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Guns, Democracy, and the Insurrectionist Idea

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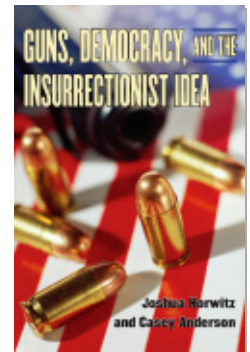
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CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS THE INSURRECTIONIST IDEA?

Insurrectionist is not a synonym for *gun owner*. Most gun owners do not belong to organizations that support—or whose leaders support—Insurrectionism. The 4.3 million members claimed by the National Rifle Association (NRA)¹ make it one of the nation’s largest membership organizations, but the United States is home to an estimated 80 million gun owners. Even within the NRA, many members perceive it as a service provider—that is, they sign up to take advantage of discounted insurance or hunting gear and ignore its political views. Some other gun groups, such as Gun Owners of America (GOA), position themselves to the right of the NRA, claiming that they are more uncompromising in their opposition to regulation of firearms. The members of these groups join because of the politics. Gun Owners of America would never be confused with a member-services organization. In fact, GOA offers its members little beyond repeated exhortations to send in another check to beat back the threat of gun control.

Americans have different reasons for—and attach different meanings to—gun ownership. Some people use guns for hunting and other recreational activities such as target shooting or collecting. Others (who might best be called the “self-defenders”) acquire guns to protect themselves or their families from crime. Nobody can say with certainty how many people own guns to protect themselves from the government. Of

course, many if not most gun owners buy firearms for more than one purpose. The major gun groups preach Insurrectionism, teaching members and nonmembers alike that they should not trust the government and should get ready to resist it with guns. Recent public opinion research shows that many gun owners have accepted the Insurrectionist message and see resistance to government as at least one good reason for owning a gun.²

The core of the Insurrectionist idea is its shibboleth that unrestricted access to guns of every kind is an essential element of political freedom. Insurrectionists see the government as the enemy and condemn any and all gun regulation as a government plot to monitor gun ownership (and presumably to lay the groundwork for confiscation in the event of a political crisis). One of the leading Insurrectionist theorists, David Kopel, vividly sums up the Insurrectionist animus toward gun registration:

It is improper to require that people possessing constitutionally protected objects register themselves with the government, especially when the benefits of registration are so trivial. The Supreme Court has ruled that the First Amendment prohibits the government from registering purchasers of newspapers and magazines, even of foreign Communist propaganda. The same principle should apply to the Second Amendment: *the tools of political dissent should be privately owned and unregistered.*³

Nelson Lund, one of the leading Insurrectionists in academia, posits that the Constitution establishes an individual right to bear arms to protect against federal tyranny: “An armed populace—even if it could not serve to deter tyranny as effectively as a legal prohibition against federal standing armies—would still constitute a highly significant obstacle to the most serious kinds of governmental oppression.”⁴ So Lund believes that the government, state or federal, is prohibited from limiting civilian access to almost any kind of weapons, including “grenades and bazookas,” and that laws banning assault weapons or the carrying of concealed weapons are unconstitutional.⁵

The late Bill Bridgewater, former executive director of the Alliance

of Stocking Gun Dealers, described in a widely circulated essay how American citizens could wage a guerrilla war against the U.S. government:

One of these days a truly charismatic individual is going to walk out of the heartland of America and point out that the Declaration of Independence has never been repealed and that it “requires” all citizens to rise up against an oppressive government. With the current attitude toward our government and the people who populate it, a massive groundswell of support for throwing the current crop to the dogs and starting over again might not be so difficult.⁶

Bridgewater noted that the North Vietnamese, using as their model the tactics of America’s war for independence, humbled the greatest military in the world. If the North Vietnamese could do it, the argument goes, American citizens—large numbers of whom already own sophisticated firearms—could succeed. Bridgewater did not live to see it, but the effort to pacify Iraq is a good reminder that even the most capable military forces face serious difficulties when confronted with the tactics of guerrilla warfare.

Bridgewater’s essay, originally published in the *Bullet Trap* in 1994, is still making its way around the Internet. In 2006, it was posted on LizMichael.com, a site with the somewhat immodest motto “Political activism for the liberation of the world” that includes a series of articles citing Lund’s work. By itself, the site is not particularly significant, but the ideas it promotes are staples of the strain of right-wing populism that has become a core element of contemporary “conservative” politics. It often marries antigovernment ideology to gun rights absolutism: Widespread private ownership of firearms is the ultimate guarantor of liberty. All gun control is an infringement of rights reserved for the people by virtue of our history. Government is the enemy. Our founding fathers believed that the individual’s personal right to armaments as a check on overbearing government was essential to the protection of freedom and democracy. This idea was true then, and it is true today.

Unsurprisingly, the NRA and its ideological fellow travelers have tried to legitimize Insurrectionism to rationalize their opposition to

even the most trivial gun regulations. Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's top executive, says, "The people have the right, must have the right, to take whatever measures necessary, including force, to abolish oppressive government."⁷ In 1998, U.S. senator (and later attorney general) John Ashcroft somewhat awkwardly argued, "A citizenry armed with the right both to possess firearms and to speak freely is less likely to fall victim to a tyrannical central government than a citizenry that is disarmed from criticizing government or defending themselves."⁸

The Insurrectionist objection to the regulation of firearms may extend to state government, even though the reservation of authority to state-level officials in principle provides another check on overreaching centralized power. The Insurrectionist mind-set took on comic effect when one of the authors witnessed the spectacle of an aide to a Virginia state legislator objecting to restrictions on firearms on the grounds that he might need a gun to resist oppression by his employer. Asked by a lobbyist whether the aide's boss might vote for closing the loophole that allows people to buy guns without background checks at gun shows, the aide responded that he would not even pose the question to the legislator. The aide explained that because a background check would alert the government when a gun is purchased, he was uncomfortable with the process. "I need my gun to protect against the government," he said. The lobbyist reminded the aide that as a legislative assistant, he is an agent of the government he professed to fear. His response, relying perhaps on advice from his accountant, "I am not the government because I am a contractor." Leaving aside the absurdity of the objection that requiring background checks on firearm sales at gun shows would prevent law-abiding citizens from buying guns (when three of the five states with the largest number of gun shows require background checks and all sales at gun stores already require the checks), the notion that an employee of one of the oldest, most conservative legislative chambers in the world thinks that he personally needs a gun to protect himself from that legislature is a testament to how tightly some gun rights advocates have embraced Insurrectionist theory.

Until recently, few Americans not involved in private militias or other right-wing fringe groups that make up the "patriot" movement took seriously the Insurrectionist idea.⁹ Despite some backpedaling in

the wake of Timothy McVeigh's use of Insurrectionist justifications for the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, the major gun rights organizations have become more aggressive in advancing an Insurrectionist rationale for an expansive view of gun rights. The propaganda used by these outfits exploits the habitual American distrust of government, but the extent of uncritical acceptance of Insurrectionist interpretations of the Second Amendment is nevertheless striking. For example, Libertarian luminary Ron Paul, who raised \$34.5 million in his bid for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination (which was more than fellow Republican Fred Thompson and only slightly less than Democrat John Edwards, both thought to be in the top tier of candidates at the outset of the race),¹⁰ stated on his campaign Web site that a "gun in the hand of a law-abiding citizen serves as a very real, very important deterrent to an arrogant and aggressive government. Guns in the hands of the bureaucrats do the opposite. The founders of this country fully understood this fact, it's a shame our generation has ignored it."¹¹ Mike Huckabee, who won 257 electoral votes in the 2008 Republican primaries,¹² responded to a question at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire with the answer that the Second Amendment "gives me that last line of defense against tyranny, even the tyranny of my own government."¹³

Together with self-defense against violent crime, the imagined need to reserve the option to use force against the government is a central justification invoked by gun rights advocates in opposing legislation or regulation that would place any restriction, no matter how mild, on access to firearms. The philosophical, legal, and practical dimensions of the use of firearms for self-defense are beyond the scope of this book, but the political and policy agenda of gun rights groups goes well beyond protecting the right to self-defense against violent crime. Most kinds of gun control—such as requirements for background checks on gun purchasers—that are designed to prevent the direct or indirect sale of firearms to criminals do not diminish a law-abiding citizen's ability to keep and use a gun for self-defense. A gun that has been registered is no less effective than an unregistered firearm when aimed at a criminal. In fact, efforts to keep guns away from criminals (e.g., by applying the background-check requirement to all gun show sales or requiring own-

ers to register their firearms) reduce the chances that the victim of a crime will be confronted by superior firepower when wielding a gun in self-defense. In addition, many firearms are ill suited for defensive use in the home or in a vehicle. A simple revolver is more useful and safer for home defense or personal protection than an AR-15, the semiautomatic version of the M-16 used by the U.S. military.¹⁴

Moreover, the claim that private ownership of firearms improves public safety is an empirical question. Academic analyses of private firearm ownership in terms of self-defense show that gun possession and availability actually increase the risk of death and injury.¹⁵ Conversely, the claim that unfettered access to firearms can prevent government tyranny in the United States without fostering anarchy bears little scrutiny by serious thinkers and academics and cannot be tested by experimental methods. As a result, it is difficult to put the Insurrectionist idea to the test of real-world practice in the absence of a cataclysmic breakdown of the American system of government as we know it.

The Insurrectionist slant on history predicts that government unchecked by well-armed citizens will eventually murder its citizens, enslave them, or allow others to do so. Mistrusting even the strongest democratic institutions, Insurrectionists argue that the only safeguard that will prevent totalitarianism over the long run is a well-armed populace. But the Insurrectionist telling of history is a myth designed to perpetuate the needs of a gun rights industry (of which firearms makers and dealers are only a small part) headed by the NRA but comprised of an array of allied groups and entrepreneurs that flourish by bombarding gun owners with propaganda designed to convince them of an ever-present threat to their guns and their freedom in the form of a government run amok. Only by arming themselves to the teeth—while sending in their checks to the major gun rights groups and supporting the conservative movement's political goals—can gun owners head off this danger.

The myth that government is the enemy of freedom and that only armed citizens protect freedom, as we document repeatedly in this volume, has been concocted by twisting the facts of historical events and in particular by popularizing revisionist accounts of three episodes from the past that are frequently used to buttress support for the Insurrectionist delusion: the American Revolution and the founding of the

American republic, the denial of civil rights to African Americans after the Civil War, and the rise of the Third Reich under Adolf Hitler. The Insurrectionist interpretation of these events is that strong government is always the gravest threat to human freedom and that private ownership of firearms is the only hope of keeping this threat in check.

From the founding of the United States, the Insurrectionists draw the lesson that guns were so important to American freedom that the framers enshrined in our Constitution the right of every individual to own guns to ward off government tyranny.¹⁶ From the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Insurrectionists conclude that the government's disarming of the former slaves guaranteed the continued subjugation of African Americans despite the introduction of formal legal equality for people of all races.¹⁷ In examining the rise of the Nazis, the Insurrectionists argue that if the Weimar Republic had dispensed with gun control, Hitler would not have been able to exterminate 6 million Jews and millions of other people.¹⁸ In the Insurrectionist account of history, these three examples offer cautionary tales that illustrate the immense danger posed by gun control schemes. For good measure, Insurrectionist ideologues have recently added to their list of historical illustrations of the folly of gun control, including the argument that in the twentieth century, governments caused the deaths of 114 million people through a combination of gun control and genocide¹⁹ and the claim that the disarming of law-abiding citizens was in large measure responsible for the breakdown of order in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Insurrectionists see anonymous gun ownership as a check on government tyranny, but they are vague about who has the right to decide the moment when the government has become tyrannical and should be resisted with private armed force. Some Insurrectionist theorists, such as Kopel, have qualified their endorsement of revolution led by armed citizens by noting that a few folks sitting around their living room can't invoke the Second Amendment to justify taking up arms against the government. Yet even Kopel unequivocally states that a majority of citizens need not support the use of violence to legitimate armed resistance.²⁰ For some other Insurrectionists, taking up arms against the government is a personal decision.²¹ Insurrectionists may disagree among themselves about exactly what triggers the right to take

up arms against the U.S. government, but they share the view that armed resistance to tyrannical government is a legitimate response to a policy or action, even when that policy or action has been carried out by democratically elected representatives constrained by an independent judiciary with the power to vindicate individual rights against the state.

Insurrectionists confuse their antidemocratic sentiments with legitimate revolution, casting themselves as putative leaders of a modern-day revolt on behalf of “the people” to restore “true” democracy and freedom (with all of the self-righteousness and romanticism that are the imperishable companions of political violence). As we describe in detail later in this book, revolution is not sanctioned by the Constitution, does not enjoy legal protection as an individual right, and should be avoided unless there is a complete breakdown in democratic institutions of government. Our founders knew this, which is why they approached revolution cautiously, convened representative bodies to study it, acted through deliberative and democratic bodies (by the standards of the era), and immediately replaced the Crown with a more democratic government. The decision of an individual to take up arms against the government, when undertaken with like-minded friends or even with a “substantial minority” of the public, is at best extralegal and at worst represents an antidemocratic attempt to undermine representative government.

To the Insurrectionists, in their obsessive paranoia, no society can be free (at least in the long term) without more or less ubiquitous private ownership of firearms because no government can be trusted to respect individual rights if citizens do not retain a credible capability to confront an overreaching state with armed resistance. Kopel has written, “If Americans are to remain free—and to live as securely as freedom allows—then it must be recognized that guns play an important and necessary role in American society, and that Americans have inherited the right to arm themselves against those foreign or domestic enemies who would deprive them of life and liberty.”²² Or as LaPierre puts it, “The Second Amendment is the fulcrum of freedom in our nation, because freedom and the Second Amendment are mutually interdependent. They are the ‘chicken and the egg’; neither can exist without the other.”²³

On its face, the “guns protect freedom” formulation sounds plausible, and anyone who would oppose the gun rights movement’s superficially attractive goals may seem to be attacking freedom itself. Then-NRA president Charlton Heston, addressing the organization’s annual convention in 2000, remarked, “I’m here because I love my country and I love this freedom. . . . It dawned on me that the doorway to all freedoms is framed by muskets.” Referring to Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic candidate for president, Heston lifted a musket over his head and said, “So as we set out this year to defeat the divisive forces that would take freedom away, I want to say those words again for everyone within the sound of my voice to hear and to heed, and especially for you Mr. Gore: From my cold dead hands!”²⁴ At the 2007 NRA convention, LaPierre detailed that threats to freedom are everywhere and that the NRA membership, fully armed and ready for battle, is the last line of defense:

So no matter what the animal rights terrorists throw at us, no matter what crime wave illegal immigrant gangs cause, no matter what deals are cut in the back rooms of the United Nations, no matter who is slamming gavels at the Supreme Court, no matter who is sitting in the White House, and no matter who wins what election or chairs what committee, if they are enemies of what’s in that exhibit hall over there, if they threaten what that great hall preserves [guns], if they dare assault the one freedom that secures all freedoms, this National Rifle Association, millions and millions of members strong, you will rise and stand and we, together, will fight them all.²⁵

Gun rights advocates have worked with a small stable of academics and think tanks over decades to churn out enormous volumes of “scholarship” intended to legitimize the link between guns and freedom. This work is not produced by the militia fringe but by mainstays of the conservative movement. Nelson Lund, for example, currently holds the Patrick Henry Professorship of Constitutional Law and the Second Amendment at George Mason University’s Law School, a post funded by a million-dollar donation from the NRA.²⁶ Lund is not just some fringe renegade activist spewing Insurrectionist rhetoric on some low-

budget radio station. He holds five academic degrees, including a law degree from the University of Chicago and a doctorate from Harvard University. He clerked for U.S. Court of Appeals judge Patrick E. Higginbotham and Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor. He has worked in the White House as associate counsel to President George H. W. Bush. Lund serves on the Board of Legal Advisors to the Heritage Foundation and has written a slew of articles on the Second Amendment, including "Have Gun, Can't Travel: The Right to Arms under the Privileges and Immunities Clause of Article IV." He also contributed the section on the Second Amendment to the *Heritage Guide to the Constitution*.²⁷

Kopel is a prolific contributor to a variety of popular and quasi-scholarly publications and serves as the research director at the Independence Institute, an organization "established upon the eternal truths of the Declaration of Independence." The Independence Institute bills itself as a "free market think tank" and advocates tight limits on the role of state and federal government.²⁸ The Independence Institute is funded in part by a network of foundations such as the Castle Rock Foundation, founded by the Coors family (also a major supporter of the Heritage Foundation), and the Southeastern Legal Foundation (which claims as one of its major accomplishments the successful effort to get former president Bill Clinton's Arkansas law license suspended).²⁹ Kopel is a frequent contributor to NRA publications and often appears as a featured speaker at NRA functions.

The NRA and its allies (including think tanks and foundations linked to the "conservative movement") have spent millions trying to camouflage as mainstream wisdom the highly dubious proposition that freedom is best protected from government by a well-armed and unregulated populace. In recent years, the NRA has made the connection between guns and the defense of liberty a central theme of almost all of its public communications. Then-NRA president Kayne Robinson's 2005 broadside against liberals, the media, and other bugaboos of the Right is representative of both the substance and tone of the contemporary gun rights lexicon: "Although the elite media and the snob left despise our freedom, we have right, history and liberty on our side," Robinson said. "We should never, never give in to the forces that would rob us of our

freedom. Never, never surrender to the bigots who look down their noses at our freedoms."³⁰

It would be difficult to exaggerate how thoroughly the "guns equal freedom" message has been incorporated into everything having anything to do with gun rights organizations and their cause. In the summer of 2006, for example, the NRA offered its members the opportunity to book passage on its "Freedom Cruise" with Wayne LaPierre, Oliver North, and Newt Gingrich, among other notables, on a Holland America ship. In addition, in the preface to his 2007 book, *The Essential Second Amendment Guide*, LaPierre writes, "In the Second Amendment, we have the purest and most precious form of freedom because it is the one freedom that gives common men and women uncommon power to defend all freedoms. . . . Thank you for keeping the flame of freedom burning brightly in American hearts. Yours in Freedom, Wayne LaPierre."³¹

By constantly hammering home the idea that the gun rights movement is essentially about the defense of liberty, advocates of the Insurrectionist myth have effectively turned *freedom* into a code word understood by the initiated to imply a quite remarkable conception of the role of private violence in our political system while communicating benign concern for civil rights to the uninitiated. Slogans such as "Vote Freedom First" allow the NRA to inculcate the idea that guns are the cornerstone of freedom without expressly spelling out the argument that citizens must prepare for violent conflict with the government or confronting the logical implications of that argument. In much the same way, "conservative" politicians use the phrase *culture of life* to remind "social conservatives" of their fealty without having to explicitly state a position on abortion or gay rights that might alienate moderate voters.

The NRA's 2006 national convention in Milwaukee was called "Freedom's Second Army," and its 2007 convention in St. Louis was advertised as the "Biggest Celebration of Freedom in NRA History!"³² LaPierre refers to NRA members and their fellow travelers as the "pro-freedom voting bloc."³³ Building on this coded language, the NRA has introduced a new monthly magazine for its members called *America's First Freedom*, with features such as a "Freedom Index" that moves up

and down in response to the victories and setbacks of the gun rights lobby. In the January 2007 issue, the index notes that freedom took a three-point hit (on a one-hundred-point scale) based on the election of a Democratic majority in Congress the preceding November; Mayor Michael Bloomberg's efforts to reduce the carrying of concealed handguns in the New York City; and Michigan voters' rejection of a ballot initiative that would have legalized the hunting of mourning doves.³⁴ Whenever any person, organization, or government entity does something the NRA doesn't like, freedom has suffered a defeat, even when the NRA's position favors limiting someone else's rights, as it has done in attempting to prevent private landowners from keeping firearms off their property.

The suggestion that the Constitution's core values are implicated in a debate about whether to allow residents of Michigan to shoot at mourning doves may seem tenuous at best, but the NRA is relentless in associating every aspect of the ownership and use of guns with the cause of protecting freedom. Each time the concept of freedom is invoked in connection with gun rights, the NRA reinforces the idea not only that the right to own a gun is an important freedom but that government is the enemy of all forms of individual liberty. The NRA's official communications consistently attribute just about every social problem to the heavy hand of government, even in situations where most observers would conclude that the source of the difficulty is the weakness of government action, not its excesses.

Perhaps the best example of the NRA's systematic attempts to interpret the breakdown of government as evidence that government is too powerful came with Hurricane Katrina. In *Freedom in Peril: Guarding the 2nd Amendment in the 21st Century*, the NRA rails against many of its perennial targets (e.g., Senator Hillary Clinton and filmmaker Michael Moore) but adds a new villain: the role of the military and local law enforcement agencies in responding to the hurricane.³⁵ While most Americans understood Katrina as a wake-up call for government to upgrade its disaster-response abilities, the NRA's communications apparatus now regularly releases videos, press releases, and direct-mail appeals arguing that efforts to disarm and evacuate residents of New Orleans as order broke down following the storm represented

proof positive that government confiscation of firearms is a clear and present danger. *Freedom in Peril* notes that for a few terrifying days, New Orleans degenerated into anarchy but then goes on to make the curious claim that

Katrina became the proving ground for what American gun owners have always predicted. The day came when government bureaucrats threw the Bill of Rights out the window and declared freedom to be whatever they say it is. A mayor and a police chief revoked the rights of law-abiding citizens. The Second Amendment was only as good as they said it was. And they had plenty of men in helmets and body armor with M-16s to prove it.³⁶

The NRA and other gun rights groups now regularly point to the Katrina episode as a reason to pass state and federal legislation expressly forbidding law enforcement officials from taking guns away from residents of a disaster area. The NRA and its allies argue that chaos ensued in New Orleans because law enforcement disarmed law-abiding citizens.

Anyone who has reviewed the contemporaneous press coverage of the Katrina disaster knows that the NRA has its facts backward. The police and National Guard did not reach areas hit hardest by flooding until after order had already broken down, so it is hard to see how their efforts to limit access to firearms could have caused the disorder. Moreover, the police and military started disarming civilians they encountered in the area precisely because so many looters and other criminals were armed, and in a few cases they were keeping rescue personnel at bay by shooting at them. Some citizens were disarmed and forcibly evacuated because violence was impeding recovery operations. The Insurrectionist account of Katrina also ignores the role that easy access to guns—many stolen by criminals from residences and gun stores abandoned as the hurricane moved in—contributed to the problems faced by public authorities in restoring order and conducting rescue and recovery operations.

None of this has stopped Insurrectionist propagandists from moving aggressively to construct a Katrina mythology that portrays the denial of access to firearms as delaying the restoration of order. By reversing

the chronology to put gun confiscation ahead of the chaos and violence in New Orleans, the gun rights movement has made the hurricane fit within its broader story line about how police—as part of the government—cannot be trusted to protect the innocent as armed criminals rape, rob, and murder but are quick to seize guns from these same innocent people who need firearms to protect themselves in the law enforcement vacuum after a natural disaster. According to the NRA, post-Katrina New Orleans was a criminals' playground with no police in sight, yet law enforcement officers were ruthlessly disarming residents who were then left with no way to defend their lives or property. In this retelling, the police represent the worst of both worlds, totally ineffective against the bad guys but highly efficient in disarming the good guys. The government is too weak to protect its citizens yet too strong to be trusted.

Guns did not play a decisive role in the catastrophic aftermath of Katrina one way or the other, but the disaster highlights the real-world consequences of weak and ineffective government. The losses of life and property resulting from Katrina were exacerbated by the government's failures to plan adequately and effectively for its response to a major hurricane in the area and to allocate the resources needed to deal with the problems created by the storm in a timely manner. These shortcomings point to the need for stronger and smarter government efforts to prepare for and respond to major emergencies. Viewed in this light, the insistence on portraying Katrina as a case study in the dangers of a government grown too powerful is counterproductive not only to improving disaster preparedness but also to a rational discussion of the role of firearms in a free society.

What makes the Insurrectionist propaganda so insidious is not just its effect on gun policy but also its role in advancing an antigovernment ideology that is hostile to progressive values and democratic institutions. The ideology behind the gun rights movement rejects community and consensus building in favor of a social compact that may be dissolved at any time, by anyone, based on narrow conceptions of self-interest. In this view, might (whether political or physical) makes right, and government can never make legitimate claims against individuals

on behalf of the community, even when decisions are made by democratic means with strong guarantees for individual rights.

The Insurrectionist idea may not spur many gun owners to challenge the government to an armed showdown, although this idea guided Timothy McVeigh (who believed that destroying the Murrah Building was justified self-defense, because after the government action at Waco and Ruby Ridge it was clear to him that “there was an imminent threat to the lives of gun owners”)³⁷ and continues to be used by white supremacists and other extremists to justify violence. Insurrectionist ideology is, however, regularly employed in service of organizing opposition to progressive political leaders and their ideas.

The gun rights movement has masterfully used its power to mobilize grassroots opposition to progressives as a way of building clout within the “conservative” coalition. We cannot say whether the leaders of the major gun rights organizations actually believe their own rhetoric, but they have shown they are not above using it in service to causes far removed from the fight to protect the constitutional rights they claim to hold dear. For example, the NRA has not hesitated to push for legislation forcing employers to allow employees to bring guns to work, an idea that requires the government to abrogate private property rights in favor of the interests of firearms enthusiasts who prefer never to go anywhere without a gun. It is also hard to believe that LaPierre, a political operative turned gun activist who makes eight hundred thousand dollars a year and lives in an elite suburban enclave just outside Washington, D.C., takes seriously the relentless attacks on the social, political, and economic elites he so closely resembles.

Some other figures within the gun rights movement cut their ideological teeth developing direct-mail campaigns aimed at senior citizens and religious fundamentalists, and gun rights advocacy sometimes seems to have more to do with frightening or angering gun owners into writing more checks than with any attempt to strip away restrictions on gun ownership through political action. In fact, the NRA’s entire “Vote Freedom First” campaign to get gun owners to the polls in the 2000 elections was crafted by the Mercury Group, an inside-the-Beltway public relations firm, to frame candidates who supported the

NRA's position as "pro-freedom." The firm's Web site boasts, "We're masters at melding news with drama, politics with theatre and public affairs with popular buzz to make your message sing and your story sell."³⁸ Indeed, the gun rights leaders have effectively told a paranoid tale that the government is evil as a way of building a formidable financial and political force.