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Counting Up AR-15s

The Subject of Assault Rifles and the Assault Rifle as Subject

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How to understand guns as not simply carriers of actions, but also as actors themselves is a challenging, but intriguing, assignment. Americans are often told, if not scolded, that they have a "gun culture." The ownership of guns, however, has been declining for decades, along with overall participation levels in outdoor sports, overall national crime levels, individual military service, and the popularity of hunting animals as recreation. In this context, where is the gun culture and what do guns mean?

To respond, this chapter reconsiders one type of firearm, namely the AR-15, along with its military M-16 and M-4 variants, which often are mistakenly labeled by the media as "assault rifles," to trace out the symbolic and material complexities associated with this type of gun. After this introduction, the first section maps some curious symbolic and material aspects of the gun culture tied to these weapons in the United States. The second section positions the AR platform within a material genealogy of battle rifles in Europe and the United States. It goes back to the beginnings of the original assault rifle during World War II, and follows the evolution of this weapon type after 1945 in the United States. Such firearms were developed as weapons of war. One set of American designs became the military-use M-16 and successor variants, while another morphed into the civilianized AR family of semi-automatic rifles. The third section situates the subject of assault-style rifles available for purchase by civilians around the United States, placing them within the context of a few recent high-profile mass shootings that have granted new emotive qualities and symbolic meanings to these guns. Given the weapons and their use in such crimes, the fourth section looks at the AR-15 as an agent, actor, or even a subject. This section is more speculative, but this approach draws upon the larger guiding thematic behind this collection of essays. One could say that a

significant quality of these firearms is their capacity for generating new subjectivity from what is dismissed too often as inert thingness. To conclude, the fifth section ties together these themes by raising additional questions about the assault rifle as a cultural fixture in the public understanding of guns in the United States today.

Exploring these ideas is important. Guns are not always carriers of action. They signal actions, empower their carriers, and provide their owners with capacities that non-carriers do not have. Thinking through these possibilities of agency, as human actors carry guns brazenly in the open or furtively in concealed-carry rigs, is crucial. A few guns fire daily, but rarely all on their own. Some guns are used in forms of extremely violent interaction, but not always daily. Many guns in the minds of their owners and society are always at the ready for violent use at the drop of a hat. Concealed in carriers, strapped in open-carry holsters, slung over the shoulder, placed in a truck gun rack, or leaning in the corner by the front door, the gun is loaded. Still, most of these weapons are rarely, if ever, fired.

The Symbolic and the Material in Gun Culture

The meaning that any weapon conveys in the mind of its owner, and to the minds of others, determines how it is carried, displayed, or fired. Similarly, the actions that firearms perform in society condition their reception, presence, or circulation in everyday life. Deterrent displays of guns without actual discharge could be quite violent interactions, but frequent firings of other weapons might only be idle entertainments. Each of these gunplays, however, centrally feature firearms as actors. To ask what kind of symbol any gun is, in turn, becomes an intricate proposition. When, where, why, how, and to whom a gun becomes symbolically significant makes answering this question about material significance almost impossible to answer easily.

By the same token, what kinds of guns become symbols? In a country proud that it was, in part, made by Minutemen, the first American pioneers' flintlock musket undeniably is a national symbol. In 2000, a Cold War–era superstar, the actor Charlton Heston (aka "Moses" in *The Ten Commandments*, "Judah Ben-Hur" in *Ben-Hur*, and "Bright Eyes" in *The Planet of the Apes*) addressed the 129th National Rifle Association convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. Oddly enough, this Hollywood titan claimed he had only "ordinary hands," like anyone else. Then during an impassioned address, Heston raised up over his head a modern replica of muzzle-loading Kentucky long-rifle. Possessed by a look of reverent awe, he brandished it, like Moses's staff, Ben-Hur's spear, or Bright Eye's ape rifle. In an intense rebuke to then Vice President Al Gore's call

for restricting the gun rights of Americans, Heston shouted, "From my cold, dead hands!"[1]

In material and symbolic terms, one wonders who or what is the actor here: does the musket carry Heston; are Heston and the Kentucky rifle headliner co-stars celebrating the NRA; or is Heston, the human, brandishing a rifled musket, the thing, as an iconic token of the Constitution of the United States of America? The audience is a star-struck gun-rights pressure group, and this NRA plenary went supernova when Heston intoned "when ordinary hands can possess such an extraordinary instrument, that symbolizes the full measure of human dignity and liberty. That's why those five words issue an irresistible call to us all, and we muster."[2] For the NRA and its members, Heston declared its deepest principles, "To defeat the divisive forces that would take freedom away, I want to say those fighting words for everyone within the sound of my voice to hear and to heed—and especially for you, Mr. Gore: From my cold, dead hands!"[3]

This gun is an actor. It serves as a lead-spitting synecdoche for the United States of America, and Heston is the NRA's well-chosen big gun, firing for effect. One probably should begin by bearing in mind how such muzzle-loaders are nearly holy vessels in the Republic's civic religion. With their Minuteman shooters, for example, they appear all across the nation on public buildings, in history books, on official documents, in military insignia, on corporate signs, in business stationery, and so on. These manifold material markers affirm that some sacred stuff for a mighty nation's citizens, in fact, is contained within such muskets. Indeed, there is an extraordinary anima/animus that "resides in that wooden stock and blue steel."[4] During this remarkable civic play of a national imaginary, the gun is a major player, and the actor is but an NRA gunhand espousing the interests of all in preserving their freedom to have and hold any type of firearm.

By the same token, this spirit cannot be separated from the development of the AR-15 and M-16 rifle platforms. These new rifles arrive during a watershed moment in US history, namely, the years of intense Cold War tensions, the broadly opposed Vietnam War, and widespread resistance against routine mass conscription into the American military. Before 1973, most male citizens could expect to be drafted, and many were educated in the use of firearms before, during, and after their military service. Not simply the "armed citizens" that the

[1] Michael W. Chapman, "Flashback: From My Cold, Dead Hands," CNS News, January 14, 2013, http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/flashback-charlton-heston-my-cold-dead-hands.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Charlton Heston, "My Cold Dead Hands NRA Speech," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnXNowPnSQY.

NRA imagines should wander among twenty-first century America, serving as those "good guys" with a gun to take out some "bad guy" with a gun, the draft-age American citizen before 1973 was presumed to be a "citizen-at-arms," willing to serve in the regular forces, the reserves, or state guard units as a "sovereign," "citizen," "soldier." This symbolic cluster of intense civil engagement entailed important duties to the American body politic. Moreover, these civic roles were not strange fringe organization fantasies about state, county, or personal rights, but rather well-known obligations to the American nation reinforced in many rituals of citizenship.

Before Vietnam, American "gun culture" had a broad and deep civic tradition, which millions of Korean War, World War II, and World War I veterans affirmed in daily life. Over fifty years later, it is almost forgotten, purposely ignored, or not well understood. Nonetheless, it was real materially and symbolically. The loss of more capacious forms of civic agency for citizens, once embedded in the circuits of state war-making through the election of legislators empowered to declare war by the Constitution, made military service since World War II more telling as a meaningful civic duty during the Cold War. However, the last official declarations of war were passed by Congress against the minor Axis powers of Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania on June 5, 1942. Thus, the elected national representatives of the voting public have broken the chain of responsibility with the rise of the Department of Defense, the threat of thermonuclear war, and the growth of a national security culture. These major political changes in citizen sovereignty haunt today's culture of gun ownership.

As a result, war making by the United States after the 1950s comes about grudgingly in strange "authorizations for use of military force" and "war resolution acts," which usually have unclear resolve, start fruitless wars, and then slip away from collective memory as tragically violent acts of Cold War and post–Cold War empire. After two generations of organizational change, America's armed forces have evolved into a professional volunteer military, and it is regarded now by most voters as another equal opportunity workplace for any able-bodied person, including foreign nationals, to build a respectable career without much real hazard in a high-tech workplace. Moreover, the American armed forces frequently outsource many of their more violent assignments to private military contractors—poor local allied nations and unmanned, remotely piloted weapons platforms "to defend the homeland." Still, at some point between the Iraq Wars of 1991 and 2003, the Department of Defense increasingly has come to call its soldiers, sailors, and airmen, both male and female, "warriors," in a nearly tribal, civilizational, or ethno-nationalist register. Before the 1970s, America's secular republican state rarely used this label. When citizens volunteered for the military, or were drafted into public service, Americans in uniform were regarded as citizens-at-arms rather than a special caste of

warriors relatively isolated from the nation's general population. Consequently, the regular military was once staffed with far more active citizens, doing their first important civic duties as service men or service women, but these patterns no longer hold true.

These are subtle shifts, but their significance is not trivial. First, it should be noted that the US military, as President Trump has grumped, "does not win anymore" with these warriors from the all-volunteer forces. And, second, the people the United States has fought since 1949 typically are not armed with high-tech capital-intensive weapons equal to those fielded by the Pentagon. Third- or fourth-world enemy forces in the global south usually have only small arms or obsolete heavy weapons. They fight hard enough to not lose, but that level of intense popular armed resistance has stranded the United States in many geopolitical traps. And, these small wars leave Washington in uneasy armistices, forced strategic withdrawals, or unending tactical losses. Who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are is not clear, or maybe not even determinable in these conflicts, but the poor opponents of the United States in the global south, who do not lose, always have guns.

It is against this backdrop that today's NRA has evolved into a powerhouse lobby for gun rights since the fall of Saigon in 1975. The National Rifle Association began in 1871, because Civil War veteran officers were dismayed with the shooting skills of their conscripts during the War between the States. The NRA has persisted through the decades as one of the largest firearms education organizations in the world, but its leaders also have become very effective advocates for gun and ammunition makers in the post–Cold War era.

A layered, close ethnographic assessment of the NRA might find that both Heston and his Kentucky long rifle were affirming the core symbolic values of the United States. They are coded, as many members of the NRA construct themselves, namely, as gun sellers and gun buyers who would only have their weapons pried out of their cold dead hands by some overweening government. They also believe every American should cherish the Constitution's Second Amendment principles. These legal rights affirm all Americans, according to this faith, as heirs of one of modernity's first wars of national liberation, armed popular revolutions, and militant settler civilizations, which all came to fulfillment in a historical play of Manifest Destiny through superior firepower. As subjects of the post–Cold War empire of bases engaged in a global war on terrorism, this mythos, of course, creates ambivalence, because it often seems quaint, brings a bad smell, and looks menacing at times. Yet, these mythic ideals also are very real, and they remain deeply entangled in the country's conflicted history.

Guns are symbols, but their materiality is loaded with civic signs, which highlight larger complexes of meaning. Recall for a moment images of John Rambo in Hope, Washington, with an M-60 machine gun; Detective "Dirty

Harry" Callahan in San Francisco with his Smith & Wesson N-frame Model 29 .44 Magnum; or Reuben J. "Rooster" Cogburn riding out in the Badlands firing his Model 92 Winchester carbine with a large loop lever.[5] Images of these three gunmen crackle with energy recurrently whipped up from America's rich folklore of armed violence. The guns convey divergent understandings of the gunman's effectiveness, while the actors trace different shades in the ethics of shooters: soldier, detective, cowboy, typically white, mostly male, but usually responsible for pursuing some larger symbolic collective good. Yet, the M-60, the S & W .44 Magnum, and the Winchester 92 also are historic headliner players filling key roles with their human costars.

Many experts assert "gun violence" amounts to a social tragedy, a national plague, a recurrent epidemic, or a male curse, but it is this simple. Must such reductive views of gun culture always find the significance of the gun in-and-of-itself mired in violent death and mayhem? Not many people confront the reality that lethal force sometimes is, in fact, unavoidable, necessary, or imperative. Beyond violence, are they fully aware of the multiple American subjectivities shaped by shooting, owning, handling, or appreciating guns? These questions are well worth bearing in mind as one examines "gun culture."

Unlike a specific new flu virus strain, however, there is not just one gun culture in America. There are many, not all involve shooting, and not all shooting is violent. These other American gun cultures, as the anthropologist Robert Redfield would suggest, have their own varied conventional understandings manifest in the acts and artifacts of certain human groups through time, but these nuances are rarely discussed. Few of them can be easily disentangled from the conflicted myths or shifting hatreds that churn at the civic core of the country's collective existence. But these psychic complexities and political contradictions also enable experts to naturalize gun use in the analytical *dispositifs* of the therapeutic state, cultures of securitization, and narratives of 24/7 police surveillance.

Counting Down AR-15s

At this conjuncture, it makes sense to survey the origins of the AR-15 in its development as a weapon of war, as well as its fate as just another semi-automatic rifle for sale to civilians. Given their space-age design configurations in the 1960s marketplace, such "black guns" or "black rifles" (due to the original colors of new light alloy materials used in the AR platform) have fascinated the shooting

[5] See Sylvester Stallone in *First Blood* (1982); Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971); and John Wayne in *True Grit* (1969).

and non-shooting public for decades.[6] This particular rifle came into service with the military during 1962 after multiple studies by the Pentagon.[7] In 1963, it was made available for sale to civilians, when ads in gun magazines showed the new futuristic Colt AR-15 "Sporter" for $189.50 in rustic hunting scenes that usually would feature at an old, beat-up .30-30 Winchester rifle or Mossberg pump shotgun. Colt claimed, "If you are a hunter, camper or collector, you'll want an AR-15 Sporter," calling it a "superb hunting partner."[8] In light of this long-standing market presence, AR black rifle images have circulated in many popular press outlets, new stories, and shooting circles since the Kennedy era.

A. DESIGN VARIATIONS

After the Korean War in the mid-1950s, American military planners rethought the nation's infantry weapons types. Virtually all existing rifle designs—developed from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century—were styled largely by embedded institutional inertia (prior-generation weapons had used large, heavy-barreled pieces with simple steel actions, wooden stocks, open sights, and bayonet mounts, not unlike early muskets), incrementalism (slow changes came mostly due to occasional new bullet types, projectile designs, propellant loadings, action designs, or cartridge capabilities, as well as limited defense budgets), and fixed investment (national armories and gun factories are capital-intensive plants that make objects with considerable endurance that can work well for decades).[9]

Most militaries around the world deployed battle rifles, even during the 1960s, which bear a fair resemblance to seventeenth-century muskets. Long guns still are made to be more than guns in war. Like combat four hundred years ago, when ammunition depletion, action failure, weather conditions, or hand-to-hand tactics required riflemen to remain in battle, soldiers still could fight with nonfunctioning rifles. When equipped with large bayonets, such guns could serve as sword-like, spear-like, or pike-like cutting/stabbing weapons, in

[6] C. J. Chivers, *The Gun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 267–310.

[7] Department of War effectiveness studies of World War II American infantry units discovered perplexing patterns in their frequency of fire, the typical range of combat engagements, the number of rounds carried by individual soldiers into combat, and the need for high-caliber long-range cartridges on battlefields after 1945. Moreover, the US military during World War II fielded several types of battle rifles using different ammunition, requiring different shooting skills, and having varied battlefield effectiveness, especially in comparison to the weapons used by other Allied and Axis nations. All of these factors spoke to the merits of creating a new single type of battle rifle and ammunition.

[8] See Soldier Systems, "A 1963 Colt AR-15 advertisement," http://soldiersystems.net/2016/06/21/a-1963-colt-ar-15-advertisment/.

[9] Chivers, *The Gun*, 250–255.

addition to remaining lethal club-like blunt instruments for killing men and animals at close quarters with no bullets.

The first AR-15 rifle (AR stands for the Armalite Company, not "Assault Rifle") was designed by Eugene Stoner at the Fairchild Armalite company in competition for bids on a massive contract to sell a new multinational battle rifle in 7.2x51mm (.308) caliber for NATO and US use.[10] This original AR-10 design had promise, but suffered from several flaws due to its innovative use of aluminum, plastic composites, and modular construction when firing such high-powered ammunition. After it failed that competition, Armalite reconfigured it to fire smaller 5.56mm/.223 rounds, leading to greater success. Still, the firm won no American contracts, even though a few AR-10s were sold in Africa to newly independent countries willing to buy them. Armalite then sold the design and manufacturing rights to the Colt Company. Colt, in turn, re-engineered the design again as a selective-fire fully automatic weapon and marketed it to the Department of Defense for military use. The United States Air Force adopted it in 1962, and the other services eventually integrated it into their inventories as the M-16, and later the M-4 assault rifle, to replace their older M-14 7.62x51mm rifles, which basically were a redesigned, rechambered, and reconfigured variant of the successful M-1 Garand .30-06 semi-automatic rifle from World War II.[11]

B. AR-15S ARE NEITHER M-16S NOR THE FIRST ASSAULT RIFLE

The term "assault rifle" is, nonetheless, a complete misnomer for the AR-15 semi-automatic as it is sold on civilian markets in the United States. The AR-15 has been acquired by civilian buyers from its beginning as a "Sporter" or "Modern Sporting Rifle" with only one small-capacity (5-round) magazine. The first true assault rifle came into production during 1943 in Nazi Germany from the arms design bureau of Hugo Schmeisser in an essentially black program to respond to challenges from fighting on the Russian Front.[12] Schmeisser designed the iconic MP40 submachine gun, but its 9mm ammunition and limited range were handicaps in many battle situations.[13] Designated through various model runs as the MP43, MP44, or StG44, his new rifle putatively was named by Adolf Hitler himself as a "Sturmgewehr," or "assault rifle." Chambering a cut-down standard 7.92x57mm cartridge case used in Germany's K98 Mauser bolt action

[10] Ibid., 275–268.

[11] Ibid., 272.

[12] Ibid., 164–167.

[13] See Alejandro De Quesada, *MP38 and MP40 Submachine Guns* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2014), 15–33.

rifles, the StG44 could fire its 7.92x33mm rounds in fully automatic or semi-automatic modes. It, however, also usually had a wooden stock and could be fitted with a bayonet. Designed primarily to counter Red Army units equipped with PPS or PPSH-41 submachine guns (like the British STEN or American M-3 submachine guns of World War II), the StG44 gave German soldiers a new type of infantry weapon with high submachine gun rates of fire, but chambering ammunition with a range, bullet mass, and muzzle velocity closer to standard bolt-action infantry battle rifles.[14]

C. THE AK-47 AND THE RISE OF THE ASSAULT RIFLE IMAGINARY

The StG44 and its cartridge became better known around the end of hostilities in Europe to Mikhail Kalashnikov in the USSR, who designed today's most iconic assault rifle, namely, the AK-47. To produce a similar weapon, he endorsed cutting down the standard 7.62x54mm round used in the classic Russian Moisin-Nagant bolt-action rifle to 7.65x39mm.[15] Furthermore, the AK-47's general profile appears to slightly copy the StG44, even though the AK design much improved upon that German weapon as well as the American M-1 Garand and earlier Soviet Simonov SKS-45 fixed–box-magazine semi-automatic rifles.[16]

All of these military assault rifles have specific design characteristics integral to their roles: selective fire (semi-auto and full auto) switches, detachable box magazines with large capacities, an effective range around 350 to 400 yards, muzzle flash suppressors, and bayonet lugs.[17] The AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, on the other hand, was intentionally named a "Modern Sporting Rifle" for civilian sales. Even though it does have a detachable magazine receiver, its non-military variants are sold with only one very low capacity magazine. They also lack selective fire switches for fully automatic fire, bayonet lugs, and military-grade flash suppressors. These weapons can fire many rounds quickly, but they are not weapons of war. Nonetheless, alluring imaginaries of awesome power seeped into popular appraisals of any assault-style rifle. Even though the AR-15 did not fire like an M-16, or have all military features of M-16 weapons, it looked like an M-16 with its detachable magazines, similar shared butt stocks, and identical barrel shields. With these unorthodox looks, not unlike the AK-47, the AR therefore has been labeled inaccurately as "an assault rifle."[18]

[14] Chris McNab, *German Automatic Rifles 1941–45: Gew41, Gew43, FG42, and StG44* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2013), 8–31.

[15] Chivers, *The Gun*, 190–200.

[16] See McNab, *German Automatic Rifles*, 66–74; and De Quesada, *MP38 and MP40,* 31.

[17] McNab, *German Automatic Rifles*, 53–65.

[18] See Gordon L. Mottman, *The M16* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2011).

The condemnation of this particular gun as a weapon of war is perplexing. Most modern civilian rifle models from back into the 1800s came from military designs, or are actually military surplus weapons sold in civilian markets. Beginning with deadly rifled muskets, metal cartridge firing guns, or lever-action rifles from the American Civil War, average Americans could purchase late model firearms that had served as weapons of war. Compared to earlier smooth bore muskets, these guns could be regarded as the assault rifles of their day.[19] Unlike those once modern military rifles of 1860–1870, the AR-15 did not diffuse through civilian markets quickly due to corporate patent considerations, consumer preferences for traditional blue-steel wooden stock guns, and competitively priced .223 chambered conventional rifles.[20]

Many American hunters have taken big game since the 1870s with traditional rifles designed to kill with the maximum lethal efficiency of those earlier periods, but they also used these weapons against Native Americans, criminals, Mexicans, or anyone else who constituted a perceived threat to them. Elsewhere around the world in the nineteenth century, the Mauser bolt-action rifle was not unlike the M-16 or AK-47 of its day. Its bolt-action design was copied globally, including in America's M1903 Springfield rifle, and Mauser's rapidly loaded box magazines were the rapid repeaters deployed by armies in many conflicts.[21] Americans happily have acquired both civilian and military versions of Mauser rifles for decades, and they are found today in many US households despite their origins as weapons of war.

D. THE AMMUNITION OR THE RIFLE

To a large extent, whether to adopt the M-14 versus M-16 was a logistical rather than tactical question. At the point of the spear, as Pentagon briefings say in press briefings today, the purpose of either gun is to shoot heavy volley fire in massed or dispersed deployments of soldiers. Arguably, the rifle volley is the most decisive force materially and symbolically in modern battles. The clouds of bullets needed to fight and win wars in an age of intelligent machines are what make any army's rate, volume, and accuracy of rifle fire important, because these storms of metal must shred the opposing forces before they inflict comparable damage on friendly forces. It is effectiveness in keeping continuously and copiously firing bullets flying at the enemy that gives purpose to infantry weapons and soldiers.

[19] Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 65–107.

[20] See Chivers, *The Gun*; and Mottman, *The M16*, for more discussion.

[21] Neil Grant, *Mauser Military Rifles* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2015), 4–8, 77–78.

Both M-14s and M-16s are assault rifles, but the M-14 is the more traditional long-range weapon.[22] The M-14 could perform, and still does, this shooting task, but in most battlefield environments, such shooting situations are more extraordinary than normal.[23] Hence, the logistical trip-points of efficiency in military formations point to M-16 equipped forces, since the 5.56mm round, with its more unstable high-velocity bullet, trumps 7.62x51 rounds with much higher muzzle velocities and more stable bullets.[24] The M-16, then, is actually designed not as the deadliest, but rather the materially most efficient infantry weapon of war for military engagements.

Mass Shootings and Assault Rifles

To continue accounting for AR-15s, and situating the subject of assault rifles in contemporary America, one can recall several recent high-profile incidents in which AR platform weapons were used. Even though the vast majority of all gun crime in the United States is committed with pistols, not assault rifles, these shocking crimes serve as rhetorical range-finders in which one can sense why legally sold goods (AR-platform sporting rifles), frequently bought by ordinary consumers at big box outdoor stores, are decried by legislators, reporters, and victims as "weapons of war" let loose on civilians.

The deadliest attack to date in the United States unfolded in the evening of October 1, 2017, when a real estate investor and high-stakes gambler, Stephen Paddock, fired upon crowds at the Route 91 Harvest country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip from a suite on the thirty-second floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel. During the ten-minute volley, Paddock fired over 1,100 rounds into the crowded concert venue, killing 59, while injuring or wounding another 548 people. Over twenty guns were discovered in his hotel room after Paddock

[22] At nearly 8.5 pounds with its 7.62x51mm cartridges in 20-round magazines, M-14 rifles fired more powerful cartridges through a larger weapon with a traditional wood stock, heavy steel action, and much longer barrel. The weight of the loaded rifle magazines and extra ammunition typically meant soldiers carried only half as many rounds as M-16 equipped troops. Unless well-supplied in fixed positions, like trenches, long-distance rifle volley fire also is much less common. At 6.5 pounds, 5.56mm rounds in 20 or 30 round clips, M-16 shooters could usually carry over twice as much ammunition as M-14 equipped forces. While its maximum effective range was around 430–450 yards, as opposed to 1000 for M-14s, the M-16 in closely ordered units did what it was meant to do, namely, deliver massive volley fire against dispersed enemy formations as opposed to allowing expert marksmen to shoot accurately out past 500 yards at individual opponents. See, for more discussion, Leroy Thompson, *The M14 Battle Rifle* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2014).

[23] Mottman, *The M16*, 4–6, 74–77.

[24] James Edwards Westheder, *The Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 112.

died of a self-inflicted gun wound, and nearly a dozen of these weapons were different semi-automatic assault-style rifles. Three of them were outfitted with bump stocks to increase their rate of fire. This violent incident eclipsed the previous most-deadly attack a year earlier.[25] On June 12, 2016, Omar Maleen entered The Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, with a SIG Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle and a Glock 17 9mm semi-automatic pistol. Maleen fired around 110 rounds, killing forty-nine people, and wounding fifty-three others. US Senator Tammy Baldwin, Wisconsin (a Democrat), decried the massacre as an attack with "a weapon of war" on the LGBT community.[26]

On December 2, 2014, Syed Rizinan Farook and his wife, Tashfen Malik, entered the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, during a Christmas holiday party and unit training session for the San Bernardino Department of Public Safety. Armed with a Smith & Wesson MP 15 and a DPMS A-15 modern sporting rifle, both of which weapons had been modified by the shooters and other accomplices in violation of California law to accept high capacity magazines and "bullet buttons" to release them rapidly, they fired over 100 rounds, killing fourteen and wounding twenty-four. They then were both shot dead by police after a car chase. From their computer Web browser histories, police inferred that Internet jihadist videos motivated them to become martyrs.[27]

Many noticed an intense level of media coverage for this Islamic terrorist incident that stood in sharp contrast to another horrendous attack more lightly covered less than a week before by an American anti-abortion protestor turned domestic terrorist. On November 27, 2015, Robert Dear entered a Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado Springs, with an AK-47 semi-automatic rifle of unknown age, origin, and type, and killed three people (a University of Colorado-Colorado Springs police officer who responded at the scene, and two women at the clinic), and then wounded nine others, including five police officers and four civilians.[28] Dear's mental state was in disarray when apprehended, and his

[25] Rachel Crosby et al., "'It was a Horror Show': Mass Shooting Leaves at Least 59 Dead, 527 Wounded on Las Vegas Strip," *Las Vegas Review-Journal,* October 1, 2017, https://www.reviewjournalcom/local/the-strip/it-was-a-horror-show-mass-shooting-leaves-at-least-59-dead-527-wounded-on-las-vegas-strip/.

[26] Sarah Hauer, "Was Gun Used by Orlando Shooter a 'Weapon of War,'" Politifact, http://www.politifact.com/Wisconsin/statements/2016/jul/01/tammy-baldwin/was-gun-used-orlando-shooter-weapon-war/.

[27] See Byron Tau, "Grim Ritual, Barack Obama Again Calling for Stricter Gun Control after Mass Shooting," *Wall Street Journal*, December 2, 2015, http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/12/02/in-grim-ritual-barack-obama-again-calls-for-stricter-gun-control-after-mass-shooting/.

[28] See Julie Turkewitz and Jack Healy, "3 Are Dead in Colorado Springs Shootout at Planned Parenthood Center," November 27, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/28/us/colorado-planned-parenthood-shooting.html.

competence to stand trial was in question immediately. Nonetheless, some people's lives ended violently, several were injured, and the bad memories of other right-wing attacks on women's clinics across the United States during the 1990s spiked for a couple of days. The more complex origins of this homegrown event then were lost in the foreign-inspired terrorist gun smoke of the San Bernardino attack.

On December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old Connecticut suburban male, entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, with a Bushmaster XM11-E2S semi-automatic rifle his mother gave him and a Glock 20SF 10mm semi-automatic pistol. Having fatally shot his sleeping mother in the head at their home, he killed twenty children, six and seven years old, as well as six adults working at the school. Two others were injured. Police arrived four minutes after the attack began; Lanza fatally shot himself in the head with his pistol about a minute later.[29]

President Obama, at an Interfaith Prayer Vigil on December 16, 2012, in Newton, exclaimed, "We can't tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change."[30]

Within a few weeks of Sandy Hook, New York passed its Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement Act on January 16, 2013, while on April 4, 2016, Connecticut and Maryland also added new comparable restrictive provisions to their existing gun laws. But these varied measures only restricted gun magazine capacities, toughened existing background checks, and limited some ammunition sales. Senator Diane Feinstein, California (a Democrat), introduced the Assault Weapons Ban of 2013. It was styled on the restrictive 1994 ban that held in force for ten years with regard to certain types of weapons and magazines, but her bill did not get out of the Senate.[31]

On December 4, 2015, the *New York Times* published a front page editorial, "End the Gun Epidemic in America," asserting that "it is a moral outrage and national disgrace that civilians can legally purchase weapons designed specifically to kill people with brutal speed and efficiency. These are weapons of war, barely modified and deliberately marketed as tools of macho vigilantism and even

[29] See Tau, "Grim Ritual."

[30] See The White House, "Remarks by the President at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil," December 16, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/16/remarks-president-sandy-hook-interfaith-prayer-vigil.

[31] See National Shooting Sports Foundation, "Senator Feinstein Introduces Ban on Modern Sporting Rifles," January 25, 2013, https://www.nssf.org/senator-feinstein-introduces-ban-on-modern-sporting-rifles/; and Adam Gopnik, "One Person, One Gun," *New Yorker*, June 14, 2016.

insurrection."[32] This *New York Times* editorial captures many contradictions in gun control efforts aimed at assault rifle designs.

Acknowledging that "no law can unfailingly forestall a specific criminal," and "many with sincerity" talk "about the constitutional challenges to effective gun control," the *Times* editors opine that other countries at least try to regulate access to weapons, while the United States does not. Claiming, "it is not necessary to debate the peculiar wording of the Second Amendment," the editors then flatly declare, "No right is unlimited and immune from reasonable regulation." Their agenda was quite clear to gun owners: certain guns must be banned, the Constitution would be ignored, and the control of people as well as confiscation of their private property is the higher moral good behind gun control. That is, "certain kinds of weapons," like the slightly modified semi-automatic rifles used in San Bernardino, and "certain kinds of ammunition" must be outlawed for civilian ownership. Moreover, "it is possible to define those guns in a clear and effective way and, yes, it would require Americans who own those kinds of weapons to give them up for the good of their fellow citizens."[33] In his reactions to these incidents, President Obama concluded, "We have a pattern now of mass shootings in this country that has no parallel anywhere in the world."[34] This statement is not entirely true, since other countries have different patterns of mass shootings. Obama's remarks, however, stirred worries for many citizens inasmuch as such "gun control" equals "people control," which the Bill of Rights is meant to prevent.

The Materialities of Gun Culture

With respect to the control of firearms and people, and despite the views of the *New York Times* editors, something else is at play here. A person must be instructed in gun handling. Shooters must learn to take guns in hand, manipulate their actions, work with varied ammunition on the range, and fire both in different conditions. As with any type of autonomous agency, such skills are demanding. To know a gun will fire, remain ready for use, and hit where aimed in shooting is an elaborate set of complex skills that requires practice and focus. Actually, "thinking about manual engagement" with guns, ammunition, shooting, targets, and spent casings "seems to require nothing less than what

[32] "End the Gun Epidemic in America," *New York Times,* Editorial, December 4, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/opinion/end-the-gun-epidemic-in-america.html?_r=0.

[33] Ibid.

[34] See Tau, "Grim Ritual."

we consider what a human being is."[35] There is much more to guns, however, than just the shooting. The work of gunsmithing, weapon cleaning, ammunition loading, bullet casting, weapon maintenance, target placement, and gun firing are all crafts/skills with their own different demands and complicated challenges. All of these behaviors constitute regimes of discipline that constitute multiple layers of gun control.

The AR platform's modular architecture has triggered a great deal of customization and handicraft manufacture in entire cultures organized around different shooting types, OEM sources, and ammunition loadings. With regard to marketing, Bushmaster baldly asserts its rifles are "Freedom Built, American Made." This slogan says something about various AR-platform gun cultures, but not everything. With its complex readiness for modification, the AR is not like simpler automobiles of old, worked on by "shade tree mechanics." It is an open machine that invites new invention and operation directly by anyone with an interest. With AR platforms, it is possible to mix or match lower and upper receivers, different trigger and bolt assemblies, open fixed or varied optical sights, direct impingement or closed piston gas return systems, fixed or flexible stocks, ventilated or closed front barrel guards, light field-ready or heavy target-suited barrels, as well as many varied magazine types, capacities, and materials for different shooting needs.

This flexibility in the gun as implement makes the AR platform one of the most favored shooting technologies—for the shooters and for craftspeople.[36] Scores of suppliers make many of these parts and pieces, even if they appear first as the roughest of casting or most jumbled of pieces.[37] Nonetheless, there are entire do-it-yourself gun cultures tied to making, maintaining, and minding this machine at home with concentration and care in mental and manual labor. Creating and maintaining such rifles through such craft, the user often is dropped into "diagnosing and fixing things made by others," whether it is rifle bolts, barrel assemblies, or cartridge specifications, leaving one "confronted

[35] Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul-Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 82.

[36] See Steven Gregersen, *The Gun Guide for People Who Know Nothing about Firearms* (Lexington, KY: Amazon POD, 2017); as implements, they call forth multiple subject positions, and anchor power/knowledge dispositions in this "implementality"; also see Timothy W. Luke, "Gunplay and Governmentality," in *Gun Violence and Public Life*, eds. Ben Agger and Timothy W. Luke (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2014), 1–24; and Jennifer Carlson, "States, Subjects, and Sovereign Power: Lessons from Global Gun Cultures," *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 3 (2013): 335–383.

[37] For example, see David Hänks, *The Workbench AR-15 Project: A Step-by-Step Guide to Building Your Own Legal AR-15 without Paperwork* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 2004); or The Second Amendment, *Ghost Gun Build: 9mm AR-15 Project* (Lexington, KY: Ghost Gun Build.com/Amazon).

with obscurities" and requiring the user to "remain constantly open to the signs by which they reveal themselves."[38]

Speaking in such terms seems odd, but shooting is one of many activities, as Crawford might affirm, "that truly engages us," and "the best way to proceed is by *looking* at it, and taking note of its characteristic activity. That activity represents the 'end' . . . its purpose. In Greek, its *telos*."[39] The purpose of guns is to shoot; and, to perfect that purpose in all respects before, during, and after the shot is "experienced as intrinsically good. They contain their end within themselves: they enact that end, in 'real time,' as we say now."[40]

This mindfulness can serve the good, because such control also rests upon being responsible, acting with virtue, and doing everything right. These individual actions also can be done badly for the wrong reasons. Still, in being done well enough to shape subjects, one can concede shooting, gun handling, or hunting in their full mix of mental and manual labor are a type of soul craft. As with archery, to go far in the armed practice of shooting, and for the skill to become "spiritual," then "a concentration of all physical and psychic forces is needed" and, in fact, "cannot under any circumstances be dispensed with."[41] With good materials and refined skill, the AR platform also enables a remarkable range of workmanship to thrive, including totally de novo fabrication with no preformed components. And, "unless workmanship comes to be understood and appreciated for the art it is, our environment will lose much of the quality it still retains."[42]

Nonetheless, the key symbolic and material construction of most guns in the United States originates with mass commercial marketing by gun manufacturers, which is continuous, elaborate, and sophisticated. It must be this way for the firms to survive. Unlike automobiles, guns are highly durable, and most remain serviceable for decades. Despite popular belief, however, fewer people today are gun enthusiasts. Four decades ago in 1977, gun ownership was common. Over 50% of the population had at least one gun in their home, while less than a third own a gun today. Many of these gun owners have more than one—on average they have eight guns.[43]

Guns can kill, but they have other uses and meanings in gun cultures as well. As Nick Leghorn asks, and then answers, "Why would anyone want to own

[38] Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul-Craft*, 82.

[39] Ibid., 192.

[40] Ibid., 193.

[41] Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 41.

[42] David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 19.

[43] See Evan Osnos, "Making a Killing: The Business and Politics of Selling Guns," *The New Yorker* (June 27, 2016).

a gun?"[44] Posing the question like it is a question about individual consumer choice, he comes up with six reasons, each with a different culture of gunning:

(a) *Recreational Target Shooting*, given how "there's something magical about making a projectile hit a target," and "target shooting is a great way to relax" that can "be very similar to meditation" or a practice "that becomes addicting";
(b) *Competition Target Shooting*, linking back to "ever since that first caveman chucked a stone at a target, some jackass has been there to claim he can do it better";
(c) *Long Range Target Shooting*, which begins at 1,000 yards, or well over half of a mile, where "the appeal is not only bragging rights to the furthest shot but also the job of putting theoretical physics to practical tests";
(d) *Hunting*, which combines "the biggest challenges of competition shooting (specifically accuracy under pressure and firing from a less than ideal shooting positions) with the added challenge of finding your prey," not to mention "wild animals provide an excellent source of protein and are much less expensive than store bought meat, and eating locally grown food reduces pollution and is much greener for the environment";
(e) *Collecting & History*: "There's no denying that firearms have changed the world . . . helped create the United States, and stopped an evil dictator or two during World War II . . . some people find beauty in mechanical ingenuity and want to have functioning versions for their own collection . . . like works of art, to be admired and cherished," and not only delight in the aesthetics of collecting, but "use it as a way to invest their money without playing the stock market or other traditional methods";
(f) *Self-Defense*, "this last reason is the one that is gaining the most popularity" due to slow police response time, fear of invasion, societal collapse, crime, and other disasters, which makes "buying self-defense firearms like buying insurance, except if used properly they keep bad things from getting worse instead of trying to clean up the aftermath."[45]

Cultural distinctions, therefore, vary with different guns and their specific subcultures. Shotgun shooters with their cultures of skeet and trap contests,

[44] Nick Leghorn, *Getting Started with Firearms in the United States* (Lexington, KY: Amazon POD, 2017), 11. Shooting, in turn, is not exclusively a male preoccupation. Guns and their holsters are increasingly a female interest as well as manufacturers seek new markets; see Kathy Jackson, *The Cornered Cat: A Woman's Guide to Concealed Carry* (Lexington, KY: White Feather Press/Amazon POD, 2017).

[45] Leghorn, *Getting Started with Firearms*, 11–14.

six-gun shooters in quick draw contests for Wild West re-enactments, Olympic-level competitions in target rifle shooting, and "prepper" survivalist weapon-building circles all attract different people with diverse understandings of guns and themselves. These cultural variations, in turn, will differ regionally, nationally, and internationally. Consequently, caution is warranted before reducing all of these practices to "the gun culture," even in the United States of America with its deep connections to firearms.

The Assault Rifle as a Subject and Symbol

Beyond these object-oriented ontographies of assault rifles as things, how can subject-shifting biographies of assault rifles as actors be written? Can one detect how, why, and in what manner the weapon is, or can become, a subject? For the sake of argument, why not say "yes." The shooter and the gun are perhaps symbionts. Gun and gunner are co-constituting subjectivities, once readied, prepared, and joined by ownership, instruction, and use. Neither can really come to be fully without the other. As some suggest, weapons define subjects. So human subjects armed with different weapon objects gain varied capacities, powers, and identities, as well as diverse allies, deterrents, and targets by becoming spearmen, swordsmen, axemen, clubmen, bowmen, or gunmen. And, these valences also can reverse, once these weaponized subjects interact collectively with others humans as stabbers, cutters, choppers, bashers, archers, or shooters—both symbolically and concretely.[46] Becoming adept with one weapon is a craft, and it demands discipline and training to truly become expert enough to master each weapon's capabilities and vulnerabilities.

There are several roads into armed subjectivity for the more philosophically inclined to fully grasp the material and symbolic significance of "becoming armed and dangerous." One need not surrender to the allure of vitalism, whereby one simply strides into the rush of events, or life force, to announce with Whitehead, Bergson, or Lucretius, knowing alternative realities are always around remaking "us." One simply can assume that matter is not dead, things are never inert, and objects are essentially fictive. Such ontological premises, in turn, allow agency and subjectivity to things, including firearms.[47] Real things

[46] Evan Selinger, "The Philosophy of the Technology of the Gun," *Atlantic*, July 23, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/07/the-philosophy-of-the-technology-of-the-gun/260220/.

[47] Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave, 2007); and Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (New Airesford: Zero Books/John Hunt Publishing, 2010).

caught up in the machinic meshes of modernity with human beings gain agency in polymorphous actor networks. Gun objects thereby can be recognized as discharging plenipotentiary powers for companies, designers, marksmen, peoples, and states that must channel delegated choices, designated capacities, or deliverable constructs of action through such objects. In firing and not firing, action still unfolds, since almost any stuff can be treated as brimming with layers of symbiotic processes, conjoining living and nonliving things in zones of "vibrant matter."[48]

These premodern, amodern, postmodern, or ultramodern ontographies are nothing new. They simply have been suppressed in Enlightenment-era codes that normatively conjoin *Thoughts* narrowly to only very constrained sets of *Beings*. This twist ignores the multiplicity of epistemic possibilities to correlate thinking with only a routine existence exclusively rooted in always already accessible a priori actions.[49] Rejecting Kantian principles of rigid correlationism between Thing and Being in which nothing beyond these rigidly fixed correlates is knowable, one can follow Quentin Meillassoux to repudiate the exclusive/exhaustive links of sufficient reason. There can be, and undoubtedly is, much beyond such conventional normative ontographies. Things may very well be organized otherwise, far beyond the daily correlates of Thought and Being conventionally believed to be knowable. Hence, the structure of reality can be, and always is, otherwise in different facticities. The same cause can create many different outcomes that strict correlationism obscures, neglects, or ignores.[50]

Things can be actors symbolically and materially, but too few human beings think otherwise, mostly due to an unwillingness to concede anything outside of the naively self-evident relations between Thought and Being, Subject and Object, Cause and Effect relations. To forget naive self-evidence, ignore the brittle principles of correlation, and admit that complex causality can cascade out in hundreds of directions—rather than the few serialized routines recounted in time or repeatedly observed in constant conjunction—changes the grounds of subjectivity. These conceptual releases loosen what is reified in the usual principles of causality. Beyond these epistemic doubts, of course, guns can easily be regarded as subjects, actors, or agents. And, many already freely accept their active agency and subjectivity.[51]

[48] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[49] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[50] Levi Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

[51] Steve Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press).

While many hear only a metaphor, it is perfectly plausible to say this or that "Gun won the West." To win is to triumph, and more than one gun model won the West for the United States with the deadly force that massive numbers delivered. As an article in *True West* magazine asserts:

> Was the so-called West-winning gun given this coveted title because of the great numbers in which it was produced, or for the work it accomplished? Or was it simply because of who used it during those tumultuous times known as the Wild West? Although some firearms manufacturers advertise their lead-dispensing products as having rightfully earned that distinguished title, such a claim is not to be taken as gospel. While some folks feel that a single model firearm was most responsible for taming our raw frontier in the late 19th century—such as the 1873 Winchester repeater, 1874 Sharps buffalo rifle, double-barreled shotgun, or perhaps The Peacemaker, the legendary 1873 Colt Single Action Army revolver—most serious students of the American West agree that it was not a single model gun or type of firearm that "won the West." Rather, they believe it was an assortment of rifles, shotguns and handguns, in the hands of a diverse and colorful crowd of men and women, which brought both violence and law and order to our Western territories.[52]

To unpack this historical account, invading crowds of settler men and women with a rich assortment of guns ruthlessly shot down indigenous bands of other men and women who had far fewer guns. As a result, these crowds of gun-firing settlers "made a peace," standing over the bodies of their dead native opponents with an array of Colt, Remington, Sharps, or Winchester firearms still smoking with victory in their triumphant hands.

The Old West, however, might not be enough evidence. One can look to the US armed forces for how they accept guns as actors. No less than the United States Marine Corps maintains that guns are subjects, as the rifle is the closest companion to each and every human Marine. The Corps has a credo that acknowledges this special subjectivity: "The Rifleman's Creed" from 1941:

THE RIFLEMAN'S CREED
This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.
My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.

[52] See Phil Spangenberger, "22 Guns That Won the West," *True West*, October 27, 2015, http://www.truewestmagazine.com/22-guns-that-won-the-west/.

Without me, my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will . . .

My rifle and I have love knowing that what counts in war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit... My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel.

I will keep my rifle clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become part of each other. We will . . .

Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until there is no enemy, but peace. Amen.[53]

Upon receiving his or her new life in military service, then, every Marine must pledge full recognition of this Other as a subject. It is regarded as part of his or her human being, continuing life, and national service. Each human soldier takes the rifle into possession, and the weapon then possesses the Marine with its symbolic power, material capability, and active authority. The rifle becomes the Marine's life, and a life master for their national service. The rifle gives genuine use to the riflemen, and the Marine truly uses the rifle in a mutually constituted hybrid existence. To fire true as defenders of country, masters of any enemy, survivors of life, makers of peace, shooters that hit, parts of each other, the Leatherneck and rifle must become these oath takers before other Marines, God, and Country.

All Marines declare, "my rifle is human," like he or she, and it is what gives him or her, as humans, their lives. The gun is forever a brother with weaknesses and strengths. All of its parts and accessories are parts and accessories of each Marine, who guards his or her weapon as the weapon safeguards each of them. By staying clean and ready as a firearm, brother and sister Marine become, by this creed, ready to serve as compatriot subjects in battle as armed war machines until victory is created by vanquishing all enemies, and thus creating peace.

Some see these declarations as metaphorical or symbolic, but belief in these symbols clearly creates new subjects with unique purpose, resolve, and utility. With the Marine and the rifle hybrids, the Corps fields its gunners and shooters, riflemen and riflewomen, who would not be what they are individually without becoming what they are together through well-disciplined conduct. Collectively, with other brother and sister Marines at arms, their shooting creates the capacity to attain a shared mastery of enemies and defenders of country.

[53] See also United States Marine Corps, Camp Lejeune, http://www.lejeune.marines.mil.

Despite this vision of subjectivity for Marines and their rifles, the popularity of AR rifles as actors developed slowly over the years. The repeating rifles available to civilians after the Civil War also did not sell quickly in the United States as objects. Gun culture then was utilitarian, since firearms were regarded as basic ordinary tools to be bought like farm equipment. Americans often chose "less expensive, more durable muskets over new weapons that could fire multiple shots" from the late 1860s to 1880.[54] Colt, Remington, Smith & Wesson, and Winchester had to export newer modern products overseas to keep their factories open, but those sales sagged along with domestic markets as frontiers closed, cities grew, and other commodities attracted buyers.

Like other Gilded Age industrialists, gun executives had to evolve into "captains of consciousness,"[55] creating needs that often did not exist, or fanning their intensity when they did, by making guns into actors through massive publicity campaigns. Casting Winchester rifles as luxury goods, like diamonds or golf clubs, tying them to "the vigorous life" of outdoors culture celebrated by Theodore Roosevelt, and evangelizing at Wild West shows to attract women, children, and urbanites to shooting sports proved to be effective marketing techniques. That is, "gun marketing had moved from describing how guns work to describing how guns make their owners feel."[56] The selling of shooting to women in the Victorian era, and then to boys as a component of every "boy's life" is part and parcel of bureaucratically planned consumption in American society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, AR-platform weapons also were not popular. Many shooters openly regarded them as ugly, junky, and/or flimsy. They were not inexpensive, and they consumed costly ammunition quickly. Many veterans of the wars in Indochina kept alive the AR's bad reputation for jamming and fouling when returning home from Vietnam. Only after a few years, and some better product placement for these weapons in the movies and on TV, did the AR-15 design gain a fresher image of power, manageability, or flexibility.

This flexibility helped make the AR platform the most enduring firearm in the US military's history, exceeding the fifty-two years of service the .30-06 Springfield rifle gave as a bolt-action battle rifle. This enduring materiality also has made it a global star. To be fair and fully assay its importance as an actor, one can survey the placements of the AR-15 and M-16 in popular culture. It is hard to forget Al Pacino's introduction of his live-in companion as Tony Montana in *Scarface* (1983), to attackers from competing drug gangs assailing his mansion,

[54] Paula Haag, "The Commercial Origins of Our Love for Guns," *Wall Street Journal,* April 23–24, 2016, C3.

[55] See Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976); and, Haag, *Gunning of America*, 225–266.

[56] Haag, "The Commercial Origins," C3.

as he comes out firing an M-16 A with an M-203 40mm grenade launcher, and announces, "Say hello to my little friend."[57] Film moments like that have helped sell a lot of modern sporting rifles for over a generation.

Thanks to this marketing, AR-15 variants now typically account for "up to 1 in 4 of all new rifles sold in the U.S.A., the AR family is truly America's rifle, at home and abroad. This popularity is reflected on screen, as the gun's futuristic looks and real-world ubiquity guarantee a starring role in television and movies."[58] AR weapons in their M-16 configurations, as a result, have appeared prominently in Hollywood for over fifty years. Their acting career begins in the *Seven Days in May* (1964), as well as *Ice Station Zebra* (1968), but they circulate as menacing figures of crime, espionage, policing, warring stories, as well as in tales about alien invasion, dinosaur resurrection, mercenary work, and shape shifter attack from *Shaft's Big Secret* (1972), *Octopussy* (1983), *The Enforcer* (1976), *Operation Thunderbolt* (1977) to *Predator* (1987), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Expendables 2* (2012), and *Wolfen* (1981). Perhaps more importantly, M-16s also are cast as starring actors in many single person shooter computer games, like the "Matrix" (2003), "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" (2006), and "Call of Duty: Black Ops" (2010). In all of these roles, AR variants are implements of endangerment and empowerment, but they also feature central casting co-stars, lending their lethal power to shooters for good, bad, and indifferent ends.[59]

To conclude, it makes sense to suggest "guns and ammo" are actors, both materially and symbolically. Materiality matters, especially when dealing with American gun cultures with their different firearms and many diverse uses. One can only begin to judge guns by looking down their sights, knowing they are locked and loaded, and recalling rapidly a montage of such mass mediated moments. Then and there, any gun credibly becomes a material force, symbolic power, and great actor. Plainly, the AR-15 is a major player in these terms, and it is no surprise that owners of this weapon will cling to them even unto the death, as pledged to the NRA by Charlton Heston years ago. And, its presence as a powerful subject and sophisticated object has circulated as another high-tech sign for the United States of America since the 1960s. If and when AR rifles are discharged in blockbuster movies, weekend hunting trips, police raids, mass shootings, terrorist attacks, military landings, or ordinary crimes, their shooters all are firing for this effect.

[57] See Peter Barrett, "The Black Rifle: The Film Career of the AR-15," Get Zone (originally published July 2015 in *GunUp*), http://getzone.com/the-black-rifle-the-film-career-of-the-ar-15/.

[58] See "M-16 Rifle Series," Internet Movie Firearms Database, http://www.imfdb.org/wiki/M16_rifle_series#Film.

[59] Ibid.