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## Review of *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in the Age of Political Gridlock* by Craig Rood (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019)

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**Abstract**

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**Keywords**

gun violence, gun policy, gridlock, public memory

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Gun violence, and the conversations that follow it, do not appear to be stopping or changing. US politics seems to be gridlocked with no path to change. Craig Rood's *After Gun Violence* explores gun violence, gun policy, and political gridlock, speaking to those who study, teach, and practice deliberation about public problems. Rood brings a rhetorical perspective to the gun debate in order to examine why public deliberation surrounding this topic is often so dysfunctional. Specifically, this book explores the complex gun debate through the lens of public memory as it relates to deliberation, the Second Amendment, our obligation to the dead, and racism.

Despite the public perception of gridlock, Rood begins with a look through recent turning points in gun violence and gun policy in the United States as a way to highlight the impact they have on how people debate about gun policy. He argues that public memory and deliberation are interconnected: Events that have taken place in the past shape our public memory, and that public memory then influences our deliberation, which, in turn, affects our public memory and continues to impact future deliberation. In this way, memory and the past, and deliberation about the future mutually influence one another in a circular, unending loop. Public memories are never neutral: people choose which aspects of the past to remember, which to forget, and which aspects do or do not demand attention. This selective remembering often leads to arguments such as whether the individual or the gun is to blame for gun violence. Because individuals are unable to see past their own selective memories that shape where they place blame on gun policy issues, the false choice of either the gun or the owner being at fault thus creates gridlocked positions on gun policy.

Expanding upon this connection between memory and deliberation, the second chapter explores the impact the National Rifle Association (NRA) has on shaping public memory in relation to the Founders of the United States and the Second Amendment. The specific understanding of the past the NRA states leads to an inarguable situation where the Founders are the ultimate authority on the issue of gun policy, their original intent is clear, changing circumstances do not matter, and further debate on the subject is moot. However, Rood argues that individuals should reflect on the Second Amendment, not as something set in stone, but rather as something that lives both on paper and within individuals. Adopting this understanding of the Second Amendment opens up the possibility to deliberate on the meaning and impact the Second Amendment has on gun policies today.

The third chapter moves away from legal arguments toward ethical ones about the relationship between the dead and the living and what Rood calls "the warrant of the dead." As Rood explains it, the warrant of the dead is an argument that denotes a responsibility of individuals to make change out of a sense of obligation to those who have lost their lives to gun violence. Public memory of previous shootings shapes how people understand and respond to the warrant of the dead. This becomes another impenetrable false dichotomy: either now is the time to discuss the issues or it is not, and the conversation comes to a halt. Rood argues for more research into the impact of the warrant of the dead to provide additional insight into the implications the warrant of the dead has on gun rights and gun control rhetoric.

Finally, Rood explores the relationship between public memory and racism, highlighting the historical impact of White supremacy in the United States and the impact that racism still has on the gun debate today. The history surrounding gun rights in favor of White males while discriminating against Black males has created a “good guy”–“bad guy” memory in the minds of Americans that continues to draw a racial line through the gun debate. One of the important conclusions of this chapter is how the passing of time impacts memory around racist events and periods. As time passes, we simplify the past. The result of this oversimplification is a lack of critical analysis of the past in a way that will help us understand our present situation. This inhibits our ability to see a more complete picture of the past, making it more difficult to discuss and create gun policies today. Rood suggests more research in this specific area for continued insight into the implications of racism and gun rhetoric.

A common theme of the book is the difficulties that surround changing an individual’s mind. Rood discusses how public memory shapes our ideas and beliefs when it comes to gun policy and how this relationship to public memory makes it so difficult to break the political gridlock. This understanding of the complexity of public memory can help individuals recognize its influence over their individual memory and, by doing so, help them break away from either/or false dichotomies by focusing on larger matters beyond their individual beliefs and politics.

While this book positions itself toward scholars, practitioners, and laypersons alike, the book does lend itself more theoretically toward rhetorical scholars. Although the book does outline some possibilities for getting through gridlock, it is more of a diagnosis of how that gridlock came to be. Much of the advice given is about viewing others as complex individuals, expanding our understanding of the Second Amendment, and reflecting upon deliberative practices. These are important steps to begin communicating through gridlock, but they are not easy steps, and they depend on the willingness of everyone involved in the gun debate to look past their firmly held beliefs and agree to take these steps together. Providing concrete policies and actions is beyond the scope of Rood’s project. Nevertheless, Rood leaves room for readers to work together to imagine those possibilities, and others might continue to address the issues this book identifies in order to suggest more practical actions.

An empowering message of this book resides in the assurance that while we exist in this world that comes with its own meanings and past, we have the power within ourselves to change what language habits we use and pass down. Public memory is integrally tied to gun policy debates, and we all have unique autonomy in our communication and the ability to shape public memory moving forward. With this understanding, and through slow, incremental change, perhaps the political gridlock will loosen with time.