



Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms

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Chronicling the underappreciated black tradition of bearing arms for self-defense, this book presents an array of examples reaching back to the pre—Civil War era that demonstrate a willingness of African American men and women to use firearms when necessary to defend their families and communities. From Frederick Douglass’s advice to keep “a good revolver” handy as defense against slave catchers to the armed self-protection of Monroe, North Carolina, blacks against the KKK chronicled in Robert Williams’s *Negroes with Guns*, it is clear that owning firearms was commonplace in the black community.

Nicholas Johnson points out that this story has been submerged because it is hard to reconcile with the dominant narrative of nonviolence during the civil rights era. His book, however, resolves that tension by showing how the black tradition of arms maintained and demanded a critical distinction between private self-defense and political violence.

Johnson also addresses the unavoidable issue of young black men with guns and the toll that gun violence takes on many in the inner city. He shows how complicated this issue is by highlighting the surprising diversity of views on gun ownership in the black community. In fact, recent Supreme Court affirmations of the right to bear arms resulted from cases led by black plaintiffs.

Surprising and informative, this well-researched book strips away many stock assumptions of conventional wisdom on the issue of guns and the black freedom struggle.

Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms Details

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Author : Nicholas Johnson

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Tereneh says

Professor Johnson is a Harvard Law graduate and law prof at Fordham University. Reading this book with that in mind is helpful. He writes building the case for both sides or should I say the many sides of the issue of gun ownership in America. Focusing on Black American gun ownership. Growing up I believed in the myth of a nonviolent Civil Rights movement. That all one needed to do was pray up, march on, sit on and sing We Shall Overcome to achieve equality. That is not the case and was never was the case.

Professor Johnson presents the horrific violence of the Black experience from Slavery to the near present, with a fine eye towards editing out the most gruesome details of lynching and mob violence. Though I still found the need to skip a paragraph or two at times. Being published in early 2014, he does not cover the recent well-publicized incidents of police brutality directed at Black people nor the American terrorists attacks on Black churches - from shootings to arson. He excels at presenting the complexity of the issue of gun ownership though I found myself more in the I would rather die shooting than be shot down like a dog camp than that of the author.

The gem, the payoff is the final chapter. Here is his summation and it is brilliant. There are no easy answers but the modern orthodoxy like all myths is too simplistic and no real answer to a complex question. Read this book regardless of your race or how you feel about guns, you will learn about American history and you will be enlightened and you may even change your stance on the issue.

Jarrell says

Professor Johnson's tracking of the people's interpretation of the right to bear arms over the past 200 or so years successfully challenges modern orthodoxy on the role of arms in the civil rights struggle.

Jonathan Blanks says

Fascinating run through American history. It as much a history of white American terrorism against black folks as it is its stated purpose of a history of blacks and guns. I plan to write a more detailed review for publishing soon.

Jeremy Hatfield says

From my perspective, it seems that the African-American community has, in general, developed an aversion to gun ownership. Given the state of things in the inner cities, it's easy to understand why some would develop that mentality.

But, it hasn't always been so, and Johnson explores the history of American blacks and gun ownership, from slavery on through the Civil Rights Era, in this book.

There, I learned how, thanks to the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, freedmen eagerly took up gun ownership to defend themselves against those who were less than ready to accept them as free men and fellow Americans, all the way from Ida B. Wells to the Deacons of Defense and Justice a few generations later.

Even if you aren't that interested in guns, the book will be of interest to those who love African-American history, especially in the aftermath of Emancipation.

Beardo Gomez says

Everyone should read this book.

Ron says

A great written history of african americans from slavery through the 1970s whose only form of a self defense was a firearm. This is a painful account of state and local law enforcement duplicity in the terrorizing and lynching of (mostly) southern blacks. The book does a great job identifying people history has overlooked who made significant contributions to protecting their communities and eventually protecting those who were marching for equality and civil rights. The book did not propose that everyone who took up arms had a satisfying outcome. In some cases, self-defense led to larger, angrier mobs of Klan and their supporters. Gun control and self defense is a difficult topic. The author did a great job of presenting both sides of the argument and why the choice of firearms should be an individual choice and not a government mandate.

Todd says

Johnson has compiled an impressive amount of historical research elucidating what he terms the "black tradition of arms." I valued Johnson's exploration of a neglected area of inquiry, even if I found myself craving a stronger organizational scheme for what amounts to a numbing avalanche of anecdotes. The section addressing the use of arms by radical groups (e.g., the Panthers) was inexplicably cursory compared to earlier chapters. The few passages of deeper analysis always came as a welcome relief, even if I often found myself in disagreement with Johnson's conclusions (e.g., "today, the malevolent state is thankfully an anachronism").

Mark says

The title and cover caught my eye when browsing Amazon. The book progresses chronologically with many anecdotal stories. While there were times when I got bogged down in keeping focused due to the sheer number of individual stories, it was definitely worth the read.

The content does seem to get a bit light when it gets up to the post 9/11 period and the Heller and McDonald decisions. Almost as if the black tradition of arms no longer exists or there is no one working to continue the tradition.

Sheehan says

Very well researched academic examination of guns in the Black community, their history in the support of self-determination.

The book does a wonderful job illustrating the difference between self-defense and political violence and the narrow line that the Black community has had to walk in proselytizing the former while protecting against immediate rhetorical urges toward the latter. There is a long storied history of ownership and use of guns to salvage personal safety and act as an immediate surrogate to often non-existent (reconstruction) to non-compliant (civil rights era) government institutions who long turned a blind eye to the security needs of the Black community.

My favorite part was the last third discussing the professionalized post-civil rights Black political era in which the rhetoric reacts to a period of high political violence by pivoting to a position of gun control and restrictions to ownership in impacted black communities. Which as you may intuit is not an empirically effective solution. The author points out a much more effective tactical solution would be to address the small but wanton subset of criminals which are actually violent offenders. This solution is generally ignored by liberal politicians afraid to court criticism or reign in the multivariate problem. As such, politicians rally around the politically expedient and financially rewarding cause of reducing the number of guns on the street in the hands of law-abiding citizens who are most readily effected by legislative solutions, instead of addressing the real toxic agents in the communities.

I'm sure I will reflect on the historical lessons of this book for a long time to come, very enjoyable.

Adrienna says

Even though this book seemed to focus on Black historical accounts during the 1960s who may have used force or a gun, I was unable to read it at this time.

Leisure read 2015

Bob Croft says

Good overview, from the Civil War on. Much detail. Particularly good final chapter on the current gun-rights debate, including conceal carry results, stats on accidents, child deaths (both few), armed robbery results (among young blacks, almost half of homicides during armed robberies result in the robber being the corpse).
