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## [Introduction to] Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America

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WOMEN AND GUNS  
IN AMERICA

LAURA BROWDER

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

CHAPEL HILL

...

**HER BEST SHOT**



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## INTRODUCTION

### THE NEWS ABOUT WOMEN AND GUNS

**T**he armed woman has held, and continues to hold, enormous symbolic significance in American culture. In the pages that follow, I will explore the ways in which she anchors popular debates about women's capacity for full citizenship—and women's capabilities for violence. Throughout much of American history, the gun has served as a recurrent symbol that links violence and masculinity. For over two centuries, there have been women who have escaped conventional gender roles by picking up guns. In doing so, they became armed icons. Paradoxically, to succeed with the public, these famous armed women have had to embrace female stereotypes and expectations. Iconic women with guns have challenged and yet reinforced the masculinist ideal of America—that guns are inextricably tied to both masculinity and American identity. Public discussions of these women reflect the discomfort that they have produced in American culture.

In the late 1980s, the media began reporting on a new trend in women's involvement with guns. "Firearms Industry Woos Women Who Dress to Kill" was the title of a 1986 story that described bras, garters, and belly bands designed to hold concealed weaponry.<sup>1</sup> Other stories discussed the National Rifle Association's decision to gear ads toward women, which were placed in such magazines as *People*, *Family Circle*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Redbook*. The NRA created a women's issues division in 1990.<sup>2</sup> The press also covered Smith & Wesson's introduction of its new LadySmith handguns, the brochure for which, depicting a fur coat, a yellow rose, and a LadySmith handgun, bore the caption "just possibly an ideal answer to a very contemporary need."<sup>3</sup> *Armed and Female*, a 1989 book by former actress turned gun industry spokeswoman Paxton Quigley, became a publishing phenomenon by selling more than 200,000 copies as of 2004.<sup>4</sup> Many stories noted the growing popularity of *Women & Guns* magazine, founded in 1989, as it hit the newsstands in 1991, with advertisers such as *Feminine Protection*, a Dallas-based purveyor of concealed-carry handbags and other accessories, and the American Huntress Bang Bang Boutique in Fort Lauderdale.<sup>5</sup> Most of the media stories were positive, though many also contained quotes from representatives of the gun-control movement questioning the wisdom of

having women arm themselves. Thus some articles bore titles in the vein of “NRA Is Defending as Educational Its Campaign Targeting Women,” a 1993 headline in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>6</sup>

The coverage was not confined to the general interest media. Gun industry publications included such articles as “Targeting a New Market for Firearms (Women Buyers),” which began with a little handgun humor: “Women as targets! Not as targets for handgun practice (although most husbands probably harbor a thought like this from time to time) but women as targets for handgun marketing and sales.” On a more serious note, the article’s author warned that “the female market is growing quickly, and if you don’t become a part of it soon, you may be left behind.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the 1997 SHOT Show, an annual industry exposition hosted by the National Shooting Foundation, featured a seminar titled “Selling to the Fast Growing Women’s Market.”<sup>8</sup> *Women & Guns*, whose circulation had reached 20,000 by the mid-1990s, was joined in January 2003 by the NRA’s new glossy magazine *Woman’s Outlook*, a development that suggested this new marketing phenomenon was continuing to grow.

Of course, not every observer agreed with the NRA’s assessment that gun ownership among women was increasing dramatically and that by the mid-1990s 12 to 20 million women owned guns. A 1995 article in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* pointed out that while “this claim has been accepted by most journalists and repeated in dozens of stories about the feminization of gunnery . . . pro-gun groups and the media have greatly exaggerated the rate of gun ownership among women.” The article’s authors, Tom W. Smith and Robert J. Smith, analyzed data presented by the University of Chicago’s respected National Opinion Research Center, concluding that neither women nor men were more likely to own a handgun in 1995 than they had been in 1980. The Smiths asserted that “through the circulation of statistics of dubious reliability and accuracy, pro-gun groups have successfully created the impression that gun ownership by women has increased appreciably and has reached unprecedented levels. Most of the media have accepted the claims of increasing ownership and have sometimes even mangled and exaggerated these claims.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, despite statistical evidence to the contrary, industry supporters and most reporters agreed that although, as one journalist put it, “most women are taught from childhood that guns are for men,”<sup>10</sup> there was a strange new phenomenon in the United States. Whether fueled by women’s fear of crime or by the gun industry’s advertising blitz, women were becoming gun owners, seemingly for the first time.

In fact, the armed woman was hardly news. From the Revolutionary era to the present day, the armed woman has served—and continues to serve—as a locus for popular debates about women’s capacity for violence, as well as women’s capability to defend—or engage in insurrection against—the state.

Much of this history has been forgotten, as have earlier commercial images of women with guns. Yet for the pundits of the 1980s and 1990s commenting on the “new” phenomenon of women and guns, a glance at the magazines of a century ago might have proved illuminating. An 1891 ad for Stevens Special Firearms, published in *Forest and Stream*, depicts a series of tableaux of trapshooters: first two women in Victorian dress, then two men together, followed by a man and a woman, all shooting in different directions; and, finally, a fourth image of Annie Oakley standing alone. The text, which describes the rifles and pistols depicted, includes a mention of the Stevens Ladies’ Rifle—“the proper rifle for ladies. It is wonderfully accurate and has no recoil.”<sup>11</sup> Another ad for the Stevens Lady Model Rifles, from the year before, begins, “Here we are again with the same notice, which proved so popular last month that we have decided to try it again. . . . Have you any idea how many fine *Lady Shots* there are in this and other countries? *We have*, as we are supplying them with what has proved *the most popular* arm ever made for this purpose with both the *Ladies and Gentlemen* who do not care or are not able to use a heavy arm.”<sup>12</sup>

Rather than suggesting that women needed guns to ward off undesirable men, some ads suggested that guns would attract suitors. “Armed with a Marlin repeater,” runs one 1891 ad, “the Summer Girl is always surrounded by admirers.” The ad portrays a fashionably dressed woman leaning the butt of her rifle on the ground with one hand as she shows off her target—and shooting skill—to a crowd of admiring men.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising ads from this period are the ones that feature gender-neutral copy yet depict female shooters. Most ads do not assume that women need men in order to hunt. A 1903 poster for Iver Johnson Sporting Goods shows a woman in full skirt climbing over a fence, dog in attendance, in order to retrieve the fox she has just shot.<sup>14</sup> In a Winchester poster from 1909, a woman prepares to load up her canoe with supplies—while holding her .22 caliber repeating rifle.<sup>15</sup> A 1915 ad for Winchester repeating shotguns, from *Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, shows a woman alone in the wilderness with her hunting dog for company, holding a shotgun. There is nothing in the ad that comments on her sex.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a 1916 ad for the Ross rifle, which promises that the gun “paralyzes

# ARMED WITH A MARLIN REPEATER



**the Summer Girl is always surrounded by admirers.**

Nothing you can take on your vacation will give you as much pleasure for as little money as a Marlin 22 calibre. Our 1897 Model, Take-Down, using short, long and long-rifle cartridges in the same gun, is the finest pleasure arm made. Ask your dealer. 198-page illustrated book of arms and ammunition free, if you will send stamps to pay postage to The Marlin Fire-Arms Co., New Haven, Ct. *Send 15c. for sample tube of Marlin Rust-Repeller.*

An 1898 Marlin ad from *Field and Stream* suggests that women with shooting skills will have an easy time attracting beaux—and that the fashionable markswoman need not surrender her femininity in order to shoot. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming;

Gift of Roy Marcot; Tucson, Arizona; MS111.12.36.

*It's the splendid  
new 20 Gauge  
Marlin!*

*Isn't it a  
Beauty?*



# Marlin

**20 Gauge**—This neat little, sweet little pump gun adds zest to the sport of shooting—5 shots, about  $5\frac{7}{8}$  pounds, 25-inch barrel. A perfect gun for snipe, quail, partridge, woodcock, squirrels, rabbits, etc.—handles fast and with wonderful precision. ¶ You will like the handsomely matted barrel—a high grade and exclusive feature. ¶ Uses  $2\frac{3}{4}$ - as well as  $2\frac{1}{2}$ -inch shells, allowing good, stiff loads for duck and trap shooting. ¶ For longer range or increased weight, you have option of 28-inch barrel at the same price—\$24.00.

## Hammerless Repeating Shotguns

**12 and 16 Gauge: Hammerless**, for ducks, geese, foxes, trap shooting, etc.; perfect in build, weight and balance for the heavier loads. Like the 20 gauge, they have solid top, side ejection, matted barrel, take-down construction, and the solid-steel-breech and safety features that make it the safest breech-loading gun built. Six quick shots. ¶ **Hammer Guns**, take-down, solid top, side ejection, closed-in-breech. Many grades and styles. Write for full details of 20 gauge—or send 3c postage for catalog of all Marlin repeating rifles and shotguns.

**The Marlin Firearms Co.**  
29 Willow Street, New Haven, Connecticut

This Marlin 20-gauge repeater ad, which appeared in *Popular Mechanics* in 1914, is an early example of advertising linking a gun and a beautiful woman. Unlike the sturdy outdoorswoman who generally appeared in ads of the period, the model here gazes coyly at the viewer. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of Roy Marcot, Tucson, Arizona; MS111.12.106.

with a single shot," features a woman with an ammo belt slung casually around her skirted hips, aiming her rifle. Many Stevens ads also did not refer to women in the copy. One from 1905 had the caption "The story of the Stevens Tersely Told: Chapter 1 'Aim' [illustrated by a woman raising her rifle], Chapter 2 'Game' [showing the same woman with rifle lowered accepting a dead bird from her hunting dog]."17 Clearly, a woman with a gun was such an unexceptional sight that it did not require comment.

Guns were presented as being so unthreatening that they were safe for young girls, as well as for women. An 1891 calendar for the Union Metallic Cartridge Company shows a girl, who cannot be more than four or five years old, surrounded by eight hunting dogs and carrying a rifle.18 Sometimes girls were used in even more provocative images. A 1903 ad for Iver



# The STORY of the STEVENS



## To Shoot or Not to Shoot—That is the Question

There is a tremendous difference between **Hitting** and **Missing**—as all shooters know.  
Get a **Stevens** and have the assurance that our reliable arms shoot where you hold them. **Unerring Accuracy** has been the predominant characteristic of the **Stevens** for almost fifty years.

We manufacture  
**RIFLES, PISTOLS, SHOTGUNS, RIFLE TELESCOPES, etc.**

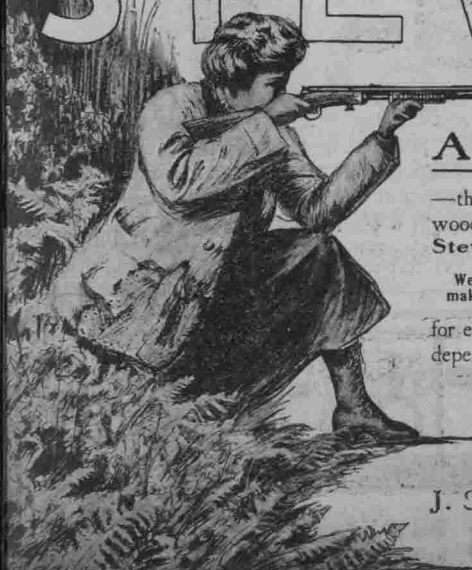
Where not sold by local merchants, we ship direct, **express prepaid**, upon receipt of price. Send four cents in stamps for 140-page illustrated catalog. A handy book of ready reference for all who shoot, or are going to.

Our attractive 3-color Aluminum Hanger will be mailed anywhere for 10 cents in stamps.

**J. STEVENS ARMS & TOOL CO.**  
159 Main Street  
CHICOPEE FALLS, MASS., U.S.A.

This Stevens ad from 1907, which appeared in the *National Sportsman*, shows a practically dressed woman fully intent on her target. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of Roy Marcot, Tucson, Arizona; MS111.18.44.

# STEVENS



## THE AUTUMN IS THE TIME

—the time you enjoy the bracing, invigorating ozone of woods and fields. The time you want to use your reliable **Stevens Repeater.**

We make **RIFLES, SHOTGUNS, PISTOLS, Etc.**

for every conceivable purpose—all at popular prices and of dependable quality.

Ask your Dealer—insist on STEVENS. If you cannot obtain, we ship direct, express prepaid, upon receipt of Catalog Price.

Send for 160 Page Illustrated Catalog Replete with STEVENS information. Mailed for 5 cents in stamps to cover postage.

**J. STEVENS ARMS & TOOL CO.**  
159 Main Street  
CHICOPEE FALLS, MASS.

The copy in this 1905 Stevens ad does not make reference to its subject's gender; instead, it showcases her hunting abilities. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of Roy Marcot, Tucson, Arizona; MS111.18.40.

Johnson safety hammer automatic revolvers, for example, shows a little girl in a nightgown holding a revolver that she has pointed right at her face. The caption, written in childish script across the picture, reads, "Papa says it won't hurt me." The main text advises readers that "an Iver Johnson revolver can lie around the house."<sup>19</sup>

While the women in these ads were portrayed as competent hunters, other magazine ads highlighted their accomplishments as trapshooters. Through the 1920s and even into the 1930s, ads featuring trapshooting regularly starred women champions. A 1921 ad for Ithaca Guns showed three-time trapshooting champion "Mrs. Harry Harrison." The sensibly attired Mrs. Harrison "says that any woman can break more targets with an Ithaca."<sup>20</sup> This particular ad ran in the magazine *National Sportsman*; clearly, women were considered readers of that publication—and the presence of women in the ads was not perceived to turn off male readers. A

# Iver Johnson

SAFETY HAMMER AUTOMATIC

# Revolvers

*Gentlemen: An Iver Johnson revolver can lie around the house: the Iver Johnson safety device makes it safe even for children.*



**\$4.50** ACCIDENTAL  
DISCHARGE  
IMPOSSIBLE ABSOLUTELY SAFE

SEND FOR FREE CATALOGUE

IVER JOHNSON-FITCHBURG, MASS. U.S.A.

Some early advertising images, like this one from a 1903 issue of *McClure's Magazine*, seem particularly alarming. The text written across the photo reads, "Papa says it won't hurt me." The "gentlemen" addressed in the ad are encouraged to leave the Iver Johnson revolver lying around the house. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming;

Gift of Roy Marcot, Tucson, Arizona; MS111.7.5.

1929 ad for Ithaca guns shows an unglamorous woman aiming her rifle. "Mrs. 'Bunny' Arnold Sanders won the ladies' championship of West Virginia with an Ithaca," the text tells us. "Her father, mother, husband and brothers are crack shots over traps or afield. Mrs. Sanders' family believe[s] Ithaca lock speed helps."<sup>21</sup> Here, shooting is not just a family sport but also one that involves generations of women. And it was no less suitable for single women to hunt or shoot traps: another Ithaca ad presents "an Iowa lass, Miss Alice Finkel."<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, although ads from the 1880s through the turn of the century featured many images of women hunting, often alone, these images later vanished, to be replaced by more domestic scenes of gun use. Advertisements from the era of the First World War tended to show men teaching

their wives to shoot as a means of protecting the home and children while the husband was away at war.

Over time, though, those ads disappeared as well. Generally speaking, the only women who appeared in weapons ads of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were mothers and daughters participating, often somewhat vicariously, in the family sport of *BB* gun target shooting. An ad for the Winchester .22 from 1953 shows a picnicking group: two men and a boy engaged in target shooting while the two women happily unpack the picnic basket.<sup>23</sup> From the late 1960s to the present day, women in firearms ads have tended to be scantily dressed models posing with ultramasculine weapons. Women's sexuality has been used to enhance the appeal of these guns.

During the 1980s, however, a curious development became evident. The new gun ads promoted the notion that good mothers and responsible single women needed to carry handguns to ensure their own safety and the safety of their families. Housewives, lovingly tucking their children into bed, kept a revolver on the nightstand; ads featuring women without children played on fears of urban crime. Gun manufacturers had rediscovered women as potential firearms consumers and were anxious to redefine the image of the woman with a gun. These ads may represent only what gun manufacturers wished their customers to see, but they nonetheless serve as a cultural barometer: they reveal what manufacturers considered attractive to women and to the spouses, boyfriends, or fathers who would buy them guns.

The difference in content between the ads of the early twentieth century and the 1980s is suggestive in several important ways. The early ads featuring women and guns showed guns to be safe tools to be used as equipment for healthy recreation; one 1909 Winchester ad asserted that the gun "makes an outing outfit complete." However much we might now recoil at the picture of a little girl pointing a gun at her head, the manufacturers who produced this image clearly intended it to demonstrate just how safe and innocuous guns were. Indeed, many early ads showed idyllic scenes of little girls and boys asleep in the fields, cuddled next to their rifles, surrounded by hunting dogs. The message was that guns were not only safe; they were an important part of developing a healthy relationship to nature. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, outdoor recreation, which included acquiring hunting skills, was considered by political and social leaders to be key to building a racially strong nation filled with vigorous, fertile white women. Urban life, many worried, made women sickly and incapable of producing many children. In short, using a gun in the ways suggested by the ads was a part of good citizenship.

By contrast, weapons ads since the 1980s have encouraged women to buy guns not as part of an explicit nation-building effort but as a defense against anonymous violence, a task that the government is clearly not up to. No longer touted for use in a friendly forest, firearms for women are meant to ward off urban menace. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the gun manufacturers' world, the police are nowhere to be found; it is up to a woman alone to ward off the sexually threatening "predators" of the city. Over the course of a century, a dramatic difference has developed in what gun ads imply about the relationship between women, weaponry, society, and the state.

In *Her Best Shot*, I consider the ways that the gun has been a crucial symbol, over time, both to prominent armed women and to commentators seeking to define women's relation to the state. Throughout much of American history, the gun has stood not just for American citizenship but also for the linkage between violence and masculinity. Iconic women with guns challenge and yet reinforce the connection between firearms and (masculine) American identity. Consequently, public discussions of such women reflect the discomfort that they produce in American culture. Of course, words like "women," "citizenship," "violence," and "sexuality" demand close attention: our cultural fascination with the armed woman sometimes makes it easy to gloss over the many contradictions contained within these key terms. What is the relationship between citizenship and violence? How does the gun defend, express, or redefine a woman's sexuality? How does the gun serve as a charged symbol that has enabled white women to gain privileges by emphasizing their racial identity and freeing them from gender strictures?

The armed female celebrities I discuss have foregrounded sometimes their racial identity and at other times their gender identity in their use of firearms. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century female hunters and trapshooters found in the gun a means to uphold "whiteness" against the threat of racial degeneration. Both black and white women activists of the 1960s and 1970s used the gun as a bid for equal power within their often sexist movements, as well as a tool meant to dismantle the state apparatus. This book traces the development of racialized and gendered ideologies by looking at how armed celebrities fashioned their public image and at how such an image could in turn be re-created and disseminated throughout popular culture.

The social meanings of the armed woman, depicted within a single period, depend heavily on race and class, even, and especially, when there seems to be little variation in who is represented as an icon. The firearms ads of the late 1800s and early 1900s that seem surprisingly advanced in



Women and girl with hunting trophies at the Stone Ranch, circa 1890.  
Wyoming State Archives, Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources.

their attitudes toward gender equality are decidedly less so in their representations of race and class. Almost uniformly, the ads depict well-to-do white women.<sup>24</sup> Yet photographs and illustrations from the period represent a wide range of experience. The ubiquitous ads from the 1870s and 1880s showing women of leisure trapshooting at a resort appeared along with such images as an 1877 *Harper's Weekly* cover picturing working-class women making cartridges in a factory. Photos of the self-consciously western Annie Oakley, in her girlish outfits, carefully posed to do trick shooting, were produced at the same time as a photograph of a mother, her preschool-aged daughter, and a teenage girl posed in front of a Wyoming ranch building, all three of them armed and holding the rabbits they have presumably just shot—animals that seem clearly destined not for the trophy shelf but for the stewpot.<sup>25</sup> While my focus is on iconic, mainstream images, these other images haunt the margins of U.S. culture during the late nineteenth century.

Although almost all the images from this period are of white women, their racial status was not always secure. The Wild West show performers who became the era's most famous armed women needed to take special care that both their femininity and their whiteness were unimpeachable, since their popularity depended on successfully representing civilization in

opposition to the encroachments of nonwhite barbarity. Annie Oakley was a model of contained sexuality: she incorporated both her husband and their pet dog into her act, highlighting her status as a family-focused woman. In one famous image she dressed up in a dramatic Indian feather headdress, but her usual costume, which she sewed herself, was genteel and girlish, and decidedly not exotic. On the other hand, Wild West show performers who either were suspected of behavior that was too masculine, such as swearing or promiscuity, or were seen as racially ambiguous quickly found their performing careers derailed.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the social anxieties that focused on armed women demonstrate how unstable a category “woman” can be, even the category of “white woman.” The promotion of armed (white, respectable) womanhood in the late nineteenth century depended on divorcing guns from the possibility of violence. Yet the weapons brandished by the urban gun molls of the 1920s highlighted for commentators dangerous linkages between these women’s sexuality and their attraction to violence, and suggested as well the dangers posed by women’s participation in urban working-class culture. These women with guns were not upholding the race; rather, they were using weapons to spread disorder and to further erode traditional gender roles. The “Brooklyn gungirls” who so transfixed newspaper readers during the 1920s were clearly threats to the urban social order.

Womanhood is, after all, linked closely to sexuality; and guns—and the possibilities of violence they promise—in the hands of women whose sexuality is unregulated or unorthodox have seemed especially dangerous to conservative commentators, who have often equated criminal gun use, degeneracy, and feminism. “Strange Phase of Modern Feminism Keeps Whole of the Police Department Guessing Hard” read a headline in the *New York World*, which reported on Celia Cooney, the infamous “bob-haired bandit” of the 1920s and the best known of the Brooklyn gungirls of the period. J. Edgar Hoover, writing about the bandits of the thirties, blamed American criminality on domineering women. He was appalled by the popular appeal of Bonnie Parker, the criminal who successfully managed her own media image by portraying her relationship with Clyde Barrow in a traditionally romantic vein. Parker, who published poetry about her affair with Barrow and who seemed to fully understand the importance of a domestic image even as she engaged in acts of criminal violence, was aghast when some gag photos Clyde Barrow took of her holding guns and smoking a cigar became public. Those pictures threatened to change pub-

lic perceptions of her from a star-crossed lover to a sleazy, masculinized gun moll.

The images of Cooney and Parker illustrate the difficulties of separating out messages of gender empowerment and the exploitative use of sexuality: is the armed woman a powerful force or a seductive fantasy? Even as some women, like Parker, attempted to control the sexual message conveyed in how they were portrayed to the public, a thriving market developed in sexualized images of gun-toting women—in movies, detective magazines, and comic books. Such women were clearly posed for the titillation of male viewers: detective magazine covers often featured women pulling guns out of their garter belts or their generous cleavage. Although they might require energetic physical subjugation by the male protagonist of the story, their threat was always containable—they were more thrilling to the male viewer than menacing to society at large.

A similar efflorescence of sexualized images followed the next publicly decried outbreak of female armed violence, in the late 1960s and well into the 1970s. Just as commentators in the 1920s and 1930s had linked women's violence and feminism, the emergence of a large number of armed women prompted *U.S. News & World Report* to ask in 1974: "From car thieves to murderers, female outlaws are in the headlines—raising the question: are they influenced by 'women's lib'?"<sup>26</sup> Yet as the women portrayed in the article—Patty Hearst, the Manson girls, and the radical bank robber Susan Saxe—began to fade from the headlines, a new genre of soft-core porn was born: posters and videos of women firing big guns, generally assault weapons. Even more clearly than in the detective magazines and comics of a previous era, these women are presented as a means of sexualizing weaponry. As the historian James William Gibson describes the videos, "Each [female fashion] model is introduced along with the weapon she will fire. A graph shows the gun's technical features on one side, with the model's height, weight, and breast, hip, and waist measurements on the other . . . the camera shows each model's body moving from recoil as she fires long bursts of 20 to 40 rounds. Models hold the weapons at their waists so that the camera can focus on their breasts."<sup>27</sup> Here, the armed woman is rendered unthreatening through objectification: as a mere accessory to her gun, she fires her weapon as instructed. There seems no danger that she would use her gun to reconfigure the social order.

While fewer iconic images of African American women with guns exist—and virtually no widely disseminated images before the late 1960s—they carry a different charge for viewers schooled in the semiotics of the armed





G. Gordon Liddy's popular "Stacked and Packed" calendar accessorizes a model's cleavage with assault weaponry, a hand grenade, and a crucifix. Photo by Mark Swisher.

Courtesy of G. Gordon Liddy Network Productions.

woman: these images generally suggest insurrection rather than criminality. Until the late nineteenth century, American gun laws, especially in the South, used racial ideology to limit ownership of firearms (the infamous *Dred Scott* decision was, among other things, a case about the right of African Americans to own guns).<sup>28</sup> Given the long history of racialized gun laws, it is not surprising that the Black Panthers, most notably, claimed gun ownership for African Americans as a necessary element of American identity.<sup>29</sup> However, male Panthers also saw weaponry as a symbol of successful black manhood, leaving women Panthers to disrupt the symbolism by using the gun as a means to gain power within the movement as well as in a larger political framework. Although Bonnie Parker was a popular icon for many white women on the left, black women revolution-

aries—as well as white radicals who were consciously trying to dismantle the basis of white supremacy—generally ignored earlier American models of armed womanhood and looked, instead, to third world exemplars such as the women of Vietnam and the Puerto Rican nationalists Lolita Lebron and Blanca Canales. Radical journals such as *Red Star* celebrated armed motherhood, invoking the example of the peasant women of Naxalbari, India, who joined in a 1967 uprising, fighting with children strapped to their backs.<sup>30</sup> These armed mothers did seem to echo, to some extent, American icons from an earlier era. Nevertheless, the image of the Prairie Madonna, widely represented at the turn of the twentieth century as a pioneer mother, rifle in one hand, baby on a hip, settling the West as part of a nation-building effort, was replaced here by the image of an armed mother intent on overthrowing the state.

The female guerrilla fighter may have been celebrated only on the left during the 1960s, but the combat-ready woman soldier has been a figure of controversy since the founding of the United States. Given the strong historical linkage between citizenship and the right and obligation to fight in wars, the female soldier has been a particularly contested figure in United States history. Both feminists and antifeminists in the years leading up to the Civil War saw military service as the ultimate outcome of the women's rights movement—and as the ultimate test of women's patriotism. Women's rights advocates of the 1840s pointed to actual Revolutionary War soldiers such as Deborah Sampson Gannett as proof that women were capable of martial valor and thus should gain access to the full privileges of citizenship, while readers snapped up cheap novels featuring rough, ready, and sometimes bawdy cross-dressing female soldiers.

Because the female soldier suggests a sexual ambiguity that conflicts with conventional expectations, the women who cross-dressed as soldiers in the Civil War and then published memoirs about their experiences had to portray themselves as almost ludicrously respectable and committed to upholding traditional gender roles if they were to succeed in reaching a wide audience. Belle Boyd, the most famous Confederate cross-dresser, claimed that she shot her first Union soldier because he used disrespectful language to her mother: the murder was framed as an attempt to protect her genteel status. Sarah Edmonds, author of a best-selling memoir about her service in the Union army, not only omitted mention of her years of cross-dressing before the onset of the war but also barely alluded to her soldierly disguise, burying her references to it beneath a welter of patriotic and Christian language. On the other hand, Loreta Velazquez, the Confederate author of *The*

*Woman in Battle*, described her military service primarily in terms of the pleasure it gave her to cross-dress and to outfight, outlove, and outswagger the male soldiers with whom she fought. Her memoir, as might be expected, was roundly denounced by commentators, who charged that she had besmirched southern womanhood.

Besides suggesting potentially troubling aspects of female sexuality, the idea of women in combat implicitly raised the possibility that, having fought on the battlefield, they would expect equal rights in other aspects of life. Although women no longer need to engage in cross-dressing to serve as soldiers, the relationship between armed patriotism and feminism continues to be contested to this day. Female soldiers were featured in a 2003 photo spread in the *NRA* magazine *Woman's Outlook*. However, in a caption accompanying the photo of Airman Rossana Ojeda—who is in uniform but wearing pink lipstick—Congresswoman Heather Wilson (R-N.M.) offers a nonfeminist rationale: “Women in combat is not about equity or equal opportunity. The point is National Security.”<sup>31</sup>

The tensions surrounding women's armed patriotism are nicely contained by the fictional female soldier who remains the most famous of all American armed women. According to the legend, which was late in developing, Molly Pitcher was a Revolutionary War soldier's wife who took over her husband's artillery position when he fell in battle. As historians have pointed out any number of times, Molly Pitcher was a composite of several Revolutionary-era women.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Linda Grant De Pauw writes, “The woman memorialized on posters, postage stamps, and a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike was not a real woman at all but a mythic figure constructed by artists and writers many years after the war.” Molly Pitcher had not been identified as anything more than “Captain Molly” until 1848, when Nathaniel Currier produced the first print of her; the first written mention of Molly Pitcher did not appear in a book until 1859.<sup>33</sup> But after 1876, when a Carlisle, Pennsylvania, man published a genealogy identifying a local woman as “the heroine of Monmouth,” the Molly Pitcher cult grew and grew. Molly Pitcher was never pictured as a cross-dresser; instead, she was portrayed as a properly feminine—though heroic—helpmate. Margaret Corbin and Mary McCauley, the women on whom the character of Molly Pitcher was purportedly based, were far from being models of feminine deportment: Corbin was known as “Dirty Kate” and “died a horrible death from the effects of a syphilitic disease” after the war, and McCauley was remembered as “a very masculine person . . . [who] could both drink whiskey and swear.”<sup>34</sup> However, the idealized Molly Pitcher—who grew more



Molly Pitcher, the fictional female soldier who remains the most famous of all American armed women, was always pictured as very feminine, never as a cross-dresser. In this engraving, a number of men stare at her exposed breast as she loads the cannon. Engraving by J. C. Armytage after Alonzo Chapel. National Archives and Records Administration.

perfect over the years—had none of the sexual ambiguity or unseemly independence of actual female Continental soldiers.

From Molly Pitcher to the present, a stunningly broad range of images and performances suggest the ways in which women's associations with guns have both shaped and reflected American notions of femininity and citizenship. In researching this book, I read early nineteenth-century autobiographical pamphlets, the proceedings of nineteenth-century women's rights conventions, best-selling novels of the Civil War era, gun advertisements from the 1890s to the present day, detective magazines of the 1930s, revolutionary feminist handgun manuals of the 1970s, and twenty-first-century magazines marketed to gun-owning women, as well as mainstream newspapers, magazines, and popular autobiographies. These sources offer

something that a public-policy approach does not, and that is access to the realm of American imaginings about armed women. Looking at a range of subjects, from female Civil War soldiers to gangsters such as Bonnie Parker, from Wild West stars to Patty Hearst, I explore the self-fashioning of these armed female icons and their cultural meaning as a way of looking closely at questions of gender, power, and citizenship.

Because armed women celebrities—and their interpreters—have often looked to a stock of iconic American images, such as the pioneer woman, in creating their characters, I am able to trace these images and their metamorphoses over two centuries. The authors of female soldier autobiographies in the early nineteenth century had a limited range of antecedents and images to which to refer and on which to model themselves: Joan of Arc, the Maid of Saragossa, and perhaps Revolutionary War heroine Deborah Sampson Gannett. However, the evolution of mass-mediated culture has given armed women today an enormous library of images from which to draw, and with which to negotiate their place in American life. And the icons of the past are often used by female gun owners and gun-industry supporters in different, and contradictory, ways. For instance, how is armed citizenship interpreted by the women who make elaborate period costumes, invent “frontier” names for themselves (under which they write imagined autobiographies), and spend their weekends at Wild West reenactment shooting events? What is the community they imagine themselves to be re-creating? Are they harking back to an individualistic model of citizenship? For them, are guns a means of escaping a contemporary version of female identity that seems uncongenial? As Dianne Gleason, a well-known Calamity Jane impersonator and shooting champion whom I met (in her buckskins) at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, told me when I asked her about her decision to embark on this role, “I ain’t no Doris Day.” For her, choosing an identity as Calamity Jane—branded in her time as criminal, drunk, and racially degenerate—was a means to personal freedom. Gleason’s first character, she told me, had been an imagined servant girl who had shot the employer who raped her. For Gleason, a Wild West identity seemed to be a way of asserting both female strength and rage. Yet to the writers for gun magazines, women’s shooting reenactments are primarily a way to make guns seem “fun” and historical—and, thus, an effective way to soften the opposition of gun-control advocates.

In the past decades, a vast scholarly literature on citizenship has emerged, with many writers focusing on the complex interplay between gender, race, and nationhood.<sup>35</sup> This book follows on this body of research

to examine what is perhaps the most charged symbol of American citizenship. The gun, after all, suggests the close connection between violence and citizenship, as well as the ongoing debate over who should have access to firearms, and how they should be used in relation to the state—to defend it, literally (in the case of soldiers) or figuratively (in the case of Wild West show women), to dismantle it (in the case of left- and right-wing revolutionary women) or to take over the functions of an ineffectual government (which the “Armed Citizen” column in the NRA magazine *American Rifleman* regularly details, recounting the successful attempts by homeowners to resist criminal break-ins). Citizenship, after all, entails more than the rights and obligations of full political participation in the nation. It also involves the chance to partake in the imagined life of the nation—to enter into the mythologies of nation making and nation building. Perhaps that is, most of all, what cowgirl reenactors are doing when they claim their place on the frontier during weekend shooting events.

Commentators on the right, most notably the NRA, have drawn a direct line between gun ownership and citizenship, claiming that any laws controlling gun ownership abrogate the rights of citizens. Commentators on the left, of course, interpret the Second Amendment in a different way. It is not necessary to take sides on this issue, however, in order to agree that Americans care deeply about guns, both as symbols and as actual objects. The NRA can regularly rally its 4.3 million members to defeat laws limiting the availability of assault weapons, laws limiting the ability of gun-show attendees to skip background checks, and laws limiting the purchase of multiple handguns at gun shows.<sup>36</sup> The extent of the NRA’s success has led to an absence of gun regulations and to widespread ownership—and, critics on the left argue, to levels of gun violence that are without parallel in other industrialized nations. In fact, the NRA’s rhetoric has aroused widespread revulsion only when it has most bluntly urged gun ownership for citizens worried about the encroachment of the state on their individual rights—such as when NRA executive vice president Wayne LaPierre referred in an infamous 1994 fund-raising letter to the “jack-booted government thugs [who] take away our constitutional rights, break in our doors, seize our guns, destroy our property, and even injure and kill us.”<sup>37</sup> Guns are everywhere in the United States; today, about 200 million of them are in private hands. According to recent estimates, between 35 and 45 percent of American households contain guns, and the number of firearms owned by individuals has been on the rise in the past few decades.<sup>38</sup> But even more important for the purposes of this book, gun mythologies abound.



"Figurines II" (1998). The contemporary artist Cynthia Consentino uses images of prepubescent girls with handguns and rifles to continue and transform the sentimental figurine tradition: the guns suggest both violence and self-protection.

Courtesy of Cynthia Consentino.

Because the range of cultural images of women and guns is so wide, I have been selective in my approach. Although this study is chronological, I have chosen to focus each chapter on a particular question. The first chapter looks most closely at the relationship between citizenship and the right—or obligation—to fight in wars. The second chapter examines the complex racial politics of armed womanhood, as seen in frontier expansion and the move away from militarism to spectacle. The portrait of armed women in coffeehouse ballads of the late eighteenth century and the best-selling novels and popular memoirs of the Civil War era morphed into the Wild West show performance, which offered its stars, most notably Annie Oakley, unprecedented opportunities for international celebrity. While armed women from the Revolutionary era through the Civil War were generally portrayed as white soldiers fighting alongside and against other white sol-

diers, the Wild West shows stressed racial and ethnic conflicts—most obviously, those between European settlers and Native Americans. The third chapter highlights the linkage between women's violence and women's sexuality and explores how the armed woman has triggered social debate about women's capacity for lawlessness. The fourth chapter concerns left-wing women who saw in the gun a means of redefining or—in the most extreme cases—dismantling the state. The fifth chapter looks at the ways women on the far right in the 1980s and 1990s made guns the basis for discussing the relationship between femininity, violence, and the nation and for redefining the idea of armed citizenship from a white supremacist perspective. The final chapter delves into twenty-first-century gun magazines for women and considers the complex and contradictory ways that the gun lobby today uses the image of the woman with a gun.

Our national fascination with guns shows no signs of diminishing, and neither does the passionate investment by those on the right and on the left in the place guns have held in our nation's history.<sup>39</sup> Although images and narratives of women and guns have shocked and titillated Americans since the nation's founding, they can provide us with far more than entertainment. The images of armed women that have appeared throughout American history have always been contradictory and difficult to contain; they have challenged the boundaries of gender definitions and the multiple meanings of the gun itself as an American icon.