

# American Guns

## & the Pathology of Empire

Rob Riled

1994

[two\_third padding="0 20px 0 0"]with **E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)**

Q: How do you know when there's a major social problem in America?

A: It's on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Now it's the "problem" of guns which shouts from the magazine racks, and liberals have an easy and seemingly obvious answer: gun confiscation by the state. Though voluminous human slaughter by musketry goes back to the European arrival here, the American obsession with firearms appears to have entered another dimension.

Are people shooting family, friends, bosses, co-workers, and strangers more frequently than ever? It seems so; certainly in the inner cities things have gotten worse. Parents there are desperate to stop the killings, especially of youth. Young black men in the '90s have a better chance of being hit by gunfire than did U.S. combat soldiers in Vietnam. The middle-class, although isolated from the areas of actual violence, reacts in panic to the media hype, nervously waiting for the shots to ring out in their neighborhood. Liberal believers in the State, want something done immediately by their servant, the government.

Why the sudden interest in firearms? Other types of destruction and death continue under-reported and accepted in the pages. Daily human annihilation, physical and spiritual, of ghetto residents plagued by grinding poverty is considered "normal." The toxic content of our brave new industrial world has compromised our immune systems and induced cancer at epidemic rates. Cars leave smashed and torn corpses littering the nation's highways each year by the tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands of our neighbors succumb to tobacco-and alcohol-induced deaths yearly. The country is filled with death for profit's sake.

## World's Most Violent Nation

As a slow motion social decomposition of America extends, gunplay gore continues on inner city streets, in family disputes or suicides (which account for 50% of annual handgun deaths), and overseas when the military "pacifies" trouble spots along imperial fault lines. Such incidents used to seem far away to many of the good citizens, and somehow avoidable if one was wise and didn't drive through "bad" neighborhoods, get involved with psychotic lovers, or be born the wrong color or nationality.

What is so upsetting lately to loyal subjects is that even if one plays by the rules, a fellow commuter's crack-up on the 5:15 home from the office can void everything in a flash.

As usual, the media-induced perception has only a partial relationship with reality. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice's *National Crime Victimization Survey* show that, for most of the population, violent crime has remained at a fairly constant level for the last twenty years, even as the prison population has skyrocketed. Even murder has remained at a consistent 9.3 per 100,000 people, and while making us the industrial world's most vi-

olent nation, doesn't conform to the image of rising danger. The murder rate for white males is 4.6 per 100,000, little different than the statistics for males in France or Italy.

What has changed dramatically are economic conditions for much of the black, urban, working class and poor. During the Reagan-Bush era, the bottom dropped out for the lower third of the American citizenry, and it is only common sense that the poorer you are, the more likely you are to commit or be the victim of a crime. Blacks make up only 12 % of the population, but are 50% of homicide victims. The murder rate for black men is a staggering 32.1 per 100,000, a figure near the highest in the world.

Regardless of media-induced paranoia or actual danger, any attempt to confiscate guns (short of martial law) would have limited effect on American reality. With well over 200 million firearms in circulation, disarming the population is not going to occur. Handguns are sturdy and easily hidden machines, and other than slowing down the rate of sales, even the most drastic gun control will not change the basic equation in our lifetime. If a confiscation law were somehow to be adopted, disobedience would be as massive as it has been for alcohol and drug prohibition.

The protests of officials over youth homicide (or sponsoring silly stunts like trading guns for athletic shoes), coming from political and business leaders of the biggest arms dealing state in the world is of course carnival patter for the yokels. The mass production of military hardware in this country fills the arsenals of states on every continent. How many children are killed worldwide by U.S.-manufactured/sold/supplied weapons? Guns-for-shoes stunts target poor people with an old pistol in the closet and net a few hundred weapons, while major corporate manufacturers produce weapons by the hundreds of thousands. This "save the children" bluster also avoids talking about murdering children without actually blowing them apart, as in Iraq, where tens of thousands died of dysentery after water treatment and energy structures were destroyed by American bombing.

## **Guns Are Totemic**

Firearm possession in America does have a sorry history. So, it should not be surprising that guns currently play a strange role in our national life. Like cars, guns are totemic—representing emotions far beyond what their utility is supposed to provide. When you see men walking around with baseball caps declaring, "My wife, yes; My dog, maybe; My gun, never!" you know you are dealing with something more than a lust for hunting or the anticipation of defense against some future tyranny.

On the right wing talk shows, you can hear the voices of the gun nuts seethe with rage, swearing they will die before giving up their guns. There is a growing psychopathology on the part of those white males who feel their traditional status and privilege eroding, their wages dropping, and who know blue collar jobs are going overseas and middle-level white collar positions are being hatcheted wholesale.

Previously, the average white male had a small piece of the pie and possessed a racial and gender identification with the ruling elite which gave him a sense of social superiority. Now, with their income and status under assault, many middle- and working-class men furiously blame their woes on minorities, women, gays, and the poor. This intense process of denial relieves them from confronting the real source of their anxieties and misery—life in capitalist society.

Gun control to these guys is their final emasculation: the severing of the last bastion of what they perceive as their power. The fantasy of perforating a trespasser with their Tec-9 assault pistol is going to be taken from them by effete liberals in Washington.

The media aren't likely to examine the social factors inherent in capitalism that create so many homicidal maniacs, so it blames America's ubiquitous guns. It is a bizarre, yet apt, symbol of this particular nation state to have almost as many guns as people, but is that the source of the problem? If firearm accessibility is the main cause of Americans' propensity for shooting each other rather than a deeply profound societal sickness, why then are other nations more immune to the phenomenon? The Swiss and Danes are required to have fully automatic assault rifles in their homes as part of a national military reserve policy, yet shooting deaths there are rare.

Part of the reason for this difference is that the formation of the state Leviathan occurred differently on this continent than in the Alpine Mountains or Scandinavia. Slavery was fundamental to the American accumulation of wealth and its expansion into the “world market.”

These captive Africans combined with nineteenth and twentieth century European and Asian immigrants to develop a multiracial, often internally competitive, class society becoming increasingly polarized economically. The frontier heritage—a willingness for quick use of aggressive violence to expropriate land from the natives and hold it against all comers—is still inculcated into the citizenry. Though the crusade for land across this continent ended generations ago, we are still bombarded with paeans to those who use aggressive violence to solve problems whether in fictional media cop and cowboy dramas, or in real-life celebrations of the latest frontier massacre by the imperial armies.

In his book, *Facing West*, Richard Drinnon analyzes the ethos and practice of the Euro-American settler state since the first East Coast enclaves were established. The unstoppable drive westward was fueled on the insatiable desire for stolen land which necessitated the racist slaughter of native people and the extermination of their culture. After reaching the California coast, this frenzy extended across the Pacific Ocean, swept through Hawai’i, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia, for control of resources and markets as well as territory. Uncounted millions of human beings and the ancient ecosystems they lived in fell before the American Leviathan (until Vietnam provided a bone of determined armed resistance that slowed down the imperial hunger for conquest.).

## The “Uncivilized” Periphery

Although global plunder provided generations of opulence for the ruling elites, and some stability for the middle classes, problems in the metropole have only worsened. Human alienation continues to fuel the downward spiral of community. Surrounding the imperial grandeur of America’s cities are chaos-filled ghettos usually associated with the “uncivilized” peripheries. Relentless exploitation in the so-called Third World sometimes leads to armed resistance by the exploited, a lesson not lost on weapons prohibitionists at home concerned about the great number of military-style firearms possessed by the poor.

Weaponry always figures heavily in images of revolution, but armed political struggles have an ugly history of party-led coups d’etat, guaranteeing a police state. Opposition to guns abolition does not imply sympathy for frustrated fuhrers or commissars who desire a turn at the helm of bureaucratic vessels of state. Although anarchists have participated in armed uprisings against the state, the theory of anarchism holds that it is popular social revolution which will end the pillage of the earth. Suppose a [text missing in original print]

The victorious settlers who consolidated community decided to change its social activity by unplugging TV rather than by the political act of expropriating the local broadcast station to televise the revolution and pronouncements of its “leaders”?

After withdrawal from the telescreen’s light blue glow, suppose these same communards carried their insurrection further and attempted to stay off the treadmill of work and consumption by establishing food and medical capabilities within the community; what would be the state’s response to such anarchy?

*Leviathan*, Hobbes’ expression for the monster that is the State, must have ultimate control over its domain, either subtly or crudely. As Fredy Perlman wrote in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*, “The Leviathanized cannot encompass free beings in their horizon and still remain Leviathanized. Once they grasp freedom, they become Renegades.” We all know what happens to the unrepentant Renegade. Demonstrations of non-statist life and community cannot be allowed to exist for long, for then the panoply of human possibilities would be unveiled.

If Leviathan reacts this way by definition, then any talk of “autonomous zones” or “free human communities” must consider the inevitability of attempts at their suppression. Internally, the American state rules more “benignly” in 1994 than at other points in its history because no viable threat exists. If the threat should arise, the velvet glove slips off and the American Leviathan acts according to its needs. Subtle techniques of control are preferred, but decisive action against Renegades is institutional.

A popular social revolution would depend upon mutual aid for survival from other rebellious communities, but it is not inconceivable that early movements towards self-sufficiency would have to defend themselves from the

government or other plunderers. It is when considering self-defense rather than a leftist putsch that the idea of weapons in the hands of the people becomes important.

For such hypothetical healthy free communities to maintain autonomy when under physical attack, they would need guns. This does not mean becoming obsessed with them as a major pathway to “freedom” as numerous past and present rebels have in attempting to slip this nation-state’s grasp.

When looking at U.S. history, we must remember that the rights conferred by America’s parchment charters are the product of either those who slaughtered this continent’s original inhabitants or of their cheerleaders. Talk of life, liberty, and pursuing happiness in this Leviathan’s founding document used a self-serving eloquence intended for consumption by the white, male, land-owning segment of the populace.

Belief in the principles of the Enlightenment was fashionable then, but the business of America was, and remains, business. The English on the new continent who desired more territory were pitted against English with fur interests necessitating woodlands instead of farms. “Both interests are equally Leviathanic, both are Imperialisms, enlargers of the archipelago of labor-camps erratically but totally administered by the World Market,” Perlman concluded in his study of civilization’s conquest.

Their united states had experienced martial law in towns patrolled by soldiers. The soldiers were generally their own countrymen who searched homes at will and were particularly keen on seizing guns. The ministers of the imperial bureaucracy in London decided their subjects could no longer be trusted with firearms and began counterinsurgency operations to confiscate them. To the planter and merchant colonialists, the tyranny of military occupation meant the royal government had “gone bad.”

Years of armed resistance finally threw off the oppressors, and when the upstart revolutionists-turned-rulers wrote their revered 1789 Constitution, they left slavery intact, women subordinate to men, and the colonial oligarchy consecrated by law. Significantly, the second item on the list of basic “human rights” guaranteed the citizens of the new nation the right to arm themselves as a “well-regulated militia.” It is within the language of this provision that the gun nuts of today find the rationalization for personal ownership of high-powered weapons of war.

However, a close reading of the amendment and a knowledge of the era in which it was written shows the emphasis was on the “well-regulated” phrase and not the “right to bear arms.” The founding bourgeoisie wanted power for their merchant/planter class, and greatly feared the “mob” which increasingly created uncontrolled disturbances and riots on both sides of the Atlantic.

## **KKK Allowed Free To Roam**

The “well-regulated” clause precluded autonomous militias not subject to state control. Ironically, the colonial war of 1776–1783 was sparked by unregulated frontier militias who confronted soldiers of their own government over gun confiscation. The new rulers had no intention of letting such a process repeat itself.

Autonomy goes against a state’s authoritarian structure, and can exist only if the state is not strong enough to destroy such independence. Although armed groups such as settlers, KKK, or American Legion mobs were allowed to roam freely at different historical moments, they were given leeway only to the extent that their activities supported state interests. But, from the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s to the christian millenarian wackos in Waco last year, domestic concentrations of weaponry usually are liquidated as quickly as politically and militarily feasible.

Ninety years after the planter class brought off successful secession from England they saw their national dominance being eroded by ascendant industrialists of the Northeast. The grandchildren of New England Minutemen now lived in towns and worked in factories dominated by powerful bankers and the captains of industry they financed. The Dixie elites realized the oncoming economic and political shift would disrupt the plantation and farm-based slave system constructed in the South which was the foundation of their dominant position.

A bloody civil war cleared up whatever confusion lingered about the legitimacy of extra-governmental militias. Raging across the continent and consuming hundreds of thousands of lives, the war decided that secession of nationally annexed territory was treasonous and illegal, and would be put down at any cost.

That the rebellious provinces were merely a breakaway Leviathan rather than free communities does not change the lesson. Being a part of the empire proper is like being in the Mafia; no one can quit. Those who try, however populous or powerful, will be liquidated. The bearded emancipator of African slaves helped consolidate the U.S. Leviathan against Indians as well as Southern whites, and ensured a lucrative destiny of empire rather than Balkanization for the industrialists. Faith in a “progressive” future inspired him to end racially based chattel slavery, but guaranteed wage slavery for the multi-racial inmates of the American work gulags and its victims overseas.

In addition to the continual massacre of “hostile” natives, the bloody precedent of the federal monopoly on militias was soon invoked to deal with the turbulent strike wave of 1877. Armed railroad workers in several states were resisting their ordained exploitation, so military occupation of the South was quickly ended to free troops for their suppression.

Similar tactics have always been invoked after more subtle methods have failed, significantly the large mid-1970s FBI counterinsurgency operation in South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation, or more recently in Los Angeles three years ago. In LA, the National Guard (with army and marine regulars on alert) crushed an uprising/riot situation where some street gangs were using military weaponry and acting in a quasi-guerrilla fashion.

Unarmed insurrectionary people are more easily neutralized by state power in a tactical military situation. The eighteenth century land-speculating elites who decided to cut the Crown out of the swell racket they had going in the colonies knew what Huey Newton (a rebellious descendent of their human chattel) stated 200 years later: “An unarmed people are slaves or subject to slavery at any given moment.”

The last occasion in this country when a social movement threatened the status quo by invoking self-defense “privileges” was during the turbulent 1960s and 70s, when inner city Blacks and reservation Indians armed themselves against government attacks. The Black Panther movement Newton was a part of took the Second Amendment literally and attempted armed defense against killer cops who functioned in their communities like an occupying army. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, they learned how seriously the American state regards such actions, especially when the motive is social or political.

## **Secret FBI War**

A secret war, orchestrated by the FBI and coordinated with local police department “red squads,” killed scores of Panthers and railroaded hundreds of others into the penitentiary on spurious criminal charges. The Black Panthers, with their vanguardist political style and Leninist party apparatus, were certainly not a paradigm of organization to be emulated. However, by working for local autonomy and the severing of dependence on the state, the Panthers were directly addressing immediate social problems of the impoverished black community.

They did not want more federal money for their neighborhoods; they wanted the feds out altogether. They knew dependent people could never become autonomous, so they organized food and medical programs within their community which state suppression efforts particularly targeted. Though never numbering more than a few thousand members nationally, polls taken in the late ‘60s showed up to 75% of inner city Blacks sympathized with the movement.

Their advocacy of guns for community defense gave the government fodder to portray the Panthers as terrorists. The specter of rebellious armed Blacks had haunted Euro-American settlers since they first brought enslaved Africans to the colonies, so encouraging this fear was not difficult. The nervous white citizenry bought political repression disguised as a gang crackdown hook, line and sinker.

As still-imprisoned former Panther Geronimo Pratt said, “It wasn’t the question of armed self-defense which was at issue, but the question of what we were defending. All you have to do is examine the extreme lengths they went to to destroy the Breakfast for Children Program. Look at what they did to our clinics and our legal education program. That’ll tell you all you need to know.”

## Armed Anarchist Militias?

Pratt was framed for a 1969 murder committed in Santa Monica, California, on the same day the FBI had him under surveillance hundreds of miles away attending a Panther meeting in Oakland. Refusing to renounce his beliefs, Geronimo is still imprisoned a quarter century later. [For more information write: The International Campaign to Free Geronimo Ji-Jaga (Pratt) P.O. Box 3585, Oakland, CA 94609]

Many calls for securing weaponry, forming armed anarchist militias and carrying out urban guerrilla activity appear in the libertarian press from time to time. Since the conditions for social revolution aren't currently present, these calls wind up to be at best a pathetic posturing amounting to little more than chain rattling, but at worst encourage government repression and victimization of militants.

We have no opposition to individuals securing arms for self-defense, but to elevate this to the level of political strategy is ineffective, potentially dangerous, and often authoritarian. If American society reaches social revolution's flashpoint as have societies in other states, a stalwart, unarmed populace with enough widespread ardor to back its intent can quickly arm themselves, if troops sent to suppress them are sympathetic. In a truly popular social uprising, mutinous police and soldiers would open the armories to their comrades in revolt against established political power.

Voline, a Russian anarchist active in Petrograd and Moscow during 1917–1918 and Ukraine until his imprisonment by the communists in 1920, wrote in *The Unknown Revolution*: "If, for one reason or another such [political] power is supported by a strong section of the populace and especially by the Army, it would be impossible to win against it, and therefore futile to attack it.

"But, if on the contrary, it is abandoned by the majority of the people and by the Army—which occurs in every genuine revolution—then it is not worth bothering with. At the slightest gesture of the armed people, it will fall like a house of cards. It is necessary to be concerned, not with 'political' power, but with the real power of the Revolution, with its inexhaustible, spontaneous, potential forces, its irresistible spirit, the far-flung horizons it opens."

Balzac said laws are cobwebs for the rich and chains for the poor so we can expect any legislation or programs designed to confiscate weaponry will fall heaviest on minority communities and potential rebel sectors of society. The gun "crisis" in our cities is more a product of increasing poverty than the availability of weapons, but neither liberals nor conservatives want to confront this.

The real crisis of this society is the state which is founded on guns and their use to enforce social policy here and abroad. The debate would be better focused on the violence of the cops and U.S. Marines rather than on urban gang members.

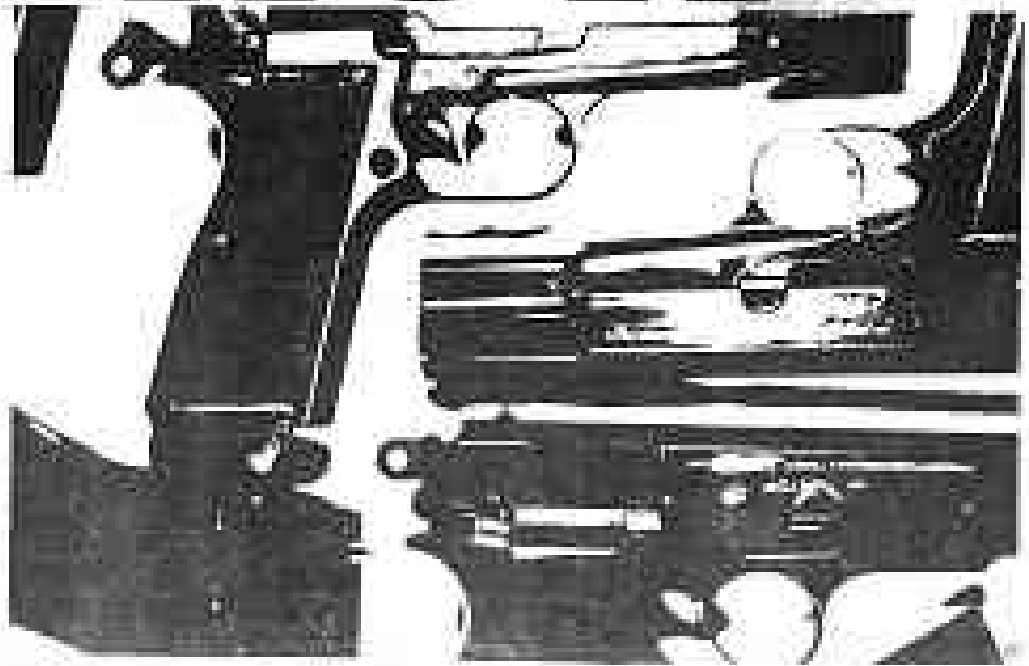
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After publication of this front page in the Feb. 20, 1969 *Fifth Estate*, we lost the services of the FE founder, who quit in protest over it. Taken from a Cuban propaganda poster, its appearance was not a result of our over-the-top revolutionary enthusiasm, but from a last minute, 4:00 am search for a cover with the paper due at the printer in two hours.[/one\_third\_last]

A COMPASSION OF MORTUARY  
APRIL 1974 VOL. 10 NO. 4  
PAGES 1-10

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Rob Riled  
American Guns  
& the Pathology of Empire  
1994

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