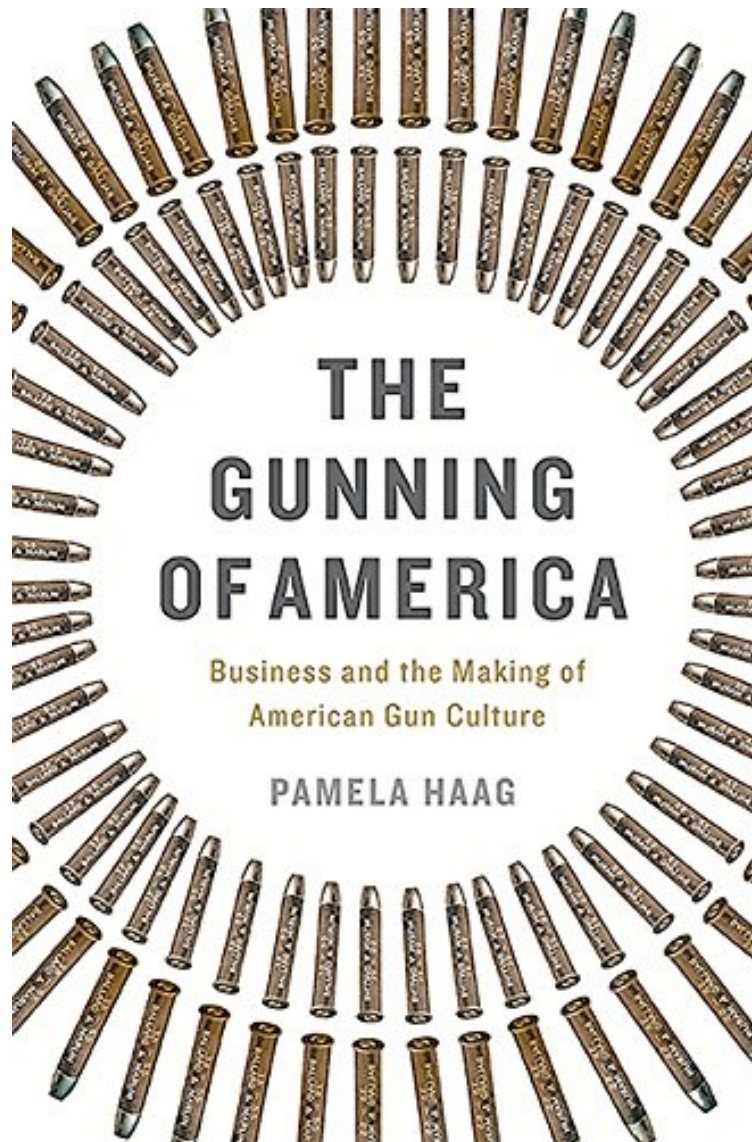


The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture

Pamela Haag

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Pamela Haag : The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture:

256 of 269 people found the following review helpful. Politics trumps history, this is an advocacy book, not a history

bookBy John R. Lott Jr. This review was published in The Weekly Standard August 1, 2016 Pamela Haag calls gun makers merchants of death. And Americas love affair with guns, she says, didnt really start until the late 1800s, when the merchants of death convinced Americans that they wanted guns. She describes how gun makers were innovators in advertising, using promotional materials to lure Americans into buying firearms, even deploying skilled marksmen and trick-shot artists to show off the guns. Haags story centers around the Winchester family, famous for its rifles, and she focuses on two members of the family: Oliver Winchester, who started the company, and Sarah Winchester, his daughter-in-law, who was supposedly haunted by her familys blood fortune and experienced an enormous, haunting debt of guilt. The Gunning of America, however, is an advocacy book, not a history book, and Haag carefully selects her facts and gives readers a biased presentation of history. She tells us, for example, that Winchester gun sales soared from 9,800 in 1875 to 292,400 in 1914. But 1914 makes for a convenient end-year: The First World War had begun in July, and Winchester increased production to provide guns for the British and Canadian armies. (In 1875, the company was only selling two types of rifles.) Total gun sales did increase over that period; but a lot of that came from cheaper guns, many produced in Europe a fact that doesnt fit Haags story of easily duped buyers. Indeed, little evidence is provided that Sarah Winchester actually disliked guns. Yet if she really hated guns so much, theres a lot she could have done to prevent their sale. Oliver Winchester died in 1880, Sarahs husband William died in 1881, and by then, Sarah owned 50 percent of the stock in the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Until her death in 1922, over 40 years when gun sales were exploding, Sarah could have done anything she wanted with Winchester Repeating Arms. So if she really hated guns, why didnt she sell her stock or move the company away from gun manufacturing? Haag fails to note that Sarah Winchester ended up controlling half the company stock; all she tells us is that Sarah owned 7.8 percent of Winchester stock while her father-in-law was still alive. Sarah Winchester did struggle with depression, and Haag attributes this to guilt largely caused by being in the business of making and selling guns. But it is equally possible that Sarah was depressed because she suffered numerous stillbirths and her only child to survive birth would live for just one month. One fact not mentioned by Haag is that, until Sarahs death at age 82, she kept various items that she had bought for her expected children. Haag also tries to revive two claims made by the disgraced historian Michael A. Bellesiles. In *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000), Bellesiles asserted that probate records showed gun ownership was rare in pre-Civil War America, arguing that the gun industrialist '!' was crucial to the development of the commercial market. But Professor Bellesiles had falsified his probate data and, as a result, Alfred A. Knopf stopped publishing the book and an investigation commissioned by his university concluded he had committed fraud. Haag also selectively references probate records from the pre-revolutionary era to argue that guns were not commonly owned in early America. According to the numbers she reports, there was an estimated low in Massachusetts of 37 percent of wills mentioning guns to a high of 62 percent in the South. But she ignores other studies that show higher rates, as well as the fact that these records provide only a partial account of gun ownership. She also mentions current gun-ownership rates, claiming that they have been falling in recent decades, according to the General Social Survey and Pew Research Center. But surveys by Gallup, ABC News/Washington Post, and CNN have found no decline. Haag offers no explanation for picking only the two surveys that support her thesis, nor does she mention concerns that these surveys systematically miss gun owners. Let us assume, however, that Haag is correct that gun ownership has recently fallen. Is this because gun makers have lost their marketing prowess? No answer is provided, and her treatment of current gun-control debates is filled with errors. She claims that the 2005 Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act prohibits civil liability actions against gun manufacturers, distributors, or dealers for damages caused by their products. But that is false: Gun makers can be sued if they fail to do background checks or sell to someone who doesnt pass the check or if any reasonable conclusion can be drawn that the buyer intended to commit a crime. The best history books grapple with opposing evidence and alternative explanations, arguing why one interpretation makes more sense than another. But in *The Gunning of America*, Pamela Haag simply ignores inconvenient facts.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. An academic account of the early days of gun manufacturing in America By Marcus Crowley As a non-American, I am keen to understand America's obsession with guns. That's why I bought this book whose cover caught my eye. I did learn a few things, but was disappointed that such a recent book didn't venture far into the 20th century, let alone this one. The author's area of expertise was plainly the Winchester family although she does frequently comment on the affairs of competing manufacturers. I got a sense of this before I bought the book, so have only myself to blame. Like other reviewers here, I didn't see the point of tales of Sarah Winchester, her baby and the spirit world. Far from providing additional interest, these sections went off topic and made an already disappointing book more tedious. I was also bothered that there was no in depth account of the congressional and moral dilemma that guns generated. These were mentioned only in passing. I am left with an unresolved sense that either there really was very little political objection and debate, or that the author didn't take the time to research this important aspect more fully. Neither of these possibilities sits well with me, especially as she grew up in a family that owned guns. If you are looking for an answer to why the USA today is addicted to guns, this book is well-researched but only gets you halfway there. I commend the author for leaving her own emotions at the door, but this makes the read academic and somewhat dull. I congratulate her on contributing to a better understanding of the origins of the current state of affairs, and offer my condolences at the passing of her brother.

3 of 3 people found

the following review helpful. Profits drive the gun trade. Gun violence dishonors and degrades it. By waterbear19 It's been a while since I read this book, but somehow my previous review disappeared from this site (perhaps I accidentally deleted it). So here's another 5 star review for an important book that challenges the prevailing American gun culture's myths. Although there's quite a low-star backlash here, it's not unexpected considering the defensiveness of those who love their guns. Considering that and the NRA's powerful reach, those who believe that we should be more cautious about arming America are being drowned out and ridiculed. That, despite the example of other developed countries which have fewer guns and less violent crime. Unfortunately, our gun virus is contagious. Haag's book, careful and well-researched, is a refreshingly courageous look at what actually drives American gun culture: naked capitalism. The most fascinating reveal is that the US gun industry had to be propped up repeatedly between wars because there was not enough demand for guns in America. Admittedly it's difficult to produce large amounts of armaments for war and then have to scale back between hostilities. That's naturally destabilizing to any such industry. That fact does not negate the conclusion that Americans had to be manipulated in various ways to encourage them to buy guns in peacetime. The demand was manufactured, complete with homespun mythology about the noble hunter and/or the warrior. All while most citizens had no need to kill their food or defend their property. What to do then? A gun culture must be contrived, replete with target shooting and the excitement of collecting various weaponry to own and trade. What's wrong with that? Only that gun violence has exploded in America because of the proliferation of weapons and exchange, leaving many victims and a polarized, angry and defensive populace. Some of us think it's worth it. Others emphatically do not. And the rest of the world looks at us and wonders how we let this get so out of hand. Yes, this book has an agenda, and so does this reviewer. Some of the low-star reviewers here who criticize our reviews as being agenda-prone might be more honest with themselves about their own agendas.

Americans have always loved guns. This special bond was forged during the American Revolution and sanctified by the Second Amendment. It is because of this exceptional relationship that American civilians are more heavily armed than the citizens of any other nation. Or so we're told. In *The Gunning of America*, historian Pamela Haag overturns this conventional wisdom. American gun culture, she argues, developed not because the gun was exceptional, but precisely because it was not: guns proliferated in America because throughout most of the nation's history, they were perceived as an unexceptional commodity, no different than buttons or typewriters. Focusing on the history of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, one of the most iconic arms manufacturers in America, Haag challenges many basic assumptions of how and when America became a gun culture. Under the leadership of Oliver Winchester and his heirs, the company used aggressive, sometimes ingenious sales and marketing techniques to create new markets for their product. Guns have never "sold themselves"; rather, through advertising and innovative distribution campaigns, the gun industry did. Through the meticulous examination of gun industry archives, Haag challenges the myth of a primal bond between Americans and their firearms. Over the course of its 150 year history, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company sold over 8 million guns. But Oliver Winchester—a shirtmaker in his previous career—had no apparent qualms about a life spent arming America. His daughter-in-law Sarah Winchester was a different story. Legend holds that Sarah was haunted by what she considered a vast blood fortune, and became convinced that the ghosts of rifle victims were haunting her. She channeled much of her inheritance, and her conflicted conscience, into a monstrous estate now known as the Winchester Mystery House, where she sought refuge from this ever-expanding army of phantoms. In this provocative and deeply-researched work of narrative history, Haag fundamentally revises the history of arms in America, and in so doing explodes the clichés that have created and sustained our lethal gun culture.

"In her remarkable new book, *The Gunning of America*, historian Pamela Haag undercuts much of the charged rhetoric about the importance of firearms in the nation's culture and history with a richly sourced, empirical look at the 19th century origins of the gun business and the men who made it." *Boston Globe* "[An] inspired new book... Haag's book is strongest when it upends the belief that America has had an uninterrupted love affair with guns." *San Francisco Chronicle* "[A] fascinating exploration of the major businesses and families that have manufactured firearms--and manufactured the seductiveness of firearms--in this country over the past 150 years." Carlos Lozada, *Washington Post* "A revealing new account of the origins of America's gun industry." *New York of Books* "[A] fascinating account.... Both convincingly argued and eminently readable, Haag's book will intrigue readers on all sides of the gun control debate." *Publishers Weekly*, "starred review" "In her masterful *The Gunning of America*, Pamela Haag furnishes a salutary corrective to the perception of the gun's inevitability in American life by showing its history as a commodity invented and then deliberately marketed and distributed like any other widget or household appliance.... [A] beautifully composed and meticulously researched volume." *New Republic* "Pamela Haag has accomplished a rare feat. She combines wonderful storytelling with a serious analysis of the firearms business to reveal how the Winchester Repeating Arms Company taught Americans to love guns." Richard White, Margaret Byrne Professor of American History, Stanford University "Pamela Haag has written a very smart book, deeply researched, original, provocative. The compelling narrative makes a powerful argument about the origins of America's gun culture." John Mack Faragher, Howard R. Lamar Professor of History, Yale University About the Author Pamela Haag holds a Ph.D.

in history from Yale University. Her work on a diverse range of topics has appeared in many venues such as *American Scholar*, NPR, Slate, and the Times (London).