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Gun Violence in America: The Struggle for Control

Alexander DeConde
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The author could have just as accurately subtitled this dismaying chronicle of bloodletting and sophistry “The Failure to Control.” Although foes of the unlimited arming of private citizens have won occasional victories in the U.S., these triumphs have been so few and far between and so minor in scope as to be inconsequential.

After a brief look at the development and social impact of firearms in early Europe, the author leads us through four centuries of America’s stormy relationship with guns. He quickly dismantles the myth that private ownership of guns has always been a national characteristic. Even after the Constitution (with its enigmatic Second Amendment) was ratified, gun ownership was still not widespread. Huge segments of the population, notably blacks and Indians, were routinely denied the right to bear arms. Moreover, guns of that era tended to be expensive and unreliable.

Besides these practical impediments, there was the recurring political question of who among those theoretically entitled to have guns should be allowed or encouraged to. Would the emerging young nation be best served by a well-trained and standing army or by loosely organized groups of citizen soldiers? Some of the first advocates of gun control, DeConde notes, were those appalled by the carnage wrought by the practice of dueling in the early 1800s.

The burden of DeConde’s narrative concerns the struggle between the National Rifle Association-formed in New York in 1871-and those who believe that public safety demands that gun availability be curbed. A former history professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, DeConde illustrates that Congress has consistently lacked the will to stand up against gun interests. He does credit Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and especially Bill Clinton with offering the NRA significant resistance.

While gun opponents continue to be well organized and funded, and courts and the populace remain congenial to the concept of limitation, prospects for gun control in America appear dim. Neither the assassination of presidents nor the slaughter of children have yet been sufficient to turn the tide.

“Blame for the failure to contain gun violence cannot be placed solely on the NRA,” DeConde concludes. “That failure derives also from a history of associating gun keeping with personal protection, anachronistic rural values in one of the world’s most urbanized nations, impractical militia theory, states’ rights, and myth.”
EDWARD MORRIS (September / October 2001)

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