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DON'T BLAME THE NRA

*America's gun culture exacts a toll,
but it's only a small part of the problem*

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

In 1978 I was testifying in a Phoenix Federal courtroom against a man who repeatedly bought dozens of cheap, new handguns at gun stores and took them to gun shows, where he posed as a "collector" and, in a practice that remains widespread, sold them to all comers, no paperwork, ID or record check required. Many of his guns quickly wound up being used in crimes.

As an ATF agent I was used to investigating such cases, but what surprised me in this instance was the presence in the spectator section of an NRA attorney who flew in specifically for the trial. In time the jury found the defendant guilty of dealing guns without a license and the lawyer disappeared. But his shadow haunted me throughout my career.

Now that our land has suffered the effects of a string of twisted personalities -- Presidential assassin and would-be assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and John Hinckley, Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, Jewish Community Center shooter Buford Furrow, Columbine High School killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Virginia Tech killer Seung-hui Cho, and, most recently, the murderously self-pitying [Jiverly Wong](#) and [Richard Poplawski](#) -- one might be tempted to conclude that a straight line leads from the lawyer to the madmen.

Most of my work (I retired in 1998, after working in Arizona, Montana and Los Angeles) involved the investigation of illegal gun sales, by licensed dealers selling them out the back door, and by unlicensed peddlers selling them on the street and at gun shows. While spending countless hours in and around gun stores, gun shows and the cultural backwaters of this other America I came into intimate contact with what is commonly called -- though I think too simply -- the gun subculture.

Yes, those whom I met, sometimes undercover, other times not, liked guns -- a lot. Like me, most were from the working class. Where we differed was in outlook. As an immigrant from troubled Argentina, whose parents barely squeaked through the Holocaust, I was delighted to be in the land of opportunity. Yet the last thing these men (and a few women, as well) manifested was hope. Their invariant rallying cry -- that the

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unworthy got the benefits, while the hard-working got the shaft -- placed them in the lunatic extremes of the far right. It also reflected a sense of worthlessness that made more than a few dangerous and many others candidates for a good shrink.

No -- their concerns weren't fundamentally about guns. But when talking about guns, holding guns, or, best of all, firing guns, their eyes lit up and their burdens visibly lifted. Yes, it's pop psychology, but in my mind nonetheless true: many of these gun aficionados, both the outwardly law-abiding and the unabashedly criminal, found in their toys a sense of power and autonomy that was otherwise sadly lacking.

Naturally, those who got famous for the worst of reasons are so beyond the pale that no one, not even an NRA lawyer, would dare stand in their defense. But their twisted justifications, like the sniveling [manifesto](#) that Jiverly Wong used as his excuse for the Binghamton massacre, seem much more a difference in degree than in kind from the pathologies that suffuse much of America's gun culture. Every so often another disturbed gun fanatic will come out, pistols, rifles and shotguns blazing, and a handful of innocents will die. Then after a respectful but pitifully brief interval we'll shrug our shoulders and turn our attention elsewhere.

Still, even neutralizing every murderous extremist would have little effect. We've become so accustomed to gun violence that we seldom think about the gang members, "ordinary" criminals and otherwise law-abiding heads of household who commit countless mini-massacres year-in and year-out with weapons whose unthinkable lethality would have horrified the framers of the Second Amendment.

That's what's really insane.