

# The Guns That Won

The haphazard origins of American gun culture.

BY ELI GOTTLIEB

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Illustration by Matt Rota

Though a New Yorker by birth, I lived for many years in Boulder, Colorado, a city known for its mountain views, superior body mass indices and affluent stoner chic. Hidden from prying eyes at the end of a dirt road outside of town is a lesser-known attraction: an illegal shooting range. On a typical spring afternoon, a visitor there might see a bunch of late-model cars parked in a grass clearing, and, beyond them, a dozen or so well-groomed twentysomethings standing around chatting and drinking beer. The scene would look posed, cinematic, a little bit like a photo shoot for fashion-forward jeans. Only the sharp, cracking reports coming from around a bend would indicate these sons and daughters of the American West had in fact gathered for the express purpose of pumping bullets into the side of a hill.



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Like it or not, America's struggle with guns is mostly over, and the results are in: Guns won. Below the steady cycle of gun-driven agony and outrage lies our peculiarly dissonant national conversation on the subject—a standoff between opponents lacking even the most minimal common language, whose debate, if that's the right word, is filled with shopworn tropes hurled by each side at the other that add up to a single, vast, self-canceling din. In the meantime, the firearms—and their side effects—keep coming. A quick but necessary tour of the numbers would read as follows: 36 Americans currently killed by guns each day on average (excluding suicides); more than 100 metro areas in the United States afflicted by mass shootings in 2016; 12 billion bullets manufactured annually; an estimated 200,000 suicides by gun each year around the world; and incredibly, in America, a toddler currently shoots someone about once a week.

Off to one side of this dispiriting blur of statistics, two new books find a way through the violent rhetorical storms surrounding guns by shining a light on their life cycles as objects—of homicide, fetish, and most intriguingly, perhaps, commerce. In *The Way of the Gun*, British journalist Iain Overton provides a kind of Cook's tour of guns as they're traded, coveted, and employed for target practice, murder, and war around the world. In her masterful *The Gunning of America*, Pamela Haag furnishes a salutary corrective to the perception of the gun's inevitability in American life by showing its history as a commodity invented and then deliberately marketed and distributed like any other widget or household appliance. Backed by vast research in the company archives of Winchester, Colt, and other manufacturers, her book is a mixture of analysis and close-focus biography of the many sturdy and sometimes strange early Americans who rode to wealth on the back of firearms.

**The base signifier regarding the gun in American life is the fantasy of American exceptionalism, a kind of ballistic version of manifest destiny. In this telling, America has a unique relationship to the gun; the country was practically born to the click of firing pin on cartridge; our origins as a nation faced with the subduing of a “savage” wilderness made us necessarily invested in firearms from the start. And the Second**

Amendment was the plinth upon which our national gun edifice was reared.



**The hollow-point bullet, popular with police in the United States, is banned from use in war under international law.** From the series “Gun

Nation” by Zed Nelson

Against this assumption Haag proposes a simple clarifying action: Follow the money. As she writes in her preface, “We hear a great deal about gun owners, but what do we know of their makers?” Her hope, she explains, is to avoid the “polemical undergrowth” sprung up around gun questions, by providing an alternate commercial chronology of firearms, from the colonial period, when guns were one-offs produced individually in response to requests, all the way to the giant, multilevel, roaring factories of the gun manufacturers Winchester and Colt, who armed the world.

“We became a gun culture,” she writes illuminatingly, “not because the gun was symbolically intrinsic to Americans, or special to our identity or because the gun was something exceptional to our culture, but precisely because it was not.” In the early years, guns were seen as simple implements, like garden rakes or axes. Made often by moonlighting blacksmiths, there was no special mystique attached to them, and no laws regulated their sale. One colonial gunmaker, a certain George McGunnigle, advertised he also made “locks, keys, hinges of all sorts, pipe

tomahawks, scalping knives ... razors, scissors, and pen knives.”

Fittingly, given these workaday origins, the nineteenth-century gun titans usually followed roundabout routes to their eminence. Oliver Winchester had been a shirt salesman and had never even shot a rifle before starting the company that would eventually bear his name. Samuel Colt was originally a public showman hawking the miracle of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and providing “scientific amusement” to audiences by elevating the brains below their derbies and bonnets. Eli Whitney turned to guns only after exhausting the commercial potential of hat pins.

Depicting a particularly vivid scene at the dawn of mass production, Haag describes Whitney in 1801 arriving at the “muddy unfinished White House with a mysterious black box” to pitch his cause. The inventor explained confidently to President John Adams and the assembled grandees that he was as easily able to produce 10,000 muskets as one. “Before their astonished eyes, Whitney placed ten of each part of a musket on the table and proceeded to assemble ten rifles out of them.” An oath was heard, and the age of mechanical reproduction clanked to a start.

All of these early American gun czars were capitalists to the core, inoculated against the real-world effects of their products through a commercialist ethos that concentrated on “contractual obligations” and allowed them to ignore the question of what actually happened at the other end of their thundering gun barrels. A robust export market helped. Among the many surprises offered by the book is its picture of the early dependence of American gun manufacturers on Europe. Convulsed by a cascade of geopolitical crises in the second half of the nineteenth century, Europe offered America commercial sanctuary through an apparently limitless (and remote) venue for its products. “A small knot of New England manufacturers would arm almost the whole world” she writes, but “without the thirsty markets of imperial Europe and other belligerent regimes abroad ... the business would have struggled to stay afloat in the mid-1800s.”

What helped ground—and almost bankrupt—the industry on home soil was the Civil War. The war shined a light on the regional loyalties of the gun bosses. (Samuel Colt sold plentifully in the South, causing the *New-York Daily Tribune* to label him a traitor; Winchester fed the

North; the state of Kentucky was carved up between the two.) It also produced the prototype of the schmoozing, favor-dispensing glad-hander who would eventually become the modern lobbyist. It demonstrated the limits for industrial manufacturers of having as a client a wartime government that would insist, even to the point of legislative mandate, on vast quantities of goods and then decamp in peacetime and leave companies stranded with large stocks of those same goods and no market.

For soldiers, most of whom had grown up on older muzzle-loading weaponry, it provided something else entirely: the shock of facing the awesome killing power of a new generation of repeating rifles. Rebel commanders confronting these rifles said the Yankee lines “spit out a continuously living fringe of flame.” Some infantrymen, overcome by the incoming quantity of bullets, “simply pulled their hats over their faces as if to shield from a storm of hail.”

Intriguingly, this era also marks the beginning of the period in which the object of the gun itself was imbued with a moral valence. These new repeating rifles (the main three were the Henry, the Sharps, and the Spencer) were somehow seen as unmanly, even cowardly. By reducing the risk involved in battle, they were thought to cheapen warfare. Haag quotes critics of the day who believed that “‘the Henry rifle would change not only tactics but also the psyche of the shooter. ...’ It would corrode bravery and even martial imagination by encouraging stealth sniper shots from behind cover.”

The Henry rifle that acquitted itself so well in the Civil War would become the Winchester in 1866 and from there go on to achieve the erroneous distinction of “the gun that won the West.” The more accurate phrase, Haag proposes, would be “The West that won the gun,” reflecting the truth about how Winchester admen created a mythopoetical West of rugged, masculine values, compliant women, and trigger-happy cowboys and then, in the great American tradition, sold pieces of that myth (the guns themselves) as memberships in a lethal new community.

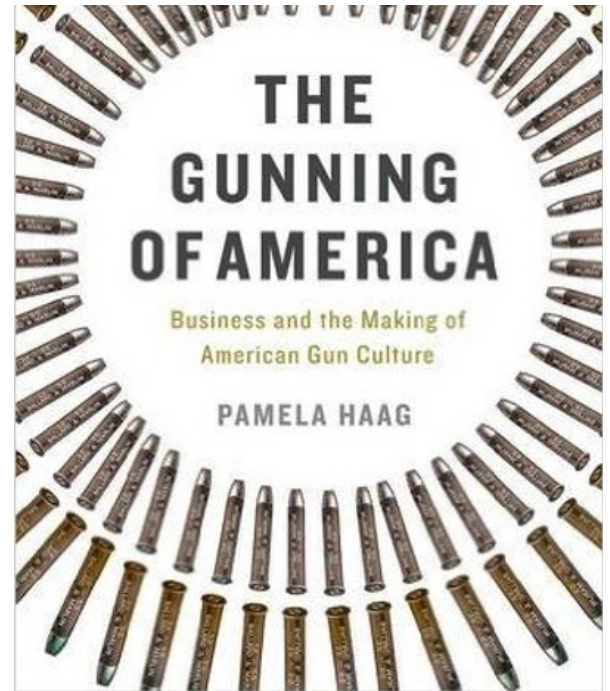
To her credit, in this beautifully composed and meticulously researched volume, Haag regularly takes time off from the business chronicle to dilate on the first ladies of the gun, those wives and daughters of



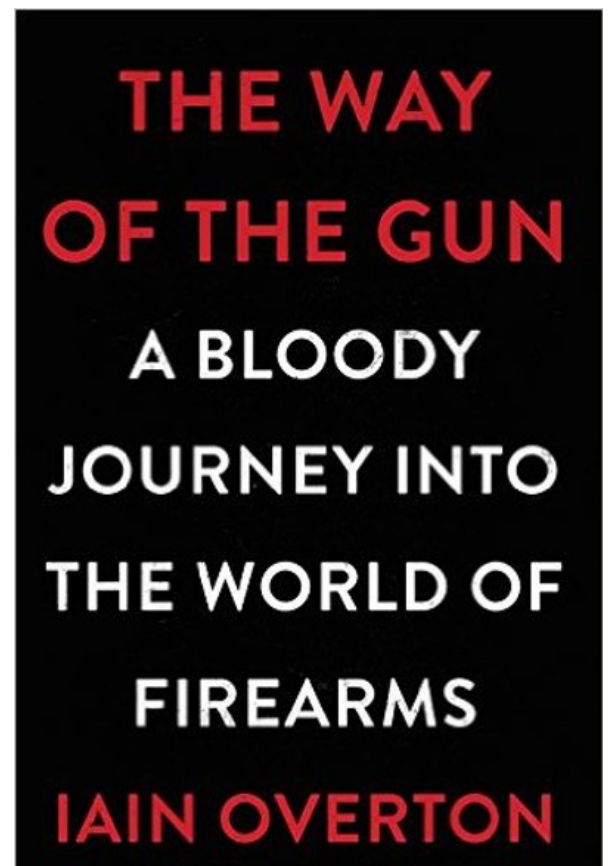
the men who made firearms famous. Of these, none is more fascinating and finally heartbreaking than Sarah Winchester, a woman whose life has the arc and gothic conclusion of a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story. A granddaughter of George Pardee, one of the founders of New Haven, the lissome and petite Sarah belonged to a social set of women known for being “strong, lively and spirited.” Dubbed the “belle of New Haven,” she was highly educated, well versed in all the freethinking and abolitionist currents of the day, and spoke four languages.

Not long after marrying the only son of Oliver Winchester in 1862, Sarah began her march to bleak distinction. Her first child, Annie, was born and died 40 days later from the mysterious childhood ailment of marasmus, a wasting malnutrition for which the doctors of the era had no answer. Death now began to stalk her in earnest, and though the evidence is inconclusive, it is thought that she had at least one if not two more stillbirths, before her husband Will died of tuberculosis in 1881 and her own mother died two years later. Faced with this squall of mortal misfortune, Sarah sought recourse in the rage for mediums and spirit séances that was sweeping the country in the 1870s and '80s as Americans, still reeling from the death toll of the Civil War, sought to communicate with their dearly departed.

In a partly speculative but gripping foray, Haag describes how Winchester most likely felt herself cursed, not only by the immediate deaths of her family but by all the souls dispatched courtesy of her



**THE GUNNING OF AMERICA: BUSINESS AND THE MAKING OF AMERICAN GUN CULTURE** by Pamela Haag Basic Books, 528 pp., \$29.99



husband's firearms. As she writes, the famous medium Ada Coombs told Sarah she could "balance the ledger." Sarah's deceased husband then spoke through the medium, suggesting, "an urgent, astonishing, and fantastic mission for Sarah: a mission of both evasion and atonement." In response, the reclusive Sarah spent her vast wealth on an arms race of her own, buying a plot of land in what is now San Jose, California, and hiring a team of carpenters to work in shifts around the clock for 38 years, adding a crazy-making array of rooms, hallways to nowhere, intricate tile floors blazoned with obscure spiritualist motifs, and windows opening on brick walls. Only by building, apparently, could she keep the vengeful spirits at bay. This loony monument to excess and expiation by one of the world's richest women is now a tourist attraction known as the Winchester Mystery House.

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**THE WAY OF THE GUN: A BLOODY JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF FIREARMS**  
by Iain Overton Harper, 368 pp., \$26.99

***The Way of the gun: A Bloody Journey Into the World of Firearms*, picks up** the story in modern times, and begins from the foundational premise—hardly worth arguing over—that our species is currently saturated to the point of bursting with guns. Different from Haag's book, which concentrates mainly on the United States, author Iain Overton takes readers with him on a global whistle-stop tour dedicated to showing how our firearm apotheosis has transformed social codes, engendered new categories of employment, changed medical practices, and in ways both macabre and charming, altered the terms on which guns themselves are prized and collected. In the process, he paints an entirely dispiriting picture of a world whose cognitive dissonance—its embrace of the thing that's coarsening and killing it—is extreme.





**Smith & Wesson sales plummeted 40 percent in 2000 after the company supported gun safety regulations proposed by President Bill Clinton.** From the series “Gun Nation” by Zed Nelson

Overton, a former BBC journalist, is the director of a charity called Action on Armed Violence, and he qualifies for his investigative role by also being, in his words, “a weapons researcher and a former gun club president, a hunter and a sports shooter.” The result is a remarkably balanced tone of reportage, which, however, does not conceal his growing horror at what he uncovers, beginning in the United States. He racks up the frequent-flyer miles with assiduity, visiting a gun-death scene in Brazil and following it up with a call on the mostly indifferent police. He tours the British National Firearms Center, where he sees, among other things, one of the gold metal-plated AK-47s that Saddam Hussein gave to guests in what he memorably describes as a bit of “oil-bling chic.” He goes to a morgue in Honduras where the depressed director, commenting on the endemic gang violence, says with breathtaking understatement, “The murder of an entire family is hard.”

Many of these visits serve mainly to give a kind of cinematic burnish to the book, which can read like an extended episode of one of Vice’s grittier documentaries, with live-action chapter openers standing in for jump-cuts. But a portrait of the deforming power of firearms in our lives builds steadily throughout the narrative.

In Geneva, Overton discovers that when they took away the guns formerly given to soldiers at the end of their compulsory service, military suicides dropped significantly, as did the rate of suicide by firearm generally. This flies in the face of the idea, so beloved by NRA supporters, that the instrument of violence is value-neutral and only the agency of its user counts. Another example cited by the author to overturn this canard: In the mid-twentieth century, ovens in



England used a particularly lethal form of coal gas that was filled with carbon monoxide (its effects famously immortalized by Sylvia Plath). These easy-access life enders were put of business when gas companies, alarmed at the rash of deaths, switched gases. Instantly, suicides dropped by a third and stayed that way.

In Norway, he travels to the campsite where Anders Behring Breivik killed a total of 77 people in one of the world's deadliest single-handed rampages and meets a man, in a black cap and thick boots, who provides him with the following pearl of wisdom about Breivik: "He is a stupid man." He reaches out to American SWAT team members who refuse to speak, Salvadoran gangbangers who can't stop talking, and a beautiful female Israeli sniper, who tells him that her fellow snipers had T-shirts printed up that read, "By the time you finish reading this you'll be dead."

As the cameos of professional hit men, gangsters, coroners, victims, and cops pile up without much sense of a larger structural coherence, a certain weariness does, it's true, take over. The book begins to read like a gunshot atlas. A more useful version would have drilled down deeper into individual countries and returned with analytic syntheses, such as those Haag extracts from nineteenth-century America. It's not till the end of the book that the wealth of anecdotes starts to yield something like wisdom. One passage in particular, dwelling on the singularity of U.S. gun policy, is worth quoting at length:

Elsewhere in the world mass shootings have provoked governments to introduce ways to prevent future mass shootings. After the Hungerford and Dunblane massacres, in England and Scotland, respectively, the British government brought in stricter gun controls. When fourteen were killed in Aramoana, New Zealand, lifetime gun licenses were replaced by ten-year ones. The massacre of sixteen in Erfurt in Germany in 2002 led to the screening of buyers under the age of twenty five. ... In Australia, the Port Arthur massacre led the Conservative Government to ban automatic and semi-automatic weapons as well as initiate a nationwide gun buyback scheme.

After citing a blizzard of facts showing the efficacy of these various legislative maneuvers—falling murder rates in every single country in which gun control was introduced—he goes on to say, "The U.S., though, is different. It is the only country in the world where, following a

mass shooting, the nation has responded with loosening, not tightening, gun laws.”

Though Haag’s book takes readers only up to the early 1900s, it is precisely in the above quoted summary that her book and Overton’s converge: The fantasy of American exceptionalism, planted in its citizenry with utter commercial cynicism by gun manufacturers and watered with the persuasive power of American advertising and endless lobbying, has taken root and flowered into a culture of sanctioned murder unique in all the world.

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