

The Gun Crisis: Where we are, how it happened, what next?

First, I'd like to acknowledge that we are on the ancestral lands of the Pawtucket and Massachusett people, whose name was appropriated by this Commonwealth, and whose land was not given but taken by some first English invaders, bringing disease and guns. I extend my respect to those who still live here today and have lived here for centuries.

Thank you for that wonderful introduction, Michael and Sarah. Being here today is special for many reasons, including the fact that the conference chair is a former student and a wonderful colleague. Thank you to the SIGDOC committee for honoring me with the RIGO award, thank you to those who took the time to nominate me, and thanks to conference committee for all you've done. I owe a debt of gratitude to many scholars in the field, from emerging scholars to professors emeriti, for opportunities and amplifying my work. I especially thank my community of scholars, including brilliant co-authors Dr. Natasha N. Jones and Dr. Octavio Pimentel, and the scholars I'm honored to teach with at Texas State.

Some of you may know that my family has a long history in Texas. On my mother's side, we trace our family's history in Texas to her mother's great grandfather, formerly enslaved across two states, working the cotton fields of Mississippi and Texas, and living to experience some freedom in Fort Bend County, Texas, right outside of Houston. According to my 97-year-old mother, a proud alum of Paul Quinn College in Waco, Texas our family has celebrated Juneteenth since long before she was born. On my father's side, we trace his family's history to my great grandparents, formerly enslaved in Rapides Parish, Louisiana. My dad's family moved to Texas from Louisiana after he and his two brothers enlisted to serve in the U.S. Army during WW2, serving in Italy and then returning to Jim Crow America. I thank God for my family, without a doubt, Dr. Thereisa Coleman. I stand here because of them.

In keeping with this year's theme: **Return, Reassess, Resolve**, I'd like to return to some unfinished business I have related to my most recent research, which encourages technical communicators to continue to

involve ourselves in the work of public policy, including the dangerous issue of guns. As you know, the U.S. Supreme Court, Congress, state governors, and state legislators have made way for laws allowing access to standard military issue rifles, and, in some states, allowing adults to carry a gun on their person without training or a license. In the U.S., we have yet to find ways to stop the mass shootings we see over and over again. **This is where we are.**

My home state, Texas, is not an easy place to live. So much so, that I recently double checked to make sure my years of government service would make way for early retirement, if needed. If we're honest, in this climate, unseasonably hot and dry, politically polarized, neither is much the world, easy that is. So, today I want to share some ideas about the U.S. and how I think we got here, and ask those of you who live here and in other countries to join me in conversation about on how to support each other in this interesting new era we find ourselves living in. I admit, I've never lived in post Roe V. Wade America or Er'body Gets an AK America, but my mother, and her mother, and her mother survived so much more. So, I draw inspiration from them as I explore our deadly relationship with guns in America. This gun business requires serious scrutiny and exploration by academics, including technical communicators. It requires that we acknowledge that we don't just face difficult conversations over holiday dinners with relatives we vehemently disagree with, but that many of us need to have these discussions in our homes, amongst ourselves. Because, quite frankly, election voting data shows that these laissez-faire opinions about guns sit squarely within our own homes, at our own dinner tables. It also requires that we are honest about the ways we are complicit and resolve to contribute our skills in communication and design. Today, I ask for patience as I walk you through three points that I've been wrestling with for the past few years: 1) how I think the U.S. arrived in its current state, 2) some hard truths that are missing from public debates, and 3) how technical communicators can contribute and work for change. I must note that my talk today will be about the gun violence crisis and will not include slides or visuals, though I will try to paint the picture.

As an African American woman and a Texan, I am no stranger to guns. Years ago, after receiving a top-break revolver passed down through generations in my family and realizing that this was a tradition on both the maternal and paternal sides of my family, I began to study the history of African Americans and guns in the United States. I imagine it is due to some need to connect these family histories to the place of guns in the Black community that I have obtained some level of expertise in the identifying and understanding the mechanics of historical pistols, revolvers, rifles, and shotguns. Because of my keen interest in African-American history, I paid special attention to those Civil War era guns issued to approximately 200,000 black soldiers who made up ten percent of the Union Army as well as those used by notable black women who could not serve in the Union but worked as spies, scouts, and nurses (Archives.Gov, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>).

After exploring the history of guns for personal reasons, I decided to expand my exploration to the modern technology and the public policy issues related to gun control and gun rights. How exactly, does a semi-automatic high-capacity rifle work? I admit, I was especially anxious after the Texas legislature passed laws that would allow students to carry guns on public university campuses. At the same time, I was also witnessing the growing number of mass shootings and wondering if I thought there might be any way common sense gun control policies would pass. I needed to know more about guns than the top break pocket revolver my grandmother brought to Texas from Louisiana and more about the people who love them.

In this effort, I attended several gun safety classes. To be clear, I did not complete this training to conduct ethnographic or participant observer research, but so that I could learn to use the technology that I had thus far studied from afar. Before taking the classes, I did not know the difference in the features or operations of high-capacity semiautomatic weapons and my family heirloom. After completion of a handgun course, the young military veteran trainer said, “Welcome to the gun community.” I had seen references to the “gun community” on YouTube by gun rights advocates who are quick to distinguish the gun community, made up staunch supporters of the National Rifle Association (NRA), from other gun owners who acquire a gun for

home protection or as heirlooms, a group that we know includes progressives and conservatives. This welcome felt nice enough, but as a Black woman, I did not feel welcomed into the very conservative community made up of advocates who express support for the NRA, a gun rights organization publicly criticized for failing to defend Black gun owners with the same vigor as White gun owners (Crump, 2017). Recall Philando Castile, the Black man in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, who had a legally registered pistol in his car, told the police it was there, did not reach for the gun, but was fatally shot by police.

Since my dad passed in 2002, my family has held an annual Memorial Day breakfast. We fill the house with my seven older siblings, cousins (some of whom we've lost along this past three years), nieces and nephews, and their children. Our last big gathering was pre Covid-19 pandemic. I remember sitting at the table with my two nephews, one who is only a couple of years my junior, a retired Army vet, who served several tours in U.S. conflicts in the Middle East. The other is a millennial small business owner, with hobbies that include time at the gun range. At some point, our discussion moved from the Houston Rockets and James Harden to guns. When I made a comment about proposed laws to ban AR-15s, they quietly shook their heads side to side in unison, saying that they would not give up their rights to semiautomatic rifles in a world where white folks kept theirs. My nephews, like Philando Castile, justly believe that they should have every right that everyone else in this country has. This issue of the equal rights to guns and what guns we should have a right to, is complicated, so let's go back in time a bit to see how this started. How Did AR15's end up in the hands of civilians? Or the millions of other high-capacity semiautomatic weapons, including tons of Mikhail Kalashnikov designed AK-47 variants that we don't talk about, but are also sold and serviced in this country, and used in mass murders.

This is How It Happened.

The point I find missing from gun policy debates is this: There is a very long history in this country of the transition of military weapons to civilians, especially the infantry rifle. After the U.S. Civil War, many

Union and Confederate issued rifles and revolvers were repurposed by civilians and civil war veterans for hunting, personal protection, and, obviously, the long-lauded American tradition of policing and terrorizing Black and Indigenous people. In the War Department's 1855 Manual of Arms, the loading process for muskets used in this war were described in seven detailed steps: Load, handle cartridge, tear cartridge, charge cartridge, draw rammer, ram cartridge, and return rammer (W J Hardee, Silas Casey p 34-36). Loading of the rifle required speed, patience, and proficiency that escaped Union soldiers as often as Confederates, especially on battle fields clouded by the smoke of black powder and challenges of being so precise with so little time. When the lead minié ball had already been shot and there was no time retreat, there was no second round, and soldiers' only hope were bayonets faceted to the top of the rifle and protruding beyond the barrel's end.

The problem is, in the U.S., the transfer of the primary infantry rifle (or standard issue rifle) to civilians has been a consistent practice for over 150 years. From the Colt 1861 Special Musket to the Colt AR-15, we've seen U.S. gun manufacturers move infantry rifles from combat to civilian closets. The transition of military weapons for civilian use was formalized in 1903 when the War Department's Appropriations Bill created a program to "boost civilian marksmanship training" and by the national Defense Act of 1916, which "authorized the War Department to distribute arms and ammunition to organized civilian rifle clubs (NRA Institute of Legislative Action, 2004). These clubs include the youth-focused Civilian Marksmanship Program, also known as CMP, a non-profit organization, which still operates today and describes the purpose of the organization as follows:

1. To instruct citizens of the United States in marksmanship
2. To promote practice and safety in the use of firearms
3. To conduct competitions in the use of firearms and to award trophies, prizes, badges and other insignia to competitors.

(Civilian Marksmanship Program, <http://thecmp.org/about/>)

Today, beyond the CMP, military surplus weapons can be purchased by civilians at gun shows, gun stores, online and storefront.

So, how did the Infantry Issued M16 transition to the Civilian AR-15, the most popular gun in America?

During the Vietnam War, the United States' standard issue rifle, the M16 was categorized as an assault rifle because it had both semiautomatic and fully automatic capabilities (Colt Manufacturing <https://www.colt.com/timeline>). Although the AR-15 does not have fully automatic capabilities of the M16, which would allow the user to shoot continuously without leaving one's finger from the trigger, the AR-15's semiautomatic action automatically moves another high-velocity .223 cartridge to the chamber after each trigger pull unlike other action rifles and shot guns (i.e. bolt, pump, and lever) that require 1) a trigger pull and 2) a bolt pull, a pump, or lever pull to cycle another round into a chamber. The semiautomatic's quick cycling of rounds into the chamber coupled with the ability to insert high-capacity magazines filled with very powerful ammunition is what makes it a controversial civilian weapon. As we all know, the AR-15 can, even without fully automatic capabilities of the M16, be used to critically injure many people in a very short amount of time.

In a March 4, 2018, New York Times article "Wounds From Military-Style Rifles? 'A Ghastly Thing to See'," Kolata and Chivers investigate the severity of wounds inflicted by AR-15s by interviewing several trauma surgeons who have operated on victims of gun violence with use of AR-15s and similar weapons and note:

"Many factors determine the severity of a wound, including a bullet's mass, velocity and composition, and where it strikes. The AR-15, like the M4 and M16 rifles issued to American soldiers, shoots lightweight, high-speed bullets that can cause grievous bone and soft tissue wounds, in part by turning sideways, or "yawing," when they hit a person. Surgeons say the weapons produce the same sort of horrific injuries seen on battlefields."

(Kolata and Chivers, 2018)

I need not recount the numerous victims, death counts, public spaces, or locations of mass murders by high-capacity semi-automatic rifles over the past years. As we know, this phenomenon, coupled deaths from suicide, homicide, and domestic violence makes gun violence a public health crisis in the United States.

When discussing the Colt AR-15 and its reproductions, many of us have opinions about who should lose access to certain guns and what levels of access to guns we should lose. This is a question that scholars in economics might ask a “rational person,” but loss aversion theory, which we borrow from cognitive psychology and economics, teaches us that consumers are seldom rational when considering losses versus gains and often view the potential of loss two times as costly (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Poldrack, 2016). The truth is, the loss of access to high-capacity semiautomatic rifles in the U.S. is more costly to some than improving public safety in movie theaters, mosques, temples, churches, stores, night clubs, grocery stores, and classrooms, from universities to elementary schools. The questions that I leave you with include the following: Who plans to try to take guns from gun rights advocates who use the slogan “Come and Take It?” Would government officials use the same assault ban policies as previously lauded bans that grandfathered in assault weapons already owned? Apparently, because the recently passed H.R.1808 - Assault Weapons Ban of 2022 says, it “does not apply to the possession, sale, or transfer of any semiautomatic assault weapon otherwise lawfully possessed under Federal law on the date of enactment of the Assault Weapons Ban of 2022.” So, if you ban high-capacity semi-automatic weapons and grandfather in the over 20 million AR-15 style guns in circulation (Business Insider, 2022), is it a ban or a band aid? I wonder what a bailout would look like. In a post-ban society, at what cost would gun owners be willing to give up their high-capacity semi-automatic weapons? This is the crisis.

So, What’s Next?

When preparing this talk, I kept running across a year that most view as a turning point in this country. It was 2004 when the assault weapons ban expired under the George W. Bush administration. I remember the rumblings, but had no idea of the implications, almost 20 years later. That year, 2004, the ATTW conference

was held in San Antonio, Texas and I presented on Texas Black Codes and the historical regulation of Black labor. Many thanks to Dr. Charles Sides for attending my presentation, emailing me, and encouraging me to submit the work to JTWC. My dissertation committee members, Drs. Susan Lang, Thomas Barker, and Ken Baake were helping me make connections between rhetoric, regulations, and race, and Susan referred me to the first edition of Dr. Jacqueline Jones Royster's brilliant 1997 work on Ida B. Wells (Wells-Barnett & Royster, 1997). In this work, we find Well's lynching reports and pamphlets. Not surprisingly, we also find guns. In the section titled, "The Case According to Wells," Royster wrote, "In both gender and race control, however, southern white men in the post-Reconstruction era reclaimed power, honor, pride, and their version of southern manners with the rope, the gun, and a cultural ideology that allowed them to define lynching and mob violence not as terrorism and race and gender control but as "right" action to avenge their honor, their manhood, their women" (Royster, 2016, p. 29). Our nation's problems with guns and terror are not new. If we join in on academic conversations or in the community debates, we can again look to studies in Rhetoric. There is a recently published edited collection titled, **Rhetoric and Guns**, edited by Lydia Wilkes, Nate Kreuter & Ryan Skinnell, which I hope to find in mailbox in Austin, Texas when I return home.

I encourage you to use your skills as rhetoricians, designers, and technical communicators to study issues related to the production, testing, marketing, distribution, and regulation of guns (Williams, 2022). As important as our scholarship, there is an urgent need to support survivors and victims of gun violence in the community. On July 1st of this year, I received a text from my niece, a doctoral student in clinical psychology, saying that she'd co-authored an article about trauma and the emotional effects of gun violence on Black and Latino children. As I read their article, I thought of the gun violence survivors in Uvalde, Texas and across the U.S. As a technical communicator, there's one quote from the article that stuck out to me. They wrote, "... it is critical to consider the racial/ethnic context of loss experiences in social action efforts, including advocacy, grant writing, and resource distribution."

Let me make this plain: **Advocacy**, aren't advocates?

Grant-Writing, don't we have a proposal writing chapter prominently displayed in all of our textbooks and tell our students it's what we know how to do?

Resource Distribution – don't we know how to write, design, and distribute accessible, multilingual resources?

On the same day that I received the text from my niece, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece titled, "Stop Asking Those Closest to Tragedy to Do the Heaviest Lifting," by Nelba Márquez-Greene. The author is also a therapist and mother of Ana Grace, a child who was shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in New Town, Connecticut. In the piece, she shared that after the mass shooting of children and teachers at Robb Elementary in Ulvade, Texas, she opened her email to find requests that she share the autopsy photos of her child, I guess in an effort to make a graphic, visual argument against gun violence in the way Emmitt Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, did with regard to racial violence and lynchings of Black people. In regard to gun violence, Ms. Márquez- Greene wrote, and I quote "The demands on survivors to sacrifice their privacy and lives are misguided and ultimately only serve to weaken the gun safety movement. Our country's problems with guns will not be fixed with images of dead children. Lower your gaze and do the work without asking for any more blood from me." She also wrote, "In the fight against gun violence, we need two teams: One for all the change that needs to happen and another for the immediate and long-term comfort and support of the survivors. Sometimes those are the same teams, but often they're not."

I leave you one question: Which team are you on? Thank you and, I'm happy to take questions.

References

Archives.gov (n.d.) Black soldiers during the civil war. Retrieved from:

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>

Civilian Marksmanship Program (n.d.) About the CMP. Retrieved from: <http://thecmp.org/about/>

Colt Manufacturing (n.d.) The colt history Retrieved from: <https://www.colt.com/timeline>

Commission on Ordnance and Ordnance Stores (1855) Springfield Armory, Hardee, W. J.,

Casey, S. (Eds.) (2017) Manual of arms: Drill, tactics, rifle maintenance for infantry soldiers during the American civil war. United Kingdom: Leonaur.

Crump, Benjamin. (2017, June 29). Where is NRA's forceful statement on Philando Castile's

trampled rights? USA Today. Retrieved from:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/spotlight/2017/06/29/castile-gun-nra-rights-policing-the-usa/437110001/>

Cummings, W. & Jansen, B. (2018. Feb 14) Why the AR-15 keeps appearing in America's

deadliest mass shootings. USA Today. Retrieved from:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/02/14/ar-15-mass-shootings/339519002/>

Douglas, R, Kaplow, J, & Alvis, L. (2022). Wounds Inequities in Bereavement and Grief

Experiences of Black and Latinx Adolescents: Considering the Role of Homicide Exposure in

Symptoms and Implications for Treatment, Society for Research on Adolescence. Retrieved from:

https://www.s-ra.org/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2022&month=07&day=01&id=141:hidden-wounds-inequities-in-bereavement-and-grief-experiences-of-black-and-latinx-adolescents-considering-the-role-of-homicide-exposure-in-symptoms-and-implications-for-treatment

Heath, D., Hansen, E., Willingham, A.J. (2017, December 14). How an 'ugly,' unwanted weapon became the most popular rifle in America. Cnn.Com. Retrieved from:

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/14/health/ar15-rifle-history-trnd/index.html>

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American Psychologist*, 39(4), 341–350.

Kolata, G. & Chivers, C.J. (2018, March 4). Wounds from military-style rifles? ‘A ghastly thing to see. New York Times. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/health/parkland-shooting-victims-ar15.html>

Loh, M. (May 20, 2022) America has 20 million AR-15 style rifles in circulation, and more guns than people in the country. *Business Insider*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-20-million-ar-15-style-rifles-in-circulation-2022-5#:~:text=Around%2019.8%20million%20AR-15%20style%20rifles%20are%20in,2020%20statement%20by%20the%20National%20Shooting%20Sports%20Foundation>

Myre, G. (2018, February 28). A brief history of the AR-15. NPR.com Retrieved from:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/02/28/588861820/a-brief-history-of-the-ar-15>

NRA Institute for Legislative Action (2004, August 2). The civilian marksmanship program Retrieved from:

<https://www.nraila.org/articles/20040803/the-civilian-marksmanship-program>

Poldrack, R.A. (2016, July 1) What Is loss aversion? *Scientific American*.

Retrieved from:<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-loss-aversion/>

Pukula, A. & Mulligan, R. (1963) *To kill a mockingbird*, United States, Universal Pictures

U.S. War Department. (1862) Mowbray, S.C. and Heroux, J. (Eds.) (1998) *Civil War Arms*

Markers and Their Contract: A Facsimile Reprint of the Report by the Commission of Ordnance Stores.

Andrew Mowbray Publishing, Lincoln, RI

Watkins, A. Ismany, J. and Gibbons-Neff, T. (2018, March 3). Once banned, now loved and

loathed: How the AR-15 became ‘America’s Rifle’. *New York Times*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/03/us/politics/ar-15-americas-rifle.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

Wells-Barnett, I. B., & Royster, J. J. (1997). *Southern horrors and other writings: The anti-*

lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900. Bedford Books.

Wells-Barnett, I. B., & Royster, J. J. (2016). *Southern horrors and other writings: The anti-*

lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900. (2nd Edition). Bedford Books.

Williams, M.F. (2022) Gun Control and Gun Rights: A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Public Policy Issues in Technical and Professional Communication, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 31:1, 33-43, DOI: 10.1080/10572252.2021.1963487