

America's Rifle: Neither Unusual Nor Unusually Dangerous

by [Dennis P. Chapman](#) (July 2022)



Madonna with Machine Gun, Kārlis Padegs, 1932

Few things in the United States today are as polarizing as “America’s Rifle,”[\[1\]](#) the ubiquitous semi-automatic AR-15. Gun control advocates hold contradictory views about the AR-15, at once deriding it as a useless instrument of no practical value while simultaneously loathing it as a weapon of unprecedented destructive power on par with Thor’s hammer of the [Marvel Comics universe](#)[\[2\]](#) or Empress Jadis’ “Deplorable Word” in the *Magician’s Nephew*.

Gun control advocates have spread a lot of disinformation about the AR-15’s capabilities, describing it as inaccurate and hard to control.[\[3\]](#) The truth is just the opposite. An AR-15 chambered in the standard calibers of [.223 Remington](#) or 5.56mm produces no felt recoil and almost no tendency for the muzzle to rise. As such, it is uniquely suited for teaching novices how to shoot (as I know from experience). It is accurate and its light weight and ability to accept an adjustable stock lends it to use by people of smaller stature.[\[4\]](#)

Another misconception is that people own AR-15s but don’t actually use them, as claimed by California Senator Diane Feinstein in 2018. Contradicting a comment by then-Judge Brett Kavanaugh, she sniffed that “use is an activity—it is not storage or possession, it’s use. So what you said is these weapons are commonly used. They’re not.”[\[5\]](#) Had the Senator visited my local range about 12 miles from the Capitol building she would have known better, as nearly every rifle fired there on any given day is an AR-15. The AR-15 is used

in nearly every legitimate shooting application. Former *Wired* editor Jon Stokes wrote in the left-leaning *Vox* that “I’ve owned an AR-15 for four years, and I use it for varmint control on my 17-acre Texas estate.”[\[6\]](#) He further explained that

“[a]nyone who tells you that the AR-15 is bad for hunting and home defense has absolutely no idea what they’re talking about because by definition an AR is a gun that can be exquisitely adapted for those niches and many others ... The AR-15’s incredible flexibility, accuracy, and ease-of-use combine with its status as the most thoroughly tested and debugged firearm in military history to make it massively popular with shooters of all stripes, from hunters to home defense buyers to competitors to police.”
[\[7\]](#)

As Stokes observes, the AR-15 is commonly used to hunt many types of game. Six years ago Will Drabold of *Time* profiled several hunters who use AR rifles to hunt feral goats, wild boar, jackrabbits, elk, coyotes, and deer.[\[8\]](#) Hunting such a wide variety of game with the AR-15 is possible because it can be configured to fire many different calibers. Other accounts of AR-15 hunts including hunts for antelope, mule deer, bobcat, wild boar, prairie dogs, whitetail deer, squirrel and groundhogs can be found at the website ar15hunter.com. An acquaintance of mine has used AR-style rifles to hunt deer and wild boar with his children. For those who may be wondering, according to Terminal Research Ballistics the AK-47 Kalashnikov “is [also] often used as a basic hunting tool, employed throughout the vast expanses of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia.”[\[9\]](#)

The AR-15 is also the most popular platform for some types of competition shooting, including 3-Gun, Multigun and Pistol Caliber Carbine competitions, and it is especially popular in NRA and Civilian Marksmanship Program service rifle and high power rifle competitions. Per Serena Juchnowski of *Shooting*

Sports USA, while older rifles like the bolt action 1903 Springfield and the semiauto M1 Garand can be used, most competitors “use the AR-platform, as it is more accurate and has less recoil. This has made it easier and more enjoyable for many people to shoot high power—specifically women. It has also made the sport more inclusive, as anyone who can safely use the rifle can learn to shoot high power.”[\[10\]](#)

California U.S. District Court Judge Roger Benitez recently captured the AR-15’s unique place in American culture, writing that “[l]ike the Swiss Army Knife, the popular AR-15 rifle is a perfect combination of home defense weapon and homeland defense equipment. Good for both home and battle, the AR-15 is the kind of versatile gun that lies at the intersection of the kinds of firearms protected under *District of Columbia v. Heller* ... and ... *United States v Miller*” (referring to two important U.S. Supreme Court Second Amendment cases).[\[11\]](#)

Judge Benitez correctly perceived that the AR-15 is an extremely well-designed general purpose rifle readily adaptable to virtually any legitimate shooting application. It might seem an easy leap to conclude that a rifle so useful in such a wide range of applications must also be especially good for killing lots of people compared to other guns. But as intuitive as it may seem, this is wrong. Legitimate shooting applications require skill and patience. The excellent performance characteristics of the AR-15 enhance the capabilities of a skilled shooter in these pursuits. By contrast, violent crime requires no such skill. As Evan Marshall and Edwin Sanow note in their definitive study on handgun lethality, people are much easier to kill than animals.[\[12\]](#) When using a firearm against an unarmed person or group, *any* reasonably modern firearm is sufficient to quickly kill and maim many people; in this scenario, the superior capabilities of the AR-15 are simply surplus to requirements.



Acquaintances of the author with game killed using AR rifles.

Gun control advocates are at pains to lump the semiautomatic AR-15 in with its selective fire cousin, the M16 (a selective fire weapon can operate either as a semiautomatic or as a machinegun at the user's discretion), the implication being that if a weapon is useful on the battlefield, it must be especially dangerous in the hands of a criminal. Perhaps paradoxically, this is not the case. To see why, it is necessary to understand how infantry combat differs from violent crime.

While superficially similar insofar as they both involve the use of physical force, violent crime—including mass shooting—operates under a fundamentally different assumption than infantry combat. Comparing the two is akin to equating a dog and a wolf. Infantry combat is the ultimate shooting application. In an infantry battle, a military commander must assume that the opposing force will be able to offer meaningful resistance, and therefore must marshal as much combat power as possible to defeat him. In this a hyper-competitive environment, every marginal advantage could make the difference between victory and defeat, and the quality of the individual rifleman's weapon matters a lot. Violent crime, by contrast, is the opposite of competitive. It is a predatory activity in which a criminal seeks out helpless victims who he

assumes will *not* have the capacity to meaningfully resist. This is why most mass shootings occur in gun free zones. As firearms expert Masaad Ayoob has observed, “[a] bandit who fears you is unlikely to force you into a situation where you will attempt to harm him. Unless he is suicidal, a criminal who believes he stands a reasonable chance of being killed or injured will give up the attempt.”[\[13\]](#) Even a “suicidal” predator such as a mass shooter will usually avoid places with armed security and seek out easy targets. The Pulse Nightclub shooter, for example, reconnoitered the club and confirmed the absence of security before launching his attack[\[14\]](#) (for reasons unknown, the off duty police officer contracted to provide security had “abandoned his post,” according to one Florida court).[\[15\]](#)

Avoiding targets likely to resist effectively in favor of more vulnerable ones puts the criminal at a huge advantage. According to self-defense expert Craig Douglas, a criminal attacker enjoys two profound advantages over his victim: “Unequal initiative” –the advantage of surprise–and “unproportional armament.”[\[16\]](#) A predator’s superior physical strength alone may constitute such armament, but “[m]ore often than not,” he will deploy a weapon “to enforce compliance.”[\[17\]](#) Given an unarmed victim, a criminal introducing a firearm into an attack–nearly any firearm–creates an almost insuperable disparity of power in the attacker’s favor so large that it simply swamps secondary factors such as the relative quality of his gun compared to others he might have chosen. Using a superior firearm like an AR-15 in a criminal attack is like using a [Ford GT](#) for your daily commute. It gets you where you want to go, but a [Chevy Malibu](#) would do just as well (the reverse does not follow, however. As I have [discussed elsewhere](#), a citizen faced with a criminal attack can benefit very much from a high quality firearm equipped with a high capacity magazine).

Someone bent on a killing spree certainly does not need an

AR-15 to carry out his evil intention. As Francisco Alvarado reported in *Vice News* six years ago,

“A list of mass shootings between April 1999 and January 2013 prepared for lawmakers in Connecticut showed that rifles were used in ten incidents and shotguns in ten others, while handguns were used in 42. Glock brand pistols turned up in nine of those cases. Another compendium of mass shootings since 2009 by the New York Times showed that handguns were used in thirteen incidents, compared to five in which a rifle was the primary weapon. Glocks were recovered from six of the perpetrators.” [\[18\]](#)

Examples of mass shootings not involving AR-15 or similar rifles include the April 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, where the attacker used two pistols, a 9mm Glock 19 and a .22 caliber Walther P22;[\[19\]](#) and the 2013 Washington Navy Yard shooting, where Aaron Alexis killed 12 people with a 12-gauge Remington 870 pump action shotgun.[\[20\]](#) The mass shooting phenomenon long predates the AR-15. An early example is the 1889 Jim Jumper Massacre in which Jumper killed eight people with a lever action Winchester rifle in half an hour, including at least one person who tried to disarm him.[\[21\]](#) And while firearms certainly facilitate the process, a gun is not strictly necessary to carry off a mass murder, as Andrew Kehoe did with explosives in 1927, killing 43 and wounding 58 at the Bath Consolidated School in Bath, Michigan.[\[22\]](#) In another case, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel used a commercial truck to kill 86 people and injure 458 others in Nice, France in 2016.[\[23\]](#)

An important aspect of the debate over the AR-15 is controversy over the 20 and 30 round detachable magazines that the rifle is designed to use. Gun control proponents argue that a magazine containing so many rounds facilitates mass shootings by allowing the attacker to fire more rounds before reloading. Once again, this argument seems to make intuitive sense, but in a 2016 study, Florida State University

criminologist Gary Kleck showed it to be unfounded. Kleck demonstrated that the average time between shots by a mass shooter is typically much longer than the seconds it takes to change magazines—a time so short that it deprives the victims of any meaningful opportunity to escape or counterattack during a magazine change, [\[24\]](#) as former Boone County, Indiana Sheriff Ken Campbell ably demonstrated in [2013](#). [\[25\]](#) Practical experience bears them out. The Remington 870 shotgun used by the Navy Yard shooter was equipped with a 6 round fixed magazine, meaning that he had to have reloaded at least once during his attack, accomplished by individually inserting each round into the magazine via a loading gate forward of the trigger. Canadian spree killer Gabriel Wortman killed 22 people over a span of 13 hours in 2020—obviously magazine capacity was not a factor in that attack (tragically, negligence and ineptitude by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police helped Wortman elude capture for so long, as Canadian journalist [Paul Palango](#) has established). [\[26\]](#)

Given that the AR-15 and firearms like it are not more dangerous in criminal scenarios than other guns, why are so many people so convinced that they are? One reason is surely habit, as firearms expert Melvin Johnson explained in 1944. While “there are no preconceived notions of how [new types of vehicles and weapons] should look ... in the field of small arms the ancient forms still cling stubbornly.” [\[27\]](#) By way of example he cites pistol shooting. Johnson wrote before the two-handed grip became standard in handgun shooting; in his day, marksmen held the pistol in one hand, extended straight out (a pose that looks slightly ridiculous today) even though a two-handed grip is superior. As Johnson explained, the pistol

“was at one time a basic weapon of the cavalry, together with the sword, or saber. Horseman, needing one hand for the reins, fired the pistol using one hand only. The functional approach, not the procedure nor the form, dictated the one hand pistol

technique. But as time went on, the true reason for one hand pistol shooting was forgotten. Even today we still look askance at the pistol shooter who uses two hands. Sissy stuff.”[\[28\]](#)

By a similar process, some people are unshakably convinced that a civilian rifle should look like the traditional wooden stocked hunting rifle that their father used, and they simply cannot accept the AR-15, with its aggressive look so close to that of its military cousin, as a legitimate tool in private hands. Unfortunately, though, most of the animosity to the AR-15 has been carefully cultivated by a misinformation pervasive campaign, sometimes consisting of honest error but often carried out more cynically. A prime example of this is the work of the Violence Policy Center, which in 1988 set the pattern for gun control advocacy going forward. In its publication *Assault Weapons and Accessories in America*, the group wrote that the AR-15’s “menacing looks, coupled with the public’s confusion over fully automatic machineguns versus semiautomatic assault weapons—anything that looks like a machinegun is assumed to be a machinegun—can only increase the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons.”[\[29\]](#)

Thus early on gun control advocates tipped their hand about their desire to exploit public confusion about the AR-15 by equating it in the public discourse with the Army’s M-16 rifle, a tactic that has also been used in other contexts, such as the [Nuclear Fear campaign](#) where environmental activists sought to thwart the construction of nuclear power plants by equating them with atomic bombs.[\[30\]](#)

But this leads naturally to a basic question: Is the AR-15 a “weapon of war” as so often claimed by the likes of Barack Obama? No. Most small arms technology is dual use, developed by civilian designers for civilian applications before later being adopted for military service. The most striking example is the rifled barrel. Rifling technology was mastered at least

as early as 1520, [31] and patented as early as 1635. [32] Yet the rifle would not come into general (as opposed to occasional) use by military forces until after the 1854 Crimean War. [33] Before that it was used mostly by hunters. Semiautomatic technology follows a similar pattern. A semiautomatic pistol was patented in the United States as early as 1863, [34] and Colt introduced a .38 caliber semiautomatic pistol designed by John Browning in 1900 – the first in the US market [35] – long before the United States Army adopted the Model 1911 semiautomatic pistol. Likewise, Winchester introduced its first semiautomatic rifle for commercial sale in the United States in 1903, [36] decades before the U.S. Army adopted the semiautomatic M1 Garand in 1936. [37]

Even the AR-15 itself owes its existence to civilian innovation. Although designed by Eugene Stoner with military contracts in mind, its real progenitor was Richard Boutelle, president of Fairchild Engine and Aircraft Corporation. Boutelle, an “avid hunter and gun aficionado,” [38] formed the ArmaLite division of Fairchild with the goal of adapting lightweight materials used in aircraft – the aluminum, fiberglass and polymers that became hallmarks of the AR-15 – for use in high end commercial sporting rifles. ArmaLite only diverted its effort to military contracts after the success of its AR-5 survival rifle made for the U.S. Air Force. [39] The materials used in its construction weren’t the only civilian contribution to the AR-15. Perhaps the rifle’s greatest innovation was its ammunition, the .223 Remington and 5.56mm NATO rounds. These are intermediate cartridges, larger than the typical 9mm Parabellum pistol round, but smaller than the .30 caliber rifle cartridge adopted by the U.S. Army in 1906. [40] But even this was based on a civilian antecedent—the .222 Remington, developed by Mike Walker as a varmint cartridge.

There is only one uniquely military small arms technology of

any importance—the machinegun. The purpose of automatic fire is, to adapt the words of J.F.C. Fuller, to reduce the enemy’s “resisting power ... through ... preponderating fire,”[\[41\]](#) what we now call “fire superiority.”[\[42\]](#) Fire superiority enables an attacking force to suppress the defenders, degrading their ability to thwart the attacker’s maneuver.[\[43\]](#) In the defense, achieving fire superiority enables the defender to break the attacker’s momentum and prevent them from breaching the defense. On the unit level this is accomplished with crew-served machineguns like the [M60](#) or [M240B](#).[\[44\]](#) Although the individual rifleman usually operates his weapon in semiautomatic mode, the addition of an automatic or burst mode to modern infantry rifles gives a soldier the ability to achieve fire superiority in his immediate vicinity in an emergency. The absence of a full-auto capability was one of the complaints about the M1 Garand that led to its replacement by the M14.[\[45\]](#)

But even if the semiautomatic AR-15 really was used by the military, this wouldn’t change things. Americans have always possessed military weapons, as a brief perusal of one of Francis Bannerman’s [catalogues](#) will show.[\[46\]](#) This tradition extends to semiautomatic firearms (but not machineguns, as noted below). Nothing typifies this better than the story of the M1 Garand. Described by General George Patton as “the greatest battle implement ever devised,”[\[47\]](#) the U.S. Army adopted the semiautomatic Garand as its standard infantry rifle in 1936.[\[48\]](#) It was replaced in that role by the M14 in 1957,[\[49\]](#) which was itself replaced a few years later by the M16. M1 Garands became available for civilian purchase through the Civilian Marksmanship Program in National Match configuration at least two years earlier in 1955; by 1960 civilians could buy them in service configuration.[\[50\]](#)

The Garand became a staple of American gun culture while still in active service with the U.S. Army. Although formally replaced in 1957, it took years more before all the M1s in

service were replaced. Major combat units of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve did not receive their full allotment of M16s and M14s until at 1971,[\[51\]](#) meaning that many Army units were using the M1 Garand at least that long, contemporaneously with the civilian shooters who were also using it. It was the Ohio Army National Guard—not any of those civilian shooters—that used M1 Garands to kill four students and wound 9 at Kent State University in 1970,[\[52\]](#) and it was [Captain Quint's M1 Garand](#) that Chief Brody used to kill the shark at the climax of the 1975 thriller *Jaws*. [\[53\]](#) The tradition of Americans owning military-style weapons continued with the AR-15: Colt began marketing it as the AR-15 Sporter to civilian shooters in 1964, describing it as a “superb hunting partner.”[\[54\]](#) The Department of Defense received the first examples of its full-auto cousin, the M16, the same year.[\[55\]](#)

I suspect that one factor driving some peoples' antipathy for the AR-15 is fear of a slippery slope—if private citizens can own this, what is stopping them from owning more extreme weapons like bombs and machineguns? This fear is unfounded. American gun rights are constrained by two significant limits. One is the text of the Second Amendment itself, which protects the right to keep and bear arms. As the Supreme Court has made clear, bearable arms are those that can be carried about the person – major weapon systems like tanks, artillery, fighter jets and battleships are not protected. The other limit is history. As the Supreme Court explained in its 1876 decision *United States v. Cruikshank*, the Second Amendment did not create the right keep and bear arms, but merely codified a preexisting right defined at common law.[\[56\]](#) Under the common law, dangerous and unusual weapons could be banned. Because of this, as Justice Alito explained in his 2015 concurrence to *Caetano v. Massachusetts*, the Second Amendment extends to commonly owned weapons.[\[57\]](#) Semiautomatic rifles, including the AR-15, are commonly owned, but as I show [here](#), machineguns have never been viewed the same way in the United States and are likely not within the scope of the Second Amendment's

protection. Neither are hand grenades, flamethrowers, nuclear weapons, or the many other engines of destruction which equip our armies and navies today.

The AR-15 is the best conceived and executed general purpose rifle ever made—an all-American design readily adaptable to any legitimate shooting application. For all that, it is a far cry from the selective fire battle rifles that equip our Armed Forces, and it no more lends itself to the causing of harm through accident or malfeasance than does any other modern firearm. Those interested in learning more can consult my other writings on the topic [here](#) and [here](#).

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