

Book Review: Joshua Horwitz and Casey Anderson, *Guns, Democracy and the Insurrectionist Idea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 274 pages.

Whither the American State?

A Statist Review on *Guns, Democracy and the Insurrectionist Idea*,

by Joshua Horwitz and Casey Anderson

Jimmy Teng

The insurrectionist idea argues that the American Constitution, specifically the Second Amendment, guarantees the individual's right to bear arms to prevent political oppression by the government. Such arms could even include "grenades and bazookas" (p. 106). The book by Horwitz and Anderson argues that the insurrectionist idea poses a serious threat to democratic values and institutions, besides public safety. This book is a very valuable addition to the increasingly salient debate on how to balance national security concerns and democratic processes. This review presents the statist viewpoint and argues that the authors have conceded too much to the insurrectionists' distrust of the state and central government and, consequently, that they underestimate the full economic costs of the insurrectionist idea to America. Furthermore, if one were to put the insurrectionist idea in the context of the contemporary global trend of increasing state failures and rising nongovernmental force-wielding organizations of which the insurrectionist movement of the United States is a part, the danger of the insurrectionist idea would be even more evident. Finally, by focusing on refuting the historical and legal arguments of the insurrectionist idea, the authors may have missed the more important issue of identifying the social cleavages that drive the insurrectionist movement, and thereby may have produced the wrong diagnosis and prescriptions.

Like most Americans, the authors probably share with the insurrectionists some level of mistrust of the state and central government. Consequently, the unique American distrust of the state and central government is an issue that the authors avoided to touch upon seriously. The American distrust of the state and its role in the economy is, however, directly related to the costs of the insurrectionist idea and should be addressed together with it. Independent of the insurrectionist idea, the American distrust of the state and central

Jimmy Teng is an Assistant Research Fellow in the Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. <jteng@gate.sinica.edu.tw>

government has huge negative economic consequences. On a whole, American economic competitiveness has lagged behind that of countries where the state takes a more active role in the economy and promotes key industrial sectors. America retains her competitiveness and performs relatively well in sectors where the federal government undertakes a more active role due to national security considerations.¹ Therefore, the insurrectionist movement undermines the American economy by creating greater general public distrust of the federal government and its economic role. Fully understanding the economic costs of the insurrectionist idea might make less extremist elements and allies ponder whether their support for the insurrectionist idea is worthwhile.

The insurrectionist movement negatively affects the economic health of America not just by increasing public distrust of the state and its role in the economy. The movement also hurts the economic health of America by undermining the state's monopoly of force. State monopoly of force is critical for good economic performance. The suppression of private violence and provision of justice, as well as the taxation of the economy for financing public goods (both for consumption and boosting productivity), cannot be carried out effectively without state monopoly of force. History has testified to the importance of state monopoly of force in facilitating economic development. The use of gunpowder weaponry beginning in the fifteenth century in Europe increased the economies of scale in warfare. It became easier for the centralized national state to suppress regional feudal resistance and to monopolize the means of coercion within the boundary of the state. Consequently, private warfare largely became a thing of the past in Western Europe, where national states managed to consolidate their rule. One of the consequences of the consolidation of national states in Western Europe was that the national states were better able to provide public goods, including internal peace, maintenance of law and order, and uniformity of policies and administrative practices within their boundaries. Economic performance thereby improved.² This positive relationship between the larger state role in the economy and economic development is a well-known fact in public finance literature.³ So, the insurrectionist idea, by challenging the monopoly of force of the state, poses not just public safety and civic health problems for the United States. It also undermines the very foundation of the United States as a state and its ability to provide critical public goods such as law and order. Consequently, it is very detrimental to American economic health.

¹ Linda Weiss and John M. Hobson, *States and Economic Development: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).

² Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

³ Richard M. Bird, "Wagner's Law of Expanding State Activity," *Public Finance* 26, no. 1 (1971): 1-26.

More important than the issues of public safety, civic health, and economic performance is the impact of the insurrectionist idea on the power and viability of the American state. There is the possibility that the insurrectionist movement or other domestic groups with large arsenals of firearms might in the future be utilized by foreign forces, governmental or nongovernmental, to engage in activities that are detrimental to the security of United States. This possibility should not be dismissed lightly, especially since terrorism is running rampantly in all continents. Hence, the rise of the insurrectionist movement should be viewed within the context of the macro historical global trend of rising nongovernmental force-wielding organizations, including terrorist organizations, and the increasing cases of failed and failing states. An underlying cause of this trend could be the declining economies of scale in military and information technology.⁴ The economies of scale in military technology measure the relative advantages a larger force has over its smaller rival in military conflicts. The economies of scale in information technology measure the relative advantage a larger organization has over smaller organizations in the collection, storage, processing, use, and dissemination of information. Larger economies of scale in military and information technology make monopoly of force and information easier and facilitate the rise of a large political organization. For instance, the use of gunpowder weaponry and the printing press in the early modern era increased the economies of scale in military and information technology and facilitated the rise of national states in Europe and gunpowder empires in other major Eurasian cultures. Smaller economies of scale in military and information technology led to the dissolution of large states and empires. A good example was the rise of heavy cavalry in the medieval era, which led to the collapse of the mighty Roman Empire. An important lesson from history is that when military and information technological changes take place, states that fail to adapt to the new environment are eliminated. For instance, the use of gunpowder weaponry aided the rise of centralized national states in Europe and states that failed to adopt the required institutional structure fell out along the way. A good example was Poland. Poland was once a great Eastern European power but was eliminated in the European great powers game due to her failure to produce a centralized compact state capable of competing with other states. Viewed in this light, the insurrectionist movement is another symptom of the weakness of the American political system: a state that is too weak and besieged by interest-group politics. This weakness might be accentuated due to the contemporary macro technological trend of declining economies of scale in military and information technology.

⁴ As argued by Leonid Dudley, *The Word and the Sword: How Techniques of Information and Violence Have Shaped Our World* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

The authors understand the danger posed by the insurrectionist movement to the viability of the American state. They bring up the well-known argument that a state that has failed to monopolize the means of coercion is no state at all since such a state will also fail to govern and provide justice. This point is especially important given the contemporary change in military and information technology which weakens the state. The declining economies of scale in military technology and information technology might lead to the atomization of the United States.⁵ The ability of the National Rifle Association and other liked-minded groups to propagate their ideas, organize themselves, and ultimately gain mainstream recognition and respect is helped by new information technology such as the Internet and mobile phone. Likewise, these new information technologies have greatly enhanced the organizational capability of nongovernmental organizations, including terrorist groups worldwide. So, the important question to ask is, could conventional wisdom fail to take into account the declining economies of scale in military and information technologies and thereby underestimate the danger of the insurrectionist idea and the widely spread and largely unregulated availability of arms? Justice Scalia, for instance, apparently underestimated or understated the danger of easy accessibility to sophisticated weaponry with great destructive power:

Scalia insisted that the Second Amendment establishes a right to take up arms against government even as he attempted to address the objections of the four dissenting justices by assuring them that individuals will not have access to sophisticated weaponry (p. 172).

This view of Scalia is at odds with many experts in the area.⁶ The availability of portable nuclear weapons, for instance, cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, as the authors have noted several times in the book, even individuals armed with small arms and home-made explosives can cause much damage, as evidenced by the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences.

The contemporary declining economies of scale in military and information technology already have led to important changes in world politics: the dissolution of empires such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the failure of states such as Congo, Somalia, and Sudan, and the rise of nongovernmental organizations, some of which are force-wielding and terrorist in nature. Yet, technological change alone does not produce the above shifts. The empires and states that failed, dissolved, and descended into anarchy

⁵ Ibid., 267-307.

⁶ James Bonomo, Giacomo Bergamo, David R. Frelinger, John Gordon IV, and Brian A. Jackson, *Stealing the Sword: Limiting Terrorist Use of Advanced Conventional Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007).

were also beset by deep social cleavages that their political systems failed to reconcile peacefully. These cleavages could be economic in nature, such as income inequality or regional unbalanced development. They could also be ethnic in nature, relating to the highly emotional issues of race, language, and religion. Is America free from such cleavages that her political system might fail to reconcile peacefully?

The authors point out that the insurrectionist movement is mainly a phenomenon of the rural areas and small towns and is hardly visible to metropolitan dwellers. Could it be that the insurrectionist movement might be due to social cleavages such as a rural-urban divide or regional differences? The book also mentions many times that the insurrectionist groups are against immigration, racial equality, and pluralism. Could it be that ethnic cleavages such as race, language, and religion are driving the insurrectionist movement? The authors have not elaborated on these issues. More than a century ago, economic cleavages between the industrial North and the agricultural South, together with the issue of slavery and racial inequality, led the Southern states to propagate the state's right argument and take up arms to challenge the federal government. Could it be that contemporary social cleavages in America are generating great worry among some segments of the population and leading them to propagate the right to bear arms to confront the government in order to fight for the America that they want? Such cleavages have plunged many states into civil wars or other forms of violence. To ascertain if such cleavages are the real issue, a line of analysis that might be useful is a study of the geography, socioeconomic status, occupations, and ethnic backgrounds of the insurrectionist and private militia groups, especially the key figures. Analysis like this would help to clarify the social underpinnings of the insurrectionist movement and related groups in greater depth. The book, however, focuses on the legal and historical arguments of the insurrectionist movement and has left the underlying social cleavages largely untouched.