Mad men

How marketing created American gun culture, turning a weapon of war into an object of desire

In 1870 Thomas Addis urinated on a rifle before the Ottoman Sultan and saved one of the largest gun businesses in the world. The Sultan had challenged Colonel Addis – a globetrotting salesman for the Winchester Repeating Arms Company of New Haven, Connecticut, and only a self-styled Colonel – to unclog a sandy batch of rifles using implements available to ordinary soldiers. Impressed by Addis's ingenuity, the Sultan ordered 20,000 rapid-fire Winchesters. His men soon mowed down Russian troops, who toted mere single shooters, and showed nations and tribes around the world what it took to survive.

Back in Connecticut lay a less spectacular but, the historian Pamela Haag shows, equally significant part of the story. The Winchester Company sent Addis abroad because it was struggling at home. Few Americans purchased guns. Those who did sought to possess a practical tool, not a totem of individual freedom. Precisely when the West was being "won", and before the first federal gun-control legislation in the 1920s, consumer demand failed to sustain Winchester and other manufacturers. Through most of the nineteenth century, the United States hardly seemed destined to become the ballistic republic it is today, when civilians own the most guns per capita of any country, tens of thousands die from gun violence annually, and toddlers shoot someone at least once a week. The aggregate statistics make the recent mass shooting in Orlando, despite its setting a record for fatalities, look like a spectacular version of normality.

Haag is not the first scholar to debunk the myth of American "gun exceptionalism", as she calls it. In Gunfight: The battle over the right to bear arms in America (2011), the law professor Adam Winkler revealed the long acceptance of gun restrictions at state and local levels from the American Revolution onwards. Only in the twentieth century did gun advocates decide that almost any regulation, however modest, would destroy the right to bear arms. Haag offers a similar chronology but shifts the perspective. Looking beyond gun owners and the scope of their rights, Haag focuses on gun makers and the power of their business, arguing that it was the particular dynamics of gun production that compelled Winchester and a handful of manufacturers to cultivate a consumer market. Gun capitalism created gun culture.

But first, capital created the guns. Diving into the archives of Winchester, along with its Northeastern counterparts Colt's, Remington and Smith & Wesson, Haag traces how the handcraft of eighteenth-century gunsmiths gave way to mass production in nineteenth-century factories. Churning out arms required capital accumulation above all. Thus Oliver Winchester, a well-heeled shirt-collar maker, morphed into an iconic "rifle king" despite never owning a gun until he got into the business, and he continued to view firearms in the unexceptional terms of commerce. "A gun", he explained in 1869, "is a machine made to throw balls."

STEPHEN WERTHEIM

Pamela Haag

THE GUNNING OF AMERICA Business and the making of American gun culture 528pp. Basic Books. £19.99 (US \$29.99). 978 0 465 04895 3

As with other industries, one gun was expensive to make but each thereafter was cheap. Profits thus depended on massive sales. But to whom? Winchester failed to impress American consumers, notwithstanding his prescient effort to "scatter our guns as much as possible". The first generation of arms companies instead relied on government contracts and international deals, subsisting on the Civil War and a host of European and colonial conflicts. Amazonian rubber barons, Mexican

commercial promotions that helped to produce gun exceptionalism. Winchester and Remington, she shows, dispatched entertainers called "missionaries" across the American continent. Shrewdly forbidden from selling guns directly, these marksmen associated firearms with non-commercial recreation. They counterposed the armed Wild West to the industrial East, where the guns were actually made. Just as the North American frontier closed and corporate capitalism triumphed, Americans romanticized the gun as a fount of traditional pioneer freedom.

The colonization of America had many willing collaborators, among them Theodore Roosevelt, who brandished his beloved Winchesters when he charged up San Juan Hill and hunted African game, seeking new outlets for "virile vigor". Or perhaps it was Roosevelt – and a host of cultural purveyors, from dime

push around the gun industry. Better for the manufacturers to reap the perpetual spoils of Haag doesn't shrink from drawing implications for the present. One would think she might urge proponents of gun control to seize the offensive, to stop taking for granted the historical importance of gun ownership and the commercial rights of gun manufacturers. Her narrative, after all, casts gun capitalism as not just physically but morally destructive. In a novelistic B plot, Haag follows the spiritual crisis of Sarah Winchester, Oliver's daughterin-law, who decamped to California and embarked on a never-ending mansion-building project featuring staircases to nowhere. Haag suggests, though the evidence is thin, that the conscience repressed in her gunmaking family surged in Sarah. Yet Haag ends up wary of legislative gun

worked, the gun became an object of desire.

Winchester sales duly multiplied, more than

tripling from 1890 to 1914 even as smaller

shares went to the military and foreign

markets. By the First World War, Winchester

fulfilled its original dream of securing large

government contracts but found peacetime

production more profitable - and more secure,

since the wartime state might seize arms

plants. Haag concludes that the first wave of

gun critics in the 1920s and 30s, who condemned "merchants of death" for pushing the

government into the war, had it backwards. In

fact, the war empowered the government to

control. She briefly counsels a business-focused approach that would pressure gun manifacturers to make their products safer by ending their exemptions from civil lawsuits and various consumer-safety regulations. Perhaps this move has tactical merits in a deadlocked debate, but it is a jarringly small finale to a sweeping narrative. It also highlights the absence of political contestation from Haag's analysis. Even if corporate power made America's guns and shaped its gun culture, the question of the hundred years since is how public power has, or has not, been brought to bear. In this regard, gun owners and their lobbyists have often proved more obstructive than the gun makers themselves. Consider Smith & Wesson's decision to institute safety measures proposed by the federal government in 2000: the National Rifle Association organized a boycott and sales plummeted. Pamela Haag nonetheless reveals the bracing banality of how Americans came to love the gun in the



A National Association for Gun Rights poster

revolutionaries, the Thai King – all joined the Sultan in buying American guns, sold without government oversight. Some of Haag's most original chapters describe this "arms diaspora radiating from Connecticut outward". The global consequences warrant more systematic research.

novelists to academic historians – who made collaborators of the gun makers: given the spate of national myth-making in these years, Haag struggles to attribute causality mainly to businesses. Nevertheless, by tracing the evolution of advertising campaigns, she pinpoints how guns found their way into each corner of

For Haag's gun capitalists, however, globalization proved to be less alluring than nationalization. The business of supplying wars around the world suffered from the persistent problem of peace. Huge contracts could end at any moment, leaving firms swimming in supply. Around the turn of the twentieth century, gun capitalists, now in their second generation, devised a solution: "Our advertising will CREATE the demand", Winchester headquarters told its salesmen.

Haag excels in decoding the succession of

collaborators of the gun makers: given the spate of national myth-making in these years, Haag struggles to attribute causality mainly to businesses. Nevertheless, by tracing the evolution of advertising campaigns, she pinpoints how guns found their way into each corner of everyday life. Colt's pitched its automatic pistol to urbanites who might be held up on country drives. Smith & Wesson targeted homebound women, promising to reverse their "sense of helplessness when male members of the family are absent". Not least, Winchester developed a "boy plan" in 1917. The company went over the heads of parents, and into what it conceived as the subconscious, to tell ten- to sixteen-year-olds that every "real boy" coveted a rifle.

Once marketed simply by describing how it

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

The Westward Movement of Northern Insular Culture and Christianity in the Middle Ages by

Gunnþó Ingason National Church of Iceland

Publish your scholarly book with Mellen peer reviewed

www.mellenpress.com