The Power of False Narratives

Exclusive: The defeat of a modest gun-safety bill in the Senate is further vindication of Orwell’s cynical observation that “who controls the past controls the future” since the American Right has persuaded millions of Americans that a false narrative about the Second Amendment is true, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Over the past several decades, the American Right has invested heavily in media outlets and think tanks with the goal of imposing right-wing historical narratives on the nation. That investment has now paved the way for defeat of modest gun-control legislation in the U.S. Senate.

Because of this well-financed right-wing propaganda, millions of Americans have been convinced that the Framers of the U.S. Constitution wanted individual Americans armed to the teeth so they could kill policemen, soldiers and other government representatives. Thus any restriction on gun ownership, no matter how sensible, is deemed as going against the nation’s Founding Fathers.

The fact that the key Framers, such as James Madison and George Washington, actually believed that the people would be protected against tyranny through a representative Republic operating within the rule of law and the checks and balances of a Constitution has been lost amid the Right’s propaganda and paranoia.

Madison only grudgingly agreed to incorporate a Bill of Rights at all as a deal to secure the necessary votes for the Constitution’s ratification, with the Second Amendment essentially a concession to the states which wanted to protect their right to maintain citizen militias.

At the time, the right to bear arms within the context of “a well-regulated Militia” was not understood as a “libertarian” right to have an unregulated arsenal in your basement or the right to stride into public gatherings with a semi-automatic assault rifle with a 100-bullet magazine over your shoulder. In 1789, when Congress approved the Second Amendment, muskets were single-shot devices requiring time-consuming reloading.

And, as the Second Amendment explains, its purpose was to maintain “the security of a free State,” not to undermine that security with mass killings of civilians or insurrections against the elected government representing “We the People of the United States.” Under the Constitution, such insurrections were defined as “treason.”
But the Right has successfully abridged the Second Amendment as it is now understood by many ill-informed Americans. The 12-word preamble explaining the point of the amendment gets lopped off and only the last 14 words are left as the unofficially revised amendment.

So, when Tea Party favorite Sen. Ted Cruz lectures fellow senators on the Second Amendment, he doesn’t include the preamble, “A well-regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State.” He only reads the rest: “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.” Nor do the Tea Partiers note that to Madison and the Framers the term “bear Arms” meant to participate in a militia, not to have as many guns as you want.

The real history has gotten lost in a swamp of false narrative, the sort of ideological deceptions that have come to dominate the current American political scene and have given us an Orwellian present in which he “who controls the past” really does “control the future.”

Obama’s Bow

Now, even intelligent politicians like President Barack Obama genuflect before the mythology of the Second Amendment as he did on Wednesday when he stood with parents of children massacred in Newtown, Connecticut, and repeatedly argued that a defeated compromise on background checks for gun buyers in no way impinged on anyone’s Second Amendment rights.

No one, it seems, wants to get into the reeds on this issue and take on the Right’s false narrative, apparently hoping that those distortions can be simply overridden by public outrage against the thousands upon thousands of Americans who are killed by gun violence every year. But the failure to contest false narratives, especially ones as powerful as the nation’s founding myth, effectively dooms rational policy discussions.

If the Right can rile up a lot of people with neo-Confederate appeals against the “tyranny” of the federal government, the United States cannot face its future challenges, whether stopping school massacres or effectively regulating Wall Street or reducing income inequality or addressing the existential threat of global warming. All such efforts will simply be dismissed as federal assaults on “liberty.”

Most perniciously, the Right through its propaganda has equated the federal government with the British Crown, treating any national effort to deal with domestic problems as the same as British troops marching on Lexington and Concord. That’s the message in the Tea Party’s hijacking of Revolutionary War imagery.
Yet, that would mean that Revolutionary War heroes like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton as well as the Constitution’s chief architect James Madison are stand-ins for King George III, since they were the ones who organized the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

The Constitution dramatically strengthened the central government from its status as a “league of friendship” dominated by “independent” and “sovereign” states under the Articles of Confederation. The power grab in Philadelphia was what gave rise to the first claims about a powerful central government imposing federal “tyranny.”

Anti-Federalists rose to oppose the Constitution, in part, by claiming that federal authorities might destroy the system of state militias and then crush the individual states. Madison ridiculed that argument in Federalist Paper 46, which ironically is one that the gun-rights advocates often cite in arguing in favor of a fully armed population.

But Madison’s key point in Federalist Paper 46 was that when critics cite the Constitution’s potential for a tyrannical central government, they miss the point that it would consist of representatives from the states and the people.

“The adversaries of the Constitution seem to have lost sight of the people altogether in their reasonings on this subject,” Madison wrote. “These gentlemen [the Anti-Federalists] must here be reminded of their error. They must be told that the ultimate authority, wherever the derivative may be found, resides in the people alone.

“If the people should in future become more partial to the federal than to the State governments, the change can only result, from such manifest and irresistible proofs of a better administration. And in that case, the people ought not to be precluded from giving most of their confidence where they may discover it to be most due.”

Mocking the Paranoia

In Federalist Paper 46, Madison then went on to offer a series of reasons why the Anti-Federalists’ fear of the strengthened federal government was absurd, especially since Congress would consist of representatives from the states and those representatives would assert the interests of their states.

Madison also rejected comparisons between the imagined tyranny by the federal government over the states and the violent imposition of authority by the British Crown over the American colonies. He wrote:

“But what would be the contest in the case we are supposing [between the federal
government and the states]? Who would be the parties? A few representatives of the people, would be opposed to the people themselves; or rather one set of [federal] representatives would be contending against thirteen sets of representatives [of the states], with the whole body of their common constituents on the side of the latter.

“The only refuge left for those who prophecy the downfall of the State Governments, is the visionary supposition that the Federal Government may previously accumulate a military force for the projects of ambition.

“That the people and the States should for a sufficient period of time elect an uninterrupted succession of men ready to betray both; that the traitors should throughout the period, uniformly and systematically pursue some fixed plan for the extension of the military establishment; that the governments and the people of the States should silently and patiently behold the gathering storm, and continue to supply the materials, until it should be prepared to burst on their own heads, must appear to every one more like the incoherent dreams of a delirious jealousy, or the misjudged exaggerations of a counterfeit zeal, than like the sober apprehension of genuine patriotism.”

In other words, Madison judged this alleged danger of the federal government tyrannizing the states as nuts.

It is true that he continues in Federalist Paper 46 to play out what to him was the absurd notion of federal tyranny, noting that this imaginary federal army of oppression also would have to contend with state militias consisting of armed citizenry which is the point frequently cited by gun-rights advocates but the context of those quotes is that Madison had already dismissed the possibility of such an event as crazy.

The Civil War

Granted, one could argue that Madison failed to fully see into the future as he argued for the ratification of the Constitution, which he had worked so hard to create. For instance, as slavery became a contentious issue in the mid-1800s, Southern states rebelled in defense of the rights of whites to own blacks and then violently resisted President Abraham Lincoln’s efforts to bring the Confederate states back into the Union.

To this day, some white Southerners call the Civil War the War of Northern Aggression. In the 1950s and 1960s, the pattern played out again, albeit much less violently, when many white Southerners resisted the federal government’s outlawing of racial segregation. To some white Southerners that was another example of federal “tyranny.”
You could also say that Madison missed the emergence of the post-World War II Military-Industrial Complex in which military contractors accumulated so much political and economic power both within states and inside the federal government that the American people did “silently and patiently behold the gathering storm, and continue to supply the materials, until it should be prepared to burst on their own heads.”

However, it is a gross distortion of history to cite Madison as someone who favored a “libertarian” right for citizens to operate on their own in the killing of police, soldiers and other representatives of the Republic. Rather, his proposal of the Second Amendment was a concession to what he regarded as paranoia among states’-rights advocates within the Anti-Federalist circles.

Indeed, one could argue that the Second Amendment has never been used to protect individual liberty, unless you’re talking about the “liberty” of white Southerners to own African-Americans as slaves.

Beyond the language in the amendment’s preamble about “a well-regulated Militia” and state “security,” that is exactly how the Second Amendment was used. After being approved by the first Congress and ratified by the states, the amendment was given real meaning when the second Congress passed the Militia Acts, which mandated that all military-age white males obtain a musket and supplies for militia service.

President Washington then federalized several state militias and led them on an expedition into western Pennsylvania in 1794 to crush an anti-tax revolt known as the Whiskey Rebellion. The uprising was treated as an act of treason as defined by the U.S. Constitution, although Washington used his pardon power to spare rebel leaders from execution by hanging.

Over the ensuing years in the South, state militias were called up to put down slave revolts, with the rebellious slaves not as lucky as the white Whiskey rebels. For instance, in 1800, Virginia Gov. James Monroe called out the militia to stop an incipient slave uprising known as Gabriel’s Rebellion. Twenty-six alleged conspirators were hanged.

Southern militias also were instrumental in the secession by the Confederate states after Lincoln’s election in 1860. Again, the central concern of the Confederacy was the maintenance and protection of slavery.

Jefferson’s Words

Yes, I know some on the Right have cherry-picked incendiary comments by other Founders, such as Thomas Jefferson and his remark that “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants” (although
the context was Jefferson’s boasting that the new United States had seen little violence since its founding, with the exception of Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786-87). Jefferson also had very little involvement in writing the Constitution and the Bill of Rights since he was serving as the U.S. representative in Paris.

Many other right-wing citations of Founders favoring armed insurrection against the elected U.S. government have been taken out of context or were simply fabricated. [See a summary of dubious quotes compiled by Steven Krulick.]

But the key point about the Second Amendment is that it was never about an individual’s right to possess guns without restrictions. It was framed mostly out of concern that a standing federal army could become excessively powerful and that the states should maintain their own citizen militias. [See Krulick’s detailed explanation.]

Only in modern times, with the emergence of an American Right angry over the idea of racial equality, has the Second Amendment been reframed as a “libertarian” right to kill representatives of the elected government. That attitude flared up after Bill Clinton’s victory in 1992 and the rise of the “militia movement,” which found a voice in the angry white radio talk show hosts who popularized the supposed linkage between the Framers and modern-day insurrectionists.

After President George W. Bush claimed the White House and added two more right-wing justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, a slim five-to-four majority formed giving the Right’s reinterpretation of the Second Amendment some official sanction in 2008. The five justices overturned longstanding precedents recognizing only a collective right to bear arms and endorsed a limited individual right to own a gun.

Then, with the election of the first African-American president and the demographic change that Obama’s victory represented, the frenzy surrounding the Right’s false founding narrative heated up, with anti-government extremists naming themselves after the Boston Tea Party, an anti-British protest in 1773, and waving “Don’t Tread on Me” Revolutionary War banners.

This symbolism merging the American Republic with the British Empire was profoundly wrong especially since many Revolutionary War leaders including General Washington and his aide-de-camp Alexander Hamilton were central to expanding federal powers in the Constitution. But the Right’s use of the Founding symbols was powerful nonetheless.

Essentially, however, the Tea Party operatives were not harkening back to the
Constitution as much as they were to the Articles of Confederation, which the Constitution replaced, and to the Southern Confederacy, which sought to withdraw from the Constitution in the early 1860s. Today’s Tea Partiers are advocating a restoration of a system of states’ “sovereignty” that Washington, Madison and Hamilton overturned in 1787 and which Lincoln defeated in 1865.

But the modern Right has figured out a new way to circumvent the real Constitution, which granted broad powers to the central government and which as amended guaranteed equal rights for all citizens. The Right has simply invested billions of dollars in a propaganda system that has revised American history.

The absence of any determined or well-funded effort to counter the Right’s false narratives has allowed this fabricated history to become real for millions of Americans. And, on Wednesday, it meant that even modest attempts to impose some sanity on the national gun madness, including the slaughter of children, was stopped in the U.S. Senate.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).