

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

America's Toxic Gun Culture

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By The Editorial Board

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This editorial is the fifth in a series, "The Danger Within," urging readers to understand the danger of extremist violence and possible solutions. Read more about the series in a note from Kathleen Kingsbury, the Times Opinion editor.

A year ago, Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky posted a Christmas photo on Twitter. In it, Mr. Massie, his wife and five children pose in front of their ornament-bedecked tree. Each person is wearing a big grin and holding an assault weapon. "Merry Christmas! ps. Santa, please bring ammo," Mr. Massie wrote on Twitter.

The photo was posted on Dec. 4, just four days after a mass shooting at a school in Oxford, Mich., that left four students dead and seven other people injured.

The grotesque timing led many Democrats and several Republicans to criticize Mr. Massie for sharing the photo. Others lauded it and nearly 80,000 people liked his tweet. "That's my kind of Christmas card!" wrote Representative Lauren Boebert of Colorado, who then posted a photo of her four sons brandishing similar weapons.

These weapons, lightweight and endlessly customizable, aren't often used in the way their devotees imagine — to defend themselves and their families. (In a recent comprehensive survey, only 13 percent of all defensive use of guns involved any type of rifle.) Nevertheless, in the 18 years since the end of the federal assault weapons ban, the country has been flooded with an estimated 25 million AR-15-style semiautomatic rifles, making them one of the most popular in the United States. When used in mass shootings, the AR-15 makes those acts of violence far more deadly. It has become the gun of choice for mass killers, from Las Vegas to Uvalde, Sandy Hook to Buffalo.

The AR-15 has also become a potent talisman for right-wing politicians and many of their voters. That's a particularly disturbing trend at a time when violent political rhetoric and actual political violence in the United States are rising.

Addressing violent right-wing extremism is a challenge on many fronts: This board has argued for stronger enforcement of state anti-militia laws, better tracking of extremists in law enforcement and the military, and stronger international cooperation to tackle it as a transnational issue. Most important, there is a civil war raging inside the Republican Party between those who support democracy and peaceful politics and those who support far-right extremism. That conflict has repercussions for all of us, and the fetishization of guns is a pervasive part of it.

The prominence of guns in campaign ads is a good barometer of their political potency. Democrats have sometimes used guns in ads — in 2010, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, running for the Senate, shot a hole through a copy of the cap-and-trade climate bill with a single-shot hunting rifle. Since then, guns have all but disappeared from Democratic messaging. But in the most recent midterm elections, Republican politicians ran more than 100 ads featuring guns and more than a dozen that featured semiautomatic military-style rifles.

In one of the most violent of those ads, Eric Greitens, a Republican candidate for Senate in Missouri and a former Navy SEAL, kicks in the door of a house and barges in with a group of men dressed in tactical gear and holding assault rifles. Mr. Greitens boasts that the group is hunting RINOs — a derogatory term for "Republicans in name only." The ad continues, "Get a RINO hunting permit. There's no bagging limit, no tagging limit, and it doesn't expire until we save our country."

Twitter flagged the ad, Facebook banned it for violating its terms of service, and Mr. Greitens lost his race for office. He may have been playacting in the ad, but many other heavily armed people with far-right political views are not. Openly carried assault rifles have become an all too common feature of political events around the country and are having a chilling effect on the exercise of political speech.

This intimidating display of weaponry isn't a bipartisan phenomenon: A recent New York Times analysis examined more than 700 demonstrations where people openly carrying guns showed up. At about 77 percent of the protests, those who were armed "represented right-wing views, such as opposition to L.G.B.T.Q. rights and abortion access, hostility to racial justice rallies and support for former President Donald J. Trump's lie of winning the 2020 election."

As we've seen at libraries that host drag queen book readings, Juneteenth celebrations and Pride marches, the Second Amendment's right to bear arms is fast running up against the First Amendment's right to peaceably assemble. Securing that right, and addressing political violence in general, requires addressing the armed intimidation that has become commonplace in public places and the gun culture that makes it possible.

A growing number of American civilians have an unhealthy obsession with "tactical culture" and rifles like the AR-15. It's a fringe movement among the 81 million American gun owners, but it is one of several alarming trends that have coincided with the increase in political violence in this country, along with the spread of far-right extremist groups, an explosion of anti-government sentiment and the embrace of deranged conspiracy theories by many Republican politicians. Understanding how these currents feed one another is crucial to understanding and reversing political violence and right-wing extremism.

The American gun industry has reaped an estimated \$1 billion in sales over the past decade from AR-15-style guns, and it has done so by using and cultivating their status as near mythical emblems of power, hyper-patriotism and manhood. Earlier this year, an investigation by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform found that the gun industry explicitly markets its products by touting their military pedigree and making "covert references to violent white supremacists like the Boogaloo Boys." These tactics "prey on young men's insecurities by claiming their weapons will put them 'at the top of the testosterone food chain.'"

This marketing and those sales come at a significant cost to America's social fabric.

In his recent book "Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry That Radicalized America," Ryan Busse, a former firearms company executive, described attending a Black Lives Matter rally with his son in Montana in 2020. At the rally, dozens of armed men, some of them wearing insignia from two paramilitary groups — the 3 Percenters and the Oath Keepers — appeared, carrying assault rifles. After one of the armed men assaulted his 12-year-old son, Mr. Busse had his epiphany.

"For years prior to this protest, advertising executives in the gun industry had been encouraging the 'tactical lifestyle,'" Mr. Busse wrote. The gun industry created a culture that "glorified weapons of war and encouraged followers to 'own the libs.'"

The formula is a simple one: More rage, more fear, more gun sales.

A portion of those proceeds are then funneled back into politics through millions of dollars in direct contributions, lobbying and spending on outside groups, most often in support of Republicans.

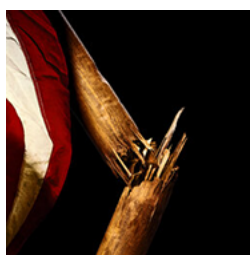
All told, gun rights groups spent a record \$15.8 million on lobbying in 2021 and \$2 million in the first quarter of 2022, the transparency group OpenSecrets reported. "From 1989 to 2022, gun rights groups contributed \$50.5 million to federal candidates and party committees," the group found. "Of that, 99 percent of direct contributions went to Republicans."

The Danger Within

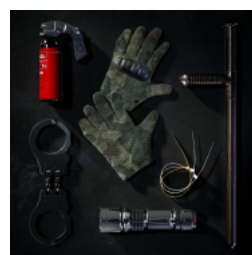
A series by the editorial board on the danger of extremist violence and possible solutions.



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America Can Stop Violent Extremism



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America Can Have Democracy or Political Violence. Not Both.



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It is important, of course, to distinguish between the large majority of law-abiding gun owners and the small number of extremists. Only about 30 percent of gun owners have owned an AR-15 or similar rifle, a majority support common sense gun restrictions and a majority reject political violence.

Institutions and individuals — prominent politicians, for instance, and responsible gun owners — could do far more to insist that assault weapons have no place in public spaces, even if they are permitted in many states, where the open carry of firearms is legal. Public condemnation of such displays is a good place to start.

Republicans should also show more courage in condemning extremists in their own ranks. When Representative Massie posted his Christmas photo, Representative Adam Kinzinger of Illinois responded on Twitter: “I’m pro second amendment, but this isn’t supporting right to keep and bear arms, this is a gun fetish.” There’s a difference between celebrating Christmas secure in the knowledge that you have a weapon to defend your home and family and sending out a photo of your arsenal days after a school shooting.

Democrats, while they may hope for stricter gun laws overall, should also recognize that they do share common ground with many gun owners — armed right-wing extremists and those who fetishize AR-15s do not represent typical American gun owners or their beliefs. That’s especially true given the changing nature of who owns guns in the United States: women and Black Americans are among the fastest-growing demographics.

This summer, for the first time in decades, Congress passed major bipartisan gun safety legislation — a major accomplishment and a sign that common ground is not terra incognita. It should have gone further — and can in the future: preventing anyone under 21 from buying a semiautomatic weapon, for instance, and erasing the 10-year sunset of the background-check provision. States should also be compelled to pass tougher red-flag laws to take guns out of the hands of suicidal or potentially violent people. Mandatory gun-liability insurance is also an idea with merit.

States and the federal government should also pass far tougher regulations on the gun industry, particularly through restrictions on the marketing of guns, which have helped supercharge the cult of the AR-15. New York’s law, which allows parties like victims of gun violence and the state government to sue gun sellers, manufacturers and distributors, is a good model for other states to follow.

Federal regulators should also do more to regulate the arms industry’s marketing practices, which are becoming more deadly and deranged by the year. They have the legal authority to do so but, thus far, not the will to act.

Americans are going to live with a lot of guns for a long time. There are already more than 415 million guns in circulation, including 25 million semiautomatic military-style rifles. Calls for confiscating them — or even calls for another assault weapons ban — are well intentioned and completely unrealistic. With proper care and maintenance, guns made today will still fire decades from now. Each month, Americans add nearly two million more to the national stockpile.

But even if common-sense regulation of guns is far from political reality, Americans do not have to accept the worst of gun culture becoming pervasive in our politics. The only hope the nation has for living in and around so many deadly weapons is a political system capable of resolving our many differences without the need to use them.

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