

**Carnegie Mellon University**

---

**From the SelectedWorks of Adam Hodges**

---

2015

# The Paranoid Style in Politics: Ideological Underpinnings of the Discourse of Second Amendment Absolutism

Adam Hodges, *Carnegie Mellon University*



SELECTEDWORKS™

Available at: <http://works.bepress.com/adamhodges/59/>

# The paranoid style in politics

## Ideological underpinnings of the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism

Adam Hodges

In American politics, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has asserted itself as a leading voice in the gun rights movement. The strident rhetoric emanating from the NRA leadership impacts the development of a broader discourse in American public life over gun rights — a *discourse of Second Amendment absolutism* — that articulates a set of assumptions and explanations in defense of an absolutist stance against gun regulation in any form. This paper examines the ideologies that underlie this absolutist discourse and the identities those ideologies help to construct. In particular, the absolutist discourse is analyzed through the lens of what historian Richard Hofstadter termed “the paranoid style in American politics.” The aim is to isolate and expose the extremist elements of this discourse, which polarize political debate and hinder the democratic process.

**Keywords:** Gun rights movement, Ideology, National Rifle Association, Paranoid style, Second Amendment absolutism

*“Go ahead, write about our paranoia, as if we should just close our eyes and buy some candles and duct tape and extra water.”*

Wayne LaPierre, NRA Executive Vice-President  
(2012 NRA Annual Meeting)

### 1. Introduction

The debate in American society over what limits should be placed on the sale, ownership, and use of firearms represents a longstanding and contentious political issue that takes on heightened concern with each new mass shooting. As part of the larger gun rights movement in the United States, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has asserted itself as a leading voice of resistance against gun

regulations. Although more radical gun rights groups exist in the American political landscape, the NRA is the most powerful and institutionalized with a lobbying arm that has come to exert enormous influence on legislative action and electoral politics. Yet the NRA is more than a special interest lobbying group. As Melzer (2009) argues, it is best characterized as a social movement organization, engaging in various forms of consciousness raising that range from local rallies and protests to its annual national membership meetings. As a result, the NRA's reach impacts the development of a broader discourse in American public life over gun rights — a *discourse of Second Amendment absolutism* — that articulates a set of assumptions and explanations in defense of an absolutist stance against gun regulation in any form.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution concerns itself with the right to own and use firearms. In full, the Amendment reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” As with any Constitutional issue, much legal debate exists over how to interpret the meaning of the Amendment and its implications for the issue of gun rights and regulations in the twenty-first century. To date, the US Supreme Court has affirmed the right for individual US citizens to own and use firearms while allowing for some restrictions to be put in place on those rights through government regulations. Second Amendment absolutists nevertheless argue that the amendment enshrines a natural or God-given right for individuals to own firearms without restriction. They view any governmental actions to regulate firearms as unconstitutional and view even limited gun control measures as a first step down a slippery slope toward the complete abolishment of gun rights. The NRA's discourse of Second Amendment absolutism is conveyed through strident rhetoric that positions even moderate proposals as part and parcel of an agenda that will lead to government confiscation of guns from all law-abiding citizens.

In this paper, I examine the ideologies that underlie this discourse of Second Amendment absolutism and the identities those ideologies help to construct. In particular, I analyze the absolutist discourse through the lens of what historian Richard Hofstadter (2008[1965], 3) terms “the paranoid style in American politics,” a rhetorical style with “qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” As Hofstadter suggests, a distorted style of rhetoric may signal a “distorted judgment” and an underlying “political pathology.” Although he does not fully unpack this metaphor, I suggest that what is pathological about the paranoid style in politics is that it poisons the type of healthy, robust, and reasoned debate that is vital to the political process. As Hofstadter (2008, 31) explains, those practicing the paranoid style do not “see social conflict as something to be mediated and comprised, in the manner of the working politician.” Rather, the

political struggle in which they are engaged is seen to be “totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise” (Hofstadter 2008, 39). Where the paranoid style dominates debate, deliberative democracy suffers. Isolating and examining the elements of the paranoid style in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism therefore opens up for inspection the elements of an extremist discourse that may hinder the democratic process.

The corpus of discourse data examined for the analysis consists of speeches delivered by the NRA’s Executive Vice-President, Wayne LaPierre, during the organization’s annual membership meetings over the past decade with emphasis on his most recent speech in 2013. LaPierre’s tenure as the NRA’s top leader (a post he has held since 1991) has helped institute a more strident rhetorical style as part of its ongoing consciousness raising efforts (Melzer 2009, 91). LaPierre’s remarks therefore provide a well thought out and clearly articulated perspective that is representative of the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism promulgated by the organization. In examining the data, I worked with written transcripts available on the NRA’s website and videos available on the NRA’s YouTube channel.

The approach I take draws from the concern in critical discourse analysis with the ideological underpinnings of discourse (e.g. Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995; van Dijk 1998) and the conception of discourse forwarded by philosopher Michel Foucault (1972, *inter alia*). In the Foucauldian perspective, a discourse encompasses the way language is used to both represent and constitute knowledge about a particular topic during a particular historical moment. A discourse therefore provides a powerful set of assumptions, explanations, and expectations that gives meaning to an issue (such as gun control) and constrains the way it can be reasoned about. In this way, a discourse draws boundaries around a domain of knowledge, constraining and governing discussion. As a result, speaking outside the discourse can be seen as heretical, making it difficult for alternative views and perspectives to be entertained. This is because to step outside of a discourse — such as the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism — is to step outside the ideological system in which certain social relations and cultural understandings are made possible, meaningful, and logical. Therefore, in viewing the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term, I wish to underscore its role as a guiding narrative or myth (Barthes 1957) that governs absolutist thinking on the Second Amendment.

Central to the discourse is the construction of a clearly delineated, invidious dichotomy between an in-group defined as “freedom fighters” struggling to save the Second Amendment from an out-group defined as an “elite ruling class” that is said to be the “enemy of freedom.” These identities are stitched together out of different ideological strands to form a cohesive fabric of meaning within the

discourse. In analyzing the Us versus Them binary, I therefore focus on the ideological systems that come together to support the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism. Rather than a single ideology, the discourse draws from multiple, intersecting cultural and political ideologies.

Ideologies are not simply individual beliefs or isolated ideas. Rather, an ideology is a shared system of ideas and beliefs that guide representations of the world for a social group. The concept of ideology can be viewed as encompassing both sociocultural and cognitive dimensions (van Dijk 1998). In discussing ideology as a cultural system, Geertz (1973, 207) defines “ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings.” Hall (1996, 26) defines ideology as “the mental frameworks — the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation — which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.” Common to any definition of ideology is its group component — that is to say, ideologies are “not individual, idealistic constructs, but the social constructs shared by a group” (van Dijk 1998, 9). Ideologies are “socially situated and collectively shared” (Thompson 1990, 51). These shared frameworks of meaning provide the basis for articulating the image of the world found in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism. The aim of the analysis is therefore to identify these ideological influences and expose their assumptions as the partial and interested positions that they are, rather than allowing them to pass unnoticed as taken-for-granted assumptions or naturalized facts.

Before delving into the analysis, I provide a brief overview of the NRA and discuss in more detail Hofstadter’s (2008) concept of the paranoid style in politics. The analysis then focuses on the discursively constructed image of the NRA as the defender of individual liberty against an oppressive government controlled by an elite vanguard determined to stifle the freedom of ordinary citizens. Through the analysis, I seek to illuminate the ideological influences that contribute to the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism, which provides a Manichean vision of the world that works to foreclose reasonable debate on the topic of gun rights and regulations.

## **2. The evolution of today’s NRA**

Since its founding in 1871, the National Rifle Association has undergone an evolution from an organization of soldiers to sportsmen to lobbyists. The original impetus for the organization centered on a desire to improve marksmanship among American soldiers. Two veterans of the Civil War, George Wood Wingate and William Conant Church, were concerned with the poor shooting skills of Union

troops during the war and the ineffectiveness of the National Guard in addressing the issue after the war. So they set out to create a private organization modeled on the National Rifle Association of Great Britain, which was begun in 1859 by militia officers. With the mission of building ranges and promoting rifle practice, the state of New York granted the NRA its initial charter (Sugarmann 1992, 25–26). The organization struggled for support and funding in the early years, but its efforts to promote marksmanship among citizen soldiers gained momentum after the turn of the twentieth century. Federal legislation signed in 1905 by President Theodore Roosevelt enabled the NRA “to purchase surplus military rifles at cost and sell them to members and civilian shooters” (Melzer 2009, 36). The Roosevelt administration also began to provide federal money to the NRA to hold shooting matches. Federal funding for these efforts continued until 1958 with only a short break during the Great Depression. A primary focus for the NRA during much of the early twentieth century therefore concentrated on competitive shooting. However, after World War II, the NRA developed a firearms safety program and began to draw in hunters as members. By 1950, approximately half its members identified as hunters so that by mid-twentieth century, firearms safety education and recreational shooting joined marksmanship training as the NRA’s primary concerns (Melzer 2009, 36; Sugarmann 1992, 34; see also, Winkler 2013).

With the high profile political assassinations in the United States during the 1960s, the issue of gun control began to intensify in American society. In 1968, the US Congress passed the Gun Control Act with opposition from the NRA only on certain provisions. Despite the presence of Second Amendment fundamentalists within the NRA’s structure, the sportsmen still dominated the organization and Franklin Orth, the NRA’s Executive Vice-President in the wake of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, even publicly supported some form of gun control, “arguing that no reasonable American could take a different stance” (Melzer 2009, 39). However, the growing faction of hardliners within the organization, led by Harlan Carter, took a different stance and worked to replace the leadership with like-minded members — an effort that was initially thwarted in 1976 when the intact leadership fired several dozen employees aligned with Carter. Yet, it was only a matter of time before Carter and his allies took control, staging a revolt before the NRA’s annual meeting in Cincinnati in 1977 that replaced the organization’s entire leadership. Carter was elected Executive Vice-President of the organization and his allies filled the remaining leadership positions. The coup marked a turning point in the history of the NRA, shifting its focus to the strident defense of gun rights.

In 1975, the NRA established its lobbying arm: the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA). Carter was the NRA-ILA’s first director, and its lobbying efforts and influence only grew when he became Executive Vice-President in 1977 — a post

in which he served until 1984. The NRA struggled during the late 1980s with leadership issues until it regained momentum with the election of Wayne LaPierre as Executive Vice-President in 1991. LaPierre continues to guide the organization through 2014. Since the 1970s, the NRA's membership has risen from one million to nearly five million members. Its public image was helped along by the role played by actor Charlton Heston who served as NRA President from 1998 to 2003. Although the modern NRA remains active in the areas of gun safety education, marksmanship training, and the promotion of recreational shooting, the organization has firmly dedicated itself to opposing any type of gun control legislation. "Today the NRA-ILA is where most of the organization's energy is directed" (Melzer 2009, 40). Spokespersons for the NRA have adopted a uniform, fundamentalist stance represented by the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism.

### 3. The paranoid style in politics

In the early 1960s, historian Richard Hofstadter detailed in a lecture (and subsequent essay and book chapter) a particular style employed in American politics that he termed "the paranoid style." Although not exclusive to any one political orientation — in fact, examples of the paranoid style exist across the political spectrum — Hofstadter formulated his description against the backdrop of the conservative movement led by US Senator Barry Goldwater and the style of politics practiced by associated right-wing groups. As Hofstadter (2008) describes, the paranoid style involves "a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself" (Hofstadter 2008, 4) that entails the "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (Hofstadter 2008, 3). He explains:

Webster defines paranoia, the clinical entity, as a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one's own greatness. In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. (Hofstadter 2008, 4)

As a historian, Hofstadter (2008, p. 6) is interested in the way this manner of expression "has been linked with movements of suspicious discontent". He details

several instances of its use throughout the history of American politics, including examples contemporary to his times such as accusations of communist infiltration of the government circulated during the McCarthy era and the John Birch Society's argument that water fluoridation was a communist plot to poison Americans. Even though "nothing prevents a sound program or sound issue from being advocated in the paranoid style," the term carries an intentionally pejorative connotation, Hofstadter (2008, 5) notes, because "the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good". One might alternatively argue that the paranoid style has a potentially transforming effect in that it can effectively shut down debate on legitimate issues by moving the discourse into the realm of ideologically distorted fantasy. Where democratic debate may genuinely entertain the pros and cons of adding fluoride to the public water supply, for example, the paranoid style moves the discourse into a realm marked by conspiratorial accusations and apocalyptic warnings that bear little resemblance to lived reality.

The paranoid style, as outlined by Hofstadter, can be thought of as a *style* insofar as it involves a manner or way of doing something — namely, a way of advancing a political position. Importantly, the political position (content of the message) can be separated from the style (manner) in which the message is conveyed. This usage of *style* accords with the concern in rhetoric with *how* ideas are expressed (as distinct from *what* ideas are expressed). Any issue could potentially be forwarded through the use of the paranoid style just as different styles could be used to forward the same issue. In politics, it is common to speak of the styles of politicians so that, for example, the issue of immigration reform could be advanced by a president who adopts a professorial style (think of President Obama) or a president who adopts a cowboy style (think of President Bush). Notably, the focus here is on individual variation in the way language is used, a concern shared by sociolinguists (Eckert and Rickford 2001). Despite the differences between the usages of *style* in rhetoric versus sociolinguistics (not to mention the numerous definitions employed within sociolinguistics alone), a common concern nevertheless focuses on the linguistic features or figures of speech employed by an individual speaker to convey a message. In other words, interest rests on how a message is conveyed, the manner in which it is done in an individual's discourse.

Yet there are additional dimensions to Hofstadter's (2008) paranoid style beyond concern with stylistics or the definitions of *style* that emphasize individual variation or expressive choice. These dimensions are especially relevant to the critical analysis of discourses in which the paranoid style appears. In particular, the paranoid style is not just a way of "expressing oneself" but also encompasses "a way of seeing the world" (Hofstadter 2008, 4). As Hofstadter (2008) explains, the paranoid style "has to do with the way in which ideas are *believed* and advocated" (Hofstadter 2008, 5; emphasis mine). In other words, more than a mere style

of speaking, it is “a style of mind” (Hofstadter 2008, 3). It encompasses certain ideas and beliefs. In addition, although embodied at any given time in a particular spokesperson for a cause, there is an important group dimension to the use of the paranoid style. It is not simply a matter of a speaker employing individual stylistic choices. The paranoid style involves a *shared* system of beliefs and way of representing the world. Whereas paranoia in the clinical sense, as Hofstadter points out, infects the individual; paranoia in the political realm permeates the worldview of a social group, forming a system of beliefs that guide how the group represents and comes to understand the political landscape. In this way, the paranoid style acts not just as an individual rhetorical style, but as an *ideology* in the sense of a system of ideas and beliefs that guide representations of the world for a social group. The paranoid style effectively encapsulates a way of seeing and hence reasoning about the world.

In postulating the paranoid style as an ideology, I wish to underscore the symbolic dimension of ideology as a tool for expressing concepts, thoughts, ideas, and representations. Moreover, I wish to emphasize the plurality as well as the variety of ideologies — whether political, cultural, or linguistic — in play in society at any given time. Various systems of ideas and beliefs operate simultaneously to represent the world from different perspectives, intersecting and impacting representations in the process. Although not itself a political ideology, the paranoid style *qua* ideology can operate in the service of a political ideology, combining with it to express and formulate arguments that bolster a political position.

Underlying the paranoid style are several basic elements or ideological assumptions about the nature of the world and the in-group’s political struggle in that world against opponents. Central among these is the image of “a vast and sinister conspiracy” (Hofstadter 2008, 29). The conspiracy is carried out against a culture or way of life with the intent to put an end to its existence. This is not the same as simply seeing an occasional plot or conspiratorial act within the flow of historical events (e.g. Watergate or an assassination plot). Instead, the paranoid style perpetuates the idea of an ongoing, “gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (Hofstadter 2008, 29). For exponents of the paranoid style, conspiracy is viewed “as *the motive force* in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy” (Hofstadter 2008, 29; emphasis in the original). The conspiracy is set in motion by a well-organized, powerful force that is seen as an *enemy* and not just a political opponent. The enemy is viewed with extreme suspicion and is attributed vast power to control the flow of historical events through secret schemes and behind-the-scene plots that allow it to conduct acts of malice toward the persecuted way of life. It is as if the enemy stands outside history, “not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history” to instead manufacture, will, or deflect “the normal course of history in an evil way” (Hofstadter

2008, 32). The power the enemy is said to possess may include control of the media and educational system along with vast funding sources that allow it to disseminate (mis)information and control the public mind. The group that is persecuted by the enemy is therefore seen as the last defender of its way of life, making a final but determined stand in “a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil” (Hofstadter 2008, 31). As such, the Manichean struggle is viewed “in apocalyptic terms” so that the stakes involve “the birth and death of whole worlds, political orders, whole systems of human values” (Hofstadter 2008, 29). Importantly, the current moment always represents a crucial “turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy” (Hofstadter 2008, 30). Leadership against the threat is therefore strident and militant, moving the conflict beyond the realm of political mediation and compromise.

##### **5. Us vs. Them in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism**

Given its Manichean underpinnings, the paranoid style/ideology lends itself well to bolstering a discourse of absolutism. My claim is that the paranoid style provides a valuable set of ideological assumptions that are woven together with additional ideological threads to form the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism. In other words, various systems of thought form the fabric of this discourse, which, as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term, provides an explanatory framework that structures knowledge and constitutes social identities central to the politics of gun rights in American society. The aim of the present analysis is therefore to unravel these various ideological threads and illuminate the assumptions that contribute to the arguments forwarded by the NRA. Since group identities are built upon the scaffolding provided by ideologies, I do this by focusing on the construction of the in-group and out-group in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism.

In the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism, the world is divided into a simple binary between the in-group and out-group. Much of this divide follows the common imagery in American politics between Washington insiders and outsiders, where “Washington” metonymically represents the power center of the US government. Outside this power center exists what is depicted as the American mainstream comprised of the everyman. Many a political campaign has used the epithet of “Washington insider” against an incumbent candidate who has served in Washington while attempting to position the challenging candidate as an ordinary citizen uncorrupted by the halls of power. In his rhetoric, NRA Executive Vice-President Wayne LaPierre sets up a similar dichotomy to position the NRA’s

political opponent as Washington insiders that are out of touch with the rest of America, as seen in the excerpts that follow.

1. The national media and the political elites, they are all part of the same class that thinks they're smarter than we are. They know better than we do. They can tell us what to do or not, what to own or not, what to eat and drink or not, and how to live or not. (LaPierre 2013)
2. Anti-freedom elitists in academia, the media, rich foundations and government can do permanent damage to individual freedoms just as real as an insurrection or coup. (LaPierre 2002)
3. When it comes to those scheming bureaucrats in Washington, gun owners have had it. Our rights have been attacked before as the political elites and the media have often conspired to shame and blame American gun owners for violent crime. (LaPierre 2011)

The labels used to name the NRA's political opponents in these first three excerpts — "political elites," "national media," "anti-freedom elitists in academia," "rich foundations," "government," and "bureaucrats in Washington" — represent a broad and general swath of the sociopolitical landscape. Although the NRA is not shy about naming specific politicians or figures working for gun control regulations, much of the discursive process of constructing the political opponent in LaPierre's rhetoric involves naming a general, unspecified out-group that acts as a foil against which the NRA is defined. In this way, various interchangeable entities are lumped together as "part of the same class" that is attributed an "elite" status removed from the life and concerns of the everyman. Descriptors throughout the discourse underscore the elite status of this out-group, which is referred to in the following excerpts as "the ruling class."

4. Behind every anti-gun law...or candidate ...or editorial...or movie ...is a ruling class... (LaPierre 2008)
5. They're the ruling classes that all believe the same...elite...conceit — (LaPierre 2008)

Constructing the out-group as an elite ruling class underscores the perception that they control the reins of power. As Hofstadter (2008, 32) describes of the paranoid style, "Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through 'managed news'; he has unlimited funds...he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system". Lumping together the media, government, and academia certainly covers the power bases in society. In the process of naming these various social and political institutions, LaPierre attributes a common viewpoint to them all — "the same elite conceit" — while erasing the diversity of opinion that undeniably does exist

within and across those institutions. Moreover, the “conceit” attributed to these “elites” characterizes them as showing disdain and contempt for those supposedly under their rule.

Further in line with the paranoid style, the power attributed to the out-group is portrayed in terms of “a vast and sinister conspiracy” (Hofstadter 2008, 29). As seen earlier in (3), it is not just bureaucrats in Washington that form the opponent but “scheming bureaucrats.” The conspiratorial nature of the out-group is further elaborated in the excerpts that follow.

6. If you consider the Constitution less relevant, if you ignore or distort the Second Amendment, if you conspire to make lawful firearms less accessible to lawful citizens, if you infiltrate school boards and churches and legislatures and foundations to advance an anti-freedom agenda of any kind — the fact that you were born on American soil won’t mask the fact that you’re an enemy of freedom and a political terrorist. (LaPierre 2002)
7. Already, they are conspiring in private. Re-grouping, planning, preparing, organizing, even waiting for the, quote “next Newtown” — the next tragedy to come, the next senseless, horrific crime to exploit. (LaPierre 2013)

Through word choice associated with the conspiracy frame — e.g. “conspire” and “infiltrate” — LaPierre forwards the notion in (6) that the NRA’s political opponent has what amounts to a conspiratorial “anti-freedom agenda.” The use of the word “infiltrate” in conjunction with the naming of “school boards and churches and legislatures and foundations” further solidifies the image of the out-group as controlling a variety of social institutions. Much like accusations of communist infiltration during the era of McCarthyism, the “anti-freedom” elites are said to “infiltrate” and control everything from schools to churches to government to private funding sources. The elites who are said to be in control, operating with a single agenda and mindset, “are conspiring in private” to take away gun rights, as seen in (7).

One could view this conspiratorial talk in metaphorical terms, and argue that LaPierre is simply adopting a rhetorical flourish to arouse the passions of movement followers. Certainly, this may very well be the case. My concern, however, is not whether LaPierre truly believes there is a vast and sinister conspiracy working against the NRA (in the technical sense of the term) or whether he intends it merely as a metaphor. The perlocutionary intent is the same in both scenarios — namely, the paranoid style aims to construct an absolutist stance that inflames tensions surrounding the debate over gun policy and walls off reasoned discussion of alternative viewpoints. Instead of debating gun policy proposals, attributing conspiratorial designs to a vast and powerful political opponent moves the discourse

into the realm of vague themes and helps turn a political opponent into a mortal *enemy*, further helped with descriptions as seen in the following excerpts.

8. Together they form a sort of Taliban, an intolerant coalition of fanatics that shelter the anti-freedom alliance so it can thrive and grow. (LaPierre 2002)
9. The Constitution is pristine and inviolate. And those who promote that we be less free are political terrorists. (LaPierre 2002)

As seen in (8) and (9), the demonization of the political opponent qua enemy depicts those who propose gun control measures as “a sort of Taliban” or as “political terrorists” that form a “coalition of fanatics that shelter the anti-freedom alliance.” Such inflammatory characterizations effectively strip gun regulation proponents of their place as legitimate members of the polis, and equate them with foreign enemies. In this way, the political struggle over gun rights is portrayed through a war-like frame as a conspiracy by the out-group to not just regulate firearms but to destroy the in-group as a foreign autocratic regime or terrorist organization might attempt.

10. Apparently, there is nothing the president will not do to get something — anything — through Congress to advance his agenda to destroy the Second Amendment. Nothing. (LaPierre 2013)
11. ...they're coming after us with a vengeance to destroy us. To destroy us and every ounce of our freedom. (LaPierre 2013)
12. They use tragedy to try to blame us, to shame us into compromising our freedom for their political agenda. They want to change America, our culture and our values. (LaPierre 2013)

Whereas the core issue revolves around interpretation of the Second Amendment, the paranoid style amplifies that interpretive struggle as an “agenda to destroy the Second Amendment,” as seen in (10). Yet the fears portrayed in the discourse go well beyond the Second Amendment. As Hofstadter (2008, 29) notes, the perception is that the enemy seeks “to undermine and destroy a way of life”. Indeed, this is well represented in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism where the ultimate fear is that “they’re coming after us with a vengeance to destroy us” (11) where “destroy us” means, “They want to change America, our culture and our values” (12). In other words, the threat is not just one against the Second Amendment, but a threat perceived to endanger a culture or an entire way of life. This perception shifts the political conflict into a type of war — a *culture war*. “The paranoid tendency is aroused by a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise” (Hofstadter 2008, 39). In this way, the idea of working together with proponents of gun regulation to

balance the rights and responsibilities of gun ownership with concerns for public health and safety is replaced by the image of a pitched battle for what is perceived to be the social group's very existence.

The delineation of the enemy in the struggle over gun rights and regulations operates as a crucial foil for defining the in-group. In contrast to the image of the political other as an elite ruling class with vast power, the NRA positions itself as the little guy — a political outsider that lacks the resources of its foe. Of course, from an objective perspective, such a characterization appears undeniably at odds with the reality of the NRA's substantial resources and political influence (not to mention the fact that the NRA-ILA is headquartered in the DC area). Nevertheless, like the Washington outsider in those classic American political campaigns, the NRA claims to be the true representative of America. Where it lacks the vast power of the scheming enemy, it putatively makes up for it with the overwhelming support of the American public.

13. All over this country, people are more and more frustrated with Washington and the political and media elites. They are dismayed over a political debate that has nothing to do with addressing our problems and everything to do with advancing an old, tired, failed political agenda. Everywhere I go, I've learned that the NRA is truly at the heart of America's heartland. That we are in the middle of the river of America's mainstream. That what we want is exactly what most Americans want. (LaPierre 2013)
14. The political class and media class just don't get it. In a lot of ways, they've lost track of what this great nation is really all about. It's about US and people like us, all over this country. It's always been about "we, the people," not the political class, all the way back to our founding. (LaPierre 2013)
15. Today, the NRA is a record 5 million strong! Even as thousands of Americans join our cause every day, the media and political elites denigrate us. They cringe at the sight of long lines at gun shows. They mock Americans who are buying firearms and ammunition at a record pace. They scorn and scold the NRA. They don't get it because they don't get America. (LaPierre 2013)

As LaPierre states in (13), "the NRA is truly at the heart of America's heartland." The metaphor of a beating heart dovetails with the image of rural America to convey the notion that this locale is both geographically and symbolically the life force of America, distal to "Washington and the political and media elites." As he shifts to another metaphor to convey the same point, LaPierre states, "we are in the middle of the river of America's mainstream." Here, the river metaphor merges into the political connotation of "mainstream" as normal and conventional. The NRA is thereby positioned as representing the orthodox view on gun rights and regulation. As Morris (1992) notes, "A crucial feature of hegemonic consciousness

is that it always presents itself as a set of values and beliefs that serves the general welfare” (Morris 1992, 363, quoted in Melzer 2009, 108–109). This is certainly evident in the NRA’s discourse where its absolutist stance is positioned as the political center (rather than extremist fringe), claiming to represent “exactly what most Americans want.”

In (13), (14) and (15), the pronouns *we* and *us* refer to both the NRA (including LaPierre and NRA members in the audience) and “people like us, all over this country.” Further, through the allusion to “we, the people,” and its intertextual echoes of the Declaration of Independence and connotations of the nation as a whole, the NRA becomes the true representative of “this great nation” in contradistinction to the ruling elites that represent heretical views and rule, presumably without consent, over “we, the people” on the issue of gun regulations. The oration in (14) places emphasis on “us” (represented by capitalization in the NRA’s transcript), explicitly staking out a diametrical opposition to *them*. With these lines of a power imbalance drawn, the image of persecution is then filled in by the hand of “political elites” who are said, in (15), to “mock Americans,” “denigrate us,” and “scorn and scold the NRA.” The feeling of persecution at the hands of the enemy serves to rally the in-group’s sense of injustice.

In the paranoid style, the charge against a clearly delineated enemy is led by a militant leader; and LaPierre (among others in the movement) certainly fits the bill. Moreover, to effectively espouse the paranoid style’s fantastical imagery of impending doom, the leader positions himself as a prescient figure with the ability to perceive the conspiracy and foresee the looming threat “before it is fully obvious to an as yet un-aroused public” (Hofstadter 2008, 31). As LaPierre notes:

16. At this gathering one year ago, I predicted that our freedom might soon face its greatest threat ever. I spent the past year warning gun owners all over this country that, if re-elected, President Obama would launch an all-out, historic assault against the Second Amendment and the personal freedom of hundreds of millions of law-abiding Americans. (LaPierre 2013)

As LaPierre contends in (16), the predictions and warnings he gave are coming to fruition in the current moment of political struggle.

Curiously, in the paranoid style, the present moment always seems to be the defining moment in the Manichean struggle of good versus evil. “Like religious millenarians, he expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days and he is sometimes disposed to set a date for the apocalypse” (Hofstadter 2008, 30). In actual fact, the specific political moment is largely irrelevant to the apocalyptic scenario painted by the militant leader, whether it is in 2013, as in (16) above, or in 2008 as seen in the following excerpt.

17. The Second Amendment is facing a perfect storm. In fact, the worst I've seen in thirty years. It's hard to believe it's been that long ... I came to work at NRA in 1978. And it's taken three decades to crystallize for me: Behind every anti-gun law...or candidate ...or editorial...or movie ...is a ruling class that can't stand you taking responsibility for your own safety. (LaPierre 2008)

Where the actual threat against gun rights realistically waxes and wanes as the political winds change, the NRA's perception of threat remains constantly amplified so that regardless of the occasion, the "Second Amendment is facing a perfect storm." It is now or never to make the last stand; "it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy" (Hofstadter 2008, 30). The portrayal of a constant level of imminent threat against gun rights serves much like a revivalist sermon to "portray that which impends but which may still be avoided" (Hofstadter 2008, 30). As long as movement supporters do not grow weary of the message, and come to perceive their world as constantly under attack, then the immediacy of the message works to rally the membership and mobilize new supporters to the cause. It also helps mold an absolutist, unbending stance on the issue.

When it comes to defining the cause of the NRA and movement followers, defense of the Second Amendment may be the core political issue but the cause is outlined in much broader terms as a fight for freedom. The ubiquitous theme of freedom resonates throughout the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism. Thus, instead of political arguments against particular gun control proposals, the discourse emphasizes a more general threat to freedom.

A term and concept such as *freedom* is sufficiently vague and positively valued by the national community as a whole so that it is difficult to argue against without being seen as opposing a universally accepted principle (see also, Burke 1945 on "god-terms"). To argue against freedom would be viewed as heretical, unpatriotic, and un-American. Thus, to attach a specific cause (such as the opposition to sensible gun regulations) under the generic banner of freedom is to position it as falling within the realm of "the general moral order, and hence not justified only by partisan, self-serving grounds" (van Dijk 1998, 258).

Furthermore, the vagueness of a term such as *freedom* allows for the accrual of different shades of meaning that vary with political orientation as different ideological attachments color its significance. As Melzer (2009, 131) points out, the gun rights movement is closely aligned with the main dimensions of conservative politics in the United States, including traditionalism, anti-communist militarism, and libertarianism (see also, Diamond 1995, 7). In particular, libertarianism in its conservative form helps undergird the strong theme of freedom found in the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism with its emphasis on self-ownership, liberty of action, and protection from interference (Vallentyne 2012). Where gun

regulations interfere with individuals' autonomy by limiting their ownership or use of certain firearms in certain locations under certain conditions, *freedom* in the sense attributed to it by strict libertarianism is violated. As a result, the NRA is not merely fighting for gun rights, as the organization frequently emphasizes, but is fighting for freedom from governmental interference. This refrain is commonly heard within the discourse, as seen in the excerpts that follow.

18. So when they ask you to sign over some rights, you say this: [...] I'm the NRA, and I'll fight for freedom. (LaPierre 2002)
19. From liberty's defense, we will never back down. We will never surrender. We will always stand, we will always fight. We will always Stand and Fight for freedom! (LaPierre 2013)

In this way, with its rhetorical focus on freedom, the NRA fashions itself as the "largest and oldest civil rights organization in the United States" rather than simply a gun rights organization.

Through the libertarian principle of self-ownership, individuals are also seen as responsible for their own self-protection. This view merges with a gender ideology that defines masculinity in terms of a man's ability to protect himself against threats to his self-ownership and the subordinates in his household. To abdicate this responsibility to another entity, such as the government, is not only to give up one's freedom but also one's responsibility as masculine protector. Young (2003) summarizes this "logic of masculine protection" as follows. "The world out there is heartless and uncivilized, and the movements and motives of the men in it are unpredictable and difficult to discern. The protector must therefore take all precautions against these threats, remain watchful and suspicious, and be ready to fight and sacrifice for the sake of his loved ones" (Young 2003, 4, citing Elshtain 1987, 1992). In his examination of gender and the NRA, Melzer (2009) provides a similar description of this logic, which he links to the ethos of the American frontier and terms *frontier masculinity*. "Characterized by rugged individualism, hard work, protecting and providing for families, and self-reliance, frontier masculinity is the mythologized dominant version of manhood from America's frontier past" (Melzer 2009, 16). Frontier masculinity therefore represents a hybridization of libertarian principles with the logic of masculine protection, a perspective well voiced by LaPierre, as seen in the excerpts that follow.

20. There is nothing more good and right and normal than an honest American citizen owning a firearm to defend himself or protect her family. (LaPierre 2013)
21. And the ultimate underpinning of personal survival is the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution. The lesson of New Orleans is that all those

politicians who said government and police will be there to protect you in a disaster are naïve at best and liars at worst. The lesson of New Orleans is that you can't count on government to protect you. But you can count on the looters, robbers, rapists, and armed gangs to show up right on time, every time, to prey on the vulnerable, law-abiding, unarmed citizens. (LaPierre 2006)

22. More Americans today than ever before understand the principle of our Second Amendment: the freedom it gives to them as individuals, to be responsible for your own safety, protection, and your survival. Americans, throughout this country, are suspect of criminal attack. They've witnessed the slaughter of tyrants, and they know that terrorists are lurking and plotting to murder us. These aren't just distant fears, they're coming realities, gathering and approaching as certain as dark storm clouds. (LaPierre 2012)

Importantly, the logic of masculine protection and frontier masculinity — which can also be enacted by women, as the NRA avidly spotlights — is predicated upon the assumption of a hostile world that poses a constant threat to the safety of oneself and one's family. True to the paranoid style, the image of a hostile world is painted through the amplification of exaggerated threats represented by various bogeymen. The specifics are drawn from the latest news headlines. In (21), a speech delivered after Hurricane Katrina, the threat comes in the form of “the looters, robbers, rapists, and armed gangs” that threaten one's “personal survival.” In (22), bogeymen are provided in the shape of “tyrants” and “terrorists” that “are lurking and plotting to murder us.” Likewise, in LaPierre's speech at the 2013 annual meeting, allusions are made to the Boston Marathon bombers. As LaPierre underscores in (22), “These aren't just distant fears, they're coming realities, gathering and approaching as certain as dark storm clouds.”

Appeals to fear draw from the Manichean vision of the world as a sharply divided contest between the forces good and evil. With evil lurking everywhere, “good guys with guns” are positioned as the only reliable form of protection for themselves and families against those threats. As one of the NRA's favorite sound bite arguments says:

23. ...the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. (LaPierre 2013)

In addition, the Manichean template applies equally to the pitched political struggle qua (culture) war where the outlines of the debate are painted as an either-or choice between “freedom fighters” and “freedom haters.” In language that resonates with Bush's “war on terror” narrative (Hodges 2011), LaPierre states the case as follows:

24. It's black and white, all or nothing, you're with us or against us. There are not flavors of freedom. You can't like yours, but not mine. There are not classes of freedom. You can't have more, or less, than me. And there is no temporary suspension of freedom. Once on loan, you never get it back. Americans who think freedom is negotiable or malleable are, by our Founding Fathers' standards, not Americans. (LaPierre 2002)

As implied in (24), those who propose even limited regulations on gun ownership and use are, by the standards set up by LaPierre, "not Americans." The Us versus Them dichotomy thereby sets up a political contest between two enemies disdainful of each other and suspicious of one another's motives.

## 6. Conclusion

In examining the sharp divisions constructed by the NRA through its spokesperson, Wayne LaPierre, my aim has been to illuminate key elements of a larger discourse of Second Amendment absolutism that buttresses the gun rights movement. As a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term, the discourse of Second Amendment absolutism carries with it a set of assumptions, explanations, and expectations about the struggle over gun rights and regulations in US society. Various ideological influences underpin this discourse, coming together to promote a way of thinking about the world in which certain social relations and cultural understandings are made possible, meaningful, and logical. The political tenets of conservative libertarianism and the gendered logic of frontier masculinity join together with the elements of the paranoid style to form the discourse. In particular, the paranoid style provides a substantial contribution that steers the discourse toward unbending extremism. Where there is genuine public concern and desire to find solutions that balance gun rights with public safety, gun rights absolutists see conspiracy, governmental plots to confiscate guns, and a threat to their very existence. In imposing sharp social divisions and sowing fear — and even hate — the discourse polarizes and leaves little room for common ground.

The implications of this for democratic debate over gun policy should be evident by now. In a debate dominated by extremist positions that paint political opponents as mortal enemies, productive dialogue that seeks to find widely acceptable solutions through the normal political process becomes increasingly difficult. Despite the NRA's claim to represent mainstream views on gun policy, such claims are belied by national polls that show most Americans support some regulation, such as background checks prior to the sale of firearms, while preserving the individual right to own firearms (Gallup 2013). Although the NRA leadership may

speak for a relatively small number of extremists in the gun rights movement in staking out an absolutist stance against any form of regulation, the powerful discourse of Second Amendment absolutism that the NRA leadership and lobbyists promulgate impacts the debate as a whole. It impacts the debate not so much by joining the debate as by obfuscating and shutting it down. After all, to espouse Second Amendment absolutism per the discourse outlined above is to vilify any gun policy proposal as intolerable and beyond reasonable deliberation. Yet gun violence is an issue of real concern in American society, and finding real solutions depends upon fostering dialogue on policy questions in a manner that recognizes legitimate concerns on all sides without the heated exaggeration and conspiratorial fantasy of the paranoid political style.

## References

- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Edition du Seuil.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1945. *A Grammar of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Diamond, Sara. 1995. *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*. New York: Guilford.
- Eckert, Penelope, and John Rickford (eds.). 2001. *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511613258
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 1987. *Women and War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 1992. "Sovereignty, Identity, Sacrifice." In *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory*, edited by V. Spike Peterson, 141–54. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1989. *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock.  
DOI: 10.1177/053901847000900108
- Gallup. 2013. Guns: Gallup Historical Trends. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>. Accessed September 14, 2013.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretations of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 25–46. London: Routledge.
- Hodges, Adam. 2011. *The 'War on Terror' Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 2008[1965]. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. New York: Vintage Books.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2002. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://www.nraila.org/news-issues/speeches/2002-nra-annual-meeting-speech-by-wayne-lapierre.aspx?s=&st=&ps>.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2006. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://www.nraila.org/news-issues/speeches/remarks-by-wayne-r-lapierre,-nra-executive-vice-president,-at-the-nra->

- 2006-annual-meeting-in-milwaukee,-wi-52006.aspx?s=wayne+lapierre+annual+meeting&st=&ps.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2008. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://www.nraila.org/news-issues/speeches/remarks-by-wayne-lapierre-at-the-137th-annual-meeting-of-members,-louisville,-kentucky,-may-17,-2008.aspx?s=&st=&ps>.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2011. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://youtu.be/A5vAViVDO7A>.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2012. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://youtu.be/D8rBHcCW8Jo>.
- LaPierre, Wayne. 2013. NRA Annual Meeting Speech. Available: <http://youtu.be/iJQqr8PpG98>.
- Melzer, Scott. 2009. *Gun Crusader's: The NRA's Culture War*. New York: New York University Press.
- Morris, Aldon D. 1992. "Political Consciousness and Collective Action." In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, 351–374. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Sugarmann, Josh. 1992. *National Rifle Association: Money, Firepower, Fear*. Washington, DC: National Press Books.
- Thompson, John. 1990. *Ideology and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
DOI: 10.2307/591346
- Vallentyne, Peter. 2012. "Libertarianism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. Available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/libertarianism/>.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. 1998. *Ideology*. London: Sage.
- Winkler, Adam. 2013. *Gun Fight: The Battle over the Right to Bear Arms in America*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2003. "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State." *Signs* 29(1):1–25. DOI: 10.1086/375708

### *Author's address*

Dr Adam Hodges  
Department of English  
Carnegie Mellon University  
5032 Forbes Avenue SMC 1070  
Pittsburgh, PA 15289–1070  
[adamhodges@cmu.edu](mailto:adamhodges@cmu.edu)

### *About the author*

**Adam Hodges** is author of *The 'War on Terror' Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (2011, Oxford University Press), editor of *Discourses of War and Peace* (2013, Oxford University Press), and co-editor (with Chad Nilep) of *Discourse, War and Terrorism* (2007, John Benjamins). His work examines the social, cultural, and political dimensions of language use.