

# Mad men

How marketing created American gun culture, turning a weapon of war into an object of desire

STEPHEN WERTHEIM

Pamela Haag

THE GUNNING OF AMERICA  
Business and the making of American gun culture  
528pp. Basic Books. £19.99 (US \$29.99).  
978 0 465 04895 3

As with other industries, one gun was expensive to make but each thereafter was cheap. Profits thus depended on massive sales. But to whom? Winchester failed to impress American consumers, notwithstanding his prescient effort to “scatter our guns as much as possible”. The first generation of arms companies instead relied on government contracts and international deals, subsisting on the Civil War and a host of European and colonial conflicts. Amazonian rubber barons, Mexican



A National Association for Gun Rights poster

revolutionaries, the Thai King – all joined the Sultan in buying American guns, sold without government oversight. Some of Haag’s most original chapters describe this “arms diaspora radiating from Connecticut outward”. The global consequences warrant more systematic research.

For Haag’s gun capitalists, however, globalization proved to be less alluring than nationalization. The business of supplying wars around the world suffered from the persistent problem of peace. Huge contracts could end at any moment, leaving firms swimming in supply. Around the turn of the twentieth century, gun capitalists, now in their second generation, devised a solution: “Our advertising will CREATE the demand”, Winchester headquarters told its salesmen.

Haag excels in decoding the succession of

commercial promotions that helped to produce gun exceptionalism. Winchester and Remington, she shows, dispatched entertainers called “missionaries” across the American continent. Shrewdly forbidden from selling guns directly, these marksmen associated firearms with non-commercial recreation. They counterposed the armed Wild West to the industrial East, where the guns were actually made. Just as the North American frontier closed and corporate capitalism triumphed, Americans romanticized the gun as a fount of traditional pioneer freedom.

The colonization of America had many willing collaborators, among them Theodore Roosevelt, who brandished his beloved Winchesters when he charged up San Juan Hill and hunted African game, seeking new outlets for “virile vigor”. Or perhaps it was Roosevelt – and a host of cultural purveyors, from dime

worked, the gun became an object of desire. Winchester sales duly multiplied, more than tripling from 1890 to 1914 even as smaller shares went to the military and foreign markets. By the First World War, Winchester fulfilled its original dream of securing large government contracts but found peacetime production more profitable – and more secure, since the wartime state might seize arms plants. Haag concludes that the first wave of gun critics in the 1920s and 30s, who condemned “merchants of death” for pushing the government into the war, had it backwards. In fact, the war empowered the government to push around the gun industry. Better for the manufacturers to reap the perpetual spoils of peace.

Haag doesn’t shrink from drawing implications for the present. One would think she might urge proponents of gun control to seize the offensive, to stop taking for granted the historical importance of gun ownership and the commercial rights of gun manufacturers. Her narrative, after all, casts gun capitalism as not just physically but morally destructive. In a novelistic B plot, Haag follows the spiritual crisis of Sarah Winchester, Oliver’s daughter-in-law, who decamped to California and embarked on a never-ending mansion-building project featuring staircases to nowhere. Haag suggests, though the evidence is thin, that the conscience repressed in her gun-making family surged in Sarah.

Yet Haag ends up wary of legislative gun control. She briefly counsels a business-focused approach that would pressure gun manufacturers to make their products safer by ending their exemptions from civil lawsuits and various consumer-safety regulations. Perhaps this move has tactical merits in a deadlocked debate, but it is a jarringly small finale to a sweeping narrative. It also highlights the absence of political contestation from Haag’s analysis. Even if corporate power made America’s guns and shaped its gun culture, the question of the hundred years since is how public power has, or has not, been brought to bear. In this regard, gun owners and their lobbyists have often proved more obstructive than the gun makers themselves. Consider Smith & Wesson’s decision to institute safety measures proposed by the federal government in 2000: the National Rifle Association organized a boycott and sales plummeted. Pamela Haag nonetheless reveals the bracing banality of how Americans came to love the gun in the first place.

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National Church of Iceland

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