Department of Justice, for example, found that only 0.7% of criminals had sourced their guns from gun shows, while 39.6% had acquired them from family or friends (Harlow, 2001).

Throughout my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to conduct participant observation at two gun shows and on both sides of the table. As those who have done fieldwork can attest, often the biggest breakthroughs in your project are not a part of your original research design. While talking to a colleague at George Mason University, where I was a visiting scholar during my fieldwork, he mentioned radio ads that he had heard for a gun show near Dulles airport. I decided that it would be well worth my while to check it out.

The gun show took place at an airport convention center located in a suburban mall. It went on for three days. I arrived at the show on Saturday morning, a few hours after it opened. The parking lot was already full, and I had to park in the reserved parking which was slightly further away. The lot was mostly filled with large SUVs, like hulking Chevy Suburbans, and a sea of pickup trucks. A significant percentage of the cars were adorned with gun-related bumper stickers, featuring parts of the Second Amendment, the logos of gun brands, or political witticisms.

Though this gun show was organized by a private company, the NRA was very much present. Two NRA booths were set up, one at each main entrance to the convention center. Volunteers at the booths were promoting the NRA and its various programs and encouraging convention-goers to sign up to become members.

I walked inside and purchased my ticket to the show for $16 from a blonde, middle-aged woman in a straw hat, which was covered in flowers. She had the demeanor of a bubbly kindergarten teacher, and greeted me warmly: “Good morning hun. Just one ticket then?” I showed the security guard at the entrance my now stamped hand and walked past the gun
inspection booth that was making sure that no one brought live ammunition or loaded guns into
the show. This was a safety precaution that is taken at most gun shows. Given the number of
guns being handled at the show, allowing unboxed lived ammunition, or loaded guns, is a recipe
for an accident.

The gun show occupied most of the convention center. It was made up of a large central
room, and a smaller side room, though even the smaller room was about the size of two high
school gymnasiums. The show claimed to contain over 1,300 booths, most of which were filled
by smaller businesses and mom and pop shops. Many of the people operating the booths had
brought their children with them or even put them to work.

My time at the NRA Annual Meeting had given me the chance to develop an order of
operations, or methodology, for conducting participant observation at the gun show. My first step
is always to take a quick initial lap around the convention center and collect my first
impressions. During this lap I focused on the large crowd surrounding me. The booths had been
arranged in a tight formation to pack in as many as possible, which meant wading through the
large crowd was difficult but gave me lots of time to observe. Though predominantly white and
male, the crowd was still quite diverse. There were a large number of African American men and
families, as well as many Asian Americans. The older generation in attendance seemed to be
mostly white, however, the younger crowd was a lot more diverse in terms of race and gender.
Many women in attendance seemed to be with their partners, though I saw a few women flying
solo or visiting with their girlfriends.

Walking around I spotted a man in a cowboy hat and camo cargo pants, with a long
brown beard and shoulder-length hair examining a pistol. Across from him, a small group of
twenty-something Southeast Asian American men with bulging muscles and tattoos were ogling
Sig Sauer’s latest take on the AR-15 platform. Their years of experience with firearms showed in the way they handled the rifle on the showroom floor, inspecting the chamber before picking it up, and always controlling the direction of the muzzle. At a nearby booth, an African American woman with long dreadlocks unsheathed a Samurai sword, examining the blade. Like Dulles itself, the gun show stood at a crossroads between urbanized D.C. and the suburbs and countryside of Northern Virginia. But it also reflected the crossroads in the gun culture, between old and young, Gun Culture 1.0 and Gun Culture 2.0 (Yamane, 2017).

While reflecting on this, a booth caught my eye. It was being run by a small non-profit organization devoted to women’s self-defense. The bright pink design of the stall was quite eye-catching, as well as the colored hair and bright eye-makeup of the young African-American women minding the booth, who was dressed more like she should be selling makeup at Sephora than tasers and pepper spray. I introduced myself and she confessed that “We don’t get a lot of men stopping by this stall”.

“I’m a researcher”, I said, “I sometimes look at the intersections between gender and gun culture”. She smiled at that.

“Well you’ve come to the right booth. We are a small organization. We focus on empowering women to take responsibility for self-defense. We have pamphlets and books for kids, all kind of great stuff!” She gave me a quick tour of the booth, before extricating herself from the conversation to help another patron while I continued to look around. The booth sold accessories, like self-defense key chains, personal alarms, pepper spray, and tasers; available in black or pink.

This booth was yet another example of the emerging nexus between women’s self-defense and the world of guns, a connection that the NRA is working hard to forge through their communications material (N. S. Schwartz, 2019) and their courses. As I later discovered, booths
at gun shows can be rented by virtually anyone, subject to the approval of the organization or company running the show. It was clear that this women’s self-defense group saw the show as a way to reach its core demographic, women who might be concerned about self-protection.

The gun show was a veritable buzzing hive of activity. Like at the NRA Annual Meeting, there were a multitude of products for sale. Beyond the obvious firearms of every type and caliber, from modern sporting rifles to lever action .22s, there were other products as well. Certain booths specialized in antique and used firearms, some selling for vast sums. The most expensive item I saw was an antique revolver from the old west that was priced at $18,000. Other booths specialized in selling knives for hunting or everyday carry as well as less-than-lethal self-defense tools for the less gun-friendly jurisdictions in the vicinity of Dulles. Every once and a while the general din of the showroom would be pierced by the crackling of a taser demonstration\textsuperscript{64}. The first time I heard the loud zap I almost jumped out of my skin, but I soon became accustomed to the sound.

This was not the only initially shocking practice that I would slowly become acclimated to as the show progressed. Given that a large part of attending the gun show is buying, swapping, and selling used guns, it is common at these shows to see people walking around with shouldered rifles and holstered pistols. This was quite surprising at first. Given the size of the NRA show, and the level of professionalization, guns were not permitted to be taken from the booths. But at these smaller shows, a sizeable minority of attendees were walking around packing unloaded guns. This was especially strange for me to get used to when it came to children. At one point a younger boy, probably twelve, walked past me with a shouldered pump-action, .22 rifle. After getting over my initial shock, I was impressed by how well he carried himself and how attentive

\textsuperscript{64} A point of clarification – these demonstrations did not involve using the taser on a person.
he was with it. This drove home Yamane’s important observation about guns in America (2017), and I would argue much of rural Canada as well: for large parts of the continent, firearms are a normal piece of their everyday life. The whole thing, so foreign and exciting to me, was a normal part of these people’ lifeworld.

There were many products for sale at the show that seemed very tangentially related to firearms. There were foods for sale, from the jerky, which I suppose fits the rugged western outdoorsman motif, to items that seemed completely random, like a flavored pickle stall. There were also a few artisanal jewelry stalls. One booth, which was run by a mother and daughter, sold wooden crafts like cutting boards, and salad bowls. On top of a stack of wooden cutting boards they had strategically placed an NRA hat to show their support.

At the center of the showroom, one of the largest booths was taken up by the NRA, which was passing out literature and giving away small trinkets to recruit members.

They were not the only gun rights organization in attendance. At the show, I had my first encounter with the Virginia Citizens Defense League (VCDL). The legislative battles in the great gun debate are fought at multiple levels of government: the municipal level, the county level, the state level, and the federal level. As a result, a slew of state-level gun rights organizations have emerged in order to lobby at these lower levels, given that the larger national organizations, like the NRA, have their attention focused on the federal government, or certain high profile state battles. After a quick internet search, I found that at least 42 states have at least one state-level gun rights organizations, with most having more than one (see Table 1).

Table 1

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The VCDL is a small gun rights organization that advocates for the Second Amendment in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The attendant at the booth looked like the archetype of a suburban dad with greying hair, a short beard, and khaki cargo shorts. “We are like the NRA but at the state level”, he noted. “We’re a grassroots organization, run by volunteers, and we send out newsletters to try to get citizens together to protest unjust laws”. The logo of the VCDL is a colonial-era militiaman, holding a musket. The logo’s color scheme is red, white, and blue. The minuteman is depicted gazing off in the distance, eyes focusing on an unseen threat, as he pours gunpowder from his powder horn into the priming pan of his musket. This would not be the last I heard of the VCDL during and after my fieldwork.
The gun show at Dulles gave me an idea. If businesses and gun rights organizations can use the venue of the gun show to promote their products and advocacy, why not use it to promote my research? I went onto the website of the show’s organizer to see which upcoming shows were nearby. The closest show to me that would take place during my fieldwork was in Lynchburg, VA. I put in an application and was soon put into contact with an employee of the company. My request for a booth was unusual, to say the least, but after explaining my research project over the phone, the organizers agreed to let me rent a booth. With only a few weeks before the show, I rushed to amend my ethics protocol, book a hotel, and prepare an online survey that I could promote at the show.

Lynchburg is about three hours south of my main field site in Fairfax. Rather than take the interstate, the GPS directed me to take a smaller state highway. While Fairfax felt very familiar, things changed quickly after heading south. The homes changed. They became less affluent, and humbler. Accents changed, picking up a slight twang. The fast-food businesses changed, and I started to notice more southern fare on the menu. I stopped at a fast-food joint outside of Charlottesville and ordered the biscuits and gravy to fill my belly for the rest of the drive. As I ate, I reflected on the fact only a few years before a white supremacist rally had shocked the world and resulted in the death of a counter protestor and two state troopers. This event seemed emblematic of the growing political divide confronting America; a divide that I was poised to dive deeper into in the coming days.

Lynchburg itself is a town with a close connection to the American right. Home to Liberty University, which was started by Evangelical preacher and right-wing activist Jerry Falwell, the area is much more conservative than Fairfax, which tends to be one of the liberal enclaves in Virginian politics. The city itself is home to just over 80,000 people and is known
colloquially as the “City of the Seven Hills”, given its topography.

I pulled into the parking lot of my hotel in the late afternoon. The hotel was perched on top of a small hill, and even from my ground floor room, I had a good view of the city’s outskirts, and Liberty University. The university had shaved its initials, LU, into the top of a nearby hill, which dominated the skyline. I had selected the hotel because it was located directly across the parking lot from the mall where the gun show would take place. I stayed in that evening, tired from the road and nervous for the next morning’s work. Coming back from the hotel gym, I glanced at the tourist brochures in the lobby. A brochure for the Liberty University Creation Hall caught my eye, the school’s creation science museum.

I woke up early on Saturday morning to set up my booth at the show. A travel cup of weak hotel coffee in hand, I shuffled across the parking lot with my poster, sign-up list, business cards, and a bag of candy to give out to my booth visitors. The show was being hosted in an abandoned Macy’s on the far end of the shopping mall. I showed my confirmation sheet to the attendant at the door, and they directed me to the sign-up table, where I could pay my fee and get my booth number. The sign-up desk was being run by a seemingly overwhelmed older woman in her late sixties or seventies. She seemed swamped by the sheer volume of booth members queuing up to register. “I’m so sorry”, she said, “This is the first time we’ve run a show here in twenty years, we’re all a bit frazzled”. After a few minutes of confusion, she was able to sign me in and direct me to my table. I had been placed in the section of the show devoted to historical firearms and militaria sellers, likely given the name of my project.

The booths at the show were arranged in rows, with three aisles, and tables backing onto

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65 For my Canadian and international readers, Macy’s is a major US department store chain.
66 Militaria refers to old military memorabilia that is popular amongst collectors, history enthusiasts, and reenactors. It includes everything from military surplus uniforms, badges, or pieces of kit to antique firearms and bayonets.
one another. My booth was in the center aisle, and I busied myself setting it up as I waited for the doors to open to the public. The booth to my right was being operated by an older woman and her husband, whose business was devoted almost entirely to selling antique German Luger pistols from the Second World War. Given the popularity of these pistols in Hollywood movies, like the *Indiana Jones* franchise, and video games, like the *Call of Duty* series, they command a high price. Their top-selling item of the day, however, was not 9mm German small arms, but hats. The enterprising couple had designed a blue variation of the infamous Make America Great Again hat. Using the same font as the original version, they read: “Make America Shit Again – Vote Democrat”. The hats caused quite the buzz at the show and were a popular item. The couple got several compliments on them and sold out quickly as word of mouth grew. Clearly, no one at the show felt the need to hide their political allegiances.

To the right of my booth Liam, a greying middle-aged man from Ohio sold Second World War memorabilia. He was quite knowledgeable about different artifacts and made a business of buying old heirlooms at estate sales, garage sales or through word of mouth and then reselling them to collectors. “I do a few of these shows a year”, he explained. “Some of ‘em are gun shows, and others are just for the militaria folks”. Despite the age gap, Liam and I became fast friends throughout the day, chatting during lulls in the crowd and watching one another’s tables when going for lunch or bathroom breaks. When Liam complained the lines were too long for him to grab lunch, I shared some of my snacks, pretzels with Nutella dip, with him and he was very grateful. These things seem trifling, but when you are alone amongst strangers at a show like this, far from home, these small gestures and shows of friendship are quite meaningful.

The other tables in my row were mostly selling militaria or some older firearms. An older man behind me spent the whole day in his chair, having loud and opinionated conversations with
his neighbors. Across from me, a tall and muscular African American man walked between his
two booths at opposite ends of the room, while his wife staffed their soap and shampoo booth
nearby. His table near me was entirely devoted to selling Trump paraphernalia, like Make
American Great Again Hats and flags.

The show was jam-packed. I later learned that thousands of people walked through
during the two days of the show. Given that I was alone at my booth, I did not have a lot of time
to explore, but anytime I left for a restroom break, the already thin laneways were clogged with
people milling about and looking at the different items on display. The clientele in the morning
was decidedly older and whiter than the show near Dulles. As the day progressed, however, the
crowd grew larger and more diverse. While the overwhelming majority of people were white and
over forty, there were a significant number of young people, women, and African Americans.
There were some lone guys, but most were accompanied by friends, wives, girlfriends, and
families. Like at the Dulles show, many visitors were carrying around recently purchased guns,
or firearms that they were trying to sell or exchange. Some would put sticks down the barrel,
taping a piece of paper to the protruding end which listed the model and price of the gun. Some
had lists taped to their backpacks. Later in the day, I even saw a man come in with his wife and
two children. The man had two rifles shouldered, and his wife was balancing two more on top of
the stroller.

Like at Dulles, all guns were safety checked at the door to make sure they were unloaded,
and plastic zip ties were secured around the action of the firearm to render it temporarily
inoperable, and to show that it had been safety checked. In the corner, an employee from the
state of Virginia sat at a desk with a set of rugged, military-style laptops connected to the
national background check system. Booth attendants could request that customers pass a
background check before purchasing a firearm. The state employee would periodically be relieved by two Virginia state troopers, who were patrolling the event. The troopers were in full uniform, their wide-brimmed hats held at an angle with leather straps. Both troopers were hulking men with shaved heads, who looked indescribably intimidating. They were not the only law enforcement on the scene. Other police officers, some off-duty and some on, milled about occasionally, as well as the gun show’s armed security team.

My table at the show consisted of my *Quick Draw History* foam board posters, two ledger-sized laminated sheets explaining my study in ethics review board approved-language, and a bag of Halloween candy I bought at the grocery store to entice attention. I talked to over a hundred people throughout the day, handing out business cards with links to my survey and my email. As much as possible, I tried to encourage potential participants to sign up for a survey mailing list, so I could send them a link directly. Most people were pleasant and curious about my research. Younger people tended to be more interested than older people, and several particularly curious visitors were former or current students at Liberty University. Many people just seemed genuinely happy to be able to have their voices heard and get a fair shake in academia, a venue which they perceive, rightly or wrongly, to be unfriendly to their lifestyle. Others were quite suspicious until they heard the details of my research. Very few people were rude. If not interested, they would usually just say no thanks and walk away.

Sunday was much slower than Saturday. Liam, a veteran of these shows, had correctly prophesized the rhythm of the day to me while we were setting up.

“IT’s Sunday morning, everyone’s at church. You will see, people are gonna get out of church. They will go to lunch, meet up with friends, and things will pick up around 1pm”. He was spot on.
Taking advantage of the morning lull, I did a quick lap of the gun show to scope out what was there. The show was smaller than the one I had attended in Dulles, but still had a bewildering variety of items for sale. There was less medium-sized business at this show, and a lot more mom and pop outfits and individual collectors. There were also food vendors selling everything from pickles to dog treats. One stall only sold parts for AR-15s, including painted barrels and receivers. Others sold knives and self-defense equipment. One sold velcro patches decorated with flags or pro-Second Amendment slogans. Another, tactical style vests for dogs.

The Virginia Citizens Defense League, who I had first encountered in Dulles, was out in force, offering free admission for those who signed up to be members. The NRA was not there, but an affiliated organization, the Virginia Friends of the NRA were, as were the Virginians for Trump, who rolled up in an RV adorned with TRUMP in big white letters, and massive pictures of the then president. These organizations clearly saw the show as a useful point of contact with their active and potential memberships.

In this chapter, I have focused on three central sites integral to the gun culture, as well as how the NRA has leveraged them to insert themselves into and grow the Second Amendment community. The NRA firearms safety classes I attended teach students not just technical knowledge and firearm safety, but the values and discursive practices of the gun culture. In these classes, students are taught that guns are tools, not weapons, and engage in exercises involving hypothetical narratives placing themselves at the center of the action. Gun ranges are spaces where the community can interact and socialize and provides opportunities for gun rights organizations like the NRA to attract new members. Similarly, the organization uses venues like gun shows to reach its target community.
I have examined how the NRA uses points of contact the Second Amendment community to disseminate narratives and frame the gun debate. These points of contact include the NRA Firearm Safety Courses, gun shows and gun ranges. These points of contact provide the organization with a venue to attract new members and new gun owners and motivate existing members to become more involved. The chapter has further explored the relationship between the NRA and the gun culture, which provides a strong motivating force behind the gun rights movement.

Participant observation was a useful technique for observing this phenomenon at work. It is one thing to read about NRA courses in a book, and quite another to experience them. For those outside of the gun culture, guns are objects of fear. They make people think of criminals, mass shooters, and danger. Through participating in the cultural practices of the gun culture, I have a better understanding of what guns mean to the ordinary people who own and use them. I understand that to those within the Second Amendment community target shooting, self-defense preparedness, and even concealed carry are expressions of pleasure and empowerment as much as they are fear. I can better understand how this passion for their serious leisure pursuit could motivate someone to fight so hard to keep their firearms when they perceive them to be threatened by government intervention. More importantly for the purposes of this project, I witnessed firsthand the NRA turning this passion into advocacy.

Throughout my short time at the gun show in Lynchburg, I spoke to several people, both at my booth and while milling around the showroom floor. Most were wary at first but warmed up as we continued speaking. One man openly admitted that he and his friends were skeptical of me, but after talking with me had determined I was “okay”. As I sat there, listening to story after story, meeting person after person, shaking hand after hand, I saw in their face a hesitance and
mistrust that, as the conversation continued, gently melted away into an eagerness to share. They told stories of afternoons at the range, self-defense situations, of perceived political marginalization, and gun shows of yesteryear. They talked about their hobbies, their re-enactments, and their collections. It soon became apparent to me, watching the flow of attendees, that people did not just come to the gun shows to shop but to socialize with likeminded people.

At that moment, I felt the full weight of the responsibility that had been creeping up on me since the beginning of my fieldwork on my shoulders. I saw with perfect clarity the immensity of the task before me. Here were a group of people, much maligned, declared deplorable, stereotyped and hated; yet eager to have their stories told, their perspectives shared, just as they were wary of being misrepresented. I realized how easy it would be for me, as many before me, either through bias, ignorance, or ill intention to portray these people in the way they were so used to being shown to the world. To make them out as ignorant, stupid, or poorly educated. To fail to look beyond my own urban and class biases to understand who they truly were, and to use my pen to try to show their humanity and their value to a world that has seemingly forgotten how to disagree with grace.

As the show ended, I packed up my things and bid farewell to Greg and the various friends I had made over the weekend. It was after four o’clock and I wanted to make it back to my dorm room in Fairfax quickly to write up my notes. I had a long road ahead of me.
Chapter 7 – The NRA Firearms History Museum

Noah – What role do you think firearms have played in US history?

Sam – *(instantly)* They gave us our freedom.

The NRA National Firearms Museum is located within the organization’s headquarters in Fairfax, a pair of non-descript blue office buildings. These two large blue-green glass towers are flanked by a parking lot, with a larger covered parking garage in the rear. If you drove by it and did not see the stone and metal sign bearing the NRA’s crest, you could be forgiven for assuming that it belonged to a tech company or accounting firm, like many of its neighbors. While much of the headquarters is taken up with office space and thus restricted to the public, it does have several sections open for visitors. Members of the public can eat at the NRA Cafeteria, take in the National Firearms Museum, shop at the NRA gift shop, and take advantage of the NRA shooting range, where firearms safety classes and shooting competitions are held.

Pulling into the parking lot, a sign pointed me towards the dedicated Firearm’s History Museum parking. I shut the door to my car, locked it, and made my way towards the closest tower. I followed the instructions and clicked on the buzzer button, where I was greeted by the security guard. “I’m here for the museum…” I said, nervously into the speaker. The guard buzzed me in greeted me warmly.

“Welcome to the Museum”, he said. “You start off over there, just past Mr. Selleck”, he gestured to the large cardboard cut-out of actor Tom Selleck in full cowboy regalia, which held the museum’s pamphlets. “The tour is at one-thirty”.

“Thanks so much. Is it okay if I take pictures?”, I asked.
“As long as they are for personal use only.”

I thanked the guard and walked around the corner into the museum, tipping my black baseball cap to Tom Selleck as I passed him by and whispered: “Howdy partner”.

The NRA National Firearms Museum is 15,000 square feet large. It houses over 3,200 firearms, which I was told is a fraction of the museum’s overall collection, much of which is stored in large underground vaults or at the NRA’s other museums. The National Firearms Museum is one of three NRA museums located across the United States. Collectively, these museums attract 350,000 visitors every year (Tucker et al., 2018). The National Firearms Museum has only five permanent employees and relies on help from volunteers to run it and preserve the collection. Each of the collection’s thousands of firearms are cleaned and waxed regularly. Anyone who has ever cleaned a gun, let alone an antique firearm, can appreciate what a massive undertaking this represents. Gun owners I spoke to who had been to the museum described being overwhelmed by the vast collection. Though not as physically large as the great state-run museums of the Smithsonian Institute, it is nevertheless packed with artifacts and takes at least a full afternoon to take in, if not several days. My research, for example, was done over four visits to the museum from May to June of 2019, as well as an interview with the Director of the Museum, and the NRA’s Head of Research.

Why does the NRA have a museum? More specifically, how does the NRA use their museum as part of their wider political communications strategy? A key assertion of this dissertation is that the NRA plays a leading role in the social construction of gun culture in the United States and that a large amount of its political power stems from this ability to build and then mobilize the Second Amendment community. The organization targets three core groups; those already involved with the NRA, gun owners who are not politically active, and the gun
curious. For a community to exist, it must have an identity. As this chapter will demonstrate, the institution of the museum has served as a powerful tool for national communities, and increasingly local minority communities, to assert their identity. This is a key role for the National Firearms Museum.

In this chapter, I argue that the NRA operates the National Firearms Museum for the same reason that nation states, corporations and minority communities operate museums. First, museums are powerful status symbols for the organization, and the donors who contribute to it. They serve as a public relations tool for the gun culture, establishing the right of the Second Amendment community to exist. Second, the NRA museum serves internal purposes within the organization similar to a corporate museum. These include preserving corporate memory, the organization’s identity and even acting as a practical tool for those working on other NRA programs. Third, and most important, the museum helps to connect the Second Amendment community and the meaning of firearms to several central macro-level narratives of American history, emphasizing the role that firearms have played in the country’s sacred stories and thus demonstrating their importance.

The first section of this chapter will begin with a brief outline of the literature on museology, and the history of the museum, to illustrate the connection between museums, status, identity and power. It will demonstrate that museums are powerful tools for the creation of identity for both national and sub-national communities. It will also introduce the primary tools of the museum: narrative and artifact. The chapter will then move on to introduce the NRA National Firearms Museum and examine how it is used to legitimize the NRA’s place in the Second Amendment community, demonstrate the organization’s authority, prestige and status, create communal identity and communicate the organization’s values and sacred stories. The
museum does this through the assemblage of artifacts into a collection, and through the use of narrative.

**Museums as Political Spaces**

For most ordinary people, the museum does not seem like a political space; rather they are thought of as places of amusement, or places of learning. You might remember having visited a museum as a child, or as a teenager taking a trip to a new city. Perhaps you remember gazing at the paintings in an art gallery, staring at stuffed woolly mammoth at a nature museum, or yawning as a parent dragged you through a history museum. To most, museums are places of escape and entertainment.

Behind their apolitical artifice, museums are deeply political beings; born of, shaped by and implicated in the hot button issues of their time. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the past is brought into the present for a variety of reasons: to help us to make sense of the world, to validate practices or beliefs, to create and affirm identity, to guide our lives and to enrich the present (Lowenthal, 1985). Museums are physical manifestations of the past. They impart new ways of seeing the world. They can be used to validate and reaffirm our practices and beliefs. Most importantly, they are powerful tools for the creation and affirmation of our individual identities and group identities. Understanding this requires tracing the origin of the museum from a tool of nascent western nation-states during the Enlightenment to a globalized medium, employed by corporations and community groups alike.

**Origins of the Museum**

The origins of the museum can be traced back to the ancient world (Abt, 2006; Duncan, 1991), but it was during what came to be known as the Enlightenment period that the museum as
we know it began to take shape. Historians tracing the history of the museum usually pinpoint the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford as the first modern museum, given that it was the first museum established explicitly to be viewed by the public. Others point to the Louvre in Paris, given its ties with the populism of the French revolution (Abt, 2006). During this period, the urge to classify and collect that had grown in popularity during the Renaissance exploded, as the growing middle class, and then the modern nation state, adopted this practice.

We see this begin during the 17th century, when the ordering of objects came into vogue, rather than simply the collection of curiosities. This led to the creation of taxonomies in the natural sciences that allowed for the “…systematic observation and comparison of objects…” (Macdonald, 2006b, p. 84). “Removing objects from their pre-existing worlds of use and arranging them in a designated space allowed meaning and order to be discerned in the unruly and teeming world of things”. New social relations and social practices surrounding collecting developed during this period, and new hierarchies emerged, as being a collector was seen a “mark of status”(Macdonald, 2006a, pp. 84–85).

Though the practice of collecting originated amongst the aristocracy, during the Enlightenment, the nation-state entered the collecting game, using museums as a tool of nationalism. The British Museum would be established in 1749 from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, which was purchased by British Parliament for the purpose of public display (C. S. Smith, 1989). Across the English channel, the Louvre in Paris began as the princely collection of the ruling dynasties of France, but during the revolution was nationalized, dedicated to the people as a “…symbol of the fall of the ancien régime and the creation of a new order” (Duncan, 1991, p. 93). This influenced the creation of national art museums, which each western nation would possess by the mid-1800s (Duncan, 1991, p. 88). The purpose of these new national
collections was to take the collections of individuals and incorporate them into the nation state. These collections gave nations the ability to “...amass and present evidence of their own pasts, so turning their histories into ‘objective’ fact and legitimizing their right to exist” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 85). Museums at this time were created to justify the existence of a national community.

As these institutions continued to proliferate, the newly formed museums, emerging at a time when mass production was beginning to flood the world with new objects, needed to find a way to discern what was significant, and thus what was worthy of preservation. Museums began organizing objects, especially art, by time period or by nationality, helping to naturalize these categories (Macdonald, 2006). The increasing changes brought about by industrialization also created an increased urgency for collection (Macdonald, 2006, p. 88).

By the end of the 19th century, the institution of the museum had become formalized taking on several key characteristics. Museums set out to advance public knowledge and to arrange their collections in systematic and logical ways towards that aim. They saw themselves as public institutions and therefore aimed to be accessible to the public (C. S. Smith, 1989). Even in the United States where, with the exception of the Smithsonian Collection, the European model of state operated museums did not take off, private museums largely adopted the same goals. These museums, founded by private associations, were paid for by the increasingly wealthy industrialists of 19th century America (Abt, 2006). Even though most of these museums were privately owned and operated, they aimed towards public goals, such as education (Abt, 2006).

The largest period of growth for museums occurred in the years following the Second World War, and especially since the 1970s. Approximately 95% of modern museums were founded during this period (Macdonald, 2006). As the world continued to change rapidly,
people sought to cling to “… the material fragments before they were forgotten was a means of holding onto pasts, values, and cultural forms whose future felt uncertain” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 88-89). Yet this post-war proliferation of museums was accompanied by a crisis of meaning, caused in part by the increasing professionalization of the museum and the emergence of a new field of study, museology, which placed the old institution under the looking glass of critical scholarship (Smith, 1989; Macdonald, 2006).

The New Museology

During the 1970s and 1980s, a movement was sweeping through the social sciences as scholars began to interrogate the relationship between knowledge production and power in society. The expansion of the museum as an institution, as well as a slew of high-profile museum scandals, forced museums into the middle of the identity politics debate, turning museums into battlegrounds “…at which some of the most contested and thorny cultural and epistemological questions of the late twentieth century were fought out” (Macdonald, 2006b, p. 4).

This movement resulted in the creation of a literature dubbed the New Museology, which was launched by Peter Vergo’s edited volume in 1989. This intellectual movement sought to move the study of museums away from looking at “museum methods” towards looking at the foundational assumptions that underpinned the museum, and the power structures that these museums upheld (Macdonald, 2006b, p. 2).

In the introduction to the volume Vergo notes that: “The very act of collection has a political or ideological or aesthetic dimension which cannot be overlooked”. This is because collections inevitably lead to questions regarding what is worthy of preservation, how we judge beauty or historical significance, and how we treat material from other cultures. The arrangement of the museum is based on the values of those who created the museum and the society from
which they emerge (Vergo, 1989).

Vergo encouraged scholars to look beyond the public face of the museum to its subtext, which he describes as being shaped by the viewpoints, identity, background, desires and education of all of the people involved in the process, from the museum management to the curator, the sponsor to the viewer (Vergo, 1989). He argued for the need for a new museology, and defined this new field as the “…study of museums, their history and underlying philosophy, the various ways in which they have, in the course of time, been established and developed, their avowed or unspoken aims and policies, their educative or political or social role”, as well as the study of their audiences (Vergo, 1989, p. 1).

Since 1989, the literature has proliferated widely. Macdonald (2006b) identifies three main themes in the literature of the new museology. The first is the desire of scholars to “…understand the meanings of museum objects as situated and contextual rather than inherent”. The second, focuses on the increased role of “…commercialism and entertainment” in the museum industry, and the ways in which the museum is connected to the market. Finally, this literature seeks to shed light on how visitors interact with and understand the museums that they visit.

The Museum, the State, and Beyond

Given that the state is the primary creator of museums, it is only natural that the lion’s share of the literature on the new museology should focus on the state. This literature examines the function that museums play for the state and has begun to look at sub-national groups such as ethnic groups or communities.

While museums are a product of western civilization, they have been spread across the world through the forces of imperialism, and later globalization. In the post-war period the rest
of the world has caught on to the museum trend. Often, these museums are created for political purposes by countries in the global south, to demonstrate their modernity to potential trading partners in the global north (Duncan, 1991, pp. 88–89). A good example of this occurred when Imelda Marcos hastily put together a modern art museum for the Philippines in 1975 ahead of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting (Duncan, 1991). Museums are seen by these countries as a way to demonstrate adherence to liberal democratic values, and thus belonging in the larger international community (Duncan, 1991). They serve the needs of modern states both in the global south and the global north by making the government look: “…progressive, concerned about the spiritual life of its citizens, a preserver of past achievements and a provider for the common good”. Further, wealthy benefactors who give money to or establish art museums gain social status and prestige (Duncan, 1991, p. 93). Museums are thus a way to generate social and political capitol.

Museums are employed for nation building in different ways depending on the contexts. For example, in a number of western countries, large art museums like the Louvre in Paris or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have served to “…create rituals of citizenship…” that help to legitimize the state by creating a sense of continuity between classical cultures and their own, claiming these cultures as their heritage (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 3).

The state is not the only actor that recognizes the power that comes with operating a museum. The end of the 20th century saw the emergence of the small, or local museum. These museums were collection based, and generally run privately or by local government branches. This explosion of small museums demonstrates the: “…continuing salience of the idea of collecting and displaying material culture as a means of reinforcing and giving legitimacy to group and place-based identities” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 88). Further, recent years have seen an
explosion of community and cultural museums by: “Groups attempting to establish and maintain a sense of community and to assert their social, political, and economic claims in the larger world…” (Lavine & Karp, 1991, p. 1). Part of this was due to the rise of oppressed minority groups fighting to reclaim the presentation of their culture from large national institutions (Lavine & Karp, 1991). In the 21st century, non-state group identities like ethnicity, religion, culture, and community have become even more salient and are often mobilized as ways to rally people for political goals. Museums serve as a tool to assert their identities and display them to fellow group members and to the world (Kaplan, 2006). Sites of memory like museums and monuments have become key “sites of persuasion” for communities and cultures (Dubin, 2006, p. 478). Museums are prime battlegrounds in cultural and political conflicts and debates because museums are a way for groups to present themselves to the world. Further, museums institutionalize ideas, giving them “…tangibility and weight” (Dubin, 2006, p. 479). Given that museums are “…powerful identity-defining machines”: “To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths” (Duncan, 1991, p. 101-102).

The medium of the firearms history museum emerged along a similar timeline as the museum itself. While the first deliberate firearms history display was the Grand Storehouse in London, which was opened in 1688, a wider explosion of museums featuring firearms occurred in the 19th century (Tucker et al., 2018). In the United States, the first firearm museum display was opened in 1840 at the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, which would later become the Smithsonian Institution (Tucker et al., 2018). Some of these early displays were commercial, like Samuel Colt’s display at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851 in London, England (Tucker et al., 2018). There are currently about 30 firearm museums in the United
States, operated by federal, state and private actors (Tucker et al., 2018).

Despite the history and popularity of firearms museums, the field of museology and public history have only recently began to engage with these museums as distinct entities (Hlebinsky, 2018). Two camps have emerged in the small literature on the museology of guns. The schism is representative of a wider divide in museum studies between those focused on studying museums from a technical perspective, and those focused on the critical theory side. The first camp, which I label the technicalists, is composed mainly of pieces written by curators and professionals. Given that these individuals are engaged actively in the museum enterprise, they grapple mainly with the logistical challenges of storing, curating, and presenting guns as “loaded” cultural objects. For example, authors in this camp note the problems of presenting firearms in a way that engages with their broader history of use, or appealing to audiences to whom firearms may have very different meanings (Hlebinsky, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). They acknowledge the difficulties that emerge from displaying firearms designed for military use or self-defense alongside firearms intended to be works of art for display or sporting tools. Further, they grapple with the fact that firearms are contentious objects in the public discourse and that “…it can be difficult for both visitor and employee to dissociate historical artifacts from these discussions, creating a curator dilemma of how best to engage with the public on various and potentially separate historical narratives” (Hlebinsky, 2018, p. 4).

The second camp within the literature is made up of critical artists and academics. This camp generally comes from the perspective of what Tonso (1990) labels the adversary culture, and seeks explicit pro-control policy change on the issue of guns, which it often euphemizes as “opening a conversation” (Ali, Ferrara, O’Dell, & Slavick, 2018; Dell’Aria, 2020). Curators and scholars engaging with gun museums from this perspective are highly critical of the technicalists,
arguing that neutrality is a “…fiction that people participate in to avoid having to be seen as political” (Serlin, 2020, p. 5). Authors within this camp are critical of exhibitions that treat firearms as objects of art or historical artifacts, but instead frames them through the lens of “gun violence”, which is signaled out as a particularly morally repugnant form of violence given its prevalence in American society. For example, Dell’Aria (Dell’Aria, 2020) is highly critical of the way that museums turn guns into objects of art, isolating them from the acts of violence that they were used to commit, asking “…what would it mean to include a firearm in a museological display that dealt explicitly with its relationship to gun violence, suffering, and death?” (Dell’Aria, 2020, p. 2). He goes so far as to argue that the presence of guns in society stifles conversation, and that artwork that speaks back to this can help to: “produce (rather than evade) conversations around complex issues, allowing us to move past the stalemate and comprehend how the material proliferation of guns intersects with broader social justice concerns” (Dell’Aria, 2020, p. 2).

This chapter will engage with the NRA Firearms Museum using a third approach. The focus of this analysis will be on uncovering and analyzing the instrumentality of the museum, and how it fits within the organization’s broader communications program, rather than spending time critiquing or refuting the claims made by the museum. This is consistent with the approach that I have taken throughout this work.

Thus far we have seen that since the Enlightenment, museums have served as powerful tools to assert the identity of communities, both national communities as well as smaller sub-national groups. Museums have two principal tools at their disposal to do this: the artifact and narrative.

The primary tool in the toolkit of the museum is the artifact. Artifacts are objects that are
selected by museum curators as important and placed into the context of a museum. The primary function of the museum for most of its history was to take artifacts from the social world in which they existed and recontextualize them within the context of the museum (Smith, 1989, p. 6). Within this perspective, museums then become spaces where objects can be ascribed value (Mason, 2006). Artifacts serve similar functions to Lowenthal’s relics (1985). They serve as physical evidence of the past, lending it gravitas. These artifacts are given value and meaning by virtue of being placed in the museum. This value is often explained to the viewer through the use of a label, which helps to guide the visitor in interpreting the significance of the artifact. The “…space between object and label…” is extremely important in the production of meanings. These labels do not describe objects neutrally. Rather they communicate the meaning that the exhibitor wants the viewer to take from the object (Baxandall, 1991, p. 38).

Artifacts in a museum are rarely displayed on their own. Usually, they are part of a collection, which opens them up to further understandings. Collecting in the context of museology is defined as “…a self-aware process of creating a set of objects conceived to be meaningful as a group”. The key idea is that the creation of the collection is self-conscious and intentional. This involves recontextualizing objects as parts of a collection rather than how the objects were originally intended to be used or thought of (Macdonald, 2006, p. 82).

Narrative is also a powerful tool for the museum, as museums are not just about displaying objects but about tying objects to a narrative. The narrative thus helps to convey the message or lessons that the museum is trying to impart, while the objects solidify that message, providing material evidence to support the message (Dubin, 2006). Like a lawyer presenting physical evidence to support their witness’ testimony, this one-two punch of narrative and object impacts the viewer more strongly than simply reading about something in a book (Mason, 2006).
This use of narrative makes museums important tools for the creation of community. In the 19th and 20th century, scholars focused on the use of this tool was the national community. Museums thus served to make concrete the “…shared history represented in the grand narrative of the nation…” (Crooke, 2006, p. 174). In the era of globalization and the retreat of the state, other actors are beginning to use this identity making tool for their own purposes.

Throughout their history museums have been powerful tools for legitimizing or demonstrating authority, prestige and status, creating communal identities and spreading a message. Museums do this through the assemblage of artifacts into a collection and through the use of narrative. The next section will move on to examine the NRA National Firearms Museum, exploring the ways in which the museum works as a tool to establish the prestige and authority of the NRA, construct and legitimize the Second Amendment community, serve corporate functions for the organization, and weaves firearms and the NRA into key macro narratives surrounding American history and identity.

Status, Community, Resonance and Wonder

As I explored in the first section of this chapter, throughout their history museums have been tied to conceptions of status and identity. In Europe, the practice of museum creation was largely confined to nation states since the 18th century. Museums were a way for these new and emerging nations to show their status, their commitment to certain values and to showcase their identity. In America, where the state was less involved in this process, private associations of wealthy benefactors used museums for similar purposes.

The NRA National Firearms Museum serves as a symbol of status for the organization. Having a museum helps to project an image of the NRA’s sophistication, commitment to education, and to showcase its power. This is demonstrated through the grandness of the
museum. Though the individual sections of the museum have different themes, the overall decorative theme is that of a patrician hunting lodge. This is conveyed through the use of old-fashioned decorative wallpaper, low lighting and wood paneling, as well as through the paintings, ivory décor, and mounted animals displayed throughout.

The Peterson Gallery, the newest section of the museum, and the first that the visitor sees when entering the museum, is a prime example of this. As I passed through the large glass doors of the museum into the exhibition proper, I was greeted by this gallery. My eyes, slowly adjusting to the dim light, were drawn to the large, diamond shaped case filled with some of the most expensive and rare artifacts in the museum. These elegantly engraved firearms were made for hunting, many of them for taking dangerous game in Africa. Behind the case and to the right was a hearth, surrounded by dark, wood paneled walls. Each of these walls contains either a painting of a hunting or nature scene, or a framed display of rare firearms. The hearth at the center of the display was flanked on both sides by elephant tusks, embellished with intricate carvings. To its right, there was an American flag and to the left the flag of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

As I learned from the plaque on the wall, this gallery was donated from the collection of Mr. Peterson, a veteran of the Second World War and a magazine magnate who published such titles as *Hot Rod Magazine*, *Tiger Beat*, and iconic firearms magazines like *Guns & Ammo*. The sign tells the visitor that he was a hunter and sports shooter. It discusses his relationship with the NRA, and the fact that he lent an enormous amount of his collection to them when he was alive. When he passed, his widow donated a large portion of his collection to the museum, which represented “…the largest and most generous gift ever received in the 140-year history of the NRA”, according to the panel.
The wood paneling and hunting lodge motif is a consistent theme throughout the museum. There are also pieces of art showcasing hunting and nature scenes, as well as various hunting trophies, including large stuffed bears, lions’ heads, mountain goats, and deer. These displays help to not only link the organization to a tradition of American hunting that dates back beyond the nation’s founding, but also assert the status and identity of the organization through portraying their patrician roots.

The décor of the museum also allows the organization to help assert the identity of the Second Amendment community, and the place of the NRA as the head of that community, by showcasing its values and cultural practices. It is a way for the organization to say: “this is who we are, and this is what we stand for”.

Connecting the gun culture to the family is key theme that repeats itself throughout the museum. Connecting gun culture to the family is an oft used technique by the organization, and one that is likely highly effective given the centrality of the family unit to processes of remembering and identity construction (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). This helps to not only emphasize that firearms ownership is a heritage deeply linked to the family unit, but also assert the fact that the Second Amendment community is centered around the family. One of the ways that this is done is through the use of symbolism. For example, the hearth is a common theme that popped up in the décor of the museum. There are no fewer than four hearths in the museum spread out throughout the various exhibitions. Both of the Peterson and Thurston galleries contain a hearth, as well as the exhibit on the American revolution and in the Civil War section. The hearth is a key symbol of family and home. Expressions like “gathering around the hearth”, or “hearth and home” show the long history of the hearth as a family gathering place in western culture. Even though the hearth has been obsolete as a heating method since the mid 19th
century, it has retained its symbolic function, and remains a common feature of most homes, serving as a symbol of “…domestic harmony, nostalgia and comfort…” (Roberts, 1990, p. 9). A key example of this being mobilized in politics is Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats. Roosevelt faced a unique challenge in adapting an American political system that had largely relied on personal connections to the new reality of an emerging mass public. He used the medium of the radio to address the public directly, drawing on the tropes of family to connect with his audience (Ryfe, 1999). The fireplace was a key element of this symbolism.

The section of the museum devoted to the American childhood, which will be discussed in greater detail later, further ties the organization and the wider Second Amendment community to the American family. For example, this part of the exhibition features a painting of a father and son on a hunting trip. Both are wearing blaze orange hunting uniforms, and the father is clearly instructing the son on what to do. A wall of air rifles and bb guns in this section is centered around an image of a 1950s father wearing a suit and fedora and kneeling beside his son, who is aiming a bb gun. The father’s hand rests lovingly upon his son’s shoulder.

Finally, this focus is also made quite clear in the twin family galleries, the Thurston Gallery and the Petersen Gallery. Both galleries were donated to the museum by prominent American families. A large painting at the entrance to the Thurston Gallery, for example, features the elder Thurston kneeling, rifle in hand, beside a downed Cape Buffalo on a hunting trip in Africa. His son is crouched down behind him. The painting captures an important family memory, a moment of bonding between father and son. The Petersen gallery also features numerous family photos mixed in amongst the ostentatiously decorated engraved firearms and on the mantle of the fireplace.

This focus on the family connection throughout the museum is clearly meant to evoke the
personal memories of the firearms enthusiasts who visit the museum, emphasizing the
connection between family, childhood, and firearms. It helps to establish firearms as a key part
of American heritage, that must be preserved so as to pass it on to the next generation. It also
asserts the key role of the family as the center of gravity for the gun culture.

On top of showcasing the values of the gun culture, the museum also serves as a
showcase for the cultural practices of the Second Amendment community. Each of the different
practices are showcased in the museum: hunting; sports shooting; self-defense preparedness; and
gun collecting. The museum houses a large collection of hunting firearms and trophies. This
includes beautifully engraved shotguns and hunting rifles and several rare pieces. It also features
hunting firearms that belonged to wealthy, powerful or famous people, such as a hunting shotgun
given to the English Princess Dianna as a wedding gift. The break action shotgun is presented
disassembled in its original gift box. The box, made of polished wood and lined with felt, is
decorated with a wedding photo of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. The shotgun itself is
decorated with a golden engraving of the royal crest as well as other embellishments. During the
tour, the guide noted that Diana was an avid hunter. “The media of course completely ignored
this in their depiction of her”, the guide chided.

Several sections of the museum are devoted to the history of sports shooting. These
displays, which featured artifacts from early competitions, tell the story of the history of
competition shooting in the United States, from early shooting competitions organized by Swiss
and German Immigrants to NRA Shooting Matches at famous ranges like Creedmore in New
York, to the modern and Olympic shooting sports. Interestingly, the museum goes to great
lengths to make space for the history of women in competition shooting. For example, in the
display on sports shooting in America, the only panel devoted to telling the story of an individual
shooter is devoted to Elizabeth Topperwein, who was one of the first women in competitive shooting.

Further, a large glass display case in the Peterson Gallery was devoted to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Mr. Peterson, who lived in California, took charge of organizing the shooting events, building a new venue in a field in California. The museum shows some of the guns that were used at that Olympics, as well as Mr. Peterson’s Golden Ring of Freedom Jacket that he was awarded from the NRA. The exhibit notes that 1984 was the first year that women’s shooting events were incorporated into the Olympics.

Finally, the museum also pays tribute to firearms collectors. In a panel entitled “A Passion for Collecting – Collecting the Past, Preserving for the Future”, the museum explains the connection between the NRA and hundreds of collectors organizations, as well as thousands of private collectors.

The NRA National Firearms Museums serves as a space for the NRA to present the gun culture to the world, showcasing its values and cultural practices. But the museum is also a space for members of the community to interact with the organization. Like the NRA Annual Meeting, the NRA National Firearms Museum provides yet another point of contact between the organization and its current, latent, and potential members. The museum is promoted heavily through the NRA’s website and its NRATV programs. Further, in each of the firearms safety courses I took, the instructors mentioned the museum and encouraged us to visit. When I asked participants who I met in these classes later whether or not they had been to the museum, those who replied no always offered excuses and promises to go later, in the same way that someone might justify having missed church or visiting an elderly relative. The museum is further promoted through public roads signs. The freeway exit closest to the museum has a sign that
says: “National Firearms Museum this exit”. Further, as one approaches the museum on Waples Mill Road, there is a worn green public road sign advertising the museum.

Upon entering the museum, there is a computer set up to help members renew their memberships, or sign up, showcasing the way that these points of contact help the NRA recruit and retain members. Further, visitors can join the NRA at the museums giftshop. For example, during my last visit to the museum I witnessed a group of young men, so motivated and excited by their visit, that they all signed up to become members. The shop also allows supporters to display their affinity for the organization by purchasing NRA paraphernalia. The giftshop sells everything from firearm history books to NRA memorabilia like t-shirts, ball caps and mugs, as well as tactical gear like backpacks, and even souvenirs for children, like toy guns.

Over my visits to the museum I witnessed a surprising variety of visitors. The building was never packed, but there were always at least five to ten other visitors there with me. This may have been because I only visited the museum on weekdays when it is less busy, according to Google Maps analytics. The visitors to the museum were surprisingly diverse. Though there were usually several older white couples, as well as single white men, the museum is popular amongst families visiting the area, many speaking Mandarin, Hindi, and Spanish to one another.

The tour, conducted by one of the museum’s curators every weekday at 1:00pm, provides another opportunity for the organization to speak directly with its potential constituents. I took the tour on a particularly quiet day. For the most part I had the guide to myself, though various people joined in and branched off during the hour-long guided walk through the museum. The guide was a kindly, older gentlemen, wearing a yellow polo and beige cargo pants. He wore thick glasses, over which he peered at me as he took me through the gallery.

Looking at the bb guns, I could not help but think: “You’ll put your eye out kid”. 
The tour provided the back story for many of the artifacts in the exhibition, as well as the stories behind the displays. The guide was exceptionally knowledgeable, obviously a long-time employee of the museum rather than a part time tour guide. He was close friends with many of the donors and often lapsed into tales about the history of the museum. For example, he told the story of the museum’s move from increasingly anti-gun District of Columbia to Fairfax in the winter of 1993, where a fleet of semi-trucks transported the entire collection through a blizzard.

He also gave the context for many of the objects which did not have panels devoted to explaining their origin. These stories were generally focused on the value of the artifact, or how it was used by the owner. The guide took particular joy in pointing out the many quirky guns along the way, like a double-barreled bolt-action hunting rifle designed for dangerous game in Africa. It is very rare for a bolt-action rifle to appear in this configuration. Apparently, the firearm was commissioned after a close call with three charging elephants was narrowly averted using a regular double-barreled elephant gun. The owner wanted more firepower in case the situation reproduced itself.

The messages conveyed by artifacts in a museum collection are not always literal or textual. Often, they are emotional. Museums can employ affect in several ways. Most relevant to the NRA museum are the concepts of resonance and wonder. Wonder can be defined as “…the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 42). Wonder, in objects, is characterized by the experience of “intense, indeed enchanted looking”. This occurs when “…the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices” (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 49). This sense of wonder can be a result of the individual’s personality or
interests, but can also be cultivated by the museum. Often, museums use lighting to create this sense of wonder, a practice borrowed from retail shops (Greenblatt, 1991).

Resonance, on the other hand, refers to “…the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand” (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 42). Resonance is not necessarily tied to the object itself, but the cultural meanings and stories surrounding the artifact, which change as the object moves through time. Thus, resonance can be created by the object itself, or by the narratives that the museum weaves around them.

A key component of the charm of the NRA museum for firearms enthusiasts is the sense of resonance and wonder that it inspires. This “cool factor” is a large part of what drives visitors to the museum and is usually the most powerful takeaway. Participants who spoke about the museum often used terms such as “awed” and “amazed” at how large the collection is, as well as the items within. What resonated with these visitors was the experience, however brief, of being surrounded by so many firearms and their history.

When I sat down with one of my participants, Timothy, I asked him about his experience of the museum. He described being awed by the sheer scale of it. “I was only there for about an hour… that didn’t give justice to the… it’s a huge collection. So… uh… My son and I we just laughed because we didn’t have that much time, we were like there’s no way we can enjoy this (properly)” (Interview, Timothy, June 2019). His son, Sam, echoed the sentiment “We didn’t have a lot of time to look around. It was more we just stopped and walked through it quickly. Uh… There was still like… We only walked like 1/4th of it. The museum is pretty big” (Interview, Sam, June 2019).
Of course, the portions of the museum that will resonate or evoke feelings of wonder are deeply subjective and based on the personality of the visitor. For example, the prospect of seeing General Patton’s revolver evokes curiosity, but not excitement for me. However, for a gentleman in black who interrupted our tour several times asking about it, seeing this item was a singular obsession; the man even walked out of the museum after discovering the revolver was not there. Sam, one of my participants, said that he was particularly drawn to the M1 Garand, the service rifle of American soldiers in the Second World War. When asked to elaborate, he talked about his interest in studying the war:

My interest in firearms history is actually all over the place, but one of the conflicts I like to research and study the most is WWII, because I like the politics that were being played, how that tied into who got what firearms, to the supply routes. How different countries built up their armies. How there were still, during WWII, you had some countries still using cavalry while others were using tanks. So... that time period is very interesting... How the technology kind of took a jump and countries are trying to catch up but at the same time they are trying to fight a war. So, it just all got mixed up. There’s a lot to study. (Interview, Sam, June 2019).

Firearms owners often feel deep emotional ties to certain firearms, connections that can motivate them to read books about them, memorize their history, and spend money collecting, shooting, and maintaining them.

The parts of the museum that resonated with me the most, and provoked feelings of awe and wonder, were those that connected to key parts of history and popular culture. I was immediately drawn to the Winchester 1873 Repeating Rifle in the Wild West Section. This is because I find the history of the American west fascinating, probably because of my exposure to this period in popular culture growing up through movies and video games. The memories that this period of history evokes in my mind are childhood images of playing with a Cowboy Lego set, or teenage memories of watching the most recent remake of 3:10 to Yuma with my best friend Nathan. The various Winchester Repeating Rifles, like the Colt Peacemaker, have a
particular aura about them for me as a result, and I enjoy watching documentaries or reading books that tell the history of the production and use of these firearms.

Despite the fact that resonance and wonder are subjective, it is still possible to observe certain portions of the museum that are particularly designed to evoke these emotions in the viewer. A large portion of the museum is devoted to firearms curiosities and popular culture. The former category refers to strange or experimental firearms which never saw commercial success but were unique and curious. The latter refers to firearms popular in movies, television shows, and other media.

The most obvious manifestation of this in the museum was the section devoted to firearms used in Hollywood. This gallery is located in a separate room, directly following the section on the American childhood. One enters the gallery through a set of wooden double doors that are propped open. A life-sized cardboard cut-out of John Wayne dressed as a cowboy flanks the entrance. When one enters the gallery there is a full wall of glass cases facing the viewer. The back wall of the room is plastered with Hollywood movies posters for films featuring John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, and Clint Eastwood.

The glass cases are filled with movie memorabilia and firearms. Seeing the firearms used by famous action heroes transposed the aura of the Silver Screen to this museum display. The glass cases displayed firearms from historical films, such as muskets used both the original and remake of The Alamo. It held handguns from popular modern TV shows like Criminal Minds and older shows like Magnum P.I. A large portion was devoted to Western films, with various props from John Wayne movies, like the famous eyepatch he wore when portraying Rooster Cogburn in True Grit. There were even fantasy guns from sci-fi blockbusters, including a stormtrooper blaster from the Star Wars franchise. These movie artifacts bore labels, explaining
which movie they were from and which actors used them. They were usually placed next to a small poster of the movie, or a picture of the actor wielding them.

Many of the unique pieces throughout the museum were similarly used to evoke resonance and wonder in the visitor. One of the most famous pieces in the museum, often used in its promotional material, is the Vampire Hunter’s Revolver. When looking at this item in its case, Greenblatt’s observation of an invisible circle of interest being drawn around the object can be felt; the artifact commands attention. The revolver, a short-barreled Colt Detective Special, is engraved with gothic motifs, including a cross and a bat hanging with its wings folded. The firearm came as part of a set, which was sold in a coffin-shaped gun box. The set included a small mirror, to confirm that your target is a vampire, a miniature wooden stake that attaches to the gun and can be used as an anti-vampire bayonet, a small container of holy water, and six silver bullets with vampire heads carved into them. The craftsmanship and attention to detail of this item are captivating in and of themselves. Yet the way that the revolver ties itself into Bram Stoker’s Vampire lore, bringing the fantasy realm to life in an object as serious and solid as a firearm, blends whimsy and reality in the mind of the viewer, creating a powerful emotional pull.

While many individual objects in the museum evoke this sense of wonder, the museum resonates with firearms owners because of its uniqueness. There is a siege mentality in the Second Amendment community, captured well by the guide’s snippy comment about the media and Princess Diana. As more and more brands and celebrities come out as anti-gun, and the weight of America’s massive cultural industry is being put behind gun control reform, there is a sense within the community of continual impending peril. The museum thus provides a space for gun owners to explore their interest, an unspoiled oasis free from the anti-gun forces that seem ever assembled and ready to attack.
The Corporate Museum

One way of looking at the NRA museum is through the concept of the corporate museum. The comparison will not be perfect, given that the NRA is not a for-profit corporation, but a collective actor. That being said, looking at the museum as a corporate museum can shed light on the strategic internal purposes that the National Firearms Museum serves.

Nissley & Casey (2002) define corporate museums as “… exhibit-based facilities that are owned and operated by publicly traded or privately held companies, often serving roles such as public relations and marketing” (p. 36). These museums are usually located in or near the headquarters or production facilities of the organization and are managed by the organization or by an affiliated non-profit group (Bonti, 2014). Corporate museums consist of several moving parts, like the artifacts on display, the written labels, the narrative of the tour guide, as well as the meanings created by the museum visitors. These museums began to appear in the English-speaking world at the beginning of the 20th century, with companies like the Union Pacific Railroad opening their own museums. Like the wider post-war museum boom, however, the largest growth of corporate museums happened after WWII (Nissley & Casey, 2002).

Corporate museums serve several unique purposes. First, they tell, and thus help to preserve, the story of the company. In this way we can see them as a form of organizational or corporate memory. These museums usually begin with the story of the organization’s foundation and explain the way that the company grew. Further, the corporate museum does not just tell the story of the company, but functions to assign meaning to the “past, present and future” of the company through recounting this story (Nissley & Casey, 2002, p. S38). After all, who are we if not for our past? How do we move forward without knowing where we have been? To preserve the company’s history, these museums collect and present notable artifacts in the company’s
production history, commemorate key moments and overall make the organization’s history more “tangible” (Bonti, 2014, p. 143).

Second, corporate museums create a sense of identity and pride amongst the employees. They are not only used as a way to project the company’s image externally but internally as well, creating a sense of identity. Some companies, like the Coca Cola Museum, even use these museums as a tool to train new employees. (Nissley & Casey, 2002).

Third, corporate museums serve as a form of advertisement for those visiting, as a way to build a sense of connection with the company’s brand. They are powerful tools for public relations, especially with regards to controversial issues (Bonti, 2014; Nissley & Casey, 2002). Corporate museums are political in that they choose which elements of their past they wish to preserve and highlight and wish they wish to selectively forget (Nissley & Casey, 2002).

Another important function of the corporate museum, which is especially relevant for the NRA, is the way they can serve as a “goods lounge”, a place to store the impressive relics the company has collected during its history. This can help project the company’s image during its interactions with business partners (Bonti, 2014, p. 143).

Viewed through this lens, certain elements of the NRA museum begin to make more sense. First, while the story of the NRA is certainly downplayed in the museum, it is far from absent. The museum takes several opportunities to mention its advocacy efforts, weaving its own story into the displays. For example, the section of the museum devoted to telling the history of sports shooting in America highlights the role that the NRA has played in organizing shooting sports events in the United States.

Further, the museum takes several opportunities to commemorate key actors within the organization like actor, civil rights activist, and NRA spokesman Charlton Heston, who is
commemorated in the form of a large bronze statue. There is also a bronze bust of Harlon B. Carter, a former NRA president and the first Executive Director of the ILA. Beside the bust of Carter, an information panel tells the story of his life and contributions to the NRA. It features an assemblage of pictures of Carter shooting or posing with family members, and contains his service revolver and badge from when he served in the US Border Patrol. Displays like this tell the story of the organization and its key members, serving as a repository of memory to be accessed by visitors and employees alike.

During my first visit to the museum, the function of the museum as a “goods lounge” also became apparent. On this visit, I ended up running into Chris Cox, then the Executive Director of the ILA, who I had seen speak at the NRA Annual Meeting. Cox was visiting with several of his family members, who were receiving a private tour of the museum. It is not a far stretch to imagine the museum being used in a similar way for official visitors.

During my interviews with NRA officials, the function of the museum as an archive became apparent. When I sat down with Joshua Savani, the Director of Researcher for the NRA Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), the organization’s advocacy wing, he noted that the information in the museum and archives are often useful for legal cases. “There have been times when I’ve actually literally gone down to the museum for a particular piece of legislation to show that particular gun worked a particular way, which is really handy to have on site” (Interview, J. Savani, May 23, 2019). Jim Supica, the museum’s curator, noted that the National Firearms Museum’s archives and library provide information for employees that is simply not available at other libraries. Further, the museum staff’s collective knowledge of firearms history is often valuable for employees as well. For example, Mr. Supica noted that NRA staff have served as expert witnesses on the history of firearms technology (Interview, J. Supica, June 28,
Internally, the museum is seen by employees as an important part of fulfilling the organization’s mandate of protecting the Second Amendment. That is because firearm’s history is seen by the group as a form of American heritage, one that less and less people are interested in protecting. Conceptualized as a heritage that must be protected, preserving the history of firearms becomes an important part of defending this heritage.

Maintaining the history of firearms is part of the mandate of defending the right, and maintaining information and an understanding about the firearms that existed… a lot of American history is tied to arms bearing. Like the history of the world is. Most wars are pretty important events for the history of the world, so… you know… they’re fought with weapons.

Again, I think part of the mandate of the NRA is preserving firearms history. We feel like we have pretty broad mandate as far as, you know, who else is going to do it? We have, between the museum that is here at headquarters and we have one other relatively large museum, and between those two museums we have one of the largest historical firearms collections in the world. It’s kind of part of what we see as our job (Interview with J. Savani, May 23, 2019).

Mr. Supica noted a similar theme in our discussion, when he discussed what he sees as the disarmament of museums. Given anti-gun trends in academia and the museum industry, he noted that less and less museums are including firearms in their exhibits or telling the story and history of firearms. The National Firearms Museum is thus seen by the organization as one of the lone actors protecting this heritage (Interview with J. Supica, June 28, 2019).

Perhaps the most important function of the NRA National Firearms Museum is as a communications tool for the organization. The museum helps the group to disseminate key narratives that work to tie firearms to American history and identity, emphasizing the role that
guns have played in the country’s sacred stories and thus demonstrating their importance. It serves as a communications tool not just to those who visit the organization, but also to those who watch NRA TV or read the American Rifleman Magazine, where the museum is often featured.

As discussed in previous chapters, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) focuses on the way that politicians, collective actors, citizens and members of the media use narratives to attempt to build political alliances, convince others that their cause is just, and impact policy. In order to do this systematically, the NPF separates narratives into three levels: micro, meso and macro. Those who have studied micro level narratives look at how these narratives impact individuals, while studies of meso-level narratives look at how political actors mobilize narratives within the policy subsystem (Shanahan et al., 2018). The type of narrative that I will be focusing on in this chapter is the macro-level narrative. These are grand narratives or sacred stories that are shared by larger communities, like cultures, religions or nations. These background ideas (Schmidt, 2008) are large truths that are rarely, if ever questioned by those within the political community.

The National Firearms Museum provides the NRA an opportunity to emphasize the role that firearms have played in pivotal or foundational moments in US history. In fact, this is a central element of the museum’s mission statement: “…to educate the public about firearms history, technology, and artistry in an accurate, accessible, responsible, and entertaining manner, with special focus on the role of firearms in American history and culture” (Interview with J. Supica, June 28, 2019). Connecting firearms to America’s sacred stories helps to demonstrate their importance to American culture. In the final portion of this chapter, I will examine the way that the National Firearms Museum connects firearms to three central macro-level narratives in
American society. The first, I will label the history of American freedom and liberty. This narrative emphasizes the role of individual liberty in America’s historical tradition, from the American Revolution to the Civil War, the Wild West to Vietnam. The second narrative I will look at is that of the narrative of individual great men in American society. These great men are paragons of individual achievement due to either their ingenuity, in the case of Samuel Colt or Oliver Winchester, or their magnanimity, in the case of the Rockefellers. Finally, I will look at American cultural identity as a macro-level narrative, which includes things such as the idealized American childhood and the cult of the American President.

**America’s Story**

The goal of the NRA National Firearms Museum is to tell the story of “Firearms, Freedom and the American Experience”. While the two private galleries of the museum described earlier tend to focus more on the objects themselves, the main body of the museum focuses on telling America’s story and the role that firearms have played in that story. Once again, the purpose of this analysis is not to question the role that firearms have played in American history, but to demonstrate that telling the story represents and effective political tactic for rallying supporters, and upholding certain truths in society.

As I continued to move through the museum, I left behind the newer Peterson Gallery, and entered into the largest section of the museum on the history of firearms. The barrier between the two is marked by a change in the carpeting on the floor. The first section of this gallery begins not in America but in Medieval China and Europe, telling the story of the history of the development of early firearms. It begins well before European settlement of the Americas, by showing crossbows and hand cannons. It then goes into the history of muskets and the development of gunpowder, which the museum emphasizes on the plaque is one of the most important inventions in history and helped to lead to the end of Feudalism.
Following the trail laid out by the museum curators, I continued forward deeper into the section on historical firearms, which looks at the firearms used in the 13 Colonies, emphasizing their utility for protection, trade, and survival. This section contains a life-sized diorama with a mannequin dressed as a Jamestown Settler taking aim at a real stuffed bear with a matchlock musket to showcase this message. Moving along, I passed through a doorway and entered what looked like the living room of a colonial home. The walls of this recreated colonial foyer have glass cases built into them like windows, which tell the story of the French & Indian War through the American Revolution. It gives you the basic story of America’s tumultuous entrance into nationhood, but places emphasis on the different firearms used during the revolution. The display stresses the role that firearms played in the revolution, noting that a key inciting incident that ignited the revolution was the British attempt to seize gunpowder from the colonists. This is something that the NRA feels gets overlooked in national curricula:

I have a presentation that I give to university students about the purpose of the Second Amendment, and I always start with how most American history books talk about the tea party and the stamp acts and things. They don’t often get as much into the fact that it was right at the time that arms seizures, so the powder seizures were literally the event, the powder seizures in Virginia and Massachusetts, were kind of the sparks that lead to the beginning of the revolutionary war in the United States because when the English troops started to march to seize arms and powder the militia mustered and tried to stop them. So that’s how the war started (Interview with J. Savani, May 23, 2019).

The NRA sees itself as responsible for reminding people that the colonists at the time, “understood that one of the things that was essential to their future liberty was the ability to defend themselves from the crown” (Interview with J. Savani, May 23, 2019). This is a key pillar of the organization’s argument that the possession of arms by individuals serves as a check and balance, designed by the nation’s framers, against tyrannical government. Here we can clearly see the interaction of background ideas, macro-level narratives, and foreground ideas (See Figure 1). If you understand the use of arms by ordinary citizens during the American Revolution as a
key source of the revolution’s success, it opens the door to seeing firearms as a modern check and balance on excessive state power. It also helps to explain why citizens of other developed countries tend to find this argument so unintelligible. Without this collective memory embedded in their, for lack of a better term “national psyche”, this argument makes no sense. Clearly this historical interpretation of the revolution cannot speak for itself and has been the topic of lively debate. It is a macro-narrative that must be retold to survive, and the NRA sees itself as a key actor in its retelling.

Figure 1

Macro: Firearms were a key tool of the American Revolution. Founders understood their importance.

Meso: Firearms needed to protect from tyranny

The section on the American Revolution was particularly important, giving that the nation’s founding is a key and oft repeated theme in NRA material. This is because the foundational story of a nation is often a key pillar of that nation’s identity and presents a powerful affective draw. Emphasizing the role that firearms played at this pivotal juncture in the nation’s history helps to underscore their importance and connect them to ideas of freedom and

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68 The controversy over the discredited work of Michael A. Bellesiles (2000) certainly demonstrates the ferocity of this debate. Historians like Charles (2018) question the view that the militias were an important factor in the success of the revolution and whether firearms played a large role in colonial life. Others like Halbrook (2013), Lansford (2016), and Cramer (2018) provide evidence that firearms did indeed play a large role in the everyday life of most people during early American settlement.
liberty. By connecting the story of firearms rights to the story of the nation’s founding, the NRA can thus not only mobilize its supporters but also appeal to a larger swath of Americans:

…most Americans feel a strong connection to the founding of the United States and its especially people that value individualism, as kind of a general concept… you know a lot of the writings that are contemporaneous with the founding are focused on concepts of individual liberty and freedom and so… were talking about defending a civil right and so we often try to appeal to that authority as much as possible. It’s something that most Americans will agree with. The gun debate is a highly divisive debate in the United States, but if you talk broad policy, like people have a right to defend themselves with the means of their choosing, you start to get, you know, 80 plus percent of Americans to agree on that, 75, 80 percent. And it’s the same thing with, you know, appealing to the constitution or to quotes by particular framers or things like that. Again, we are trying to appeal to a general feeling in most Americans about liberty and freedom that, you know we think the Second Amendment represents. (Interview with J. Savani, May 23, 2019).

Walking past the weapons of the Mexican War and the War of Texas Independence, you enter the section on the American Civil War, where the clear and unambiguous message of the American Revolution gives way to more murky and potentially divisive ground as the museum covers a conflict whose scars have yet to heal today. This display is especially cogent given that the National Firearms Museum is perched on the dividing line between north and south. The conflict is introduced with a wall of images of Union and Confederate soldiers holding their weapons. This focus on everyday soldiers seems to be a key theme in Civil War commemoration; a way to depoliticize the conflict by focusing on common experiences of war rather than the divisive reasons for which it was fought.

Just past the photos, I walked between two displays. On the right, I gazed through what appeared to be a small factory in an industrialized northern city in the mid 19th century. It had red brick walls and green windowpanes. Reading the label, I learned that the shop had been made to look like the gun foundry at Harpers Ferry, which was famously seized by pre-civil war
abolitionist John Brown. Brown sought to arm the slaves for an uprising. This incident added urgency to the national debate on slavery that would help to set the fire of the American Civil War. John Brown is an important historical figure in the region. The preserved old town of Harpers Ferry, a short thirty minute drive from the museum, is now managed by the National Parks Service, and much of the historical information presented in the town focuses on Brown’s attempted slave uprising, trial and eventually hanging, and the roll that this played as a catalyst to the American Civil War.

Gazing through the window of the recreated foundry, I examined the display of Union firearms from the war. The display emphasizes the industrial power and modernity of the Union, discussing the production process and standardization of their firearms. Most of the firearms on the display were muzzle loading\(^69\), percussion cap rifles like the 1861 Springfield Rifle Musket.

Directly across from the display of Union weaponry is the showcase of Confederate weaponry, which is housed in the recreated foyer of an antebellum southern mansion. The visitor peers through three sets of double patio doors, separated by white Greek columns. The firearms inside are laid out on the sumptuous wooden coffee table, perched on plush red chairs, or hung above the fireplace. My eye was immediately caught by a Confederate Lemat revolver sitting on top of a wooden box on a table in front of the hearth. Famously wielded by the Man in Black in HBO’s \textit{Westworld}, this cap and ball revolver\(^70\) not only fired nine .42 caliber balls, but had a 20 gauge shotgun barrel underneath.

\(^{69}\) A muzzle loading firearm is one in which the gun powder and projectile are loaded from the front end (the muzzle) of the firearm. For example, a musket. 

\(^{70}\) A cap a ball revolver is the precursor to the single action cartridge revolvers made famous by Western movies. The firearm is loading by packing the round and explosive black powder into the cylinder of the revolver and placing a small percussion cap on the back (similar to the round wafer from a child’s cap gun). When the gun is cocked, the cylinder of the revolver rotates, lining up with the barrel of the gun. The pull of the trigger releases the hammer of the gun, which strikes the percussion cap, igniting the black powder and launching the bullet from the gun, producing a black cloud of sulfurous smoke.
This display is quite captivating. On the one hand, it tells the viewer a lot about the two sides in the war without even saying a word, contrasting the industrial power of the north with the old-world agriculturalism of the south. Further, by paying homage to John Brown’s attempted slave uprising, the museum once again subtly connects firearms to themes of freedom, liberty, and emancipation in American history. The message that the museum wants you to take from the display is that Brown understood that seizing firepower, something that slaves had been systematically denied, would be critical to winning their freedom from slaveholders.

Leaving behind the Civil War, a large bronze statue of Charlton Heston dressed as a cowboy ushered me into the history of the Wild West. The statue held a lasso in one hand and a Winchester rifle in the other, and gazed sternly off to the side. The exhibition on this period of American history was centered around a large rectangular glass case. This case was filled with the iconic guns of the old west, arranged in rows seven guns high that illustrated the evolution of lever action rifle and single action revolver. At the end of the display is a plaque talking about Oliver Winchester and Sam Colt, which I will expand on later.

Another glass case lined the wall to the right of this display. It held a life-sized mannequin of an African American Buffalo Soldier standing behind a Gatling Gun in front of a large, mounted buffalo head. The panels on the display noted important events in the history of the wild American West. They discussed famous events Little Bighorn and the Battle of Wounded Knee, emphasizing the role that firearms played on both sides of the conflict. The displays are careful to mention that because of US army bureaucracy, American troops were actually outgunned by the allied Indigenous tribes at Little Bighorn, many of whom owned Winchester Repeating Rifles which gave them an advantage of firepower. The display featured black and white photos of famous Indigenous leaders in the American Indian Wars like the
famous Apache chief Geronimo, and examples of firearms, some decorated with feathers and animal skins, that these Indigenous soldiers would have used.

This display represents yet another example of how the NRA has attempted in recent years to universalize the gun culture. Corporations, like Nike, are increasingly realizing that selectively adopting elements of progressive culture can be a powerful branding tool for reaching key demographics (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018). Advocacy organizations are not far behind, and are working hard to attract women and visible minorities (N. S. Schwartz, 2019). The NRA clearly understand the need to speak to a wider public and diversify its support base in a changing America. Though it is often unsuccessful at this, and has garnered much criticism on this front, the museum’s staff clearly realize the need to bring the museum in line with the times, and the rhetorical power that comes from connecting a political narrative to the struggles of a marginalized group. What these displays tell the viewer is that firearms have served as the tools of freedom for diverse people, not just white settlers.

The exhibit also focuses on the more glamorous aspects of the Wild West. A glass case to the left of the room is dedicated to the history of outlaws and lawmen, like the famous Wyatt Erp of O.K. Corral fame, while another emphasizes the exploits of Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill Cody, and other gunslingers and showmen. A large panel is devoted to the exploits of Nat “Deadwood Dick” Love, a slave freed following the Civil War who would become a cowboy and famous marksman.

Firearms in the hands of individuals are central to the legend of the Wild West. Despite the fact that this period of history was less bloody and violent than popular culture would have us imagine (Udall et al., 2000), the popular memory of the period, stoked by iconic western films has made the guns of the old west almost as famous, if not more famous, than the people who
wielded them. Evoking this frame in the museum helps to strengthen the narrative of the Good Guy/Gal with a Gun, that the NRA often refers to in its messaging. The displays on the Wild West set the image of a good guy with a gun against a familiar cultural backdrop, in which firearms in the hands of righteous and moral individuals helped to bring law and order to the American frontier. The modern concealed carrier can then imagine themselves continuing this American tradition.

Interestingly, unlike in the *American Rifleman* magazine, the two world wars do not feature prominently into the central narrative of the museum. The display for the First World War is made up of three glass cases recessed into the wall. The central case features a recreated trench, with mannequins dressed in the uniforms of German and American soldiers. The cases that flank either side hold a collection of firearms from each side, though not much information is given.

The section on World War II is a bit bigger. Named “Ever Vigilant”, the central glass case of this exhibit displays a collection of weapons from the conflict, as well as pictures of both sides, flags and a leather jacket which belonged to an American airman. The information panels in these sections are light on detail and narration. For the most part they are straightforward explanations of the conflicts, or the features of the different firearms that were used.

The largest display in this section is a recreation of a fallen German stronghold, filled with piles of captured guns which a few mannequins dressed as American soldiers are organizing into piles. The display’s information panel discusses the trophies of war that many American soldiers brought home from the front, recontextualizing the objects from tools of war to collectors’ items.
America’s Soul

Nations are imagined communities (Anderson, 2006), and these communities are built on stories. The macro-level narratives that form a part of national identities are powerful forces to which political actors can connect their cause. The National Firearms Museum is quite effective at emphasizing the role of firearms in broader American political culture and symbolism. This is done not only by evoking the narratives of American history we explored in the previous section, but through connecting firearms to the collective memories of visitors. Not only are firearms presented as a key element of America’s past, but of her soul as well.

What better place to begin this narrative than with childhood? A section of the museum is devoted to the quintessential American childhood. This section is composed of four displays. When I entered this room, my eyes were first drawn to the large shooting gallery to my right. This is a recreation of an old carnival shooting gallery, where visitors would have paid to fire pellet guns at metal targets that move mechanically. The display now uses motion sensors, and as I approached it, I jumped in surprise as it roared to life, filling the once silent room with raucous carnival music as the targets danced around in front of me. Compared to the relatively static displays in the rest of the museum, this one seizes your attention as if by force of arms.

Flanking this display are two walls. One is filled with children’s BB guns, which are presented as a rite of passage for young American children. On the other side is a display of .22 caliber rifles, the next step in a young person’s journey into the world of firearms. To the left is perhaps the most powerful display of memory in this section: a recreation of a child’s bedroom. Though the display uses the term child, the display will likely be read by the viewer as a young boy’s bedroom. It is designed to evoke the essential American childhood and looks like the bedroom of a young, middle-class boy growing up in the 1950s or 1960s.

The room was plastered with blue wallpaper with cartoon images of saddles, cowboy hats
and horseshoes. The window of the room was flanked with beige curtains covered with images of horses. To the right of the room there was a bed, with a western themed bedspread, littered with old cowboy comics, several cap guns and BB guns, and a small triangular boy scouts’ flag. A boy scouts’ uniform hung on the top of the bed frame. There were several western paintings on the wall, depicting horses and cowboys set against the colorful landscape of the American west. Beside the bed, sat a record player and bookshelf topped with an old wood paneled radio, a gas lamp, and a globe. These objects worked to give the viewer a sense of the period the display was meant to evoke.

Tying firearms to visitors’ collective memories of childhood represents a powerful emotional tool. The display is obviously an embellishment, as there is no typical American childhood, rather childhood is “…a name we give to a vastly complex and variable set of experiences” (Jordanova, 1989, p. 29). Yet, representing childhood, or attempting to construct an image of a “universal childhood” is a vector used to communicate certain meanings, and connect the visitor’s personal memories to a larger collective conceptualization of childhood. Though few viewers would have grown up in a bedroom exactly like this, they can see pieces of themselves in it. For example, though I did not grow up in the time that the bedroom was representing, I was not a boy scout, and was not allowed to play with toy guns as a child, the cowboy imagery of the room struck a chord with me, evoking images of playing with my Lego cowboy set as a child.

Further, this display ties into collective memories of childhood conveyed through popular culture. It evokes such sets as Andy’s bedroom from the iconic Toy Story series, or Ralphie’s room from the American classic A Christmas Story (1983). There is even a Red Ryder BB gun on display in this part of the museum. This connection to American popular culture and film is
further reinforced in the Hollywood gallery, which was discussed earlier, though it bears repeating. The meaning that the visitor is meant to take from this exhibit is as clear as day: firearms are an essential part of a normal American childhood.

Narratives of progress and innovation are central to American culture, as are the stories of the enterprising individuals responsible for these inventions. Inventors, successful businessmen, entrepreneurs and innovators often attain a hero status in America. In contemporary society, people like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg are household names. In American history, people like Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and John D. Rockefeller are legends. This image is also present in American popular culture, where heroes like Iron Man and Batman save the day not with the help of superpowers, but with wealth, scientific prowess, and their ability to wield industrial power.

These individuals become living symbols of the American faith in progress and scientific advancement. The faith that tomorrow will be better than today. The central promise of the American dream: the pursuit of happiness. The National Firearms Museum weaves the story of firearms, and the individuals who invented them, into the narratives of technological progress and the great innovators that represent such a large part of the “American experience”. A key theme of the museum involves highlighting firearms innovations, and the inventors who brought them about. This is done primarily in three displays. The labels of these displays evoke the language of a Science and Technology museum, highlighting the impact of great inventors on scientific progress in the field of arms development.

The first display, located in between the galleries on the American Revolution and the Civil War, focuses on one of the most pivotal periods in the history of the modern firearm. As a result of industrialization, firearms technology evolved by leaps and bounds in the 19th century.
As the century opened, battles were fought, and game taken with single shot, breach-loading muskets and rifles that could fire at most a few shots every minute. By the end of the century Gatling guns, repeating rifles, and semi-automatic pistols could hurl multiple shots downrange with significantly reduced reloading time. This period of technological progress made names like Colt, Winchester, Smith & Wesson, Remington, and Browning famous. This display highlighted the key innovations of this period, like the percussion cap\(^\text{71}\), which allowed for the development of repeating firearms. It highlights the accomplishments of the great inventors by telling their stories and tying them into the broader history of the United States. For example, one panel discusses the relationship between Samuel Colt and Texas Ranger Sam Walker. Walker, who understood the value of Colt’s revolvers for cavalrymen due to his campaigns against the Comanche people in Southern Texas, worked with Colt to develop a revolver for the military.

Next to Colt were displays on the other prominent gunmakers of the time. Each window held sketches of each of the inventors or businessmen, framed and displayed above some samples of their inventions. Sketches of Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson, founders of Smith & Wesson, are placed above their information panel. Bellow the panel three early revolvers are displayed on a ledge, showcasing the technological developments brought about by the 19\(^{th}\) century industrialists.

The second large display devoted to firearms innovation demonstrates the evolution of the bolt action firearm. The rifles are arranged in a row, like a timeline, with the date of their invention written below. The information panel tells the stories of John Browning, one of the

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\(^{71}\) A percussion cap is a small metal cylinder containing priming powder. When struck by the hammer of a firearm, it provides the spark that ignites the powder and launches the bullet. Before the invention of the percussion cap, the flintlock mechanism meant that users had to pour small amounts of priming powder into a small pan on the side of the gun. The percussion cap sped up the process of loading the gun, made it more reliable, and paved the way for the development of the self-contained cartridge.
most prolific firearms designers of all time, and John G. Garand, who invented the M1 Garand for the US military. They highlight each of these men’s achievements and their contribution to firearms technology.

The final display, entitled “America’s Rifle”, shows the development of semi-automatic firearms, culminating in the AR-15. Once again, a series of firearms are placed in a timeline, though this time no dates are given. An information panel discusses the achievements of Eugene Stoner, founder of Armalite who invented the original AR-15. Pictures next to the firearms show soldiers firing the M16, the military counterpart to the AR-15, as well as civilians using the AR-15 for target practice. Other famous modern firearms, like the AK-47 and FN-FAL are displayed below the AR-15. Given the controversial position that the AR-15 holds in the Great Gun Debate, the museum seeks to remove it from its political context and emphasize the technological aspects of its development, weaving it into the narrative of technological development and scientific progress. Further, by dubbing it as “America’s Rifle”, the museum works to tie the controversial firearm to American identity.

The final key element of American culture and identity that the museum weaves together with the history of firearms is the mythos surrounding the American Presidency. This reverence for the figure of the President as a symbol of national identity is widespread in popular culture. It has even spawned a particular genre of action movies, which involve a threat to the President’s life being thwarted by the actions of a heroic individual, whether it be Harrison Ford in *Air Force One* (1997), Channing Tatum in *White House Down* (2013), or Gerard Butler in the saga that includes *Olympus has Fallen* (2013), *London Has Fallen* (2016), and *Angel Has Fallen* (2019). The aura surrounding the Presidency is also put on display by shows like the *West Wing* (1999-

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72 Contrary to popular belief, the AR in AR-15 stands for Armalite, not assault rifle.
There are several firearms in the museum that belonged to former US presidents, many of whom were members of, or involved with, the NRA. The first shows up in the Petersen gallery. It is a single-action .45 Colt revolver that belonged to President John F. Kennedy. The revolver has a black finish and a light brown wooden handle. The metal on the revolver is intricately engraved, with the seal of the president carved into the cylinder, and JFK’s initials inlayed in gold towards the rear of the firearm. The revolver is displayed next to a black and white photo of the man himself, as well as a color photo showing the other side of the revolver, which is turned away from the viewer. The information panel notes only that the revolver was a gift to President Kennedy. The display makes no mention of Kennedy’s untimely demise, instead emphasizing his participation in the gun culture and affiliation with the NRA.

Near the Wild West Gallery, a small display features Ronald Reagan’s Kentucky Rifle, a rifle-musket common to the frontier. It is displayed on top of a table covered by a glass case. The rifle itself is centered in the display, with a small plaque bellow giving it context. On the top right of the table sits a presidential photo of Reagan, sitting next to an American flag. Another picture in the center of the display shows Reagan in the Oval Office being presented the rifle by a man dressed like a 18th century fur trapper, who the plaque tells us is C.S. Hirsch. Finally, in the bottom right of the display is a framed cover of the American Rifleman Magazine which featured the same image. Reagan’s role in implementing gun control in California, following an armed protest in the state capitol building by the Black Panthers, is not mentioned.

Finally, it seems natural that America’s outdoorsman president, Theodore Roosevelt, would feature prominently in the museum. In a glass case devoted to the ascendency of America to global power, Roosevelt features prominently. Set against a blown up black and white
photograph of Roosevelt posing with his Roughriders, a Winchester Model 1895 features prominently, as it is positioned just below the viewer’s eye level. A small information panel explains that the rifle belonged to Roosevelt and was used during his service in Cuba. Below the rifle is a Colt single-action revolver, which lies next to a box of machine gun shells attached to a Colt 1895 belt-fed Machine gun. It is explained that both of these firearms were used by the Roughriders. Curiously out of place in the display is a small Teddy Bear, the popular children’s toy named after Roosevelt, who famously refused to shoot a tied up black bear on a hunting trip to Mississippi (E. Morris, 2001).

These objects serve to connect firearms to the aura surrounding the American Presidency, naturalizing firearms as quintessentially American. This narrative is almost an appeal to the authority of the institution of the Presidency, proving that firearms are a key part of American identity by showing them being owned, used, and gifted to the men elected by the people to symbolize the nation. My participant Sam noted that this part of the museum surprised him, as one does not often associate firearms with the presidency:

Something that stuck out was that the presidents actually owned firearms. Yeah, they don’t really talk about it, because politics, but the different presidents owned different firearms. Obviously, Teddy Roosevelt having a large collection, because of his hobbies. But I don’t think the media or anybody really talks about it that much. Because you know the leader of our country owning their own firearms… They could… I don’t know… It’s just politics in the end. (Interview, Sam, June 2019).

This points to another narrative of suppression that was often raised by my participants. The idea that the mainstream of society, usually personified by the media, anti-gun billionaires, or large corporations, seeking to suppress the gun culture, consciously hides or skims over information that might normalize firearms ownership or the gun culture, such as the idea that presidents might own firearms.
Factories of Meaning

Firearms are objects of meaning. These meanings can be personal, such as the significance of a particular firearm to an individual, or can be shared by broader communities. But these meanings must be produced, they do not spring from nothing. The NRA museum produces meaning, tying firearms to key narratives surrounding America’s past and identity. These macro-level narratives then serve as the ideological backdrop against which the organization’s political program can be set.

Much like museums have served the needs of nation-states, corporations, and community groups for hundreds of years, the NRA museum serves several functions for the organization. First, the museum is meant to assert the NRA’s status, prestige, and identity. It does this through subtle elements like the patrician décor or the focus on the family. The museum serves as a repository of corporate memory, telling the NRA’s story, and serving as a treasure trove of evidence to be brought forward for trials and promotional material.

But the museum is also a powerful communication device for the organization. The tools that the museum uses to do this are artifacts and narratives, which, when paired together, are powerful instruments for storytelling and identity building. The true power of the museum lies in its ability to inspire resonance and wonder in visitors. This is the aspect of the museum that is most difficult to capture, even with thick description. The NRA National Firearms Museum represents a truly unique and captivating space for those within the Second Amendment community. Museums allow communities to come together and represent themselves. Seeing one’s serious leisure pursuit reflected in the glass case of a museum display is affirming, especially for a community that sees itself as at war with the powerful American cultural industry.
Conclusion

“We may not live in the past, but the past lives in us” – Samuel Pisar.

This dissertation has traced the ideational roots of the National Rifle Association’s (NRA) influence on the Great Gun Debate in America, and thus their ability to influence firearms policy in the United States. It began from the assumption that explanations of the NRA’s influence that focus solely on lobbying or campaign donations miss out on the source of the NRA’s power, which is its ability to mobilize its membership to provide human and financial resources for the organization. It then sought to explain how the NRA uses key points of contact with its membership, like its magazines, videos, classrooms, and events, to communicate important stories to its active and potential members. These narratives often take the form of macro-level policy narratives, which attempt to influence how Americans understand their past to justify a specific set of policies, and work towards the growth of the gun culture from which the NRA and their political allies draw political support.

The preceding chapters have explored how the NRA works to influence the perceptions of the American public towards both their present and their past. Macro-level policy narratives surrounding the American Revolution, the Second World War, or Good Guys/Gals with Guns are intended to reinforce the idea that firearms have played an essential role in American history. This role includes not only the personal protection of Americans, but also a political safeguard against government overreach and tyrannical government. These narratives reinforce the idea that firearms are a key part of America’s story and soul. They tie guns to key elements of America’s identity, from what it means to have an American childhood to the defining characteristics of the American people – self-reliance, freedom, innovation, and a disdain for authority.
Given its long history and its size, the NRA has many tools at its disposal to disseminate these narratives. I began by exploring the NRA’s written and audio-visual material, the *American Rifleman Magazine* and a sample of *NRATV* programs. I then went on to explore key physical point of contact: the NRA Annual Meeting, NRA Firearm Safety Classes, gun shows, and the National Firearms Museum. I explained that these narratives have three intended audiences. The first audience is the NRA’s existing membership, who must be mobilized to ensure their continued participation in the NRA’s advocacy efforts, be it financial contributions to the organizations, keeping one’s membership current, getting out to vote, or engaging in advocacy work like letter writing. The second audience are gun owners who are not currently deeply engaged in gun culture. These owners likely own a single gun, tucked away in a sock drawer, for self-defense. They are not deeply involved in the gun culture, and do not engage in practices like reading about guns, listening to or watching programs about guns, going to the range regularly, hunting, participating in the shooting sports or engaging in online knowledge communities. Deeper involvement in the gun culture is a predictor of political behavior (Joslyn, 2020), and the NRA has a deep incentive to capture members of this group, who are primed to be sympathetic to its messaging. Finally, NRA programming targets the gun curious, people who may be open to the idea of gun ownership but have simply never been drawn towards guns or are unsure of how to proceed. This includes new groups of gun owners that the NRA now recognizes are essential for maintaining the Second Amendment: women and racialized minorities. Recruiting these people is a major focus for the wider gun rights movement, and the NRA is no exception.

In Chapter Four, I analyzed a sample of 100 articles from the *American Rifleman Magazine* and a sample 35 *NRATV* episodes. The chapter explored how the NRA draws on history, memory and heritage to connect firearms to American identity using these mediums.
This involves linking firearms to large historical narratives, like the story of America’s involvement in the Second World War. Telling these narratives and emphasizing the role that particular firearms played in these stories, drives home the message that guns are a key tool of freedom, for America and its allies. Further, the NRA works hard to link firearms to American identity through curating, editing, and sharing the personal memories of its readers. 17% of the articles I analyzed in my sample contained references to family memories, from a reader shooting a German Luger pistol with his mom to a hunting shotgun, inherited from a respected father-in-law. Finally, the NRA’s written and online material worked to present firearms, gun rights and the cultural practices of the Second Amendment Community as American heritage, through presenting the long history of gunsmithing in America, and profiling important NRA members who work to preserving this heritage.

In Chapter 5, I presented data from my participant observation at the 2019 NRA Annual Meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana. The chapter discussed how the NRA uses the meeting to reach out to the three target groups to deepen their involvement with the organization. The meeting also serves as an opportunity for the NRA to cement political and corporate alliances with key actors like the President, or gun companies like Henry Repeating Arms. I also examined how the NRA-ILA Leadership Forum provides the organization with an opportunity to disseminate key macro-level policy narratives, like the good guy/gal with a gun, to a captive audience, whether it be those in attendance or those watching online.

In Chapter 6, I explored three central nodes of gun culture in America: the firearm’s class, the range, and the gun show. I elucidated how the NRA maintains a strong presence in each of these areas, as they recognize that these are important points of contact with their active and potential membership. I noted how the NRA uses its wide gamut of firearms safety classes to
recruit members, frame the gun debate and disseminate narratives, like the cautionary tale or the hypothetical narrative.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I analyzed the NRA National Firearms Museum, the most important of the NRA’s three firearms museums, which together draw about 350,000 visitors each year (Tucker et al., 2018). The chapter explored why the NRA operates museums as part of its political communication program. I argued that the NRA operates the museum because museums are powerful tools for identity creation within a community. For hundreds of years, museums have provided national governments, corporations, and smaller communities a vehicle to tell their stories, to display their artifacts, and to shape their identity. Museums have also served as a symbol of power and status. This makes the museum an attractive tool for the NRA. Through conducting participant observation at the NRA museum, as well as conducting interviews with NRA employees, I helped to unpack the practical ways that the museum is used as well, like providing safekeeping for artifacts that have played a role in firearms litigation.

This dissertation has made three broad contributions to the literature. The first is to the literature on the policy process; mainly to the theoretical development of the Narrative Policy Framework. Using the NPF as a scholarly lens allows us to empirically trace the influence of narratives in the Great Gun Debate. Unfortunately, the focus on a more erudite interpretation of empiricism has led to the theoretical underdevelopment of this perspective at the macro-level, as researchers have preferred to focus their examinations on the micro and meso-levels of narrative analysis. While the approach was initially intended to bridge empirical work and theory, publishing and funding structures have induced scholars to focus on empirical projects at the expense of theory development. As a result, the macro-level of the NPF remains underdeveloped. This project has worked towards righting this imbalance, drawing on insights from the field of
history and memory studies to account theoretically for the influence of macro-level narratives.

I have demonstrated that macro-level narratives about a nation’s past and a nation’s identity serve two purposes. The first is a repertoire of stories that allow ordinary people to make sense of the world around them, including the political world. These broad narratives serve as a heuristic that help us to navigate the complex barrage of political information that ordinary people are bombarded with on an everyday basis. Political actors can influence the meanings that people take from these narratives by engaging in past presencing, highlighting certain elements, and downplaying others. Though the past is not infinitely mutable, powerful actors with access to a well-funded and professional communications program can certainly influence the way that we see our past. As we have seen, the NRA works hard to influence the way that Americans see key macro-level narratives about American history and identity, in order to make them amenable to the organization’s policy preferences. For example, by forwarded the narrative of the Good Guy/Gal with a Gun using their magazines, online television programming, convention, museums, and courses, the organization creates the necessary ideological backdrop to make policies like concealed carry laws intelligible and desirable to a broader public.

The second function that macro-level narratives play is community building. I have explored how the NRA both socially constructs and draws on macro-level policy narratives through what memory scholars call past presencing; drawing on history, public and personal memory, and heritage to build a political community of gun owners. The organization works to build the Second Amendment community because they understand that participation in the gun culture is a powerful predictor of political behavior. Communities are built on shared stories, and those with the power to tell these stories to a wide audience gain the power to shape the meaning that people take from them. To those within the Second Amendment community, gun ownership
is about more than just self-protection. It is a serious leisure pursuit and a way of finding
community and purpose in an increasingly fractured world. It is also a political act, an assertion
of agency in an era where ordinary people are increasingly disempowered by the forces of
globalization; global capitalism, centralization, bureaucratization. Narratives are a key element
of ascribing gun ownership with these meanings.

The second contribution my project makes is to the literature surrounding the NRA and
gun culture in the United States. This diverse literature spans several fields across the social
sciences and humanities: history, political science, sociology, and anthropology. My dissertation
contributes to this literature through the addition of a holistic, bottom-up approach to
understanding the influence of the NRA. It expands on the work of Melzer (2009, 2019), Carlson
(2015), Lacombe (2019), and Spitzer (2015), who have attempted to trace the cultural and
grassroots influence of the NRA. It does this by exploring the role of narrative and memory in
the organization’s toolkit. Further, it expands on the work of scholars like Tonso (1990), Wright
(1995), Kohn (2004) and more recently Yamane (2018) by engaging with the gun culture on its
own terms, and seeking to understand how the diverse meanings and understandings attached to
firearms within the Second Amendment community motivate political action in a way that other
serious leisure pursuits do not.

Finally, my project makes a contribution to the field of memory studies, museology, and
the emerging literature on firearm museums. Though the field no longer sees the state as the sole
producer of historical material the majority of the scholarship in this field has been state-centric
in focus. This is understandable, given that nation-states are often the largest producers or
funders of historical material in a given country. The past is important for states, as it represents
a major component of the nation-building project (Friedman & Kenney, 2005). Comparatively
little research has examined how collective actors mobilize memory to promote their cause. As we have explored, the NRA has several tools at its disposal to engage in past presencing and the practices of memorialization. It regularly presents historical content and personal memories in its magazines, through its museums, and during its conventions. NRA instructors further mobilize individual and hypothetical memory to promote the practice of self-defense preparedness.

As I noted in the introduction of this dissertation, those expecting to find the usual scathing critique of the gun culture, Second Amendment community and NRA within this work have likely been disappointed. I do not, however, see the value in attempting to judge and measure the NRA by the normative standards of academic critical perspectives. The NRA is a conservative political organization and will obviously fail to live up to those standards. This approach has been adopted by many other authors who I have cited copiously in the preceding pages. I do not try to hide behind the artifice of neutrality, but the normative goal of my project has always been promoting rapprochement and understanding. Setting aside a discussion of various gun control policies and their consequences for a later time has been a necessary precondition to achieving this goal. I have been addressing a gap that I have seen in the academic understanding of the gun culture. This gap has consequences for our empirical understanding of the success of gun groups like the NRA.

The reality is that the overwhelming majority of academics approach this issue from the perspective of the adversary culture to which gun ownership is a best a strange curiosity, or at worst an unconscionable vice. I do not write this to pander to the fantasies of conspiracy theorists who see academics as ideological culture warriors doing the bidding of George Soros, but to acknowledge the empirically verifiable fact that most academics in the social sciences and
humanities approach the world through a more “left leaning” or “liberal\textsuperscript{73}” worldview, especially on social issues like firearms policy (Cardiff & Klein, 2005; Duarte et al., 2015; N. Gross & Fosse, 2012; Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Jussim, 2012; Larregue, 2018; Lindgren, 2016; Yancey, 2012; Zipp & Fenwick, 2006). Further, while a small academic literature exists that approaches the issue from the perspective of the gun culture, this is generally relegated to the fields of econometrics or certain legal journals. This literature speaks past the mainstream, and the two cross paths rarely. Adding a third voice to the conversation, one that is able to bring two vastly different world views into conversation, is normatively valuable.

This dissertation has raised several important questions for further research. The study of macro-level policy narratives is still in its infancy. More work is needed to determine how actors both draw on and shape key macro-level narratives to gather support for their cause. A possible case study might be the other side of the gun debate. How do pro-control activists draw on the past to support their program? What parts of the past do they focus on? How do pro-control groups draw on the public memory of tragic mass shootings as part of their advocacy mission?

Further, the shift from gun culture 1.0 to gun culture 2.0 has had the impact of diversifying the gun culture in the United States (Yamane, 2017). For example, looking at concealed handgun permit data from 2019 demonstrates that women now represent 26% of permit holders in states that track the gender of applicants, compared to 16% twenty years ago (J. R. J. Lott, 2019). For further comparison, only 12% of gun license holders in Canada, where a shift in gun culture has not occurred, are women (Gimore, 2019).

In addition to the increasing gender diversity in the gun culture, we also see increasing racial diversity, as groups with traditionally lower levels of gun ownership begin to exercise their

\textsuperscript{73} Liberal is used here in the American context.
Second Amendment rights. While only four states collect data on race, we see that African American and Asian American permit holders were the fastest growing groups (J. R. J. Lott, 2019). We can see this reflected in the world of gun advocacy, where a new and diverse generation of advocates are taking advantage of social media to spread their message. This includes African American advocates like Colion Noir, Ursula Williams, and Maj Toure; Jewish American advocates like Ava Flanell and Yehuda Remer, who goes by the moniker the Pew Pew Jew; white women like Eva Shockey and Dana Loesch; and Asian American gay activist Chris Cheng, who rose to prominence as an advocate after winning $100,000 on the shooting sports reality show Top Shot. We can see it in the growth of minority gun rights organizations, like the National African American Gun Owner’s Association (NAAGA), which grew by 25% in 2020 alone (Perry & Meraji, 2020).

The unrest and turmoil of 2020, which led to one of the largest surges in gun sales in American history, has served as a catalyst to this diversity. Initial studies have shown that women and visible minorities are making up larger percentages of new gun owners during the pandemic. For example, in one study of 1,000 participants, 64.8% of people who had bought a gun for the first time during the pandemic were women (Lyons et al., 2020).

These events raise interesting questions for scholars of guns moving forward. Considering much of American gun history involves the concentration of firearms in the hands of white, Protestant Americans, do these new groups draw on the past in their advocacy? If so how? One interesting place to look is at the Black Tradition of Arms. While conducting this project I came to discover two historians exploring this vein, Nicholas Johnson (2014) and Kellie Carter Jackson (2020). While guns are generally framed in the debate as a threat to minorities, and gun control as a solution to inner-city violence which disproportionately impacts racialized
minorities, these authors have written histories of African American armed protest and resistance, from slavery to the civil rights movement to the present. These texts seem to have had an impact on the discourse employed by African American gun advocates, with advocates like Maj Toure of the Black Guns Matter movement, and Philip Smith of NAAAGA drawing on them in the public discussion of guns.

Further, where in our story of the gun culture do liberal gun owners fit? Liberal gun owners tend to exist on the periphery of scholarly analysis, yet as Yamane et al. (2020) note 20% of gun owners identify as liberals and 37% political moderates. More work needs to be done to understand this silent majority of gun owners, and the role that they play, or do not play, in firearm advocacy.

As I noted in the introduction to this project, the gun debate has gone global. This work raises questions of comparative analysis between the American gun rights movement and others. In Canada, the gun rights movement has been increasingly active since the election of Justin Trudeau in 2015. In response to the Trudeau government’s ban on “assault-style weapons”, the gun rights movement has spearheaded a large legal challenge and multi-million dollar public relations campaign. How does the Canadian gun rights movement operate in an institutional environment much less friendly to its goals? Do Canadian gun rights groups tell stories about the nation’s past? How does their rhetoric compare to that of the NRA?

My journey into the gun culture has now spanned half a decade. I have explored the gun culture through several mediums, from the pages of magazines to the gun ranges of Virginia. I have sat with thousands of cheering Trump supporters, walked the aisles of gun shows and fired the most mediatized objects in the Great Gun Debate: the Glock handgun and the AR-15. I have spoken to NRA supporters, ordinary gun owners, and employees of the organization.
If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything it is that human beings are social creatures. Our social impulses, so hardwired into our very being, have made fighting the virus infinitely more complex for public health officials seeking to reduce contact, and thus viral transmission. Human beings seek company and community, and communities form around shared activities, interests, and stories. If we are to understand the Second Amendment community, we must look at it through this lens. Only then can we truly understand gun culture, and the advocacy that it inspires.
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Appendices

Appendix A – NRA Tax Return Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ILA - Lobbying</th>
<th>Communications</th>
<th>Programs/Services</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013 Spent</td>
<td>27,618,525 74</td>
<td>41,409,374</td>
<td>34,063,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 Spent</td>
<td>47,081,434</td>
<td>39,467,120</td>
<td>54,497,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Spent</td>
<td>24,851,934</td>
<td>35,465,774</td>
<td>45,404,733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 Spent</td>
<td>76,579,388</td>
<td>37,776,105</td>
<td>48,204,544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017 Spent</td>
<td>27,086,771</td>
<td>145,759,099</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B – Methods: Ethnography

Ethnography is a relatively new tool in the toolkit of political scientists. As such, I thought it would be useful to include a short discussion of the craft of ethnography. It is my hope that this will be useful to future scholars, particularly graduate students, seeking to apply this method to prepare themselves for both the professional and personal challenges of performing such involved research.

When we think about ethnographic research, our minds immediately jumps to participant observation. While it is true that participant observation is the most important tool in the ethnographers toolbelt, it is rarely used alone. My field research involved combining mutliple research methods. Some of these could be employed from the comfort of my own office, others in the field. After a thorough review of the literature, I thought the best place to begin my empirical analysis would be by using written and audio-visual material. I analyzed 100 *American Rifleman* articles, and 35 episodes of NRATV. This was useful for gaining an understanding of

74 All numbers in USD.
NRA messaging strategies, and of gun culture itself.

In the field, I conducted participant observation at the NRA Annual Meeting over the course of three days in April of 2019. The process of writing field notes brings the tension of your position as a researcher to the forefront. As a result, there are several different approaches on how to go about recording them. Many ethnographers will record jottings throughout the day and turn these into longer fieldnotes during downtime or after leaving the field (Emerson et al., 2011). This is the method that I elected to use at the convention. This was different from the notetaking technique used by Melzer (2009), who was fearful of being observed, and chose to record his jottings in the bathroom of the convention. The proliferation of smart phones since he completed his ethnography gave me an easier solution. I took small jottings on my cellphone’s notepad application. Given the amount of time most people spend glued to their phones, this method of notetaking was unobtrusive and went completely unnoticed by my participants. At the end of the day, I would use these jottings to jog my memory as I composed my fieldnotes. Sitting at my laptop in my hotel rooms, quick notes like “North – national anthem – Broadway” would become long passages:

…I heard a speaker introduce Oliver North (of Iran-Contra fame), the current President of the NRA. I headed over to the doors to the convention center to see what was going on. North was giving a speech, though there was such a crowd around him I could hardly see him. I only caught the end of the speech, but afterward the mc introduced a young blond girl to sing the national anthem. The mc said she dreamed of one day singing on Broadway. Everyone removed their hats and sang the national anthem.

Between May and July 2019, I participated in five NRA Firearm Safety Courses. These courses lasted between 7-9 hours. During the NRA courses, where the demands of the class forced me to become more participant than observer, I had to adapt. I usually did not take notes during the classes, except to jot down the most pressing of thoughts, which I recorded in shorthand. I am lucky in that my handwriting is almost illegible, thanks to my learning disability,
so I was not worried about classmates deciphering my notes.

In these classes I had a very short time to build trust with potential participants, who were naturally skeptical of a researcher coming from anti-gun academia, especially one from Canada. The question of my citizenship came up several times. I am dual American-Canadian citizen. This provided me with a tremendous advantage, as I was told by my instructor that only American citizens are permitted to take NRA courses, or have access to shooting ranges in the US thanks to policy changes made after 9/11\textsuperscript{75}. However, explaining my citizenship, even after proving it with my passport, was always a point of contention. I was usually able to gain participant trust, however, when they realized that my project was agnostic on questions of firearms policy evaluation and was not one of the numerous media hit pieces to which gun owners have become accustomed.

Thus, my fieldnotes for the NRA courses were taken after the fact. After driving home and taking a shower to wash off any lead or gun powder residue, I would sit down and write for a few hours. I would leave the notes to percolate for a few days, and then return to them, expanding on things that I had remembered once my brain had had time to process the information.

To expand the scope of my participant observation, I visited two gun shows. One was in the wider DC Area, which I visited for a full afternoon, and the other in Lynchburg, VA. This second gun show involved participant observation over a full weekend. I set up a booth at the show to talk to participants, and recruit for my online qualitative survey. The survey resulted in a small pool of responses (n=12) to compliment my interview data.

\textsuperscript{75} I later learned that there are several exceptions to this rule, including the possession of a Green Card or a valid hunting license in the state, though no instructors that I worked with were aware of this exception. See: [18 U.S.C. 922(a)(5) and (9), 922(g)(5)(B) and 922(y); 27 CFR 478.99(a) and (c)(5)].
I conducted interviews with two NRA executives; the NRA’s head of research and the Director of the NRA National Firearms Museum. Elite interviews usually lasted under one hour. They took place at the NRA Headquarters. My interview with the museum director also included a tour of the museum’s collection that is not on display.

I also conducted interviews with my six principal participants, who I recruited during the firearm safety classes. Interviews were semi-structured, and while I had a list of “prompts” for my participants (see Appendix C), I tried to let them lead the conversation as much as possible. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. All but one participant consented to be tape recorded. I also took notes during the interview but kept the notetaking to a minimum in order to be as engaged as possible with participants. These interviews were often preceded by trips to the gun range with participants. Interviews were conducted over coffee, or in one case ice cream, and I always treated my participants to a coffee or tea to thank them for their time.

These interviews were useful for understanding how ordinary gun owners interact with and selectively incorporate or reject the NRA’s narratives into their worldview. During interviews I was often taken aback by how closely the rhetoric of my participants mirrored that of the NRA. This is partially a reflection of the success that the NRA has had in shaping the discourse on gun policy. But it is also a reflection of the experience of speaking to a researcher. Some participants seemed to be uneasy about sharing their views with an academic. One even came with a pre-written prepared statement to ensure that they got their message across clearly. I believe that they saw themselves as ambassadors for their community. They saw me as a researcher as a vessel to have their voices and opinions passed onto a wider audience, though they were nervous about having these views misrepresented. Falling back on certain talking points was a way of protecting the integrity of their message. As interviews wore on, however,
participants usually became more comfortable, and began to share more personal stories, opinions, and experiences that moved beyond these talking points.

My analysis of the NRA Museum was performed over four visits between May and June of 2019. These visits usually lasted between two and four hours. I conducted my initial visit to get used to the space. I took only brief notes, focusing on capturing my initial impressions of the museum. On the second visit I took a tour of the museum and conducted a more thorough visit. In addition to taking short form notes on my cellphone, I also took pictures of displays and information panels that I could come back to later when writing more detailed notes at my computer. These pictures proved useful for remembering key details of the different exhibits. For example, when remembering the display of Gatling guns in the museum, my mind had been so focused on the firearms that I had completely blocked out the wall of ammunition displays in the back, that were themselves interesting pieces of history.

Looking at the museum involved taking into consideration several perspectives. My academic hat was the easiest to don, as it is the one that I wear the most. For each exhibit I tried to puzzle the why and how of it all. Why was this included? Why was it presented like this? How does it fit into the broader narratives of the organization? The other hats were more difficult to adopt. Analyzing the museum also involved trying to imagine how a non-expert would interpret the displays and narratives. I simply did not have time or the institutional access to perform exit interviews of the museum, robbing me of an important perspective.

In addition to methodological challenges, it is important for researchers planning on conducting ethnographic field work to think about the personal, ethical, and emotional difficulties that this research entails. Ethnographic research is that it is lonely, stressful, and presents the researcher with moral and ethical quandaries that few other scholars need seriously
engage with. Descending the so-called “ivory tower” and being close to your research, or your research subjects, very clearly problematizes the artificial boundary between researcher and subject. It is for this reason, however, that ethnographic research is so rewarding and so honest. Entering the world of your participants helps to break down some of the barriers, and power dynamics, between researcher and subject. It makes you feel vulnerable and forces you to try to understand your participants on their terms. It is easy to disparage someone, or their belief system, in the comfort of your office, writing at your computer. But when you look someone in the eyes, and talk to them openly and honestly, you are forced to meet them halfway, and gain a more grounded view of the truth.

Researching a topic that you are passionate about poses its own challenges to your mental health. First, the boundary between work and life becomes extremely difficult to maintain. Every news story, conversation with friends and relatives, or snippy line in a once favorite television series brings you back into work mode. This phenomenon is compounded when you are in the field. Being somewhere for a short time to do research places one under a tremendous amount of strain and pressure. You are isolated from your normal social circle, and the challenges of adjusting to a new place are compounded by the pressures of research. I failed to appreciate, until I was in the field, how isolating it would feel to go days without a face-to-face conversation with another human being that did not involve the exchange of goods or services.

Further, being in the field erases the delicate boundaries that academics fight to maintain between their personal lives and work. There are no family members, partners, or old friends to take your mind off your work, no excuse for you to stop. In the field, your project is your first priority, but as I would learn, carving out days to try to not think about my project would become

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76 This is especially true when your subjects are armed.
77 Something that many of us have come to experience during the COVID-19 lockdowns.
exceptionally important to my well-being, and thus my ability to keep my mind sharp and do the best job that I could.

Progress in the field came stochastically. Brief flurries of activity were followed with days of down time. I spent this time doing research, taking advantage of the George Mason Library, and trying to set up meetings to speak with other scholars. Yet despite this it was hard to shake the nagging feeling of failure, the pressure to justify my time spent away, the financial burden, and my loneliness.

The silence of the lulls were filled with self-doubt. What was I doing here? Was I wasting time and money? What was the point of all of this? During the flurries of action however, I was elated. Anyone who has done research knows the sense of exhilaration that a new discovery or lead can create within you. The closest experience I can compare it to, though one that people may find strange, is the experience of dating. You feel a simultaneous sense of excitement and nervousness at meeting someone new, yet this joy feels fragile. What if my interviewee cancels? What if they revoke my access? What if I lose participant trust? What if something happens to me and I do not get to finish my work? Thoughts like this flew through my head during these breakthroughs, making me oddly nostalgic for the melancholy and comforting gloom of the lulls.

The stress of ethical dilemmas was another factor that I had understood academically, if not emotionally, when planning my trip. It is one thing to consider ethics when planning your research, and another to live it. At my first NRA class, I was tremendously nervous to approach the instructor. I went to talk with them, and ask them for an interview, and was shocked and disappointed to discover that they are forbidden from being interviewed and could lose their NRA teaching license as a result. Though not really a close call, this drove home to me the

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78 I later learned that this was untrue, and that the instructor had either misunderstood my request or the rules.
potential danger that I was putting people, and myself in with my research. The thought of my work costing someone their livelihood made me feel sick to my stomach. Though I always tried to be as open as possible with participants, the feeling of being an intruder, outsider, or interloper was yet another feeling I struggled to shake throughout the process. It is important to be aware of these drawbacks when thinking about using ethnographic methods in your research design.

Appendix C – Interview Prompts

Interview prompts were used to stimulate conversation during interviews. Participants often expanded the scope of topics covered.

1. How long have you owned and used firearms?

2. What was your first experience with firearms?

3. What does owning a gun mean to you? What does the gun symbolize for you? (Kohn, 2004).

4. What kind of firearms related activities do you enjoy (i.e. hunting, sports shooting, etc.)?

5. When did you join the NRA? What prompted you to join?

6. Did you buy your first gun? Did someone buy it for you? Did you inherit it?

7. What does the Second Amendment mean to you?

8. Have you been to the National Firearms Museum? What did you think of it?

9. What role do you think firearms have played in US history?

Appendix D – Online Survey Questions
You are invited to take part in a research project because you are a firearms owner, enthusiast, National Rifle Association (NRA) member or a supporter of the Second Amendment.
I am a political science student writing a thesis as part of my degree. I am interested in looking at how the NRA builds community among gun owners with their communications materials, and whether these materials resonate with firearms enthusiasts.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to better understand ideas about gun ownership through collecting your gun stories. I want to better understand what guns mean to you, your personal experiences with firearms and what you think about the role that firearms and the 2nd Amendment have played in the history of the United States.

This survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete.

Please feel free to answer as many or as little of the questions as you would like.

If you do not wish to answer a particular question, simply enter NA in the text box.

Your participation in this study is anonymous.

You are free to withdraw or stop the questionnaire at any time.

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at ethics@carleton.ca).

Your participation in this study is anonymous. All information will be kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board in order to ensure continuing ethics compliance.

All information will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others, possession of illegal firearms, intent to cause harm with a firearm).

Your survey responses will be stored and protected by Qualtrics in a password protected account, and backed-up on Dataverse, in a server located in Canada. Please note that they may be disclosed via a court order or data breach.

After the study is completed, your data will be retained for future research use.

By clicking on the Captcha verification, you confirm that you have read and understood the following information and agree to participate in the study.

Questions

1. Tell me about your first experience with firearms. Where was it? Who were you with? What was the experience like?

2. Tell me about your first firearm. Did you buy it yourself? Did someone buy it for you? Did you inherit it?

3. How long have you owned and/or used firearms? (0-1yr, 2-5yrs, 5-10yrs, 10+ yrs)

4. What does owning a firearm mean to you?

5. When you think of your favorite firearms related experiences, which stories come to mind? Who were you with at the time? What were you doing?
6. What kind of firearms related activities do you enjoy (i.e. hunting, sports shooting, self-defense preparedness etc.)?

7. If Other is selected, respondent prompted to list those activities.

8. Tell me more about how you got into that activity? (Appears only if they select an activity)

9. “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”. What does the Second Amendment mean to you?

10. Are you a member of a gun-rights organization (i.e. NRA)? (Yes, No, I was but not anymore, Considering it, Prefer Not To Say)

11. If so, when did you join? What prompted you to join?

12. Have you been to the National Firearms Museum? (Yes, No, Intend to go, Prefer not to say)

13. What did you think of the museum? What do you remember seeing? Were there any objects or experiences that were particularly memorable? (Only displayed if they select yes to previous question).

14. What role, if any, do you think that firearms have played in US history?

15. What is your gender? (M/F/Other/Prefer not to share)

16. What is your ethnicity?

17. What is your age group? (18-25, 26-35, 36-50, 50+)

18. In which state do you currently reside?

Closing Text

Thank you very much for participating in this survey. If you have any further questions, please contact (email).