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Guns, Democracy, and the Insurrectionist Idea

Horwitz, Joshua, Anderson, Casey

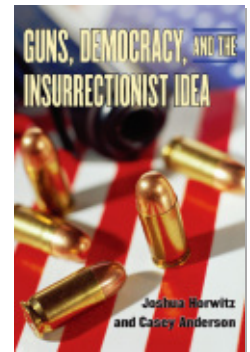
Published by University of Michigan Press

Horwitz, Joshua and Casey Anderson.

Guns, Democracy, and the Insurrectionist Idea.

University of Michigan Press, 2009.

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CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS THE INSURRECTIONIST AGENDA?

Many on the left assume that support for an expansive view of gun rights is essentially just a manifestation of a muscular strand of libertarianism. Anyone who has studied the propaganda churned out by the leading gun rights groups, however, quickly comes to understand that gun rights advocacy has been harnessed to an ideological perspective that is better described as right-wing populism, which includes deep-seated resentment of the power and values of elites, xenophobia, and distrust of powerful institutions such as large corporations as well as activist government.

As an outgrowth of a set of political and cultural sentiments that extends far beyond gun rights, the Insurrectionist idea is often invoked in connection with issues that on the surface have little or nothing to do with the regulation of firearms. Not coincidentally, these issues largely mirror the priorities of the “movement conservatives” who emerged as a potent political force with the nomination of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election and have grown in influence within the Republican Party ever since. In other words, the Insurrectionist idea provides a theoretical framework that ties the interests of gun owners to the political priorities of movement conservatives by explaining gun rights in terms of a wider set of grievances.

Gun Owners of America, for example, is leading a coalition of right-

wing groups opposed to federal influence on public school curricula,¹ and David Kopel, apparently energized rather than exhausted by his prolific writings urging Americans to prepare for armed rebellion against the government, also has found time to attack public education, arguing that compulsory education lies at the root of school violence. In an article advocating allowing children to drop out of school at earlier ages, Kopel asserts that “abolishing compulsory attendance beyond the fifth grade would almost certainly have an immediate, dramatic effect in reducing school violence in the United States.” As a side benefit, Kopel suggests, larger numbers of dropouts will help justify reducing the amount of government spending on public schools, long a cherished goal of many conservatives: “There is . . . nothing unfair about reducing school funding when the number of students declines. If you have fewer customers, you need fewer resources.”² If sixth-graders start dropping out, the schools will be safer and the taxpayers will save money—a winning proposition for antitax types and religious conservatives whose children do not attend public schools in the first place, but not so good for kids with a fifth-grade education.

Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership (JPFO), a gun rights group that usually focuses on the need for ethnic, racial, and religious minorities to use firearms to protect their civil rights, has directly linked the destruction of gun rights with federal taxation and Social Security. JPFO’s founder, Aaron Zelman, whose group believes that tax policies “destroy American rights,” wrote in *Shotgun News* that this is because gun owners “pay increasingly outrageous taxes for guns and everything else, only to have our tax money spent to terrify and oppress us gun owners.”³ Zelman also has argued, in “Can the Second Amendment and Social Security Coexist? Terrified Politicians Believe One or the Other Has to Go,” that the allegedly imminent collapse of the Social Security system will trigger a violent confrontation with the government that will, in turn, give “statists” their long-awaited excuse to confiscate all civilian firearms. Unfortunately, Zelman has no suggestions for shoring up the Social Security trust fund. Instead, he recommends that we “wean ourselves and our families from dependence on the all-pervasive nanny state. We should do the best we can to prepare ourselves financially for the future, independent of government hand-

outs and Ponzi schemes. . . . We can't risk being dependent on a government that cheats us, then disarms us to avoid the consequences of its actions."⁴

For its part, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has campaigned to curb the influence of the United Nations⁵ (attacking it as the "face of Global Socialism"),⁶ built support for right-wing judicial nominations, and defended the George W. Bush administration's decision to allow road building to encourage logging on public lands (a policy that most hunters opposed).⁷ The organization has also been busy warning America about "the unfolding Latino gang crime wave" at the same time its legislative allies have been trying to use the fear of illegal immigration as a campaign wedge issue. The NRA has gone beyond the usual tactic of complaining that illegal immigrants cost "real" Americans their jobs and has made the seemingly much more attenuated argument that illegal immigrants will be a major factor in the coming crime wave and that this will give cover to politicians who want to take away the gun rights of law-abiding citizens. As an NRA publication states, "The bottom line is that America, by its free and independent nature, is a breeding ground and safe haven for violent, illegal immigrant criminal gangs. American gun owners should not only draw even tighter rein on their rights, but also brace for a new and decades-long assault upon all their freedoms."⁸ It is odd to think that our "free and independent nature"—the same nature that presumably makes us so enthusiastic about guns—also makes Americans tolerant of violent criminals from other countries, but no matter. The NRA asserts that the illegal immigrant lobby is so powerful that "most law enforcement officials won't acknowledge that an illegal alien crime wave exists."⁹ (This might explain why so many Americans labor under the misimpression that most violent crimes are committed by the 290 million people who are legally within our borders.)¹⁰

Indeed, opposition to immigration—both legal and illegal—is a major focus of many gun rights propagandists. The Web site for the Liberty Belles, a minor gun rights group targeting women (slogan: "Putting the Second Amendment First"), makes some bizarre claims in "Open Borders Threaten Gun Rights." The Belles maintain that "we are importing Socialism. Organizations like the Communist Party USA and the New

Socialist [*sic*] are assisting the effort by attempting to fuel a revolution of underpaid workers who rise up against the evils of capitalism." In an effort to connect this contention to the cause of gun rights, they say,

One can only assume that our newly imported Socialists are voting in American elections regardless of whether or not they have the legal right to do so. And without understanding the Bill of Rights or the cultural trademark of American individualism, we can expect illegal alien voters to elect Socialist politicians who promise "free" benefits to the poor. Regardless of party affiliation, these Socialist and Communist politicians [*sic*] will stamp out our gun rights with the same pen they use to grant aid to the misguided immigrants who voted for them.¹¹

The Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) links a hard-line position on immigration with the fear of crime and has adopted the slogan "Border control, not gun control." Its widely read tabloid newspaper, *Gun Week*, often publishes articles arguing that the debate over public safety can be boiled down to a choice between regulating access to firearms and cracking down on illegal immigration. SAF founder Alan Gottlieb writes, "An overwhelming majority of American citizens think it is far more important to stop the flood of illegal aliens into this country than it is to restrict the rights of law-abiding gun owners."¹²

While immigration figures prominently among the grievances stoked by Insurrectionist organs, these outlets often highlight a wide range of other public policy controversies with only the most tenuous connection to guns. The NRA's flagship magazine, *American Rifleman*, frequently features complaints about the evils of judicial activism, international organizations, environmentalism, free trade, restrictions on prayer in schools, and even campaign finance reform.

Why do gun rights organizations go to such great lengths to tie the litany of right-wing grievances to firearms? Gun rights groups use their membership lists, communications infrastructure, and fund-raising capability on behalf of a wide range of causes dear to the hearts of "movement conservatives" because the Insurrectionist idea fits neatly into an ideology that preaches the evils of big government and the hated liberals who control it. The organizations seek to weaken government not

simply by curbing its power over individuals but by defining as narrowly as possible the community whose interests the government may legitimately serve. Those who favor protection of the environment for the benefit of the public or who believe that the federal government should ensure that all children, including those born to illegal immigrants, receive an education or that senior citizens should have a minimum level of subsistence are condemned as “statists” who have no respect for the values of ordinary Americans. These “elites” are blamed for a host of evils, ranging from high taxes to sex and violence in the entertainment media—along with gun control and disrespect for gun owners.

These “elites” are, of course, the same people who offend right-wing populists. What Insurrectionism adds to the standard list of complaints about liberals who are “ruining the country for everyone else” is the claim that the elites who supposedly control the government are literally out to get ordinary people. Insurrectionists contend that if given a chance, the elites who control the levers of power in government, industry, and the media are likely to grab privately owned guns and enslave their owners as the condescending, paternalistic instincts that initially motivated their actions give way over time to totalitarian impulses. According to this line of reasoning, Americans have a patriotic duty to own guns because of the need to resist the oppression of elites.

The seeds of this debate (oversimplified here) are as old as the republic: Jeffersonians believed that freedom is preserved by limiting the role of the federal government, and Hamiltonians thought that a stronger federal government would be consistent with—and in some ways helpful to—the expansion of individual freedom. For many people, this debate was largely settled in favor of the Hamiltonians by events and perspectives that later reshaped the institutional structure and philosophical underpinnings of the American system—first the Civil War and later the New Deal. Both Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt confronted crises that posed grave threats to our country. Both expanded the scope of the federal government’s power in addressing these threats, invoking the founders and, in FDR’s case, the ideas of John Maynard Keynes and others to assert that in some ways, a strong

central government is essential to the defense of individual freedom. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson followed with the New Frontier and the Great Society, programs based on the premise that government intervention could defend and strengthen freedom for Americans.

The Insurrectionist dreamers share a fundamentally reactionary set of political sentiments that formed the basis of a backlash with roots in a complex collection of social and economic controversies. There is nothing inherently wrong with working to reduce the size of government and to limit the scope of its authority over individuals. Unfortunately for the rule of law, however, Insurrectionists take the “smaller government” rhetoric to a dangerous new place where gun owners, ready and eager to use violence to realize their desire for limited governance, emerge as an essential and legitimate counterbalance to a government they see as out of control.

As we will discuss in more detail later, the founders (an occasional intemperate remark by Jefferson notwithstanding) explicitly rejected the Insurrectionist theory of democratic government in the framing of the Constitution.¹³ The Insurrectionist argument may seem wildly paranoid or simply absurd on its face, and most gun owners would not articulate their views about the importance of guns to the preservation of freedom in such stark terms. Even in watered-down form, however, the Insurrectionist vocabulary resonates powerfully among America’s undersocialized, alienated, and disaffected. It helps carve out a place at the table of “movement conservatives” who need to welcome gun rights advocates into their tent to bind together a winning electoral coalition. As a small but vital part of that coalition, the Insurrectionists, bereft as they are of cosmopolitan sensibilities, conservative instincts, social skills, or even good humor, nevertheless prove themselves curiously capable, time after time, of using their organizational clout on behalf of the “conservative” movement.