Explaining the NRAs radical transformation: the role of identity and strategy in discursive boundary work and the emergence of sub-group dominance

William A. Sisk

University at Albany, State University of New York, siskwilliam@gmail.com

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the Political Science Commons, Public Administration Commons, and the Public Policy Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
EXPLAINING THE NRA’S RADICAL TRANSFORMATION: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND STRATEGY IN DISCURSIVE BOUNDARY WORK AND THE EMERGENCE OF SUB-GROUP DOMINANCE

by

William A. Sisk

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy

Department of Public Administration and Policy

Spring 2022
ABSTRACT

This dissertation asks how a radical faction within the National Rifle Association (NRA) took over the organization and transformed it into such a dominant force in American politics. To address this question, the researcher conducted a historical discourse analysis of articles and letters in two prominent gun magazines – *Guns & Ammo* and *Field & Stream* – during a critical period of development from 1958 to 1978. The project integrates existing theoretical models based on identity (Castells 2004) and discourse coalitions (Dodge & Metze 2016; Hajer 1995) to understand the process by which coalitional boundaries get shaped and reshaped in policy language, as well as the dynamic interplay between sub-group identity formations, the particular strategic political actions sub-groups take, and the development of sub-group dominance. This dissertation has relevant implications for the study of advocacy organizations, discourse theory, and American politics. It provides new insights about the development of the NRA and the gun rights movement in America. Additionally, it has important implications for studying the development of group polarization and sub-group dominance more generally, phenomena accelerating in politics around the globe.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much like the policy development this dissertation details, the development of scholarship and the scholars that help build it is neither a singular individualized pursuit nor a linear stable process. It is a collective, messy, and ongoing effort. I want to thank SUNY Albany and the Department of Public Administration and Policy at Rockefeller College for giving me the opportunity to pursue my PhD. Thanks to all the instructors and staff at Rockefeller that supported me through a long and difficult journey. I am so fortunate to have known and learned from so many unique and supportive people. You all made me a better researcher, a better writer, and a better teacher. I want to thank all my colleagues in the department who were kind enough to share their time and ideas, and were willing to give me constructive feedback on my work. To the classmates I am fortunate enough to call my friends, I could not ask for a better or brighter group to struggle through this with and I cannot wait to transform the ideas we’ve ruminated on over the years into published ones together. A special thanks to my committee for their exceptional expertise, encouragement, patience, and commitment to help me finish. Patty, you are fearless, rad, and unapologetically yourself. When others gravitate toward the trendy you always manage to see the angle everyone else missed. You always ask the interesting questions and find the most innovative ways to answer them. Julie, you are one of the best scholars on the planet. Nothing gets by you. You see the big picture in even the smallest details. Everything you write blows my mind, but it is your compassion for others that truly sets you apart. Jennifer, I could not have done this without you. You made me better. You were uncompromising in your standards and unwavering in your support. Your ability to understand, process, and apply theory is simply unmatched. Even with all you’ve taught me, there’s still so much I hope to learn from you. I cannot help but admire your professionalism, commitment to your craft, your incredible perceptiveness, and your empathy. I could not have asked for a better mentor.

Thanks to my family for all their love and support every step of the way. You were there whenever I needed it, and forgave me when I missed things to finish my work. When I needed a place to crash for a conference presentation or data gathering mission, you were there for me. When I was struggling you never failed to come through for me. When I wanted to gloss over little victories you celebrated them. Finally, thanks to my partner Megan. You are a rock star and you are my rock. In my darkest hours you kept me going. You never fail to cheer me up or calm me down. You keep it so real that I cannot believe you are a real person. I am in awe of you. You inspire me. I cannot thank you enough for all the things you do for me or adequately express how grateful I am to have you in my life.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

2. THEORY & METHODS: USING DISCOURSE COALITIONS & IDENTITY THEORY TO EXPLAIN SUB-GROUP DOMINANCE IN THE NRA


7. CONCLUSIONS

8. APPENDIX

9. WORKS CITED
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The National Rifle Association of America (NRA) is one of the most visible and influential political lobbies in American politics. There is no shortage of articles, books, documentaries, and other forms of media covering the organization. That attention is well earned. For decades, the NRA has helped shape American gun policy, reshape political parties, and dominated the discussion about the role guns in America. However, while the organization’s effectiveness as a lobby is well documented, and recent scholarship has suggested that its role as a partisan political lobby is a relatively new one (with most noting the change of its leadership in 1977 as a major turning point), these accounts still understate the apparently remarkable nature of the rise and continued dominance of its most radical members.

Although gun control is still often taken for granted as a partisan wedge issue neatly dividing Democrats and Republicans, surveys suggest that with respect to certain gun policies, the demand for gun regulation is closer to a valence issue than a partisan wedge. One recent national poll from 2019 found 90 percent of American that were surveyed supported universal background checks for all gun purchases (Grabmeier 2020). That same survey found that while support for mandatory waiting periods to buy a firearm was lower among gun owners than non-gun owners, the disparity was not nearly so large as one might expect, with 72 percent of gun owners still supporting waiting periods compared to 85 percent of non-gun owners (Ibid 2020). There numbers were consistent with other national surveys like the one conducted by Public Policy Polling, which found that background checks were supported by 83 percent of gun owners, 81 percent of Republican gun owners, and even 72 percent of NRA members (Center for American Progress 2015). Pollster Frank Lunz’s 2012 survey also suggested similar trends (Ibid 2015). Even the NRA’s own internal surveys indicate the persistence of these trends, a fact that
NRA leaders have carefully guarded. In his book *Ricochet*, former NRA lobbyist Richard Feldman recounted, “National polls (Gallup, media-sponsored surveys, etc.) showed great public support for background checks. What the pollsters did not know, and we kept closely guarded, was the fact that our own polling showed that gun owners and even a majority of NRA members supported background checks” (Feldman 2008, p. 181).

If polls and surveys – even the NRA’s own internal ones – continue to show considerable gaps between the opinions of the organization’s general membership and the NRA’s official policy stances, that destabilizes much of what we think we know about the NRA’s transformation in the 1960’s and 70’s, and more importantly, how and why the NRA has managed to dominate American politics for decades. The NRA’s power is supposed to come from their ability to consistently mobilize members against any gun control policies and for policies expanding gun rights. If data suggests that a relatively small contingent of the organization is doing most of that work, and the majority either only weakly support those policies or do not support that entire agenda, we may need to rethink how we understand the dynamics and power of the NRA. Moreover, such revelations suggest we may need to question what we think we know about the dynamics and power of other similar kinds of advocacy organizations. If the radical takeover of the NRA did not even necessarily involve the full conversion of a majority of their own membership (let alone a majority of gun owners, Republicans, or the non-gun-owning public) to embrace their uncompromising issue positions, then what explains the continued power and influence of their most polarized members? Put another way, if there seems to be such a significant misalignment between the NRA’s issue positions and the attitudes of a significant share of their membership, how did the organizations most polarized members grow so dominant, take over the leadership, and keep the others
onboard or at the very least, in check? Although both identity-driven theories explaining group
dominance through intensity of preferences (Lacombe 2018; Meltzer 2009; Luker 1984) and
more resource-driven theories (Goss 2006; Schumann & Presser 1981) provide some useful
insights, I argue that a discourse analytic approach that combines elements of identity theory
provides a useful alternative approach that sheds light on the connections between different
mechanisms of dominance.

This dissertation asks how a radical faction within the NRA managed to take over the
organization and transform it into such a dominant political force without necessarily enjoying
the presumed advantages of superior numbers, superior resources, or – at least prior to their
takeover – control of the leadership. To do so, this study traces the evolution of the pro-gun
movement during a critical period of transition, tracking political language and patterns of
communication in specialized gun media sources associated with the NRA from their rise in the
late 1950s and early 1960s until the takeover of the National Rifle Association (NRA) by a more
radical faction of members at the 1977 convention. By analyzing the discourse in two prominent
magazines representing a range of different and evolving pro-gun perspectives – Guns & Ammo
and Field & Stream – I examined how the choice of discursive strategies in these magazines, and
what they reveal about the interplay between identity formation and an increasingly fractured
identity or set of identities, on one hand, and the political tactics and strategies, on the other, as
they played out over time and shaped real coalitions and policy formulation. The study provides
an alternative explanation for how discourses that are not as widely accepted or popular can still
come to exert tremendous control on political agendas and public policy choices in advocacy
organizations. In doing so, the project aims to integrate existing models based on identity
(Castells 2004) and discourse coalitions (Dodge & Metze 2016; Hajer 1995) to understand how
the strength and importance of group identities in policy language can make it much more or much less motivating for certain individuals and groups to take particular forms of political action.

**Contributions & Main Arguments**

This work makes contributions to the literatures on advocacy organizations as well as the literature on discourse coalitions. First, my main arguments and contribution in the work concern the literature on NRA and sub-group domination of advocacy organizations more generally. My central argument is that the NRA’s most radical members have succeeded not just in using identity-driven discourse to promote greater group cohesion of their core collective, but also in the manner that their discourse has destabilized the potential cohesion among their counterparts in ways that have closed off alternative coalitional alliances. Radicals not only divided and conquered as a strategy but worked to maintain realignment and resorting of divided forces through the construction of weaker consensus among them. The NRA’s radical hardline gun advocates thus maintained their power not just by virtue of the high motivation they inspire in their core members (which is well documented and explained in multiple studies) but in the more general complacency they have worked to maintain among the others. Radicals constructed complacency in discourse not on the basis of total agreement on gun policy or tactics, but rather on the construction of agreement of shared enemies and shared interests, appealing to core commitments and threats to masculinity, tradition, and culture in ways that limited internal challenges and kept skeptics from mobilizing across partisan lines.

In short, I argue that the transformation of the NRA did occur, but that the nature of that shift was not just built on the strong mobilizing identity of radicals (Carter 1997; Vizzard 2000;
Meltzer 2009; Lacombe 2018) but also depended just as critically on the disorganization and pacification of dissent, and removal of “cross-cutting” allegiances (Powell 1976). The process of pacification began to take shape following the passage of the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA), with radicals showing significant progress and success on this front by 1975. Thus, the NRA’s transformation was not so much a radical transformation of identity per se, so much as a more gradual realignment of priorities and alliances revolving around that conception of identity, radicalizing some while pacifying others. Rather than a clean split or linear process, there was considerable fragmentation at times as groups resorted the boundaries of their coalitional identities and strategies (Metze & Dodge 2016). My account also challenges some other contemporary scholarship which treats the NRA as a more unitary actor (either in its leadership or in its membership), that its development has involved stable coalitions, or that the NRA has relied on traditional forms of authority to dominate.

While many – including radical NRA leaders themselves – describe their takeover of the leadership at the 1977 convention as a victory over a retreat from politics, compromise on guns, and a drift towards a feminine birdwatching society, I argue that this widely accepted narrative mischaracterizes the state of the leadership and membership at that point in time. On the contrary, I argue that the NRA’s genuine commitment to conservation was being undermined from within the organization long before the change of leadership in 1977, and had all but lost genuine or principled support within the organization by 1975 (especially among the core leadership and board of directors). The so-called moderate old guard1 leadership which would be removed in the takeover arguably enjoyed stronger connections to conservative politics and

---

1 I borrowed the categories of old guard and hardline from existing NRA scholarship (Sugarmann 1992; Davidson 1998; Carter 1995; Meltzer 2009; Winkler 2014) generally describing the old guard as the moderate leaders removed from power in 1977, and hardliners as the more radical coalition of gun owners that took over. As I will discuss in Chapter two, I developed additional distinctions and categories to describe NRA coalitions.
parties than the radicals at that time, worked hard behind closed doors to support developments like the Trans-Alaska pipeline, and were more concerned with managing growing budget deficits by 1975 than the growing radicalism of a sub-group of their membership. Far from being the moderates and conservationists described by hardliner accounts and historians, the remaining leaders by that point were primarily elite opportunists who had already worked with and enabled radicals to shut down the possibility of counter-mobilization for a genuine alternative and balanced agenda. Following the success of these coalitions in pacifying and demobilizing conservationists, it ironically made this faction an easy scapegoat for radical activists looking to building a more principled and unyielding gun rights movement. Elites who were more focused on material interests and sought to attract external resources by coopting the conservation cause were caught off-guard by radicals who turned on them and lumped them in with feminine birdwatchers. Having already embraced hardline identity discourses to pacify conservationists, the remaining leaders lacked the discursive or ideational basis to effectively moderate or challenge radicals.

Second, with respect to the discourse literature, the above dynamic is similar to some other descriptions of discursive dominance whereby a coalition can dominate by setting the terms of debate in a way that aligns best with their chosen preferences (Hajer 1995). Although the ultimate dominance of the radical sub-group in the NRA case did not involve the construction of a full consensus, it still reflected a persistent consensus about the maintenance of identity being the central issue at stake, even for otherwise more fragmented groups of shooters. While not making radical victory a forgone conclusion or entirely path dependent, the continued centrality of defending key elements of shooter identity provided radicals a discursive advantage by priming hunter/conservationists to argue in terms less favorable to them, frequently making
even the proposition of alliances with other naturalist groups more functionalist and fleeting. For example, birdwatchers could be described as useful allies in blocking wetland destruction, but were still treated as temporary partners whose greater concern for birds would eventually trump their tolerance of hunters.

With that said, Hajer’s (1995) characterization of two dominant coalitions seems more out of step with complex reality, as the progression of coalitional development in the NRA started from a loose shared identity space, grew into more dichotomous split, progressed to further fragmentation, and finally sub-group domination in the span of 20 years. Metze & Dodge (2016) advanced the field by showing multiples sub-coalitions can have a significant impact on policy (via discourse). This study adds to the study of discourse coalitions by not only demonstrating these approaches’ usefulness beyond the bounds of a single policy debate but also by demonstrating the flexibility of the model for less scientized debates, retrofitting identity as an alternative mechanism to facts by which coalitional boundaries may be negotiated. By adding Castells’ (2004) theories of identity to the DDC framework proposed by Metze & Dodge (2016), this dissertation makes a valuable contribution to the discourse coalitions literature by providing a more explicit approach to defining identity in discourse and the elements comprising identities, allowing researchers to explore the dynamics by which they might evolve and be negotiated in boundary work (Metze 2010; Metze & Dodge 2016).

This approach to studying discourse coalitions may be particularly useful alternative to Hajer’s approach in studying periods of social transformation where there are both deep fights over values and where the scope of the conflict is not easily bounded either temporally or by policy domain. As I will argue, the NRA case supports other theories that argue that significant political development is not only long running but can precede significant and visible policy
changes, and is not neatly or clearly bounded by organizational or government boundaries (Hattam 2007; Lowndes 2010). The development of the NRA was neither confined to a particular policy domain (Sabatier 1987) or policy stream (Kingdon 1984), and reflected a complex and confusing overlap of actors and discourses that spanned different levels, state and non-state actors, material interests, and other social developments.

**Implications**

This dissertation will help explain *how small and more radical factions within advocacy organizations develop and how they can come to dominate larger groups and their political agendas*. Understanding the development of the NRA from an alternative perspective has important implications for understanding the current state of politics, not just in field of gun policy, but in the wider field of American politics. It can help explain the development of other polarized groups, especially on the far right, who have adopted similar discursive strategies.

First, with respect to the advocacy literature, this work adds to our understanding about the role that elites play in coalitions and challenges assumptions about the inevitability, durability, or unilateral dominance of resourced elites (Michels 1911; Schattschneider 1960). While elite support still figured prominently in the balance of coalitional power in the NRA, their material power did not translate into full or stable dominance of the NRA’s agenda. Their temporary support or tolerance of coalitional alliances remained important features of coalitional success, but their interests were never truly dominant in the traditional sense. Contrary to Winters & Page (2009) expectation that elite dominance is more likely to emerge in policy areas directly connected to the protection of their wealth, the material interests of elite NRA leaders may have generated competing interests and additional “cross-pressure” (Mason 2018) which
complicated their messaging and limited their range of strategies. Additionally, resourced elites’ need to mask their true material preferences seems to have contributed to their struggle to control the terms of debate, as it seemed to make them grow increasingly reliant on adopting the discourses of other coalitions to support their agenda. Thus, this dissertation challenges assumptions that resourced elites can maintain their power by virtue of their positions and resources alone, easily control information, or maintain a stable plurality of support without significant concessions.

Second, this dissertation supports a view of advocacy groups – even the older and more established organizations – as more volatile and less unified than we may be inclined to treat them in analysis. Even organizations which may appear large and unified over time may in fact, face ongoing debates, divisions, and evolution which may otherwise confound researcher’s expectations about their behaviors. The NRA’s development was neither linear nor easily predicted. NRA radicals nearly chose separatism rather than insurrection. Radical NRA members could not have taken over without the assistance and complacence, however temporary, of more pragmatic interests such as politicians, gun manufacturers, and industrialists. Rather than take group cohesion as a given, we should question assumptions about groups as unitary actors with clear motives or stable dynamics, even and perhaps especially the ones that appear to remain prominent and powerful. Ignoring these dynamics not only risks downplaying the ongoing work advocacy groups often engage in to maintain themselves but also the potentially misses the reasons and techniques by which groups may transform themselves. Drawing attention to these internal dynamics may help explain otherwise surprising or confusing advocacy group developments, including recent actions taken by the NRA when it briefly supported the banning
of “bump-stocks” that functionally transformed many semi-automatic firearms into fully automatics ones only to turn and around and legally challenge banning such devices later.

Third, this dissertation expands the typical picture of successful advocacy group mobilization as consensus building projects (Sabatier 1987; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier & Weible 2007) or defection as representing failure (Jenkins-Smith et al. 1991) and considers the circumstances by which consensus breaking may put certain sub-groups, particularly more radical ones, in stronger and more dominant positions. The fragmented nature of power in the American political system makes it such that for powerful groups, they may stand to gain as much if not more from defeating consensus and stirring controversy as they do from building their own consensus. In doing so, it also reinforces social movement literature which highlights the vulnerability of broad-based mobilizing strategies (Gitlin 1980; Mansbridge 1986) to breakdowns in cooperation and factionalism, especially when political identity remains a critical feature of a groups’ dynamics.

Finally, this work makes a contribution to the literature on discourse and discourse and discourse coalitions (Hajer 1995). Metze & Dodge (2016) advanced the field by showing multiples sub-coalitions can have a significant impact on policy via discourse. I add to this by not only demonstrating the model’s usefulness beyond the bounds of a single policy debate but also by demonstrating the flexibility of the model for less scientized debates, retrofitting identity as an alternative mechanism to facts by which coalitional boundaries may be negotiated. By bringing the discourse literature into more direct conversation with identity-based theories (Castells 2004) it provides a more complete picture of the progression of coalitional development in the NRA and the discursive interactions and choices that helped shape the organization’s alliances and strategies over time. Such an approach also directs greater attention to the
alternative paths and progressions the organization might have followed, and helps explain how
certain paths were chosen over others.

**Roadmap of the Chapters Ahead**

In the chapters ahead I will introduce the literature, analytical concepts, and necessary
background context that will be foundational for understanding both the NRA and my analysis of
the organization’s development. Chapter two starts by providing a brief overview of NRA and
existing NRA scholarship before covering the explanations for sub-group dominance in the
advocacy group literature, including elite theories (Michels 1911; Schattschneider 1960; Bakal
1968; Gilens & Page, 2014), group intensity theories (Luker 1984; Kleck 1991; Vizzard 2000;
Aronow & Miller 2016), coordination/resource mobilization theories (Schuman & Presser 1981;
Mansbridge 1986; Goss 2006), theories based on the construction of salient political identities
(Melzer 2009; Lacombe 2018), and finally discursive dominance (Hajer 1995; 2006). Although
each provides useful insights for understanding advocacy groups, I explain why I think my
theoretical approach integrating identity-driven theories (Castells 2004) with a historical
discourse analysis using a Dynamic Discourse Coalitions (DDC) approach (Metze & Dodge
2016) provides a more complete understanding of sub-group development and dominance that is
particularly useful for identifying and analyzing the emergence/outsized influence of radical sub-
groups. Chapter two concludes with a summary of my methods, including data selection, data
collection, and a summary of my analysis, including the definitions of key concepts, categories,
and codes I developed. This will include a discussion of my concept of inflection points, how I
adapted the concept from existing literature, and how the concept informed my periodization
strategy for the empirical chapters.
Each of the four empirical chapters follows a different period of coalitional development and the dynamic changes in that period which will gradually lead to the development of radical sub-group dominance of the NRA. Chapter 3 provides additional background detail about the founding of the NRA from 1871 to 1958, especially the roots of the NRA’s connections to patriotism, conservation, and traditional American masculinity that will be at the center of gunowner’s identities. The chapter then details the development of the American sportsmen identity from 1958 to 1963, the preferred priorities and strategies connected to it, and the early divergence of a contingent of hardline members growing more vocal by 1960 who begin to articulate a more distinctive identity, though do not yet distinguish their strategies – particularly with respect to policy compromise – on that basis yet. Chapter 2 covers the breakdown into two increasingly distinctive discourse coalitions – the hardline and the old guard – that followed the Kennedy assassination at the end of 1963, and the subsequent realignment of identity and strategy embraced by each coalition which followed between 1964 and 1968. The chapter explains the divergent interpretations and coalitional formations that developed around key inflection points, including Kennedy’s death, the passage of gun legislation in Philadelphia and New Jersey, and the growing relevance of conservation and environmental pressure on hunters. The chapter closes with the passage of the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA) and explains why the hardliners were gaining some influence but were not yet able to grow more dominant.

The final two empirical chapters explain the increasing fragmentation of discourse coalitions, leading to the eventual dominance of the radical hardline coalition. Chapter 5 explores the significant and dynamic development of coalitions from 1969 to 1974, with the old guard further dividing into old guard conservationists and a more conservative rural hunting coalition while the hardline divided into pragmatists more driven by the interests of the gun industry and
radicals more driven by the preservation of their social identities. The chapter delves deeper into the concepts of bridging and demarcation strategies in discourse, exploring the initial momentum of the old guard coalition in building discursive bridges to non-shooting conservation allies before those bonds began breaking down in the later part of the period. One demarcation strategy in particular that figured prominently in the breakdown of the old guard was what I term the “anti-hunting” demarcation. The strategy would not only become more frequent in this period but also would be more forcefully applied to old guard allies such as conservation politicians, government agencies, and non-shooting conservation groups. Chapter 5 explores the dynamic interplay between material interests and identity, the variable sources of inflection points as well as the variable interpretations of them, and the often messy/non-linear process of coalitional development. Chapter 6 examines the period from 1975 to 1978 and the circumstances by which radical hardliners began to dominate key elements of discourse – especially with respect to identity and the appropriate range of strategies it supported. It explains how pragmatist’s efforts to pacify radicals by letting them establish their own internal institutional arrangements signaled radical victories in pacifying pragmatists before finally taking over the leadership of the NRA at the 1977 annual meeting. The chapter follows the final efforts of both pragmatic and radical hardline coalitions to realign the fragmented old guard coalitions to support their preferred agendas, and explains why pragmatists in particular struggled to address radical challenges. The chapter also calls into question the authenticity of pragmatist’s efforts to support conservation by establishing an Outdoor Center, which also helps explain why those efforts not only enraged radicals but also failed to mobilize old guard fragments. Chapter 7 summarizes the key findings and contributions of the dissertation as well as the implications of the work for future research.
CHAPTER 2: THEORY & METHODS: USING DISCOURSE COALITIONS & IDENTITY THEORY TO EXPLAIN SUB-GROUP DOMINANCE IN THE NRA

How, why, and when do radical sub-groups dominate policy decisions in advocacy organizations, even when they appear to represent a relatively small proportion of the membership? The NRA provides an ideal case for understanding the development of more extreme sub-group mobilization and dominance. It represents an opportunity to both explore the development and takeover of a radical sub-group, one that continues to confound both normative democratic ideals as well as many of our most popular theoretical explanations for a groups’ dominance within the NRA and advocacy group literatures. Broadly speaking, explanations for the development and dominance of sub-groups in the advocacy organization literature and overlapping NRA literature include elite theories treating subgroup dominance as an inevitable consequence of organizational size and structure (Michels 1911; Schattschneider 1960; Bakal 1968; Gilens & Page, 2014), explanations based on comparative intensity of preferences (Luken 1984; Kleck 1991; Vizard 2000; Aronow & Miller 2016), and alternative theories of coordination and resource mobilization (Schuman & Presser 1981; Mansbridge 1986; Goss 2006). While the edges of contemporary literature are no easily separated into classical divisions of hard and soft sources of power and influence, most place greater emphasis on the relationship between access to material resources such as money, elite positions, etc. or solidarity resources which are more identity-driven.

This dissertation is situated in other literature and studies of policy advocacy and advocacy coalitions (See Sabatier 1987; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier & Weible 2007), especially groups’ configurations and roles in policy frame development (Schon & Rein 1994; Benford & Snow 2000), and how those developments influence policy and politics. Although each of these theories provide useful insights for understanding the NRA and groups
like them, I will argue that theories which have used the NRA’s construction of a salient political identity (Melzer 2009; Lacombe 2018) provide some of the most useful insights. By integrating some of these identity theories from the sociological tradition along with a discourse analytic approach to research, I hope to more explicitly connect the dots between the constitutive roles of language, context, and interests in group interactions and coalitional development in context, and the implications for these developmental processes on future policy developments.

I will briefly review some of the current perspectives and explain why addressing certain disagreements is non-trivial. Although I find that identity-driven theories of social movements represent the most useful explanations for sub-group dominance in the NRA, I make the case for why integrating a Dynamic Discourse Coalitions (DDC) approach (Metze & Dodge 2016) provides a more complete understanding of sub-group development and dominance. In doing so, I hope to not only add to the historical literature on the NRA’s development but also to make a meaningful contribution to the discourse literature by combining discursive approaches with identity theories which are often competitive with rather than complementary to discourse perspectives. I conclude the section by summarizing the methodological approach to discourse I adopted, along with the key assumptions of it.

**General Intro to the NRA: Beginnings, Structure, and Takeover**

The NRA was founded in 1871 not long after the American Civil War in New York as a civilian marksmanship and training organization. The target demographic was young men of military age who may look to enlist in the armed forces and wanted to improve their accuracy with their service rifles. Gradually, the organization added new kinds of training and priorities, expanding its interest in law enforcement and pistol training by the 1920s. Not long after, the
NRA started to make some of its first serious forays into gun legislation, lobbying state and local governments to adopt uniform pistol licensing standards to make transporting firearms across state lines for competition and training easier (Winkler 2014). By 1934, the NRA found itself in its first major battles to combat strict legislation, watering down but ultimately supporting what would become the National Firearms Act of 1934 (NFA). This would set the standard for NRA negotiations on firearms policy going forward, an issue that would not pop up again on a national scale until the 1960s, by which time the organization had continued to expand its membership into hunting and related issues policy connected to that pastime such as the protection of land and wildlife that supported the shooting sports. The organization by that time had also developed a leadership structure that consisted of 75 board members, elected every three years by the organizations Life Members, dues-paying members in good standing, which mostly means they had to have been in the organization for at least 5 years and paid their annual fees. The board was responsible for electing a president every two years, who among other things was responsible for the selection of the nominating committee for board seats. The hierarchical structure of the organization made major shakeups in the leadership difficult, with some such suggesting the board and leadership was virtually “self-perpetuating” (Bakal 1968). This made the takeover of the organization’s leadership by a radical sub-group of its members at the annual convention in 1977 all the more surprising. This faction would steer the organization away from pastimes to a more exclusive focus on politics, and more importantly, a refusal to compromise on those politics. The organization today boasts over 4 million members and is widely considered one of the most effective political lobbies in Washington, routinely ensuring that gun legislation does not pass at the federal level and in many cases, rarely even comes to a vote.
NRA Scholarship and Contestation Over Political Development

Most scholarship detailing the development of the NRA has discussed the importance of the hardline takeover of the NRA in 1977 at its convention in Cincinnati, with most defining it the central turning point for the organization, transforming the group’s primary mission from a sports shooting organization to a politically conservative lobby (Sugarmann 1992; Davidson 1992; Carter 1997; Vizzard 2000; Goss 2006; Melzer 2009; Winkler 2014). However, explanations about the nature and impetus of this change vary. Some have basically treated it has a hostile takeover by powerful interests (Sugarmann 1992; Davidson 1992; Carter 1997) while others have treated it as the result of a shift in either a plurality of members (Tartaro 1981) or a “significant” portion of NRA members (Vizzard 2000, p. 94) affirming gun rights as a central priority. I will argue that each perspective provides a partial but incomplete picture of the development of sub-group dominance, with some treating the takeover as the result of a sudden shift (Davidson 1992; Carter 1997; Winkler 2014) or an inevitable progression (Vizzard 2000; Melzer 2009) rather than the product of a chain of prior work, alliances, and developments (Goss 2006). Additionally, I will argue that each of these perspectives have either ignored intergroup tensions in the NRA or treated tensions as more binary and stable over time than they actually were. In the final section, I present an alternative account of the final takeover by radicals, pointing to key details that have been overlooked in the historical record about the events leading to the takeover, and provide a meta-critique of persistent trends in the NRA literature which have framed the takeover as either more or less revolutionary than it appears to have been.
Policy Theory and Sub-Group Dominance

A more general goal of this dissertation is to help explain the emergence of sub-group dominance of organizations and their policy agendas. One group of theories to help explain sub-group development and domination are elite theories of organization and policy-making. Elite theories suggest that elite domination of organizations is the rule, not the exception. Classical theorist Robert Michels’ study of the German Social Democratic Party in the early 1900’s proposed the “iron law of oligarchy”, an elite theory suggesting that the natural development of bureaucratic hierarchy that emerges in all organizations – even democratic ones – will inevitably lead to the centralized power of a leadership which controls authority and decisions. Michels’ assumes that once power is concentrated in the hands of a few, decisions will increasingly reflect the interests and perspectives of the leaders, whose powers over sanction and reward of members, as well as the ability to promote allies who share their views, inevitably leads to elite domination and a self-perpetuating oligarchy (Michels 1911). E.E. Schattschneider’s later critique of interest group pluralism in the US similarly suggested that the whole range of organizations competing over policy decisions was heavily skewed in favor of wealthy elites, with the pressure system reflecting a fraction of minority rather than genuine plurality of perspectives (1960). A 2014 study of thousands of policies in the US all but replicated Schattschneider’s predictions, with economic elites and organized interests demonstrating far greater influence on political outcomes while public opinion showed no significant impact (Gilens & Page 2014).

On the one hand, the NRA certainly seems to conform to certain elements of elite theory. The NRA’s structure is unquestionably an elite and hierarchical one and has been since before even the publication of Michel’s study in 1911. Although it has had a relatively large board – 75
members prior to the 1970’s and later bumped up to 76 members today – each of whom serves for a term of 3-years, the organization’s bi-laws specify a structure that was and still is tightly controlled from the top, with researcher Carl Bakal once literally referring to the board as “virtually self-perpetuating” (Bakal 1968, p. 132). Candidate selection for the board was specified by a nominating committee, with the committee’s choices for nomination being mostly past or present directors. Moreover, the 11-man nominating committee was selected by the president, also elected by the board every two years along with the 20-member executive committee (Ibid, p. 132). Even after the takeover of the leadership and reforms in 1977, the organization remained hierarchical and arguably more tightly controlled from the top following the reforms, with more power and influence concentrated in the position of the executive vice president (Tartaro 1981).

However, in other respects, the NRA’s development seems to challenge certain assumptions about the nature of elite power predicted by these theories, as well as the relationship between organizational elites and the rank-and-file. First, elite control of the NRA was not as stable as most elite theories might predict. Many of the NRA’s more powerful and connected elites were removed from the leadership of the NRA in 1977 by a coalition that did not boast superior resources or positions of power. This outcome for NRA elites calls into question both the durability of elite power once an oligarchy is in place as well as the reliability of superior material resources or positions of power in explaining which groups are able to seize power.

Second, although many elite and oligarchy theories assume resources, interests, and positions are the principles sources of sub-group dominance, both classical and contemporary elite models also tend to assume elites manage to secure a majority or plurality of support for
their leadership by shaping wider perceptions using the resources at their disposal. For example, a key mechanism behind Michels (1911) iron law suggests that leaders maintain control in part by controlling the information that flows down, and censor what they do not want the lower ranks to know. Similarly, Thomas Ferguson (1995) argued that in modern politics, the cost of gathering political information is so high that only elites can afford it, with elites dominating political systems by controlling access to political information and awareness, and influencing politics by filtering information in ways that suit their interests. Winters & Page 2009 suggested key mechanisms of elite influence included opinion-shaping and lobbying, implying a strong relationship between information control, elite resources, and dominance (p. 740). For example, Graetz and Shapiro (2005) noted how wealthy elites used their resources to change public opinion on the estate tax, using focus group research and subsequent media communications strategies to frame estate taxes as a “death tax”. Other potential sources of elite control and manipulation of information and influence on public opinion may be more diverse and long-running, operating through the establishment of foundations, think tanks, scholarships, and commentators (Winter & Page 2009, p.743; Bagdikian 2004).

With that said, Winters & Page 2009 noted that elite dominance is more likely to emerge in policy areas directly connected to the protection of their wealth, such as foreign economic policy, domestic monetary policy, and tax policies (p. 740). Additionally, the specialized and complex nature of policy areas related to finance and the economy also seem to make them more prone to centralized information control by elites. Rich (2006) noted how the manipulation of the public opinion that enabled the invasion of Iraq was due in part to foreign policy being complex and unfamiliar to many Americans, and subject to both centralized control of information and the spread misinformation (See also Kull, Ramsay, Lewis 2003-2004).
It was not clear that gun politics lent itself to a similar pattern of elite or centralized information control. While elite interests certainly figured into the NRA story and played an important role in its development, elite control of information was not so absolute, with early evidence even suggesting leaders themselves solicited the efforts of rank-and-file gun owners to report on state and local gun proposals and policies (Hilliard & North G&A Sep 1964, p. 26-27). It was also not clear that radicals grew dominant by virtue of superior information or numbers either. Robert Sherrill’s correspondence with NRA insiders suggested that leaders as late as 1973 still assumed that no more than a quarter of their base of members were “non-shooting constitutionalists” (Sherrill 1973). Even NRA member and Federation for NRA organizer Joe Tartaro, who was a key player in the takeover, acknowledged in his account that leadership at the time may well have operated under the assumption that they were fulfilling the wishes of most members (Tartaro 1981). Thus, the elite leaders who were pushed out by 1977 may well have been operating on the assumption that they had broader membership support if not complacency, assumptions that were not entirely unfounded. Yet radical members still managed to seize control and dominate the NRA’s agenda. If neither superior positions, resources, or superior numbers fully explain the loss of leadership control, then it would seem alternative explanations of sub-group dominance are required to explain such a development in the NRA.

Identity Theories & Intensity of Preferences

The concept of identity can be tricky to define. Some scholars such as Miller (2012) have argued that treating identity as a noun risks affording it too much stability and treating it a fixed entity, an essentialist perspective (Stavrakakis 2005). However, while I share a less stable and fixed view of identity than some classical theories, I hesitate to treat it purely as a verb or action,
or to separate the concept of identity from the discourses themselves. I prefer Castells’ (2004) concept of identity. Castells describes identity as a particular kind of idea, an idea of self. He distinguishes the concept of worldviews, which he defines as people’s ideas of the world around them, from the concept of identity, people’s understandings of themselves and their roles in the world they inhabit. While people have multiple identities which they emphasize more or less in different environments and at different times, people can often develop a particular identity that is more central and dominant, and order other identities around it. It is with the invocation of these types of identities in discourse (and what they do) that I argue is a central mechanism of their discursive strength. In short, I view identities as an idea that takes shape through discursive formation.

With the emergence of identity politics as a construct for conducting political analysis (Calhoun 1994), the affirmation of social identities became recognized as having the potential for being a central offering rather than an inferior intangible good. Traditionally, studies of identity politics have centered on political mobilization promoting the public recognition of particular identities based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or sexual orientation categories (Calhoun 1994; Alcoff 2006) and these groups’ struggles for visibility and rights (Glendon 1991). More recently some scholars have noted the central role that identity formation and boundaries plays in politics and public policy, even when the professed goals of groups are less transparently linked to identity. Yanow (1996) argues that policies are essentially expressions of community and national identities, with policy battles typically revolting around disputes about who we are as a culture, which groups are recognized or lauded in that culture, and who does not belong. Richard D. Parker puts a new spin on Lasswell’s (1936) classic description of politics as, “Who Gets What, When, How”, as being more fundamentally motivated by “efforts to define and defend
who I am, or we are, or you are, or hope to be, or hope to be seen to be” (Parker 2005, 53).

Béland (2017, 5) argues that identity disputes often lurk just under the surface, noting how Tea Party mobilizations positioned as rejections of fiscal policies and big government were really about race, class, and generational conflicts (See also Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Cramer (2016) explained how the election of Scott Walker in Wisconsin was driven more centrally by the Walker campaigns’ invocation of rural identity politics rather than interest-based or economic incentives. Recent work by Béland (2017) calls for greater recognition of the role of identity formation in understanding the development of group mobilization, politics, and policies. Shifting greater focus away from material or interest-based explanations of mobilization to identity-driven mobilization.

The formation of individual and group identities is complex and has multiple and variable sources. Rather than consider all of these, I restrict the scope of focus to the construction of identities in discourse and the co-construction of other elements in the discourse such as related actions and strategies. This shifts our attention on what Hajer (1995) refers to as affinity between discourses to explain the emergence of discursive dominance and resultant policy change/stability, and instead refocuses our attention on understanding the deployment and sorting of identities in discourse as the central dynamic by which sub-group dominance can emerge through the construction of more passionate, organized, and/or cohesive political activism. This is a departure from other approaches combining discourse and identity but treating them as separable and distinct objects, such as Huerta, Lopez-Reza, and Garcia’s (2007) exploration of bilingual education programs in the US borderland schools. That study treated education programs as embodying a discourse of power and exclusion, suggesting that discourses play a significant role in forming and transforming bilingual student identities and
shaping the pedagogical practices of teachers. While sharing an interest in the interrelation between elements of identity and practices, I do not treat discourses, identities, and practices as separable and distinct objects. Rather, I view identities and prescribed practices as embedded in and inseparable from discourses. While I view discourses themselves as more than just an identity, I embrace a view of identities that is more similar to Cameron (2001) who treats discourses themselves as an identity.

One of the best and most recent social identity approaches to studying the NRA was Mathew Lacombe’s (2018) study of 79 years of the NRA’s American Rifleman, where he used a structural topic model to track the prevalence of various combinations of words or “frames” as well as ingroup and outgroup framing used in the magazine. Lacombe argues that the NRA has used its political communications to construct a politicized gun-owner identity, which has allowed it to influence politics by mobilizing supporters to take on intense political actions on its behalf (Lacombe 2018, 2).

There is much to Lacombe’s account that I find useful and refreshing. First, his focus on the “third face of power” (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1982) begins to move away from the otherwise puzzling disparities in more traditional bases of power that NRA radicals seemed to lack, particularly prior to their takeover of the organization. Second, he not only seeks to explain the critical role of identity but also considers the constitutive role of language in the construction of political identities. This sets his perspective apart somewhat from other approaches to social identity that have followed language but tended to emphasize place/context as a more critical determinant than language in the formation of political and social identities, with political actors trying to connect to pre-existing political cultures or identities to mobilize support rather than constructing entirely novel ones (For place-based identity politics approaches, see Luker 1984;
Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016). While not discounting co-option and expansion of existing identity themes among other groups as part of identity construction, Lacombe’s focus was on, “the NRA’s role in articulating, disseminating, expanding, and interrelating otherwise distinct themes and using them to cultivate a devoted, politically active membership” (Lacombe 2018, p. 28-29). Third, he begins to move away from identity-based approaches which limit the impacts of identity more to recruitment and retention (Clark and Wilson 1961; Salisbury 1969; Hansen 1985; Wilson 1995), and considers the role identity plays in supporting group actions (Lacombe 2018, p. 7).

I both add to and depart from Lacombe’s approach in some important ways. First, I expand the focus on dynamics of co-option and expansion of identity themes, but also to move beyond in-group/outgroup framing that is external looking, focusing also on boundary drawing that is internal and introspective. By adopting a dynamic discourse coalitions approach, it provides an opportunity to expand the exploration of boundary negotiations between the NRA and outside groups (either as allies or foes) to struggles within the organization over identity and which kinds of members belong or do not, and on what terms their inclusion should continue. Are sportsmen conservationists because they pay licensing fees and taxes or does conservation demand more of them? Are gun owners building private arsenals and preparing for combat patriots defending America or extremists threatening law and order? Exploring these internal dynamics can help better explain the related development of external connections or disconnections, and provide more useful explanations for how and why certain general themes or trends were growing more or less popular. Second, while applauding Lacombe’s increased consideration of the relationship between group identity and group influence, connecting the two through the motivation to take political actions, I wish to take that a step further by considering
whether there are particular kinds of political action that political identities may motivate or constrain. If certain groups are being encouraged to take on particular kinds of political actions, it may help explain why groups that appear similarly passionate and motivated are none-the-less showing differential levels of action or influence. Third, while Lacombe suggests that social identity rather than resources/material interests have been the principle persuasive tactics that explain the NRA’s dominance, he still supports a more elite-driven and top-down model of that development and mobilization. In light of the past and present divisions within NRA’s members and leaders, it is useful to consider the dynamics of a less unified NRA because doing so can provide a more complete understanding of both sub-group dominance as well as group dominance more generally. By assuming an NRA leadership that has been mostly unified for decades in their construction of a militant and mobilizing social identity, it downplays the nature and magnitude of the shifts that have taken place within the organization, shifts which even Lacombe’s own data seems to indicate happened. Setting aside the accuracy or at least durableness of operationalized boundaries Lacombe employs for the “Americanism & Guns” frame in the *Rifleman*, the linear decline in that framing trend indicates a strategic move away from ideas of the outdoors and hunting as constitutive identifications (Lacombe 2018, p. 44). By embracing the view of a more unified and durable NRA leadership and agenda over time, it also removes the agency of NRA members and leaders who were active participants in an ongoing struggle to define their group, and risks focusing too much attention on the winners of that framing contest without similarly understandings the losers.

Most social identity theories – particularly those that involve the NRA – tend to follow some version of the greater intensity thesis of sub-group domination. Specifically, the formation of strong social identities is frequently described as the impetus for greater intensity of
preferences, which in turn drives stronger political mobilization. However, even within social identity theories, there are important differences. Perhaps most radically, Liliana Mason (2012; 2017; 2018) has argued that social identities work is not just the key mobilizing force behind intense groups involved in gun and abortion debates (2017) but that identity supersedes actual discreet issue positions, such that intense resistance and mobilization does not necessarily map to the individuals discreet issue positions (2012; 2018). In other words, she would explain the apparent misalignment between people’s issue positions on gun regulations like background checks and their political behavior as a product of the erosion of the substance of policy issues and their replacement with symbolic struggles for the maintenance of group status. Mason (2018) has argued that polarization of the general electorate has been driven by the super-alignment of social identities into America’s two major political parties and has developed independently of issue polarization. In other words, while most people’s positions on issues have remained relatively moderate, their social identities and related political behaviors have become more polarized. Thus, the misalignment of some NRA member’s stated preferences and the organization’s strategic behavior would be explained by the development of a strong and shared social identity that drives people’s political behavior more than the issues of gun regulation per se.

While Mason’s theories provide some useful scaffolding for my own argument, I see a misalignment of the theoretical basis for her description of the construction of identities and claims of such a strong separation between issues and identity. On the contrary, the NRA’s power as a “single-issue” lobby is made possible by the alignment of that issue with a salient political identity, not the erasure of the policies in question. While I would not go so far as to suggest that people’s beliefs about policy issues play no role in their actual political behavior,
especially for activists, I do think that political identity serves as the foundation for many people’s issue advocacy and that groups like the NRA have been embedded in the ongoing project of political realignment.

Although discourses may draw on other pre-existing identity commitments in social and cultural circles, they can also creatively reconfigure or construct new identities, often by realigning and resorting existing ones. While this process of sorting and alignment of identities in discourse is not always defined with the same terminology, the process is often described in very similar ways. For example, Lowndes (2010) explains how the development of the New Right and the realignment of political parties in the US was not simply the result of white cultural backlash, and instead represented a discursive project by political actors who spent decades forging new “chains of association” between free market economic interests and southern segregationists. Rather than a reactionary movement against Civil Rights legislation, Lowndes demonstrates that realignment of parties in the US involved a kind of boundary work and coordination of multiple coalitions through the redefinition of goals, identifications, and related interests.

While identity can be used as a useful means of building coalitions, it can also be used to explain comparative group intensity, which in turn can help explain differential mobilization and sub-group dominance. Many scholars connect the level/intensity of group mobilization to the emotions that group identities inspire. When people become both heavily invested in a particular identity and that identity is understood to be at stake, it can trigger strong emotional responses to defend and protect that identity (Kaplan et al. 2016). Tarrow (1994) has argued that windows of opportunity are better understood as the translation of external events by political actors into events which threaten group identity, generate fear and anger, and mobilize group action.
Gould’s (2009) study of the emergence militant AIDS activism also notes is how the shift from shame to pride in identity coincided with shifts in feelings and emotions felt and expressed by the group, which can dramatically affect how groups respond to a problem. Gould notes gay advocacy organizations took bad feelings or affect and redefined them as cause for anger instead of shame, and developed/supported new strategies of activism building on that righteous anger. The shift from ambivalence to anger helped develop and sustain militant protest and rapid mobilization of gay communities across the country (Gould 2009, 147).

Returning to Lilianna Mason’s research provides some useful concepts for understanding the process by which identities can become more or less mobilizing through their reconfiguration. While mostly describing the process of party polarization rather than sub-group dominance, the description of the construction of a polarizing identity might well be substituted for a description of the construction of identities that are also most mobilizing. Specifically, when someone has multiple social identities that are aligned, or ‘sorted,’ then the power of the resulting sorted identity to shape perceptions, judgements, and actions is significantly increased (Mason 2018, p. 7). Conversely, when someone has multiple ‘cross-cutting identities’, then the driving power of identity is reduced. Some such as Mason (2018) and Bishop (2009) have claimed this the removal of cross-cutting social ties is a negative development because it increases partisanship and reduces the possibility of compromise. However, past work exploring cross-cutting ties and pressures suggest that such ties have other effects which also seem to reduce the likelihood and intensity of group mobilization. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Guadet (1944) and Campbell et al. (1960) both found that party members who identify with groups associated with the opposing party would be less likely to vote (In Mason 2018, p. 7). Likewise, Lipset (1963) called cross-pressured voters ‘politically impotent’ and voters that faced cross-
cutting pressures were more likely to lose interest, withdraw from politics, or avoid making a choice (p. 211; In Mason 2018, p. 7). Powell (1976) later replicated these findings and extended them to other political cleavage structures. More recent work examining partisan ambivalence also aligns with prior research, as those who are ambivalent about their party are more careful about their political choices, and do not take their group membership as a simple trigger for taking political actions (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). Viewed in this way, the construction of salient identities comes to resemble a project whereby groups who seek to increase mobilization and reduce ambivalence must not only connect their cause to resources but also effectively sort group identities of their members in ways that reduce cross-cutting pressures. Another segment of the literature suggests that sub-group dominance emerges not from superior resources or superior numbers, but rather from the greater intensity of a group relative to others (Luker 1984; Kleck 1991; Vizzard 2000; Melzer 2009). For example, Luker (1984) explains that a group’s influence on policy despite relatively small number can reflect the intensity of their preferences, or more simply that they “care more”. Following Luker, Meltzer (2009) suggests that this may help explain the radical takeover of the NRA in the 1970’s despite relatively small numbers, with hardliners being more motivated and mobilized to action than opponents whose preferences were different but weaker and less mobilizing. Aronow and Miller (2016) found that 71 percent of individuals who did not favor stricter gun control laws were also unwilling to ever vote for political candidates who supported gun control, while just 34 percent of persons polled who supported stricter gun laws claimed they would not vote for a candidate who did not share their views on gun regulation. Although Aronow & Miller suggested that one possible explanation for the disparity in support for gun control relative to their issue positions on background checks policy may be based on misinformation, others have suggested that this is
stronger evidence for the greater mobilizing power of gun owners’ social identities (Lacombe 2018, p. 27). Other’s supporting the intensity of preference thesis include Kleck (1991), who has not only been particularly skeptical of public opinion polls on gun control but argued that other polls consistently indicate gun control as of less importance than other issues for most supporters. Former Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms officer and scholar William Vizard also seems to support this argument, suggesting that beyond the numbers, the volume and intensity of letters from pro-gun advocates relative to their opponents is hard to ignore (Vizzard 2000, p. 67).

Taken together, identity theories and intensity theories do much to explain group mobilization and intensity. However, these explanations are not without their detractors. Some question whether intensity is adequate or complete enough as an explanation (Goss 2006), suggesting that intensity per se is less critical to understanding group dominance than the comparative coordination, organization, or solidarity of action it inspires (or does not) (Goss 2006). Additionally, even those who embrace the intensity argument or at least accept it is a necessary if not sufficient condition for sub-group dominance vary with respect to the explanations for and drivers of intensity (Luker 1984; Meltzer 2009). Such perspectives seem to indicate that the construction of strong and mobilizing group identities may be necessary but not sufficient to explain the emergence of dominance, particularly sub-group dominance within an organization.

With respect to the first point on adequacy and completeness, one set of perspectives assumes that sub-groups can dominate political arenas at least in part by virtue of superior coordination and organizing, not necessarily brought about by greater comparative intensity (Schuman & Presser 1981; Mansbridge 1986; Goss 2006). While these approaches do assume a certain level of resource mobilization, they are not necessarily built as strongly on the
aggregation of *superior* material resources per se, and instead are built more critically on the
general ability to organize and coordinate members, as well as maintain strong enough unity of
action. For example, Schuman & Presser (1981) suggest that polls indicate similar levels of
intensity among gun control and gun rights supporters, calling into question that it is primarily
the greater passion of gun rights advocates in America that explain their dominance over control
advocates. Similarly, Goss (2006) argues that the intensity of gun rights supporters fails to
explain their relative dominance given similarly strong intensity of gun control activists, whose
numbers are not significantly different than gun rights activists and may even be larger. Instead,
Goss argues that it has been superior organizing, coordination, and tactics of gun rights groups,
and their ability to block access to the formation of similar organizing among their opponents
that better explains their continued dominance. Mansbridge’s work examining the social
movements battling over the Equal Rights Amendment also appears to provide some evidence
for the organizing and coordination thesis, suggesting that the more hierarchical and centrally
directed conservative movement to block the amendment managed to maintain greater unity.
Conversely, ERA advocacy groups that were no less intense were torn apart by intersectional
tensions and weaker cooperation (Mansbridge 1986). Thus, it is not just comparative intensity
but also the organizational structures and related levels of solidarity that help explain the failure
of ERA supporters. We might even ask if actions taken by gun rights advocated that Vizzard
(2000, p. 68) describes as evidence of greater intensity (letters to periodicals, legislators, and
Amazon book reviews) are really evidence of greater intensity, or stronger evidence for what
kinds of behaviors, strategies, or practices seem to translate into effective resistance or signal
greater coordination.
This explanation seems to be at least partially transportable in explaining the internal struggles of NRA, since the radical takeover did involve the radicals stacking the deck at the annual convention so that they had superior voting numbers at the meeting. They seemed to have managed this without having to convert the majority of the rank-and-file membership or voting members. Rather, they did it through superior organizing and coordination. In keeping with Mansbridge (1986) in particular, I will argue that the fragmentation of radical’s counterparts also played an important role in their eventual domination. With that said, intensity of preferences cannot be entirely ruled out as an important element of the equation either, and may even be usefully combined with strategic mobilization perspectives to provide a more complete picture. I want to argue that understanding the development of comparative intensity and the manner in which that intensity is translated into action or inaction is critical for bridging the gap between these perspectives and usefully combining them to understand comparative sub-group dominance.

In sum, although the construction of strong group identities may be a necessary condition to meet in order to explain the emergence of sub-group dominance, it is not necessarily a sufficient one. However, these theories still provide an incomplete explanation of the development of sub-group dominance. To fill in some of the gaps in these dynamics, I integrated identity models and conceptions of alignment between identity and strategy with dynamic discourse models explaining discursive development and discursive dominance. Such a merger of these different and sometimes competing perspectives can help explain the dynamics between pieces in discourse, and the means of translating or aligning identities and strategies in discourse coalitions in ways that can translate in to different levels of efficacy in political context.
Discourse Approaches, Dynamics, and Dominance

Although there are a variety of different approaches to studying discourse, one of the most useful approaches for studying the dynamics of the policy making process and policy advocacy is to study discourse coalitions. A discourse coalition describes a network of actors that develop shared ways of interpreting policy issues (Hajer 1995; Cotton et al, 2014). Hajer (1995, 65) defines “discourse coalitions” as, “the ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these story-lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based.” Story-lines can be understood as, “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer 1995, 62; See also Schon and Rein, 1994). Story-lines can include things like metaphors, analogies, historical references, clichés, appeals to collective fears or senses of guilt, and serve as the glue that binds actors together into communicative networks with shared or overlapping understandings of the world (Hajer 1995, 63). A central assumption of this interpretive approach to analysis is that language plays an important role in shaping physical and social reality. It is an interactive practice through which individuals come to understand the world around them and the people/things in it, which in turn influences their interests and preferences (Hajer 1995, 59). Story-lines are critically important language practices in the policy context because they serve as “devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of ‘blame’ and ‘responsibility’, and of ‘urgency’ and ‘responsible behaviour’ are attributed” (Hajer 1995, 64-65). Since discourses are “the prime vehicle of change” (Hajer 1995, 63), identifying them and analyzing them is a critical task for researchers.

Hajer (1995) ultimately uses this framework to identify the dominance of a particular discourse over the others in the case of acid rain, showing how a particular frame can come to
“contaminate” and limit even those discourses trying to oppose the dominant frame. Hajer’s theory suggests a discourse will gain greater traction to the extent it successfully aligns with more powerful interests and their discourses. In his acid rain case, creating a coalition to conserve nature and address the acid rain problem required discourses that made those commitments more compatible with discourses about economic and scientific progress. It was only when addressing pollution was deemed to be consistent with modernization rather than opposed to it that a broader coalition was possible and the problem could be addressed.

Although this study still shares Hajer’s assumption that a compelling discourse can change actors’ understanding of what their interests are (Hajer 1995, 66), I call into question Hajer’s presumption that discourses must achieve broad acceptance or favor in social groups in order to dominate political agendas. Hajer’s model requires some supplementation to explain the NRA case, as hardline revolutionaries seemed to face a different task than groups seeking to address acid rain. In Hajer’s acid rain case, environmentalists were able to address the problem only after creating consensus between their coalition and the dominant discourse of economic modernization. In contrast, hardline NRA radicals sought to actually disconnect the NRA from what they viewed as powerful contaminating interests and partnerships in order to commit it fully to gun rights, breaking rather than expanding cooperation on other issues such as conservation. Moreover, as polls generally indicate over time, the NRA and its allies have not succeeded politically so much by constructing broader consensus as they have by overcoming and defeating it. If sub-groups can dominant without constructing broader issue consensus under a common discursive framework, there must be alternative explanations for coalitional dominance. While the realignment of discourse coalitions during the 60’s and 70’s is still an

---

2 As Miller (2019, 250) also points out, Hajer (2005) discussed the concept of affinities between different discourses, but not the affinities towards a discourse on the part of individuals.
important part of the NRA story, understanding these groups’ evolution and relative dominance over time requires the addition of supplemental theoretical approaches and considerations.\(^3\) From this, we can see that the foundations of their radical take over in 1977 has deeper roots and more complex dynamics.

Additionally, although Hajer’s approach is useful for mapping the storylines of two major competing coalitions over time, such as in the acid rain debate in the UK and the Netherlands, focused on two similar and bounded policy disputes in different decades, applying the approach to internal, multiple, and sometimes informal disputes within the NRA is not a perfect fit. The greater fragmentation of coalitions in the NRA case as well as the need to trace development both within as well as between coalitions across more than just a single policy required the adoption of a more contemporary discourse model.

Domination in discourse analysis is described by Hajer (2006) as having both narrative and institutional components. A discourse coalition can be considered dominant if it achieves “structuration” of the discourse, setting the terms of debate and the dominant understanding of policy issues and/or solutions, and through structuration, succeeds in supporting the more formal institutionalization of particular actions, policies, etc. depending on the site of the discourse and scope of the discussions (p. 70). While structuration can be achieved through consensus, both structuration and institutionalization can be achieved without broad or majoritarian consensus in discourse. For example, a study by Cotton et al. (2014) of shale gas development in the UK defined structuration and dominance by one discourse coalitions storylines being adopted within

\(^3\) Some theories of discourse treat them as having some sort of agency or will of their own. I have adopted a view of discourses as communicative tools that are deployed strategically by different groups and individuals. However, like any tool, they can substantively alter the way people see themselves, the world, and how they interact in it. While the tool does not have agency, it may mutate and take on a life of its own, especially after it gets adopted by new users. My phone does not have sentience or agency (not even Siri) but it still alters my perceptions and behaviors. Sometimes this is the intention of its crafters and sometimes the changes that happen are unforeseen or unintended. See Latour’s discussion of ‘actants’ (1993).
the discourse of elite central government decision-making bodies. The key point is not that discursive dominance always should be defined in this particular way but rather that the particular context of development matters. In an elite setting like the one in the UK shale case, structuration and dominance could be achieved not only without broader consensus and perhaps, even in spite of extra-institutional coalitional majorities. In other less elite decision-making arenas, such as the case of economic reform movements in India (Sharma 2011), discursive dominance can still emerge without achieving complete consensus, with the dominant coalition in that case achieving dominance by withstanding “the widest range of criticisms in various forums and media.” (p. 169). In other words, a coalition can sometimes achieve dominance not just by achieving consensus for the greater good but by constructing a smaller plurality of tolerance/acceptance for a lesser evil. However, domination is not necessarily a given, inevitable, or default state of discursive fields either. Dominance can be lasting, temporary, or non-existent. Advocacy can become “crowded” (Dodge 2017) and lead to varying levels of contestation and gridlock, where discourse coalitions eb, flow, come together, and break apart, without the achievement of consensus or clear resolution. A study of discourse coalitions in Swiss waste management (Duygan et al. 2018) found that fragmented and divergent beliefs among the major coalitions hindered consensus, produced gridlock, and stunted policy change or implementation. Similarly, Szarka (2004) study of gridlock and policy stalemate on climate change in Britain, Demark, And France mused about ways to overcome its negative impacts by considering ways to overcome disagreements between environmental, economic, and social considerations. While these cases support a more negative view of gridlock, Dodge (2017) study of fracking coalitions in New York offered a more complete and useful understanding of gridlock as both valuable and even productive, providing the necessary time for actors to make sense of complex problems.
Dodge’s conception of gridlock is particularly helpful because it also suggests that in the right circumstances, gridlock can also provide groups with outcomes that (while potentially less durable) can be functionally equivalent to the achievement of consensus. In other words, if prevailing institutional arrangements are preferable to reform proposals, institutional dominance may well be achieved just as readily through the active defeat of counter-consensus. It is this last implication in the current discourse literature discussing dominance and gridlock that I find most useful to explore with respect to the development of sub-group dominance in the NRA.

To remedy these issues, I adopted a Dynamic Discourse Coalitions framework proposed by Metz & Dodge (2016). The DDC approach is particularly useful for tracing the development of sub-group evolution and dominance by steering away from a conception of dominance as the convergence of a single coalition/storyline, and instead turns our attention to the dynamic processes by which multiple discourse coalitions work to, “reinvent themselves, break apart, and reform” (Metze & Dodge 2016, p. 5). They introduce the concept of “boundary work” as a key discursive mechanism by which coalitions evolve and compete (Ibid 5). Boundary work is further conceptualized as discursive strategies of demarcation and coordination. Demarcation is the distinction of one discourse coalition from another (Metze 2010; Gieryn 1999), with actors framing elements of the discourse as either belonging to their coalition or another (Ibid p. 5). Coordination is the inverse strategy, with actors seeking to form bridges between discourses and transcend boundaries, creating greater alignment between coalitions (Metze 2010, p. 43).

The concept of boundary work is useful in the way it allows for the exploration of developments both within and between discourse coalitions. However, Metze & Dodge (2016) describe this communicative strategy in the highly technocratic context of fracking debates, such that coalitional actors in these cases engaged in boundary work that revolved around the framing
of facts in contrast with other kinds of arguments. Thus, while the emergence of narrative structures or argumentative logics is thought to involve both the integration of facts and normative orientations (See Fischer 2003), the dynamic discourse approach has generally been employed to focus on the framing and reframing of supportive facts in discourse, with normative orientations implied through (if not driven by) the facts. This is not to say Metze & Dodge deny the possibility of alternative dynamic constructions. But it does indicate that something like coalitional alliances or sorting occurs through temporary agreements on the facts, not the reformation or resorting of identity among coalitional actors. With little empirical work employing the framework to explore more value-laden or identity-driven discursive formations, I demonstrate the empirical application and usefulness of the model beyond more scientized debates (Sarewitz, 2004).

Integrating issues of identity and strategy with the dynamic discourse approach was particularly relevant for understanding the evolution of the NRA because the internal debates were not about the facts – for which there appeared to be relatively limited disagreement – and instead revolved around normative issues related to social identity and core values like the meaning of heritage and freedom. Since identity was a driving force behind both coalitional formations and strategic preferences, identity theory was particularly useful as a theoretical resource for understanding how coalitional boundaries were negotiated in the NRA. To remedy these issues, I sought to graft other (and arguably competing theories of group action) to discourse theory, especially identity-driven theories of social movements (Mansbridge 1986; 2001, and Castells 2004) and theories indicating how the emotional content of identities can shape practices and political behaviors (Cramer 2016) and the level of political mobilization (Gould 2009). I did this by focusing on conceptualizations of identity that shared similar
paradigmatic assumptions with the discourse coalitions approach. By treating identity as an
element of the discursive formations and treating discursive formation as an active and
interactive process rather than a passive or unconscious set of forces, the theoretical approaches
proved more complementary than competitive.

METHODS SECTION

Intro

In order to address my research questions, I conducted a historical discourse analysis of
NRA discourse in two affiliated gun magazines, Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo. The main
unit of analysis was the discourse in the texts of the magazines, with each article and letter
analyzed serving as a unit of observation. My data collection strategy focused on articles and
letters in the two magazines covering issues of policy and politics, especially firearms policy and
conservation policy. My data analysis strategy involved general reviews for relevance and
categorization of articles and letters in each magazine, detailed analytical memos to identify the
prominent features of each discourse, and finally coding for discourse coalitions (Hajer 1995;
2006) based on identity (Castells 2004), strategy and boundary work (Metze & Dodge 2016). My
approach to research produced the insights about the dynamics of the NRA’s coalitions
organized around four time periods, as explained in each of the four empirical chapters. This
periodization strategy was built around discursive shifts (Hajer 1995) in the data, which were
changes in the coalitional configurations of identity and strategy.

Theoretical Framework Overview

The conceptual framework and theoretical orientation of this project combines elements
of discourse analytic theory – especially from Hajer (1995) and Metze & Dodge (2016) – with
elements of social identity theory, especially Castle’s (2004) framework for understanding the construction and ordering of social identities. My analysis maintains a similar accounting and definition of discourse coalitions proposed by Hajer (1995) which includes two key elements. First, the analysis must identify and trace discourse coalitions. Second, the development and evolution of discourse must be considered in the context they are produced in, especially time, but also important events, institutions, region, etc. I also embrace a similar conception of discourse coalitions as Hajer (1995) but embrace two key modifications to the theory. I maintain the importance of mapping coalitions in terms of a, actors, b, the storylines they share, and c, the practices they engage in. However, I also modify this approach with respect to storylines and practices. First, I focus attention on storylines that are driven by identity, identifying both shared and core features of identity as well as secondary identifications which may overlap with certain core elements but also contain elements that may conflict with others. Drawing on Castells 2004 definition of identity, I identify identity as an element in storylines internalized by actors which define both coalition boundaries as well as related strategies by defining their meanings. I embrace the view that identity is defined by actors in discourse, through storylines defining the content of identities, boundaries of group identity, and the strategies which are more or less in line with them. Specifically, I analyze identity-driven discourses by analyzing, 1, storylines framing group characteristics, attributes, beliefs, and values, 2, storylines defining group boundaries of inclusion, exclusions, and foes/enemies though comparisons of those identity features, and, 3, storylines of policy strategies and actions that best support and reinforce the maintenance of the core features of identity.

Second, with respect to the second point about boundaries, I bring in Metze & Dodge’s (2016) dynamic discourse coalition approach, tracing the use of discursive strategies of
demarcation and bridging, both within and between groups, and when/whether this leads to discourse coalition confirmation, integration, disintegration, or polarization.

Finally, I also replace the concept of practices which are not always directly observable with stated/proposed strategies. While still verifying some actions that were taken through supplementary research, I also place greater emphasis on the definitions of political strategies in discourse. This is relevant because it helps trace the connection between identity and strategy, not just in terms of alliances, but in terms of related actions. This enhances Castells’ theory by expanding the processes of group definition beyond stated beliefs to the practices and actions that also define the group. I distinguish discursive strategies from the political strategies proposed in discourse. Discursive strategies are generally persuasive tactics used in discourse to convince people to take one action or another. Strategies are the actual actions or alliances being proposed. This can be confusing because these concepts occasionally overlap. For example, while discursive strategies may include bridging and demarcation in discourse, this is related to but distinct from more formally proposing working with or allying with a particular group, party, etc.

This model makes an analytical and methodological contribution to the discourse literature by integrating elements of social identity theory. It enhances the discourse coalitions literature by providing a more explicit approach to defining identity in discourse, the elements

---

4 One might quibble that I am neglecting the practice of writing in the magazines which was a key strategy supporting the development and alignment of discourses. I am in full agreement that this was in fact, an important strategy. However, aside from certain coalitions figuring less prominently, it was difficult to otherwise account for writing in magazines as making any coalition distinct from others on that basis in a way that the analysis substantively misses something. Whether writing to gun magazines, writing letters to other editors, making phone calls to legislators, or other strategies involving communications, these were actions that every coalition took. The central crux of the strategies and distinctions between the coalitions remained the manner of communicative strategies each coalition advocated for and the particulars of communications. Moreover, discussions of internal looking communications reflected in writing in the magazines versus external communications targeting more mainstream sources is still covered in the analysis.
comprising them, and the dynamics by which they might evolve. It also expands the application of the dynamic discourse coalitions model by demonstrating its flexibility. I demonstrate how the framework is applicable to longer developmental timelines, less bounded policy disputes, and identity rather than fact-driven or scientized arenas. Additionally, I hope to enhance and supplement popular models connecting mobilization to discourse by clarifying how identity in discourse not only helps define the level of mobilization, but also shapes the more specific kinds of strategies, alliances, and tactics that will be available to and adopted by competing coalitions. Such a contribution is critical for developing better understandings of sub-group dominance, not just the NRA but among other advocacy organizations.

**Brief Introduction to The Methodological Approach**

As some of my review of existing scholarship on advocacy groups has indicated, group identity formation is commonly recognized as a key component of group mobilization in politics. However, as Blee (2012) has noted, research often focuses on groups after they are already far along in their development or treats groups as end-results or finished products. This can shroud the circumstances by which groups develop, the alternative paths they might have considered, the sources of fragmentation or change, and why certain leadership collectives or organizational priorities emerged as the dominant ones while others fell off or became marginal. Discourse analytic theories are ideal for looking at the progression of different ideas and group identities because it recognizes the constitutive role of language in group meaning-making and interaction and provides a means of cataloging those languages processes. By integrating DDC (Metze & Dodge 2016) with Castells (2004) identity theory, it provided a framework with enough flexibility to look at multiple possible coalitional formations and interactions while still
providing enough structure by attuning the researcher to the key elements of discourse to look out for. I was able to approach the data with an abductive coding strategy, looking out for combinations of the elements of identity and related elements of discourse while still remaining open to other trends and developing categories from the elements in the discourse that emerged.

Since I was looking at development retroactively and there was no video or other media of actual meetings, I needed to rely on historical text rather than participant observation or other real-time methodological approaches. In order to conduct an effective analysis, I needed access to texts that provided a window into development. Text needed to covered the relevant period of development of the NRA and contain the discourse of NRA gun owners. Through a review of secondary NRA scholarship and some key documents, I was able to identify both a general period of key development to study, 1958 to 1978, as well as two gun magazines – Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo – that would provide a window into the range of perspectives at the NRA that were in conversation and changing over time. Following assumptions typical in discourse analytic traditions, I treated gun magazines as key sites of communication and interaction between NRA gun owners.

**Data Selection**

To get a sense of divergent gun owner perspectives, I chose to focus on related and affiliated NRA publications which members could subscribe too but represented different editorial focuses; Field & Stream and the Guns & Ammo. Field & Stream provided a more moderated perspective of shooters who hunted and enjoyed the outdoors while Guns & Ammo represented a more radical perspective on gun ownership and politics. Each provided a range of perspectives within the membership and leadership of the NRA the competition over which was
alluded to in some secondary literature as taking place behind closed doors (See Knox 2009) because it was often censored or downplayed in the flagship NRA publication *The American Rifleman*. However, in the pages of *Guns and Ammo* and *Field & Stream* these disputes were more visible, direct, and explicit.

*Guns & Ammo* presents ideal sources from which to track the development of more hardline and radical gun discourse. The growing discontent and divergence of a significant swath of NRA members during the 1960’s, according to Vizzard (2000), “owed much to the development of a specialized gun press that catered to the most avid gun enthusiasts,” including, “magazines such as *Guns, Guns and Ammo*, and *Gun Week*” (p. 94). From its inception in 1958, *Guns & Ammo* chose to focus much more centrally on the politics of gun control than its competitors who were focusing more on sports shooting, game hunting, or shooting memorabilia. Though independently run and operated, the magazine ran advertisements for the NRA and was among a number of magazines that NRA members could subscribe to as part of their NRA membership perks. *Guns & Ammo*, as of 1968, had a circulation of about 220,000, which ranked second for gun magazines behind only *The American Rifleman*, the official NRA publication (Bakal 1968, 113). Unlike the *Rifleman*, which at the time remained under the oversight of the more moderated NRA leadership that preferred to cover political efforts in a more dispassionate manner, *G&A* from its inception described itself as, “written, edited, and published by men who believe deeply and unshakably that personal weapons are essential to personal and political liberty” (Bakal 1968, 114). The magazine’s writers set out to create a

---

5 I chose not to include the *Rifleman* as part of the analysis for two main reasons. First, there is no shortage of strong analysis of the *Rifleman* (Melzer 2009; Bakal 1968; Vizzard 2000; Lacombe 2018). Second, while the *Rifleman* is among the oldest gun periodicals, it was not until the introduction of new editor Ashley Halsey Jr. in 1968 that it really began to become more focused on gun regulations and took a more inflammatory political spin. Magazines like *Guns & Ammo*, which had taken a hard political turn earlier and almost certainly helped inspire this shift, seemed to me to be a more compelling site to analyze earlier discursive development.
magazine that encouraged greater political activity among its readers and also served as a mechanism for recruitment, encouraging readers to join the NRA if they had not done so already. It offered readers things like buttons, emblems, and bumper stickers saying, “Support YOUR Right to Keep and Bear Arms” (Guns & Ammo Jan. 1968). As such, Guns & Ammo provides insight into emergent perspectives on guns that was less visible in publications like the NRA’s primary publication The American Rifleman until much later.

To contrast the discourse in Guns & Ammo, I analyze issues of Field and Stream, another magazine available to NRA members with a subscription and a member of the National Shooting Sports Foundation also affiliated with the NRA. Field and Stream is an older periodical, founded in 1895, and more prominently focuses on hunting, fishing, and target shooting. While the magazine would become more politically focused in the 1960’s as more legislation started getting introduced at the national level, it still retained a greater level of balance and moderation on the issues of gun regulation compared to Guns & Ammo. With hunting and outdoor sports being its central focus, it featured a much greater share of moderate perspectives on firearms controls than Guns & Ammo as well as a greater focus on conservation legislation relevant to hunting.

I initially expected the vast majority of discourse in Guns & Ammo to represent the development of a predominantly hardline coalition in the NRA and Field & Stream to represent

---

6 The actual number of established NRA-members who ordered the magazine after joining the NRA and the number of new NRA-membership signups that were ordered through monthly ads in the pages will be requested from the NRA themselves, though there is no guarantee they will make that information available or that they still maintain those records. In demonstrating how effective a recruitment mechanism the magazine proved to be, subscription numbers are not the only measure of the magazine’s success. While there are actual columns and evidence from the magazine urging people to get more political and become involved with the NRA, showing an impact on the NRA agenda over time may require additional research and interviews with the architects of NRA takeover (including relatives of those who are deceased) to access the contribution of the magazine to the evolution of the gun rights movement. While the specific influence of Guns & Ammo on the evolution of gun discourse is unclear, it unquestionably played more than a passive role and served as an important forum for gun owners to develop new and more radical perspectives.
old guard moderates who tolerated some control measures. Both the labels of hardline and old
guard as well as the assumptions about their representation in the two magazines was based on
existing NRA scholarship (Sugarmann 1992; Davidson 1998; Carter 1995; Meltzer 2009;
Winkler 2014). These assumptions were generally corroborated by the first two periods of my
analysis from 1958 to 1968. Table 2.1 below provides the available circulation numbers for the
two magazines over the period of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Field &amp; Stream</th>
<th>Guns &amp; Ammo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1,327,061</td>
<td>134,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>1,605,000</td>
<td>333,323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1,946,198</td>
<td>379,543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>2,224,519</td>
<td>496,505</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collected from the circulation statements published in Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo.

Guns & Ammo did not begin to provide full circulation numbers until 1964, and only
seemed to publish a circulation statement in the magazine every four years while Field & Stream
published one every two years. However, the table above still provides a strong comparison of
the relative circulation of the two magazines, with Guns & Ammo circulation increasing by
1970’s, but Field & Stream still boasting roughly four times the readership. These trends in
circulation were consistent with expectations that Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo readership
provided relatively accurate sample of the two major coalitions of gun owners in the NRA over
the period. The organizations internal surveys indicating the share of members that were most
concerned with opposing gun control represented about a quarter of the membership, while the
rest of the membership represented a mix of members that owned primarily for hunting and other
recreational purposes (Sherrill 1973).

---

7 I will note that I did not account for overlap in subscriptions. I had no way to account for potential overlapping
subscribership, although it is reasonable to assume there was at least some moderate level overlap in readership
between the magazines.
Data Collection & Description

I selected for analysis both articles and letters to the editor in *Field and Stream* and *Guns & Ammo*. I selected political articles and letters from 205 issues of *Guns & Ammo* spanning 20 years from 1958 to 1978 and 240 issues of *Field & Stream* over that same time frame. The disparity in the number of magazine issues reflected the difference in the early formats of *Guns & Ammo* in the 1950’s being seasonal and then bi-monthly, with monthly articles finally becoming the norm from 1960 onward.

I collected *Field & Stream* articles from bound volumes at the SUNY Albany’s University Library archives. The thickness of the volumes made getting solid image’s from photo-copiers and scanners difficult, so I relied on taking photo’s using my camera phone and converting these images to PDF files. Since articles were often spread across multiple pages, each article and set of letters to the editor were merged into a single linear PDF file to make review easier. Collecting issues of *Guns & Ammo* presented greater challenges because SUNY’s library did not have bound volumes of the magazine or microfilm copies. Interlibrary loan also only provided access to microfilm copies from 1967 onward, and microfilm for 1973-1976 were missing pages from important articles. I scanned what I could from micro-film readers and created merged PDF files. I then traveled to the Library of Congress’s National Archives in Washington DC to scan the remaining files and fill in missing data into readable PDF files. In total I collected, scanned, and converted 4427 articles and letters from *Field & Stream*, and 3652 from *Guns & Ammo*.  

Overall, there was very little missing data in either magazine. I was able to collect data from every single published issue over the study period. Missing pages from letters or articles was very rare, though was noted in the places where a gap existed and could not be filled in. This was an issue of less than 3 percent of the total content.
 Atlas TI Coding software for later analysis. I reviewed all article and letters collected. Of these, I was able to do more detailed summaries and memos for 2650 of the articles from *Field & Stream* and 2191 articles and letters from *Guns & Ammo*. From that analysis, I distilled my codes and categories for discourse coalitions, including identity and strategy, as well as more extensive accounting of bridges and demarcations in the later-half of analysis from 1969-1978. I completed extensive summaries and memo categories from each year, but only retroactively applied codes in full to election years given the generally higher volume of political content in election years.\(^9\)

I made a point to make copies of the table of contents for every issue in order to have a record of the total contents of both magazines. I excluded from collection, coding, or analysis advertisements for products as well as articles that were more technical in nature or explored topics that were recreational rather than political. These articles were often Q&A pieces accessing things like the recoil (how much the gun kicks back when fired) or the range/accuracy of different models of rifle, discussions of the best caliber weapons for hunting particular kinds of game, or how to tell if an old rifle is an authentic collectable or a less valuable reproduction. For example, from *Guns & Ammo* I skipped over articles about collecting antique rifles or pistols, product reviews of firearms, pieces covering holsters, or news about shooting competitions. In *Field & Stream*, typical articles that were scanned and skipped were articles about backpacking, fishing, camping gear, or various product reviews and tip columns. I still collected every letter to the editor since these were not divisible and I reviewed every letter for relevance, though only coded ones that discussed political issues such as firearms, hunting laws, or conservation.

---

\(^9\) In future research I plan to complete the full coding for every year as well as audit the counts for possible overlap in the count totals of *Field & Stream*.
I also drew on secondary historical research and accounts to fill in details about the historical context the writers referenced and help situate the discourse within a broader story of American political and social development. I conducted supplementary analysis of NRA insider accounts from organizers of the NRA takeover in 1977, Neal Knox and Joe Tartaro, NRA documents they referred to such as a consulting report from Oram International, reviewed bio information on the writers when available, and reviewed contextual features like national political party platforms to help situate the discourses and fill in some key points of context. These pieces were NOT coded. Instead, they were used to fill in gaps in knowledge and situate the coded analysis in the context they were produced in to build richer and more complete explanations.

**Units of Analysis**

The main units of analysis were the discourse coalitions and the elements of discourses in the texts that I analyzed which defined their boundaries, including identity, strategy, and discursive boundary work. Each article and letter I analyzed from the magazines I selected was a unit of observation. For each unit of observation that I collected, I reviewed for the elements of identity (attributes, values, and goals) and strategies (proposed political actions). The combinations of the elements of identity and strategies in each unit of observation formed the basis for distinguishing each unit as a unique coalition, and eventually categorizing units into one of the discourse coalitions.
Analytical Memos

Memo writing was an iterative analytical strategy whereby I started by creating summaries and key details for each article, highlighted key categories and themes in the piece, and then sorted those down into discursive elements of identity and strategy and the respective discourse coalitions they corresponded to. I also kept track of some of the more evocative quotes to illustrate key points. The detailed summaries for each year included general overviews of the article or letters contents, the elements of key details and information described, and my interpretations of some of the meanings and implications for what each observation described.

Through the process of memoing and whittling down the codes, I began to recognize the importance of the connection between certain key strategies being advocated by coalitions and the elements of the identities distinguishing the coalitions. I initially developed a list of codes for analysis based on a pilot project where I analyzed a single year of articles and letters – reviewing 206 total articles and coding detailed memos for 132 – in Guns & Ammo from 1968. However, although some of those codes and categories I developed from the pilot for identity and strategy were useful for subsequent coding and analysis of articles that were published between 1958 to 1968 in Guns & Ammo & Field & Stream, that coding schema began to breakdown significantly by the second half of the study period. Thus, I developed detailed summaries and memos for each year in the two magazines, from which I developed additional codes and categories, including accounting of new discourse coalitions with different configurations of identity and strategy as well as codes for discursive strategies which I will now layout in greater detail.
Key Concepts & Codes

1: Discourse Coalitions, Elements of Identity, & Strategies

From the detailed memos and summaries, I was able to retroactively summarize categories and codes for elements of identity and strategy, the combination of which generally helped form the basis for categorizing observations into different discourse coalitions. In total I identified 4 coalitional configurations over the 20-year period of study. The first which spanned from 1958 to 1963 was a mostly shared and overlapping identity space that I called the American sportsmen. Unlike some of the later coalitions that would develop, it lacked a defined or consistent strategy and instead was defined on the basis of particular elements of identity that would continue to overlap and cut across various coalitions in later periods. These elements were coded variously as masculine toughness, individualism, self-reliance, stoicism, and central goal of preserving cultural heritage. Stoicism generally described a rejection of emotion or emotionality, and often was described in tandem with masculinity and against femininity. However, it could also describe being rational and analytical about problems rather than hysterical or emotional. Occasionally a discourse might come across as angry or justify anger, and although this was rare and more often frowned upon or buttressed by appeals to control emotions, expressing sadness, sentimentality, or vulnerability were virtually out of bounds. The goal of preserving heritage could sometimes come up of discussions of growing kids up right or fathers teaching sons, but frequently was quite direct about the importance of preserving traditions of hunting and Americas wild places to do so.

From 1964 to 1968, the sportsman coalition fragmented into an old guard and hardline coalition. Identity was coded following Castells (2004) definition of identity, on the basis of the values, attributes, and/or goals in the discourse of any particular article or letter to the editor.
Figure 2.1 summarizes the key elements of identity for the old guard and hardline discourse coalitions that I coded for, as well as the shared elements between them.

Figure 2.1: Old Guard & Hardline Identity Discourses

Consistent with Castells’ suggestion of multiple overlapping identities and identity as a generally more fluid construction in discourse rather than a separable or distinct object, defining the “edges” around a discourse could be tricky and ambiguous at times. While the shared elements in the middle of Figure 2.1 were not a strong enough indication of being in either coalition, any article or letter that described at least one of the old guard or hardline identity elements and did not describe one of the other identity elements was coded as old guard or hardline identity discourse respectively. If there was a mixing of elements, it was still possible to be coded as hardline or old guard on the basis of the proportion of content, though more than two elements mixed in was generally grounds for classifying something as mixed. Mixed categories
across the study period were generally rare, comprising a mean average of less than 4 percent of coded content in both magazines. There would need to be a significant share of one or the other to be categorized in this way. A single mention of the right to bear arms for example in a sea of content about preserving the wilderness would still be classified as old guard. This was generally the case for most content in the first two periods, with only a small share of pieces showing mixing too ambiguous or even to classify. However, as I will discuss, changes in the discursive configurations in the second half of the study period required some adjustments to account for shifts and fragmentation.

In terms of their divergence, the meaning of preserving cultural heritage started getting described differently. The hardline coalition defined preservation of heritage as revolving around the preservation of natural rights and freedoms, with references to the Constitution, the right to bear arms, and the tradition of armed citizenship to defend Western liberty and democracy. There was little attention to issues of preserving the landscape or wildlife as part of cultural preservation. They also began embracing pride and anger over stoicism, while still rejecting emotionalism. What I coded as the old guard discourse coalition embraced a different role that I classified as stewards, which was virtually inseparable from a central focus on preserving the land. It was a generally less militant image that hinged on maintaining practices and traditions for future generations and while some of the details varied, these elements of discourse consistently described a recursive relationship between preserving the great outdoors and perpetuating good citizenship. These divergent conceptions of identity fed into the distinctive strategies each coalition favored. Figure 2.2 below summarizes the codes for strategy between the old guard and hardline coalitions.
As Figure 2.2 indicates, although certain practices and strategies overlapped, there were strategies and preferences that were unique to the hardline and old guard coalitions. Strategies were also coded using a similar method, though followed a less specialized and more colloquial set of classifications given that actual strategies were generally more straight-forward. Things like challenging laws in court or contacting public officials rarely required further classification. Overlapping strategies included activities such as letter writing, contacting legislators, setting up clubs, organizing events to raise awareness or coordinate actions, gathering information, and voting. Differences in strategies though were typically tied to points of focus, the level of cooperation called for, and the overall tone of communications and actions. For example, as
hardliners developed and mobilized, they often emphasized strategies of pressure and resistance to proposals, while moderates tended to emphasize tactics of limited compromise and persuasion. Thus, while both called for letters, the nature of those letters may be very different. While the first period from 1958 to 1963 showed less distinctions with respect to tactics and strategies, by the second period hardline discourse more consistently distinguished its strategic preferences from the old guard in important ways, connecting unyielding and strong identities with a refusal to compromise on gun policy, pressure tactics which emphasized antagonism and visibility, and a more singular focus on firearms policies.

The coding system I developed from the pilot remained helpful for tracing development through the first two periods. However, by the third period covering 1969-1974, there was more fragmentation and mixing of identities in the discourse of both magazines, such that the categories and relationship between the identities and strategies I developed in pilot research of *Guns & Ammo* did not perfectly fit. I thus needed to expand my categories for identity and strategy in the final two periods spanning 1969-1978, as well as introduce an alternative framework for tracing not only the relationship between identity and strategy, but the boundary work between multiple coalitions. I thus integrated the dynamic discourse coalitions framework proposed by Metze & Dodge (2016) to trace development in the third and fourth periods of study. This enabled me to sort through the dynamic ways in which coalition boundaries were being drawn and redrawn in relation to meanings about identity and strategy that were in great flux during these later periods.

Following the same memoing process developed for the pilot, I developed codes from the detailed memos I had from each year of the two magazines from 1969 to 1974, 1087 total articles and letters. Through this analysis, I was able to identify fragmentation of the hardline and old
guard coalitions into 4 sub-coalitions; the old guard conservationists, conservative rural hunters, hardline pragmatists, and hardline radicals. In sum, the coalitional development I identified over the 20-years study period moved from one, to two, and eventually four sub-coalitions, with each of the four periods featuring the development into a different coalitional configuration. To summarize the timeline of development, the loosely shared American sportsmen coalition (1) split into old guard (2) and hardline (3) discourse coalitions between 1964 and 1968. From there, these two fragments further divided into their own sub-coalitions between 1969 and 1974, with hardliners breaking into pragmatist (4) and radical coalitions (5), while the old guard broke down into conservationist (6) and conservative hunting coalitions (7). Figure 2.3 provides a breakdown of the identity codes from analysis of in the second half of the period.
Coding breakdown in the old guard coalition into conservation and conservative hunting coalitions centered on an initially subtle but important difference in the conception of stewardship that developed. The conservationists stood out in the way they increasingly drifted away from a concept centered on individualism or even personal responsibility towards a conception of individual duty that began to mirror collective duty or stewardship. That is, defending the outdoors not just for future generations of their own children, but all Americans.
Conservative hunters instead began to increasingly embrace stewardship of their land in much narrower terms, intent on protecting their cultural stomping grounds from outsiders, or allowing anyone to question their rights or authority in their neck of the woods. Unlike their conservation counterparts who continued to define clear strategies, conservative hunters, often from rural areas of the West and South, described less in the way of proactive strategies than a general expression of strategies and actions they were no longer for, and desire for isolation from and non-compliance with non-shooting conservationists, federal regulators, or policies that might restrict their access to hunting.

The most unique and tricky coalition to code for was the hardline pragmatist coalition. This was because this discourse coalition generally represented elite industry interests of gun companies and their parent companies involved in industrial development. Because they were more driven by more direct material and political interests, while the strategies these discourses enumerated were generally more consistent with respect to elements of partisanship coupled with some limited compromise on multiple policies, this coalition could also feature a mix of elements found in old guard identity as well as radical hardline identity. Some ambiguities were easy enough to clear up when the interests in the discourse such as gun industry or logging profits were referenced explicitly, or the writer’s title in their bio or letters indicated their position at DuPont or Smith & Wesson. I also worked to clear up some ambiguities in the discourse by profiling who some of the writers were through secondary research to confirm their positions, connections, and interests where possible.

As a general note on coding, particularly for letters, sometimes an otherwise short letter could still be coded into a coalition by virtue of their explicit support for a recent article or piece that was a clear part of a discourse coalition. For example, a letter praising an article by
conservation columnists like Ted Trueblood which specifically praised the article for taking a stand in protecting the wetlands could still be classified as old guard despite being otherwise sparse on the details. However, a vague praise or disapproval of a piece that contained some radical asides, but which was also covering technical reviews of firearms and other unrelated topics, would be excluded from analysis.

2: Bridges & Demarcations

A discursive bridge in discourse is any appeal signaling agreement between groups based on facts, interests, identity, or other salient content (see Metze 2010; Metze & Dodge 2016), whereby coalitional actors seek to extend the boundaries of their coalition. A successful external bridge leads to discourse integration (Metze & Dodge 2016), while an internal bridge leads to discourse confirmation (Metze & Dodge 2016), re-affirming existing coalitional ties. Bridges are strategic discursive mechanisms which can serve various purposes, with groups seeking to increase their influence, gain access to resources, or legitimate their interest to name just a few potential aims.

I coded bridges and demarcations based on Dodge & Metze’s (2016) four-type classifications, with internal bridges and demarcations limited following a definable internal focus. Internal focus was determined by either a bridge or demarcation based on a sense of shared identity. An example of an internal demarcation might be a hunter talking about other hunters as “gun jerks” or “slobs” because they do not act safely or comply with hunting norms or rules, tarnishing the general reputation of shooters. These constructions would typically be accompanied by strategies such as calls for stronger self-policing or other measures such as stricter licensing to weed such hunters out. An example of internal bridge would be a call to stop
infighting between resident and non-resident hunters, calling for solidarity based on shared attributes, values, and goals rather than dividing over selfish interests.

External bridges would be praise and calls to work with other groups outside the NRA or allied local shooting clubs, such as conservation organizations like Sierra Club or political actors such as Congressmen or Senators who were not verified members. External demarcations were not particularly distinctive from other work which has looked more exclusively at common-enemy framing (Benford and Snow 2000) or “Devil Shifts” (Sabatier 1987). It is basically the distinction of any individual actor or group whose interests are defined in antagonism or opposition to the in-group. It is negative out-group framing of anti-gun politicians, environmentally destructive industrialists, or similar distinctions. When discourse coalitions diverged with respect to their demarcations and bridges, it often marked critical disagreements between them. Was the Sierra Club a powerful environmental ally and conservation group, or anti-hunters seeking to close off access to valuable hunting ground? Unlike Metze & Dodge (2016), while I coded for internal and external bridges and demarcations, I did not restrict the coding of bridges and demarcations based on facts and instead focused on the construction or deconstruction of bridges based on identity. While some claims of fact were made here and there, they were rarely the foundation on which bridges or demarcations were built.

Given the high volume of content and the greater detail required for coding identity, strategies, and demarcations/bridges in discourse, I focused on the discourse analysis and coding on election years when volume was generally higher and content was richest. The one exception was for a particular anti-hunting demarcation strategy that grew prominent in *Field & Stream* for the second half of the study period. Given the importance of this particular demarcation strategy in discourse, I did a more general coding in that magazine to examine the prominence of that
demarcation over time. The sub-set of data coded for boundary work (bridges and demarcations) was about 662 pieces in *Field & Stream* and about 550 pieces in *Guns & Ammo*. In addition, I conducted some supplementary content counts of the data in each magazine to provide a general sense of the trends in topics in each magazine. This included counts and percentages of articles and letters collected covering gun laws, hunting issues, conservation/environment, or “other” to capture less important themes unrelated to those main topics. I also kept track of the percentage of gun articles in each magazine that expressed support of gun laws.\(^{10}\) This approach to analysis also helped bound the time periods, aiding in pin-pointing changes in trends that could serve as focal points for analysis about any major changes in the discourse leading into or following peaks in gun coverage, hunting coverage, or conservation coverage warranting deeper investigation.

3: *Inflection Points, Periodization Strategy, & Approach to Discursive Shifts*

Embedded in the above-mentioned accounts are various approaches to political development that support some concept of major external events or focusing events (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1998; Cobb & Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995; Light 1982; Walker 1977; Majone 1989) which can play important roles in both policy development (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995) and group mobilization (Birkland 1998). Focusing events are usually big moments or external shocks that receive national attention and can impact agenda setting (Cobb & Elder 1983). Majone (1989) argued that while big events like an oil spill can gain major attention, events are often followed by contests to define the problem, with status groups such as oil lobbies seeking to downplay the events while groups pressing for change use

\(^{10}\) Focusing analysis in this way was a data reduction strategy, in which purposeful choices are made to focus analysis on the most salient and relevant articles for the purpose of theory development (Miles and Huberman 1994).
the events to mobilize greater support. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) theorized that major external events can favor pro-change groups by providing them evidence for the problems they want addressed, while pro-status-quo groups must manage the fallout and greater public scrutiny. Birkland (1998) noted that although a major event may increase attention, the visibility of some events relative to others still depends critically on the presence of interest groups to mobilize around the event. Birkland (1998) also theorized that some events may lend themselves to more or less ambiguous harms (p. 71), which in turn can make an event more or less focal. As an example, Birkland compared the Three Mile Island (TMI) incident to the Exxon-Valdez oil spill and suggested mobilization from the spill was greater because the harms were more visible, while the impacts of TMI were less immediately visible or obvious (Ibid, p. 72).

Other scholarship has noted the importance of focusing events but questioned the self-evidence of major events and the need for groups to define problems and solutions. For example, Deborah Stone’s concept of “causal stories” concurs in some ways with Birkland’s conclusions about problems that are defined as complex or ambiguous being less likely to lead to mobilization, though places greater emphasis on the process by which groups define causes rather than events lending themselves to particular causal stories. As Tarrow (1994) points out, threats or opportunities are not objective realities but rather subjectivities that must be articulated and interpreted as such by groups. Events are rarely if ever uncontested or produce uniform meanings or actions. Blee’s (2012) study of advocacy organizations also notes how groups can have “turning points”, moments that are more internal or seemingly minor at the time that ultimately come to precipitate big changes in groups or group dynamics. To account for context without downplaying the importance of interpretation, I developed the concepts of inflection
Inflection points were key points of discussion or debate among the discourse coalitions that helped define the interactions and disagreements of the period. These were the points of emphasis in the text that could come from external shocks, but could also be internal or even manufactured to some degree. The concept of inflection points is a mid-range one and may involve external shocks or focusing events (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1998; Cobb & Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995; Light 1982; Walker 1977; Majone 1989) but must be interpreted and defined as such by groups as relevant to them. This is similar to theories suggesting events must be interpreted and translated as threats or opportunities (Tarrow 1994; McAdams, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) or a problem with or without solutions (Stone 1989) to become major points of focus relevant to advocacy groups. Additionally, an inflection point can be constructed or manufactured in the discourse without a clear external flashpoint or event, instead emerging from changes in internal dynamics (Blee 2012) or constructed by actors in discourse as a moment to rethink things without clear reference to events beyond the boundaries of the ideas in the pages. For example, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, the publication of Don Martin’s piece National Suicide did not seem to emerge from a clear flashpoint or event, yet still seemed to mark an important moment of reflection that began to reset the meaning of gun control for many shooters. While I noted 7 potential inflection points from key events noted in the existing NRA literature, I needed to both verify and qualify whether/how those events meanings were used to shape coalitional development through my analysis of the magazine data, and also identified additional ones through the review of the magazine content and discourse. For example, the JFK assassination is commonly identified as an important moment in the development of both the gun
rights and gun control movements in America. However, the passage of laws at the state level in the mid-1960s emerged from my review of the magazines and analysis of the ways coalitions developed around those moments. These major inflection points catalyzed greater division of gun owners into more distinctive identities and discourse coalitions.

Inflection points were related to but distinct from discursive shifts (Hajer 1995; 2006), characterized by major changes in the configuration of the discourse coalitions. A discursive shift was a change or shift in the trends of the discourse coalitions. I identified discursive shifts in the coalitions as changes in the way identity, strategy, or group boundaries were being articulated in the magazines. Discursive shifts emerged when the configurations of elements of identity and strategy in discourses were both distinctive from previous ones, repeated by others beyond a single article, columnist, or letter, and persisted beyond a single inflection point. The conception of discursive shifts that I adopted is similar to Hajer’s (1995) concept of discursive shifts, though was not limited to changes in policy or changes in the dominance of one coalition or another.

Discursive shifts were an important part of my periodization strategy. After initially considering breaking the 20-year study period into segments based on even 5-year increments or basing the periods on external events identified in existing NRA scholarship, the periodization strategy I ultimately adopted was based around the discursive shifts I identified in my analysis. The first period from 1958 to 63 was characterized by a shared identity which showed some signs of early tension before really starting to split following Kennedy’s death and changes to the Dodd bill at the end of 1963. The second period followed the inflection points and interaction of hardline and old guard coalitions before the passage of the GCA wrapped up the first major discursive shift and breakdown of the coalitions. The third period followed the inflection points
after the GCA and the further fragmentation of coalitions in that period into 4 sub-coalitions. The passage of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and controversies following the CBS program the *Guns of Autumn* provided the final set of key inflection points driving a discursive shift to a fragmented coalitional configuration favoring hardline coalitional priorities, and the emergence of radical coalitional dominance, its takeover of the NRA takeover, and the aftermath in the final period.

There are other approaches to describing discursive shifts, such as three stage models (See Krzyzanowski 2020), but I feel this analytical choice strikes the balance between retaining some of the parsimony of Hajer's (2006) concept of discursive shifts while adding some clarity to the dynamics of the concept.

**Limits**

My understanding of each magazine contributors’ perspectives was grounded in what they offered up in the text as well as my secondary knowledge of the context they produced them in and, in the instances when it was applicable, my knowledge of the individuals themselves. I could not always verify if everyone advocating certain practices truly practiced what they preached. However, from a discourse analytic perspective it is not centrally important if people’s actions perfectly mirror what is advocated, as I am ultimately more focused on the language-practice and how this might influence the development of more extreme views. The focus of the analysis was not on experience, per se, but rather on how discourses supported the development of more extreme views and actually shaped experiences in the process.

On a related note, another potential limit of the study is that with respect to strategies, publishing articles or letters in these particular magazines is itself a form of discursive strategy which I did not code for unless a member explicitly advocated for it (i.e., questioning whether publishing in the magazines was the appropriate audience or supporting the sharing of internal
viewpoints and information). Since otherwise publishing opinions in the magazine’s themselves was a universal strategy, coding each piece as representing this strategy was impractical because it failed to distinguish coalitions within the data collected. It is possible that some NRA members may either have chosen to publish their discourse elsewhere, been excluded from one magazine or another for space or other considerations by the editors, could have participated less visibly by virtue of reading but not contributing, and/or may have chosen other forms of communication or strategy not captured in the magazines. In other words, I cannot rule out the possibility that there may have been additional coalitional viewpoints not captured in the magazines or that some coalitional discourse could have been more prominent in other magazines, NRA clubs, or related sites of discourse. With that said, I had strong reason to believe that the data was broadly representative of actual coalitional developments in the NRA. In addition to supplementary historical research of documents, studies, and selected works in the NRA’s flagship American Rifleman, the articles and letters frequently picked up and remained in conversation with other sites of discourse. It was common for any mention of firearms policy in mainstream media, local news coverage, books, or other gun magazines to receive multiple mentions and commentary in both Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo. Moreover, pieces showed a level of introspection about other members who may or may not have actively published and variously helped place some of those elements within the context of coalitional development. Thus, while drawing conclusions about the actual share of coalitional viewpoints within the NRA provided some limitations, the magazines still provided a representative sample of the coalitional formations as well as the dynamic process and sequence of those formations over the study period.

One final analytical limit I faced was that it was not always possible to verify NRA membership of all actors, particularly if they were letter writers that did no self-identify and were
not a prominent figure like a politician or organizational leader. Additionally, some of the columnists of *Field & Stream* such as Michael Frome were definable “outsiders”, figures from conservation organization or federal departments that were not under the direct authority of the NRA. With that said, I still believe that generally speaking, it was appropriate to treat each magazine as a discursive space over-represented by NRA members, and the discourses in them as part of general trends in the discourse among members of the NRA. With that in mind, I am still open to the possibility that additional evidence may either strengthen or weaken my assumptions that these magazines are representative of discourse coalitions that existed within the NRA.

**Conclusion**

Such a discursive approach provides an alternative means of exploring the transformation of the NRA, challenging assumptions of the organization as a more durable unitary actor operating under a shared set or interests or building a single unified identity. Instead, this discourse analytic approach provides a means of exploring the ways in which sub-groups formed and interacted to make the NRA the organization it is today, and that such a path was neither linear or inevitable. In doing so, this approach helps better understand the dynamic interplay between identities, interests, and context in the development of advocacy organizations and the level of influence that different sub-groups have on them, not just independently, but interactively. Additionally, it draws attention to the alternative mechanisms by which a group may come to dominate a discourse, not just through structuration or the building of new consensus, but also through the unmaking of prior coalitional consensus or boundaries in particular contextual moments. Such a detailed and contextualized approach can shed light on
some of the complicated, temporary, and unstable relationships between coalitional alliances, particularly with respect to the interplay between interests based more on material resource advantages and interests shaped by identity. In short, this approach which blends considerations of identity, strategy, and related alliance-building in discourse is well suited to exploring the phenomenon of sub-group dominance, not just in the NRA, but growing increasingly prevalent in the landscape of American politics.

How and why has the NRA gone from an organization that once tolerated and even supported some gun regulation to one that refuses to compromise on any gun legislation? How is it that a particular sub-group of more extreme members, whose preferences remain largely out of step with public opinion on gun control, dominate this shift? In this chapter, I will start by providing some background and context about the early development of the NRA drawing on secondary sources. By covering this background, I will show how early development shaped a loosely shared identity space that defined the organization and its membership at the start of this period in the late 1950s. I then begin my analysis in 1958, an important period that marked both the first year of Guns & Ammo’s publication as well as the transition from a long period of growth in hunting and firearms ownership starting to give way to the development of different external pressures and internal tensions among NRA members and leaders. I’ll then move on to describe the overlapping and distinct elements of identity and their connection to political strategies in the discourse of Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo. In this process, I will highlight both the shared features of discourse among shooters in both magazines as well as some of the more distinctive elements. Although there was little evidence of explicit confrontation between NRA members in this early period, divergent concerns and goals signaled the seeds of future division to come, with some shooters remaining more concerned about the future of hunting while others expressed greater alarm about gun regulations, military preparedness, and the Cold War. I will conclude by summarizing the implications of the analysis in this first period for understanding both the delay of open conflict as well as understanding the eventual dominance of a more radical sub-group.
This chapter helps us understand the formation of discourse coalitions and the dynamics within that might lead to fragmentation. The theory of discourse coalitions (Hajer 1995; 2006) suggests policy decisions are the result of coalitional competitions to structure policy debates and subsequent policy outcomes. A coalitions discourse can be considered dominant if it achieves “structuration” (Hajer 2006). Structuration of the discourse has been described as a storyline setting the terms of debate, and domination as a coalition connecting their preferred strategy to the dominant discourse by showing an affinity between their storylines and the dominant one (Hajer 2006). Thus, the theory of discourse coalitions assumes that so long as a discourse coalition can align their preferences around the dominant storyline and achieve institutionalization, the periods that follow are stable and held in place by continued dominant (even unquestioned) storylines holding in place similarly stable institutional arrangements. What the NRA story suggests in this chapter is that even during periods of apparent stability, what may appear like sustained consensus or convergence around storylines can mask sub-group differences, distinctive features of group identities, and imperfect matches between identities, interests, and strategies. As the boundaries of group identity and membership are expanded, it can precipitate the formation of sub-groups. Subgroups may live in relative harmony, but may do so less out of perfect alignment than from a lack of conflict from their actions, lack of more substantive interactions making differences more visible, and/or a lack of changes in circumstances that necessitate more or less uniformity of actions.

**Origins Of Sportsman Identity & Political Strategy**

Understanding the state of the NRA and its membership by the 1950s and even beyond requires some understanding of the evolution of its identity as an organization over time. The
NRA was not founded as a political organization with a mission of blocking gun control\textsuperscript{11}, but the concerns and philosophy of its early members still provided the building blocks from which future membership would articulate new identities and missions. The NRA was founded in New York by two Civil War vets, *Army Navy Journal* editor William Conant Church and retired Union Army General and New York National Guard officer George Wood Wingate (Davidson 1982, p. 21-22). Following the Civil War, Church and Wingate were concerned that labor protests signaled a critical threat to Capitalist democracy and that too many military recruits lacked the skill and preparation to hit their targets should a Socialist or Communist insurrection take root. They founded the NRA as a quasi-military organization designed to prepare future military recruits for service by improving their marksmanship. Church, Windgate, and early members of the NRA feared and despised the idea of insurrection –who would not after fighting a civil war – and were staunchly anti-communist long before it was fashionable. Church in particular was dedicated to fighting “enemies of the Government and the advocates of a disgraceful peace” (Ibid, p. 21). These “Communists, Socialists and other outlaws” Church despised were actually embodied by labor strikers and activists in American cities who during the early days of the NRA, clashed with police and the National Guard (Ibid, p. 22). Thus, while the official purpose of the budding organization was marksmanship training, the goal of civilian training was to ensure military preparedness for recruits to effectively snuff out extreme social unrest and other “socialist” threats to national security. While the organization would continue to change and evolve, the strong military and anti-communist roots of the organization were carried

\textsuperscript{11} The NRA did not start as an organization with any interest in combatting gun control or regulations. But considering it was founded in 1871 and the first major modern gun proposal was not passed until the NY Sullivan Law in 1911, the NRA’s initial lack of involvement in blocking gun control is understandable. With few broad or serious restrictions on gun ownership being proposed, the NRA had little need to block anything.
forward and remained an important ideological foundation from which hardline gun activism would eventually develop.

Militant nationalism was not the only discursive tradition to develop in the early history of the NRA. By the 1900s, President Teddy Roosevelt’s involvement would not only provide important government support but helped expand hunting and conservation as priorities for the NRA as well. A revered figure in both *Field & Stream* & *Guns & Ammo*, Roosevelt was a prolific hunter who embodied both a strong commitment to conservation and a similarly strong affinity for militant nationalism. Many writers and readers of *Field & Stream* in particular traced the origins of their conservation roots to Roosevelt. Roosevelt passed some of America’s landmark conservation legislation including the establishment of the Forest Service, the creation of five National Parks, established bird reserves and game preserves, and placed hundreds of millions of acres of land under public protection. He was also renowned for his exploits in the Spanish-American War, a populist who glorified war and nationalism. In many ways, Roosevelt was the embodiment of what would become a more deliberate fusion of traditions and membership interests under a single banner of American masculinity in the NRA.

Roosevelt’s value as a symbolic icon and the NRA’s increased commitment to conservation legislation took shape in the mid-1930s when NRA leader Karl Fredrick and allied gun industry representatives helped translate Roosevelt’s sportsmanship identity into a strategy, and strategy into policy, with policy feeding forward into the perpetuation and expansion of that sportsmanship identity. In the 1930s, the NRA was facing its first real national battle over gun

---

12 Early in the NRA’s existence, it actually struggled to stay afloat and apparently lacked the resources to even conduct annual meetings of its Board of Directors. But in 1905, then President Teddy Roosevelt signed a law that allowed the NRA to buy surplus military rifles and sell them to members and civilian shooters at a significant discount (Melzer 2009, p. 36). Roosevelt also started the practice of providing the NRA with money for annual national shooting matches (Ibid, p. 36).
control with the National Firearms Act (NFA). Under Fredrick’s leadership, the NRA worked to water-down the 1934 National Firearms Act (NFA) but feared the continued connection between guns and violent crime could lead to even more controls in the future. With so much negative press about machine guns and mob violence in 1930s connecting guns to bank robbers like John Dillinger and gangsters like Al Capone, leading gun manufacturers and NRA leaders saw a need to rehabilitate the image of firearms, expand their popularity, and connect the use of guns in popular consciousness to more lawful and popular activities. Leaders gathered and agreed that the future viability of gun ownership depended on the expansion of recreational hunting and shooting, not only for expanding their ranks but also for improving the popular image of legitimate gun ownership. The NRA’s goal was to connect guns and their use to hunting and causes of conservation, and disassociate them from their use in criminal activities (Bakal 1968).

In launching a coalitional strategy to connect with a broader conservation collective, the NRA and gun manufacturers first established their own conservation organizations and offered existing prominent organizations financial support. Less than a year after the passage of the NFA, representatives of the three large arms industry players including Hercules Powder, Remington Arms, and du Pont, which had recently purchased Remington, had a meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York and agreed to pool funding for the creation of the American Wildlife Institute (later the Wildlife Management Institute) and the National Wildlife Federation, as well as offering financial support to existing conservation groups (Bakal 1968, p. 102-103). Although some conservation organizations like the National Audubon Society politely declined any donations, the NRA and its allies in the gun industry proved rather successful in more deeply embedding themselves in the conservation movement. Besides direct dealings with these organizations, the NRA’s influence on the proceedings was obvious. One of the first vice
presidents of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) was NRA president Karl Fredrick (Winkler 2014, p. 210). Shortly after, the NWF helped design and push for the successful passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937. This would earmark the 11 percent excise taxes imposed on shotguns, rifles, and ammunition for conservation projects sought by individual states, including the purchase and protection of wetlands and the establishment of shooting ranges.

The stage was effectively set for the expansion of hunting and shooting to expand in America and increase the membership of the NRA. With the passage of Pittman-Robertson, defeating gun legislation and supporting conservation legislation became largely complementary rather than competitive goals at this time. With that legislation, the future of both hunting and conservation in America would be much more formally and materially linked. Thus, the NRA would become just as concerned with land conservation and wildlife legislation that might impact the future viability of hunting and recreational shooting as they were with gun legislation, since anything impacting one could impact the other. Moreover, with gun legislation remaining comparatively rare over the next 20 years, the NRA could place greater attention and resources into their hunter safety training and club programs, range construction, public land protection, duck stamps, and other related projects.

When WWII ended, the combination of an influx of cheap surplus military rifles hitting the secondary market as well as men returning from war with weapons training continued the evolution of the NRA into a sportsman and hunting organization. While hunting license data were not collected by US Fish & Wildlife from the states until 1958 (U.S. Fish & Wildlife 2004), the emergence of a whole federal department gathering information on it by 1958 could indicate the increased prevalence of hunting in America over the period, at least to the point where the
potential impacts warranted greater management and oversight. After the war, the NRA established its firearms safety program and pursued hunters as potential members, resulting in both a huge influx of new members and nearly half its members being hunters by 1950 (Melzer 2009, p. 36). From 1945 to 1956, NRA membership jumped from 84,000 to 300,000 (Ibid. p. 36). According to Frank Zimring, from 1939 through 1957 there were virtually no federal firearms proposals and very little legislative activity related to firearms regulation at the state and local level (Zimring 1975, p. 143). The NRA’s strategy of promoting an image as a sportsmen’s organization and prioritizing the expansion of hunting and conservation almost certainly helped increase its membership as well as its investment in conservation legislation to meet growing demand for hunting access. What influence the increase in hunting licenses and related gun ownership had on the relative absence of strict gun control proposals is less clear. It is possible that the coinciding period of nearly 20 years with almost no serious gun controls was simply a coincidence. Zimring has argued as much, attributing the absences of firearms control proposals to a drop in violent crime since the mid 1930s along with economic recovery post-Depression, and World War II figuring more prominently on the national agenda (Ibid. p. 143). However, that the expansion of conservation efforts coincided with nearly 20 years free of most gun regulations is something the NRA’s leaders likely recognized as significant. The leadership’s success at the NRA in continuing to grow its membership, increase the related sales of firearms and ammunition by allies in the firearms industry (Remington, Winchester, and other big domestic companies), all while apparently avoiding serious proposals of gun regulations, more than likely continued to inform and influence NRA strategy going forward.
The American Sportsman Identity\textsuperscript{13}

The strategy of connecting conservation causes and preventing gun regulations helped develop a sportsmanship identity in the NRA, which in turn would reinforce and drive the organization’s continued commitment to a multi-issue conservation strategy. By 1958, the dominant identity that defined the gun owners of America in the pages of *Field & Stream* as well as *Guns & Ammo* was described variously as “the sportsman”, “sportsman of America”, and “American sportsman”. Castells (2004, p. 7-9) describes identity in terms of shared attributes, values, goals, and storylines. I will cover the central forms of identity that had developed in the NRA to this point and that will remain relevant for understanding the development of more distinctive factions of shooters in the 1960s and 70s. Teddy Roosevelt remained an important symbolic figure for the American sportsmen, as frequently referenced by writers in both magazines. Roosevelt embodied the duality of shooters’ roles in society protecting and preserving masculine heritage and culture. This brand of rugged masculine identity politics is what sociologist Scott Melzer has termed “frontier masculinity” (2009), and Roosevelt seems to be a central figure in its development and popularization.

The first issue of *Field & Stream* in 1958 kicks off with a whole host of Roosevelt articles. In the first five issues of *Field & Stream* there were nine separate articles and reaction letters about Teddy Roosevelt and his past exploits, but his general influence on the philosophy and lifestyle brand of the sportsman of the 50s and 60s could be said to figure in nearly every article. Roosevelt was described in rosy detail by *Field & Stream* editor Hugh Grey.

\textsuperscript{13} Although more similar to what will eventually become the old guard discourse coalition concerned with conservation, the sportsmen coalition represented a less differentiated or developed departure from Rooseveltian soldier roles. It was a loose but shared coalition characterized by more overlapping and shared identity and culture of gun owners, with some underlying tensions which will eventually contribute to greater divisions later.
He will be remembered as a soldier, a hunter, an explorer and – not the least – a vivid speaker and writer. But every American who enjoys the outdoors should feel a special gratitude to Theodore Roosevelt, for without him there would not be so much to enjoy as there is (Grey F&S Jan. 1958, p. 6).

As he described Roosevelt, Grey touched on a number of key roles that modern sportsman should also embody or aspire to. The two key ones were the roles of soldiers and hunters. Each of those roles were built off of different but related goals of protecting America. The most direct and obvious goal of protecting America Grey connected to the protection of the American landscape. He wrote,

Roosevelt genuinely loved nature and open spaces and wildlife, and understood the importance of protecting them far better than most of his time did – and indeed better than some people do yet (Ibid, p. 6).

The open landscape, nature, and wildlife, were all things that hunters enjoyed and should protect. However, in Grey’s discourse there was also another implied connection and goal which was described more directly and in greater detail in other articles and letters by sportsmen. This was the connection between preserving the land, preserving the practices of hunting and exploring, and the ability to defend those lands’ borders. The soldier role was associated with the protection and defense of national territory and sovereignty. Although such roles may seem very different, writers like Richard Starnes helped clarify. Starnes – a regular Field & Stream contributor, hunter, and member of the Outdoor Writer’s Association of America – described the connection between preserving the tradition of hunting in the outdoors and preserving the American masculinity required to defend its borders and culture.

We have ruined, frittered away, burned, dug up, cut down, slaughtered, and otherwise destroyed much of the priceless heritage that was left in our stewardship. From a nation of outdoorsmen for whom the wilderness held no terror, we have become a country of soft-muscled, soft-minded males, of whom fewer than 50 percent are adjudged fit to serve in the Armed Forces (Starnes F&S Nov. 1963, p. 12).
Much of what Starnes described in the above quote echoed the sportsman legacy of Teddy Roosevelt. Sportsmen like Starnes articulated discursive connections between the stewardship of the land, defense of its borders, and the maintenance of muscular, hard-minded, fearless males. These identity-driven discourses fed into the ongoing commitment of sportsmen to conservation legislation. Starnes followed up his discursive connection between identity and the land with appeals to demand the passage of the Wilderness Bill, legislation that was supposed to keep certain areas free from development and open to recreational activities like hunting, fishing, and backpacking. He wrote, “any man who loves the outdoors and takes spiritual refreshment from the wonders of nature has to gripe…any citizen who wants to see self-government work is conscience-bound to cry out in indignation over the back-alley assassination of the Wilderness Bill” (Ibid, p. 73). Sportsmen like Starnes connected the conservation of nature with the maintenance of their identity. Sportsmen were duty-bound to protect nature and the “spiritual refreshment” it provided. As such, they not only supported conservation legislation like the Wilderness Bill, but also described strong and principled basis for similarly strong and principled strategic action.

One claim in some coalitional literature, not just about the NRA but other contentious political groups, is that coalitions and sub-groups can achieve dominance by virtue of the fact that they care more about some policy (See Luker 1984; Meltzer 2009). But Richard Starnes did not sound like the kind of sportsman who cared any less about the preservation of the land he connects to his heritage than he professed to care about defending his firearms. He not only sounded passionate but also articulated a strong alignment between his identity and preferred strategy. What Starnes’s discourse indicates is that even if the comparative intensity thesis holds,
it will take significant discursive work along with some combination of external developments to produce any disparity in intensity or differences in tactics among NRA members.

The general goals and strategies articulated by sportsmen fell into two general categories in this period: generic support of state and federal legislation and local direct action to promote hunting and conservation. For example, one of the most important legislative actions was taken by Clare Conley, conservationists, NRA member, and editor of *Field & Stream*. Conley testified in favor of the Federal Wilderness Act, S. 174, which would set aside areas for hunting, camping, nature appreciation, and scientific studies, while ensuring no commercial use for the land (Titus F&S Jul. 1962, p. 16). With the increasing pressure to keep land open for hunting, *Conservation* article columnists for *Field & Stream* Harold Titus warned sportsmen that timber and mining interests sought to block the bill. Titus urged all sportsmen to be active or face as many as 10 years before a similar act might be passed again, by which time the land in question may already be destroyed. He wrote,

> Those who are trying to dismember the Wilderness Act are making themselves heard, and if the rifle-toters and back-packers don’t make their desires known almost 8 million acres of publicly owned and publicly used primitive areas in ten states are going to be hacked at by every private interest for another decade (Titus F&S Jul 1962, p. 16).

Titus hits two key themes here with respect to strategy that were consistent with other articles calling for action on the Wilderness Act and similar legislative proposals. First, there is an appeal to both know your representative and make a point of contacting them on key legislation. The second more subtle implication was the connection made between back-packers and rifle-toters. That is, given the power of industrial interests, it would take more than the support of sportsmen to protect certain outdoor projects. Thus, it was critical to maintain good relations and joint action on proposals like the Wilderness Act with all outdoor enthusiasts with a
shared interest in protecting the wilderness, including the ones who might hunt with cameras instead of firearms. The connection Titus described between hunters and non-shooting conservationists was an early example of an external bridge in discourse (Metze & Dodge 2016). Bridges and demarcations in discourse are strategies that individuals and groups deploy to define their coalitional boundaries, supporting either greater cooperation with other groups (bridges) or to draw clearer lines of non-cooperation or opposition between their coalition (demarcations). Although bridging and demarcation strategies will become more prominent and developed towards the end of the next period from 1964 to 1968 – which I will cover in Chapter 4 and the succeeding empirical chapters – Titus’s bridge to non-shooting conservationists foreshadows the early recognition by many sportsmen that protecting their heritage would likely require more than just a strategy of strong resistance. Sportsmen also began articulating the need for a broad-based coalition building strategy in order to overcome the power of industrialists. As such, sportsmen would attempt to build discursive integration between themselves and non-shooting conservation groups, an external bridging strategy in which they would articulate cooperation based on shared interests, but not shared identity. This made for alliances that carried greater potential for overcoming the power of opposing forces in the moment, but which may have been less durable in the long-run than bridges based on shared identity. Every two-way street of cooperation in discourse could also be redeployed as a double-edged sword *internally*, with external bridges made by some sportsmen making them vulnerable to internal demarcations from other sportsmen.

---

14 For greater detail and clarification about internal and external demarcations and bridges, see Methods in Chapter 2.
The second class of strategies or proposed actions proposed by NRA sportsmen were less overtly political and more local direct actions. Local direct actions included establishing hunting and outdoor clubs, hunter education and training programs, and local public relations efforts that ranged from community self-policing to more direct interventions. For example, *Field & Stream* columnist and NRA life member Ted Trueblood detailed why the NRA’s hunter and safety shooting programs were an important recruitment tool “for the boy just starting out” (Trueblood F&S Nov. 1961, p. 38). Trueblood explained, “The program is conducted locally by state conservation commissions, sportsmen’s organizations, civic groups, schools, and police departments.” (Ibid, p. 38). This was the ideal means of growing the community, as it satisfied goals of expanding ranks, engaging in community relations, and even passing on sportsmen’s heritage. Trueblood even noted that such programs were ideal for boys without a “hunting father or uncle” (Ibid, p. 38).

Sportsmen were particularly concerned with public relations, because their access to hunting often depended not just on public policies but also private attitudes and actions. Any angry farmer or local landowner could post their land against hunting, or encourage their neighbors to do the same. One article noted, “With more farmers demanding something in return for hunting on their lands, smart sportsmen are finding new ways of cooperating for the good of all” (Titus F&S Dec. 1958, p. 37). Suggestions ranged from offering leasing agreements for parts of the land to fund-raising drives to pay for seasonal leasing to cross private properties and prevent posting (Ibid, p. 39).

Since other local residents and non-hunters could make hunting easier or harder – not just through policy but by virtue of their individual actions – it made for a connection between sportsmen’s identity and strategy that was often very local, interpersonal, and introspective.
When hunters destroyed a local fence to access wildlife they tracked, columns covering such incidents frequently proposed both a literal and figurative mending of fences. With so much riding on the popular image and conduct of hunters, direct engagement, education, and community policing became important practices. Writers and readers in *Field & Stream* expressed particular concern that any hunting accident could result in local hearings or proposed restrictions. When *Field & Stream* writer Corey Ford wrote a story about a tragic fallout from a hunting accident, letters came in applauding the message, with most echoing reader LE Predmore’s sentiment about the story being, “one of the best lessons I’ve ever read on hunting safety, and should be made required reading for every hunter who carries a gun in the field.” (Predmore F&S Feb 1960, p. 4). Others noted that such tragedies inevitably brought newspapers and newscasts blaming all hunters for the actions of one (Piper F&S Feb. 1960, p. 4).

Similar to sportsmen’s strategies related to legislation, these more localized strategies reflected a similar recognition of the importance of their external relations to the future of their hunting privileges. Whereas other bridging strategies sought to improve the leverage of shooters against powerful opponents, these introspective strategies pointed more towards efforts to bridge the gap between sportsmen and local non-shooters. While some described the possibility of collaborative efforts and programs, most simply sought to avoid provocation or organized resistance to hunting.

With sportsman connecting the preservation of their culture with the conservation and protection of land and wildlife, their dominant focus remained on issues of hunting and conservation, which frequently overlapped. As Table 3.1 below indicates, from 1958 to 1962, the overwhelming emphasis of *Field & Stream* was on issues of hunting and other recreational
activities. Each percentage reflects the percent of articles covering the topic out of the total articles and letters collected for that year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gun Laws</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Conservation</th>
<th>Recreation/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis articles & letters in *Field & Stream*, excluding ads. Total N = 1407. Annual range N = 286 to 191, Annual mean average N = 235.

As shown in Table 3.1, conservation was not the dominant focus in *Field & Stream* in this period, but averaged 16.5 percent of the content every year over the period. Yet conservation consistently comprised significantly more coverage than gun laws. Over that same period, the sportsman of *Field & Stream* rarely brought up the topic of gun regulations. Between 1958 and 1962, the publication never generated any combination of featured articles and letters from readers about gun regulations that reached the double-digits. There was a significant spike in the pieces about gun laws in 1963 but that still comprised little more than half of the share of conservation pieces. These numbers seem to reflect both the relatively limited pressure of gun regulations on the NRA in this period and the growing popularity of hunting as a pastime in the US following the end of WWII (Meltzer 2009, p. 39). That growth was aided by the strategies adopted by sportsmen to preserve and expand hunting areas by supporting legislation, organizing local clubs, and engaging with local non-shooters, priorities that were motivated by the preservation of their American identity. However, as sportsmen continued to expand the boundaries of their coalition and grow their own ranks, that same expansion created new problems for sportsmen to manage, problems that animated internal tensions between them that
reflected class and regional differences. Sportsmen began to show early signs of fragmentation that would grow more salient in the periods to come, eventually making them vulnerable to internal demarcation strategies\textsuperscript{15}, disintegration\textsuperscript{16}, and/or realignment\textsuperscript{17} with other discourse coalitions as problems escalated and other circumstances brought additional conflicts to the fold.

**Early Signs of Tension and Conflicting Interests Among Sportsmen**

Sportsmen may have been united in certain core features of their identity and supported similar goals and strategies, but as pressure on resources and access increased, so did comments and disagreements on limits to individual behaviors or hunting access. For example, in January of 1959 and even in a few issues in *Field & Stream* in 1958, writer and Idaho sportsman Ted Trueblood made the case for increasing fees for hunting to better support wildlife protections and keep hunting land accessible in the long-term. The next three months of letters to the editor featured numerous letters from annoyed hunters identifying as average Joes whose hunting activities would be disproportionately disrupted by the policies and activities advocated by Trueblood and other columnists. One reader took issue with Trueblood’s claim that hunting

\textsuperscript{15} As noted in Chapter 2, a discursive demarcation in discourse is any argument signaling disagreement between groups based on facts, interests, identity, or other salient contents (see Metze 2010; Metze & Dodge 2016), whereby coalitional actors seek to limit or narrow the boundaries of their coalition. A successful external demarcation will result in discourse polarization (Metze & Dodge 2016), closing off external cooperation and/or driving coalitions further apart. Conversely, a discursive bridge in discourse is any appeal signaling agreement between groups based on facts, interests, identity, or other salient content (see Metze 2010; Metze & Dodge 2016), whereby coalitional actors seek to extend the boundaries of their coalition. A successful external bridge leads to discourse integration (Metze & Dodge 2016), while an internal bridge leads to discourse confirmation (Metze & Dodge 2016), reaffirming existing coalitional ties. Bridges and demarcations are strategic discursive mechanisms which can serve various purposes, with groups seeking to increase their influence, gain access to resources/close opponents off from them, or legitimate their interest to name just a few potential aims.

\textsuperscript{16} Discursive disintegration (Metze & Dode 2016) describes an internal splitting of a coalition into two (or possibly more) distinctive coalitions that can result from internal demarcation in discourse, whereby the boundaries of the current coalition are rejected and redrawn in more exclusive ways.

\textsuperscript{17} Realignment is related to but does not necessarily follow from disintegration. Realignment of discourse coalitions describes a defection (either immediate or gradual) that follows from one discourse coalition that embraces the discursive elements or agrees with one they were not previously connected to or even opposed.
restrictions posed the same burden on all hunters. That reader argued that if writer Ted Trueblood was in his neck of the woods, it would be a lot harder to be sporting given the much greater scarcity and pressure he faced in his area of New York (La Pan, F&S Mar. 1958, p. 8). In April’s *Field & Stream*, a letter to the editor from one hunter in Brainerd Minnesota under the header “Let’s Face It”, gets to the core of concerns raised by some hunters about fee-increases and fee-hunting. He writes,

> Is he [Trueblood] getting a payoff from these game farms or is he against the average guy? I wish he would go to England to see how fee hunting works. The working guys is just out of luck. They want your dough. So most working chaps just have to leave it to the upper class (Ward F&S Apr. 1959, p. 6).

For working-class hunters like Ward, relying on game farms that charged fees was not a realistic option because it was not accessible or affordable. In comparing the system to the one established in England, he not only connects such a system to elitism but subtly implies such an elite system is akin to British aristocratic hunting that was un-American. Given the constant connection of the protection of the outdoors with American heritage and frontier roots, such an implication was a pretty serious criticism. In both *Field & Stream* and *Guns & Ammo* there are similar working-class complaints in early magazine issues from the late 50s and early 60s related to safari hunting articles. These reactions showed less concern about the moral implications of shooting elephants and instead suggested such hunts were classist and out of reach to the average person. Thus, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was tension between different shooters related to class that made regulations, increased fees for duck hunting, or other conservation measures more or less objectionable to groups of different means and status. Hunters of greater means generally worried more about maintaining both their own positive image and increasing the popularity of their sport while also ensuring that nature did not get too commercial or crowded with the wrong sorts of people. While related to class concerns, upper class sportsman
also grappled with a distinctive theme of balancing commitments to continue to expand the 
popularity of outdoor sports without creating a tragedy of the commons. Reader Henry Collins 
Milton Jr. from Trenton NH reacted to a column by contributor Ralph Hedlin which 
optimistically recounted how the addition of new roads to travel into wildlife areas would make 
certain spots previously inaccessible to most more open to everyone. He wrote,

How long will these areas be new and unspoiled? I dread to think of the 
Mistassini, Metabetchouan, South West Brook, Bella Colla, Rupert River, and other 
places I know so well being debased with hot-dog stands, billboards, and empty beer cans 
and other refuse so freely discarded by the untutored and unthinking. God help the 
sportsmen when Coney Island moves in on the George River (Milton Jr., F&S May 1961, 
p. 6).

Milton’s NIMBY grumblings were not trivial. Discourses like his indicated that even if 
the early sportsmen of the NRA were growing more numerous, they were already showing a 
certain level of fragmentation. The ranks of sportsmen may well have been growing but so too 
were perceptions that the woods were growing into crowded Coney Island tourist trap-shoot. 
Multiple articles and letters in Field & Stream expressed concern that the once solitary sport of 
hunting was now overrun by crowds that increased the potential for accidents and dwindling 
game numbers. Crowding and diminished hunting access also generally threatened to cheapen 
the nature of the hunting experience, or more specifically, the experience of nature. With so 
much of the connection between identity and strategy built on particular idealized hunting 
conditions and norms, sportsmen now faced a situation where they may well have become 
victims of their own success increasing the popularity of hunting.

With hunting apparently growing more popular, sportsmen had to confront a difficult 
balancing act to reconcile the desire to preserve their sport without cheapening the experience of 
it. As sportsmen proposed various strategic responses to balance priorities, internal demarcations 
such surfaced in their discourses, dividing sportsmen by class and region, and evidencing how
actors can draw on shared identities and experiences of a problem but still demarcate themselves from blame for those problems by drawing further distinctions, which I will elaborate on more below.

Various sportsmen introduced internal demarcations aimed at “slob” hunters but the variance in the way these lines were drawn continued to echo various regional and class differences. Gun owners of all stripes in both magazines were not shy about chastising the so-called slob hunter. The slob hunter was any hunter who did not follow the written or unwritten rules of hunting etiquette, outdoor etiquette, or basic safety and conduct norms. Yet who or what exactly constituted a slob versus a legitimate sportsman as well as what activities were acceptable or not showed some variance and could be inconsistent and unclear. For upper-crust hunters who traveled, slobbery was frequently connected with hunting practices that were associated with local undesirables who shot up signs, jack lighted deer\(^\text{18}\), and did not pay fees, buy licenses, or purchase duck stamps. While not always direct in criticism, it was often implied that local townie shooters were to blame for deviant activities or even posting their own land while continuing to hunt on it themselves. A good example summarizing multiple of these kinds of gripes came from a reader calling out *Field & Stream* writer Corey Ford’s recurring fictional column *The Lower 40* for minimizing and even glorifying characters who were textbook examples of witless townie hunters who broke laws, jeopardized the safety of others, and gave hunters a bad name. In contrast to a Ford column depicting the characters of the *Lower 40* as victims of posted land, reader Arthur Corbin Jr. applauded the move, writing,

\(^{18}\) Jack-lighting is a controversial hunting practice of hunting at night using a flashlight or lantern to lure and effectively paralyze deer (literally a deer in headlights), leading to easy and quick kills.
Well, sir, that gang of irreverent sinners has at last gotten just what was coming to them. There is hardly a law of God or man that they haven’t violated. Spent all the winter sitting around the store, swilling Old Stump Blower and, through that Corey Ford, letting the world know what great guys they think they are. They’re just a bunch of barroom bums everlastingly hatching plans to hornswoggle their neighbors (Corbin Jr. F&S Jun 1958, p. 4).

Corbin not only expressed frustration about romanticized depictions of the drunken local hunter and their other unlawful conduct, but indicated frustration that Ford’s column reinforced the attitude of some hunters they should feel entitled to play by a different set of rules. Many depictions of slob behavior tended to pit rural hunters from Southern and Western states against out of state and well-to-do sportsman who were buying summer homes in rural hunting areas or commuted from the suburbs and cities, especially so-called Yankees from Northeastern states. The locals – often from midwestern and southern states – but almost always from rural areas, associated slobbery with tourists, novices, and “city boys” who didn’t know or respect the woods, trespassed on local property, and generally didn’t have respect for local nature or safety. One Field & Stream reader Hank Paris from a small town in Virginia provides a typical description of this brand of slob, though thankfully a less typical solution.

10,000 damn Yankees [travel] here come hunting season & I ain’t for it. Now the ocean is free and if the dumb [censored by editors] wants to try that on their own, let em’go; but when it comes to upland shooting, they are going to get lost. Posted means stay off, period, or you can be shot without recourse (Paris F&S Sep. 1960, p. 10).

What followed was a host of complaints from other hunters in November of 1960 called “Hanks and Yanks”, where divides between these hunters became more apparent. Contributors from multiple magazines across eras often recounted multiple examples of slob behavior and while there was broad agreement that hunters and shooters needed to clean up their sport, which groups or behaviors were the most concerning was never entirely settled.
As such, regional divides started to splinter unity over conservation policies and procedures. Some spoke out about the need for greater federal authority over matters, while others preferred state control. Divides seemed to be most pronounced in Western states, as evidenced by both sportsmen and the local game departments there objecting to the game policies of the National Parks Service limiting hunting areas. For example, in a December Conservation column for Field & Stream, editor Harold Titus discussed the tensions building over “federal intrusion” in Western states, and while he makes the case for federal intervention being necessary, he summarizes some of the grievances as well. He wrote,

A clash has been brewing for years. State Administrators in the West have been more and more insistent that recreational hunting be the tool used to control herds of deer and elk. Easterners generally have not become involved in this issue, but now too, have become apprehensive – this because of the program to acquire more seashore areas for Park Service administration (Titus F&S Dec. 1962, p. 22).

While hunting access on Federal land was still discussed in terms of maintaining “park ecology”, the subtext of tensions between east and west indicated the real tension was over more than just hunting access. There was resentment about who exactly the land really belonged to, not just among administrators, but the local hunters they represented. On this particular policy, Titus noted that a compromise plan for herd reduction in various states was reached, and “any rupture in the ranks of conservationists averted” (Ibid, p. 63). Titus did not stop there. He noted the importance of quickly squashing any difference and reaching compromises on land use and authority because while gripes were understandable, they were small compared to the larger issues of conservation and passing policies like the Wilderness Bill. He warned that any division in the ranks would be exploited and mean no hunting or outdoors for anyone to enjoy. Following the recent defeat of the Wilderness Bill in 1962 even with strong conservationist support, Titus shared a “stern warning” (Ibid, p. 64). He wrote,
As various pressure build up on our natural resources, conservationists are going to find it increasingly difficult to attain the goals which all of us find desirable. Thus, differences of opinion within our ranks that threaten to arouse tempers and distract attention away from the basic aim should be adjusted, even if compromise is necessary. Otherwise, they might destroy the cause to which all of us are dedicated (Ibid, p. 64).

Through reminders of the stakes of cooperation from Titus and other conservation-minded sportsmen in this period and the next, divides for the most part would remain successfully managed. Yet as this section illustrates, even in this early period, the unity of sportsmen was fragile, held together by the continued promise that collective actions promoted individual access to nature’s spoils and individual self-actualization. When more specific proposal of strategy interfered with individual pursuits, some of the tensions among sportsmen came to the surface. Even when managed, these tensions would linger and foreshadow the fault-lines of future fragmentation which I will discuss in the final two chapters.

These divides were not the only diverging interests developing at the time in the shooting fraternity that had to be managed. While the American sportsman identity remained the dominant one in the pages of Field & Stream over this period, another more distinctive identity with much stronger connections to the NRA’s other traditions of nationalism and anti-communism was growing more prominent in the pages and Guns & Ammo. Although not yet in open conflict with conservationists, they certainly expressed little to no interest in issues of conservation and some very different concerns and priorities.

**Minutemen: Gun Rights & The Far Right**

Guns & Ammo was founded in 1958 by Bob Petersen of Petersen Publishing. Propelled by the success of his first niche magazine, Hot Rod, as well as a life-long interest in firearms, Petersen launched Guns & Ammo to appeal to a niche audience of gun hobbyists. Although
hunting remained a major point of emphasis, the magazine’s focus by 1960 was pivoting to one that was increasingly politically and ideologically driven. The magazine’s editorial department made clear in its mission statement by 1960 that *Guns & Ammo* was “written, edited, and published by men who believe deeply and unshakably that personal weapons are essential to personal and political liberty” (Bakal 1968, 114). Table 3.2 introduces the percentage of topics covered in the magazine from the total articles and letters I collected from the magazine each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gun Laws</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Conservation</th>
<th>Recreation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1958*</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959*</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>32.50%</td>
<td>28.50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>22.50%</td>
<td>1.50%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Ratio of Topics in *Guns & Ammo*

Author’s analysis of articles & letters in *Guns & Ammo*, excluding ads. Total N = 1194. Annual range N = 287 to 54, Annual mean average N = 200.

As Table 3.2 above illustrates, contributors of *Guns & Ammo* showed almost no concern for conservation even in this early period. The few pieces covering conservation issues in 1962 and 1963 generally glossed over them in a wider discussion about hunting access and lacked the depth of detail or coverage about bills described in *Field & Stream*. Although hunting and recreation received relatively stable coverage in the first half of the period, by 1961 the number of hunting articles began to dip while the trend in gun law coverage continued an unmistakable and consistent trend up. By 1961 there were more articles covering gun laws than hunting. By 1962 it was the most popular topic in the magazine and by 1963, the number of articles about gun laws and gun rights nearly doubled.
As a relatively new magazine in the budding gun press, especially compared to the older more established magazines like Field & Stream which had been around for decades, the circulation numbers of Guns & Ammo started off much smaller. In 1960, Field & Stream had a circulation of over a million and Guns & Ammo did not even print a full circulation report yet, having just completed its first year with a full monthly print run. Based on the first circulation statement Guns & Ammo provided from 1964 of 134,085 (G&A Jan. 1964, p. 16), a rough conservative estimate of their circulation was probably around 100,000 or less. With approximately one tenth the circulation of Field & Stream by 1963, Field & Stream represented many more shooters at this point in time. Yet the influence of this magazine and connections to the NRA membership was strong, and did represent a niche but growing contingent of NRA members. Though independently run and operated, much like Field & Stream, the magazine regularly ran advertisements for the NRA and was among a number of magazines that NRA members could subscribe to as part of their NRA membership perks.

Although the contributors of both magazines represented a range of perspectives, the editors and readers of Guns & Ammo described a stronger connection to the NRA’s military, nationalistic, and anti-Communist roots. Some did hunt and variously identified as sportsman, but even at the beginning of the period, the contributors of Guns & Ammo discussed politics, they showed less concern for defending nature than the civil defense of America or the defense of their firearms. Most of the writers and readers of this magazine would develop into what I will call hardliners19, NRA members who will accept no compromises on gun control and connect firearms with the defense of their patriotic identity. The hardliners will become a clearer and distinctive group by the end of this period, expressing both a stronger opposition to gun control

and more socially conservative politics. However, they will not begin to consistently align that identity with an uncompromising strategy until the next period. Two early connections these shooters made in discourse was to demarcate tolerance for gun control with being real Americans, and connecting the ownership of firearms with strength and resistance to subjugation. A letter from police officer Travis L. Hobbs provided what will become a typical example of hardline storylines connecting gun control to a Communist takeover. Responding to another readers’ suggestion that sometime in the future, the US might restrict the legal ownership of firearms to shotguns and .22 rifles, he wrote,

If the people of America allow themselves to be stripped of their arms, then they should simply step aside and let the Communists take over. So long as we retain our arms we will never be enslaved or dominated (Hobbs G&A Jul./Aug. 1959, p. 4).

Hobbs in this letter made what would become an increasingly common hardline connection between disarmament and weakness in the decades to come. The hardline connection between disarmament and weakness would eventually be used to support the adoption of more uncompromising strategies to prevent gun regulations between 1964 and 1968. With hardliners moving beyond defining gun control as annoying or ineffective to defining disarmament as a critical threat to American manhood and national identity, compromise too would increasingly be defined as unacceptable weakness. Hobbs also made a common hardline connection in discourse between gun control and communist takeover. The discursive connection between communist ploys and gun regulation were not entirely new. members of the NRA had promoted it earlier. For example, NRA’s Rifleman editor C.B. Lister seems to have made the discursive connection between Communism and firearms controls in an April 1948 editorial in the American Rifleman (Volsky 2019). The connection between disarmament and communist takeover seems to predate even Listers column. Guns & Ammo contributor and NRA member
Judge Don Martin wrote a similar column in the magazine *Outdoor Life* in the 1930s. It simply had not received very much attention. Yet when Martin published a similar column in *Gun & Ammo* in 1960 there was outpouring of enthusiasm and support from readers, a reaction that surprised even Martin. What might explain why Martin’s column in 1960 seems to have resonated more than similar columns in the past?

Although Martin had his own explanations, what really seemed to set this column apart from prior ones was the manner in which he made discursive connections between identity, articulated a stronger basis for grievance, and connected those elements to a more proactive political strategy. In Judge Don Martin’s article in October of 1960 Titled “Gun Control: National Suicide”, he claimed,

> We have always been on the defensive and we have always been on the losing side. True, we have won some skirmishes. Every year two or three hundred anti-gun laws are tossed into the legislative hoppers. Some of them always get through. None are ever repealed. We will never win while we are on the defensive (Martin G&A Oct. 1960, p. 110).

Martin’s claims of increased or persistent state and local gun regulation pressure actually lacked a strong or clear empirical basis. Instead, what Martin described which seemed different

---

20 Most historical accounts do describe some proposals surfacing in the late 50s and early 60s, but these were minor tax and record-keeping adjustments connected to existing legislation or minor pistol carrying permits to cover transport, the most prominent of which were quietly squashed by the NRA, domestic gun industry interests, and/or allied local gun chapters (See Zimmering 1975; Vizzard 2000; Bakal 1968). What Martin refers to as a recent “Treasury Department attempt to demolish the handgun business by a flagrant abuse of its taxing power” (Martin G&A Oct. 1960, p. 19) was little more than a minor proposal in the late 1950’s to extend serial number requirements to all firearms, extend the so-called permanent dealer-records to be maintained permanently rather than for six years, and some minor changes to the types of records dealers kept. These proposals were promptly blocked by stiff opposition from the NRA and industry representatives. The only adjustments being made in 1958 included the requirement that dealer records be kept for 10 years instead of 6, along with serial number requirements for new guns with a blanket exemption for all .22-caliber rifles (Zimring 1975, p. 144). Martin’s claim of two-to-three-hundred firearms control proposals was another claim that lacked any clear empirical basis. He makes reference to “several” states with anti-pistol laws currently on the books, but aside from New York’s Sullivan Act passed in 1911 requiring a permit to carry a pistol and a similar measure passed in Chicago in 1916, I did not come across any mention of similar proposals passing elsewhere. Martin also made reference to homicide statistics from the era from 20 states, but the source of the numbers or his claim that all 20 had anti-pistol laws on the books was something I could not verify. Even assuming the 20 unnamed states from an unnamed study
was both an increased sense of grievance as well as a need to switch to a more pro-active offensive political strategy to prevent gun control proposals from emerging in the first place. Whatever the reasons that Martin’s piece received more praise and attention in the firearms community in 1960, there was no question the piece represented a turning point in the development of a more distinctive and progressively more radical hardline discourse coalition in the pages of *Guns & Ammo*. The Martin piece marked the first key inflection point in *Guns & Ammo*, and while more specific and internal to the readership than inflection points I will discuss in the next two chapters, it highlights how the concept of inflection points is distinctive from concepts of external shocks or focusing events (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1998; Cobb & Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995; Light 1982; Walker 1977; Majone 1989) While an inflection point can certainly come from an external focusing event, inflection points depend more on the construction of a moment as critical and are more similar to Blee’s (2012) conception of turning-points, whereby even seemingly minor shifts in group thinking can set a group on a new path. What made Martin’s piece an inflection point was not some big or obvious external shock or even the invention of completely new tropes about gun control but rather the way Martin reconfigured gun control discourse in a way that seemed to increase salience of the storyline at this particular time. The driving force behind this article – and what seemed to set it apart even from other anti-control pieces prior to it in this era – was the manner in which Martin started to more forcefully connect resistance to gun control with the preservation of America’s Constitution and national character, and likewise, explained how a continued reliance on other kinds of justifications for the ownership of firearms fell short. Martin wrote,

or statistical source did have laws on the books, what exactly the nature of these laws were and how similar or different the measures were in letter and practice also received no mention.
A majority of the shooters who oppose anti-gun laws do so from a purely personal attitude. They want to retain their guns for hunting and target shooting and, in a desperate emergency, personal defense. This motivation is commendable but does not go far enough (Martin G&A Oct. 1960, p. 21).

While Martin ran through common justifications for owning firearms and acknowledged each as legitimate, he suggested that these purposes were secondary and masked the deeper meanings and principles behind civilian gun ownership. He wrote,

The vital reason is that constitutions, just laws and honest courts are worth no more than the willingness and ability of the people to support them. The gradual attrition of personal freedom by endless niggling anti-gun laws threatens all of our freedoms equally as well as the existence of our country (Martin G&A Oct. 1960, p. 21).

Martin defined the stakes of gun regulation as the preservation of America’s laws and constitutions, and thus the very existence of the country. By doing so, he aided in the development of a foundational demarcation strategy distinguishing hardliners from other sportsman whose personal attitudes lacked the particular type of value or resolve Martin deemed necessary to motivate stronger political strategies. He described a hardline identity storyline revolving around individual freedoms and national character, and explained how that identity cohered to more proactive, focused, and unyielding political strategies. Martin – like the hardliners that will follow him – challenged justifications for gun ownership typically used by other sportsman and other pro-gun advocates during this era. He laid out – in clearer terms – what the foundations of hardline gun ownership identity and principles should be. He did this by appealing to shared and overlapping concerns about preserving masculine American heritage and national identity. While defending and reclaiming the true meaning of the second amendment figures into his descriptions, underlying that discourse is the connection between the preservation of Americas laws and the Constitution, and what it signaled about the preservation of a particular kind of national character. To Martin and hardliners that follow, the symbolic value of legislation
and what it said about the people who did or did not accept it, was the central thing that was at stake. “If you are willing and able to fight, it is quite likely you won’t have to” (Ibid, p. 21).

Likewise, those who were not willing to fight were destined to be conquered. He wrote,

That’s the pay-off for teaching young men to take no chances, to not rely on themselves, to have no opinions about right and wrong that they cannot compromise, to appease evil rather than resisting it, to leave all responsibility to the police or other authority, to be panty-waists, milksops and softies (Ibid, p. 21).

Martin described the supporters of gun legislation as villains, but the more important argument he made was not about who he thought was evil but rather how such evil operated and triumphed by emasculating American men. Once emasculated, it removes not only toughness but general moral character and resolve. Thus, while he connected opponents to an array of characters – labeled variously as the “peace at any price” crowd, “do-gooder, pacifist, subversive, pinko, traitor and gangster” (Ibid, p.110) – the most important connection he made was between gun regulations, individual character, and national character.

This article and its message resonated with many of the readers of Guns & Ammo. According to the editors – admittedly questionably reliable narrators whose claims should be taken with a grain of salt – hundreds of letters poured in praising the Martin’s article, requesting reprints, and asking how they could get more involved. Editor Tom Saitos happily reprinted these messages, urging readers to ‘preach the gun gospel’ (Saitos G&A Dec. 1960, p. 6) and join the NRA. One reader Ernest Bean from Seattle, Washington wrote that too many sportsmen were passing the buck or letting “George-do-it” instead of getting involved in legislative action. As he put it,

Many ‘lukewarm’ sportsmen may shrug their shoulders and say ‘so what’ but when a bill is passed that takes away their pleasure, they will then, and only then, bay at the moon, so to speak, and with the same effective results (Bean G&A Dec. 1960, p. 8).
In this response, Bean began to draw a distinction between hardline shooters like himself and ‘lukewarm’ moderate sportsman. He suggested that too many of these other sportsmen were selfish and complacent, only raising their objections to legislation they felt would directly regulate their “pleasure” with guns instead of standing against gun laws on the basis of principles enumerated by hardliners. Bean’s reference to ineffective “baying” at the moon suggested other shooters were weak sheep and lacked the unyielding character described by Judge Don Martin. Such a message certainly gave the impression that for some early hardliners, any complacency with respect to gun legislation was already deemed by some as an unacceptable weakness that must be corrected.

Despite some early hardline gun owners already articulating of an uncompromising masculine identity as a basis for taking stronger action to block gun legislation, such a link was not yet being made consistently in this era yet. Even with Judge Martin’s article and readers like Bean, the nature of most of these responses still largely concerned the inaction of sportsman and gunowners in combatting gun legislation. When it came to the nature of the strategies favored by groups like the NRA in combatting such legislation, such as political compromises on weaker legislation, such tactics remained a much lower source of conflict.

Hardline Bridge to Radicalism

Following the response to Martin’s article, Guns & Ammo moved quickly, encouraging their readers to get more active in combating gun regulations, and urged reads to connect with and join the NRA as well as other pro-gun groups in their area. In January of 1961, C. Richard Rogers of the NRA’s Division of Special Services praised Martin’s article, and urged readers to inform the NRA of state and local proposals to help them gather information and organize
resistance. The volume of reader correspondence about gun regulations from in 1961 more than doubled from the previous year and by August of 1962, *Guns & Ammo* launched its *Right to Keep and Bear Arms* Column. In doing so, *Guns & Ammo* not only continued to step up its activity in combating gun legislation but also its activity in connecting that cause to other neo-conservative platforms and causes which were radically anti-communist.

In fact, *Guns & Ammo* editor and NRA member Tomas J. Saitos, admitted to being a member of the far-right John Birch Society, a radical anti-communist group which believed that various members of Congress and even past presidents were secret Communists plotting the takeover of America. In 1962, *Guns & Ammo* even boosted the signal of an even more radical offshoot of the Birch Society, the Minutemen. The group was a militia organization that believed Communist subversives were planning to take over the country and were stockpiling weapons in preparation for a counter-revolution (GaleArchives, FBI Library).

The Minutemen’s founder, Robert DePugh, had been a former member of the John Birch Society. In May of 1962, *Guns & Ammo* reader Thomas McHugh from Chicago expressed fears about gun control as part of a “fifth column”\(^{21}\) overthrow, described the need for citizens to arm themselves and practice ‘guerrilla warfare tactics’, and expressed admiration for and interest in joining the Minutemen (McHugh G&A May 1962, p. 10). In response, Saitos explains, “We have received numerous requests for this information. Perhaps one of our readers can furnish us with the address of the Minutemen organization which we then could pass on to interested readers.” (Saitos G&A May 1962, p. 10). Furnish they did. Following the request, DePugh

\(^{21}\) The term refers to any group of people who undermine a larger group from within, usually in favor of an enemy group or nation. The term originated from the Spanish Civil War (Ruiz 2014) but was popularized in American discourse leading up to WWII as fears of Nazi’s subversives within borders and governments were attributed to the rapid fall of France in 1940 and its use in Winston Churchill’s famous “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” address (Churchill 1940).
himself publishes a letter which included his National Coordinator address, a PO Box 68 in Norbourne, Missouri.

Even for those who did not have verifiable or direct connections to these groups, most hardliners did not distance themselves from their conspiratorial worldviews and identified with a role combatting secret and subversive enemies of the state. *Guns & Ammo* even shared a conspiracy theory circulated by James Utt, a Republican congressman in Orange County California, who claimed on the Congressional record that a US program training soldiers from visiting nations in counterinsurgency tactics on bases in Savannah, Georgia was actually a plot by Communists to take over the country (Wadowski G&A Jun. 1963, p. 13). The letter, which skims over the details, directs readers to look up Utt’s full Congressional testimony, in which he claimed that “a large contingent of barefooted Africans” could be training on the bases in Georgia as part of a UN plot to invade the US (Utt, Cong. Rec. A1110, Mar. 4, 1963). Other Congressional Records show that Utt also voted against the Civil Rights Acts of 1960, 1964, and 1968, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This is consistent with the rhetoric and beliefs of both the Birch Society and Minutemen, whose material frequently described the civil rights movement as part of another subversive Communist plot to take over the country.

Such pieces signaled early discursive bridges between gun rights and anti-communist groups some hardliners were deploying more strategically to not only define gun control as a central threat to American strength and masculinity, but also to forge political alliances between the NRA and emergent far right groups and politicians. *Guns & Ammo* reader Ken Hawkes of Wisconsin provides a great example of such a bridge, writing,

I belong to four gun clubs. I bend the ear of every political candidate I meet. We might be UN'd and World Court'd out of our freedoms and with the help of the Liberals lose our gun rights, but we can "Alamo" the hell out of them! (Hawkes G&A Mar. 1963, p. 10)
The references to the World Court and UN here reflect objections to red-scare conspiracy that the US’s foreign policy under Kennedy had not been hawkish enough and that the Disarmament Act – a bill that achieved bi-partisan support at the time to reduce nuclear proliferation between the US and USSR – was really a plot by Communists to replace the US with international government and disarm all Americans. Such a bill was initially not even discussed by the either magazine or the NRA because it was an international and bi-partisan bill that had little relevance to domestic firearms. The bill never received a single article or mention in Field & Stream. In fact, even Guns & Ammo did not provide any direct discussion of that legislation or discuss NRA involvement with it until a full year after the legislation passed in late September of 1961.

The Incomplete Alignment Between Hardline Identity and Strategy

In September 1962, the NRA’s legislative division finally addressed the bill in the pages of Guns & Ammo. Although the interview with NRA officials signaled an awareness and sensitivity to the concerns of hardline readers like Hawkes, NRA leaders also re-affirmed the NRA’s strategy of negotiation and compromise. In an interview with Guns & Ammo in their new Right to Keep and Bear Arms column – which had just launched a month earlier in August of 1962 – gun columnist B. Friz Samuel spoke to Judge Hilliard Comstock, a former president of the NRA, current NRA legislative committee member, and California Superior Court Judge. Comstock was suddenly warning readers that the proposal “carried the ultimate goal” of “confiscation” and would give rise to a “police state” (Comstock G&A Sep. 1962, p. 26). Then B. Fritz Samuel asked the obvious question about the NRA’s apparently delayed concern. In
Samuel’s words, if the legislation posed such a serious threat, why had the NRA been, “completely silent about the whole business” (Samuel G&A Sep. 1962, p. 72)?

Comstock goes on to explain why the NRA had been moving “cautiously” (Comstock G&A Sep. 1962, p. 72). He explained that with the bill “cloaked in the mantle of World Peace, the NRA is afraid of being tagged as an irresponsible, extremist organization. So far, this has kept the NRA from voicing public objection to the plan” (Ibid p. 72 & 74).

Essentially, what Comstock describes is not only the NRA’s strategy at this moment but also why that strategy cannot yet be perfectly aligned with a hardline or “extreme” identity. In fact, embracing such an identity would lose them critical allies and influence. Comstock explained,

At present, we enjoy the confidence and respect of the committees of both House and Senate...So far, they’ve always listened to us; even requested our opinion at times. But this Arms Control was passed with enormous bi-partisan support. If we had fought it, we might have lost every friend we have in Congress (Comstock G&A Sep. 1962, p. 74).

The fear was crystal clear. Should the NRA have chosen to embrace the hardline politics of certain members and even leaders too openly, they feared losing prestige and influence, making them “powerless to resist the routine anti-gun laws that are introduced in nearly every Congress” (Ibid, p. 74). At least for the time being, this was something that even hardliners like Samuel, Saitos, and others largely accepted, even if they would prefer to fight more openly. The still incomplete alignment between hardline identity and a more distinctive uncompromising strategy helps explain why there were still a number of pieces in both magazines over this period – even from some hardliners like Tom Saitos and Jeff Cooper – which expressed support for certain gun control measures.

The best evidence of the incomplete alignment of identity and strategy among hardliners during this period was the Dodd bill. The bill, sponsored by Connecticut Senator Thomas Dodd
would place very mild regulations on the mail order sales of handguns, requiring a notarized statement from buyers for the purchase of any handgun through the mail be sent to local law enforcement for their records. It would not even require approval from law enforcement before the transfer was made. When the bill was finally proposed in 1963, even as concern for the possibility of gun regulations seemed to be rising in both magazines, neither magazine voiced any opposition to the bill. In fact, the bill was not even mentioned in the pages of Field & Stream, let alone criticized. Meanwhile, Guns & Ammo was consistent in their support of the Dodd bill. Between June and November of 1963, there were four separate articles describing the Dodd bill and hearings in Guns & Ammo, all of which described Dodd and the bill in favorable terms. When Dodd’s Subcommitte hearings finally got some coverage in the press, Guns & Ammo editor Thomas J. Saitos assured readers that while the press was sensationalizing the hearings and stirring up controversy, the bill was not a real threat to gun owners. “This reporter must be fair and admit that the people we talked with who are connected with Senator Dodd’s office, and who are intimately involved behind the scenes in the recent headline’s appearing against guns from coast to coast, deplore the downright sensationalism that has [been] attached to the hearings” (Saitos G&A Jun. 1963, p. 6). Saitos did not name anyone in particular, but it was clear enough that representatives of the NRA were the representatives the magazine had talked to behind the scenes. Guns & Ammo’s B.F. Samuels explained in an August article about the Dodd bill,

There is reason to believe that the Senate’s juvenile delinquency subcommittee won’t come up with any hasty, ill-considered recommendations. Its chairman is Thomas Dodd (D-Conn.), who G&A’s staff feels is not an anti-gun fanatic. Senator Dodd has been cooperative with legislative representatives of the National Rifle Association, and it appears that his only aim is to prevent juveniles, convicted felons and the like from buying guns by mail (B.F. Samuels G&A Aug. 1963, p. 31).
Samuels not only refused to label Dodd as anti-gun but noted how the NRA was working closely with Dodd on the bill to ensure that controls would be narrowly tailored and only impact criminals attempting to buy guns through the mail. He concluded by assuring readers he had spoken directly multiple NRA sources who confirmed the bill was not a threat, stating,

This writer has interviewed several people recently returned from the NRA convention in Washington. They all felt that the Dodd committee is looking for a way to solve this problem without enmeshing the law-abiding adult in any further red tape (Ibid., p. 31).

Samuels account frankly understates the NRA’s involvement, as they had been working behind the scenes for nearly two years to craft this legislation (Sherill 1973, p. 71-72; Carter G&A Sep. 1971, p. 41; Carter G&A Oct. 1973, p. 44). With the NRA involved more directly in those proceedings, NRA leaders seemed to have reached some consensus that any resulting legislation would not be overly restrictive. Before the Dodd Bill was finally introduced, drafts were sent around to various interests for review, including representatives of the National Sports Shooting Foundation, The National Wildlife Federation, The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute, and the NRA (Sherrill 1973, p. 170). Guns & Ammo’s reporting on it in November of 1963 was somewhere between neutral/informational and generally supportive reporting (See Hertzberg G&A Nov. 1963, p. 28-29).

The NRA’s support of Dodd’s bill indicated that while the identity of the organization may have been growing more fragmented, its strategy of proposing weaker legislation to preempt stricter legislation was yet to be contested. There remained an incomplete realignment between political identities and strategies of compromise. The NRA’s relationship with Dodd as well as his relationship with the gun companies in his state like Colt and Winchester (Sherrill 1973, p. 71) gave the organization confidence that Dodd would limit the scope of the bill an prevent stricter measures from passing. One such bill the NRA was worried about was proposed
by the Washington D.C. City Council. The bill mirrored the design of the NY State Sullivan Law, requiring a permit to own a handgun in the city, which not only required paperwork and fingerprinting but also had to be approved by local law enforcement. The law which was termed a “Little Sullivan Act” was described as “much more serious” a concern.

Not only will it disarm the law-abiding citizen of Washington, but it will set a pattern of legislative thinking for the rest of the nation. Your state legislature may think that “What’s good for Washington is good for everybody.” Worse, Congress itself may be more favorable to some form of federal gun registration if it imposes this law on its own city (Hertzberg G&A Nov. 1963, p. 30).

The NRA at the moment most feared stricter gun bills like the one proposed in DC becoming the model for gun legislation elsewhere. If such legislation was adopted anywhere, the NRA worried it could spread via similar state-level policies, and could eventually even be adopted nationally. Thus, NRA leaders – even those already embracing a hardline identity – generally still felt that narrower legislation like the Dodd bill was useful. With a bill like Dodd’s in place, it could help prevent or even pre-empt the development and spread of stricter policies.

With internal pressures and fragmentation beginning to surface in this period, leaders from the NRA and other allied groups took other formal efforts to keep the peace and maintain a united front to support multiple priorities. To help secure conservation legislation, shore up alliances with other conservation groups and organizations, improve their image, and ward off new gun regulations, the NRA and gun manufacturers once again met in New York at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel and launched the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF). The foundation would help balance multiple priorities and redouble efforts to keep hunting and outdoor sports the central focus/face of gun ownership in America. By September of 1960, editors of both magazines made reference to the meeting and the formation of a new organization that would help coordinate a multi-issue strategy. Grey announces more formalized efforts to
build a coalition of industry organizations and clubs, “To Protect Your Sport” (Grey, F&S Sep. 1960, p. 8). In a big meeting in NYC, the “First National Sporting Conference” featured Warren Page, the regular Shooting columnist at Field & Stream, NRA member, and a broker between industry, political organizations, and rank-and-file hunting groups. Particular emphasis in the piece was placed on the role of a committee of “14 phases of industry”\(^{22}\), including Fred Roff, then President of the firearms company Colt, Members of Groups like Ducks Unlimited, and representatives for the NRA.

By August of 1961, Field & Stream followed with an announcement about a program dreamed up at the June “First National Sporting Conference”, which featured representatives from the NRA, The Shooting and Development for the Sporting Arms and Ammunitions Institute (SAAMI), editors from guns magazines including Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo, and other arms industry leaders like Remington and Winchester.\(^{23}\) Field & Stream editor Hugh Grey enthusiastically described one program dreamed up at the Conference to help coordinate and reward grass-roots community organizing and action to promote and protect the shooting sports. He wrote,

> There are sportsmen of every walk of life throughout the country who work hard setting up ranges and organizing rifle clubs, teaching gun-handling safety classes, and leading the battle against incipient anti-gun legislation. We feel these fellows deserve more than just a pat on the back. That’s why the hard-cash awards (Grey F&S Apr. 1961, p. 8).

---

\(^{22}\) This particular phrasing choice was an error, misconstruing a popular business theory terminology of the era describing “four phases of industry”. The phases of industry theory described four phases of a business’s life cycle, from emergence to decline. What they likely meant to indicate

\(^{23}\) While a complete list of attendees wasn’t provided, some of the big players by the time of the second conference in 1961 included Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, Fred Roff of Colt, William Ruger of Strum Ruger, H.G. Williams of Browning, 100 other manufacturers and industry organizations. Also in attendance was Joe Foss, a man whose list of accomplishments included two elected terms as a Republican in the South Dakota legislature before a brief stint as South Dakota’s youngest Governor in 1955, a position as the first Commissioner of the American Football League from 1959 to 1966, and a card-carrying member of the NRA who would eventually go on to serve as the president of the organization from 1988-1990 (Grey F&S Aug. 1961, p. 16-17).
The cash rewards and recognition were part of a larger strategy to coordinate action, balance priorities, and keep everyone working towards shared goals. The strategy described by Grey represented an extension and evolution of prior strategies of promoting the continued expansion and viability of gun sales through the continued expansion of hunting and recreational shooting. Chief among these organizing strategies was the pooling of organizational and industry resources to encourage and promote grassroots organizing and expansion at the local level – whether recreational or more directly political. Even before the 1950’s, the NRA and their gun industry allies seemed to recognize the danger of being too directly and visibly involved because they could be viewed as unsympathetic or powerful “contender” organizations (Schneider & Ingram 1996) advancing their own selfish goals. However, by encouraging, promoting, and rewarding organizing by sportsman at the local level who could set up ranges, perform training, or were engaged in legislative battles, they could more effectively achieve their goals without being accused of direct contender behavior.

Men like these, plus unselfish devotion to shooting’s cause by public and industry alike, can turn the United States into a nation of true sportsmen and gun users – defended, if need be, by minutemen like those of Lexington (Grey F&S Aug. 1961, p.16).

Grey’s summary appeared to represent a subtle internal bridge being made to reconfirm the connection between hunters and an increasingly vocal and divergent contingent of hardline patriots, grass-roots insiders who wanted the NRA to step up their role in preventing gun legislation. Grey sought to reaffirm a duality of the sportsmanship identity combining conservation of the outdoors and more militant patriotism to support a multi-issue strategy. As of this period, while certain groups of gun owners will emphasize or concentrate more on the perseverance of guns or the America’s landscape, few will describe these purposes as incompatible or conflicting with some like Grey describing a streamlining of purposes that is
mutually beneficial. Thus, although differences appeared to be growing, it will take additional external and discursive developments to rearticulate the compatibility of these goals as well as the compatibility of sportsman’s actions and alliances.

Conclusions

What does this period tell us about how and why the NRA remained open to compromise? Although a more radical and distinctive faction was already forming by 1960, these shooters had yet to consistently connect strategic compromise with weakness, or as something entirely incompatible with their identity. Legislators, such as Dodd, who were willing to work with the NRA, were still described as necessary and valuable connections rather than liabilities. There was also little indication that either gun regulation or conservation were polarized or partisan issue yet. Thus, a writer like Richard Starnes could express strong objections to gun regulations in one article, and then strong objections to land development in the next without stirring much controversy. NRA gun owners may have shown some early signs of fragmentation and distinguished themselves in some important ways. Not every gun owner expressed equal concern for both kinds of policies. But none described the various policies or their champions as competitive with each other. Even in Guns & Ammo where conservation issues and related policies received almost no mention, there was little evidence of any objection to it as a policy or priority, nor a threat to demand stronger commitment against gun laws. With the NRA aiding in the establishment of the National Sports Shooting Foundation in 1960 and 1961, it seemed clear from the press releases about the new organization that the goals of preventing strict gun regulations and conserving land and wildlife were being treated as complementary rather than competitive. The state of discourse was one of general if loose
consensus on strategy if not priorities. There were definitely distinctive discursive identities and communities forming, but they were not yet so fractured. Some conflicts surfaced, but they remained rare and did not define the period. With little overt conflict, no one coalition dominated the other.

With that said, this period did provide some early clues about the factors that would play into both the development of conflict and the eventual dominance of the hardline faction. Three key observations stand out. The first major insight from this chapter related to the identity fragmentation that started to occur and would lead to the development and eventual dominance of radical hardline gun activists in future periods. As the ranks of hunters were growing more numerous, they were also growing increasingly fragmented. Various disagreements (some more or less minor) surfaced in the discourse of the magazines, some of the most important of which were related to regional and class divisions that were already complicating united commitments to conservation and other wildlife legislation. There was little evidence for demarcations that were politically strategic at this point, but demarcations between urban and rural hunters, eastern and western hunters, and average Joe hunters and wealthy hunters all pointed to the beginning signs of a potential lack of unity among sportsman that made them more vulnerable to strategic demarcation, dissolution, or even realignment (on these discursive strategies see Metze 2010; Dodge & Metze 2016).

Second, the old guard was already articulating a strong connection between their identities and a political strategy to support conservation legislation. The external bridging and integration strategies they adopted in discourse to non-shooters and non-shooting conservation groups was necessary to overcome the power and influence of timber, mining, and extraction industries. However, these bridges were somewhat fragile because they were built on shared
interests such as keeping developers off of wetlands and not identity, interests which could change with the shape of policy particulars. As I will show in later chapters, if and when circumstances put shared interests in some conflict, external bridges were not only vulnerable to breakdowns in external cooperation but could also contribute to internal demarcations between old guard conservationists themselves, providing hardliners with a potential opportunity to realign members with their more singular dedication to guns.

Third, while the hardline discourse coalition was beginning to develop an identity which mirrors the perspectives of modern-day gun rights advocates, they had yet to consistently connect that identity with a strategy which rejected any compromise on legislation. The incomplete realignment of identity and strategy for hardliners during this period was coupled with a both the continued lag in serious gun control proposals or clear partisan lines being drawn on gun control or conservation. This blunted more open conflict between discourse coalitions, let alone one dominating the other.

This chapter had interesting implications for the discourse coalitions literature, the literature on the NRA, and the literature on group mobilization. First, the discourse of hunters like Richard Starnes suggested that hunters at this moment were no less intense in their support for conservation than early hardliners were in their resistance to gun control. This evidence does not necessarily disprove the intensity thesis which posits that polarized groups can grow dominant despite smaller numbers because they care more about some issue than their opponents (See Luker 1984; Kleck 1991; Vizzard 2000; Melzer 2009). Nor does it discount Lacombe’s (2018) contention that a central feature of the NRA’s power has hinged on the organization’s ability to cultivate a political identity that is mobilizing (p. 27). However, what the discourse of early hunters like Starnes does suggest is that the mobilizing strength of the identity cultivated by
hardliner NRA members over time required even more difficult discursive work than scholarship has recognized. Hardline dominance involved more than simply persuading other dispassionate gun owners to embrace a more radical identity and political strategy. They also had to deconstruct, realign, and/or moderate their counterparts whose connection to the land of their forefathers was no less important to them than their attachment to their firearms.

As I hope to demonstrate in the chapters to come, a dynamic discourse coalitions approach (Metze & Dodge 2016), borrowing elements of Castells (2004) theories of identity, can shed light on the process by which the identities and preferences among gun owners changed, and the discursive strategies groups adopted to change them. In telling that story, I will provide an alternative though potentially related explanation of sub-group dominance to explanations centered on comparative intensity. In the next chapter, I will discuss how major events like the Kennedy assassination, protests and riots, and the passage of gun legislation will begin to test the unity of members of the NRA.

Introduction:

By the 1960s, some NRA gun owners remained more connected to the organization’s military roots of civilian marksmanship training while many others were hunters more connected to the organization’s conservation roots. However, most still shared a distinct American masculine identity as well as a common goal of preserving that heritage. The preservation of that identity organized the central stakes of future discursive contests in the NRA about what goals, alliances, and strategies it should pursue. In the period prior to 1963 a more militant pro-gun discourse coalition was developing, but it had yet to connect its identity clearly or consistently to a unique set of actions or political strategies, or demarcate clearer boundaries between itself and other shooters.

This chapter discusses three key inflection points in the period from 1964 to 1968: the interpretations of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and subsequent Dodd bill revisions; the interpretations of the passage of city and state regulation of firearms in Philadelphia and New Jersey following riot and protest between 1965-66; and finally, the interpretations of the contextual political forces of the incomplete partisan resorting of the major political parties on issues of conservation movement and firearms controls. I defined inflection points in the discourse as reconfigurations in the way identity, strategy, and thus group boundaries were being articulated in the magazines. While I identified 7 potential inflection points from the existing NRA literature, I identified additional ones through the review of the magazine content and discourse. For example, the JFK assassination is commonly identified as an important moment in the development of both the gun rights and gun control movements in
America. I was able to confirm this through my analysis, and also took stock of the different interpretations that followed from it. This is because an inflection point is an inflection point not because of the presence of some external shock but rather whether or not/how the event is provokes interpretations and responses, which in turn can start to reinforce or reshape a group’s boundaries. These major inflection points catalyzed greater division of gun owners into more distinctive identities and discourse coalitions as they made sense of it in different ways. The term “sportsmen” will remain in common use in the discourse, but it would cease to be as meaningful for defining a common identity among increasingly distinctive and divided gun owners. As identities grew more distinctive, it drove the articulation of different political actions and strategies between the coalitions. The period will close with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy helping pass the Gun Control Act of 1968, solidifying the divergence of shooters during this period and setting the stage for future development.

Following Kennedy’s death and the chain reaction of developments that followed, gun owners began to split into two discourse coalitions that began to grow more distinctive in both their identities and preferred political strategies. One discourse coalition, which was forming in the previous period but was not yet as cohesive as it would become in this one was the hardliners. JFK’s assassination not only increased public discussion of gun reform but prompted Senator Thomas Dodd to strengthen a milder bill he had been working on with the NRA, a move endorsed by President Johnson. Hardline discourse thusly interpreted the assassination, and more importantly, subsequent fallout over the scope of regulations as reason to start questioning the value of political compromise. Having already expressed limited concern for conservation

---

24 For additional detail on inflection points and their identification, refer to Chapter 2.
policies in the prior period, they continued in this period to instead embrace identities as armed
defenders, not just of the country’s boarders, but of their own homes, businesses, and families as
well as America’s Constitutional foundations. By the end of the period hardliners would adopt a
view of firearms as the only sensible and proactive solution to crime and violence. They moved
towards a single-issue advocacy strategy for defeating gun control and started to articulate a
political strategy of pressure, one in which unyielding and uncompromising force were the best
courses of political activism. Hardliners constructed a recursive relationship between
disarmament and weakness: unarmed citizens were weak subjects and any hint of compromise in
negotiating tactics was a sign of emasculation and a path to disarmament.

The other discourse coalition, the old guard\textsuperscript{25}, began to develop a different combination
of identity and strategies. The old guard would continue to retain a more Rooseveltian
conservation identity similar to the American sportsmen identity described in the previous
chapter. It would also begin to articulate strategies that required a greater balance of priorities, as
it attempted to forge and strengthen external bridges to non-shooting conservationists, and
maintained advocacy strategies that – while more non-partisan and issue-dependent than their
counterparts – began to resemble a more centrist and even center-left strategy by the end of the
period. The old guard was concerned about gun control, but it was also not as keen on alienating
politicians like President Johnson, particularly when it still required support for wildlife and
conservation bills that were important for the future viability of hunting. While preaching greater
tolerance – if not acceptance – for gun regulations, what really distinguished the old guard most

\footnote{I borrowed the old guard and hardline labels from Greg Lee Carter (1997) to refer to the conservation and
hardline coalitions. However, Carter and other NRA scholars such as Melzer (2009) have used the old guard term to
refer to the specific leadership of the NRA that was ousted in the 1977 NRA convention. While there may have been
some overlap, as I will show in later chapters, most of the leaders who were ousted may have been less moved by
conservation than ulterior material motives. Additionally, extending the old guard label to the concept of discourse
coalitions extends the boundaries beyond the leadership hierarchy.}
was the *tone or tact* of political communications and advocacy it preached. The old guard began to distinguish a politics of *persuasion*, emphasizing a dignified and respectful politics built on convincing politicians through moderate negotiations and rational appeals to support legislation they liked or reconsider legislation they did not. On a related note, they would also begin to demarcate from hardliners adopting more provocative pressure tactics.

As I will show, this period was defined more by the divergent development of the discourse coalitions than the emergence of any one as dominant. Instead, there was a mix of identities and strategies that reflected a muddled hedging of bets and parallel efforts. It was not clear that either coalition saw the other as internal competition, though each was beginning to view the other as a drag on their agenda. By the end of the period, each coalition began to define a stronger alignment between its own strategies and political identities. However, neither coalition appeared to fully or successfully align themselves with any particular national policy, party, or set of priorities yet. Furthermore, neither major party embraced a firm commitment for or against gun regulations. There was also a continued uneven mix of conservation priorities across party lines. Some evidence indicated that hardliners were developing stronger discursive connections to far-right conservative politics and figures, while the old guard remained more centrist. But with partisan resorting in the national parties still an ongoing and incomplete process, each coalition seemed to make several efforts to reconfigure their discourses in order to redraw the strained relations between them. By the end of the period, the settled arrangement that defined the prior period seemed to be growing more unstable, and signaled the possibility of further fragmentation, possible dissolution, or further resorting and realignment of the discourse coalitions.
Inflection Point 1: Interpreting the Kennedy Assassination and the Dodd Bill

Although there were already distinctions growing between sportsman by 1963, these distinctions would grow more salient in differential calls to action following the Kennedy Assassination. Prior to Kennedy’s death, the NRA had worked with various interests on the Dodd bill, a mild measure designed to regulate the sale of pistols and parts through the mail. The bill served multiple purposes but chief among them was to head off stricter legislation while maintaining influence with government officials and law enforcement. The compromise on the Dodd bill would be shattered by the shooting of President John F. Kennedy by former Marine Lee Harvey Oswald, who used a rifle he purchased through the mail from the NRA’s flagship periodical The American Rifleman. Following Kennedy’s death, Dodd amended the proposal to include long-guns such as the one that killed the president.

The hardliners and old guard begin to show their first substantive divisions in the way they interpreted and reacted to Dodd’s amendment to his proposed legislation following Kennedy’s death. Some letters writers began to articulate a response that would become typical of the old guard discourse coalition, including continued and even escalating need for compromise on legislation to counteract the negative image of gun owners and the national microscope that gunowners and the NRA was suddenly thrust under. By contrast, the hardliners that emerged in the last period became a more distinct voice and viewed Dodd’s reversal in the face of public and political pressure as evidence for the dangers of proactive compromise. Hardliners grew more resistant to gun control proposals and the NRA’s involvement in crafting any.

With respect to the development of the hardline discourse coalition, Dodd’s expansion of policy prompted both a reconsideration of tactics and alerted others to question their assumptions.
about what the NRA stood for. Harlon Carter, who would go on to serve as NRA president from 1965 to 1966, and become a central figure in the organized hardline takeover in 1977, later cited Dodd’s expansion of his policy as a key event that prompted a critical shift in his thinking and tolerance for compromise on gun control. In a piece published in *Guns & Ammo* in 1973, he wrote of the period before Kennedy’s death,

> I once suffered the illusion that our opponents were essentially good people and that grounds to live and let live could be found. Several times during the incubation of Senator Dodd’s earlier gun bills I met with him personally and, in light of a friendship dating back from a decade before, I felt confident that his sincere desire was to do something effective in aiding law enforcement by denying the delivery of firearms to irresponsible people (Carter G&A Oct. 1973, p. 44).

This is was rather shocking revelation. Carter had not merely viewed Dodd as a politician he could work with and trust, he had viewed him as a friend he’d known for a decade. Prior to Kennedy’s death, he seemed to have had full confidence that Dodd would limit the scope of regulations. Thus, when Dodd changed course following the president’s assassination, Carter did not see it coming. He wrote,

> I did not know, and with the experience we had had up to that point could never have known, that the gun control movement was already far out of the Senator’s hands; the zealots had already been waiting for years for an opportunity to grasp the handle of gun ownership (Ibid, p. 44).

Carter’s takeaway following Dodd’s reversal of policy was described less as a feeling of betrayal than a realization that NO politician could be trusted to curtail the scope of gun control proposals. According to a separate piece Carter wrote, he would not personally abandon compromise until 1965 when additional developments seemed to have finally pushed him to more openly and fully embrace a no-compromise stance on gun control.

One of those developments may well have been the outrage of hardline members already growing vocal about their disapproval of leaders like Carter and Orth for continuing to negotiate
with the Senators like Dodd. Reader Jim Kennedy from Ann Arbor Michigan summed up the hardline perspective and growing concerns nicely, stating,

"Senator Dodd did say, however, that a strong first bill would not have passed because of the strong lobby of gun fans…but now he felt confident because he had the support of the major gun organizations, even if it did cost him a few extra words in the bill. Isn’t it the duty of an elected official to carry out the will of the people? (Kennedy G&A Apr. 1964, p. 8)"

Kennedy’s hardline discourse was well developed already in the connection it made between identity and strategy: the strong bill was defeated by a strong lobby of gun fans. He then made a demarcation between a strong lobby of gun owners and major gun organizations showing weakness, not only in failing to demonstrate strong resistance but providing actual support for gun legislation in exchange for the deletion of a few extra words. While he condemned elected officials broadly for representing special interests rather than the will of the people, Jim Kennedy also drew an internal demarcation in this letter between rank-and-file gun owners and the major gun organizations like the NRA. The subtext is that major gun organizations appear to represent a different set of interests and agendas than the will of strong gun owners.

With respect to the development of the old guard discourse coalition, the shock and spectacle of the President’s murder seems to have driven them to accept and even favor the potential for concessions that hardliners like Jim Kennedy objected to. The assassination had a particularly strong impact on the NRA’s Executive Vice President Franklin Orth. Apparently moved and angered by Kennedy’s death, he testified before Congress on behalf of the NRA in support of Dodd’s expansion of his mail-order bill to include long guns, stating, “We do not think that any sane American, who calls himself an American, can object to placing into this bill the instrument which killed the president of the United States” (Winkler 2014, p. 253). Appealing to shared elements of identity such as patriotism and individual duty, Orth justified
the compromise on the expansion of the Dodd bill. Orth’s position represented the old guard’s growing visibility and distinctiveness on gun control following JFK’s death. A reader and military man from New York, APO Lloyd F. Kautz Jr., shared a similar perspective as Orth, taking issue with *Guns & Ammo*’s increasingly hardline stance against gun control. He wrote,

> You make it sound as though we are losing one of our rights and privileges. As I see it, the new laws do not jeopardize our right to bear arms, but rather protect it…ownership of guns would still be possible for those persons who have proven themselves capable of the responsibility of handling and using [guns] with prudence, and what greater protection could we want…[?] I believe this law would do much to clear the bad name of ‘guns’ caused by persons who misuse them (Kautz G&A Sep. 1964, p. 8).

Kautz attempted to build a bridge to convince hardliners to accept some gun regulations, suggesting that laws would enhance rather than remove rights. In doing so though, he also subtly implied a vision of ownership of guns as a privilege and not an unconditional right. Instead, he connected ownership to proof of positive attributes typical of sportsman such as responsibility and prudence, and emphasized proof of a particular skill and moral character as a necessary prerequisite to weed out uncapable persons who give guns a bad name. Kautz’s concern for the reputation of gun owners was particularly salient following the increased scrutiny faced by shooters and the NRA after the President’s assassination.

Among other developments that the Kennedy assassination led to was an increasing scrutiny and concern about extremist groups. By 1964, neither major presidential platform contained much in the way of specifics on gun control. However, Johnson’s Democratic platform connected Kennedy’s death to extremism and specific extremist groups. It the section headed “One Nation, One People”, it stated,

> We condemn extremism, whether from the Right or Left, including the extreme tactics of such organizations as the Communist Party, the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society (Peters 1999-2020).
Besides sowing the seeds of distrust for compromise on any legislation for hardliners, Kennedy’s death also served to shine a light on hardliner’s most extreme elements and their connections to the NRA became problematic for both old guard and hardline leaders. Reports came in about these elements not only joining the NRA but doing so to form their own private armies. Ironically, Guns & Ammo’s editor, Bircher, and Minuteman booster Tom Saitos first mentioned the controversy. Saitos described how the Attorney General of California was seeking an investigation into the NRA’s “Army supported” civilian marksmanship program in order to “discredit and cast suspicion upon the National Rifle Association, its affiliated shooting clubs and the membership in general” (Saitos G&A Sep. 1964, p. 6). According to Saitos, the AG of California was worried the NRA’s program provided a “cheap way” for “extremists and fanatics” to stockpile weapons and form “private armies” (Ibid, p. 6). While Saitos noted that the AG claimed to have no proof this was going on and suggested the investigation was a “witch hunt”, fears that extremist groups were infiltrating the NRA’s established clubs or forming their own to get cheap weapons given the lack of checks or oversight in the process was well-founded from evidence in Saitos’s own magazine.

In the previous period, Minuteman leader Robert DePugh had published a letter in Guns & Ammo outlining the Minutemen’s goals and how to join following a request for more information from another reader. Just two months prior to Saitos’s announcement of the NRA’s investigation for possible extremist infiltration in September of 1964, Guns & Ammo published a letter from a reader who was both the Secretary & Treasurer of North Carolina Rifle and Pistol Association and an NRA Life Member. He claimed that Democratic Senator and eventual LBJ vice president Hubert Humphrey was part of a plot to confiscate all weapons for his efforts to work with the United Nations towards nuclear disarmament. He also charged the Senator who
was presently heading the Senate Civil Rights Bill had been a participant in, “the ‘Disarmament Symposium’ held in Ann Arbor and that the purpose of the meeting – which included ‘powerful Leftists’ and participants with ‘genealogical roots in Russia and other countries now behind the Iron Curtain’ were planning to confiscate all privately held firearms” (Willis G&A Jul. 1964, p. 9). The actual purpose of the symposium was to foster a dialogue about international relations and nuclear disarmament. Willis attributed the source of his information to another publication called ‘On Target’, a news-letter published by the Minutemen.

A Department of Defense Study done by Arthur D. Little Inc. would ultimately find no evidence that extremist groups were using the NRA’s marksmanship program to buy guns or use them in crimes (Eds. G&A Aug. 1966, p. 6). However, for the time being, the connection of the NRA with far-right groups seems to have provoked different reactions and mobilization strategies among hardline and old guard discourse coalitions. For some hardliners, the connection sparked outrage at the supposed blanket condemnation of gun owners and being labeled as extremists, which may have ironically translated into more aggressive political mobilization and communication strategies. A typical example of these kinds of letters came from Samuel L. Maxwell of Edmonds Washington. He wrote,

We have been called “Far Right, gun-toting minutemen, alarmists, gun nuts, slaughterers of diminishing wildlife,” and so on…I and my associates soon tired of the name calling and decided enough was enough (Maxwell G&A May 1964, p. 10).

Outraged by what he saw as the equation of gun owners with minutemen and nuts, Maxwell went on to describe efforts to track and respond to any anti-gun radio, tv, or other media coverage and give them a piece of his mind. He wrote,

As a result of all this, I have been appointed by the President and Directors of the Washington State Sportsman’s Council to “look after the interests of the organized
sportsmen of Washington State re anti-firearms legislation,” and I have every intention of doing so to the utmost of my ability” (Ibid, p. 10).

Maxwell described the hardline intensification of mobilization in response to the negative press and fallout building from the Kennedy assassination. He and other hardliners were not merely going on the defensive. Rather, he described a more proactive and offensive approach, formally organizing and responding to any insult or injury to the reputation of shooters. His efforts to get out “our side” – by “challenging” pundits in public debates and shouting down the advocates of “Disarmament” – began to define a hardline strategy of pressure rather than persuasion.

The old guard described a similar sensitivity to negative press, but advocated different strategies for responding. For example, NRA officer George W. North rhetorically asked how often readers had heard a “so-called sportsman” bragging about firing off a nasty letter to legislators. North wrote,

The truth is that most such nasty letters do not achieve results helpful to the shooting fraternity, and indeed may do great harm (North G&A Sep. 1964, p. 26).

North went on to explain how angry letters would only alienate legislators and make shooters look angry and unreasonable. Rather than adopt an adversarial position from the start, he argued most legislators were not hatching “nefarious schemes” and may simply be misinformed about the efficacy or purpose of any particular bill. North explained,

Most legislators are honestly and genuinely open to suggestions from those back home…the short, simple, and sincere letter is noticed and often passed to the legislator for a personal response (Ibid, p. 27).

North concluded by arguing that while a single letter can change someone’s mind, a “crank letter” would not. Above all, he suggested that faith in the democratic process is not
unrealistic, that most politicians are open to suggestion, and that engaging in politics is above all, about informing and persuading politicians.

Additionally, rather than react to negative press, the old guard urged a more introspective approach of self-policing and public relations. While this could include a variety of activities, each one was aimed at promoting a positive image for shooters. Following columns and letters reporting “slob” hunter behaviors, old guard hunter and conservationist Ted Trueblood drew attention to efforts by shooting clubs to form partnerships with local game departments and provide training and education to improve the behavior of young shooters and the image of shooters more generally. He wrote, “Too few of us realize that nowadays lack of opportunity to try you luck on a lot of birds brings to the shooting areas individuals who spoil the sport for everyone else.” (Trueblood F&S Nov. 1966, p. 44). Trueblood quoted Richard Griffith, the regional head of the Wildlife Service in Boston, as saying, “While the refuges cannot begin to accommodate all waterfowl hunters even in years of great abundance, they can, provide a quality recreational experience at least once for a large number of beginning hunters. I also see such movements as resolving differences now existing between some conservation groups.” (Ibid, p. 44). That last line of Griffith’s seemed especially poignant. The old guard stood to gain a lot from improving relations with other conservation organizations, public departments, and the general public, but that meant both internal introspection and taking proactive steps to do so. Failing to do so could mean spoiling the hunting for everyone.

Thus, with so much riding on the positive image of sportsmen, for them, the association of the NRA with radical groups like the Minutemen was particularly threatening. Such a

---

26 Tens of thousands of hunters failing to report killing banded ducks marked to help game mangers determine the duck population (Titus F&S Sep. 1966, p. 42); fence jumping and risky behaviors leading to serious accidents (See Starnes F&S Sep. 1966, p. 20).
connection hurt the organization’s image and put the organization’s relationships with important allies at risk. Interestingly, although the old guard discourse during the period expressed concern over the connection to radical groups, they did not connect this issue to their relationship with law enforcement. In fact, the issue of law enforcement was rarely brought up at all. However, as the first chapter indicated, this made sense for two reasons. First, the origins of the old guard pivot to hunting and conservation was directly connected to removing – as much as possible – the association between firearms and crime. Thus, it would have been surprising to see them bridging to the law enforcement at this point. Second, so long as they downplayed any connection with groups like the Minutemen or Birch Society, the old guard also had less reason to see any misalignment between their goals and police agencies. Since old guard identity did not preclude the possibility of compromise on any legislation, they remained comparatively less concerned about any misalignment between their goals and those of the law enforcement community.

By contrast, hardliners appeared more preoccupied with this relationship in their discourse. External bridges to law enforcement were among the most prominent in hardline discourse, matched only by bridges to pro-gun politicians and the military. J. Edgar Hoover, the long-time director of the FBI, was a stanch anti-communist who had received favorable coverage in both magazines. Hoover was the subject of two letters to the editor in *Guns & Ammo* expressing concern for his public support of “strong laws to restrict the purchase of guns” as well as his condemnation of the NRA for blocking them.27 Hardliner J.D. Williams of Memphis

---

27 Curiously, Hoover never expressed much concern for the Minutemen, nor did the Minutemen seem to lose esteem for him. It was more likely his concern that black and leftist groups were arming themselves rather than white nativist organizations the compelled him to support controls. He continued to call the Minutemen a “paper organization” with “just enough followers over the country so they can occasionally attract headlines, usually because of their preoccupation with violence or weapons of war” (Turner 1967, p. 76). The Minutemen’s leader Robert DePugh even claimed to have infiltrators in the FBI, though not for fear of Hoover, instead declaring he
Tennessee wrote, “no single person in the United States other than Hoover could evoke so much respect about what he says. And when he speaks about guns, that is trouble for you and me” (Williams G&A Feb. 1965, p. 12). Another Hardline reader from Chickasha Oklahoma praised the NRA for standing against the Dodd bill’s further expansion, but expressed similar anxiety about Hoover’s public condemnation, writing, “I cannot help but become apprehensive when a public figure such as Mr. Hoover makes a statement such as he did” (Cline G&A Feb. 1965, p. 12). John Wooters, a prolific gun writer and NRA Life-Member who would serve on its Board of Directors, described that given the current state of affairs, while members should continue to support law enforcement, it would take some real work to regain the trust of some law enforcement agencies, and that Hoover’s proclamation was but the latest example of the dangers of the “federalization” of government (Wooters G&A Jul. 1965, p. 74). He wrote,

> By in large, it must be admitted that the police powers-that-be support some degree of additional restriction on personal ownership of guns. A great many of these officers may really equate fewer guns with fewer crimes, but I believe that most of them know their own business too well to subscribe to such folly. (Ibid, p. 72)

Wooters reference to the “police powers-that-be” not only implied that current support of gun laws by law enforcement was connected to the Johnson Administration but cynically suggested that such support was less commonly grounded in genuine belief than deference to political leadership. Yet Wooters was also careful to not to completely dismiss the legitimacy of some police support of gun restrictions, particularly for officers regularly confronting armed criminals. He wrote,

> On the other hand, these are men we charge with handling the least desirable and most dangerous elements of society. The cop on the beat is the man who must lay his life on the line when some punk pulls a pistol. I, for one, find the policeman’s desire to see

though the organization was slipping into the hands of “Stevensonian-type liberals”. Hoover’s classification of the DuBois Club as a Communist threat may have triggered an attempted firebombing of their camp grounds by the Minutemen in 1966 (Turner 1967, p. 69).
fewer guns in circulation completely understandable, at least on emotional grounds. Many officers feel that gun laws will give them extra tools with which to work (Ibid, p. 72).

Wooters stopped short of endorsing the desirability of gun controls, that it would help the police, or even that such laws would not disarm law abiding citizens. He took efforts to dispute all those points in the passages that followed. However, he acknowledged both the legitimacy of the perspective of law enforcement as well as the need to not only respect them – if not some of their current policy stances – but by extension, respect their position of authority. Wooters did not indicate that shooters should just accept any gun controls major police agencies might back, but he indicated that it would take additional work, time, and even patients to get their support. Until then, Wooters cautioned against judging some police’s support of gun restrictions too harshly. To put themselves directly at odds with police was not just strategically dubious but clashed with a mostly shared reverence for law enforcement and military service shared by old guard and hardline coalitions I found in both magazines.28 Hardliners like Wooters recognized that the support for gun control by law enforcement was something that could be especially damaging for their cause and that without successfully strengthening a bridge to law enforcement, it could make it much harder to block gun legislation.

This put hardliners in a rather awkward position. On one hand, many expressed increasing urgency to fight gun legislation and push back against the complacency of other

28 Critique of either was exceedingly rare, especially in the first 10 years of study, and isolated to a few individual leaders. Even criticism of Vietnam – similarly rare during this period – was almost always directed at the appropriateness of the war, not the soldiers themselves. Law enforcement and military servicemen were among the more common contributors to letters in both magazines, either because they sent in more or were published more readily.
shooters and organizational leadership. At the same time, hardliners also recognized the importance of distancing themselves from charges of extremism in their ranks.

Kennedy’s death provoked greater division and different responses to proposed gun legislation. Hardliners began to mobilize stronger resistance to gun controls and sought to stir greater action against gun regulations, but were also constrained by increased scrutiny bought about by JFK’s assassination and subsequent probes into their ranks, incomplete connections to law enforcement, and a perceived need to grow support internally among less active or complacent old guard shooters. Meanwhile, the old guard continued to seek compromise, rehabilitate the image of shooters, and moderate their hardline counterparts. Since a key element of hardline identity discourse also remained being good soldiers, armed defenders who respected military service, they remained sensitive to potential demarcations from law enforcement. This also kept hardline discourse more receptive to internal old guard bridges to confirm group boundaries on that basis, and delayed firmer hardline rejection of strategic persuasion based on measured tempers and arguments. For the time being, the dynamic interplay between discourse coalitions and the interpretations of the present context led to more polarized tolerance for compromise, but seemed to keep other tensions in check, particularly with respect to strategic persuasion and alliance building. However, riots and the passage of legislation at the state level would provoke another inflection point, driving the coalitions further apart and straining their cohesion.
Inflection Point 2: Interpreting Urban Riots, NJ and Philly Laws, and Reactions to Reactions

A national conversation about crime control had already begun to shift when race riots began breaking out in major American cities in the summer of 1964. The coverage of riots in July and August in New York, Philadelphia, and Illinois marked a trend in hardline discourse linking crime with race. Hardliners not only embraced a greater focus on crime and the need for criminal justice reforms, but increasingly connected the problem of crime with particular racial groups and classes. With fear of crime and riots in major cities becoming more acute and racialized, hardliners began to shift away from merely denying the efficacy of gun control to expounding the need for civilians to arm themselves against the threat of crime and violence. By 1965, hardliners not only ratcheted up attacks against government being too soft on criminals, and the need for minimum sentences, but urged people to exercise their “God-given right to fight rapists, murders, etc.” (Fawcett G&A Jan. 1965, p. 6). While the first half of 1965 features more arguments demanding the punishment of criminals rather than guns, mandatory sentences, and other harsher punishments, following the Watts Riots in August, the connection between crime and race would be made even more forcefully. Neal Knox, a man who would become a seminal figure in the NRA’s hardline transformation who had just begun to publish Gun Week – a magazine dedicated to following gun regulations and promoting gun activism – had a few columns republished in Guns & Ammo in 1966. Knox wrote,

The social and economic problems of the Negro, under close scrutiny of Congress and the public for several years, are commonly known. Yet it is difficult to realize that an ethnic group that comprises less than 10 percent of the Nation’s population is responsible for well over half the nation’s murders (Knox G&A Jul. 1966, p. 26).
The connections between social unrest, crime, and race not only paved the way for the advocacy of stricter criminal justice policies in place of gun laws but also more hardline articles demanding citizens arm themselves against the threat of crime. Hardliner Tom Saitos wrote an editorial that detailed citizens arming themselves for protection after riots erupted in Los Angeles. He stated, “Not being a politician, we are unable to ‘deplore’ the sight of citizens arming themselves in a lawful manner. Being gun owners we rejoice that there may be newcomers to our ranks” (Saitos G&A Nov. 1965, p. 6). Whereas old guard discourse avoided discussions of firearms and crime or limited discussions to denying connections between them, Saitos and hardliners like him embraced firearms as a proactive solution to crime, and a connection that promised to bring new recruits to the fight against crime and firearms controls. He wrote, “we are proud of the citizens who evidenced the courage to defend themselves by the lawful acquisition of firearms as guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the Constitution” (Ibid, p. 6). Crime and connections to social unrest provided a useful tool for hardliners to extend their identities as armed defenders to the problems of the times.

Such understandings drove even more militant anger among hardliners about proposed handgun restrictions and policies. An anonymous letter from a Corrections Officer in New York provides a typical connection in hardline discourse between crime victimization and gun laws. The officer wrote, “I guarantee that restrictive gun legislation will only complicate matters of the law abiding citizen and put them at the mercy of thugs who won’t pay a bit of attention to any of the gun laws (Anon. G&A May 1967, p. 9). With crime and riots garnering national attention and strongly connected to urban “thugs”, hardliners not only extended an identity as armed defenders to individual self-defense against crime, but defined control proposals as a threat to their individual strength and self-reliance. For hardliners to be victimized by urban criminals they
despised and looked down on was the ultimate insult. The officer concluded by describing how
gun laws were unfair, forcing gun owners to break the law in order to defend their lives, and
facing another layer of victimization when they did. He wrote, “In the event [a gun owner] killed
someone during a robbery [politicians] feel it was the victim’s fault because he resisted them”
(Ibid, p. 9). This may have helped mobilize resistance to gun proposals by hardliners but it was
not enough to stave off the passage of pistol licensing legislation in Philadelphia and New Jersey.

In 1965, the Philadelphia city council passed an ordinance that went into effect at the
beginning of 1966, which required police permission to purchase a firearm, fingerprinting, and a
police license to transport a sporting firearm of any description through or within the city.
Following the passage of the gun law in Philadelphia, the old guard blamed restriction on the
behavior of their hardline counterparts, making internal discursive demarcations and showing
early signs of disintegration (Dodge & Metze 2016). One of the most prominent old guard voices
to emerge on this front was Field & Stream writer Richard Starnes. As an avid hunter and proud
father of a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, Starnes maintained both a strong opposition to gun
control and a strong commitment to the conservation of the outdoors. Starnes described the
frustration expressed by many in the old guard discourse coalition that the hardliners were
ignoring their warning about emotional reactions, nasty threats, and negative pressure tactics.
Richard Starnes’s piece in March 1966 titled “A Handbook for Arm Twisters” spoke of the
dangers of extremism and blamed the passage of the Philly law on radical tactics and divisive
behavior. Starnes wrote, “It was a thoroughly bad bill, and it deserved to be beaten. But it wasn’t
beaten, and the reason it wasn’t is very important” (Starnes F&S Mar. 1966, p. 22). Starnes made
clear that his objections were not grounded in even lukewarm support for the Philadelphia law.

---

29 Bracketed text added by author for clarity.
Instead, he blames its passage on Philadelphia gun owners whose angry phone calls and violent threats to Philadelphia’s city council members turned those council members against all gun owners and drove them to support the ordinance. He wrote,

The gun owners of Philadelphia, or in any event some of them, played right into the hands of the anti-firearm crusaders. Members of the city council reported that they had been subjected to abusive and threatening telephone calls in the middle of the night, warning them of dire consequences if they voted for the bill” (Ibid, p. 22).

While he qualified that it was some rather than all gun owners of Philadelphia that were to blame, his qualification seemed to imply that it was more than a trivial bunch of bad apples. Starnes went on to suggest that the consequences of these actions extended beyond the boundaries of this single-policy. He wrote,

The bill became law, and at least some members of the Philadelphia City Council will go to their graves convinced that the systematic libels equating hunters and gun collectors with lunatic fringe neo-fascists underground movements are true. That’s how it isn’t done (Starnes F&S Mar. 1966, p. 22).

Starnes position here was not exactly moderate with respect to his position on gun regulations. Rather, he urged moderation in the way gun owners responded to proposed legislation so that they did not tarnishing their reputations and hurt their cause. His discourse connected identity to particular political behaviors and practices, and in doing so, made an important demarcation between legitimate gun owners and radicals whose visibility and participation should be condemned. He not only indicated that hunters and gun collectors should seek to persuade rather than antagonize political decision-makers, but that late-night phone calls and angry threats were behavior befitting “neo-fascists”, tactics that needed to be buried even further underground. Starnes did not go so far as to admit that such lunatic fringe elements were genuinely embedded in the community, but he suggested that radical behaviors such as those
adopted in Philadelphia were no less harmful because they not only alienated decision-makers but provided opponents with the evidence that they needed to confirm that most shooters were radical kooks.

Despite the protestations of the old guard discourse coalition, hardliners adopted the same tactics fighting gun regulations in New Jersey, which again failed to successfully block the bill. Starnes and other old guard writers again fumed at the “madness” (Starnes F&S Jun. 1967, p. 26) of hardliners, and being associated with “neo-Facists and Minute Men” (Ibid, p. 26). Critiques by old guard commentators demonstrated a concern for how hardliners were undermining the effectiveness and credibility of sportsmen on the issue of gun legislation as well as their coalitional alliances on other issues of conservation and hunting expansion. Thus, when the Gun Control Act of 1968 finally rolled around, the old guard was primed to accept – if not fully embrace – at least some concessions on the bill to maintain both their material interests and an image of respectableness.

Hardliners interpreted these legislative losses differently, marking the first major split between discourse coalitions over strategy which by the end of 1968 would extend more directly to policy. Instead of exercising restraint and respectableness, hardliners like Jeff Cooper suggested shooters needed to be more assertive and less apologetic in their interactions with opponents. He wrote, “we have to be just a touch militant if we’re not to be overwhelmed by a viscous mass of non-participating half-people. So let’s take the initiative” (Cooper G&A Sep. 1964, p. 44). Cooper and other hardliners demarcated themselves from the old guard by challenging and even rejecting the value of being polite and respectable. Instead, Cooper argued that advocates of moderation and temperance had driven too many shooters to grow too passive, avoid confrontation, and even avoid participating in the political process. Cooper highlighted a
distinct connection between hardline attributes of identity and strategy. He wrote, “Shooters are
doers, not spectators…The non-doer needs justification. The non-shooter has a good deal to
apologize for. We can be generous and accept his apology, but we don’t need to apologize”
(Ibid, p. 45). Cooper’s hardline message was loud and clear. Shooters should not concern
themselves with how others perceive them. The only people who should have to apologize or
justify their actions were those shooters who failed to write a letter, make a phone call, or
mobilize. Being a doer meant embracing at least a touch of militancy and projecting an image of
strength. So long as hardliners took strong political actions, they did not need to apologize to
anyone.

Just as the old guard was condemning the militancy of hardliners, hardliners pushed back
against proposed compromises on moderate legislative proposals. The primary concern of most
hardliners was not that shooters were being too provocative in their communications but rather
that too many were free-riding or growing too complacent to take a stand against gun control.
Neal Knox, a key figure in the eventual hardline takeover and important voice in the NRA and
gun press, expressed frustration with “Average Joe” hunters not doing their part. “He is lulled by
the assurance that his shooting sports will never be hampered by ‘crime’ bills.” (Knox G&A Jun
1966, p. 22). Knox expressed the frustration of hardliners who felt too many “average
sportsmen” were ignoring or even consenting to gun regulations while shooters like him were
doing all the work. He wrote, “While Joe Average Hunter has been asleep, a determined group of
his shooting friends have missed hunts, let dust gather on their gear and waded the musty pages
of the goings of Congress trying to see that bill doesn’t pass.” (Ibid, p. 22). It is plain to see why
a hardliner like Cooper or Knox might take offense to being chastised for being too militant. In
their minds, the same shooters who seemed to lack any urgency and whose rights hardliners were
already sacrificing their weekends for were criticizing them for hurting the reputation of gun owners.

The riots and subsequent passage of legislation in Philadelphia and New Jersey provided an important inflection point for hardline and old guard discourse coalitions. For hardliners, protests and riots along with the passage of legislation at the state level were interpreted as evidence of an alarming complacency among other shooters. The problem was not that some were being too loud or provocative but rather that too many others remained silent or worse, apologetic. For the old guard, the passage of legislation at the state level reflected a failure to moderate or persuade, which increased disintegration between the two coalitions. Disintegration and the failure to moderate hardliners threatened to hamper old guard efforts to rehabilitate the image of shooters and expand alliances on other legislation vital to the health and expansion of hunting, the shooting sports, and the preservation of outdoor heritage.

The urban crime and riots which drove hardliners to step up calls for armed defense and increase resistance to gun control also strengthened the old guard’s resolve to combat urbanization by supporting conservation policies. Although both coalitions grew more sensitive to the problems of urbanization and the unrest of American cities, the old guard discourse’s interpretations and proposed remedies for these problems diverged on the nature of the problem. Old guard writer Richard Starnes’s description of the unrest of cities started off sounding a lot like his hardline counter-parts, blaming progressive “social engineers” and “politicians” for the “urban unrest that is the disgrace of our country” (Starnes Jan 1968, p. 112). But he pivoted away from calling for stricter policing or armed defense against crime to suggest that, “The problem is the city itself, which by its nature cuts its prisoners off from the balance wheel of nature” (Ibid, p. 112). This was an interesting trend sprinkled in old guard discourse following the riots, but
was related to a more enduring trend in old guard discourse that connected the foundations of identity to the constitutive power of nature. The solution to the problems of unrest in cities was not to arm yourself to the teeth but to stop building them out and to rethink them entirely. As Starnes put it, it was not enough to add “bright lighting to playgrounds and parks” because those parks were not natural and remained cutoff from the “wheel of nature” (Ibid, p. 112). Starnes concluded by writing, “If our society is ever going to get back on track it will do it by returning to the oneness with nature that used to be a matter of course” (Ibid, p. 112). Starnes piece highlighted an important and enduring connection between old guard identity and commitment to conservation legislation. In old guard discourse, the unrest of the cities was but another affirmation of the importance of conserving natural places people could escape to. Men confined to the prisons of modernity were doomed to chaos and anarchy. Only by preserving and even expanding America’s natural spaces could old guard shooters hope to conserve their character and a healthy society.

The very different old guard reaction to urbanization demonstrated an uncertain bridging potential. On the one hand, it could provide an important bridge between hunters and other conservationists, perhaps even convincing some hardliners that trading the salvation of the woods for combat in the city was a poor approach. At the same time, Starnes’s writing also pointed to the potential for hardliners to use the urban and rural tensions to divide hunters and demarcate them from conservation allies. At this particular inflection point, the impact seemed to be closer to the former, with concern for the unrest in cities reinforcing rather than complicating old guard commitments to conservation.
Inflection Point 3: Interpreting the Variable Partisan Valence of Guns & Conservation

The incomplete resorting of issues of gun control and environmental policy between the two major political parties drove similarly variable interpretations among gun owners about their most viable political alliances. This was particularly critical for understanding the less prominent influence of hardliners in the short term, but their increased influence in the long term. Neither major US political party over this period developed a consistently strong stance on gun control, nor was a politicians’ stance on gun regulations or the environment tied as closely yet with their political affiliation. While hardliners were already having some success getting far-right Southern and Western conservative candidates to embrace the platform of gun rights, these forces still remained scattered and marginal among Republicans and Democrats. In 1964, neither major party candidate – including Goldwater who many hardliners favored – mentioned gun control or their stance on it.\(^{30}\) Moreover, Johnson – who famously won that election in a landslide – was a hunter who not only boasted a strong conservation record, but knew how to build discursive bridges that appealed to many old guard sportsmen. For example, the Democratic presidential platform’s “Natural Resources” section stated,

After the 1960 election President Kennedy and President Johnson implemented this platform by a whole series of new conservation policies and programs, some of which emanated from the first White House Conference on Conservation called by any President since the 1908 conference called by President Theodore Roosevelt (Peters 1999-2020).

The language of conservation, outdoor America, and Roosevelt’s legacy all resonated with old guard identity. As I covered extensively in the first chapter, Roosevelt was a hallowed

\(^{30}\) Guns & Ammo did provide Goldwater space to advertise his position on guns in the September 1964 issue leading up to the election. Although he was adamant that his official position mirrored that of the NRA, the piece was noticeably short on specifics and even included language that might be interpreted as supportive of common-sense regulations, especially at the state level.
and cherished icon for old guard sportsmen. However, the platform went beyond general symbols and appeals, detailing some of the conservation policies and programs important to sportsmen as well.

During this Administration two historic conservation measures were enacted. These were: The Wilderness Bill and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Bill which will together do more to help conserve outdoor America than any legislation passed in a generation (Ibid 1999-2020).

A lot of old guard sportsmen cared deeply about these bills because they conserved critical hunting areas and game species, from western big game to water fouls. Even as some support for the Johnson administration became strained for old guard shooters and hardliners near the end of his term, neither major political party provided a significant alternative position to the Johnson’s administration’s approach to gun regulation. By 1968, while both the Democratic and Republican party platforms included a section on gun control, both Humphrey and Nixon expressed vague support for it. Humphrey’s section on “Justice and Law” is broad but clear, stating he will, “Promote the passage and enforcement of effective federal, state and local gun control legislation” (Peters 1999-2020). Nixon’s Republican platform supported, “Enactment of legislation to control indiscriminate availability of firearms, safeguarding the right of responsible citizens to collect, own and use firearms for legitimate purposes, retaining primary responsibility at the state level, with such federal laws as necessary to better enable the states to meet their responsibilities” (Ibid 1999-2020). Although this statement is more verbose, substantively speaking, it does little to distinguish the Republican platform from the Democratic one on gun control.

Similarly, both party platforms provided general support for conservation and environmental protection policies. Humphrey’s Democratic ticket included enhancement of air and water quality standards, more modern waste disposal, land reclamation, and most
importantly, “avoid interference with more desirable uses of land for recreation and other public purposes” as well as supporting policies at the “national, state, and local levels to preserve the historic monuments and sites of our heritage” (Ibid 1999-2020). Likewise, although Nixon’s 1968 platform was even more vague and hinted at increased development of “natural resources”, the GOP platform still promised, “In the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt, the Republican Party promises sound conservation and development of the natural resources in cooperative government and private programs” (Ibid 1999-2020). Even by the end of this period, it appeared that it was the old guard rather than the hardliners who received greater external support as a distinctive group from politicians.

In 1966 and 1967, the old guard already seemed to be pivoting away from gun debates and connections to extremism and trying to stabilize connections to conservation. The big spike in conservation coverage in *Field & Stream* in 1966 was due to a surge of attention on one particular piece of legislation: the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966. The act provided guidelines and directives for administration and management of all areas in National Wildlife Refuge systems including wildlife refuges, areas for protection and conservation of fish and wildlife that are threatened with extinction, wildlife ranges, game ranges, wildlife management areas, and waterfowl production areas.

The passage of this legislation was hailed as a huge victory for *Field & Stream*’s audience of sportsmen over their long-time nemesis Wayne Aspinall of Colorado, who for years had done whatever he could to delay, block, stall, and kill this legislation. In 1967, a series of articles and letters detailed both successful efforts to block the building of the Rampart Dam in Alaska. By 1968, the September “Rate Your Candidate” article was derived from legislative surveys sent to candidates related to issues of environment and land use, with very little mention
of legislator’s records on gun control. In fact, their record on the pending Gun Control Act received no weight in the legislative scores. Another noteworthy fact about the score card was the absences of the individual candidate’s party affiliations, signaling a desire to remove any partisan considerations from the ratings. The old guard’s non-partisan conservation strategy appeared sensible in both its consistency with old guard identity and its effectiveness in forming and maintaining bridges to political allies.

The success of the old guard was not entirely lost on the hardliners either, especially by the end of the period. While less interested generally in environmental issues, hardliners did not yet seek to abandon others in the hunting and shooting fraternity or close off the possibility of working with other outdoor enthusiasts. But with pressure increasing for gun regulations C.W. Reynolds article “What they really mean” provided a striking example of a bridge, not just to the old guard discourse coalition, but to non-shooting conservation interests. He wrote, “While I am aware of the resentment their frequently blind opposition arouses in sportsmen, I personally feel that these particular people – the nature lovers – should not under any circumstances be considered by us as our irreconcilable enemies. I look forward to a day when more charitable feelings will exist between us. After all, they see what we see, in an altered light” (Reynolds G&A Dec. 1968, p. 24).

Reynolds not only refused to make a clear demarcation in discourse between hunters and nature enthusiasts but suggested that despite some ongoing resentment, he saw their love of wildlife and the outdoors as something that they each could identify with and still connected them. He did not demarcate radical resistance to gun control legislation and hunters, instead implying an ongoing shared conception of “us”. However, as he began to build a bridge in discourse to naturalists, he did so in ways that supported cooperation on terms that were not
equal, prioritizing firearms controls as the greatest threat to hunting, and the end of hunting as the greatest threat to conservation. He argued that without all the organized opposition to firearms controls, “the entire hunting tradition and all the conservation values intimately associated with it would have certainly begun their downward slide to oblivion; steered there by the drying up of private gun ownership” (Ibid, p. 24).

Reynolds built a bridge in discourse to naturalists, but it was an unequal bridge based on terms favorable to the status and primacy of pro-gun advocates and hunters. It was hunting, not any other purposes, which preserved the values of conservation with access to firearms being most critical to that purpose. Reynolds’s hardline discourse aimed to build a conditional coalitional, wherein any cooperation with non-shooting naturalists would need to satisfy two general conditions. First, those groups would need to dissociate themselves from animal rights activists critical of hunting, or progressive environmental groups associated with other student protest groups or support of gun control. Second, non-shooting environmental groups would need to accept a coalitional hierarchy, with pro-gun advocacy at the top, hunting access right behind or in lock-step, and naturalists lining up behind them and perhaps, even riding shooters’ coattails. Although he lamented that he wished more conservation groups saw the possibility for shared purposes, he ultimately described other environmental groups and non-shooters as hostile to the preservation of hunting. Reynolds made identity-based appeals that spoke to the current alignment of non-shooting conservation forces with progressive groups seeking to protect the environment and explain why those alliances were doomed and should not continue. He wrote,

It is a sorrowful thing that so many nature lovers fail to perceive that they have no place to go in the long run with many of the groups and individuals and ideas with which they associate themselves. Their voice, effectively added to that of the sportsman, could become an extremely powerful influence for long range preservation of the country’s natural treasures (Ibid p. 24).
There is precious little similarity – visual, spiritual or in the mental processes involved – between the hunter, active amid the primal wonder of nature, and the individual content to find his entire relaxation in the newly “acceptable” recreations (Ibid, p. 25).

Reynolds allusion to acceptable recreations seemed to challenge old guard discourse urging sportsman to conduct themselves with respectability. Rather than cater to the tastes of the “acceptable” recreations, Reynolds suggested more respect needed to flow in the other direction. In these quotes, Reynolds communicated shared goals of preserving nature for both sportsmen and non-hunting “nature lovers”. But he concluded with a stronger demarcation wherein “nature lovers” had allied themselves with other groups and causes which could not be trusted in the long-run. Reynolds is somewhat vague about who or what these groups are, but allusions elsewhere to “anti-gun” and “do-gooders” suggested he likely referred to neo-environmental groups that opposed hunting and neo-environmental groups connected to other social change causes. While the hardline use of anti-hunting demarcation strategies was just starting to pick up by the end of 1968, Reynolds’s piece foreshadowed important discursive developments to come. These demarcations began to challenge old guard alliances with non-shooting conservationists by drawing sharper distinctions between hunters and other outdoorsmen. Even while acknowledging some common goals, Reynolds made clear that hunters and other naturalists had “precious little” in common.

Anti-hunting demarcations were identity driven discourses that also contained internal bridging dimensions as well, reinforcing the shared masculinity of sportsmen and hardliners, while simultaneously distinguishing their active primal adventurousness with other “content” and passive recreationalists. As such, it supported a call to both strengthen the connection between hunters and hardline pro-gunners, while calling into question the cooperation of hunters with
other non-shooting conservationists, especially on those other groups’ terms. While not closing off the possibility of working with them, Reynolds warned of the consequences of cooperation on the terms of “acceptable” recreationists, He wrote,

For this ‘old’ and outmoded habit of life [gun ownership] they see advantageously substituted a new and more easily regulated human existence. These are the people among us who are blindly bonded to the theme of ‘progress’ as the only worthwhile human aim and achievement…they consciously intend to eliminate the unbeliever (CW Reynolds, G&A Dec. 1968, p.24)!

Reynolds not only described a common or shared heritage among hunters but also invoked the concept of a shared enemies. Reynolds described this shared enemy in rather vague and broad terms as forces who sought to destroy shooters’ heritage and control them. This other ‘breed of thinker’ was connected to a wide spectrum of “progressive” enemies that included, “seat-bound bureaucrats tied in invisibility to numberless obscure jobs in obscure governmental agencies all across the country, to renowned university professors having powerful thought-forming influence over large numbers of young people” (Ibid, p. 24). While these progressive enemies were everywhere, they were described as united in their goal of replacing shooters and their values.

A whole generation of Americans is being inoculated with the virus of collective worth, which is just another way of saying that the individual no longer has primacy…To these people, the solitude-loving hunter is a sort of outrageous left-over symbol from an impossible day when men made their own way in life unaided by the all-knowing official thinker who placed one path before them and expected them to follow that one path and not be diverted by any individual preferences for something else (Ibid, p. 24).

Reynolds defined the in-group as sharing core values of rugged individualism and defined this value in mutually exclusive terms against “collective worth”, invoking the specter of Communism. This marked an increasingly popular strategy of hardliners to not only connect

31 Brackets added by author for clarity.
their identity to a sort of neoconservative version of hyper-individualism but also to define this identity against enemies who wanted to control them. This signaled an attempt to disconnect other shooters from organizational allies or forces which they viewed as tainted by the new left. Reynolds hammered home these points by suggesting that such groups were diametrically opposed to the free lifestyle of the hunter, and would thus seek to eliminate them because they posed a threat to their conformist utopic vision of society. He wrote, “As long as the hunter exists, he is a constant reminder of the free and individualistic past…he must be done away with. (Ibid, p. 24).

Following legislative defeats at the state and local level, old guard sportsmen’s discourse which pivoted towards conservation legislation, and talked of emotionality did not fall on deaf ears. Hardliners saw the shift, and were responding accordingly. The hardline invocation of individualism and against collectivism, struck me as a discursive connection to Bircherism, which declared among their principles to be against any kind of collectivism. While it is not clear if Reynold’s discourse was in direct interaction with Field & Stream, or vise-a-versa, but Field & Stream’s decision to add Michael Frome to their staff seemed to signal a direct move in the other direction.

The addition of outdoor writer and conservationist Michael Frome to Field & Stream’s staff late in 1967 was an interesting development because it suggested that while the NRA retained close ties to the hunting and outdoor press, the organization’s influence on the editorial positions of these magazines was not unidirectional. Both Guns & Ammo and Field & Stream variously represented and influenced different perspectives among gun owners, including in the NRA. But not every writer was an NRA member or insider. However, Michael Frome was especially unique in his lack of direct ties to the NRA or even the hunting fraternity. As Ted
Williams, a former student of Frome’s and member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America recounts in his bio, he noted it was astonishing *Field & Stream* would hire him because “he’s not a hunter,” and was not an especially gifted or dedicated fisherman either (Williams 2021).

Why then did Frome’s hiring and writings have any relevance to the development of the NRA and its membership? Although Frome was not an insider or a hunter, the *Field & Stream* editors who hired him were hunters and had ties to the NRA. Should they have objected to any of his content, they could have censored or fired him. This suggests his discourse was influential/shared by both the editorial staff and other NRA hunters and allies, especially the contingent of old guard sportsman that populated the ranks of the NRA and its leadership at the time. Following his first piece in December of 1967 for *Field & Stream*, Frome took over as the regular conservation editor in July of 1968. Frome was hired and supported by managing editors Clare Conley, a man who was a bird hunter, deer hunter, conservationist, and long-time friend of the NRA. Conley provided Frome and his other outdoor writers with a great deal of leeway until Conley’s abrupt departure in June of 1972. He felt Frome – who was not a hunter – remained a strong advocate for all hunters and shooters. While some would later accuse Frome of being anti-hunting (Williams 2021), he was neither anti-hunting or anti-gun. In his article titled “Away from Violence”, Frome even embraced some hardline demarcations such as attacks against the mainstream press, the Johnson Administration, and the unfair treatment of the “gun lobby” (Frome F&S Aug. 1967, p. 34). Yet he did so primarily in service to bridging the gap

---

32 In 1988, Conley who was then editor at another sporting magazine, Outdoor Life, was endorsed for a cabinet position for the Bush administration by the NRA (Fegely 1988).
between the gun lobby and conservation groups, aiming his most polarizing demarcations at industrialists whose destruction of land he connected to societal violence. He wrote,

The handiest scapegoat at once became the ‘gun lobby,’ but I felt the President, Congress and the sanctimonious Washington Post might have pointed their fingers at other actual lobbies that play a more pertinent and fundamental role in the chain of violence, destruction, and frustration. I mean the destroyers, despoilers, polluters, and exploiters of our precious natural resources – lands, water, and air, as well as people – these money changers in the temple who spread the plague of venality in high places. (Frome F&S Aug. 1968, p. 34).

Frome implied a bridge to the NRA and its allies in the “gun lobby” by defending them, but Frome’s focus on land conservation and environmental degradation as more pressing issues distinguished his old guard perspective from hardliners focused on gun control. Frome also provided a striking complaint about government support of policies which most hardliners in the NRA had either not criticized or may have actively supported.

Oddly, Mr. Johnson decries the sale of guns, but his own Department of State is probably the biggest merchant of death on earth. I don’t mean in Vietnam – that is a separate issue all its own – but, while we are supposedly committed to the cause of peace and disarmament, a division of the State Department is peddling and pushing munitions to nations all over the world, on the spurious grounds that this benefits our balance of trade (Frome F&S Aug. 1968, p. 34).33

Although Frome is direct in his critique of both the Johnson administration and the State Department and he steers the conversation away from gun control, his critique of foreign policy, state craft, and acts of mass destruction sets him apart from his hardline contemporaries. Frome elaborated on a particular set of weapons he was concerned about. He wrote,

33 It is not entirely clear what policy he refers to here. But my best guess would be the Johnson State Department arms credit sales to Iran (McGlinchey 2013). Starting in 1964, Iran went from receiving military aid from the US to a military credit purchase partnership, paying for its own military development from the US rather than getting grant aid. The Shah’s graduation from aid to credit laid the foundation for the remaining years of his rule, a brutal and repressive dictatorship where he would build his military into the fifth strongest in the world by 1977 (McGlinchey 2013). However, military policy was rarely a topic in Field & Stream, and rarely discussed negatively in Guns & Ammo.
Furthermore, although the United States signed an atomic test ban in 1963, the Atomic Energy Commission has announced its intention of conducting between forty and fifty explosions next year in Nevada and the Aleutians. The bombs are getting larger and larger with each test. They may now be underground, but they vent lethal radiation into the atmosphere, not entirely by accident either…For such official exercises of violence, the sky is the limit (Ibid, p. 34).

This was quite a different perspective on military operations and preparedness than the ones described by many hardliners. Hardliners even as early as 1962 and 1963 actively opposed peace agreements designed to de-escalate nuclear proliferation as a communist plot and UN takeover, and pressured the NRA to more actively oppose it. What Frome was doing in this article which was most important was not just objecting to those practices but also connecting things like nuclear radiation and testing to environmental destruction. While many other old guard voices – in the past and going forward – continued to lionize outdoor living and hunting as a critical element that shaped boys into men, and men into soldiers, Frome started to question the link and even the compatibility of preserving the land if society insists on glorifying militant violence.

Nevertheless, it might be well for us to wonder whether, like the Roman Empire in its last days, we have reached a peak of world power only to find ourselves at the brink of catastrophe. Does our capacity for violence display national strength or national weakness? Most importantly of all, can we break out of the cycle of violence and thus insure our future? (Ibid, p. 34)

In addressing the issue of national identity, Frome’s began to do something that almost no other old guard sportsman in the discourse managed to address as successfully to this point. He challenged that violence, war, and the like were truly symbols of national strength. While other old guard writers will seek to retain a commitment to the outdoors, most will rarely venture so far from their Rooseveltian roots or question the appropriateness or compatibility of militant patriotism/violence with conservation. In contrast with hardliners of this era, Frome in the
coming years will question the value of building an American identity around a strong capacity for violence, and if such a hardline identity is truly a sign of strength or a weakness that will lead to the fall of America’s empire.

Frome’s discourse was significant and is important to consider because despite his outsider status, he provided an alternative path for sportsman – including those in the NRA – than the one advocated for by hardliners. Moreover, there was a period where such a viewpoint was not only tolerated but given a platform in one of the largest hunting magazines in the US. Frome even worked to build a discursive bridge between shared values of masculine individualism and defense of one’s home land, extending that understanding in ways that extended beyond an individual home to a collective home, one earth populated by one human race.

The evidence is clear that people must get away from cities in order to keep their sanity and perspective. Cities must be more habitable or each will destroy itself and be abandoned. Our environment encompasses the total habitat of man, and, as Sig Olson has said, the solution to our problems lies in a sense of stewardship, rather than exploitation (Ibid, p. 107).

This particular passage helps explain what separated the old guard identity from the hardline identity. It describes a sense of stewardship and ownership, not just of the land, but what that bond between land and people (and by extension the bond between people) meant. The integrity of the land and the people that inhabit it were understood to be mutually constitutive forces, with the degradation of one inevitably leading to the degradation of another. Both factions understood their place in the world as protecting “our” place in the world. Yet the old guard still understood that place in the world differently, in terms of stewardship, nature, and the peaceful sustainable order it maintained. Thus, the division began to mirror a similar divide growing in mainstream politics between classical republicanism and radical libertarianism.
The Gun Control Act of 1968 Solidifies Divergent Paths

As the mid-to-late 1960s wore on, the different paths being pursued by shooters was reflected in the divergent trends in the two magazines. *Field & Stream* was increasingly focusing on old guard issues of conservation while *Guns & Ammo* reflected the hardline focus on gun laws. The tables below compare content counts in elections years from 1964 to 1968. The tables exclude non-election years to make a clearer comparison because the higher political content in election years could sometimes obscure the trends in the data. Table 4.1 represents the percentage of topics covered in *Field & Stream* from the total articles and letters I collected from the magazine that year. The mean average of the total number of articles and letters for each of the years in Table 4.1 was 225.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gun Laws</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Conservation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles & letters in *Field & Stream*, excluding ads. Total N = 675. Annual range N = 237 to 202. Annual mean average N = 225

As Table 4.1 shows, while the coverage of gun laws spiked following Kennedy’s death in *Field & Stream*, coverage steadily declined to the end of the period, dropping to nearly half of the coverage the issue received in 1968 as it did in 1964. Meanwhile, conservation legislation became the most prominent issue in *Field & Stream*, overtaking the previously dominant focus on hunting. Table 4.2 shows how the trends in *Guns & Ammo* were quite different. The table illustrates the percentage of topics covered in *Guns & Ammo* from the total articles and letters collected I collected for each year.
Unsurprisingly, gun laws remained the dominant focus of the magazine, remaining close to 40 percent throughout the period. While coverage of conservation was no longer zero every year, coverage remained so low as to be rather insignificant, never reaching over 2 percent. While hunting remained an important topic, it fluctuated, and remained a secondary concern when compared to gun regulations.

These trends reflect the growing sorting and realignment of the discourse coalitions into distinct groups between 1964 and 1968. Table 4.3 summarizes the elements of identity and strategy used to identify discourse coalitions in each magazine and that are described in greater depth and detail throughout this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gun Laws</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Conservation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Percent of Topics in Guns & Ammo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Guard ID</th>
<th>Old Guard Strategy</th>
<th>Hardline ID</th>
<th>Hardline Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stewards</td>
<td>Bi-partisan politics</td>
<td>Armed defenders (soldiers)</td>
<td>Partisan politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Multi-issue advocacy</td>
<td>Strong &amp; unyielding</td>
<td>Single-issue advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoic (unemotional)</td>
<td>Some policy compromise</td>
<td>Proud &amp; angry</td>
<td>No policy compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve land &amp; hunting heritage</td>
<td>Politics of persuasion</td>
<td>Preserve natural rights &amp; heritage of freedom</td>
<td>Politics of pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Passion trumps ration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Summary of Hardline & Old Guard Identity & Strategy

Based on author’s iterative analysis and categorizations. See Methods in Chapter 2 for greater detail.

While both magazines contained both old guard and hardline discourses, it was clear that as time wore on that Field & Stream provided a much greater share of old guard discourse while
hardline discourse comprised an increasingly strong majority of space in the pages of *Guns & Ammo*. By 1966, the coalitions were growing more consistent and unified in their articulations of identity and preferred strategies. Table 4.4 below summarizes the percentage of articles and letters in each magazine out of the total number of articles and letters collected for that year that were identifiably old guard or hardline discourse based on the articulation of at least one element of identity and one element of strategy in Table 4.3. Generally, for an article or letter to be classified as being old guard or hardline discourse, the piece would also not contain an element of identity or a strategy associated with the other discourse coalition.34

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Old Guard</th>
<th>Hardline</th>
<th>Old Guard</th>
<th>Hardline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Field & Stream* Total N = 675, Mean annual N = 225; *Guns & Ammo* Total N = 609, Mean annual N = 203

As Table 4.4 illustrates, although the old guard discourse in *Guns & Ammo* held steady at just over 10 percent throughout the period, the comparative share of hardline discourse was much higher, comprising just over 40 percent of the content in *Guns & Ammo* by 1968.35 For every old guard voice, there were four hardliners. *Field & Stream* trended in the other direction. The percentage of old guard discourse stayed around 20 percent while hardline discourse would start lower and continue to drop from 8 percent in 1964 to just 5 percent in 1968.

When civil rights leader Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy’s brother and presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy were assassinated within a matter of months, it helped

---

34 For exceptions, see Methods section in Chapter 2.
35 The relatively low percentages of discourse coalitions in the total collected content from the magazines reflected the higher number of letters relative to articles. Letters could vary considerably in both length and detail which could make them harder to classify. Additionally, the relevance of letters could also be more variable than articles.
generate enough pressure to pass the Gun Control Act (GCA) of 1968. Although these assassinations and the outrage that followed were key inflection points in the passage of the GCA, they were simply the final straw in the steady division of hardline and old guard NRA members. The passage of the GCA would set the stage for further discursive disintegration both between and within the old guard and hardline coalitions, and future realignments among NRA members in the years to come. But the re-actions to the passage of the legislation confirmed and reinforced the different paths these coalitions were already pursuing following earlier inflection points. Regardless of any public comment the NRA made, hardliners would view the passage of gun legislation as acquiescence, and failure to immediately respond to or repeal it going forward as complacency. Meanwhile, the old guard was eager to move on. For the old guard, the GCA was described as both a minor annoyance and a sigh of relief for gun owners. It was an invitation to close the book on a chapter and begin rebuilding and expanding their network. The old guard would not blame hardliners for the passage of legislation. Instead, many would seek to bridge the divide and call for tolerance of the legislation. Guns & Ammo’s Washington Report column even echoed the message of old guard NRA leader Franklin Orth, suggesting that shooters were fortunate to have reached a compromise and that while not ideal, the GCA was a policy that shooters could live with.

This is not to say every old guard shooter was pleased with the passage of the GCA. But even those who were frustrated remained unwilling to embrace hardline partisanship or tactics. Richard Starnes summed up a predicament that some old guard shooters likely found themselves in that would become more complicated in the next period. Remorseful that he felt compelled to say it but feeling such a statement was necessary, Starnes stated,
I am not a John Bircher, a right-wing crazy, or even a romantic dreamer who thinks it’s possible to turn the clock back a century or so. Shucks, I’m not even a Republican. I voted for Adlai Stevenson, and if I’d had a chance I’d have voted for Eugene McCarthy. I know my liberal-to-woolly-minded friends will have trouble making all this parse, and I couldn’t care less, but I think it is important to make the point that a man with my philosophy about firearms doesn’t necessarily have to be a political Neanderthal (Starnes Dec. 1968, p. 126).

Starnes like other old guard shooters was torn. He still wanted to defend his ownership of firearms but he was also wary of defending or supporting the radical right politics increasingly embraced by other shooters. As the defense of gun rights became increasingly aligned with the far right, the old guard discomfort with being equated with that politics will complicate political decisions. Starnes described the political cross-pressure (Taylor 1976; Mason 2017; Mason 2018) that would only become harder to manage as issues of gun control and conservation became increasingly sorted along party lines. While old guard shooters like Starnes may have been firmly against gun control legislation, like him, many would remain ambivalent about voting for candidates on the sole basis of that issue, especially if it meant abandoning concerns for environmental issues, or tolerating “Neanderthal” politics.

Conclusions

The Kennedy assassination is often described as the moment where gun control emerged as a partisan political issue on the national stage and the turning point for the development of the NRA. However, as this chapter has shown, although events like Kennedy’s death were critical to the NRA’s development, those events did not result in uniform interpretations by the NRA’s leaders or members, nor an immediate or linear paradigm shift in organizational identity and strategy. Instead, it invited different interpretations of its meanings and implications for members of the NRA and brought the divisions and differences that had lingered under the surface for
some time to the forefront, catalyzing more complex and interactive processes of discursive development. The JFK assassination clearly played a role in the development of a hardline discourse coalition that would continue to evolve and eventually dominate the NRA and gun politics more generally, but it also played an important role in the development of an old guard coalition with its own internal connection between identity and strategy that continued to evolve and gain its own momentum over this period. This chapter sheds light on how the concept of inflection points offers a way to integrate the concept of external shocks into the messy interpretive processes that are required to translate their meanings and implications in discourses. An expanded conception of inflections points helps re-imagine them as catalysts for a more complex set of developmental processes and dynamics which may or may not precipitate further developments, changes, or additional inflections.

This chapter also began to illuminate some of the things that can limit discursive dominance of sub-groups, as well as the developments which may help sub-groups grow more dominant over time. With respect to limits, first, sub-group dominance did not simply emerge from the hardline construction of a powerful identity and unyielding political strategy, suggesting this may be a necessary though insufficient condition to explain sub-group dominance. If another group emerges with a similarly strong identity and strategy, and/or constructs a broader consensus, sub-groups must find a way to overcome that resistance before they can grow dominant. Second, the configuration of discourse coalitions in mainstream politics was a key contextual feature of coalitional development in the NRA and had important implications for which group was better positioned to dominate. While the political environment was growing more polarized, it was not yet quite so partisan on issues of guns and environment yet. This enabled to old guard coalition to continue to pursue a multi-issue and no-partisan
bridging strategy, which helped them secure important conservation legislation and keep a place at that table while also limiting stricter gun regulation proposals. This helped them grow and maintain their influence and resist hardline challenges.

However, developments near the end of the period also pointed to some developments and strategies that would help hardliners eventually grow more dominant. First, hardliners began to not only challenge the connection between the old guard and conservation allies, but did so in ways that spoke directly to identity. Reynold’s discourse near the end of the time period spoke to the development of an important demarcation strategy that will be important in the next time period: connecting conservation with anti-hunting groups, do-gooders united against hunting. Second, hardliners would benefit from temporary re-alignment of powerful and resourced groups whose interests favored the disintegration of old guard consensus. What I began to show in this chapter and will elaborate on in the coming chapters is the way an in-depth contextual analysis integrating considerations of inflection points – particularly the relation between discourse configurations and broader political context – can enhance the dynamic discourse coalition approach (Metze & Dodge 2016). Incorporating inflection points draws attention to the ways that coalitional boundaries are not easily confined to a single policy area, as the evolution of policies in one area interact with and impact coalitional developments elsewhere in overlapping discursive contests. Discourse coalitions exist in complex political and policy contexts and they must address challenges to their identities and strategies that come from multiple, interlocking spheres in order to stay relevant to members and broader publics.

This chapter illustrated the process of disintegration in the NRA between 1964 and 1968 into more old guard and hardline discourse coalitions. It detailed how the dynamics of their interactions shaped the future of their development and how by the close of the period, the old
guard had managed to exert more control over the NRA despite hardline challenges. In the next chapter, I will detail a period of continued disintegration into three and eventually four distinct coalitions, and the circumstances by which the old guard will initially gain momentum until the otherwise divided hardline coalition unites to divide old guard forces. In doing so, the chapter will illustrate both the critical role of broader bridging strategies and consensus building in the rise of the old guard, as well as the critical role demarcation strategies and consensus breaking which will help precipitate the dominance of the radical hardline NRA coalition.

Introduction:

The previous chapter described how a series of key inflection points led to an increasing fragmentation of gun owners into more distinctive discourse coalitions and delayed the dominance of the more radical hardline faction. This chapter will explain the process of these coalitions’ continued realignment, and the discursive mechanisms each deployed to support their preferred agenda and political strategies. The theoretical basis for this section concerns the discursive strategy of hardliners taking advantage of key external developments to both disconnect conservation-minded hunters from environmental allies while also strengthening connections to new conservative political allies, especially the GOP and state/local law enforcement agencies. Over this time frame, the old guard and hardliners will not only grow into more distinctive and competing coalitions but will face their own internal divisions that each will seek to manage.

The old guard moderate conservationists comprised two different sub-groups: sportsmen that grew more committed to conservation causes and supported multi-issue and ally activism, and conservative rural hunters whose commitment to conservation grew less stable with respect to the scope of acceptable limits on their hunting access, practices, or cooperation with non-shooting conservation groups – particularly those tolerant of other anti-hunting partnerships.

The hardliners also sub-divided into two groups: the pragmatic hardliners whose connection to politicians and domestic gun industry leaders appeared to drive a single-party strategy supporting Nixon and other conservative GOP candidates, and radical hardliner, true-believers who refused to accept any compromise on gun regulations or support candidates that did not accept their terms, demanded greater and more visible action against gun-control
politicians on the part of the NRA and allied industry organizations, and committed to pressuring anyone who strayed from their dogmatic preferences.

As I will show, hardliners more effectively deployed demarcation and bridging strategies based on identity. As they built their discourse around key inflection points, they aligned themselves with new right politics while disconnecting and fragmenting the pressure from their old guard conservation counterparts. A close analysis of this period reveals that bridging and demarcation are not always so singular or linear a pursuit. Consensus breaking is often done jointly, sometimes by coalitions whose interests and identifications temporarily align better. Put another way, the radical sub-coalition among the hardliners would have had a much tougher time positioning itself to take power without the help from their pragmatist counterparts in breaking conservation ties. My analysis of this period also indicated that interest-driven collectives may depend just as much if not more on allying with other groups – as gun manufactures (pragmatist hardliners) aligned with radical hardliners – who can then use them to make stronger and more principled justifications for shifts in the agenda, and which can also help mask their narrower elite motives. What’s more, discursive boundary work may better position one group relative to another by rebuilding coalitional configurations in ways that favor one coalition over another. Specifically, it may be that sub-groups may gain an advantage when discourse becomes unstructured, meaning no one discourse coalition is setting the terms of debate, there is no dominant understanding of policy/issues and/or solutions, and there is a

36 As noted in earlier chapters, a discursive bridge in discourse is any appeal signaling agreement between groups based on facts, interests, identity, or other salient content (see Metze 2010; Metze & Dodge 2016), whereby coalitional actors seek to extend the boundaries of their coalition. A successful external bridge leads to discourse integration (Metze & Dodge 2016), while an internal bridge leads to discourse confirmation (Metze & Dodge 2016), re-affirming existing coalitional ties. Bridges are strategic discursive mechanisms which can serve various purposes, with groups seeking to increase their influence, gain access to resources, or legitimate their interest to name just a few potential aims.
plurality of coalitional perspectives seeking recognition. This is in contrast with perspectives that associate such unstructured states with unproductive gridlock (Szarka 2004; Dychan et al. 2018), and instead adds to studies such as Dodge (2017) study of fracking coalitions in NY, which found gridlock could be valuable and even productive for groups. This is not to say seeking consensus is unproductive, and it seems likely that other groups may benefit more from structuration of discourse or the construction of consensus (Hajer 2006). The disintegration of the old guard coalition may have helped pragmatists refocus and better align priorities with their interests, but ultimately this may have provided an advantage to radicals who were better positioned to rally more rural hunters to their side and grow dominant in a more divided coalitional configuration.

The Rise & Fall of The Old Guard Identity & Strategy

Following the passage of the Omnibus Crime Bill and Gun Control Act (GCA) in 1968, the start of 1969 initially represented the chance at a fresh slate for old guard conservationists to expand the goals of sportsmen and improve their relations with the wider public in the process. The momentum behind old guard NRA conservation priorities was most evident from developments at Field & Stream over the period. NRA life-member Clare Conley took over as of Field & Stream in 1970 and would give conservation writers like Michael Frome and fellow-NRA life-member Ted Trueblood free range to push a stronger conservation agenda (Williams 2018). Between June of 1970 until Conley’s exit in 1972, the magazine peaked in terms of its conservation coverage, with 1970 and 1972 each representing the highest number of conservation pieces in the magazine over the entire 20-year study period. Table 5.1 provides the percentage of topics covered in Field & Stream from 1969 to 1974 of the total articles and letters I collected from the magazine in each of those years.
Table 5.1: Percent of Topics in Field & Stream

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Guns Laws</th>
<th>Hunting</th>
<th>Conservation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Authors analysis of articles and letters in *Field & Stream*. Total N = 1160, Annual range N = 234 to 136, Annual mean average N = 193

Even with Conley’s exit in 1972, conservation still remained the central focus of the magazine over this period. Such momentum reflected not only the continued momentum of the conservation movement in America discussed in the previous chapter, but the discursive development of the old guard. Particularly during the early half of the period, the old guard managed to maintain appeals to core elements of sportsman identity such as individualism, personal responsibility, and heritage, but channeled these into roles as stewards of the land, emphasizing how defense of the natural environment was the most important part of preserving cultural identity and heritage. Figure 5:1 visualizes the discourse coalitions and the elements of their identities.
From author’s analysis of articles and letters of *Guns & Ammo*, N=263, and articles and letters of *Field and Stream*, N =273, Total N= 536.

The discursive development of old guard identity described in Figure 5.1 as well as the importance of that development in supporting conservation goals, alliances, and strategies was showcased in the first congressional hearings for the Trans-Alaska pipeline in 1969. NRA life member and *Field & Stream* editor-in-chief in 1970, Clare Conley, spoke with fellow writer Michael Frome at the first hearing against the proposed project. At the first Congressional hearing, Frome built an external bridge to local native Eskimos in Alaska and demarcated the old guard discourse coalition from industrialists and developers. However, his arguments carried the
subtext which both defined internal bridges and the discursive confirmation of rural hunters, invoking identities of stewardship and cultural preservation in the process. He said,

The boomers [oil developers]\(^{37}\) allege that “development will provide thousands of new jobs in areas where Eskimos have subsisted for generations on only what their hunting could provide.” This notion may be interpreted as an attempt to justify expensive Federal subsidies – where for petroleum, mining, or roadbuilding – on the premise that the Eskimo is praying for a new destiny as an industrial working in a white, urban-style society (Frome, Trans-Alaska Pipeline Hearings, Ninety-first Congress, First Session…September 1969, p. 212 & 222).

What Frome did discursively was rather remarkable coming from a presumed outsider. He built a discursive bridge between himself and other more progressive conservation interests by invoking indigenous peoples. However, it was the way he described indigenous Eskimos’ identity and values against developers that not only demarcated old guard discourse from oil developers but also built a bridge that was less obvious to “outsiders”. He wrote,

But those who have observed the Eskimo know that he resents being pushed into an industrial corner and having his future determined by outsiders. It strikes me that Eskimos have a great role to fill in America’s tomorrow, serving in recreation and conservation posts, in scientific research, and education, but I have not heard or read of such prospects from any official source (Ibid, p. 212 & 222).

The internal bridge may be obscure to an outsider, but would have been clearer to the rural hunters in places like Alaska, many of whom were old guard NRA sportsmen. Frome also raised the specter of urbanization and industrialization, and he described developmental pollution as a force that also polluted the local character. He referred to Federal subsidies, sowing distrust of government more typical of the NRA’s more conservative rural hunters. Yet he also provided an alternative vision of development, one in which locals would be in positions of authority with

---

\(^{37}\) Brackets added by author for clarity.
greater self-determination rather than subservient to industrialists. Frome closed by connecting shared ownership of the land among conservation forces to shared stewardship, stating,

How little has been done by the Federal Government for decades to utilize, develop, protect, manage, and insure that long-range future of Alaska. To protect the wonderful resource, the treasure of the world, which is in our trust… The pipeline may be built, but before we go ahead, we should be sure that the oil is dealt with as part of the total resource picture of the Artic (Ibid, p. 222).

Frome did not close the possibility of development but he did not describe development as inevitable, suggesting the pipeline “may” be built, not that it will or even should be built. When he made the last appeal about Alaska’s future, he also described it in terms of protecting a “resource”, a singular “treasure” in collective stewardship. This was an important shift from past and even some contemporary old guard discourse used by others like Conley at the same hearing that still atomized nature into divisible and plural resources. Such a connection in old guard discourse not only provided the discursive justification for expanding some boundaries and alliances through bridging, but did so in a way that did not dispense with or downplay core features of identity such as individualism or self-reliance. Frome’s old guard discourse tapped into the angst of many old guard sportsmen who were already resistant to any development that would open their land to outsiders and tourists, but addressed that tension in ways that more effectively coped with – if not reconciled – it. By managing internal tension in this way, it translated into innovative strategies which aggregated individually-based actions into collective purposes and supported discursive bridges to other non-shooting conservation coalitions.

In the same issue announcing Conley’s role as editor-in-chief, Field & Stream announced the formation of an Environmental Action Group (Eds. F&S 1970, p. 14). Their motto “Not just words, but action!” called for readers to take real action to form groups, write letters, fight local pollution, and share their work with the magazine. The magazine seemed to be providing only
space, words, and recognition to readers doing the organizing themselves. It was not a group in
the formalized hierarchical sense. Yet the justification of such a strategy spoke to a shared ethos
of collective action through individual action. In an editorial, the Publisher and Editors of Field
& Stream declared that they…

...believe that an organization of this type is needed in the United States today,
because it is the only one of its kind which requires its membership to take action instead
of depending on a hierarchy of officials to speak for the group. Today, for strength in
conservation and on environmental issues, the great group of common people must be
heard making their wishes known to lawmakers, industry, and bureaucracy” (Ibid, p. 14).

The call to action was rather vague and open but indicated a decentralized and grass-roots
communication and pressuring strategy, with individuals tasked with determining what methods
worked best through trial and error.

Field & Stream also published more detailed environmental score-cards in 1970 and
1972, rating House and Senate candidates on the basis of their conservation records along with
information key races to look out for (Frome F&S Sep. 1970, p. 60-65 & 145-147; Frome F&S
Sep. 1972, p. 58-65). Although both score-cards included some mention of candidates’ record on
firearms controls, they emphasized the focus on environmental and conservation issues, and the
need to consider that record in relation to other political issues. Although noting the scorecard
only considered issues of environment, Frome noted, “this is not the only rating system available
to voters. A number of organizations – which speak variously for farm interests, business, labor,
liberalism, and conservatism – make their own reports on Congressional performance. All are
useful, depending on your viewpoint” (Frome F&S Sep. 1970, p. 63). Field & Stream
emphasized a bi-partisan approach to selecting candidates, with little to no mention of a
candidates' party affiliation in either score-card and support for candidates of both major parties.
This made for support of some rather surprising candidates that seemed to clash with the NRA’s
position on firearms. Candidates like John Dingell in Michigan and John Saylor of Pennsylvania enjoyed generally strong support among gun owners in both magazines given their connections to the NRA as well as consistent records against gun regulations and for conservation measures. However, others such as Alaska’s Ted Stevens, a Republican governor from Alaska, NRA life member, and candidate for Alaska Senate was rated “Poor” on the environment in 1970 (Frome F&S Sep. 1970, p. 65) and “Inadequate” in 1972 (Frome F&S Sep. 1972, p. 64). Another candidate receiving a “Poor” rating in 1970 and 1972 was Wallace F. Bennet of Utah, whose introduction of bill to repeal .22 rimfire ammunition record-keeping requirements from the GCA were not enough to offset his voting record on conservation. The magazine even rated some candidates’ records on the environment as “Good” whose records on gun control rather consistently favored stronger measures, including Joseph Tydings of Maryland, Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, and Jacob Javits of New York (Ibid. 1970, p. 65; 1972, p. 64).

The old guard coalition had not abandoned considerations of a candidates’ gun control record. In 1972, candidate support included praise for Representatives H.J. Heinze, III, of Pennsylvania and David Obey of Wisconsin for their strong opposition to gun licensing and registration measures (Frome F&S Sep. 1972, p. 59). They did not even fully abandon support for Richard Nixon, with noticeably no comment on the presidential elections in the scorecard from 1972 and Frome even paraphrasing the president to close out the scorecard in 1970, stating “to quote the President again, one of those rare situations in which each individual everywhere has an opportunity to make a special contribution to his country as well as his community. That’s what elections are all about. Let outdoorsmen make the most of it (Frome F&S Sep. 1970, p. 145). Instead, they had connected their identity of stewardship and strong conviction of the environment’s role in preserving culture to a political strategy where a candidates’ position on
gun control was just *part* of their commitment to preserving their hunting and outdoor heritage. As a questionnaire to candidates in 1972 from the editors put it, “Many of our readers are deeply concerned over gun control and registration. Please give your position and how you see it related to conservation.” (Eds. F&S Sep. 1970, p. 58). Access to firearms mattered to old guard shooters, but as part of a broader mission of conservation. This question was just one of 5 sent to legislators, and considered against 8 votes on conservation policies. Table 5.2 below summarizes the bridging and demarcation targets of the old guard discourse coalition from 1969 to 1971.\(^{38}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demarcations</th>
<th>Disintegration (Internal)</th>
<th>Bridges</th>
<th>Integration (External)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polarization (External)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bridges</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Industrialists</td>
<td></td>
<td>*Local Hunting &amp; Gun Clubs</td>
<td>*Non-shooting Conservation Orgs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Weak/Corrupt Gov't Regulators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Experts (Science, Ecology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Anti-conservation Politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Strong Gov't Regulators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Overpopulators, Indoorsmen, Civilized Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Conservation Politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Slob Hunters/Shooters</td>
<td></td>
<td>*Non-shooting Public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From author’s analysis of articles and letters of *Guns & Ammo*, N=263, and articles and letters of *Field and Stream*, N =273, Total N= 536.

To recap, bridging and demarcation strategies can be either internal or external looking. Internal demarcations can drive coalitional disintegration, with coalitions breaking apart as the criteria for inclusion in the group are narrowed. Internal bridges by contrast are used to confirm existing coalitional boundaries, reinforcing present coalitional configurations and cooperation (Metze & Dodge 2016). The old guard coalition employed both internal demarcations and bridges with respect to hunters, sometimes decrying slob behaviors like shooting up signs, hunting out of season, or failing to observe basic hunting and safety rules, while other times encouraging the formation and support of local hunting clubs, game preserves, or conservation

\(^{38}\) Refer to Methods section of Chapter 2 for greater detail on identifying demarcations and bridges.
advocacy groups, with some deploying both strategies in the same article. However, many of old guard bridges and demarcations were external. External bridges represented attempts at discourse integration, expanding the cooperation with other coalitions and extending coalitional boundaries, while external demarcations aimed to increase polarization, preventing the extension of coalitional boundaries. Particularly with respect to external bridges, old guard discourse embraced a rather broad-based external bridging strategy, reaching out to multiple external allies. It expressed admiration for and cooperation with various non-shooting conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club, ecologists and similar scientific experts, government Game and Wildlife officials, strong conservation politicians, and the general public. External demarcations were aimed at industrialists, especially mining and timber interests disrupting the landscape and wildlife, as well as government officials representing those interests. There were also demarcations aimed at overpopulating humans. These were generally associated with urbanization, and populations centers whose numbers were growing too rapidly, taking more than their fair share of resources, and contributing to the decline in the availability of natural spaces. As I will discuss later in the chapter, this will become an important feature of the breakdown of the old guard coalition.

Setting aside the private actions of certain NRA board members – an issue I will turn to later – the NRA generally seemed to follow the positions advocated in Field & Stream on conservation. Neither Frome nor Conley spoke as representatives of the NRA in 1969, but according to one source, NRA Secretary Frank Daniel did make one official statement against the Trans-Alaska pipeline in 1971 (Coates 1991, p. 388; American Rifleman April 1971, p. 19). Although I could not verify the statements made from the official congressional hearing records, Daniel had served as a president of the Wilderness Society and maintained his membership. The
societies’ consistent stance against the pipeline leads me to believe such a statement was made by the NRA against the pipeline’s construction. Early in 1969, Daniel, the long-time secretary of the NRA who also served as its conservation director – one of many administrative roles he served in for the organization – also spoke on behalf of the NRA to support H.R. 248, a bill to help preserve rare and endangered wildlife species around the world (US Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries First Session 1969, p. 197). When *Field & Stream*’s Ted Trueblood formed the River of No Return Wilderness Council in 1973 to combat logging and mining near Idaho’s wild rivers, he managed to secure a coalition of local outdoorsman, politicians like Democratic Senator and NRA member Frank Church, and other groups he had membership in, including Friends of the Earth, The Wilderness Society, and the National Rifle Association (Orgill 2009, p. 62-63).

By 1973, C.R. Gutermuth, one of the few true conservationist members on the NRA board assumed the presidency. While it was quite common after a few years for the vice president to become the NRA president and Gutermuth had been serving as the VP, hardline leader Harlon Carter had hoped to pressure Gutermuth out and have 2nd VP Merrill Wright take the role, a person at the time he felt had a stronger line against gun control then Gutermuth and could be pressured more easily to follow Carter’s preferred direction (Sherrill 1973, p. 186). However, Gutermuth was not cast aside and assumed the NRA presidency from 1973 to 1974, a moderate victory for the old guard coalition hoping to increase commitment to conservation. At least part of the reason for his victory despite Carter’s backroom dealings was an internal survey conducted in 1973 indicating that of the NRA membership, 35 percent were hunters while just 25 percent were “non-shooting constitutionalists” (Sherrill 1973, p. 188), which favored greater attention to conservation issues that overlapped with hunting concerns.
The trends in both Field & Stream's content as well as the public statements by NRA officials on both environment and gun control did signal that for the time, the old guard conservationists were building and maintaining bridges to political allies and resisting hardline challenges. From 1973 to 1974, although the percentage of Field & Stream articles and letters covering gun control increased, the share of those gun control pieces voicing support for moderate controls were the highest over the entire study period. Table 5.3 provides a side-by-side breakdown of the percent of articles and letters in Field & Stream each year that covered gun control laws and the percent of those articles expressing support for at least some moderate gun control policies. The percentage of gun laws in the left side of the table represents the percentages of the total articles and letters in Field & Stream covering gun regulations, while the column to the right indicates the percentage of articles in Field & Stream which covered gun regulations that indicated at least mild support for some kind of gun regulations, including targeted regulations of handguns and imported handgun parts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Gun Law Content</th>
<th>% Support for Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in Field & Stream, total N = 1160. Annual range N = 234 to 136, Annual mean average N = 193.

Table 5.3 illustrates how the support for moderate gun regulations, specifically regulations of cheap and easily concealable handguns, increased significantly by the end of the period. It seemed like the old guard conservation coalition was making major strides, both increasing the NRA’s concern for conservation policies and moderating the organizations’
positions on gun control. However, much of the advances for conservation were either surface level gains or masked the fragmentation in the old guard coalition that was already accelerating prior to 1973. If anything, Gutermuth’s influence as NRA president may have merely delayed or masked the disintegration of the old guard.

1: The Pitfalls of Old Guard Demarcation & Disintegration

With all the momentum that the old guard coalition seemed to be building, matching a strong identity discourse to a broader bridging strategy, it seemed unlikely that they would lose that momentum and influence. However, three important things would begin to unravel the old guard coalition. First, although the external bridging strategy the old guard adopted helped them expand their reach and influence, it increased coalitional vulnerability to internal demarcation and disintegration. Second, the success of the coalition began to threaten the interests of hardline pragmatists, drawing that coalition’s attention away from managing hardline radicals to addressing the more immediate material and political threats posed by growing old guard influence. Third, hardline discourse coalitions finished dividing the old guard coalition through their construction of key inflection points toward the end of the period, including interpretations of the energy crisis and subsequent passage of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline as well as CBS’s anti-hunting programming/ownership of Field & Stream.

First, the old guard coalition’s discursive bridges to a more diverse range of political allies and non-shooting conservationists had helped build momentum for their conservation agenda, but it was beginning to make maintaining the internal cohesion among hunters more difficult. Even after the cooperation with other environmental groups bore legislative fruit through the 1960s and into the early 1970s, many old guard hunters increasingly talked about the struggle and frustration of having to justify their pursuits of hunting while still fitting in with
neighbors and other conservationists, and being looked down upon by other naturalists. While a number of letters shared this sentiment, *Field & Stream* editors in 1972 published a particularly vivid description of such an experience from hunter Joan V. Mercado. After describing a hunt in which her husband took down a buffalo in the Philippines that was endangering a local area, she explained how she and her husband were distressed by how friends in NYC interpreted the story differently. “While Mario was a celebrated man among the natives [of the indigenous Filipino tribe], according to our “conservationist” friends, he was bent on the destruction of wildlife” (Mercado F&S Jul. 1972, p. 23). Joan elaborated feelings of rejection and subsequent anger. She recalled that her and husband even considered adjusting or masking their values to preserve their friendship. But instead, they cut ties, with Mario exclaiming,

> They have conducted themselves with me like amateur psychoanalysts rather than environmentalists. *To reshuffle my thinking and attitudes would be like obliterating my whole past and entire cultural background.* To hell with it; I won’t even wait for them to grow up, get down to the serious business of life and stop playing games with people and real issues (Mercado F&S Jul. 1972, p. 23-24).

The Mercados’s condemnation of people who would question the compatibility of their hunting activities with conservation spoke to the deeper identity-based motives that animated old guard actions, reactions, and resistance. Old guard hunters like the Mercados still identified as conservationists but felt excluded by other conservationists who did not hunt and even looked down on the practice. While expressing desire for inclusion if not full acceptance, any inclusion which required a change in “thinking or attitudes” was still considered tantamount to the complete obliteration of their identity. These feelings of rejection and fear of cultural obliteration will be exploited by hardliners when they sought to remove the conflicting priorities that conservation alliances imposed on the NRA.
Anti-hunting demarcation in discourse which had floated around in the discourse of the 1960s but remained scattered began creeping up in frequency. These demarcations often included both internal and external dimensions. The demarcation typically led with an external and polarizing strategy aimed at animal rights groups like Friends of Animals and/or neo-environmental conservation groups who either worked with or tolerated them. Targets could vary though, and also included mainstream media, corporate sponsors of anti-hunting content, and even the non-shooting public. However, along with that external demarcation came internal demarcations for sportsmen who would accuse other sportsmen of willingly or unwittingly put themselves in league with anti-hunters or their allies. Table 5.3 below shows the percentage of anti-hunting demarcations used in all the articles and letters in *Field & Stream* each year over the period. An anti-hunting demarcation was any demarcation in the discourse which used the term “anti-hunting”, “anti-hunter”, or generally described any group as being hostile to the practice of hunting. Anti-hunting demarcations were identity-based demarcations, articulating cooperation or tolerance of certain conservation alliances or public relations strategies as threatening the preservation of hunting heritage. These demarcations could be found in the discourse of every coalition, and while varying in their targets, were most significant in the way it divided the old guard coalition from non-shooting conservation groups accused of anti-hunting associations. Those demarcations frequently included sportsmen supporting those connections.
Table 5.4: Anti-hunting Demarcations in Field & Stream 1969-1974

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Anti-Hunting Demarcations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in *Field & Stream*, Total N = 1160. Annual range N = 234 to 136, Annual mean average N = 193.

As Table 5.4 indicates, from 1970 to 1972, there was a significant jump in anti-hunting demarcations in the letters and articles of *Field & Stream*. As anti-hunting discourse increased, lingering divisions within the hunting fraternity based on class and region grew more salient. By 1971, the division between old guard conservationists and more conservative hunters was widening.

2: The Old Guard Conservative Hunter Coalition

Part of what had held the old guard coalition together was the shared conviction that nature must be preserved in order to preserve identity, with cities and pollution serving as critical threats to that central goal. Many conservation discourses of this era continued to associate pollution with urbanization. But as anti-hunting pressure stepped up, this could turn to blame on the people of these localities and even the Federal government for their role in development. These frames often demarcated sportsmen in rural areas from suburbanite and city hunters, associating blame for things like pollution and development with the growth of these populations. Multiple pieces from 1970 onward discuss the fear of population ‘explosion’ and that in a few years the population pressure would demand more development, more housing, and
more roads. This discourse lent itself to identity-based demarcations which attributed these problems to specific urban groups and liberal politics, dividing conservative rural hunters from the old guard conservationists and increasing their potential realignment with hardliners.

One piece titled, ‘Multiply thy kind – and perish’, introduced a more explicit and refined idea of an overpopulation narrative where both elites and the lower classes were squeezing the middle class and eating up resources. The idea of population pressure on the environment was still connected to actual environmental concerns, but the focus on population often attributed blame for environmental destruction on certain urban others. As *Field & Stream* writer C.E. Gillham put it,

> Regardless of whether a man is a Senator with a dozen kids or an occupant of a ghetto with a like number of offspring, all of their children will consume an equal amount of groceries. The only difference is that the ones with the most money will last the longest, unless the have-nots take over as one starved dog might rob another (Gillham *F&S* Jul. 1970, p. 80)

While not everyone is quite so overt in their equation of over-population pressure and race as Gillham – a regular *Field & Stream* staff writer – many other population-focused pieces spread blame for environmental degradation between various politicians and bureaucrats, free-riders who complained but did not act, or the ghettos and racial minorities commonly associated with urban sprawl, pollution, and poverty. There was a pervasive idea building in old guard discourse of a once pretty country being spoiled and crowded, as both privileged and poor classes consumed more than their fair share of resources.

3: The Old Guard Conservation Coalition

Other hunters in the old guard coalition responded differently to the anti-hunting pressure, seeking to maintain bridges to the cause of conservation. Yet the strategy of increased
introspection seemed doomed to sow greater division in the ranks. Old guard conservationists responded to anti-hunting storylines and still described a sense of stigma and victimhood, but called on hunters to police their own communities and alter behavior in the hopes of achieving greater support from media and the ranks of other non-shooting conservation groups. While these discourses could be constructive and were certainly positioned as an alternative to more reactionary storylines, many still stirred inter-class tensions which subtly put down the behavior of some hunters while propping up others. When Quaker Oats sponsored an allegedly anti-hunting program called “Say Goodbye”, some readers argued that the program should be a wakeup call for hunters to clean up their acts. One *Field & Stream* reader from Torrance California reacted to the magazines’ angry editorial, writing,

> It was true that the program was heavily biased against hunters. But what distresses me was that you ignored the positive value of a show to shock people, especially hunters, as to what is the inevitable future of our wildlife if we hunters don’t revamp our own hunting attitudes (Casavan F&S Jul. 1971, p. 4).

Old guard readers like Casavan spun the criticism of the program as constructive. While still described as biased, Casavan sells it as an important reminder to modify negative attitudes and behaviors to strengthen their bridge to the non-hunting public. But he also demarcates himself from other hunters who engaged in practices in “Say Goodbye” like shooting game from planes. Another reader went as far as to suggest that the Quaker Oats people were not to blame but rather the “two-bit irresponsible trash that takes the name of hunting and grinds it into the mud” (Warren F&S Jul. 1971, p. 4). Although no hunter defended certain practices such as shooting bear cubs that were depicted in the film, shooting polar bears or even killing wildlife from air planes which was also depicted in the film remained a practice some hunters engaged in. Those hunters did not appreciate being called two-bit irresponsible trash.
The fragility of the old guard conservation collective was not something everyone in the conservation coalition seemed to grasp. One of the few NRA insiders that did was Ted Trueblood, a long-time *Field & Stream* writer who was deeply embedded in the culture and politics of rural Idaho. He understood the delicate balance of appealing to hunters and conservation conservatives in his area while channeling that identity politics into continued support for environmental stewardship rather than its abandonment.

This is best illustrated in the details of a letter that Trueblood claims to have received from a reader named Chuck Thompson, a working-class man living in one of America’s cities. Trueblood wrote,

Chuck Thompson is a self-respecting decent American, working a job he hates to support his wife and family. He owns his home. He is taking a correspondence course, hoping to improve his lot. He is not complaining. But unless America quits trying to force its political philosophy – and dole – on half the world, and diverts that energy into doing something for Americans, Chuck Thompson and a million like him will still be right there in ‘a smelly factory, drilling holes’ when the day comes that they are finally, too old to work” (Trueblood F&S Sep. 1972, p. 24).

One the one hand, Trueblood is certainly aware of – and perhaps even believes – the racialized tropes of urban poverty and government assistance. Trueblood’s use of the term ‘dole’ here invokes its informal British origins, meaning, “benefit paid by the government to the unemployed”. He’s referring to the government welfare programs which, in light of the other negative framing, suggests Trueblood actually does not embrace the idea that all people, whether products of modernity or not, deserve the same empathy as Chuck. He even accommodates far-right hardline discourses connecting anti-hunting with liberal protest culture. “Had this letter been written by a ne’er-do-well, agitator, or an adult cry baby it would not have hit me so” (Ibid, p. 24).
However, Trueblood also expresses deep empathy for Chuck, whose spirit is being crushed by his modern city environment. As Trueblood wrote, “The modern environment, particularly that of city boys, is neither a natural nor a healthy place for young men and women to grow up…” (Trueblood F&S Sep. 1972, p. 22). While accommodating certain opposition frames, Trueblood also tries to subtly build a bridge here in discourse between different sportsmen, reminding readers that while cities may have some complainers, there are still many people living in cities who are not so different than Chuck, and by proxy, not so different from themselves. Moreover, he tries to reinforce the idea that people are products of their environment, and in doing so, reinforces the importance of protecting the land against development, as it is also a critical component of conserving a healthy space for people to grow up right.

By describing modern urban society as a corrupting force, and implying that people are also products of their environment, Trueblood supported the idea that urban dwellers like Chuck were not so different and just as deserving of consideration, protection, and access to the great outdoors. He accommodated some hardline discourse but Trueblood and other old guard shooters like him still understood the defense of the outdoors as a central feature of maintaining American identity and heritage, and the importance of addressing the unstable solidarity of the hunting fraternity. Yet even as he sought to mend the bridge between shooters like Chuck and rural shooters in his home state of Idaho, Trueblood’s discourse may well have provoked hardliners whose commitment to the Nixon administration remained strong. Trueblood went on and wrote,

President Nixon promised “new initiatives” to fight pollution. Yet when the budget came along a few days later it listed fourteen functional categories for funding purposes. Natural Resources and Environment showed up fourteenth and dead last. The budget request for the Environmental Protection Agency was $439.3 million, not counting what it is obliged to spend abroad. The new Space Shuttle Program came in for $5.5 billion, more than 1,000 times as much (Ibid, p. 24).
Even if the environmental score-cards had not been as bold as to target Nixon directly, the support of his rivals like Ed Muskie in Maine and George McGovern along with questions to legislators in the most recent scorecard objecting to Nixon’s appointees for the Interior Department ruffled some hardline feathers. Many hardliners not only had strong connections to Nixon but also connections to large companies like Olin-Corp which owned both chemical and mining interests in addition to its Winchester-Western Division, and DuPont whose industrial products stretched far beyond firearms. Although Trueblood objected to, “Logging, manufacturing, mining, oil and gas production” continuing to “dominate the Washington scene” (Ibid, p. 24), other members of the NRA had a vested interest in that particular domination continuing.

Whatever the official NRA stance and actions might have been on issues of conservation over this period, many of the hardline pragmatists that were peppered among the NRA ranks of officers and even board members were government representatives, officials, or business interests that appeared to be working actively against the NRA’s official conservation agenda. While Clair Conley and Michael Frome spoke out against the Trans-Alaska pipeline, two other speakers for the Trans-Alaska pipeline in 1969 were Alaska Congressman Ted Stevens (Ibid, p. 82) and Alaska Senator Howard W. Pollack (Ibid, p. 188-189). Both men were NRA life members and although Pollack would not be re-elected to office in 1970, he did manage to secure a seat on the NRA board of directors by 1974 and would eventually become NRA president from 1983 to 1985. Both spoke in strong support of the pipeline. Wally Schirra, a former Astronaut whose role as an important spokesman supporting the pipeline’s construction was listed on his NASA bio, had another less publicized role on the NRA board of directors in
the 1970s as well (Billings & Schirra 1988). Hardliners maintained a strong front against conservation as the period went on, working to pull apart the old guard coalition and conservative rural hunters.

Hardline anti-hunting demarcations were aimed at a more deliberate and strategic demarcation of hunters from both conservation as well as other so-called anti-hunting threats. An example came from Warren Page, the long-time Shooting column contributor for Field & Stream and president of the National Shooting Sports Foundation. In a column titled The New Minority, Page made appealed to the frustrated desire of many hunters to be recognized by non-hunting conservation groups for their contributions, while implying acceptance was unlikely. “The hunting minority funds the conservation activities that bless the more penurious majority…The hunter-shooter group assuredly does not [ask for more than a fair shake]39. They would, in fact, be more than satisfied simply to receive mild recognition of what they are and do” (Ibid, p. 190).

Page would not stop at stoking resentment of the “penurious majority”, and argued that not only were sportsmen unfairly stigmatized by other conservation groups, the media, and the general public, but that these same groups ignored and apologized for minority groups stirring up social unrest. He wrote,

They have not camped on the Mall nor have they demonstrated at City Hall. They have not taken over Alcatraz, planted bombs in banks, staged sit-ins or mass marches, or picketed the Russian Embassy. So far they have performed none-of the actions we have come to expect of our minorities…I refer here to the sportsman of America… (Page F&S Apr. 1972, p. 62).

Page tries to claim the term “liberal” has “developed a new meaning in its relation to the hunting and shooting sports”, and insists disingenuously, “which of themselves are in no way associated with questions of part or politics, nor should they be”. (Ibid p. 62). However, his

39 Bracketed text added by author for clarity.
intention is clearly to connect anti-hunting, anti-gun, and liberal politics as forces in league against the interests of hunters. In doing so, he forms a stronger bridge in discourse between hunters and hardliners, in the hopes of eventually realigning these formerly old guard elements with his hardline coalition.

"Paradoxically, the roughest treatment afforded this group of citizens comes from the same individuals who boast their broadness of vision where other minorities are concerned – the same Kennedy who investigates medical malfeasance among the poor, the same Lindsay who attacks the problems of the Harlem ghetto, the same New York Times-style thinkers concerned with civil rights (Page F&S Apr. 1972, p. 62)."

Although Page, a pragmatic hardline leader, claimed to speak on behalf of sportsmen, none of the policies he discussed were hunting or conservation policies. Instead, he complained of handgun regulations, none of which target traditional hunting implements, and the liberal political and media forces he claimed were in league together against sportsmen. He discussed remarkably little in terms of tangible hunting benefits aside from ensuring hunting stayed legal. Page’s discursive strategy was designed to disconnect hunters from other conservation forces by arguing those allies were already friends with hunter’s enemies and detractors. In doing so, Page and pragmatists sought to bring old guard sportsmen in closer alignment with hardliners and their conservative allies.

4: Old Guard Inflection Points: Interpreting The Energy Crisis and The Guns of Autumn

"With the old guard coalition already showing signs of fragmentation, two key inflection points would significantly shift the alliance between hunter conservationists, more conservative conservationists, and hardline industry/political pragmatists. The first inflection point was largely external. The oil embargo and subsequent energy crisis exacerbated an ongoing recession near the end of 1973. This triggered the rapid shift in public demand for energy independence, and"
cleared the way for the previously stalled Trans-Alaska pipeline. The approval of the pipeline seemed to culminate in conservationists turning on each other, especially rural hunters. Many conservative rural hunters seemed to accept the pipeline as necessary, while placing blame for its necessity more on the demand created by easterners, preservationists, and other liberal conservation groups who some charged were happy to preserve the environment until they needed energy. Old guard conservationists bemoaned the crumbling unity and what they saw as the short-sightedness of hunters who seemed willing to sell out hunting’s future for pettiness and the empty promises of petroleum. Hardliners will take advantage of this wedge, ratcheting up the blame for environmental destruction on hypocritical environmentalists, and playing up connections between anti-hunting and anti-gun forces. Some conservation purist groups will also seek to ban hunting on Federal public land, further alienating hunters.

Following the energy crisis in October of 1973, the fragile consensus against development seemed to be crumbling, along with sustained commitment to conservation and environmental protection on the part of sportsmen. As *Field & Stream* editor David Petzal – a hunter whose alignments were murky but whose editorial position represented the general weakening of conservation discourse – wrote,

> We need oil; without it our economy will wither. And like it or not, the general public, the oil industry, and the government are not about to let this happen. This country runs on oil, and the fate of the caribou and the timber wolf, or the beauties of the Alaskan landscape, are not about to bring it to a grinding halt… Should the project be brought off with minimal damage, the efforts of conservationists will not have gone in vain. It would have been better had the Pipeline been halted, but as with so many other things in life, we may have to settle for a compromise (Petzal F&S Oct. 1973, p. 4).

The federal government under the pressure of the Nixon administration rapidly passed the Trans-Alaska pipeline in November of 1973, (Trans-Alaska Pipeline Act 1973), which not only halted all legal challenges filed by environmental activists but contained no amendments
allowing for federal or state agencies such as the EPA, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, or the Alaska Department of Fish and game to regulate the pipelines construction (Trans-Alaska Pipeline Act 1973). Kelly Orgill’s work on conservation conservatism in Western states like Idaho and Arizona noted how the energy crisis was a major turning point in the relationship between rural conservationists and other environmental groups. “Idealistic notions of nature’s inherent value seemed like hypocrisy by the end of the 1970s when demand for natural resources increased. Conservation looked like an eastern convention foisted upon the Western states and enforced by government regulations. Then the energy crisis pre-empted the legislation meant to protect Western environs, to meet eastern demands. To Westerners, the crisis, on the heels of the environmental movement, smacked of preservation shielding natural resources only until the rest of the nation needed them. Westerners could not use wilderness for their own profit yet easterners could call the same wilderness into service for Americans who had never set foot on western soil.” (Orgill 2009, p. 71).

While Orgill’s work mostly concerned Western hunter/conservationists, such perceptions seemed spread out among rural hunters across the nation. This particular segment of the conservation coalition had remained prime targets for hardline conversion. While hardliners had been hard at work trying to coopt this demographic of hunters for some time, prior to the embargo they seemed to be less successful in attracting more of these kinds of hunters to their cause. Hardliner Warren Page who had served as the president of the National Shooting Sports Foundation and left Field & Stream to be the executive Vice President of the gun manufacturing association admitted as much. Under the pen name of “Peyton Autry”, he explained how he

40 Rifle section writer David Petzal that Peyton Autry was the nom de plume of Warren Page, a fellow gun writer whose nickname ironically enough was “Lefty” (Petzal 2019).
was trying to draw more hunters in to join the NRA. In one *Guns & Ammo* column leading up to the 1972 election, Page described a type of hunter that he had been trying to draw into the NRA and to actively support what he viewed as NRA’s best allies in Nixon and the GOP, but struggled to convince him. He wrote,

I’ve been after this same guy for years to join the NRA. His consistent reply is that he is not interested in ‘rifle’ shooting. He does some reading on the subject of shooting and hunting. He has been subscribed for years to a widely read hunting and fishing magazine, which incidentally, has raised its voice only once in the past eight years against gun control (Page/Autry G&A Aug 1972, p. 35).

The magazine referred to was almost certainly *Field & Stream* which had been both critical of Nixon in recent years and had been much more focused on conservation issues than firearms laws. Yet it was just the type of rural hunters reading *Field & Stream* that Page hoped to rally more of away from conservation towards support of Nixon. He wrote,

Next, I asked him if he thought Nixon would be elected in 1972. He glanced sharply at me and snorted, ‘What’s that got to do with gun laws? But, no, he hasn’t got a chance…I won’t vote for him’ (Ibid, p. 35).

Although Page explained the push-back he faced when attempting to recruit hunters like the archetypical one he described to join the hardline cause, the persistence of hardliners to chip away at the conservation alliance gathered momentum following the energy crisis. Following the energy crisis, efforts to steer more rural hunters and even *Field & Stream* away from conservation alliances and shift their focus to a harder line against gun control and conservative alliances appeared to gain steam. Hardliners would take advantage of pent-up anti-hunting frustration and the tension between hunters to push rural hunters away from conservation alliances and closer to an alliance with hardline pro-gun purists, as well as their more conservative GOP allies. While there was a notable drop in anti-hunting letters from 1973 and 74 in *Field & Stream*, the continued presence of such letters in *Guns & Ammo* as well as the
indication by *Field & Stream*’s editors that they were not necessarily republishing all the negative correspondence they had been getting lately suggested tensions may well have been papered over.

The old guard conservation coalition was struggling to manage intersectional tensions over guns, environment, and partisan politics, even before the energy crisis. At the end of 1972, *Field & Stream* editor Jack Sampson acknowledged,

> There is also the mail that takes us to task for everything from daring to disagree with bureaucratic procedures to rating a political candidate as a good conservationist (on his voting record) even though he has anti-gun attitudes. There is also mail berating us for praising a man for his pro-gun stand even though he may not have the most sterling conservation records. As one sage once said, ‘You can’t please everybody…,’ nor do we intend to (Sampson F&S Dec. 1972, p. 4).

In that same column Sampson proudly declared that the magazine would not stray from its conservation past stretching back to Theodore Roosevelt, would continue to call things as they saw them, and not shy away from “controversy”. As he put it, “No pressure from outside the editorial office has ever altered that tradition, not in the past and not in the present” (Ibid, p. 4). Sampson’s confident declaration that outside forces would not sway editorial decisions at *Field & Stream* already lacked strong empirical support. For one, 1972 would be the last time that the magazine would feature an environmental score-card or candidate rating system over the period of study. In fact, even Samson’s arrival as managing editor of *Field & Stream*, replacing Clare Conley who had been supportive of the score card and other strong conservation writers like Michael Frome, suggested an increased sensitivity to external pressures. Sampson, whose discourse seemed most closely aligned with hardline pragmatists, may well have been looking to retreat from more explicit conservation politics in the hopes of easing tensions between the increasingly competitive factions of conservationists and radical gun activists.
The second inflection point was external to the NRA but more internal to the overlapping conservation coalition, as it had a major impact on *Field & Stream*, and seems to have been related to Jack Samson’s firing of Michael Frome at the end of 1974. CBS – the parent company of *Field & Stream* – released an anti-hunting program called *Guns of Autumn* which hardliners used to pressure the magazine and call for boycotts. Right around the time one would expect the typical candidate score card to be released by Frome, there were charges that the magazine’s control by CBS was driving an increasingly anti-gun and anti-hunting agenda and should be boycotted. *Field & Stream* had already been on thin ice over the environmental score card, not just from hardliners, but from its parent company the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). According to insider accounts, Rhode Island Democrat John Pastore – who had no involvement on environmental matters and some positive votes on gun control – happened to be the chairman of the Subcommittee on Communications and he complained bitterly about Frome’s low rating of his record (Williams 2018). While Frome survived the complaint, it put him on shakier ground with CBS management and new editor Jack Samson, another NRA life member. *Field & Stream* editor Clare Conley would later tell *Time* magazine, “We got vibes from CBS that they didn’t want trouble with Pastore. The word was ‘Do what you have to do, but take it easy’” (Williams 2018).

Editors scrambled to address anti-hunting charges. Frome almost certainly refused to pull any punches in his ratings, and although Samson fired him without comment, later justifying the move by stating Frome was “anti-hunting”, the more likely reason was that his strong conservation politics did not sit well with CBS executives or hardliners demanding a stronger pro-gun stand (Williams 2018). Frome’s exit was more than just a symbolic one, as he was not only one of the strongest voices in the discourse community for conservation but one of the few
conservation-minded hunters who was also skilled in bridging the divide between more conservative hunters and other conservationists.

The next candidate rating system in the magazine would not emerge until 1980, by which time the criteria for good environmental performance as well as the slate of other issues considered were very different. While there was never a point over the 20-years from 1958 to 1978 that the number of pro-environmental conservation pieces did not exceed the number of pro-development opinions, the ratio of pro-environment to pro-development pieces still fell every year from 1972 to 1978. By the end of 1974, although internal and external messaging would signal the NRA’s continued interest in conservation, few on its board and leadership appear to have clung to conservation in spirit, with pragmatic hardline forces appearing to coopt the conservation cause by the mid 1970s while radical hardliners began to realign some of the conservative rural hunting coalition to their gun rights cause by continuing to define environmentalism as a dirty word.

**Hardliners**

Hardline discourse was also somewhat fragmented over this period. However, by the mid-1970s, although tensions remained over the strength of certain candidates’ gun control voting records, hardliners were showing strong preferences for conservative Republicans and lower division politically. Both the more pragmatic hardline discourses from writers like Warren Page and zealots like Harlon Carter shared a strong affinity with right-leaning politics and policy. Sometimes the discursive connections were more indirect and ideational, with expressed support for law and order, and against ‘liberal’ ideas, but often the support of Nixon and allied conservatives in discourse was very direct. Connections and support went beyond talk as well. Many on the NRA board maintained strong personal connections to the Nixon administration
and some even served in House and Senate positions for the GOP. These hardline coalitions also showed a great deal of solidarity in recognizing the value of breaking the connection between old guard sportsmen and environmentalism.

This is not to say that hardliners managed the tensions between themselves ‘better’ in some objective sense. Rather, both focused greater attention on managing their tensions with the old guard coalition first. Each could remain divided and still benefit from working to pull apart the old guard plurality that had been forming. In their parallel efforts to disintegrate and realign the old guard, each presumed that when the dust settled, the resulting realignment would make them the dominant force. In this period and more so in the next, radicals ultimately benefitted more from this division because their much clearer identity provided a stronger and more rapid bridge to dislocated old guard fragments.

1: Pragmatic Hardline Interests & Strategy

What really set the pragmatist hardline discourse apart was the overlap with political and corporate power of the men sharing it. Pragmatist hardline discourse still shared certain values that overlapped with their radical counterparts, but the arguments and appeals made on strategy were often less driven by identity than interests. Pragmatic discourse maintained its solidarity with Nixon and the GOP, managed its internal divisions with radicals and old guard sportsmen, and tried to rebuild a stronger bridge in discourse to law enforcement which had unraveled a bit in the previous period. Hardliners began with a shared optimism about the Nixon administration’s official position on guns as well as enthusiasm for the administrations law-and-order agenda and related support for the law enforcement community. As Guns & Ammo editor and hardliner Thomas J. Saitos explained in January of 1969,
President Elect Richard Nixon made it quite clear during several campaign speeches last fall that, although he felt that some form of firearms registration might be necessary in the future, it should be left up to the individual states. That in itself is a refreshing departure from the philosophy of the last administration which believed in the Federal Government playing Big Brother and preempting the field of firearms legislation. (Saitos G&A Jan 1969, p. 6).

Saitos would be careful to indicate that the both the magazine itself as well as the “the great majority of responsible sportsmen’s organizations” would remain strongly opposed to any registration of firearms (Ibid, p. 6). However, there was optimism that Nixon and his allies represented progress in the battle against gun control, that a larger portion of Congress was now more “sophisticated”, and that legislation “aimed at the criminal” would prevail (Ibid, p. 6).

This shared optimism was exceedingly short lived. By February, *Guns & Ammo*’s Washington Report columnist Bob Neal described what appeared to already be a serious division within the NRA about the possibility of state-level gun identification licenses. Nixon, himself a Life Member of the NRA, along with his aides, were reportedly considering whether or not to “pursue a course which would encourage state and local gun-owner licensing” (Neal G&A Feb 1969, p. 8). He went on to explain how major players in the gun industry as well as the NRA were talking about the possibility of additional control laws. Neal said,


Neal would be mostly careful to simply report rather than provide a perspective in this article, but explained how a debate was already taking place within the NRA about how to proceed. He stated,
A debate has been boiling within the inner circles of the NRA itself over what its future position should be. There are some high officials who favor, with some gun manufacturers, supporting state and local gun-owner identification cards. Within this debate is a question of what it [id card] should look like...If the NRA were to back a ‘model’ local gun identification system, as a means of short-circuiting those are demanding a federal registration and licensing law, how far should it go? (Ibid, p. 9).

Neal described what may have been three possible approaches being discussed by the Nixon administration, NRA, and gun industry reps as alternatives to federal licensing and registration. In that same February issue, another regular contributor to Guns & Ammo James D. Mason penned a whole column equating controls with the alcohol prohibition, but also concluded supporting a “universal firearms code” (Mason G&A Feb. 1969, p. 61). Mason provided a series of justifications for such a policy that reflected a less principled and more instrumental justification that distinguished pragmatists from their hardline counter-parts. By supporting more uniform laws, he suggested that it would create more consistent and equitable laws, which was not entirely wrong. If such laws were either mandated or truly were uniform in the states that adopted them, it could have made compliance for gun owners easier, and even removed stricter standards in cities to conform to lighter standards covering the whole state. Mason also noted that it would assist law enforcement’s capacity to police “anti-social” groups, something that appealed to radical hardliners who shared both an understanding of who these groups were as well as a similar disdain for them. The justifications for these proposals by pragmatists were bridging strategies, attempts to integrate the law-enforcement community on the basis of shared interests, and to confirm the hardline coalition through appeals to both shared interests and identity.

Pragmatist discourse capitalized on a unitary eagerness to crack down on “anti-social groups” and this did appear to temper direct confrontation editorially for a time between pragmatists and radicals. Bob Neal’s April column described how new Attorney General John
Mitchel planned to crack down on the, “hippies, yippies, and assorted war protestors that caused a slight rumpus during the inaugural events” (Neal G&A April 1969, p. 62). This discursive dynamic reinforces the view that groups often define themselves in the negative, defining who they are through a clarification of who they are not. This discursive polarization was repeated by various hardliners and reinforced solidarity among pragmatists and hardliners behind Nixon, the GOP, and law enforcement, and against protest culture, civil rights groups, hippies, and women’s movements. Guns & Ammo editor George Martin – and NRA insider and close ally of radical hardline leader Harlon Carter – illustrates polarizing discourse, denigrating a young talk show interviewees that supported gun control as a

[Long-haired, goateed, retreated hippies [that] spewed out in velvet tones all the same old tired and twisted propaganda into the microphonic umbilical cords which secure them to their mysterious, faceless but omnipresent mother audience (Martin G&A Jun 1969, p. 6).

Martin, like other hardline descriptions of these forces, often described them as both feminized and soft cowards, the anti-thesis of gun owners who were tough and masculine. For the time, pragmatic bridging strategies helped hold hardliners together and while there may have been disagreements going on in the background, relatively few of these disagreements made their way into the discourse for the first couple years of this period. Moreover, as Guns & Ammo editor Bob Neal indicated in an April column in 1971, the period from 1969 to 1970 saw more repeals of legislation than new controls. Neal noted how Congress and the Nixon administration had agreed to repeal requirements to register the purchase of .22-caliber rimfire ammunition that had been part of the GCA (Neal G&A Apr 1971, p. 71), which further increased hardline trust and investment in Nixon. With the slow and steady progress against controls that came with the increasing solidarity with law enforcement and Nixon, pragmatists saw the value in continuing to strengthen those relations and build up bridges.
Table 5.5 below summarizes the divergent strategies of the discourse coalitions from 1969 to 1972.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Guard Strategies</th>
<th>Pragmatic Hardline Strategies</th>
<th>Radical Hardline Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bi-partisan politics</td>
<td>Partisan politics</td>
<td>Partisan politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple issue advocacy</td>
<td>Multiple issue advocacy</td>
<td>Single-issue advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise on gun policy</td>
<td>Limited compromise on gun policy</td>
<td>No compromise on gun policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited compromise on conservation policy</td>
<td>Compromise on conservation policy</td>
<td>Politics of pressure (passion trumps ration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics of persuasion</td>
<td>Politics of persuasion</td>
<td>Any means necessary (boycotts, lawsuits, non-compliance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in *Field & Stream* and *Guns & Ammo*, Total N = 733

While pragmatists were managing a delicate balance of internal and external interests moderately well for the time, certain elements were still lacking in their discourse. There was little sense of an alternative identity, image, or set of values to more firmly distinguish them from the radicals or justify their support of controls in a more substantive or principled way. Pragmatic discourse was often based on some set of qualifiers and logics, but not on any significant articulation of values or beliefs what were consistent with radical hardline identity or challenged it. This made their attempts at discourse confirmation and bridges based on interests weaker, and vulnerable to radical challenges. Pragmatists would continue to voice periodic support for some time for moderate legislation on similar grounds but they rarely proposed alternative meanings of gun control that were either clear or strong. Instead, like James D. Mason’s support of proactive controls to head off gun prohibition (Mason G&A Feb. 1969, p. 61), pragmatists would still often accommodate and repeat the discourse of more radical members, such as the equation of
gun controls with failed prohibition policies. This failure to propose an alternative conception of
gun controls as something more than owners could live with, and not just potentially beneficial
to some gun owners but consistent with their identities as proud free men, put pragmatists
attempts at bridging on shaky ground. Moreover, just as pragmatists started placing greater
attention on the old guard coalition, radicals would face their own major inflection points and
increasingly distinguish themselves from everyone else.

2: Hardline Inflection Points: Interpreting ATFD Raid, Tydings, & Saturday Night Specials

The first major inflection point came in June of 1971, when the federal Alcohol,
Tobacco, and Firearms Division (ATFD) agents stormed the apartment of Ken Ballew on bad
intel that he had unregistered and active hand grenades. Thinking he was being robbed, Ballew
grabbed his old Civil War-era pistol and was shot in the head by officers, nearly killing him and
permanently disabling him. Ballew was a US Air-Force security policemen, Boy Scout troop
leader, and member of the NRA.

Radical distrust of federal bureaucracy and gun regulatory bodies was always smoldering
(See Neal G&A Jun 1969, p. 8; Hardgrove G&A Sep. 1969, p. 28) and mild tolerance at the
moment was only weakly held in place on the assumption that Nixon would continue to take aim
at the real subversives. When a no-knock search warrant was turned on one of their own,
pragmatic hardliners awkwardly scrambled to defend Nixon and the law enforcement
establishment, though noted how those growing wary of firearms regulation were justified.
Covering the incident in Guns & Ammo’s Washington Report column, pragmatist Bob Neal
wrote,
The line between a police state and law enforcement power necessary to curb the criminal and punish the guilty is a fine one, both police and judicial experts say...The Ballew affair, with more than slight justification, arouses strong fears in many sports shooters and gun collectors that such tactics can be the start of a hit-and-miss federal gun confiscation drive (Neal G&A Oct. 1971, p. 78).

Neal acknowledged the fear of a police state, but took efforts to discount that law enforcement were to blame for the incident, arguing that “overkill” was “a natural reaction to conditions today of rising crime” and the “general anti-establishment approach of many people”, the solution as he put it, did not, “lie in more gun control legislation” (Ibid p. 78). Yet even NRA board member and Democratic Congressman (MI) John Dingell, whose discourse often drifted between discourse coalitions, took a radical line against the raid, calling it a “storm-trooper exercise…worthy of the worst raiders of Nazi Germany” (Ibid, p. 8). Support for law-enforcement clearly had its limits, particularly when the policies they supported invited cross-pressure on gun rights. The Nixon administration tried to address the problem by reorganizing the ATFD but the damage was done. For many radical hardliners, the message was clear. No matter who was in office, federal regulators could not be trusted, least of all with gun regulation.

A second incident – really two related incidents – were more internal to the NRA and revolved around the election of Joseph Tydings in Maryland near the end of 1970. Tydings was a liberal candidate in Maryland who had supported gun control and radical organizers were keen on defeating his bid for re-election. According to a New York Times article, the NRA initially seems to have aided a group called Citizens Against Tydings (CAT) by having members mail the NRA a $5 dollar contribution for Tydings defeat and forwarding the money to CAT (Franklin 1970). As a non-profit organization, the NRA was technically forbidden from participating in direct or indirect actions in political campaigns for public office, and risked having their tax-exemption status revoked. Then NRA president Wooden D. Scott called the forwarding of the
receipt amounts a mistake, something they had not run by the associations’ lawyers, and a one-time thing that would not happen again, returning the receipt amounts to donors (Franklin 1970). Although Tydings was ultimately defeated and no punishment came to the NRA, radicals like Neal Knox expressed anger about the NRA’s retreat from involvement in the campaign to defeat Tydings and the return of receipt money, arguing that the NRA would not have been in such a position in the first place had they simply already had a formal fund and lobbying arm set up.

This internal discontent escalated from what radical hardliners would refer to as the “True Davis Affair”. Davis, a DC banker, had been on the NRA board of directors around the same time as Tydings election when it came out that he had made significant campaign contributions to Tydings, and had an ‘easy intimacy with Edward Kennedy and others hostile to the NRA and its purpose (Tartaro 1981, p. 9).

Internal squabbles became so heated between radical hardliners and other NRA leadership that in an October Editorial, Knox announces his desire for a write-in candidacy for the NRA Board of Directors. Knox started by explaining his motivation for running, stating,

> The sole reason was to generate pressure for reforming the NRA before unhappy members start a rival organization – which would be a fatal mistake. The NRA needs to be restructured to end the existing three-headed leadership, replacing the internal-strife-producing system with a strong man with enough guts to do what needs doing (Knox G&A Oct. 1971, p. 6).

Knox’s claim that his “sole” reason for running was to generate pressure to reform was questionable because he was still ambitious and he likely envisioned himself in the role of the “strong man” leading the NRA. Yet his concerns about avoiding separatism were very real, as there was talk in certain local clubs and chapters about leaving the NRA for smaller upstart groups like the Citizen’s Committee to Keep and Bear Arms or forming rival organizations taking a stronger and more politicized stance against gun control (Knox 2009, p. 307).
concerned Knox because in his mind, there was no way to duplicate the size, strength, and connections of the NRA from scratch, and to abandon the NRA to old guard forces would almost certainly mean the passage of more gun legislation (Ibid, p. 307). Knox’s reference to the “three-headed” leadership referred to something called the Management Committee, which comprised the top three salaried staff officers of the NRA who oversaw the general staff of 250 people at NRA headquarters (Bakal 1968, p. 133). The management committee included the Executive Vice President, the Vice President of Finance & Treasurer, and the Secretary who had overseen the legislative and public affairs division. While this collective had ex-officio status on the board, that meant that they had voice in board meetings but no actual voting power. Instead, most of their power came with budget and staffing decisions. Knox had hoped to replace this system with a system more similar to the modern leadership structure where more power and decision-making authority related to budgets and staffing was concentrated in the Executive VP position, who would get a 5-year contract to carry out the goals of the board of directors as they saw fit (Ibid, p. 308-309). He wrote,

Most importantly, the NRA needs an able, experienced staff of legislative researchers and lobbyists. The ability to quote the Second Amendment doesn’t cut much ice up on Capitol Hill. If the NRA is forced to give up its tax-exemption status to fight legislation effectively, so be it. Let them steal a page from the Kennedy’s and establish a separate foundation to act as legislative arm, without affecting its tax status (Knox G&A Oct. 1971, p. 6).

The reference to the Kennedy’s here could well have been a thinly veiled jab about True Davis. Ted Kennedy by this point had already emerged as one of the most visible and active proponents of gun control and the Kennedy clan served more generally as a stand-in for the new left-wing of the Democratic party, which Knox and other hardliners openly disliked. However, pragmatists wariness about getting involved in politics too openly was not entirely misplaced, and was something Kennedy even tried to seize on. He had recently advocated the removal of
government support and funding for the NRA’s Camp Perry Shooting Range and events, suggesting their non-profit status was suspect given their visible political activity with respect to gun control. While Knox’s initial takeover push was unsuccessful, it served as a harbinger for things to come, first among the readers of these magazines, and eventually for the NRA. Davis would be renominated, but radicals would be successful in pushing him out and replacing him with Gary Anderson by February (Ibid, p. 9).

This led into a third inflection point in 1971, the proposal of Saturday Night Special legislation by Nixon and the law enforcement establishment. While it had been spoken about in hypotheticals before, with the Ballew incident already fueling outrage, the proposals were all the more threatening for radicals. Saturday Night Specials (SNS) were a nick-name for cheap and easily concealable pistols often assembled in the U.S. from imported parts which seem to have been used or recovered in a disproportionate number of violent crimes. The popularity of this legislation was boosted by support by many key law enforcement officials and agencies in tandem with the Council of Mayors. Some law enforcement over the period even published their support for regulations controlling these cheap and easily concealable handguns. This included the head of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, who in Senate testimony in 1971 had the audacity to suggest their numbers indicated people keeping protection guns in their homes were more likely to shoot themselves or a loved one than a home invader (Smyth 2020). The NRA had worked with the Association for decades setting up police pistol matches and marksmanship training, as well as police tactical training programs by the 1960s. But with the number of police officers being shoot in the line of duty continuing to rise (See Sherrill 1973), police hoped to get at least some of these cheap firearms off the streets.
For the pragmatists, the preferred solution was to support limited and targeted control of cheap pistols to stave off broader regulations of sporting weapons and insulate shooters from public condemnation. With so much invested in the Republican party and the war on crime, and the movement already firmly aligned against Democratic progressives, the threat of a loss of influence with law enforcement or conservative politicians was enough to prompt initial tepid support of SNS legislation. Pragmatists justified such policies as targeting certain classes of criminal rather than a certain classes of guns. They initially spun the announcement of SNS legislation as a positive development, with one Guns & Ammo headline triumphantly declaring, “WHITE HOUSE TO DEFINE, AND GRAB THUG GUNS!!” (Neal G&A July 1971). In that same July article, author Bob Neal described potential SNS legislation as an actual win for gun owners, with Nixon aiming at the real culprit of crime, “criminal weapons” (Neal G&A July 1971, p. 8). Although it was not clear that any one discourse coalition was dominating or controlling the discourse of Guns & Ammo by the mid-1970s, pragmatist and even some old guard discourse remained visible and prominent in major pieces, including Neal’s Washington Report.

Pragmatic hardliners had another plausible incentive for supporting gun regulations that while connected to law enforcement, also concerned the interests of certain domestic gun manufacturing allies. Mick Weisser, a distributor for Smith & Wesson in the 1970s explained in an interview with the New Yorker that at the time, “They [Smith & Wesson] had a lock on the police market…they [Smith & Wesson] had a certain number of guns they made every year. It was very quiet” (Osnos 2016).\(^{41}\) Apparently, Smith & Wesson, who represented the pragmatic hardline wing of the NRA and its leadership, had more than just a lock on selling guns to law enforcement.

---

\(^{41}\) I added brackets into quote for clarity.
enforcement, having been an early investor and eventual owner of Lake Erie Chemical Company and General Ordinance Equipment Company, makers of Mace or pepper-spray, which they actively marketed the use of to police departments for riot control (Moreton G&A Feb. 1969, p. 51). Should Smith & Wesson stand against police leadership which – among other things – had input on certain contracts, it could have hurt a lucrative partnership.

While it seemed like Smith & Wesson was a key player in pushing for moderate controls behind the scenes, they were but one of many firms who also stood to gain from pushing out foreign manufacturers and cheap imports competing with them for a share of the market. The National Shooting Sports Foundation, discussed in earlier chapters, along with the older and overlapping Shooting Arms and Manufacturers’ Institute (SAAMI) also shared interests and resources with the NRA. Members paid dues based on the scale of their gross annual volumes [sales], and included some of the biggest names in domestic gun manufacturing, including Remington, Du Pont, Colt, Browning, Smith & Wesson, Hercules Powder, Federal Cartridge, Savage Arms, Winchester-Western division of Olin-Mathieson, Ithaca Gun, and O.F. Mossberg, as well as key players in the gun press such as Field & Stream, Guns & Ammo, and Guns magazine (Bakal 1968, p. 118). Trade organizations like SAAMI and the NSSF had provided support to the House Foreign Affairs Committee for the legislation to regulate and curtail the importation of cheap guns and parts (Sherril 1973, p. 91), with Smith & Wesson in particular altering its gun designs in 1972 to get around legislative length and weight requirements for handguns its representatives helped draft in Congress (Ibid, p. 103 & 104).

---

42 Instructors/sales seminar leaders representing Mace were careful to suggest that this should not be considered a move away from the need for firearms or lethal implements in police work (Moreton G&A 1969, p. 52). Rather, they were a supplement to lethal force. When Smith & Wesson purchased the patent for $100,000 they aggressively marketed to police departments, despite a lack of their own data on potential long-term consequences and CDC data suggesting consequences ranging from breathing ailments to blindness (Gross 2014).
3: Radical Hardline Identity & Strategy

The support of SNS legislation would test the last ounces of radical hardline patience. Attempts to spin handgun proposals and generate cold comfort instead seemed to galvanize red-hot anger among the radical hardliners. What stood out in the radical hardline discourse of this era was the way radical hardliners translated the meaning of every control proposal into terms of insult and injury for gun owners. They would replace the expressed desires to keep guns out of criminal hands with a different interpretation; a wedge wherein any advocate of controls targeting criminal misuse of firearms was really saying that all gun owners were criminals and could not be trusted. Radicals moved on from earlier suggestions that advocates of control might simply be misguided to argue that all of them despised gun owner and had nothing but contempt for them. What’s more, any law that was passed carried and reinforced that symbolic message; that gun owners were lunatics who could not be trusted. Hardline writer Edward Breese provided a typical example;

What they are doing, in fact, by this campaign is to say certain things very clearly to you and I…We think you’re a kook…At the least you’re unstable, a psychopath, irresponsible and quite possibly with strong latent homicidal tendencies. You may well be a pathologically murderous criminal. In any case we don’t trust you enough to let you own a gun. THAT’s what we think of the American people (Breese G&A Jan 1969, p. 20).

This particular trope seemed to be one of the staples of radical discourses. Not just the cartoonish depictions of opponents as militants, communists, and hippies but in the cartoonish translations of their arguments and viewpoints. Radical hardliners would continue to substitute any direct interaction with opponents’ arguments with either selective and inflammatory snippets, or translations of what it was their opponents really meant. Moreover, radical discourse would frequently repeat the same points over and over again within the same article until they almost became Mantras. Through constant translation and repetition, the new meanings would
become almost automatic. When a discussion of moderate controls or licenses for even a class of weapon came up, people knew this really meant confiscation. When someone called for “common sense” gun controls, what they were really saying is ALL gun owners lacked common sense and were dangerous criminals. By controlling these elements in the discourse, radicals could also more effectively shield themselves from outside and even internal criticism or moderating influences.

Radical hardliners seemed to follow a two-pronged strategy to respond to the SNS threat. First, they looked internally and more forcefully demarcated themselves from shooters and sportsman who would accept compromise of any kind. Their calls for unity were really a line in the sand, describing sportsmen who claimed to be on their side but who accepted calls for control an even greater threat to gun ownership than their anti-gun opponents. Second, radicals adopted a hybrid bridging strategy in which they sought to bridge more selectively to rank-and-file police and certain departments, while condemning police leaders and other police organizations as reformists who were weakening the police and threatened the rights of law-abiding gun owners.

Two of the prominent and outspoken of the radical voices were Harlon Carter and Neal Knox, who both used Guns & Ammo as an important platform, but who also published in other gun periodicals.43 By September of 1971, Carter and others were pushing back hard against calls to support or compromise on legislation of any kind. While scholarship has noted the prominence of “slippery slope” arguments of pro-gun narratives (See Goss 2006), Carter really builds his slippery-slope arguments around a re-interpretation of the meanings of past compromises and why he feels the symbolic and discursive value of these compromises could no

43 Carter, having served as NRA president in 1967, also had some leeway to publish in the American Rifleman, while Knox spread columns in Guns, Shotgun, and Handloader in addition to the bi-weekly Gun Week which he published himself.
longer be ignored. Carter describes compromises on the National Firearms Act in 1934 on sawed off shotguns and machine guns, as well as other compromises in the 30s and 60s by the NRA as “mistakes” setting bad precedent and granting legitimacy to the idea that guns do, in fact, kill people.

If we concede in order to be practical, politically speaking – and not to be intellectually honest – that one kind of gun is bad but another is not, how are we going to defend at some future date the simple and honest proposition that crime is not the product of an inanimate object but instead is the product of dishonest or vicious men? (Carter G&A Sep. 1971, p. 40).

Carter does describe a kind of slippery slope argument, but the crux of his reasoning goes deeper than a description of the typical causal chain of little compromises quickly building to bigger and bigger ones. What he argues here more centrally is that giving up a practical inch is already conceding an intellectual and ideological mile. What he is really arguing is that there can be no compromise in a battle of core values when one’s integrity is at stake. Carter argues that to concede that any gun – not people – can kill people concedes things that are so foundational that it would undermine their credibility and resolve forever. It symbolizes both an intellectual concession that guns kill people and more importantly, symbolizes a kind of weak moral character that is willing to be intellectually dishonest or surrender their integrity under duress. In the issues that follow, radical hardliners will describe sportsman calling for moderation or compromise as more dangerous than anti-gun opponents.

These days, increasing polarization is among the bi-partisan political concerns in American politics. Yet for Harlon Carter and other hardliners, they are redefining polarization, going beyond merely promoting its usefulness or justifying it as a necessary evil. Instead, Carter was leading other hardliners to elevate polarization as an essential virtue that all pro-gun advocates must fully embrace.
Concessions stupidly made while being moderate - and proud of being so - never understanding what their irrational vanity was doing to the advantages they might have had in the legislative process (Carter G&A Feb 1972, p. 24).

Indeed I ask, where is the compromise - what does the word mean - if there do not exist two honest and clearly stated positions diametrically opposite in nature, intent, and distance from the center? Where do we establish a fair compromise if by our frivolous and timid search for popularity we have destroyed the principle of polarity? (Ibid, p. 25).

Compromise by this time for radicals was weakness, not just in strategic terms but in moral and ideological terms. A timid and frivolous desire for acceptance is described as a weakness no longer acceptable or compatible with real pro-gunners who neither fear conflict nor bend for opponents. Frequent and persistent reference to “founding fathers” and revolution reinforce a political ideology of stubborn and armed resistance. Even legal and Constitutional challenge, which for many leaders remained a difficult, time consuming, and expensive uphill battle they’d prefer to avoid, grew in importance over the period for radical hardliners.

Radicals in the NRA began forming their own organizations and pressing Constitutional challenges of the GCA as well as other state and local gun regulations. These groups looked beyond the immediate expected utility of challenging gun laws using the Second Amendment to the long-term importance of getting both the public and the courts to embrace their individualist interpretation of it. One of the most important of these groups that was formed was The Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (CCRKBA). The Committee was founded in 1971 by Alan Gottlieb, Gun Week editor and Neal Knox ally Joe Tartaro, and then NRA employee Robert Kulka (Vizzard 2000, p. 63). That same collective would go on to found the Second Amendment Foundation in 1974, for which the Citizens Committee continued to function as the lobbying affiliate of the Foundation, though the Foundation focuses more on the Second Amendment while the Committee is concerned with broader set of gun policy and legislation issues. Both groups were formed and organized to advocate an individualist
interpretation of the Second Amendment by NRA members who felt the organization was not taking a strong enough stand on gun rights (Spitzer 2001, p. 75). While the groups’ initial efficacy in pressing suit were not necessarily successful in changing court interpretations of the second amendment, they did raise the group’s profile and put pressure on the NRA to get more involved.

For radical hardliners, there seem to be a growing awareness changing court interpretations of gun policies would be a “long, tough, financially-strapping battle” (Clayton G&A Aug. 1974, p. 80). There were also indications that some were growing increasingly concerned that larger organizations with access to resources necessary to press sustained legal challenge were not as involved as they could have been. Clayton noted that the Citizen’s Committee’s Legal Action Fund as of 1973 was “the only such source of money to test anti-gun laws in the courts” (Ibid, p. 8). Clayton was not simply endorsing the Committee with this statement. He also implied that other larger and more established organizations like the NRA and NSSF were not at the forefront of this battle. Although boasting smaller numbers and resources than the NRA, these organizations primary mechanism of influence was the persistent pressure they began putting on the on the NRA, ensuring any compromise the NRA made on gun control would be both publicized and attacked (Vizzard 2000, p. 64). The emergence of these “allied” groups in the gun rights movement thus signaled the emergence of an organized network of radical challenge, one that would play an important role in the eventual takeover of the NRA leadership.

Rather than support SNS legislation to ward of harsher regulations or maintain the support of law enforcement, radical hardliners instead sought to strengthen their relationship with law enforcement by promoting their law-and-order missions while trying to influence their
policies and outlook through the sponsorship of events, training, and their increasing militarization. In September of 1971, *Guns & Ammo* launched a regular column called “Your Police”, which not only promoted these departments and their personnel but also highlighted the important relationships between police departments, gun companies, and the groups like the NRA. These columns and others highlighted how hardliners sought to continue to promote or expand the sharing of resources with the police through training, surplus discounts, and competition organizing. They sought to cross promote the activities of law enforcement department and publicize the work they were doing to restore law and order. Most importantly, since police administrative leadership was generally more pro-gun control at the time (at least with respect to handgun legislation), hardliners also emphasized divergent opinions on regulation among particular rank and file officers, often presenting them as representative of whole departments.

The first column in *Guns & Ammo* covering the Chicago Police Department functioned to both valorize the actions of police in Chicago while condemning political (and police) leadership for supporting gun control and failing to protect police on the streets. *Guns & Ammo* police columnist Don Shultz said Chicago, like other cities, “throughout our country, experience racial conflicts, unlawful demonstrations, riots and the loss of police lives through physical violence” (Schultz G&A Sep 1971, p. 70-71). The piece goes on to criticize James B. Conlisk Jr. of the Chicago PD for encouraging gun laws which disarm lawful citizens, and suggest that department policies such as the 41 hours of gun training over 7 months simply was not enough firearms training for police. They also criticized the departments official policy of limiting police officers to carrying mere .38 caliber pistols, which they indicate lacks the power to kill a criminal immediately. They even criticize the decision to keep shotguns in the back of the car so as not to
make police appear as threatening, arguing that without the shotgun being immediately accessible to law enforcement, they were at a disadvantage in a shoot-out with criminals (Ibid, p. 70-71). This pattern of police coverage and program evaluation would become regular and typical in *Guns & Ammo*, with the following months coverage of the Miami PD feature praised the department for its investment in police quick draw shooting training and policies authorizing officers to shoot to kill, whether a suspect was armed or unarmed or whether they were fleeing or not (Schultz G&A Oct. 1971, p. 68-69). The Seattle Police feature discounted the effectiveness of community outreach and continued the not so-subtle conflation of civil rights protestors with violent criminals (Schultz G&A Nov. 1971, p. 62-63). Articles on police handguns and self-defense pistols and tactics published by Jeff Cooper and Elmer Keith emphasized and promoted the use of bigger guns and calibers, the need to be able to draw and shoot fast and decisively, and to shoot until a threat was neutralized.

Besides trying to influence police policies, such columns also assured readers that their continued and strong resistance to gun control *supported* rather than endangered the lives of law enforcement. They also took great efforts to highlight any involvement with police or sharing of resources by departments for civilian voluntary services or self-defense training. While the exact impact of these efforts is hard to quantify, evidence both past and present suggest that some of these ventures have had lasting consequences on police attitudes and training (Bakal 1968; Vizzard 2000; Sisk 2021 ASPA).

Radical hardliners played up both internal divisions within certain departments but were also playing up federal and state divisions as well. This seemed to be one of the features of the discourse that allowed more radical hardliners to manage at least some of the dissonance of supporting the adoption of more militant police tactics and arcane methods while simultaneously
objecting to their use against gun owners. In some ways, the self-fulfilling prophecy even aided in the further radicalization of hardliners. Their preparation for a confrontation with the Orwellian state that had been decades in the making was suddenly granted greater – if ironic – legitimacy when events like Ballew’s death at the hands of police materialized.

While articles in *Guns & Ammo* would continue to valorize police departments and their efforts to combat crime, the continued use of no-knock warrants and the rise of stop-and-frisk at the same moment when radical hardliners were increasingly promoting the use of concealable self-defense pistols further complicated the hardline relationship with law enforcement. To address this complication, radicals demarcated some police into a separate and even liberal-leaning category. One tactic Harlon Carter adopted was to attack some police programs as part of “anti-gun hysteria”, even blaming stop-and-frisk on “liberal thinking”. Yet he warned that such liberal thinking was not merely confined to some police agencies or federal bureaucrats. He also warned that far too many gun owners were accepting this thinking as well, reasoning that such policies were not a concern for them because, “they ride in a good automobile and wear a good business suit they will not be the victim of that law” (Carter G&A Dec. 1974, p. 25). Carter expresses more than just a mild concern that the combination of armed citizens and police frisking might be a tragic mix. He even calls into question assumptions that such policies will be confined to those of a particular class. If the policy is inspired by liberal thinking, who are the real targets? Certainly not just the hippies, minorities, and other liberals.

With radicals introducing more demarcations between the law enforcement establishment and themselves, how did they manage the inevitable tension this created between themselves, law enforcement, and their pragmatists counterparts? It seems as if they did not have to because their pragmatists counterparts sought to manage tension and mend bridges for them. Pragmatists
did this in part because they refused to demarcate themselves more fully from radicals or their discourse, or confront that radical discourse was not necessarily reciprocating. At various moments, radicals seem to provide pragmatist leaders the opportunity to demarcate themselves more fully and forcefully from radical members, or even consider more formal disciplinary action such as sanction or removal of offending parties. Yet pragmatists, already more committed to removing the cross-pressure from conservationists, seemed at this point to be unwilling or perhaps unable to see the growing rift between themselves and radicals as a more critical threat to their agenda. As such, they sought to mediate rather than counter-mobilize, believing that radical behavior was misguided rather than reflective of divergent interests or convictions that might precipitate insurrection. They assumed that however disgruntled radicals might appear, they could still be managed and brought back into line so long as they recognized that cooperation with pragmatist strategies would lead to better outcomes for radicals than abandoning those resources or connections for principles of purity. Pragmatists’ failure to push back may also have indicated their increased reliance on the discursive resources of radicals. They lacked a salient alternative identity to support their narrower interests.

As hardline shooters grew more radical, they started seeing slights where none were intended, attacking potential allies or well-regarded groups with no previous rooting interest and hurting their image. Guns & Ammo was forced to print retractions and apologize to allies after a typo in one of their columns confused the American Council of Christian Churches, which did not actively support gun control, with the National Council of Churches which did (Hargrove G&A Nov. 1973, p. 34; Rev. Ralph G. Coals G&A Feb. 1974, p. 10; Eds. G&A Feb. 1974, p.10). Angry radicals were effective in killing a book mark designed by Kool-Aid which was interpreted as an anti-hunting message when in fact it was simply a cleaver pun letting the young

In addressing these gaffs, pragmatists had an opportunity to denounce such actions and make stronger demarcations. But just as they had avoided confronting radicals over controversy with law enforcement agencies, pragmatists were careful to avoid direct confrontation on other friendly fire incidents, opting to correct misconceptions but not to condemn individuals, groups, or their motives. They opted instead for a combination of more general tone/image advice, and sometimes still mixed in the sorts of conservation demarcation strategies which may have spoken to common cause among hardliners to split up conservationists, but seemed like a curious tact for winning over the non-shooting public. A more pragmatic-leaning Guns & Ammo editorial by columnist Howard French stated,

One does not have to be militant in presenting a pro-firearms viewpoint. Obviously, a calm intelligent justification of firearms ownership will be far more telling than some emotional outburst. Emphasize the positive elements of whichever field is your prime interest. The hunter can point with pride to conservation measures financed and implemented by hunters long before there were any ‘eco freaks’ (French G&A Feb 1974, p. 6).

Urging shooters to tone down their rhetoric while also urging hunters to justify their position to outsiders by virtue of their superiority to “eco freaks” seemed obtuse. It was like promoting the extension of an olive branch covered in thorns. Despite their connections to resourced organizations and politicians, it seems pragmatists increasingly lacked a level of knowledge or understanding about what good PR looked like, either to their more radical allies
or outside skeptics. The lack of strong conviction behind these PR miscues on the part of pragmatists also seemed to embolden radicals to address mistakes but also never apologize for them. Following the Salvation Army debacle, radical hardliner Allen Hargrove – one of Guns & Ammo’s Right to Keep and Bear Arms columnists – noted charges that the charitable organization was anti-gun was an error, but the attacks were not in error.

The question naturally arises in the minds of reasonable men as to whether or not the swift and vehement objections and implied threats voiced by loyal pro-gunners were justified in this particular case. The answer is an unequivocal yes…We may not safely ignore any voice raised against us. (Hargrave G&A Nov 1973, p. 34).

Although many pragmatists may have viewed misdirected and emotional attacks as a mounting liability, they were utterly failing to contain it. As Hargrave also explained, such attacks may have also proved beneficial to radicals in the long run. It reinforced their hyper-alertness and sensitivity to any pro-control measures or provocative statements, and the lengths they would go to silence dissenters or root out opposition. It may have effectively raised the cost of speaking against the radical line, with even those presuming to be on their side potentially facing retaliation for statements that were out of step.

Table 5.6 summarizes the bridges and demarcations employed by the discourse coalitions from 1972 to 1974. Figure 5.3 which follows summarizes the fragmentation of coalitional identities over that same period from 1972 and 1974. As this chapter detailed, that fragmentation was strongly connected to the bridges and demarcations which coalitions employed to reshape coalitional boundaries in different ways despite retaining general shared features of identity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demarcations</th>
<th>Disintegration (Internal)</th>
<th>Coalition</th>
<th>Bridges Confirmation (Internal)</th>
<th>Integration (External)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Industrialists</td>
<td>*Slob Hunters/Shooters</td>
<td>Old Guard</td>
<td>*Local Hunting &amp; Gun Clubs</td>
<td>*Non-shooting Conservation Orgs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Weak/Corrupt Gov't Regulators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Experts (Science, Ecology)</td>
<td>*Strong Gov't Regulators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Anti-conservation Politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Conservation Politicians</td>
<td>*Non-shooting Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Overpopulators, Indoorsmen, Civilized Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Anti-gunners</td>
<td>*Extremist Groups</td>
<td>Pragmatic Hardline</td>
<td>*Pro-gun Politicians</td>
<td>*Gun Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Mass Media</td>
<td>*Radicals</td>
<td></td>
<td>*National Shooting Orgs.</td>
<td>*Pragmatic Politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Anti-gun Politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Old Guard</td>
<td>*Pro-gun Politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Federal Regulators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Radicals</td>
<td>*Law Enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Inconsistent Politicians</td>
<td>*Moderate/Shamed Shooters</td>
<td>Radical Hardline</td>
<td>*National Shooting Orgs.</td>
<td>*Law Enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Anti-gun Politicians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Local Gun Clubs</td>
<td>*Pro-gun Politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Subversive Elements/Conspirators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*National Conservative Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Judicial System/SCOTUS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Mass Media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Liberal bloc, intellectuals, minorities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in Field & Stream and Guns & Ammo, N = 551
Figure 5.3: Summary of Identity Discourses 1972 to 1974

Conclusions

The old guard’s ability to build multiple discursive bridges to a broader and more diverse set of coalitional actors helped move it toward some early consensus on public relations and compromise strategies, which aided in the passage of some important environmental policies. However, that bridging strategy also stretched the boundaries of consensus and overall group cohesion rather thin, imposing maintenance costs as hunters from different regions began to
question whether the interests of non-shooting conservationists – particularly those whose ranks included animal welfare groups and hippies – could remain committed to the welfare of hunters or deserved their cooperation. Some hunters grew disillusioned and disengaged with a conservation movement they felt demanded more of their resources and concessions in exchange for lower status than the bleeding-hearts who hated them and contributed less.

The maintenance of shared interests for the old guard in the absence of a stronger shared conception of identity made the bridges they had built to other conservationists and political allies more vulnerable to identity-based demarcations. As the internal cohesion of the old guard discourse coalition grew less stable, attempts to maintain external bridges served to further weaken old guard hunters’ internal relationships with each other. Old tensions based on class and region among hunters grew more salient as suburban and eastern hunters sought to draw distinction in the hopes of legitimizing themselves in the eyes of non-shooting conservation allies, but demarcated them from rural hunters, especially those concentrated in Western and Southern states. In a discursive field already deeply structured around the maintenance of masculine identity and pride, radical discourses were well positioned to capitalize on this vulnerability by translating their opponent’s bridges into internal and external demarcations, driving coalitional disintegrations that would better position radical hardliners to dominate the discourse.

Second, context still mattered, and in unique ways from a discourse perspective. Context is rarely entirely stable and influences the field in which discourse coalitions operate. The wide popularity of “conservation,” which initially lent itself to more bipartisan and non-partisan strategies of the old guard, grew more contested by 1971. Conservationists began to question the motives of politicians like Nixon on his conservation record while radical hardliners griped about
the lack of direct support against gun control candidates - like Joseph Tydings in Maryland – among other NRA members and leaders. As the politics of gun control and environmental policy grew more sorted along party lines by 1972, the hardline coalitions that had already favored a move toward more conservative and right-leaning politics for years could strengthen bridges in discourse to staunch conservative allies. This allowed hardline discourses to pursue a narrower focus on pulling apart the old guard coalition, even as the pragmatist and radical hardline coalitions were showing signs of their own disintegration.

Third, in the hardline coalitions’ shared efforts to disintegrate and realign the old guard, radical and pragmatic hardliners each presumed that the resulting realignment would make them the dominant force in the NRA. Pragmatists may well have been distinct in their motives because unlike the radical hardliners and old guard, they seemed to be driven more by material considerations and interests than identity. Warren Page may have hunted, but as the president of the NSSF, he represented the arms industry. Pragmatists recognized the value of public relations, but when conservation began to threaten their material interests (including the blocking of the Trans-Alaska pipeline), conservation was no longer something they could easily manage on their own terms. Pragmatic connections with the gun industry and related industry connections to corporations like Dupont and Olin-Corp made it such that many stood to lose at least as much as they would gain from the growing momentum for environmental protections. Pragmatists were not enthusiastic about radical hardliners questioning the authority of some law enforcement agencies, nor were they pleased with resistance to regulations of cheap handguns that domestic industry could easily circumvent and their foreign competitors could not. Radicals might have hurt their image, but the old guard posed a greater threat to their material interests. Thus, pragmatists increasingly recognized over the period that it was in their best interest to break the
conservation ties and re-align the forces of conservation on terms more favorable to their interests. If radicals continued to raise problems, pragmatists assumed they could do what they needed to in order to secure their loyalty later. It is possible that without the parallel efforts of pragmatists to break conservation alliances and their continued tolerance of radicals, radicals may never have grown as dominant in the long run.

In sum, strategic demarcations carry their own costs and benefits. Burning a bridge may lower a groups’ reach, legitimacy, or access to resources, but it may also increase a group’s internal cohesion, unity of purpose, and/or unity of action. Demarcations may also remove some of the barriers or constraints that broad-based coalition building might complicate. Building bridges also can carry risks when a new bridge must accommodate greater conflict of interests, diversities of identity, or introduce new dynamic interactions that can make the coalition less stable. The more coalitional bridges that are required to build toward new consensus, the more each successive bridge becomes more difficult to build. Additionally, each successive ‘successful’ bridge may be more prone to demarcation and dissolution internally. The dynamics involved in discourse suggest the more ambitious the bridging strategy is, the more likely it may be that alliances will have to be built on interests that are temporary given the inherent instability of discourse coalitions to these dynamics.

Second, evidence suggests that radicals in this case – and perhaps even more generally – may thrive when discourse becomes unstructured, with broad consensus giving way to multiple conflicting discursive coalitions and providing circumstances by which radicals can actually bypass the need for building wider consensus or full agreement. This finding about radicals provides an alternative explanation for achieving dominance through full structuration of discourse (Hajer 2006), whereby a single dominant discourse/coalition forms and sets the terms
of debate, controlling the dominant understandings of policy issues and/or solutions. Contrary to implications that groups will actively avoid polarization for fear of gridlock (Szarka 2004; Duygan et al. 2018) and seek out elements of discursive overlap or agreement, the success of the NRA’s radical members in taking over suggests polarization can be productive for them. Thus, radical groups may see value in working to disintegrate and polarize in order to gain a discursive advantage. Hardline radicals showed signs of influence at various times, but did not grow more dominant until the end of this period when the old guard coalition came apart. As such, it may be that the structuration often associated with the construction of wider consensus through bridging is not the only variety of discursive dominance. Instead, it may be that the crowded advocacy often associated with gridlock (Dodge 2017), particularly in policy environments in which no change is the same as a policy victory, may provide opportunities for sub-groups to dominate the discourse by promoting unyielding compromise, polarization, and gridlock.

This leads to a third and final implication for understanding the development of discursive dominance. Radicals could not have succeeded were it not for the temporary overlap (though perhaps not full alignment) of pragmatic interests and radical hardline preferences. Had pragmatists not worked to destabilize the old guard coalition and unstructured the conservation discourse, hardliners may not have been able to grow dominant in the NRA or may well have exited to form their own organizations. This would have disconnected them from the resources and network connections of the organization that remained critical to their increasing political power and influence.

By 1975, radical hardliners were arguably already close to dominating the discourse, and had a coalition that was at least as big and more cohesive than the one retained by pragmatists. Moreover, pragmatists did not seem to fully recognize or appreciate that they were not operating
with the same level of support they presumed they had, with their dismantling of the conservation consensus helping radicals far more than it actually helped them. This begins to get at the heart of how a radical sub-group can come to dominate majority preferences, even without large numbers or superior resources. However, understanding this requires tracing the dynamic process of fragmentation, beyond Hajer’s (1995) more binary coalitions to other multiple unstable sub-divisions involved in a more dynamic process (Metze & Dodge 2016). The movement and evolution of these subdivisions are heavily contextual, and in this particular case, revolved around boundaries of identity rather than boundaries based on facts. Moreover, while interests and resources do seem to play a role in temporary alliances, they are not as stable nor dominant an organizing impetus as one might expect. In the final chapter, I will cover how resourced pragmatists were out-maneuvered by radical hardliners. I will discuss how and why the radicals were dominating the discourse, some of the reasons why their pragmatic counterparts accommodated rather than challenged them, and the circumstances by which radicals finally took over. The final period concludes with realignment and revolt. The final piece of the puzzle was the success of radicals to actually convert the fragmented remains of the old guard to their cause on new terms, while positioning pragmatic tactics to realign themselves with conservation forces as a threat to the purity of their gun rights cause.
CHAPTER 6: THE NEW FRONTIER: THE RISE OF HARDLINE GUN ACTIVISM
1975-1978

In this final empirical chapter, I will explain how the radical hardline coalition became dominant and took over the leadership of the NRA. This chapter will explain the continued realignment of discourse coalitions and the discursive bridging, demarcation, and polarization strategies used by both radical and pragmatic hardliners in that process which helped the radical coalition grow dominant. The pragmatic adoption of radical identity discourse appeared effective in transforming the meaning of conservation for many hunters though words alone would not be enough to appease radicals. Pragmatist leaders thus met radical demands to establish a separate lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), which in exchange for significant autonomy over operational decisions, would be required to do their own fund-raising. This arrangement initially appeared to appease radicals and could have been a mutually beneficial. However, this quickly paved the way for radical domination, ultimately helping radicals to realign conservative hunters to their gun-rights cause, while also making it harder for pragmatists to moderate radicals or successfully finish coopting the old guard conservation cause. Radical gains only emboldened them and their increasing polarization warped their interpretations of key events, increased radicals’ subsequent urgency to take over the NRA, and contributed to their effectiveness in doing so.

Hardline Alliances: Interests & Identities

In the previous chapter, I explained how NRA sportsmen began to divide into four discourse coalitions. The old guard discourse coalition split into old guard conservationists who remained committed to conservation causes and more conservative rural hunters who still sought
to defend their hunting heritage but viewed other conservation groups as more hostile than helpful. The hardline discourse coalition also fragmented into a pragmatic hardline coalition driven more by material and political considerations than identity, and radical hardliners who viewed all gun control legislation as a threat to their identity and any compromise or moderation as weakness that was incompatible with their cause.

At the outset of this period, the conservation coalition had been effectively divided by hardline forces following the energy crisis and the Trans-Alaska pipeline getting cleared for construction. Pragmatists also appear to have already begun to replace the old guard staff of Field & Stream, with Jack Sampson having already replaced Clare Conley in the previous period and ending the environmental scorecard. Yet even as pragmatists were growing successful in dividing the forces of conservation, they began to face the pressure of their own divisions and the increasing challenges from radical hardliners.

The internal squabbles between hardliners discussed in the previous chapter over the inaction of the NRA on some state-level campaigns and NRA support of SNS legislation put pragmatists on the defensive. The CBS release of the anti-hunting program Guns of Autumn also seems to have been a key development seized on by radicals, who used the program’s existence as both an example of the editorial position of Field & Stream being tainted by its CBS owners, and growing out of step with the defense of gun rights, but also a microcosm of a wider range of aligned hunters and shooters whose priorities needed to be shaped up or be shipped out. In short, radicals used all these things to question the NRA’s leadership on gun rights and the strength of their resolve.

Facing radical pressure, pragmatists made what appeared to be a curious choice. They not only tolerated radical pressure but met their demands and even embraced their rhetoric. Although
I can only speculate as to why this was the direction chosen by pragmatists, the centrality of material motives to pragmatists rather than identity may help explain their ideological flexibility. The old guard conservationists may have been divided, but pragmatists likely still viewed these forces as critical ones to ultimately rally back to their side. However, they could not do this by virtue of a discursive strategy linking old guard identity with a conservation strategy since they spent most of the last period helping to dismantle that connection. Instead, they needed to continue to redefine the meaning of conservation in a way that supported their material interests better. For the time being, it seems like pragmatists needed radicals to provide them with the discursive materials necessary to complete that re-alignment because they lacked their own. Moreover, radicals stood to benefit from greater material and discursive support from pragmatists. At least initially in the period, hardliners sought to rebuild and strengthen bridges to each other in discourse.

On the heels of the CBS release of *Guns of Autumn* at the end of 1974 and radicals in particular stepping up the attack of *Field & Stream*, the magazine’s pragmatist editor Jack Samson fired Michael Frome – the magazine’s strongest conservation proponent – and replaced him with George Reiger, another *Field & Stream* outdoor writer and sportsmen who had penned some conservation pieces in the early 1970s. While Reiger still took regular stands in favor of environmental issues, he lacked the more principled environmental zeal of his old guard predecessor. Also joining *Field & Stream* in 1975 (either at the behest of NRA hardline leaders or simply to appease hardline attacks of the magazine) was EB Mann, a hardline columnist who had published previously in *Guns & Ammo* and had also served as the editor of the *American Rifleman* in the 1940s, the editor of *Guns* magazine, and the president of the NSSF in 1966 (Knox 2009; Bakal 1968). He began publishing a regular column entitled “Our Endangered
Tradition”. In this column, Mann published regular polarizing demarcation pieces against gun regulation, anti-hunters, preservationists, and other liberal enemies. Mann regularly highlighted the connections between anti-hunters, anti-gun activists, and liberal politicians. Where once there was an environmental scorecard, the only scorecard prior to the 1976 elections published in *Field & Stream* was one EB Mann republished from the Citizens Committee to Keep and Bear Arms, a rating system based on Congressional votes for five different gun control bills.

In exchange for increasing support, radicals quickly moved to defend pragmatists from some of the accusations they had helped develop and spread. After joining *Field & Stream*, Mann moved to defend the magazine from charges that CBS exerted pressure on their gun control positions, ironically signaling a more significant bridge between hardliners like himself, the gun industry, and larger corporate business interests. He wrote,

> *Field & Stream* is part of the CBS conglomerate. But we, like our above-mentioned colleagues, are free agents. To damn us is as unthinking as it would be to damn Remington Arms because you happen to dislike some one of duPont's other thousands of products – or Winchester because you dislike some other of Olin’s many activities! (Mann *F&S* Apr. 1976, p. 139).

Mann’s discourse signified an important discursive bridge between radical and pragmatic hardliners as each worked to push their own agendas and realign old guard discourse coalitions. For pragmatists, their agenda reflected the defense of powerful interests not just of firearms manufacturers but of the conglomerates that owned them and had vested interest in protecting their profit margins. For hardliners, they seized an opportunity to enlarge their platform and gain valuable resources on terms more favorable to them. Pragmatists would allow radicals to set up the NRA’s lobbying arm, which would operate independently from the rest of the NRA and would be responsible for meeting their own budgetary needs in exchange for significant operational autonomy. This provided radicals with an opportunity to start building up their
political clout and focusing all their attention on defeating gun control. With radicals focused on
defeating gun control, it provided pragmatists the opportunity to focus on building stronger
bridges to corporate allies and realigning old guard sportsmen with their more conservative
conservation approach.

The Realignment of the Old Guard

Hardliners moved beyond merely disconnecting old guard sportsman to realigning them
and their conception of conservation with the political and economic elements of their coalition.
They began pushing the idea of the need for energy and development and growth as both
necessary and inevitable forces. Hardline discourses wore down commitments to environmental
protection through cleaver repositioning of sportsmen’s identity and wishful thinking. In perhaps
the most telling and poetic exchange, Field & Stream writer Bill Tarrant describes a meeting
with the Under Secretary of the Department of Interior Kent Frizzel, a man who has among other
things had been involved in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction.44 Tarrant started by
describing pessimism and concern for the future of the environment by the year 2000. Despite
his concerns about the environment’s uncertainty future, he introduced Kent as a brilliant figure
who could balance development and nature. Tarrant was open about his own dissonance and
reservations about the possibility of supporting energy or resource extraction. He knew that Kent
was trying to talk him into the idea that we can “have our cake and eat it too” (Tarrant F&S Jul.
1976, p. 100), and Tarrant started by rejecting that possibility. He answered the rhetorical
question flatly. “You can’t” (Ibid, p. 100).

44 The connection of hardline pragmatists among the NRA board and officers to oil and gas developers, either
directly or through GOP boosters, will remain relevant to the eventual takeover of NRA.
Tarrant was skeptical, but he was not ready to dismiss a man he already appeared to be on a first-name basis with. He wrote, “Kent deals with the ultimate problem: How can you take from the land but leave it without scar?...How the hell are you going to do that? When man penetrates, he changes things forever. You either leave the earth a maiden or take her to be your wife.” (Ibid p. 100). Tarrant’s metaphor here is vulgar, sexist, and skeptical. Comparing the land to a women’s virtue, once a man deflowers either, he suggests both are spoiled for any other man forever. Although he was initially strongly resistant to the compatibility of conservation and land development, his mind began to change when he made parallel connections between his own wishful thinking about his smoking habit and optimism about land development.

Kent pats about his torso for cigarettes, finds the package and offers me a low-tar, low-nicotine smoke. We’re both looking for some brand that lets us smoke and enjoy it, but not live up to its labeling, “Dangerous to your health.” I think, That’s what we’re trying to do with our lands – use them but not destroy our future in doing so. (Ibid. p. 103, italics added).

Tarrant failed to appreciate the tragic irony of his metaphor. He conflated wishful thinking with justifiable or evidence-based optimism. Tarrant was seduced by the promise of safer development in the same way he was seduced by the comfortable lie of every safe cigarette. He mistook safer for safe, and in doing so, justified an unhealthy dependence on a substance as both inevitable and no less important to his survival than clean air or water.45

More importantly, Tarrant accepted the subtle implication that nature, like the body, belongs to sportsman. The concept of stewardship is flipped, suggesting that somehow sportsman acting in what they see as their own best interests will remain inseparable from what is best for

45 Tarrant and Kent are meeting at Kent’s home because evidently, Kent believes he has the flu and did not want to jeopardize his health by venturing too far away. I have no idea if either eventually stopped smoking or when, but I will say Bill Tarrant is still alive at the age of 92, and Kent Frizzell passed away in 2016 at the age of 87 after an unspecified but apparently “lengthy illness” (Tanner 2016).
the land. This was part of a key move in the discourse that would help realign conservative rural hunters with hardliners. In this way, even as conservation may have been discussed in terms of collective ownership, more conservation discourse began to drift in the direction of conservation conservatism, wherein the legitimate ownership of the land was understood in narrower localized and individualistic terms. While this may well have reduced resistance to development, it may also have primed some hunters to drift towards more radical discourse coalitions that prioritize individual rights. Such a storyline not only assumed that what was desired by individuals was good for them but also that such desires were not antithetical to a more general common good.

This represented a strong example of a pragmatic hardline storyline being deployed to build a bridge in discourse between the pragmatic hardline interests and the conservative hunting coalition. It sought to mitigate the apparent dis-alignment between developing the land and the conservation of sportsman’s land, legacy, and heritage. This was done by translating the land into a body metaphor, something of “ours” that sportsman can be trusted to make use of without harming or destroying it.

While it is unclear how broadly Tarrant’s evolving understanding was shared, such a shift in understanding (particularly for any conservation conscious sportsman) would have been a profound one. Tarrant also recognized that pushing for development on the grounds of convenience or comfort too openly was vulnerable to old guard objections. The apparent choice of modern comfort presented a glaring contradiction for old guard identity discourse, not just in terms of protecting the land but with regards to its connection to nature and hunting that was built on nature’s recurring test of masculine resolve. That is, to be a “true sportsman”, a hunter had to prove they could sit for hours in a duck blind in any kind of weather, stay still and silent in the bush surrounded by swarms of insects, and brave the challenges of mother nature to prove
their own manhood. Lest you think that this may be a reach or something so unconscious most sportsmen would not recognize the contradiction, Tarrant not only recognized it but felt the need to address and discount the implication in order to protect his identity.

Do I want strip-mined coal to warm my house or do I say, ‘To Hell with heat,’ and take my dog to that land not gouged...stay cold, but have my pastoral pursuits. I conclude, Sure I would go with the dog, but who else? A guy like me would be considered a nut by those who didn’t want to shiver (Ibid, p. 103).

Tarrant’s discourse points to the need to address nuances in discourse and build in qualifiers, particularly when articulating major changes in alignments. Tarrant retained a level of self-awareness about the threat to his manly credentials and therefore saw a need to discount that he was choosing comfort over conservation. He assured readers that he would choose to shiver with his dog in his pastoral pursuits, but of course he could not expect the average regular person to do this. Confident that he has defended his outdoor credentials, he moved on to endorse Kent’s low-tar, low nicotine resource development promise. In doing so, he failed to consider the possibility of a comfortable world that did not penetrate the earth, or the possibility of seeking out alternative sources of energy, instead settling on the promise of alternative methods for extracting limited resources.

Tarrant, no longer incumbered by the contradiction of stripping the land and leaving it unscared, seemed to fully embrace the viability of Kent Frizzell’s technical solutions. Kent concluded by reinforcing the pragmatic and conservative hunter bridge by injecting the demarcation between conservative rural hunters and overpopulating city dwellers, suggesting that the solution was not to change lifestyles or reduce consumption but to reduce numbers. “Now they’d like to have both energy and wilderness, but when it comes down to a choice of being able to live in convenient quarters, to be air conditioned in the summer, warmed in the
winter, and the convenience of transportation, then as much as we all think and believe we’re conservationists and want to be, our needs of life will override that conservation ethic. Eight billion people will place energy above wilderness. It’s up to us to make sure they don’t have to take that alternative. It’s up to us not be become eight billion” (Ibid, p. 118). The level of discursive contamination was striking, and seemed to coincide with pragmatists seizing an opportunity to realign shooters more closely with their corporate interests.

In previous years, *Field & Stream* had featured some pieces questioning environmental priorities but they were less common and often met with comment and reaction from editors discounting the legitimacy of opposing discourse, particularly in letters. Now pro-development pieces showed up in letters without comment from the editors or in some cases, were even met with praise. Pro-development pieces were defined as any article or letter about conservation or environment that supported rather than opposed development projects, including oil extraction, clear cutting, or mining. Pro-development articles or letters might advocate programs supporting alliances with oil and mineral extractors, clear cutters, or other “exploiter” organizations that were previously counted among sportsmen’s enemies on a consistent basis. Table 6.1 shows the percentage of conservation articles and letters in *Field & Stream* each year from 1972 to 1978 that were pro-development, rounded to the nearest decimal place.
As Table 6.1 shows, from 1972 to 1978, there was a moderate but steady linear trend up in pro-development pieces in *Field & Stream* until 1976, when the number of pro-development articles and letters suddenly comprised a third of articles covering conservation issues before returning to a lower, though still comparatively high level relative to the years prior to 1976. These trends were accompanied by similar trends in the percentage of articles and letters in *Field & Stream* featuring anti-hunting demarcations. Table 6.2 shows the percentage of anti-hunting demarcations in the total number of pieces collected from the magazine each year from 1972 to 1978.
Although these percentages may appear generally law, it is important to consider they were spread across the total collected content, and while most prominent in pieces about hunting, were present in pieces about gun laws as well as conservation. The creep up in anti-hunting demarcations in 1975 and 76 coincided with the establishment of the NRA’s lobbying arm, the ILA, along with hardline efforts to continue dividing conservationists prior to the Presidential election of 1976. Although coverage dipping following elections was fairly common, the dip in anti-hunting demarcations in 1977 and 1978 may also have signaled a general drop in coverage of those issues in Field & Stream, with conservation dropping from 90 pieces in 1972 to just 34 total pieces by 1978.

Field & Stream writer Richard Starnes, whose discourse had remained strongly opposed to both gun control and environmental destruction, showed signs by 1975 of drifting away from support for cooperation with other environmental groups and toward a conservative rural hunting discourse. An anti-hunting demarcation piece Starnes wrote in March of that year provided a typical example of old guard disintegration. In a long and scathing review of a book by Friends Of Animals leader Cleveland Amory, he wrote, “Prohibitionists of all sorts are a dismal ilk; prone to demand that all mankind conform to their cheerless mores. And they never give up (Starnes F&S Mar 1975, p. 10). Starnes and other rural hunters, growing warry of conservation groups and the movement for environmental defense more generally. Starnes would publish an old guard conservation piece in December of 1975, celebrating the defeat of a timber clear-cutting project, but it would be his last. By 1976 he would not publish a single piece on conservation or environmental protection, and by 1977 he was no longer publishing columns for Field & Stream.
While some voices remained at Field & Stream who would raise concerns about the shift going on such as conservation columnists George Reiger and Ted Trueblood, their voices appeared to be growing marginal in the NRA and wider gun rights movement. Even more striking was the way in which even writers like Reiger increasingly adopted a hardline discourse on guns and key elements of radical identity politics. As the 1976 elections approached, on paper Presidential hopeful Jimmy Carter seemed like an obvious choice for old guard sportsmen. He was a devout Christian from the rural south, grew up hunting, and had a much stronger conservation record than his Republican opponent Gerald Ford. Reiger, Field & Streams conservation columnist, laid out Carter’s record where he seems to score win after win on his environmental stands, particularly when compared against Ford. However, Reiger not only did not endorse Jimmy Carter based on his strong environmental record but ultimately seemed to make a case against him based on his position on guns. He wrote,

Carter is tough, all right, and so long as he’s tough on behalf of conservation, we will turn happy cartwheels. But if he gets equally tough on firearms registration or trapping, as some of his environmental advisors would like, where will that leave the conservation community as a whole? Probably fractured and bleeding from a thousand wounds, with our momentum once again stalled by internecine warfare (Ibid, p. 24).

Although Reiger described the need to look at the two politicians stand on the issues, the apparent superiority of Carter’s stand on everything except guns was not enough to earn a strong endorsement. The issue Reiger was most concerned with was not firearms or conservation, but restoring unity among sportsmen. The unity he described was not based on unity on policy per se or even actions, but rather on political identity. Reiger broke into a discussion of deeper questions of moral philosophy and American identity connected to guns.

After describing the Bill of Rights and a long discussion about the fall of Rome, Reiger cites a librarian from Missouri State, Charles O’Halloran, to suggest that there are essentially two
kinds of Americans, each of whom either support the First Amendment or the Second Amendment. He defines First Amendment supporters as “intellectuals”, people who like to “play with ideas” and the Second Amendment, which as designed for “the pragmatic man of action” (Ibid, p. 26).

In drawing these polarized perspectives, his stated goal is to suggest that such distinctions – which he connects to contemporary liberal and conservative philosophy and identities – are archetypes that most sportsmen embody despite the paradoxes it creates. Yet having a dual perspective is neither described as negative, contradictory, or “schizophrenic”. Rather, Reiger argued “most of us are both” and that this was a good thing.

Where free enterprise abandons moral precepts and creates situations of stress affecting human health or the existence of another species, Americans support efforts by the government to improve (or restore) superior values by establishing guidelines. On the other hand, when we see the government growing like a mindless amoeba, our conservative natures take hold of us and we demand ‘Stop!’…Like the President himself, we must attempt to find a balanced position from which to establish our priorities, to cast our vote (Reiger F&S Nov. 1976, p. 26).

Both a refusal to formally endorse either candidate as well as an appeal for balance of priorities were consistent with a more traditional old guard politics. A politics of consideration, compromise, and multiple perspectives. However, the description of a separation of conservative men of action and liberal men of intellect (even if ultimately Reiger supported some mix or integration of identities to describe sportsmen) actually signaled a critical discursive shift for sportsmen who previously not only viewed themselves as men of action but also might not have associated that identity with either conservative or liberal identity. That is, there was nothing either distinctively liberal or conservative about being a man of action. Yet Reiger’s adoption of this distinction gave sportsmen – even those who may ultimately embraced both identities and a need for balanced perspectives – the evolved understanding that being a man of action was
conservative and being “intellectual” was liberal. A closer examination of the description of the
two also suggested that while Reiger was attempting to support a balanced perspective, that
perspective was still warped in ways that presented one identity as more venerable than the other.
Reiger wrote,

Intellectuals like to play with ideas; to them nothing in print or in speech can be
beyond interest; no idea can be beneath consideration. They argue that no book, however
shocking, has ever harmed anyone and, therefore, the danger in trying to suppress an
unwelcome idea is always great while the idea itself is ever harmless… (Ibid, p. 26).

What Reiger described was his understanding of the basis of liberal and conservative
thought, which he implied underlies the basis for divisions between sportsmen on conservation
and firearms respectively. His stated goal was to reconcile the division between liberal and
conservative thought, and by proxy, dedication to conservation and firearms. But his presumably
moderated view was not actually a balanced or unbiased one, and through his reasoning, he more
or less demonstrated why hardliners will continue to dominate, take over the NRA, and push the
old guard out. First, his description of a liberal position on communication arose from the view
that no political speech had ever harmed anyone. This seemed to be a curious interpretation
which ventured into the unrealistic and even pejorative. The idea that any staunch advocate of
free speech would support it on the grounds it was harmless should strike most as absurd. On the
contrary, the protection of speech and assembly is considered vital because such free expression
is considered tantamount to the free exercise of power, and its suppression as the unlawful
suppression of citizen’s power. Empirically speaking, even the non-critically inclined reader
could still call to mind that people have killed on the basis of ideas they pulled from books like
the Bible. Compare this with the description of men of action.

This man deals with physical reality; to him attack and defense are real events;
crime does occur; aggression does take place. Beyond this, hunting is an ancient,
honorable, even basic human activity. The good which comes of self-defense, of masculine assertiveness, of sportsmanship, far transcends the evil which may result from abuse of firearms by criminals and aggressors. Suppression or control of guns is, to him, unnecessary and, under the Constitution, clearly illegal (Ibid, p. 26).

By associating both the Second Amendment and conservatism with men of action that embody masculine assertiveness, such a storyline makes conservatism more appealing rather than equally appealing for sportsmen. This may seem like a minor discursive development but the implications seem important given that the particular politics someone ultimately chooses after weighing the issues was more likely to tilt in a conservative direction for those who would rather be “men of action” than “men of intellect”. Moreover, a look back through past articles rather consistently defines sportsmen and outdoorsmen as men of action and while these men of action were also described consistently as men of reason rather than emotion, such discourses rarely embrace identities of intellectualism. For Reiger, the Conservation columnist, to embrace this discourse indicated the growing marginality of conservation priorities as well as a general drift to the hardline, especially for conservative hunters. In that move, identity-driven discourse appeared to be a key element bridging hunters with hardliners.

Radical Hardline Development

Although pragmatists appeared to be effective in pushing their pro-development agenda and changing the meaning of conservation, radicals seemed more influential in shaping the discourse and using the move away from conservation to increase resistance to gun control. In Guns & Ammo, the support for controls was not statically different from zero in the magazine at this point. The miniscule number of letters or articles expressing anything close to mild support for gun controls were almost always met with editorial dismissal or criticism. Perhaps the best
example comes from 1975, where there was only one letter expressing support for some regulation of cheap handguns. This single printed objection did not even merit a full response, with editors simply tagging the letter with the headline “Handgun Sellout” (Eds. G&A Mar 1975, p. 8).

The more striking discursive development came in Field & Stream. By 1976, the previously more moderate shooting editor Bob Brister announced the shift in the focus of content away from conservation onto firearms legislation and hunting restrictions in Field & Stream that was both transparent and deliberate.

American gun owners in 1976 are perhaps quite like their ancestors 200 years ago – they’re more concerned over keeping their arms than over technical developments in new ones.

Field & Stream is doing its share in that battle, keeping 8 million readers advised of the latest legislative developments and/or threats to the future of hunting and individual gun ownership. A recent survey, in fact, showed this publication devoted four times as much space to such subjects during the past year than any other of the ‘big three’ outdoor magazines (Brister F&S Mar. 1976, p. 114).

While counts from a content analysis only tell a part of the story, the shift in the share of conservation content to issues of gun control does support Brister’s contention that there had been a shift in the discourse of Field & Stream. Table 6.3 shows a comparison of the annual percentage of total articles and letters in the magazine covering gun control and conservation from 1972 to 1978.

---

46 The other two publications referred to were the other big hunting and outdoor magazines at that time, Sports Afield and Outdoor Life.
### Table 6.3: Field & Stream Content Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent Conservation</th>
<th>Percent Gun Laws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in *Field & Stream*, Total N = 1337, Annual range N = 226 to 136, Annual mean average N = 191

As Table 6.3 indicates, although gun laws never surpassed coverage of conservation in *Field & Stream*, coverage of conservation followed an almost linear trend down from 1972 to 1978, while the coverage of gun laws followed a relatively consistent trend up. In 1976, coverage of conservation and gun laws was nearly equal, and by 1978, conservation coverage dropped below 20 percent for the first time since 1962. Support for controls in gun articles in *Field & Stream* would also rapidly decline. Table 6.4 shows the percentage of articles in *Field & Stream* that opposed even moderate gun regulations.

### Table 6.4: Field & Stream Gun Article Valence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Opposing Gun Control Controls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Author’s analysis of articles and letters in *Field & Stream*, Total N = 131, Annual range N = 40 to 6, Annual mean average N = 22
Table 6.4 shows how the peaks of support for handgun legislation in 1974 quickly gave way to stancher resistance to control proposals of any kind. By 1977, proposals to require steel shot ammunition rather than led ammunition in the Atlantic Flyway to protect ducks from led poisoning, once a conservation policy most hunters genuinely considered reasonable, was now being described like unacceptable gun control. The magazine received two letters in support of the regulations from representatives of US Fish and Wildlife and the National Wildlife Foundation’s respectively, urging shooters to drop opposition to the regulations. By this time, opposition to the regulations was spearheaded by the NRA’s ILA. National Wildlife Foundation Executive Vice President Thomas L. Kimball who literally refers to his organization as an “outsider group” at this point argued the battle had “succeeded only in splitting hunters away from fellow conservationists” (Kimball F&S Dec. 1977, p. 8). However, by that point, the split with conservation was all but complete, with radicals appearing to pull conservative rural hunters to their gun rights cause.

Radicals would work to further control the interactions of shooters with opponents by continuing to limit direct interaction with those discourses and replacing it with second-hand cherry-picked and translated interpretations, a tactic described in the previous chapter. A more novel tactic radical discourse adopted in this period was to manage members’ own behaviors and argumentation when in direct interaction with opponents, in ways designed to insulate them against genuine interaction with other perspectives. Charles Alden, who certainly positioned himself as a pragmatist, was a columnist for Guns & Ammo. He provided a remarkably good summary of radical discursive strategies, proceeded to deny their efficacy, then advocated for what he positioned as an alternative method of persuasion that was really a radical discursive strategy. He even articulated the basis for the strategies efficacy. He began arguing,
If you want people to follow you blindly, scare them into joining your ‘Cause’ for protection. Use scare-words to keep them in your camp. Drum into them that they are mentally, morally, physically and socially superior to those who do not follow you. Make ‘dirty words’ of the most common terms referring to the opposing viewpoint (Alden G&A Jan 1977, p. 36).

Adlen described the discursive strategy of other radicals like him quite well, but in true radical fashion, projected those methods onto opponents. According to Alden, “This is all it takes to turn a once-calm person into an agitated, anti-anything fanatic” (Ibid, p. 36). He attributed those methods to pro-control advocates and implied they started them, then moved to indicate concern that that some radical pro-gun advocates were adopting counter scare-tactics in response. Alden further distanced himself from such methods by suggesting they were counter-productive. He wrote,

Trying to win the support of an already-frightened public by ‘counter-scare’ tactics is the costliest, most time-consuming and most uncertain of all possible methods. Even saying nothing and calmly ignoring the challenge is more effective, for a ‘fight’ with no opponent loses patronage very quickly (Ibid, p. 36).

Alden seemed to be positioning himself as a moderating force among gun advocates, yet the methods he downplays as ineffective are methods he either knowingly embraced or could not escape. The demonized mythology of opponents, the repetition of the same arguments, and other hallmarks of radical discourse were sprinkled throughout his article. Most critically, what Alden goes on to describe as an alternative method of persuasion did not sound like an alternative at all. In his discussion of an alternative to scare-tactics, he suggested ‘proof’ in your argument is what would really convince people. But as Alden asked rhetorically, “What is proof?” (Ibid, p. 36). He explained proof as follows:

It’s whatever information people think is true compared with something they already believe and something that makes contradicting information seem confusing, distorted or likely to require noticeable change in what they can or can’t do (Ibid, p. 36 & 72).
Alden’s definition of proof and the original italics are revealing because what he described was not persuasion based on unbiased or objective evidence. He described strategic persuasion based on appeals to someone’s prior beliefs and biases. Proof is described as a process of alignment or dis-alignment of information someone ALREADY BELIEVES with other information they THINK is true. Their persuasive power is thus not dependent on logic per se but whether something feels logically consistent with someone’s identity, worldview, or prior subjectivities. Proving a position to someone thus becomes an exercise in demonstrating that it would be convenient for someone if something were true and perhaps more importantly, inconvenient for them if it was not.

That process is even alluded to in the second part of Alden’s definition of proof, with proof resulting in something that makes contradicting information seem confusing, distorted or likely to require noticeable change in what a person can or cannot do. Proof is described as something that feels uncomfortable or even threatening to people because it forces them to engage in introspection about the consistency of their own behavior with stated beliefs. The inconvenient parallel he tried to draw is through a familiar comparison of guns to knives, suggesting that if someone thinks they are entitled to a knife, that same person should feel either more inclined to restrict access to knives or agree to maintain similar access to firearms. His follow up example not only promotes an enduring cliché about people rather than objects killing people, but argues that his “proof” will generate dissonance that will end with a neighbor agreeing his wife and daughter have no less right to have guns because they are still “allowed to buy and use a nice carving set” (Ibid, p. 72).
Alden’s hypothetical seemed to indicate more about his own dissonance (and why that feeling can be powerful) rather than providing compelling proof such an argument would generate dissonance in someone with a different perspective who supported gun control, or drive them to change their attitude. His central claim was that people faced with conflicting information will actually update what they think is true in order to restore coherence. He ignored the mental resistance and creativity people are capable of when some empirical truth conflicts with their own truth, and the mental gymnastics people are capable of engaging in to not only work around that conflict but actually reinforce and strengthen their core beliefs and social identities.

In that hypothetical and follow up discussion, Alden ironically demonstrated his own unconscious resistance to dissonant information and the limits of the kind of proof he had described. In the same space he claimed to deplore the “guts and gore” arguments he attributed to other columnists, the details of his own alternative arguments are violent, and projects onto the hypothetical neighbor negative moral judgement of all gun owners. He wrote,

You can use your kitchen knife to slice fresh bread. You could use it to cut your neighbor’s throat, couldn’t you. If you killed your neighbor with it, would it be the fault of the knife?...Is your neighborhood frightened because you own knives and know how to use them? Do you feel that nobody but you can be trusted? (Ibid, p. 72).

Assuming Alden was genuine in his professed desire to moderate gun owners, improve shooters image with non-shooters, and represented a more pragmatic hardline perspective, it seems safe to say pragmatists like him may have had the desire for those ends, but utterly lacked the discursive or ideational tools to do so. What’s more, they seemed to be either unaware of their own radicalization or that their discourse added fuel to the fire of radicalism. A key consideration here though may also be the intended audience. Alden is still describing persuasive tactics for members seeking to convert non-gun owners and skeptic. Thus, his greater purpose
and concern still seemed to be expanding the general support base, not the genuine moderation of firearms enthusiasts. In this way, what he proposes is more of mask of moderation to harness and direct the energies of radicals. Here in lies at least part of the explanation for pragmatist’s ultimate failure to contain radical ambitions; many generally believed they were in control of radicals and could tame and manage radicalism to suit their purposes. This seems to have kept them from hedging that bet and effectively counter-mobilizing because they did not take the threat of radicalization seriously. Some pragmatists may not even have viewed it as a threat at all.

While some pragmatists like Alden still supported some kind of more direct interaction with opponents, radicals appeared to increasingly support the disengagement with opponents, boycotting any product or publication supportive of gun control, and even censorship of opposing perspectives. Mainstream media – which had been a target of ridicule long before the radical turns in in the 70s – were described less frequently as sites of engagement or a venue to get shooters’ side of the story heard. Instead, media leaders and outlets were to be either pressured through the FCC fairness doctrine (then still in effect) for any slight against shooters or threatened with boycott like Field & Stream was. Calls for boycott included NBC (Eds. G&A Feb. 1975, p. 8), ABC (Bridges G&A May 1975, p. 10), Gillet (Francis G&A 1976, p. 6, 80) and even the obscure OUI magazine, the French equivalent of Playboy (Rounder G&A Dec. 1975). For some programs, it was even recommended that people boycott the sponsors who purchased ad time for a TV program, movie, or news stories (Hannah G&A Sep. 1978, p. 8).

The final piece of the coalitional puzzle might have been the relationship with law enforcement, but with radicals dominating the discourse, the leaders of police organizations at this point in time seemed to be yet another party being taken over by radicals. LAPD’s Police
Chief Ed Davis would spread the radical protection narrative that the police could not be counted on to be everywhere, making protection of people’s families from hoodlums their responsibility (Nassif, G&A Dec. 1975, p. 24-25). When Davis became the new head of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and organization which had previously supported SNS and other handgun legislation, he would come out and make strong public statements against gun control policies. With the establishment of the ILA and the dismantling of conservation by 1975, nothing seemed to be left standing in the way of radicals’ ability to further polarize shooters. By the time tensions mounted between pragmatist leaders and radicals in 1976, pragmatists may have still held onto their leadership positions, but they had already lost if not conceded the discursive battle over the identity of the organization and its radical membership. This would make calls to manage that image in any way all the more futile.

**Inflection Points: Unbalanced Interpretations of Budgets Shift the Balance of Power**

The radical faction that seized control the NRA leadership in 1977 will cite earlier developments in the 1970s including the True Davis incident and Citizens Against Tydings battles in 1970 and 71 as early signals about the need for NRA leadership reform. However, three major developments – mostly internal to the NRA – in this period contributed significantly to both radicals’ perceived need for a takeover and the pragmatists’ failure to stop them.

The first was a budget shortfall the NRA already seemed to be facing by 1975, for which the ongoing recession likely did play a role as an external factor. According to some internal budget numbers, in 1975, the NRA’s operating expenses had exceeded incomes by $715,784 (Oram 1976, p. 21). Pragmatic leaders needed to increase revenue and/or find ways to cut costs. This was awkward because at the same time they faced deficits, radicals demanded more
spending and commitment for lobbying. They needed to both assuage demands for stronger political action while also finding ways to balance their budget by generating revenue and cutting costs, something they doubted lobbying could generate by itself.

A second critical development in 1975 was the establishment of the NRA Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) to be headed by radical leader Harlon Carter. Its establishment in April was a major victory for radicals, as the ILA would be given much greater autonomy of operations in exchange for accepting certain financial obligations. The hope of pragmatists was that by meeting the radicals’ demands for the establishment of an independent lobbying arm, they could focus on finding ways to generate revenue and even cut their own costs through various measures. This even included shifting the overhead costs for ILA operations to its radical leaders, with the ILA even being expected to pay for their own separate rental space in the NRA Head Quarters (Tartaro 1981, p. 10). In order to not only maintain independent operations and their tax-exempt status but also continue to work towards balancing the budget, the ILA was granted a starter budget and staff, but they would also not be provided direct access to NRA general funds and were expected to find ways to raise their own revenue from membership contributions and fund-raising (Ibid, p. 10). They even had to pay for ad-space in NRA publications like the *American Rifleman* (Ibid, p. 10). This naturally created considerable anger on the part of ILA staff who felt unsupported from the get go. To some degree they were, though for the most part, not for the philosophical reasons they would eventually charge. Instead, it appeared to be largely the result of genuine financial troubles.

A third and related development which emerged from the pragmatists’ need generate revenue and cut costs was a plan to relocate operations to states with lower operating costs and more space. Pragmatists explored the possibility of moving out West where real-estate was
cheaper, including plans to open a hunting and shooting recreation center in New Mexico to attract new membership and donor money. They also considered moving their HQ to Colorado Springs to save considerable overhead on what they paid at their current 3.5-million-dollar office in Washington (Sherrill 1973, p. 195). They hired a polling and PR firm called Oram International to conduct interviews and estimate how they might achieve these goals. However, that report which ironically enough concerned more effective public relations would prove to be an internal PR nightmare for pragmatist leaders. The recommendations made by the mostly non-partisan lobbying firm which non-the-less was more renowned at this point for its work with international and more progressive partners immediately put it at odds with radicals. Even more awkward was the fact that the ILA had recently hired one of their chief conservative competitors to conduct their direct-mail campaign (Oram 1976, p. 6).

As even radical writers like Joe Tartaro of Gun Week would later acknowledge, pragmatist leadership’s plan to build such a facility was at least, in part, arguably out of a genuine desire or belief that it is what a significant share of their members wanted. However, while many polled likely still identified as hunters and “conservationists”, many of their understandings of conservation by this point had already shifted, thanks in no small measure to the discursive work of both radical and pragmatist hardliners. This was even reflected in in many of the interviews done by Oram. While most of the 132 people the interviewed were supposedly positive about the Raton project, the strong support in the report was based on 115 respondents being either “very enthusiastic” or “moderately interested” (Oram 1976, p. 16), a pretty wide

47 The firm used to solicit donations for lobbying by the ILA was run by Richard Viguerie, which at the time was renowned for their direct-mailing campaigns for conservative causes. In one of Viguerie’s books which he released in 1984, he expressed his disillusionment with the Reagan revolution being less than revolutionary and described his vision for a New American right-wing populist movement. One of its final chapters its final chapters is titled “100 Ways to Make America Great Again” (Viguerie 1984, p. 181).
range to lump together. The surveys seemed to not only mask or downplay the reactions of radical leaders or membership, but also sought to position the responses from the range of elite pragmatists as more enthusiastic than moderate. Radicals like Tartaro and Neal Knox would later use their platforms in the alternative gun press to make clear their main concern was the remoteness of the center from both Washington politics and the preservation of firearms. Yet even in the responses from the mix of more pragmatic NRA elites, the actual responses from interviews themselves did not paint a very uniform picture of support either. A number of respondents in Oram’s report took issue with the remoteness of the center, not from politics, but from practical amenities like transportation, supplies, and even water (Ibid, p. 19). One respondent even shared a storyline that reflected a more classical hunter/conservationist discourse coalition. The member was worried that the land was surrounded by ranches and wondered if it would be leased for grazing purposes (Ibid, p. 19). Another shared a more conservative conservationist demarcation storyline about a national campaign contaminating priorities and privileging the concerns of outside participants – even animal-rights groups – over the concerns of members. The unnamed interviewee stated, “I think a national campaign going outside the membership would be distasteful and would give Cleveland Amory the perfect issue with which to attack us” (Ibid, p. 19).

Most hunters still in the NRA appeared primed to distrust the brand of conservation being pursued by pragmatists by 1975 and 76. For those few who still valued genuine conservation, few were likely to see the center as embodying those values for reasons I have already discussed at some length. As for conservationists who had been increasingly realigned with radical hardliners, they had not only grown to view environmentalism of any kind as a dirty word but likely viewed the project as yet another example of something their dues would pay for but
which they could not themselves enjoy. Even for those sportsmen for whom the project was
nearby or in their backyard, such a project still likely replaced land that was once public or open
to them with a range they now had to pay for the opportunity to use – especially for hunting –
and thus made it less rather than more desirable. Worse, it represented the intrusion and seizure
of land by elite outsiders. As for the core of radicals, the optics were even worse. Everything in
the Oram Report from the proposed move to the lack of shooting or firearms mentioned in the
centers name were red flags. One member whose alignment was unclear was among the few
surveyed who was remarkably clear about the present dis-alignment between the Raton project
and the NRA’s most radical members. He stated, “Raton does not interest the hard-core members
of NRA. You could raise $30 million in a few years if it was to defeat gun control. However, $30
million for Raton is going to be one hell of a task” (Ibid, p. 20).

There were also specific passages and people discussed in the Oram group’s consulting
report which signaled to radicals that a conspiracy was afoot. The inclusion of Robert O.
Anderson to chair the fund-raising efforts for the project was pounced on by the radical gun
press. Anderson was a wealthy businessman who had worked his way up from being a
wildcatter, drilling exploratory oil wells in the hopes of finding undiscovered oil and gas, to head
the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), one of the largest oil and gas companies in the US by
the 1970s and 80s. Anderson had close connections to other wealthy and powerful families,
including the Rockefeller family, which radicals described as particularly concerning. Radical
organizer and Federation for NRA member Joe Tartaro recounted,

The right-wing publications who, like the very left wing publications in this
country, have always expressed fear of the Conference on Foreign Relations and the
Bilderbergers were quick to spread the word when Robert O. Anderson was selected to
lead the NRA’s Fund Raising Effort for Raton. Anderson was reported to be a director of
the Council on Foreign Relations and a close personal friend of David Rockefeller
Tartaro and radical’s distaste for Rockefeller and Anderson stretched back to the days of the Nixon Administration. Both figures had apparently been instrumental in convincing Nixon to open up relations with China, something far-right radicals of the NRA detested, due in no small measure to their strong anti-Communist roots that were at least as old as the NRA itself.

One of these conservative journals reported that when one of their readers called NRA to complain about Anderson, and his promotion of One World Government as superior to our Constitution and Second Amendment, he was met with this query from Willits H. Swayer, an officer for Oram international: What’s wrong with one world government? (Tartaro 1982, p. 14).

Tartaro’s allusion to a “One World Government” conspiracy discourse was one shared by other radical right anti-Communist groups both past and president, from the Birch Society and Minutemen to more contemporary groups such as the Liberty Lobby. As it turned out, while Tartaro and other radicals feared Anderson’s involvement signaled a leftist agenda and a one world government conspiracy, Anderson’s actual inclusion seemed to signal a different conspiracy altogether. Anderson’s interest in the NRA project, much like his interest in China, appeared to be a fossil fuel venture masquerading as a public relations campaign.

A Radical Takeover & A Radical Reinterpretation of History

Much contemporary scholarship has described the takeover of the NRA at the 1977 convention as a major turning point, a dramatic victory of radical second amendment purists against the forces of moderation. In most accounts, this has become the critical juncture. The turning point around which the NRA’s hunting and conservation roots were abandoned for an unyielding defense of gun rights. In truth, it was not the Outdoor Centers delay at the NRA convention in 1977 that symbolized the end of the NRA’s commitment to conservation but rather
the details of that project itself which truly signaled the degree to which the NRA had already abandoned a genuine commitment to conservation.

In describing both the takeover at the convention itself as well as some key moments of tension in the year or so prior to the takeover at the NRA convention in 1977, most of the NRA scholarship has adopted interpretations of those events that upon closer inspection, do not add up. First, much was made of an event in November of 1976 called the “weekend massacre”. The massacre refers to a decision by leadership to lay off or retire some 70 plus officers and staff employees of the NRA in November of 1976. Radicals alleged this was an effort on the part of pragmatist leaders to remove officers and employees who strongly opposed the move of NRA header quarters to Colorado Springs and the proposed Raton Center project in New Mexico under the guise of streamlining operations (Knox 2009; Tartaro 1981; Winkler 2014). Adam Winkler embraced the claim that most of the layoffs targeted Carter’s radical loyalists and represented an attempt to retain leadership control, even claiming that the casualties of the event included the entire Institute for Legislative Action staff (Winkler 2014, p. 66-67). As evidence, he cites Osha Grey Davidson’s book Under Fire as well as former-NRA lobbyist Richard Feldman’s book Ricochet. Although both accounts embraced the narrative that the layoffs were politically motivated and targeted hardline opponents of the Outdoor Center plan, neither actually named anyone specific who was let go, or indicated that anyone from the ILA – let alone the entire staff – was replaced (Davidson 1998, p. 35; Feldman 2007, p. 44). These accounts also conflicted with the details of Harlon Carter’s resignation as head of the ILA. Davidson suggested that Carter was “too powerful a figure to terminate” but resigned in solidarity with the 74 other employees that were terminated (Davidson 1998, p. 34 & 35). If he retired in protest and solidarity with those who were laid off, one might expect someone as
outspoken as Carter to make that clear in his own correspondence and communications about his retirement. This was not the case. In fact, he seems to have taken every effort to suggest the opposite. In a February *Guns & Ammo*, Carter’s retirement was announced as planned, stating,

> Upon taking the post of Executive Director, Carter told all that his goal was that of making a strong viable pro-gun force; and, when that was accomplished, he would step down and return to his retirement home in Arizona (Francis G&A Feb. 1977, p. 87).

Thomas Saitos was the executive vice president and publisher of the *Guns & Ammo* at this point, and was as unyielding on gun control as anyone. If Carter’s retirement was cause for concern or a symbolic gesture, it seems likely *Guns & Ammo* would have mentioned or at least hinted at that. Instead, it was implied that Carter viewed his mission as accomplished and was retiring to drier pastures in Arizona, expressing faith in Carter’s replacement as ILA president, Robert Kukla, another hardliner and acolyte of Carter (Ibid, p. 87). In the following issue, Carter even wrote a letter to dispel rumors in an October article in *Guns & Ammo* from the previous year that there was any internal division in the NRA or that there was any plan then or now within the NRA or ILA to take a softer line on gun control. He wrote that he took exception to anyone claiming the NRA planned to “hunker down” or “keep a lower profile”, and that any such official stance would have surly spelled defeat when in fact the NRA had done nothing but win (Carter G&A Mar. 1977, p. 8).

Feldman’s account sounded closer to reality but still contained logical inconsistencies and major gaps. Feldman rounded up to an even 80-employees being let go – the number that Winkler (2014) ultimately adopted – and indicated that Carter had actually resigned several days prior to the layoff of the other employees, to “escape the indignity of being fired” and to “slip beneath the surveillance of the associations leaders” as he planned his coup (Feldman 2007, p. 45). This would explain why Carter would keep a lower profile and make his departure seem
more amicable. However, Carter at the time was not on the board of directors. As a past president, he was on the Executive Council, a body that could provide input on policy decisions but had no formal voting powers. It also seemed exceptionally difficult to remove someone forcefuly from this mostly honorary position. As Feldman himself also noted, the senior executives of the NRA were – under the bylaws – answerable to the NRA board of directors, not the life members or voting members, and certainly not to staff or other officers (Ibid, p. 44). Of the staff that was let go in the so-called massacre, only two of the officers by virtue of their Ex Officio Status on the Board of Directors would have had any direct impact on the vote for the proposed moves; vice president of finance Louis F. Lucas and secretary Frank C. Daniel (Tartaro 1981, p. 9). If Daniel objected to the proposed move, it almost certainly was not out of a primary concern for the abandonment of gun rights. In fact, prior to his retirement, he remained one of the only voting members on the board of directors with real conservation credentials, having served as the treasurer for both the Wilderness Society and National Recreation Association (Frank C. Daniel Jr. Obituary, 1982). Daniel had even worked with consultants on the Oram Report, the same report that was supposed to explore how to raise funds for the proposed Raton Project (Oram 1976, p. 8). Likewise, I could find no evidence of Lucas’s subsequent involvement with the NRA takeover, radical credentials, or that his departure reflected political motives.

Most critically, insider, radical hardliner, and Federation for NRA participant Joe Tartaro, who himself insisted the layoffs were meant to target hardliners, noted the layoffs “did not involve employees of the Institute [ILA]” (Tartaro 1981, p. 9). 48 It was not simply the case that the number of ILA staff removed in the “weekend massacre” has been overstated. Aside from

48 Bracketed text added by author for clarity.
Carter’s voluntary resignation, not a SINGLE member of the ILA was affected by the layoffs. Of the relevant layoffs or alleged “forced” retirements, only Ashley Halsey Jr. – longtime editor of The American Rifleman – was identifiable as a Carter loyalist, and like Carter, his retirement announcement in the Riflemen lacked any indication he left on bad terms (Rich AR Jan. 1975, p. 35), with the magazine even praising him for his contributions to the fight against gun control.

Instead, the evidence largely supported what Maxwell Rich and other NRA pragmatist leaders had been implying if not openly admitting for some time; that the NRA was running a budget deficit and needed to find ways to both cut costs and generate revenue. The proposed move of HQ appeared to be less of a retreat from politics than a retreat from the $3.5 million dollar price tag on the 9-story HQ building lease. Yet even this narrative is incomplete. If the NRA continued to face budget constraints, why would it seek to raise revenue for a $30 million facility in New Mexico? How exactly would spending on such a project help balance the budget or benefit members of the NRA? The answer may lay in the details of the Oram Report, the same consulting report that outraged hardline radicals and helped ratchet up concerns that the NRA was abandoning its role as America’s gun lobby.

In order to raise the funds for the Outdoor Center, Oram International – a political consulting and public relations firm that specialized in fund raising – suggested that the NRA needed to put together a fund-raising committee to raise funds and select a Campaign Chairman, preferably someone capable of both injecting their own funds and with connections to other potential donors (Oram 1976, p. 7). The top candidate recommended was Robert O. Anderson, whom they described as “one of the most outstanding and conservation-minded philanthropists in the country” (Ibid, p. 7). Anderson actually spent most of his time outdoors digging holes in the ground for oil, making his fortune in wild-catting. He was, at that moment, the head of
Atlantic Richfield Corporation (ARCO), one of the countries’ largest oil and gas companies (Ibid, p. 7). ARCO was one of seven key stakeholders that were instrumental in the passage of the Trans-Alaska pipeline, something Anderson was quite proud of (Martin 2007). The other top prospects recommended to head the committee to fund the New Mexico center were Perry Bass of Fort Worth, Texas and William Liedtke of Houston, both oil men (Oram 1976, p. 6).

Evidently, it may even have been that the purchase of the particular plot of land in New Mexico was no coincidence, as all the surrounding area was owned by these same oil men. Bass who owned nearby Philmont Ranch offered his facilities and 200,000 acres until the Raton project was finished (Ibid, p. 42). Liedtke – then the CEO of Pennzoil – owned nearby Vermejo Ranch, with 460,000 acres (Ibid, p. 41), much of which is now dotted with gas wells. The report recommended making arrangements with the “neighbors” to share access to the adjacent lands, who aside from the aforementioned, included Phelps-Dodge’s 80’000 acres, Philmont Scout Ranch with 200,000 acres, and Kaiser Steel’s 180,000 acres (Ibid, p. 41).

While the full extent of the connections between the NRA board and officers and the oil industry were difficult to pin down, and certain connections such as the one between Robert O. Anderson and NRA board member Wally Schira’s can only be inferred on the basis of both men’s advocacy for the Alaska pipeline, others seemed more concrete. For example, Pat Auld – another NRA board member on the executive committee – had a father who had worked at Gulf Oil and her late husband Dan was a member of Duke Rudman’s All-American Wildcatters Association, an informal oil industry fraternity that met once a year and included Hugh Liedtke of Pennzoil (Applebome 1987). The real smoking gun though seemed to come from the NRA itself, when Executive Vice President Maxwell Rich was defending the planned move right before the takeover in the May issue of the American Rifleman. He stated,
NRA holds some mineral rights, others are held by the Kaiser Steel Company, which says our coal is low grade and economically unfeasible to mine. If mining ever did take place, it would involve only deep tunnels under a fraction of the undeveloped section of the Center (Rich AR May 1977, p. 19).

Despite charges that the Oram Report was part of a One World Government conspiracy (Tartaro 1982, p 14), a retreat from gun politics (Kulka G&A May 1977, p. 12 & 13), or an attempt to transform the organization into a ladies’ benevolent society (Keith G&A Oct. 1977, p. 16), in actuality the Center in New Mexico – which would later be rebranded and built as the NRA Whittington Center which is still in operation – was most likely a green screen for the generation of dirty money. To the extent there was any insistence that conservation be the focal point, that demand was driven by the optics, not a genuine concern for the environment. As one unnamed interviewee put it cynically, “Conservation is like motherhood and apple pie. The NRA would be crazy to pass up this opportunity to improve its public relations image” (Oram 1976, p. 26). Ironically, for all the hoopla from radicals declaring triumphantly that they had defeated the ‘birdwatchers’ and ‘butterfly netters’ (Rich AR May 1977, p. 18), the temporary delay of the project and reshuffling of its management may well have been one of the last great victories for the environment driven by members of the NRA.

**The Radical Hardline Takeover of the NRA**

Regardless of the true motives behind the NRA’s proposed move out West, radicals quickly interpreted the move as a threat to the NRA’s continued commitment to gun rights. As radical Federation for NRA organizer Joe Tartaro explained it, there was the, “perception that the NRA was turning away from a vigorous pro-gun activism (ILA) in favor of a grandiose commitment to environmentalism and conservation (Raton)” (Tartaro 1981, p. 9). Men of action like Harlon Carter and Neal Knox met in secret, forming the Federation for NRA along with a
plan to change the NRA bylaws, mobilize as many hardliners as possible for the vote at the NRA annual meeting, and vote in their own ranks to the NRA leadership.

One final factor which likely contributed to the radical hardline takeover was the organizational structure of the NRA itself. The structure and rules were constant across the period of study from 1958 to 1977, with adjustment to the voting rules and composition of the staffing structure following the leadership takeover in 1977. The NRA and its leadership structure were relevant in at least two ways. First, the board itself was large but very hierarchical. The board was and still is comprised of 76 directors, elected by the life members every 3 years. Prior to the takeover – though not dramatically different following the takeover – the board was “virtually self-perpetuating” (Bakal 1968, p. 132). Candidates for board seats were selected by a nominating committee, appointed by the president, and with only two candidates for each position, nomination and especially renomination was functionally the same as being re-elected (Ibid, p. 132). The nominating committee’s choices were almost always present or past directors (Ibid, p. 132). This put tremendous power in the hands of the president who chose the nominating committee. The board meets every two years to vote on the president and vice president (Ibid, p. 132).

Also, not every NRA member had the power to vote and this is still true today. Voting members must either be dues-paying members in good standing for at least 5 years or pay a premium price for a Life Membership allowing them to vote. Life members could also propose and vote on bylaw amendments at the NRA annual meeting, but attendance at these events is typically low (Meltzer 2009). Most members showed up for the trade show portions rather than the business meetings, and often only attended the meetings when they were held in a state or city they were from. This made those in positions of leadership generally more responsive to the
nominating committee than the membership to keep their jobs, and also seems to have kept leaders less attuned to the attitudes of their rank-and-file members, and even some leadership less directly answerable to the board of directors.

This could have been a significant hurdle for radical takeover, but actually, it arguably disadvantaged pragmatists more. It insulated pragmatists from the shifting attitudes of its membership base and gave them a false sense of security and even the perception they were acting on behalf of the wishes of their members. It also made it so that while using the actual voting process to change the leadership was largely ineffective as a mechanism for leadership reform, changing the leadership through the bylaw amendment at the annual meeting – while at the time unprecedented – was hypothetically achievable without a physical majority of the total NRA membership. Provided radical could organize a critical mass of life-members and keep the organizing secret, they could stack the voting deck in their favor fairly easily at the often sparsely attended annual business meeting with far less than the two million or so members the NRA counted among its total ranks in 1977. That was exactly what hardline radicals did.

By May, right before the NRA convention, the ILA released an ad which seemed to have broken ranks with NRA leaders and advertised dissention over the proposed move of NRA headquarters from Washington to Colorado. According to accounts, ILA director Robert Kukla was the hardline man on the inside and released the ad as part of their organizing and messaging strategy. The hardliners arrived at the Cincinnati annual meeting, coordinating hundreds of hardline members they called the Federation for NRA. They wore orange hats and carried walkie-talkies to help them coordinate. Carter and Knox’s plan was to exploit an obscure provision in the NRA bylaws that required full consideration of any motion made by a member from the floor (Winkler 2014, p. 67). Using this obscure law, they stacked the deck of the votes
at the convention by coordinating as many hardline life members as they could. They proposed changes to how the NRA board was elected and how the top leaders of the organization were chosen, and proposed additional changes to the bylaws to recommit the NRA to fight gun control, increase funding for the NRA-ILA, and end the planned move of NRA headquarters out west (Ibid, p. 67). After a battle that dragged on until 4 in the morning, Carter was elected the new Executive Vice President of the NRA and Maxwell Rich along with 14 other members of the board were voted out and replaced by hardline federation picks (Tartaro 1981, p. 14).

Following the takeover in July, hardliners made clear that while they would continue to battle anti-hunting legislation, they would no longer be supporting broader conservation initiatives previously considered a vital aspect of preserving hunting heritage. They supported unfettered hunting and animal trapping in Ohio, something that many sportsmen in years passed objected to for the way it could lead to an animal suffering rather than being humanely killed. *Guns & Ammo* announced the ILA lawsuit against a department they once had a relatively good relationship with in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, for lead shot regulations and bans on the use of lead bullets in the Atlantic Flyway. In that same article, it was announced that Nathaniel Reed of the Department of The Interior – someone often described in friendly terms by old guard conservationists in the earlier part of the 1970s – was being replaced and celebrated his departure, branding him as a radical environmentalist. *Field & Stream* even charitably referred to the suit as the “steel shot controversy” to downplay divisions. Letters from department heads at Wildlife and Fisheries plead with sportsman that resisting steel shot regulations was only hurting their ties to environmentalists, but as should be clear by now, those ties had been severed for some time.
Such appeals now fell on deaf ears (literally, Harlon Carter was apparently deaf by this point from years of shooting without ear protection). That such action might hurt connections to environmental groups did not appear to be unintended consequence either. Rather, it might well have signaled deliberate and symbolic action that the NRA was now a single-issue group. In October’s *Guns & Ammo*, executive editor and longtime NRA Life Member Elmer Keith finally addressed the changing of the guard and NRA leadership structure more formally and directly. In that announcement, Keith signaled what the NRA’s present and future interest in environmental issues and allies would be.

Having become a member of the NRA back in 1922, a Life Member in 1928, and an Endowment Member in 1957, I met a lot of old friends who also had been members for years. They were very disenchanted with the direction the NRA had been taking, and were urging all Life Members to register, and vote at the Annual Life Members meeting. At least 95 percent of those I talked with were dead against selling our NRA building in Washington, and were also against moving to Colorado (Keith G&A Oct. 1977, p. 13). Keith avoided labeling this movement as the Federation for NRA or as something more sophisticated and formalized, instead describing it as a broader grass-roots push supported by 95 percent of the members who were fed up with the NRA’s direction. He went on to explain why the Outdoor Center was especially concerning for radical organizers.

They also regarded the Raton, New Mexico, Outdoor Center as entirely beyond the scope and purpose of the NRA. They regarded it as a move by the environmentalists to break up the NRA and even change the name of the organization founded some 100 years ago. The old NRA members were on the warpath and promised a hot time at the annual members meeting. It proved just that (Ibid, p. 13-14).

Keith’s radical demarcation was clear. Environmentalism was a threat to the very foundations and identity of the NRA that radicals envisioned. Conservation and related alliances

---

49 Text bolded by author to indicate key point of emphasis.
were not only beyond the scope of acceptable activity but threatened the fabric of radical identity as proud masculine soldiers. As Keith put it, radicals were prepared for war. He drove home the connection between identity and strategy in his demarcation, making clear that environmental causes were better left to the ladies, not the real men of the NRA.

Most members told me they felt we had accomplished everything we set out to do and that we now again had a real National Rifle Association, dedicated to its original concepts, instead of an environmental, ladies benevolent society, bent on disarming America and turning the NRA into some sort of sport center (Keith G&A Oct. 1977, p. 15-16).

For Keith and other hardliners, issues of environment were no longer compatible with the hard image of the NRA and was an effeminate cause best left to the ladies’ benevolent societies. For those still hoping for an environmental ally in the NRA, they either failed to see or refused to acknowledge the writing on the wall. It now read, “The Right to Keep and Bear Arms Shall Not Be Infringed” and that wall would remain in Washington.

Conclusion

This chapter has some important implications for both the NRA and discourse literatures. First, as the previous chapter indicated, it seems unlikely that radical hardliners could have grown dominant without the support of pragmatic interests. Pragmatists provided both the material resources and even integration of elements of radical discourse that would put radicals in a position to take over. Second, while material resources mattered, it was ultimately the discursive material of radicals that made them more successful than their counter-parts. Although pragmatists had material power advantages, their protection of those interests was consistent with what Schneider and Ingram (1996) suggest is typical of “contenders”, groups whose power is offset by a negative image which can make supporting their goals in the open politically risky.
Pragmatists thus often had to conceal their true motives and relied on the selective adoption of
the discursive elements of other discourse coalitions to justify their otherwise selfish pursuit and
protection of their interests. Conservation may well have been a lucrative alliance for a while,
but when this became a more substantive threat to their interests, pragmatists needed to break
that consensus down and grew increasingly dependent on radical rhetoric to pursue their interests
in the process. When radical discourse began to threaten the pragmatists’ ability to adequately
pursue their interests, they lacked a strong or compelling discursive basis to oppose radicals,
having already poured so much effort into breaking down the old guard and the connection
between environmental protection and hunting heritage. Third, this chapter challenges some of
what we though we knew about the radicalization of the NRA, and the development of radical
discursive dominance and sub-group dominance more generally. Radical dominance in this case
emerged not from a lasting realignment between a discourse coalition and a dominant discourse,
but rather emerged from a more dynamic process, with temporary alignment and realignments
un-structuring the discourse, and allowing a radical sub-group to form a plurality of support,
change institutional arrangements, and remove the basis for counter-consensus forming.
Although functionally similar to a divide and conquer strategy, discursively dominance operated
differently in the sense that such a process of division and conquest was, at least in part, a
biproduct of an earlier and more deliberate division strategy by pragmatists. I now turn to some
final conclusions, where I discuss in greater detail how these observations change how we think
about the development of the NRA, as well as the mechanisms by which sub-groups can
dominant advocacy organizations without superior resources or numbers.
How did a radical faction within the NRA manage to take over the organization and transform it into such a dominant political force without necessarily enjoying the presumed advantages of superior numbers, superior resources, or control of the leadership? What might this tell us more generally about how small and more radical factions within advocacy organizations develop and how they can come to dominate larger groups and their political agendas? These are critical questions to answer, not just for those concerned with the NRA’s past, present, or future, but for anyone concerned by the apparent proliferation of radical and polarizing organizations that have followed similar trajectories. Even before the rise of the Internet and the alt-right, activist groups and more radical political groups have used specialized print media as a way to organize and spread their message (Harlow, 2013). However, today, more than ever, the rising influence of alternative media discourse on the development of more radical groups and political agendas is apparent (Beran, 2017; Bernstein, 2017). Group dynamics which involve infiltration, radicalization, and/or take-over seem ever more common, from previously innocuous and mostly unaligned video game communities being coopted by the alt-right to the Oath Keepers and Qanon moving from the fringes of American politics to the center of party organizations. Such developments can warp democratic preference, not just within organizations themselves, but in wider political spheres. Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of these processes is critical, particularly if we hope to mitigate and combat their most negative impacts.

Radicals managed to take over the NRA by using identity-driven discourses to build a more cohesive faction of gun owners than their moderate old guard hunting counterparts or hardline pragmatists who were more driving by material interests. Radicals were able to
overcome disparities in resources or numbers because they were not merely more highly motivated to take action than the others – a common but underspecified claim in the literature (Kleck 1994; Vizzard 2000) – but also because their discourses motivated stronger alliances and helped them break the broader alliances of other gun owners. They did this by not only enabling strong strategic actions by aligning those unyielding and focused strategies with their mobilizing identity, but also pacified the dissent of potential opposition by redefining the boundaries of conservation roles and stewardship, alienating some hunters from allies while realigning other hunters to their more radical positions. On a related note, radicals’ organizational counterparts remained less cohesive and despite large numbers and resources, appeared unable to re-sort or reconfigure their sportsmanship/conservation identity in ways that mobilized similarly strong alliances, promote unity of purpose, or mobilize consistent counter-actions. Their inability to evolve in ways that removed cross-cutting pressures – and arguably a refusal to acknowledge or confront this – led to their increasing isolation from potential allies and alternative paths. This would eventually make them impotent in the face of more unified opposition.

The key discursive mechanisms that were used by actors to shape and reshape the boundaries of their coalition across the periods of study were demarcation and bridging strategies. These strategies were grounded in the demonstration of affinity between central masculine American identity and particular goals, alliances, and activities. Additionally, they were grounded in the demonstration of dis-alignment/incompatibility/hostility between central masculine American identity and other goals, alliances, and activities, specifically related to defense of nature, environment, or conservation heritage. In this way, strategic alliances, the range of strategic options, and the range of policy goals were consistently negotiated in discourse through reference to identity. Neither radicals nor their counterparts
entirely re-invented the central features of masculine identity discourse. Preserving their manly credentials and traditions remained the central stakes even before inter-group tensions developed and escalated. Yet radical hardliners more effectively re-positioned and sorted other secondary or related identifications, affiliations, and strategies around this central one.

Radicals used a combination of arguments to gradually break the connections between hunters and other conservationists, stoking angst and dissatisfaction with federal government projects disturbing lands, blaming individuals and population for pollution, and most importantly, defining other outdoor preservation groups and their conservation agendas as out of step with and hostile to hunters. These appeals in particular highlighted fundamental differences in identity that made working with them unworkable, with preservation groups described as caring more about trees than people, prone to unmanly “emotionalism” and irrational aversion to killing game animals, and posers who spent little time in the outdoors or money on nature.

Hardline radicals also worked to break down the unity of the law enforcement establishment. To rectify this problem, radicals focused attention on strengthening connections with state and local departments and officers, while positioning themselves against federal agents and regulators as part of an intrusive and repressive Orwellian state. The demarcation strategy followed a pattern whereby federal law enforcement agencies were part of a federal state that was too soft – especially on criminals – while simultaneously impeding law enforcement from taking stronger actions and setting themselves against the average citizen. Radicals positioned themselves as allies of the police, supporting their ability to clean up the streets and focus on criminals rather than harass and emasculate law-abiding citizens by taking their guns. In addition, they embraced crime storylines that either implied
or actively embraced race essentialism, departing from earlier storylines that crime was complex/socioeconomic problem rather than a firearms problem. This also seemed to strengthen their ties to local law enforcers, many of whom in letters to the editor often asked about the most effective guns and ammunition for stopping fleeing criminals or breaking up crowds. The ability to partly break and partly bridge that connection to law enforcement in this way allowed radicals to pursue a more unified stance against any and all gun control without losing face by appearing to oppose goals of law and order.

Across time, conservationists and moderates struggled to build a more unified or cohesive coalition, articulate a related set of strategies, or develop alternative appeals that demarcated the preservation of masculine American identity from radical storylines and strategies. They variously proposed support for certain issues, but rarely proposed consistent political actions or voting behaviors. People were reminded to vote their conscience and consider people’s conservation record as part a larger host of issues. Even when they did propose various approaches to conservation problems, they frequently avoided political or policy solutions and instead revolved around individual direct actions such as picking up litter, testing local water quality, or individual suits to block dam constructions rather than broader collective action or voting behavior. The short-lived and controversial Conservation Scorecard in *Field & Stream* represented an important failure to build bridges to conservation politicians and demarcate hunters from competing partisan and commercial influences. The inability to demarcate resistance to firearms regulations from conservation/hunting identity or re-sort conservation as a more critical cause than firearms control effectively limited and constrained the level of action and counter-action that this group could pursue. Radicals were not only not constrained in this way but managed to take strong, unified, and consistent
political actions, including voting, electioneering, letter writing, phone-calling, boycotting,
and eventually, the organization of a leadership coup.

Implications for Studying Advocacy Groups & Discourse-Driven Theories

This dissertation has interesting implications for the study of advocacy group and social
movements, and makes a substantive contribution to the discourse literature. The model that I
have developed through empirical analysis provides a useful way of categorizing and coding
discourse coalitions by coding the elements of group identity, strategy, and the discursive
boundary work they employ to expand their groups, increase their cohesion, or disorganize
current or potential opposition. This approach provides a useful way to bound the conception of
discourse and in doing so, provides a means of tracing the discursive dynamics by which
boundaries are drawn and shift over time. Although this approach is useful for studying older and
more established advocacy groups which may have a more centralized and hierarchal structure
similar to the NRA, it may actually be most promising for contemporary advocacy groups and
sub-groups which are emergent, less centralized, and involve a complex mix of identities and
interests such as Qanon, anti-vaccine movements, or even cyber groups like Anonymous which
seem to defy consistent categorization. It can be especially useful for understanding the
circumstances by which particular coalitions may become more radical and exert outsized
influence, not just by drawing in more adherents but by disorganizing opponents and stirring
doubt or distrust among them. While magazines provided a useful site of discourse for studying
the NRA, such an approach to analysis may be even more useful when applied to groups
embedded in/emerging from modern internet culture where discourse is front and center, groups
may form and change rapidly, and development can be traced in close to real time. This approach
may be especially useful for understanding the complex relationships between various advocacy
groups and the economic interests within the modern Republican and Democratic parties,
especially the continued and growing centrality of identity politics on policy-making despite
weak evidence such positions are broadly representative of either the general electorate or even
many active participants and advocates.

A discursive approach to the study of advocacy groups also points to a number of
questions and assumptions that could receive elevated attention in the policy advocacy literature.
First, with respect to the advocacy literature and the role of elites, although the NRA ultimately
reformed into a new kind of oligarchy, at least partly confirming Michels (1911) “iron law”, the
role that resourced elites in that process as well as the durability of coalitional formations did not
conform to most conventional wisdom about the nature and durability of elite influence and
power. Elite support still figured prominently in the balance of coalitional power in the NRA, but
that material power did not translate into full or stable dominance of the NRA’s agenda
(Schattschneider 1960; Gilens & Page 2014). Although Winters & Page (2009) argue that elite
dominance is most likely to emerge in policy areas directly connected to the protection of elite
wealth, the material interests of NRA elites seemed to complicate their alliances and generated
additional “cross-pressure” (Powell 1976; Mason 2018), pushing them toward an awkward
center position, mixing their messaging, and limiting the range of actions they were willing to
support. The evident need to conceal their true material-driven preferences further weakened
their control over the terms of debate, as they often depended on adopting the discourse of other
coalitions to support their interests. Thus, this dissertation suggests that elites, even within the
boundaries of their own organizations, may not necessarily be able maintain their power by
virtue of their positions and resources. Monopolizing information may be more difficult,
particularly when policies lend themselves less clearly to elite manipulation (Kul, Ramsay, Lewis 2003-2004; Rich 2006). Thus, elites may see a need to tolerate or even embrace the discourses of sub-groups in order to secure pluralities of support, which in turn can gradually chip away at their influence and control.

Second, this dissertation supports a view of advocacy groups and social movement as more volatile and less unified than scholars may expect or release. Even prominent and powerful organizations like the NRA which may appear unified over time often must manage a range of perspectives, debates, and divisions, and can evolve in ways that may otherwise confound expectations without attention to an organization’s coalitional dynamics. The NRA’s development was not linear and extended beyond the typical boundaries of a single policy domain (Sabatier 1987) or policy stream (Kingdon 1984). This suggests we should question our assumptions about where the boundaries of any particular advocacy group or coalition are, consider whether groups operate as unitary actors with clear boundaries and motives, and pay attention to the stability of those boundaries. By paying closer attention to these internal dynamics, it can draw attention to the reasoning and techniques groups employ to maintain or transform themselves, and the wider consequences a change in one coalition can have on others. Maintaining focus on discourse and identity can also help explain otherwise surprising developments, such as some far right group’s adoption of vaccine skepticism previously more exclusive to groups on the far-left, or the efforts of some gun violence prevention groups to support law enforcement reform efforts while others have remained more hesitant. This dissertation may also shed some light on the sources of the NRA’s current behaviors, explaining how trigger lock and smart gun technology we might otherwise expect gun industry elites closely aligned with the NRA to favor remain vehemently opposed by the NRA’s current leadership.
Third, this dissertation expands the typical picture of successful advocacy group mobilizations as the ones constructing broad or new consensus (Sabatier 1987; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier & Weible 2007) and considers how some groups – especially radical sub-groups – may achieve success by breaking down and preventing the formation of broad consensus. Other work has explored the ways that elite groups in particular move to protect their policy monopoly’s (Baugartner & Jones 1993) and reduce the scope of conflicts (Cobb & Elder 1983; Stone 1989). However, this dissertation suggests that radical groups may benefit not just from reducing the scope of a conflict but by pacify dissent by disconnecting the formation of broader counter consensus. That is, not just by controlling the who is involved in the policy area but also in managing the relationships between coalitions. This dissertation also reaffirms existing observations in the social movement literature about the vulnerability of broad-based mobilizing strategies (Gitlin 1980; Mansbridge 1986) to breakdowns and factionalism, especially when political identity remains a core feature of a groups’ dynamics. By paying particular attention to discourse, this dissertation also adds additional clarity to the basis for such breakdowns and formations.

Fourth, this dissertation makes contributions to the literature on discourse coalitions as well as our understanding of the emergence of discursive dominance. Consistent with Sharma (2011), I found that discursive dominance can still emerge without the construction of complete consensus. Hajer’s discourse coalitions (1995;2006) remains foundational for understanding the development and dynamics of dominant discourses. Hajer’s (1995) account of a shift in acid rain debates in the 1970s and 80s mirrored some of the dynamics of the evolution of the NRA. The construction of discursive dominance in this dissertation and in Hajer’s research still hinged on the construction of stronger coalitional affinity between some central goal and the “winning”
coalitions discursive aims. Additionally, the support or at least tolerance of economic elites figured prominently in which coalition became more dominant. However, the central feature of acid rain discourse remained “economic modernization”, with coalitional dominance requiring the discursive construction of greater compatibility between environmental aims and economic appeals, and appeals centering on interests and empirical facts. The central feature of NRA discourse revolved around group identity and the preservation of cherished masculine American heritage, with arguments revolving around which strategic actions/alliances supported or threatened the preservation of group identity. Economic elites figured prominently in the balance of power in the NRA, but economic interests remained submerged beneath identity-based arguments and eventually put pragmatic hardline elites at a discursive disadvantage when confronting radical hardline challenges. Additionally, Hajer’s model built around a single policy between two competing and mostly unified coalitions was more out of step with the complex reality of the NRA’s development. The progression of coalitional development in the NRA started from a loose shared identity space, grew into more dichotomous split, progressed to further fragmentation, and finally sub-group domination in the span of 20 years. The DDC approach proposed by Metze & Dodge (2016) proved to be a useful advancement of Hajer (1995) for following the development of multiple sub-coalitions, as well as the manner in which that development can have a significant impact on policy via discourse. I build on the DDC by not only demonstrating the approaches usefulness beyond the bounds of a single policy debate but also by demonstrating the flexibility of the model for less scientized debates, retrofitting identity as an alternative mechanism to facts by which coalitional boundaries may be negotiated.

Finally, the role of alternative media venues that the magazine’s in this study represented, particularly Guns & Ammo, should not be overlooked and has important implications that extend
existing theories of discursive development and dominance. For one thing, alternative media provided a venue by which fringe perspectives that other mainstream sources either ignored or discounted could be normalized, developed, and spread. The writers of these magazines could both share their own perspectives and talk about things in ways that other mainstream discursive venues may have resisted. It is hard to imagine the New York Times providing a platform to boost the signal of the Minutemen, even in letters to the editor, in the way that Guns & Ammo did. People may also be free to express themselves in more explicit styles that could be frowned upon in other venues, including more expressive and angry language, repetitive points, and even expletives or racial epithets. Thus, my dissertation presents a departure from some other work exploring the development of discursive dominance such as those described by Sharma (2011) or Duygan et al. (2018) more focused on the discourse of formalized or mainstream discursive venues such as mainstream coverage or formalized policy hearings. In this way, my dissertation makes the case for expanding the range of sources other discourse and policy studies typically use to examine development.

Additionally, such a focus also extends discourse theories such as Hajer (1995) beyond the alignment of coalitional priorities with mainstream ideas and values to consider the role of alternative media venues in developing and normalizing radical ideas for more mainstream consumption later. The editors, writers, and contributors of gun magazines used them to modify and translate the meaning of other discourses, especially mainstream storylines, opposing storylines, or more moderate perspectives. Much has been made about how modern internet media can close off consumers from interactions with other perspectives but in the magazines that I reviewed, translations of mainstream or opposing discourse was particularly important because it seemed to help get around the problem of an otherwise lower ability to formally
isolate or control interaction with other perspectives. Unlike an organization with a physical setting that can control what someone reads or does not, magazines – and today the internet – provide a relatively weak mechanism by which to shield people from opposing perspectives. However, through repeated translation of the proper interpretation of opposing talking points, radicals could prime readers to reject arguments from people trying to challenge their thinking or persuade them. By defining all gun regulation as an attempt at confiscation, or phrases like “common sense” as a personal insult to all gun owners, it helped to insulate people from genuine exchange or interaction. As time progressed, Guns & Ammo even dedicated entire articles on how to talk to gun control advocates, not to persuade them or reach consensus, but to avoid their “traps” and humiliate them. Gradually, through these translations, selective media may even become the dominant mode of consumption for the reader, convincing them to abandon or discount other sources as less authoritative, further insulating readers from other perspectives. Rather than needing to translate, they can simply urge readers to boycott mainstream sources, or pressure those sources to drop stories and print retractions. Through modified interaction of readers in alternative media, the discourses in them can begin to spread and gain a foothold in more mainstream periodicals and media, either due to some overlapping membership, and/or from persistent pressure coming from the readers of these sources. This seems to be exactly what happened in the case of Field & Stream. Editors went from initially condemning the false information and needling by unnamed and smaller right-wing publications to literally hiring one of their editors – EB Mann – who began writing a regular anti-gun control column urging single-issue activism.
Implications for NRA Scholarship

This project helps to unify and clarify some of the present gaps and disagreements within the NRA literature. First, while most agree that identity politics have played a central role in the NRA’s development and power, most of have treated this process as a fairly linear one and the NRA leadership as a mostly unitary actor. For example, Melzer’s (2009) contention that NRA leaders have used frontier masculinity to advance a radical agenda is mostly correct. It simply leaves out or ignores – sensibly given the scope of the research and greater focus on the 1990’s and 2000’s – that other NRA members and leaders had initially sought to use that same identity to align conservation and pro-gun interests in order to avoid rather than embrace contentious politics. When circumstances changed and conservation and gun regulations began to generate cross-cutting ties, it took important discursive work and competition to re-align masculinity with other forces of what would eventually become the far-right culture wars. That discursive work not only required specific attention to core elements of identity in discourse such as masculinity and American heritage, but revolved at least as critically – if not more critically – on efforts to break or prevent the formation of discursive connections as it did on building new ones in order to pacify dissent and enable the embrace more focused and unyielding strategic actions. That project was neither a forgone conclusion nor an entirely linear process, as real differences remained about whether or how much to pivot. My account indicates that this was not a simple division of leaders versus members, or even one group of leaders/members versus another set. Radical triumph ultimately involved both temporary alliance with more traditional materially interested parties, partial alliances or realignment of conservation conservatives to the radical coalition, and the eventual turn against the more resourced power elites. Such observations reinforce my earlier points about the importance of challenging some of our assumptions about
advocacy groups as unitary or stable entities, as well as the usefulness of combining discourse and identity driven theories for understanding these dynamics.

This leads me to a second general contribution. Even for scholars who have emphasized the transformation of the NRA, most have focused on the winners of the NRA’s internal struggle for power in the 1960s and 70s and ignored the forces they presumably defeated. Placing greater focus on the forces who ultimately lost power and influence emphasizes the relational nature of radical discursive power, not just for mobilizing those forces but in demobilizing, aligning, etc. competing groups. Without greater focus on the “losers”, we fail to adequately consider the possibility of alternatives which these groups may have taken to more successfully avoid a takeover but ultimately failed to do.

Finally, my account of the NRA challenges the contemporary timeline and interpretation of the NRA’s transformation at the 1977 convention. While contemporary narratives have described this as a dramatic recommitment to gun rights and a move away from defense of conservation, the historical record suggests the power and influence of the NRA’s conservation leaders all but ended after 1974, following years of targeted pressure from both industry-aligned board members and hardline radicals. By 1975, any interest in conservation had been almost entirely coopted and served as a green screen for revenue generation, with the proposed Raton Center even including possible plans for gas leasing on the property. Ultimately, the takeover of the NRA by hardline radicals in 1977 was made possible with the help of pragmatists who had a hand in helping radicals dismantle the support for conservation. When pragmatists moved to coopt the cause of conservation to sure up their budget and general support, radicals used the same anti-conservation rhetoric to seize control.
Implications for Practice

With all this in mind, what are the implications for practice? What lessons might these stories provide for activists hoping to stave off radical sub-group domination? While there is no surefire way to prevent the emergence of these dynamics in organizations, there are certain steps that may help prevent sub-group dominance or reduce their most negative impacts when such factions emerge. However, some likely introduce tradeoffs which are not easily discounted.

Moderates at various junctures recognized divisions and cross-cutting ties and pressures. Yet they seemed either unwilling or unable to confront those pressures, consistently tolerating and even accommodating radical identity discourse. While they sought to draw more inclusive boundaries to maintain their hunting, conservation, and recreational priorities, they failed to do so in ways that reduced cross-cutting ties and pressures that would have made their group similarly cohesive, or effectively challenged radical dominance. As the political landscape became more polarized, the old guard conservationists struggled to adapt their discourse in ways that re-imagined their relationship to hardliners or conservationists, which further alienated them from both.

The issue of exclusion criteria is a complicated and contextually variable question, but early interactions and attempts to compromise may serve as important signals about how and when a faction is growing problematic. Reports are unlikely to be as dramatic or obvious as terror groups like the Minutemen urging infiltration. However, when a faction of members or leaders are demanding the group take actions or policies that seem at odds with the general membership, leaders should take greater efforts to get input from the total membership, or at the very least, consider if appeasing those groups is worth potentially altering or imperiling the groups’ identity. Early in the NRA’s history when hardliners demanded action on nuclear non-
proliferation treaties, leaders might have considered maintaining a stronger face against militant pressure or even taken that as a moment to re-evaluate the organizations’ identity and goals.

This of course assumes that an organization’s leadership cares about operating a fair and democratic system, which unfortunately, is not always a strong assumption. The NRA’s leadership from the beginning was very elite and very corporate, which was also reflected in its organizational structure. It gradually became an organization that’s power was driven more by its membership than its resource advantages, but elites tolerated radicals in part because it was profitable, and because they assumed they could mollify and control them, also a weak assumption.

This dissertation thus may be at least in part, a cautionary tale for other elite groups who have similarly sought to capitalize on radical group mobilization to support their narrower material motives. While radical groups provide a ready-made engine for driving division and defeating consensus, once those discourses have the signal boosted, it can be difficult to rein those forces in as discourses mutate and radical coalitions gain adherents and power. The radical turn of the NRA in many ways mirrors the recent developments of the GOP, with leaders like Mitch McConnel who worked to empower radical groups now facing the fallout of Qanon, January 6th, and conspiratorial elements growing increasingly dominant in the party. Much like the NRA leadership that was ousted, the GOP has similarly grown so reliant on radical discourse and militant identity politics among pockets of their base that they seem to lack the discursive material to effectively challenge it, even as it begins to disrupt their own interests and agenda.

Even if a group begins with a more democratic and egalitarian structure though, the durability of that structure still requires maintenance through deliberation. Effective and unified action is not only more difficult with a more democratic structure, but is arguably even more
reliant on the construction of a broad and cohesive group identity. A democratic structure almost inevitably introduces the emergence of radical sub-group challenges. Again, there is no surefire solution or perfect discourses, even in any given context, to prevent sub-group domination. But the NRA’s development suggests some general lessons worth considering for any group hoping to avoid the development of sub-group dominance.

First, while the leadership and decision-making structures of an organization may vary, context matters. Even a strong and seemingly unpolarized group identity can become vulnerable, and continuous interaction and discursive work is required internally and externally to respond to external developments as they emerge, stay informed about membership concerns, and adapt storylines as necessary in the context of the times. Radical discourse may have remained committed to the themes of conserving some mythologized and unchanged Hobbsian war of all against all, but they still adapted to the pressures and developments of the times and made a clear decision about what causes they wanted to align themselves with. Their conservationist counterparts clung to a centrist position that became less and less viable in the increasingly polarized context of the times. Roosevelt, who remained an icon for conservationists may well still be for some modern hunters, arguably already foreshadowed the doomed prospects for a politics unaligned with either major party, failing in his Bull Moose campaign and getting shot in the process.

Second, sub-groups seem to grow dominant when cross-cutting ties are not properly identified or managed by others in a coalition. When radical sub-groups articulate a clear connection between their group’s core identity and a new political identity or set of strategies, they will succeed if others remain fragmented, unaligned and unsorted. If left unchecked this contingent will continue to gain power. It is not enough to criticize or condemn them, and only
strong counter-mobilization will suffice. Strong counter-mobilization will not materialize without efforts to articulate an alternative connection between core identity and opposing politics/strategies. No set of rationalizing or functionalist arguments about the expected utility of certain methods or stances will prevent further radical development either, and may even legitimize the underlying identity-driven interests already fueling radical mobilization. This is not to say that others in advocacy organizations cannot ultimately rally around and embrace a more depoliticized identity or a position of greater neutrality, but it is critical that at a minimum, the identity is demarcated in strong contrast to the radical contingent. A group must call into question the deeper moral and ideational foundations of a radical groups’ identity and position itself in a way that makes clear that this particular group either no longer belongs or never did. Radicals cannot be adequately opposed so long as their position is not only tolerated, but accepted as part of “us”. On a related note, this requires the acknowledgement of the limits of discursive persuasion, particularly with respect to radicals. Once a radical contingent develops, it may be extremely difficult to deradicalizing them, particularly when norms of interaction and key elements of organizational identity empower them. As much as possible, the norms of democratic freedom and interaction might meaningfully be insulated from radical influence and development by building in stronger norms of deliberation and perhaps more importantly, stronger punishments for operating outside those norms within organizations.

While much more systematic and empirical comparisons beyond the scope of this project are required to reach more definitive conclusions about radical sub-groups more generally, the NRA case still provides some avenues for further consideration. Radicals in this case seemed to be less democratic, driven by principles and preferred outcomes that were strong enough to support strategies of force, whereby the ends justified the means. Rather than being bounded by
norms of process or deliberation, radicals were increasingly willing to do whatever it took to win. With that said, such an approach was not a guaranteed path to victory. They thrived in and contributed to a more polarized and fragmented environment. However, they initially struggled to gain traction in political environment that was less polarized or fragmented. Radicals were motivated and cohesive, but still too narrow in their principles and goals to overcome wider bipartisan consensus. They only began to thrive when consensus waned and the discourse became fragmented and unstructured. This allowed them to take advantage of their greater mobilizing potential and cohesion, and pacify dissent. They did this through intimidation, but also by sowing divisions externally. If radicals tend to succeed by driving wedges and increasing polarization, then keeping them in check may mean finding ways to combat their most divisive strategies by not only looking for opportunities for strengthening certain ties but doing so in ways that are more thoughtful and sensitive to the most relevant elements of shared identity.

The general discomfort with and even rejection of identity politics pronounced from all ends of the ideological spectrum is understandable, but the centrality of this force in politics is not something we get rid of. We cannot hope that “the facts” will overcome the power of political identities. But the NRA and similar examples of sub-group dominance also demonstrate that alignments are not as stable as we might think they are. Skilled actors can resort and realign coalitions in ways that support rather than undermine democratic preferences. But if more egalitarian forces are to overcome radical challenges, they must put more effort into that game. Far-right activists were somehow able to inject vaccine skepticism pioneered by far-left figures like Jill Stein into their movement and purge neoliberal Nixon Republicans like Ben Stein from their ranks. But once upon a time, advocates also stitched together abolition and preservation of the Union.
CHAPTER 8: APPENDIX

Figure 8.1: Time Line of Key Events

- 1937 - Passage of Pittman-Robertson Act
- 1943 - JFK assassination kicks off new wave of public discourse on federal gun regulation (External)
- 1961 - Formation of the National Sports Shooting Foundation to Promote Hunting, Combat, Local & State Legislation (Internal)
- 1966 - Passage of gun regulations in Philadelphia and New Jersey
- 1968 - Passage of GCA, First Federal Gun Legislation since 1934
- 1972 - Establishment of the Alcohol, Tabacco, and Firearms Division (ATF)
- 1973 - Energy Crisis & Recession increases Development Pressure, Slows Conservation Momentum (External)
- 1975 - Foundation of NRA Institute for Legislative Action (Internal)
- 1976 - NRA Weekend Massacre (Internal)
- 1977 - NRA Radical Hardliners Takeover NRA Leadership at Cincinnati Convention (Internal)
Table 8.1: Dynamic Discourse Coalitions Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundary work</th>
<th>(x) Bridging</th>
<th>(y) Demarcating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within a discourse</strong></td>
<td><strong>Discourse coalition confirmation.</strong> Perpetuation and reinvention of the</td>
<td><strong>Discourse coalition disintegration.</strong> Storyline within the coalition is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>coalition</em></td>
<td>storyline of a discourse coalition through shared identity and/or common</td>
<td>contested through demarcated identity, challenge congruity of groups/goals with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>enemy framing. A discourse coalition successfully reconciles internal</td>
<td>maintaining core identity. The discourse coalition fragments due to its failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conflict of values/goals within its existing storyline.</td>
<td>to reconcile congruity of goals and identifications or address challenges to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>its storyline from a new understanding of the issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between discourse</strong></td>
<td><strong>Discourse coalition integration.</strong> Connecting two storylines and</td>
<td><strong>Discourse coalition polarization.</strong> Competing storylines are reconfirmed with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>coalitions</em></td>
<td>introducing new interpretations with the help of (new) framing of (new)</td>
<td>competing and polarized identifications; the policy controversy remains stuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>affinity of goals and values, and/or against common enemies, helps a new</td>
<td>in oppositions and decision-making is stalled. The common but ill structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discourse coalition form across previously distinct coalitions. The common</td>
<td>meaning of an issue remains contested; differences across discourse coalitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but ill structured meaning of an issue across discourse coalitions shifts.</td>
<td>become more visible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Metze & Dodge (2016).
CHAPTER 9: WORKS CITED


Coates, Peter. (1991). The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy: Technology, Conservation, and the Frontier. Lehigh University Press, Bethlehem. https://books.google.com/books?id=ZRw36ZBX8s8C&pg=PA388&lpg=PA388&dq=trans-alaska+pipeline+frank+c+daniel&source=bl&ots=fwAyRSeJtm&sig=AcfU3U3d rNtNigVAVW0GHs6SMBkqv_xTNvQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjs65aQx9Hy AhVgGFkFHT1gC1wO6AF6BAgNEAM#v=onepage&q=trans-alaska%20pipeline%20frank%20c%20daniel&f=false


https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/81282/1/Shale_gas_policy_in_the_United_Kingdom_-_Cotton_Rattle_Van_Alstine-libre%20


https://www.google.com/books/edition/Under_Fire/X1LEQd2r1sYC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=under+fire:+The+NRA+and+the+battle+for+gun+control&printsec=frontcover


https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1982/01/22/frank-c-daniel-jr/87c0bc40-d15e-4350-8f5e-f887870f41c7/


Kaplan, Jonas T., Sarah I. Gimbel, and Sam Harris. (2016). “Neural correlates of maintaining one’s political beliefs in the face of counterevidence.” Scientific Reports 6(39589). https://doi.org/10.1038/srep39589


Mansbridge, Jane. (1986). Why We Lost the ERA. University of Chicago Press.


Smyth, Frank. (2020). The NRA: The Unauthorized History. Flatiron Books, New York. https://books.google.com/books?id=-6elDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT64&lpg=PT64&dq=Editor+George+Martin+the+american+rifleman&source=bl&ots=6DwNoU4xLP&sig=ACfU3U0ncOtcX3b7OF3eSiOcstUNfFKpw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjN68vBosryAhXudd8KHF1cDwIQ6AF6BAgZEAM#v=onepage&q=Editor%20George%20Martin%20the%20american%20rifleman&f=false


http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,874297-1,00.html


http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/F%20Disk/FBI/FBI%20to%201967/Item%2037.pdf


https://books.google.com/books?id=Lus1AAAAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA197&lpg=RA1-PA197&dq=Frank+C.+Daniel+NRA+conservation+director&source=bl&ots=ivzVUwG2zN&sig=ACfU3U1_kOErwXFFRCSRxFIpivwX1hMWbZaA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi70fPW7MfyAhWSiOAKHaDQAHMQ6AF6BAgMEAM#v=onepage&q=Frank%20C.%20Daniel%20NRA%20conservation%20director&f=false

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Trans_Alaska_Pipeline/tGdJAQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0


