Preface

I originally intended *Vote Gun* to be completed in conjunction with my book *Armed in America: A History of Gun Rights from Colonial Militias to Concealed Carry* (2018). *Vote Gun* was to be a macro history on the politicization of gun rights up through the elections in 2016. Yet in conducting my research, I quickly learned that much, if not most, of the story had yet to be told, and a microhistory was warranted. Indeed, several academics and writers have written on the politicization of gun rights in the twentieth century. What virtually all these academics and writers got wrong, however, was the historical timeline of events, particularly the point in time when firearms owners were effectively organized into a political force. The politicization of gun rights did not begin in the late 1960s or early 1970s as these authors contended. Rather, it began five decades earlier, after the passage of the New York Sullivan Act in 1911, which my book *Armed in America* definitively proves. Recently, Matthew Lacombe, in his book *Firepower: How the NRA Turned Gun Owners Into a Political Force*, has shed additional light on this historical fallacy—one that *Vote Gun* seeks to dispel.

As for why *Vote Gun* stops its historical examination at 1980, the reason is twofold. First, the history of gun rights post-1980 is so rich with historical research material that every decade will ultimately require its own volume. Second, and more important from a historiography standpoint, as it
stands today, most post-1980 political collections and congressional papers are either heavily redacted or not yet open to researchers, which makes it extremely difficult for historians and academics to reconstruct any post-1980 political history with sufficient accuracy. The papers of former president Ronald Reagan are a principal case in point. But it is not just Reagan’s papers. The same holds true for the papers of former president George H. W. Bush, to include items going as far back as the 1960s. Then there are the political papers of late Michigan representative John D. Dingell, Jr.—the longest-serving member in congressional history and a principal National Rifle Association (NRA) surrogate going back to the late 1950s. Although Dingell donated his political papers to the University of Michigan in 2015, and university archivists have cataloged said papers since as early as 2018, the Dingell estate has yet to formally approve their release. And when the papers are eventually released for public consumption, given that Dingell’s spouse, Debbie Dingell, is a current member of Congress, researchers will almost assuredly find many items either partially redacted or withheld from public viewing altogether. Fortunately, the delayed release of Dingell’s papers, although disappointing for researchers, including myself, did not negatively affect the historical content and findings in *Vote Gun*. The papers of three other NRA surrogates—Florida representative Robert F. Sikes, Iowa senator Bourke B. Hickenlooper, and Nebraska senator Roman L. Hruska—as well as several letters from Dingell that appeared in other political collections provided more than sufficient material to historically reconstruct the machinations of gun rights advocacy through 1980.

*Vote Gun* would not have been possible but for the help and assistance of many friends and family, colleagues, academics, and institutions. Beginning with the institutions, the staff at several archives and libraries proved invaluable. This includes the staff at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Bob Dole Archives and Special Collections, Arizona State University, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, Minnesota Historical Society, Rauner Special Collections Library, California State Archives, Hagley Archives, Wyoming American Heritage Center, Dirksen Center, Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives, Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, University of Vermont Special Collections, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript
Library, Tulane University Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, University of Virginia Special Collections, Vermont Historical Society, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Idaho Special Collections, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Ohio State University Congressional Papers Archive, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Stony Brook University Special Collections and Archives, University of Maryland Special Collections, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Briscoe Center of American History, Montana Historical Society, Arizona Historical Society, University of Montana Mansfield Library, University of West Florida Special Collections, Nebraska State Historical Society, University of North Carolina Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections, Willamette University Archives and Special Collections, University of Massachusetts Amherst Special Collections, Clemson University Special Collections, University of Connecticut Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Pittsburgh Special Collections, University of Oregon Special Collections, and University of Washington Special Collections. The staff at most of these institutions took on the job of scanning and transmitting their respective collections for this project, albeit at a substantial personal financial cost.

Five institutions were particularly gracious during the research phase of *Vote Gun*. The Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library ($575), University of Oklahoma Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center ($1,000), and University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library ($2,000) each provided travel grants, and their staff were extremely helpful in locating materials within their collections. Everytown for Gun Safety kindly provided a $5,000 research grant, which covered roughly one-fifth of all archival scanning costs. Last, the Second Amendment Foundation (SAF) generously provided copyright permission to reprint any *Gun Week* political cartoon in *Vote Gun* at no expense. Generally, obtaining copyright permission for just one political cartoon in a book can cost upward of hundreds of dollars. Thankfully, SAF understood the broader, academic benefit of republishing these cartoons.

In addition to the assistance provided by several institutions and their staff, I am indebted to several professionals for their mentorship, guidance, and support over many years, particularly Joseph Blocher, Jake Charles,
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