

SOCI OLOGY

How the Gun Became Integral to the Self- Identity of Millions of Americans

The firearm as a totemlike symbol of personal identity emerged from the psychological insecurities of former enslavers after the Civil War



By Sara Novak on March 29, 2023



People look at handguns at the Nation's Gun Show at the Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, Va., in 2015. Credit: Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Over the past 150 years, American gun owners have gone from viewing their weapons largely as utilitarian farm tools to weapons that provide both a feeling of physical security and a sense of psychological solace. Guns' importance to their owners now goes much deeper than merely being implements of self-defense.

University of Wisconsin–Madison researcher and assistant professor Nick Buttrick studies the psychological relationship that millions of Americans have with their guns. Buttrick's research builds on the historical record to show that in the U.S.—the only country with more civilian firearms than people—white Southerners started cultivating the tradition of the home arsenal immediately after the Civil War because of insecurities and racial fears. During the rest of the 19th century, those anxieties metamorphosized into a fetishization of the firearm to the point that, in the present day, gun owners view their weapons as

adding meaning and a sense of purpose to their lives.

Buttrick, who gave a talk on his research at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) earlier this month, contends that gun owners see their world as an increasingly tumultuous place and that guns have become a tool for keeping that perceived chaos at bay. *Scientific American* spoke with Buttrick about the psychological roots of the gun culture that has contributed to the more than 100 mass shootings that have occurred in the U.S. so far this year.

[An edited transcript of the conversation follows.]

What are the roots of the U.S.'s obsession with gun ownership? And when did the motivation for having guns move from largely using them for utilitarian purposes and sport to using them as a tool for protection?

The historical literature shows that in the early American period in the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, we had a different relationship with guns than we do today. A gun was treated as a tool for hunting, pest control and other tasks around the farm. The advertisements of the time painted guns as something that helped you live your life rather than something used for protection. While there was an armed militia to ward off foreign invaders, guns were centrally stored in an armory, not kept individually.

But a transition started to occur around the time of the Civil War. Gun production was mechanized, and guns became more high-quality, more accurate and way more numerous. During the war, the U.S. gun industry went into overdrive to meet the growing demand, and after the war people got to keep their guns. Society was awash with weapons, and at the same time, the rhetoric around them was changing. After the Civil War, the South became a dangerous place where the government had been destroyed, and in some cases there was martial law. The murder rate at the time was estimated to be about 18 times higher in the South than in the North. There was also a shift in the way that people talked

about their guns.

In the absence of police, in the presence of disorder and with the threat to the established order that comes from Emancipation, guns became a source of strength, where, through your weapon, you could re-create order. The redemption, or white supremacist, approach to retaking the South called for using your gun to beat back the perceived threat from Black people to the antebellum order.

Your research has shown that the prevalence of enslavement in a Southern county predicts the frequency of firearms in the present day. Can you explain this finding and describe how these attitudes spread from the South to the rest of the country?

After the Civil War, the South was in ruins. At the same time, you had this status inversion, where all of a sudden, people who had previously been enslaved had been freed and now had some political power. The societal structure in which many were raised was in question. If you were a rich white Southerner or someone who was white and also listening to rich white Southerners, you were wondering how to bring back the world in which you were on top. In the writings of the time, the white landed gentry very explicitly talked about the need to use guns to repress Black power. The goal was to intimidate the hell out of Black people with guns so that they wouldn't vote, because if they voted, the gentry would lose whatever was left of the South.

The areas where there were the highest rates of enslavement before the war were now the areas where you had the highest potential political threat from the Black population. Our study showed that the areas with the largest concentration of potential Black voters also had the most gun ownership today. Here white people worked the hardest to disenfranchise and push back against the threat of Black power. Guns were often talked about at the time as a tool that could keep white people in control and prevent the reorganization of white Southern life. And even today these areas of the South have the

strongest relationship with the idea that owning a gun keeps you safe.

New ideas spread to the rest of the country through friendship and family, so we wanted to get a better idea of the social tendrils that reach out of the South. When people move, they bring their ideas with them, and the best way that we know of to track the geography of friendship is through Facebook. In our study, we used a Facebook tool that looks at how many people are friends with people from different parts of the country. With it, we could see which counties in the South that had the highest rates of enslavement are the most closely tied to other parts of the country. Our research showed that places with the most social ties to the South also had the most gun ownership in the West and the North.

You write that guns “bolster the fundamental psychological needs” of their owners. They provide a sense of identity and even add meaning to life. Can you talk about how this reveals itself in gun owners’ present attitudes?

Just as guns were used to re-create strength in the post-antebellum South, they were also sold as a tool that helped owners reclaim their masculinity and manhood after the loss of the Civil War. Many Southerners were trying to figure out who they were supposed to be in this new world. Slowly this template became the dominant way of thinking about guns in contemporary American life.

Sociologist Jennifer Carlson has done a lot of work to show that guns are used today for much the same purpose. Carlson argues that while people might have previously staked their identity on their ability to provide for their family..., those who have been left behind by the modern economy ... look for other tools to bolster these needs, and guns are one of these tools. If you look at advertisements in gun magazines and marketing put out by the National Rifle Association in the past 40 years, gun manufacturers have picked up on this idea and run with it. The advertisements have shifted away from hunting and moved toward using guns for masculinity and to become more “paternal” as the family protector. It’s now a very American idea that if you want to control a space, you need a gun to do it.

In terms of identity, the best evidence that we've shown in the lab comes from asking a group of gun owners and non-owners how they were feeling throughout the day via text messages. We asked them how meaningful their life was and how much control they thought they had over that life. When gun owners were reminded about their guns, they would tell us that they felt their life was more meaningful and that they had more control over it.

You explored this idea of guns as intrinsic to the psychology of gun owners using an experiment that involved electric shocks. Can you take us through that experiment?

Here we did something out of the classic psychological toolbox: we threatened people with electric shocks. We brought them into the lab and hooked them up to a shock generator. The shocks weren't powerful—we describe them as being bitten by a kitten that wasn't trying that hard. Still, people don't like it, and when they're warned that they're about to be shocked, you see a psychological response. Their heart rate goes up; they get sweaty and more nervous in general.

What we're looking to see is if a gun is helping you to feel safe in one situation, could it also help you to feel safe in this other situation, where you're about to be shocked? In the lab, the gun did not have an inner firing mechanism, but it resembled a real gun. Again, there's no physical way that the gun can help protect you in this situation. You can't shoot the electric shock machine, for example.

Still, we wanted to see if the gun helped participants cope with the pending threat of electric shock. In our study, for participants who came from gun-owning households, the threat of shock wasn't as bad when they were holding the gun. Their heart rate went down, and they felt more relaxed versus when they were holding a metal object that was the same weight as the gun. The opposite was true for non-owners, who felt much more nervous when they were holding the gun than when they held the metal object.

Considering what you know about the psychology of gun ownership and its ties to identity, what are we getting wrong when it comes to staving off gun violence in the U.S.?

Gun regulations are politically thorny because when you're talking about gun control, you're also talking about attacking a very fundamental piece of gun owners' psyche. That's hard politics when guns are something that's key to the identity of nearly a third of the population. People don't like giving up core parts of who they think they are. When you look at gun violence in this country, you have to look at what you're trying to prevent and where most of the deaths are happening. Gun suicides and accidental shootings are a tremendously large problem, and these are deaths that are in some sense preventable.

Gun suicides and accidental deaths are not tied up in politics in the same way because nobody wants someone to shoot themselves or for a child to accidentally get ahold of a gun. Finding ways to get people to store their weapons properly so that it's harder to reach for those weapons in that dark moment when they're thinking about shooting themselves or someone else is an important place to start.

We need to shift toward the idea that guns are dangerous objects meant to be respected and away from the idea that they should always be accessible. Just putting a small obstacle in the way helps people to reconsider using a gun in a given situation. Then that two-minute dark window is more likely to pass without someone taking irrevocable action.

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