

# The Political Culture of Contemporary American Liberalism and Firearms Prohibition:

## An Exploratory Inquiry

**By Roy T. Wortman**

*Why has modern “liberalism” developed such an intolerant and un-liberal view about firearms possession? In this essay, Roy Wortman suggests that contemporary liberalism has become profoundly distrustful of “the people” and therefore no longer follows in the tradition of liberalism associated with Franklin Roosevelt. Roy Wortman is a Professor of History at Kenyon College.*

Liberalism was born in the minds of those convinced that liberty is not only mine, belonging to those who agree with me, but also “theirs,” belonging to those who do not agree with me. Those holding such convictions are few. They became many. Now they are not so many. Liberalism acquired significance when dissent--heresy, deviation, and opposition--became legitimate, when “I” and “they” were on the same level, when the major political problem was no longer how to achieve any specific goal, but rather how to establish an institutional structure enabling people equal but different, and pursuing different goals, to coexist peacefully.

Massimo Salvadori, *The Liberal Heresy* (1977)

Contemporary American liberalism, shaped in large part by Progressive Era and New Deal foundations, contained, in the late twentieth century, contradictions within a tension: it became libertarian on some issues, such as acceptance and tolerance of lifestyles, gender equality, and personal choice in matters of reproductive rights, and communitarian on other issues, such as defining membership in protected groups as requisites for affirmative action, and on reliance on police power and protection rather than on individual self-sufficiency in matters of self-defense. This tension between libertarian and communitarian goals can be seen not only in liberalism, but in conservatism. Indeed, it would be simplistic to designate a preponderance in either in the matter of possession of firearms, however, this difference is clear. In contemporary conservatism the libertarian appreciation of individualism, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance favors the possession of firearms. In contemporary liberalism, on the other hand, the idea of community harmony and reliance on police power for protection mandate, rather than individual self-reliance, greater state power and regulation. Crucial to understanding the tension between these two competing visions is a broader question: to what extent does the debate over civilian possession of arms, and especially handguns, stem from practical arguments of policy, and to what extent does the debate stem from deeply held ideological views that transcend practical considerations of self-defense?

The theoretical base of contemporary liberalism’s concern for certain kinds of rights as opposed to others stems from an emphasis on egalitarianism rather than from the more classical liberal emphasis on individualism. As an example, the contemporary egalitarian impulse in liberalism sees a need for past historical inequities to be righted, a perspective evidenced in liberalism’s affirmative action. On the other hand, victimization by criminals is not regarded as a past injustice to be corrected by social policy which could encourage lawful self-defense through the prudent and reasonable use of handguns in the hands of responsible and trained civilians. Central to the tension between contemporary liberalism and conservatism is the Rousseauian strand in contemporary liberalism. It emphasizes communal compassion and anti-violence over individual initiative and action in the name of self-defense. In opposition to the historic Republican visions of liberalism which distrusted the power of the state, the Rousseauian strand in liberalism trusted state power as the expression of the will of the people.<sup>1</sup>

In large part, the twentieth century liberal notion, very much consonant with Rousseau’s, is that the collective entity represented by the state is superior to individual self-sufficiency in self-protection.

Certainly, contemporary liberalism is concerned about excessive police power of the state, as witness the current stands of the American Civil Liberties Union. Yet in as much as it is critical of excessive abuse of police power, it equally worries over individual possession of firearms as anarchic, archaic, and anti-communitarian relic of a past era. Self-preservation in contemporary liberalism shifted to a public-spirited moral sphere in which the theme of community transcended the private wills of anomic individuals. The moralism of contemporary liberalism rests on public-spirited interests which claim peacefulness and order for the broader community. Thus, the vision of the National Rifle Association, for example, is seen as a narrowly self-interested and amoral interest group. The element of community in contemporary liberalism is regarded as moral high ground; it continually looks down on the idea of individual possession of arms as a relic of a social Darwinian past or as an antique sentiment of archaic American colonial republicanism. Central to this view in the 1960s was a new group of intellectual “elites” and critics, to use Christopher Lasch’s term,<sup>2</sup> who, through their environmentalist, anti-violence, and anti-gun positions rejected the very foundation of New Deal liberalism’s constituency Blue-collar and rural voters. From the 1930s, they affirmed the intervention of the state in political and social affairs, but from the late 1960s onward were no longer viewed as a necessary component in the *moral* sphere claimed by other constituencies. Since the mid-1960s, this new elite could challenge deeply rooted social ills not fully repaired by the earlier liberalism of the New Deal; the Robert McNamara social science approach of input of problems and output of solutions to those problems became a temporary panacea for social as well as military issues.

Excluding criticism of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the very idea of state power itself was not challenged by liberals of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the classical, or republican liberalism of the Founders of the American Republic, which asserted that an armed populace existed as a check on arbitrary and capricious acts of a strong central government was viewed as a Baroque, outmoded notion from another era, a vestige of an older era applicable to the days of musket-toting, when arms were in the hands of the general population. “A people numerous and armed”<sup>3</sup> remains unacceptable to contemporary liberals and communitarians with rare exceptions.

The position of contemporary liberalism on handguns since the 1960s has been one of developing social and public policy hostile to lawful civilian possession and use of handguns. A “we know what’s good for the public” refrain echoes in the debate over public policy since the 1960s, a refrain which, despite empathy for disenfranchised and marginal groups such as persons of color and gays and lesbians, holds some of the very groups which helped install the New Deal — rural and blue-collar — in contempt. In one sense the division is class-ridden, with newer liberal elites on one side of the debate over firearms possession, and a populist — and less affluent — America on the other.

The driving force for this dichotomy in the United States today is an increasingly polarized position on certain issues such as firearms prohibition, abortion, and affirmative action which define principle and morality as a means of identification for respective interest group constituencies. Where contemporary American conservatives view themselves as tough-minded yet decent in asserting “traditional” values, including self-defense, the contemporary liberal image is that of caring, sharing, and nurturing, in short, the vision of public compassion. Affirmative action is a prime example where people who in the 1960s were deeply committed to equality of opportunity now support racial quotas or hiring by race and ethnicity. The reasons for this contradiction is contemporary liberalism’s belief, in part, that to assert affirmative action is to show that one cares, that one is both good and compassionate. The self-image of sharing and caring motivates contemporary liberalism’s proponents to assert that people may do what they want so long as their actions do not hurt others. Firearms and self-protection simply do not fit this mold, and from this stemmed the exclusion of concern for the values of many small town, rural, and working class people, especially Southerners, who believe in the culture and utility of self defense, firearms, and hunting. Contemporary liberalism’s base of support stems chiefly from urban and suburban areas where neither the culture of hunting nor of gun ownership is clearly understood, not to mention the civil libertarian aspect of gun ownership. What many liberals perceive of as the culture of the gun is, in urban actuality, the culture of criminality, and thus liberal policy seeks to place limitations on

firearms ownership. It is a view which derived from an urban perspective of criminality rather than from the more realistic assessment of lawful possession of arms for either sport or self-defense.

Crucial to the debate over handguns is the way in which politics in the United States is painted in broad, sweeping strokes. Firearms offer an opening wedge for a liberal perspective on prohibition through cultural stereotyping. Here the very existence of the firearm is connected to criminality rather than to trained, responsible, and law-abiding people.

The argument for possession of handguns, especially for self-defense, is an argument that finally forces contemporary liberals to admit that the police cannot protect the citizenry. Liberalism, in order to maintain its socially progressive outlook, denies this argument, maintaining, instead, that an admission that the police cannot protect is an admission that the world is fraught with Hobbesian selfishness, Augustinian sin, or just plain human “cussedness.” Extending this position, contemporary liberals argue that one gives up his or her right to punish others through retribution and self-defense because civil society is a social contract which mandates that the state be charged with the duty of protection. Yet in opposition to contemporary liberal arguments, John Locke, the thinker who contributed the broad theoretical foundations to Western liberalism, noted that

...the law, which was made for my preservation, where it cannot interpose to secure my life from present force, which, if lost, is capable of no reparation, permits me my own defense and the right of war, a liberty to kill the aggressor, because the aggressor allows not time to appeal to our common judge, nor the decision of the law, for remedy where the mischief may be irreparable. [Force] without right upon a ... person makes a state of war both where is and is not a common judge.<sup>4</sup>

As American liberals glorify self-expression in lifestyles, in freedom of speech and in artistic creativity, they cannot admit that their world is less safe. The argument for the use of firearms for self-protection is an argument which admits to a less safe world and a violation of the social contract between governed and governor. Indeed, to argue for individual possession of firearms for self-protection is to argue that collectively, Americans have retreated back to something akin to the Hobbesian state of nature.

In theory the liberal state repudiated the age-old view of a relationship between the dominator, the government, and the dominated, the governed. Since the American Revolution the idea of the liberal state embraced the concept of popular sovereignty which claimed to identify the needs and the “will of the people” with the state itself; no one faction or interest group, to use the Madisonian nomenclature, could be entrusted with the aggregation of power. In the early American historical experience the concept of popular sovereignty embraced a people at arms for defense of self and commonwealth. These traditions, coupled with the idea of civic obligation of a citizenry under arms in defense of colony and state merged when tradition and custom became law. Yet in spite of this deeply rooted heritage in American political culture, a heritage that highlights self-protection at the individual and collective levels, the contradiction in contemporary liberalism is, given its political culture in the last four decades of the twentieth century, eminently understandable. Liberalism’s creed in the United States initially understood both the sanctity of the individual and his or her moral imperative to defense. Ironically, the individual’s right to self-defense and possession of arms became a casualty of those intellectual elites who speak to the glories of “community.” If, as Reinhold Niebuhr observed, irony is part of the heart and fabric of American history,<sup>5</sup> the understandable yet ironic paradox of the twentieth century is that at least for issues of individual self-defense and possession of arms, American conservatives now uphold what initially was part of the republican libertarian and classical liberal tradition.

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau's Political Writings*, tr. Julia Conaway Bandanella. Ed. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).
2. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).
3. John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
4. John Locke's 1690 analysis of self-defense is in "Of the State and War," in *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Thomas P. Peardon (Indianapolis: Bobbs - Merrill, 1952), p. 13.
5. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952). Niebuhr tended toward social and political progressive views but asserted a theologically conservative world view.