

Politics

6

Political activities at gun shows represent views that start at the conservative and move to the right from there. As with the prior chapter, this will be a brief introduction to subjects that could usefully be explored by others.

Candidates for public office see gun shows as a way to connect with a motivated constituency. As one observer described it, “There are people who vote guns and only guns, and they’re Republicans. These are the people you see at the polls.”¹

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Fred Thompson campaigned at shows around the South, describing one such trip as “a day in paradise.”² When Thompson’s campaign obtained exclusive rights to advertise at promoter Victor Bean’s gun shows in South Florida, the deal was described as “huge” and “a conservative bull’s eye.”¹ Bean also planned to use his email list of “70,000 politically active gun owners” on Thompson’s behalf. Charlie Crist had scored the same coup during his successful campaign for Florida’s governorship in 2006. At his gun show booth that year, one could both register to vote and join the National Rifle Association.

Issue-oriented politics is always present, whether an election is in the offing or not. Most of the time, this activity—except for the constant presence of the NRA—does not deal primarily with guns. Perhaps, in this setting, organized advocacy on gun issues seems superfluous. Instead, Cold War leftovers like the John Birch Society are joined by organizations that promote



John Birch Society recruiting booth, Denver, Colorado.

GREAT FOR URBAN HUNTING

—Sign posted by a licensed retailer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on a Mossberg Model 500 shotgun with a pistol grip. Individual shells were labeled **URBAN GREETING CARDS** and were available in **00 BUCKWHEAT SHOT**. A Savage rifle with a sighting scope was labeled **GREAT FOR GETTO [sic] CRUISERS**.

The high volume of purchases and stockpiling of weapons and ammunition by rightwing extremists in anticipation of restrictions and bans in some parts of the country continue to be a primary concern to law enforcement...DHS/I&A is concerned that rightwing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to boost their violent capabilities.

—Department of Homeland Security's Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2009.³

Gun shows provide a natural recruiting environment. Many more are being held now than ever before, and many more people are attending them.

—William Pierce, founder and leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, February, 1994.⁴

closing the borders, not paying taxes, and defending traditional Christianity.

Perhaps the most disturbing political activity at gun shows, partly because of its content and partly because of its high prevalence, concerns identity politics. Support for the ideas behind the Confederacy goes well beyond nostalgia and regional pride to calls for continuing a war of secession and to overt racism. Neo-Confederacy groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans rent table space and recruit new members. Ku Klux Klan merchandise was observed in Tampa, Florida; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and Tucson, Arizona. The Militia of Montana recruits at gun shows in Spokane, Washington.

The National Association of Arms Shows and some individual promoters have policies forbidding activities and merchandise that promote Nazism and related hate-based movements. Most vendors of Nazi materials are just selling war memorabilia, but some are clearly proselytizing. Two young men staffed a booth for the neo-Nazi National Alliance at a Crossroads of the West show in Denver, Colorado. (This was in 2003, and the organization did not appear to be present at later Denver shows.) The White People's Party, a political party related to the National Alliance, had a noisy recruiting table outside the entrance to a show in Las Vegas, Nevada. An unlicensed gun vendor in Dallas displayed materials from the South African National Socialist Party. Other shows have very little of this activity, and at least one large event, in Orlando, Florida, appeared to have none at all.

Copies of *The Turner Diaries* are everywhere. This book, by National Alliance founder William Pierce, is believed to have provided the blueprint for Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on April 19, 1995—the day before Adolf Hitler's 100th birthday. Pierce saw gun shows as an ideal place for recruiting efforts.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Conservative political candidates recognize the value of gun shows in providing a high concentration of likely and motivated voters (page 236). During the 2008 campaign, Ron Paul stood out in this regard; his enthusiastic volunteers were at shows across the country. A month after the 2008 general elections, specialty vendors offered merchandise attacking President-elect Obama (page 237).

Voter registration booths are common during election years; they tend to have signs saying “Register Republican Here.” The Republican Party and other conservative political parties, along with a smattering of issue-oriented organizations, use gun shows to recruit and disseminate their messages (page 238). The National Rifle Association has a display at most large shows (page 239). Often they are located just outside the entrance and pay the show entry fee for anyone who stops to join the organization. Other organizations well known to gun activists, such as the Gun Owners of America, the Second Amendment Foundation, and the Citizens’ Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, have surprisingly little presence.

During the years in which this study was conducted, issue politics revolved primarily around immigration (page 240). Calls to seal the borders are not limited to shows in border states. Militant Christianity is also prevalent (page 241), making what seems to be a call to arms for a renewed war of intolerance.

Symbols of the Confederacy are ubiquitous. In some cases (pages 242-243) these might, in a stretch, be interpreted as symbols of regional and historical pride or simply as post-adolescent bravado. But in others (page 244), the clear message is that while the Union might now have the upper hand, the American Civil War is not yet finished. Overt race hatred (page 245) is a near neighbor to such sentiments.

Gun show promoters sometimes have policies against activities that glorify Nazism at their shows, but it happens nonetheless (pages 246-247). On the one hand, it is clear that some vendors of Nazi memorabilia are interested in the history of the movement; their collections of Allied Forces and Japanese artifacts lie right alongside. In other cases the Nazi materials are new and are sold alongside neo-Confederacy items.

Among the white supremacy movement’s leading texts is *The Turner Diaries*, by National Alliance founder William Pierce (page 248). Other books by Pierce and fellow Nazi sympathizers, and by Hitler himself, can be found (page 249) next to well known pro-gun texts and other right-wing literature.

Dieter Bueschgen, a regular vendor at shows in Arizona (page 250), has been identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “a grandfather figure to neo-Nazi skinheads” who is sought out by white supremacists from all over the country.⁵ His most active presence has been at shows organized by Crossroads Gun Shows in Phoenix, where he was seen as recently as

Renew your membership or join now and we’ll buy your ticket.

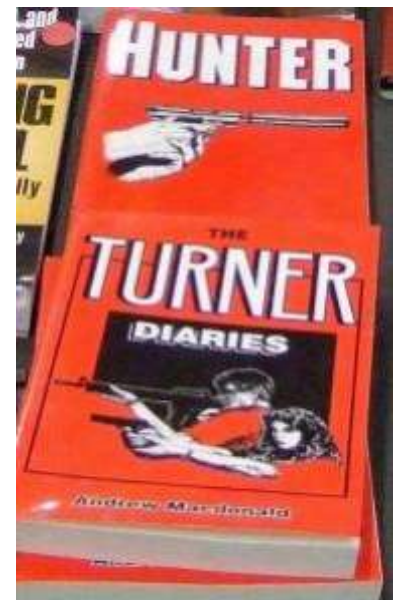
—Staffer at an NRA booth, Richmond, Virginia.

DEMOCRATS ARE DEFEATIST COWARDS

—On dozens of bumper stickers for sale, Puyallup, Washington.

SOME PEOPLE ARE ALIVE ONLY BECAUSE IT’S ILLEGAL TO KILL THEM

—T-shirt worn by a vendor of neo-Nazi and neo-Confederacy merchandise, Las Vegas, Nevada.



The Turner Diaries and Hunter, both by William Pierce, Tucson, Arizona.



Flags for sale, San Jose, California.

December 2008, despite Crossroads' prohibition on pro-Nazi activities.

Given an atmosphere of tolerance for white supremacist activities, it is not surprising that neo-Nazis and members of the Aryan Nations (pages 251-252) can be seen at gun shows.

References

1. Captuo M. Thompson gets access to Fla. gun shows. *Miami Herald*. 2007 Sep 14. Available from: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/florida/story/237311.html>.
2. Davenport J. Thompson touts gun rights, blasts rivals. *Associated Press*. 2007 Nov 24.
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *Rightwing extremism: current economic and political climate fueling resurgence in radicalization and recruitment*. Washington (DC): U.S. Department of Homeland Security; 2009. Report No.: IA-0257-09.
4. Dees M, Corcoran J. *Gathering storm: America's militia threat*. New York (NY): Harper Collins Publishers; 1996.
5. Holthouse D. The merchant of Glendale: an Arizonan who says he was in the Hitler Youth has become one of the largest dealers of racist memorabilia in the West. *Intelligence Report* 2008;129:20-21.



Political Campaigns

Gun shows offer pro-gun candidates the opportunity to meet motivated voters. Ron Paul's campaign was particularly prominent during the 2008 election cycle. In Photos 6 and 7, Indiana Congressional candidate Eric Dickerson (6, second from right) chats with voters while two of his campaign workers (7, at right) negotiate a private party handgun sale. The photographs were taken in Atlanta, GA (1); Spokane, WA (2); West Palm Beach, FL (3); Phoenix, AZ (4); Tampa, FL (5); and Indianapolis, IN (6,7).



Post-Election Commentary

A month after the 2008 elections, merchandise commenting on the results is available. The photographs were taken in Phoenix, AZ.



Political Organizations

Major and minor political parties and issue-oriented organizations are present to get their messages out and register voters. Gun show politics are decidedly conservative. The photographs were taken in San Francisco, CA (1); Spokane, WA (2); Phoenix, AZ (3); Dayton, OH (4); Denver, CO (5); Jacksonville, FL (6); and San Jose, CA (7).



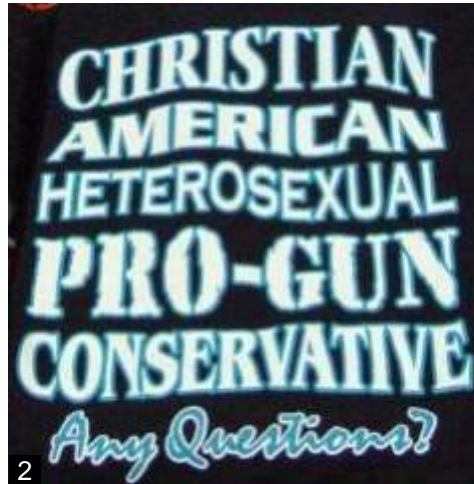
Gun Politics

The National Rifle Association (1) is present at many shows, frequently at the entrance and offering free admission to new members. Other organizations are active on a local or regional basis, sometimes for a specific political purpose (2,3,5). Literature from Jews for the Preservation of Firearm Ownership (7) is common in the Midwest. The photographs were taken in Las Vegas, NV (1); San Francisco, CA (2,3); Phoenix, AZ (4); San Jose, CA (5); Kankakee, IL (6); and Akron, OH (7).



Immigration

Anti-immigration organizations and messages are prominent at many gun shows, and not just in border states. The photographs were taken in Spokane, WA (1); Las Vegas, NV (2); Orlando, FL (3); Jacksonville, FL (4); Del Mar, CA (5); San Francisco, CA (6); Phoenix, AZ (7); and Dayton, OH (8).



Religion

Statements of religious belief are generally confrontational or apocalyptic. One licensed retailer (4-6) sells .50-caliber rifles and assault weapons and gives away copies of the New Testament. The photographs were taken in West Palm Beach, FL (1); Denver, CO (2); Indianapolis, IN (3,7); and Spokane, WA (4-6).



The Confederacy, 1

The Confederacy is alive at gun shows throughout the country. The materials on these two pages could be seen primarily as of historical interest, as expressions of regional pride, or simply as sales inducements. The photographs were taken in Indianapolis, IN (1,10); San Antonio, TX (2); Orlando, FL (3,5); Jacksonville, FL (4); Dallas, TX (6,9); Jackson, MS (7); Las Vegas, NV (8,11); Sacramento, CA (12); and Tucson, AZ (13).



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The Confederacy, 2

Other materials suggest that for some the Civil War is still being fought—at least figuratively. The photographs were taken in Orlando, FL (1,4); Jacksonville, FL (2,3,5,7); San Francisco, CA (6); San Jose, CA (8,9); and San Antonio, TX (10); similar materials were seen frequently elsewhere.



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The Ku Klux Klan and Race Hatred

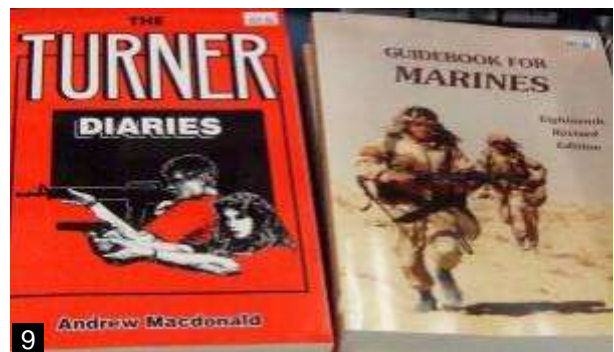
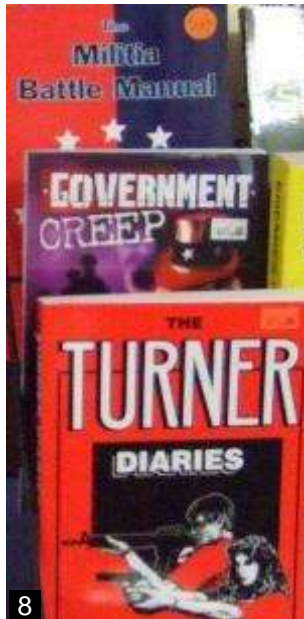
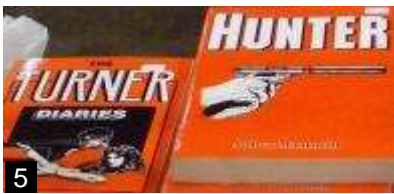
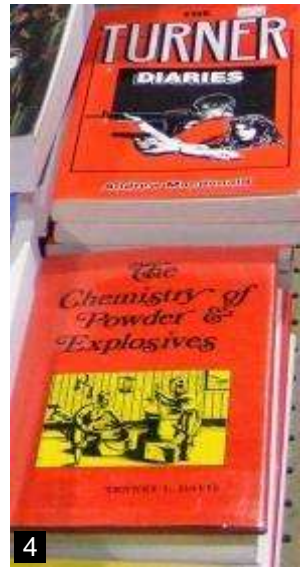
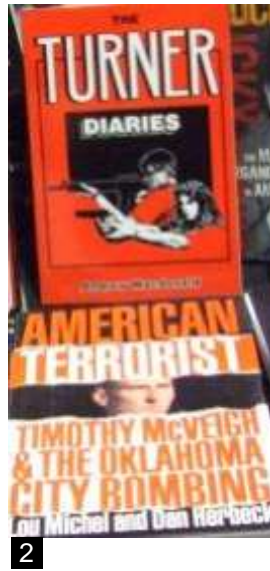
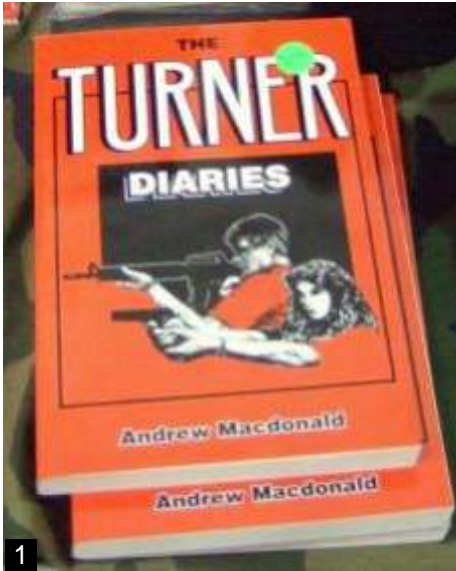
Ku Klux Klan and overtly racist materials are not common, but they can be found throughout the country. The photographs were taken in Dallas, TX (1); Tampa, FL (2); Denver, CO (3); Jacksonville, FL (4-7); and Tucson, AZ (8).



Nazism

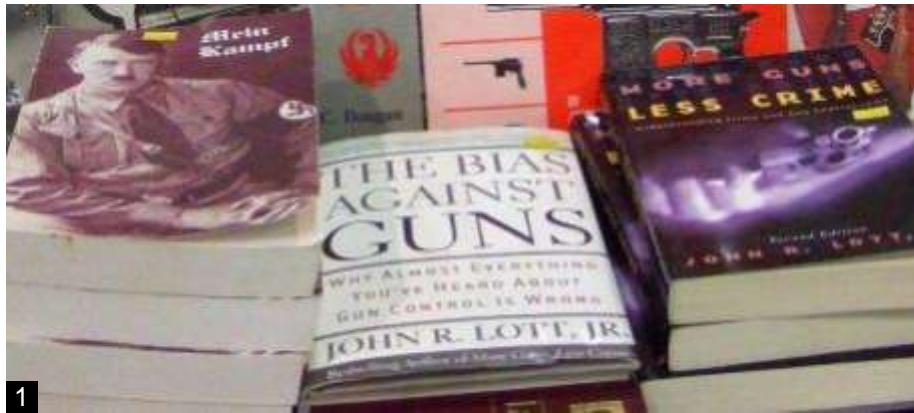
The Nazi presence at gun shows is complex. Some materials are memorabilia and are of potential interest to collectors as well as Nazi sympathizers. Other items are newly manufactured, presumably of no historical interest, and often displayed with neo-Confederacy items. Both types of materials are used to display firearms. The photographs were taken in Tampa, FL (1,7); Del Mar, CA (2); Richmond, VA (3,6,10); Waukesha, WI (4,13); Akron, OH (5); Phoenix, AZ (8,9,11); and San Diego, CA (12).



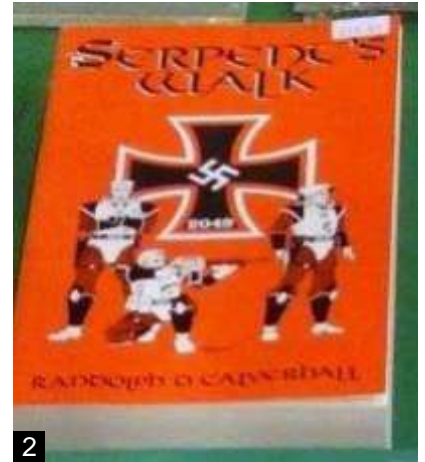


The Turner Diaries

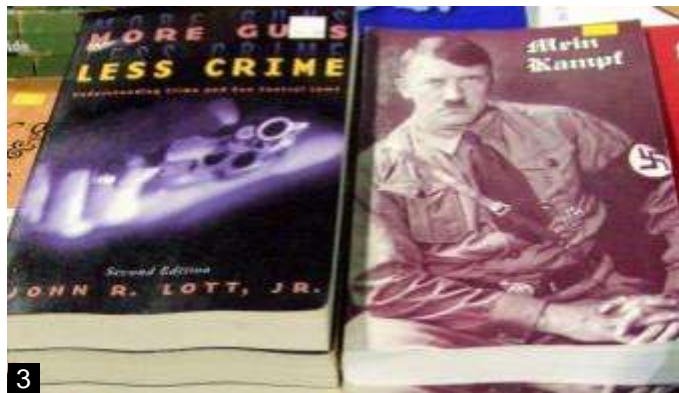
This book, by National Alliance founder William Pierce, is believed to have provided the blueprint for Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. It is available at many gun shows and is often displayed next to books that cast government as the villain or that describe techniques for making and using explosives. The photographs were taken in Tampa, FL (1); West Palm Beach, FL (2); Indianapolis, IN (3); Reno, NV (4); Houston, TX (5); Las Vegas, NV (6); Akron, OH (7); San Antonio, TX (8); and Dallas, TX (9).



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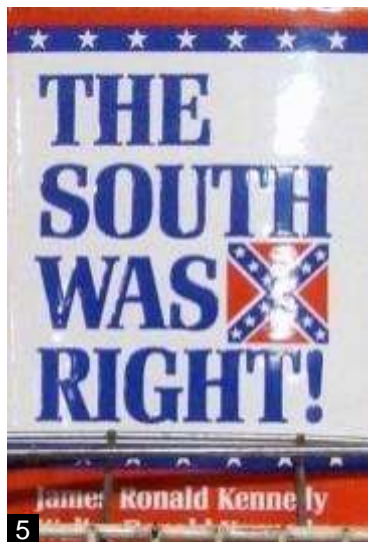
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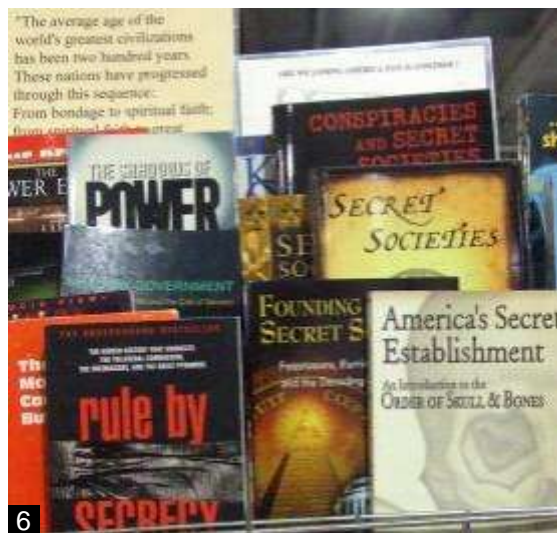
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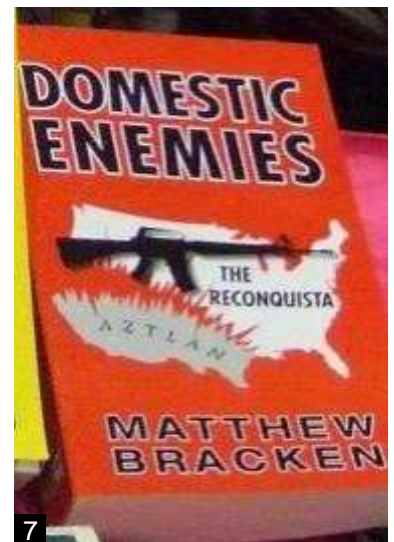
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Pro-Nazi and Other Right Wing Literature

Adolf Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf* is sold at gun shows in Arizona—always next to books by John Lott. In *Serpent's Walk*, resurgent Nazis are the heroes and fight to save the world in the 21st century. William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*, also wrote *Hunter*. Other recurrent themes: the Confederacy fought a justified war; the Southwest is the target of a takeover plot. The photographs were taken in Tucson, AZ (1); Houston, TX (2); Phoenix, AZ (3); Richmond, VA (4); Indianapolis, IN (5,6); and Spokane, WA (7).



Dieter Bueschgen

Bueschgen, who says he belonged to the Hitler Youth, is described by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as “one of the largest dealers of white supremacist paraphernalia and World War II-era Nazi memorabilia in the western United States.” A fixture at gun shows in Phoenix, AZ, Bueschgen sells both new and historical Nazi materials and neo-Confederacy items. “The skinheads,” he says, “they love my goodies.” The quotations are from SPLC’s *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2008, pp 20-21. The photographs were taken in Phoenix, AZ.



White Supremacists, 1

These two men are selecting a case for an AR rifle. One wears a shirt with a swastika and the insignia for the SS, the organization that executed the Holocaust. The other identifies himself as a Peckerwood, a term used to describe members of some white supremacist gangs. Crossroads of the West Gun Shows, the promoter of the shows pictured on these two pages, has a written policy prohibiting the display of "items glorifying Nazism." The photographs were taken in Phoenix, AZ.



White Supremacists, 2

A man and woman shop for firearms and Nazi memorabilia. Their shirts bear the symbol of the Aryan Nations. Note the swastika and hooded Klansmen in the tattoo on the man's right forearm (5). The photographs were taken in Waukesha, WI.