

Gun Shows (rewrite)

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2,380 words

“Hold the guns!” a fat man pleads as he holds out a long black cowboy revolver in one hand and a nickel-plated semiautomatic in the other. “Touch ‘em! Touch ‘em!” A tattooed biker stops and fondles a Beretta 92FS. A bookish gentleman examines an elegantly carved 1862 Peabody buffalo rifle. And a leathery grandmother squints down the barrel of a Militech combat shotgun that looks like it was developed by Klingons.¹

It’s a beautiful spring Saturday here in California’s central valley, a perfect day to be out planting petunias or hiking along the American River. Instead, about 200 people are gathered in a dimly lit Quonset hut on the Yolo County Fairgrounds, buying, selling, and swapping enough firepower to unseat a Balkan government. Here at the TS Gun Show – a kind of traveling ballistics bazaar – the discriminating buyer can pick up everything from a chrome-plated two-shot derringer small enough to fit on a belt buckle to a nine-pound M-1 rifle made during World War II by International Harvester. Ammunition is stacked in gleaming pyramids on plywood-and-sawhorse tables and gunpowder is available by the gallon jug.² The crisp snapping sound of bolts being

¹ Author’s observations

² you confirm that by visiting the Alliant gunpowder website at <http://www.alliantpowder.com/>

worked and guns being dry-fired mingles with the shouts of old friends from the gun-show circuit greeting each other as they once again unpack their deadly wares.³

“We’re here now,” says Edwin Palero, a double-eared gun dealer from Antioch, California, “but the ultimate goal of the anti-gunners is to put us out of business.”⁴

Gun shows are associated with some of the most horrific tragedies of recent American history. The weapons Thomas Dillon used in five separate murders between 1989 and 1992 were all bought at gun shows.⁵ The Uzi carbine that Buford Furrow used to shoot up a Jewish day care center and kill a mailman last August reached him through a gun show.⁶ Weapons owned by Branch Dividian leader David Koresh and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh were traced back to gun shows.⁷ And three of the four guns used in the Columbine High School massacre were bought at a gun show.⁸ Eighteen-year-old Robyn Anderson, who bought two shotguns and a rifle at Denver’s Tanner Gun Show in Denver on behalf of 17-year-old Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris,⁹ later told the Denver Post she “wish(es) it had been more difficult. I wouldn’t have helped them buy the guns if I had faced a background check.”¹⁰

³ author’s observations

⁴ Edwin Palera, (925) 778-3006

⁵ Loopholes, Handgun Control Inc. <http://www.handguncontrol.org/moreloop.htm>

⁶ Loopholes, Handgun Control Inc. <http://www.handguncontrol.org/moreloop.htm>

⁷ interview with Julie Leftwich on March 24, 2000, 415-433-2062 ext. 306

⁸ Tanner Gun Show Returns; Only the Name’s Changed, by David Olinger, Denver Post, June 6, 1999 <http://www.denverpost.com/news/shot0606a.htm>

⁹ Tanner Gun Show Returns; Only the Name’s Changed, by David Olinger, Denver Post, June 6, 1999, <http://www.denverpost.com/news/shot0606a.htm>

¹⁰ Columbine Gun Buyer Feared Check, by Mike Soraghan, January 27, 2000, <http://www.denverpost.com/news/leg/leg0127a.htm>

Small wonder, then, that the country seems ready to rein in gun shows. The promoters of this one have already been run out of two California counties, another California gun show this weekend was shut down by local ordinance, and more counties in the state are weighing legal options for booting out these festive firepower swapmeets.¹¹ Nationally, President Clinton and his congressional allies are trying to close what they call “the gun show loophole” that lets thousands of guns change hands without background checks, registration, or any record-keeping at all.¹² The heat is on.

Gun shows as arms bazaars are a relatively recent phenomenon. The federal gun law passed after Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were shot dead in 1968 didn't ban private gun sales between individuals, but did require anyone “engaged in the business” of selling guns to have a federal license and only sell guns in a proper store. Dealers could display guns at gun shows, but nobody was allowed to sell them there. In 1986, two Republican senators – both recipients of the National Rifle Association's Legion of Honor – sponsored a law to allow gun dealers to sell guns at gun shows, and made it easier for people to buy and sell guns without the regulations imposed on those “engaged in the business.” The law passed and President Reagan signed it.¹³

Suddenly, gun shows became places where huge numbers of guns could change hands.¹⁴ While licensed dealers have to behave at gun shows just as they do in their stores

¹¹ Interviews with Juliet Leftwich, 415-433-2062 ext. 306, interview with Sallie Nordyke, 530-934-7230

¹² Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 1

¹³ The Enforcement Fable, pages 6 & 7

¹⁴ The Enforcement Fable, pages 6 & 7

– running background checks before handing over the gun¹⁵ – ordinary folks can in most places can sell large numbers of firearms at a gun show with no restrictions at all.¹⁶ They don't even have to rent a table, but can merely wander the aisles or hang around in the parking lot, offering whatever to whomever, no questions asked. The attraction is obvious, both to law-abiding citizens who don't want to be bothered with paperwork and to the types of people who wouldn't be able to buy a gun the regular way. The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms looked at 314 of its recent cases in which at least one of the guns came from a gun show, and found that almost half the sales involved felons – who are supposed to be prohibited from buying guns.¹⁷ The problem, BATF concludes, is that “under current law. . . the seller has no idea and is under no obligation to find out whether he or she is selling a firearm to a felon or other prohibited person.”¹⁸ BATF found that more than a third of the guns in their study were later used in crimes.¹⁹

Gun control advocates call gun shows “Tupperware parties for criminals”²⁰ and like Tupperware parties, gun shows are more than places to exchange merchandise. They are cultural events, and the most obvious feature of gun culture is an ardent belief that guns equal freedom. “If the populace doesn't have the means to coerce the government,

¹⁵ Interviews with Juliet Leftwich, 415-433-2062 ext. 306; Brian Morton, 202-898-0792; Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 1

¹⁶ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 1

¹⁷ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 6.

¹⁸ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 1.

¹⁹ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 6.

²⁰ Gun Shows in America: Tupperware Parties for Criminals, Violence Policy Center, <http://www.vpc.org/studies/tupstudy.htm>

then you really don't have any rights," says John Ramming, a friendly, energetic man who with his ample belly and baby cheeks could be played in a movie by John Goodman.²¹

Gun culture lives by the domino theory; if the "right" to buy guns without background checks is lost today, the right to own a 10-shot Glock²² will be lost tomorrow, the right to own hunting rifles the day after that, and so on into unarmed oblivion.

Rights, though, are only one aspect of gun culture; gun shows are conclaves for a segment of society that NRA president Charlton Heston defined this way in a 1997 speech to the conservative Free Congress Foundation: "God-fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian, middle-class, Protestant. . . admitted heterosexual, gun-owning. . . NRA-card-carrying. . . male working stiff."²³

This us-against-them resentment -- "mainstream America," as Heston put it, versus everybody who isn't white, male, straight, and piously Protestant -- palpably seethes at guns shows. Those in Denver and Montana, for example, have in recent years offered white supremacist literature, rifle targets emblazoned with cartoon African-Americans and the likeness of Hillary Clinton, and copies of the infamous racist fantasy, The Turner Diaries, of Timothy McVeigh was a fan.²⁴ Gun shows tend to attract

²¹ John Ramming can be reached at (530) 661-3677

²² USA Magazines Inc. Glock Pistols website <http://www.usa-magazines.com/glock.html>

²³ Charlton Heston's speech to the Free Congress Foundation on December 20, 1997, downloaded from the Free Congress Foundation's website, <http://www.freecongress.org/search/>

²⁴ Author's observations, having been to many gun shows in Montana and Denver. As for McVeigh being a fan of The Turner Diaries, see Q&A Inside the Alliance by the Southern Poverty Law Center, <http://www.splcenter.org/intelligenceproject/ip-index.html>. This is only one of many sources of this information.

survivalists stocking up on ammunition and C-rations, militia types in camo fatigues, and scowling skinheads -- as well as harmless hunters, target-shooters, and collectors.²⁵

Here in California, the atmosphere is a bit more tame than in Montana or Colorado. The crowd looks about divided between Central Valley farmers and Sacramento desk jockeys. While in Montana it was common to see men swapping submachineguns and assault rifles in the parking lot, here they can't do that; huge state-mandated placards warn against them.²⁶

But even here, 90 minutes from San Francisco, a table offers bumper stickers that read: "Welcome to America, Speak English or Get the Hell Out," and a picture of robed Ku Klux Klansmen with the caption, "The Original Boys in the Hood." Another table sells sniper autobiographies, manuals on building silencers, and a book called Can You Survive? Guidelines for Resistance to Tyranny for You and Your Family, with a blood-dripping Commie sickle slicing through the United States.

The final element of gun culture is a sensual side to guns that gun activists don't talk much about. "Touch the guns," the fat man urges, so let's. Pick up, say, this Smith & Wesson model 4566TSW .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol.²⁷ It's a beautifully made weapon that fills the hand with a meaty grip. Its stainless-steel finish glows with understated, elegant power. Pull back the slide and it makes a satisfyingly cinematic slick-click. It's an attractive thing to hold the way a Leica camera is: heavy, solid, precise, and finely machined.

²⁵ Author's observations, having been to many gun shows in Montana and Denver

²⁶ Author's observations

²⁷ Smith and Wesson (description of gun) http://data.smith-wesson.com/sport/results_output.cfm

Lots of gun-show shoppers also are hobby-hardware types who groove on weaponry the way others cherish stereo equipment or computers. Guns offer enough permutations of features and design to keep aficionados reading, writing, and arguing about them indefinitely. And guns are associated with some of the most colorful moments of history, which brings in a large body of enthusiasts like the black-powder-musket folks you see at Civil War re-enactments or the elderly gent here with the Peabody buffalo gun.

Unlike a Leica, an iMac or, say, antebellum chandeliers, of course, the items at this show are also lethal, and that packs its own morbid fascination. It's been argued that after the wheel and the printing press, the gun is the most significant invention in history because it upsets the Darwinian odds²⁸ – the weakest can annihilate the fittest by gently curling the index finger around a sliver of metal. Strap on a gun, and the meek shall inherit the earth.²⁹ Heft this Smith & Wesson, and you can sense the devolutionary power it imparts.

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Gun shows are moneymakers. Since 1986, about 175 companies and individuals have gone into the gun-show business, staging more than 4,400 shows a year. An average 2,500 to 5,000 people show up for each one, paying from \$5 to \$50 to get in.³⁰ The promoters also collect from the dealers who rent tables, and from food concessionaires.

²⁸ I read this in book of short stories called “13 Ways to Kill a Man” when I was a kid. I’ve looked for the book online and off, and cannot find it.

²⁹ Matthew 5:5

³⁰ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, page 4

Sallie Nordyke, the salty 55-year-old co-owner of TS Gun Shows, the promoter of this one, won't say how much money she takes in during a typical show, but she already has sixteen such shows scheduled this year at fairgrounds all over the state.³¹ And she's only one of several gun-show promoters operating in California.

Sallie Nordyke's show, with about 50 tables, is among the smaller ones in the country. The biggest – the Great Western – fields 5,500 tables³² and will be held twice this year in the Las Vegas Convention Center. Venues range from the conference rooms of swank hotels, as in Denver, to the field houses of college campuses, as in Missoula, Montana.³³ Here in Woodland, the gun show is sharing the Yolo County Fairgrounds with the Society for Creative Anachronism, a national organization of enthusiasts of the Middle Ages, who have gathered in huge numbers to dress in flowing gowns and suits of armor, whack each other with broadswords, play lutes, and bow elaborately to one another in passing. The medievalists greatly outnumber the gun freaks at the fairgrounds this weekend; their gaily painted tents surround the field house and make the gun show feel like it's under siege from the Hohenstaufens.

The gun show is lucky to be here at all. Santa Clara County last year banned the sale of guns on county property, and though a federal court ruled that it was a violation of free speech, the county has filed an appeal. Last fall, Los Angeles County told the Great Western it couldn't use the fairgrounds in Pomona anymore,³⁴ after a state-run sting

³¹ TS Gun Show 2000 Schedule

³² interview with Rick Smith on March 22, 2000, 916-429-2348

³³ author's observations

³⁴ interview with Julie Leftwich on March 24, 2000, 415-433-2062 ext. 306

operation turned up huge numbers of gun violations at its spring show.³⁵ The owners of the Great Western Show sued in federal court on the grounds that state law, which allows gun shows, supercedes county law. The Great Western won that one, too, but decided to hold its future shows in the gun-friendly climate of Las Vegas anyway.³⁶ Then Alameda and Sonoma Counties flat banned the possession of guns on county property, which includes their fairgrounds.³⁷ Legal Community Against Violence, a foundation-funded lawyers' group that helps communities draft gun-control laws, says several more California counties plan similar moves.³⁸

President Clinton wants the House of Representatives to okay a bill – already approved by the Senate – that would, among other things, require all gun-show sales to pass through a licensed dealer who would have to conduct the normal background checks.³⁹ Congressional Republicans object to aspects of the bill, and have stalled the bill in a conference committee since August. Still, even they say they agree in principle that anything-goes gun shows are a bad idea, and the days of freewheeling gun bazaars appear to be numbered.⁴⁰ “In all candor,” Clinton said recently, “I think that taking a little time and a little inconvenience to save a lot of lives is a good deal for America.”⁴¹

³⁵ interview with Julie Leftwich on March 24, 2000, 415-433-2062 ext. 306. Also, Addressing Gun Violence Through Local Ordinances, 1999 Supplement, Legal Community Against Violence, page 21.

³⁶ Rick Smith, owner of the Code of the West Gun Show and board member of the loose federation of gun-show promoters. He can be reached at 916-429-2348

³⁷ interview with Julie Leftwich on March 24, 2000, 415-433-2062 ext. 306

³⁸ interview with Julie Leftwich on March 24, 2000, 415-433-2062 ext. 306

³⁹ Comparison of Senate and House Gun Show Proposals, provided by Jim Messina in Rep. Carolyn McCarthy's office, (202) 225-5516

⁴⁰ those who can confirm this characterization of the gun-show-loophole debate are: Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY) at (202) 225-5516; her chief of staff, Jim Messina, at (202) 225-5516; Sam Stratman, press secretary to Henry Hyde, chairman of the house crime subcommittee (w)202-225-2481; Deanne Benos of the White House Domestic Policy Council, 202-456-5568; Dan Bryant, Chief Counsel,

California already regulates gun shows much as Clinton would have the feds regulate them everywhere. Weapons purchased at California gun shows must be picked up at a licensed store after a ten-day waiting period and background check on the buyer.⁴² (Maryland requires background checks on all handgun and assault-rifle gun-show sales, too, but lets rifles and shotguns be sold and traded without restriction.)⁴³ The dealers at this gun show say they operate quite comfortably under California's regulations.⁴⁴

"We can live with these rules," says promoter Sallie Nordyke. "The question is whether we can stop it at this point." Nordyke sighs, as though she's made the speech a million times to a growing army of simpletons. She theatrically counts off on her fingers: "Now it's background checks; next is licenses, photo IDs, whatnot, coming in your house for your serial numbers. . . ." ⁴⁵ As she sees it, gun rights are once again on the slippery slope.

Just as California has led the way in surf tunes, emissions controls, and bottled water, the state may now be showing the way back from the white-guy anger that characterized the nineties and which finds open expression at guns shows. There are still lots of guns for sale here in Woodland, and a whiff of the racist resentment you find elsewhere, but with background checks and a ten-day wait, no felon who just had a fight with his wife can leave this bazaar newly armed. The sun is setting on the Clinton

Subcommittee on Crime (works for Hyde & McCollum), 202-225-3926. Also, Comparison of Senate and House Gun Show Proposals

⁴¹ Remarks By The President At Rally For Gun Legislation, March 15, 2000

<http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/uri-res/I2R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/2000/3/16/7.text.1>

⁴² Interviews with Juliet Leftwich, 415-433-2062 ext. 306

⁴³ Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces, Department of the Treasury, Department of Justice, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, January 1999, Exhibit 2

⁴⁴ two dealers I spoke with are Edwin Palero at 925-778-3006, and David Gwinner at 530-677-9473

presidency, and it may, too, be setting on one of the resentful political communities that have so loved to hate him.

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⁴⁵ Interview with Sallie Nordyke on March 25, 2000, 530-934-7230