

Democracy in Danger S4E4 Locked And Loaded

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] We're starting the show today in Richmond, Virginia.

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:07] It's only Virginia. We should just shut up.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:09] Where a peculiar mix of demonstrators confronted each other at the foot of Capitol Square back on July 4th, 2020.

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:17] ...it's pretty big...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:18] Just blocks away...

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:20] And a lot of change happening...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:22] Just like in so many cities across the country that summer...

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:24] But why is that change not come before today?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:27] Black Lives Matter activists had for weeks been singing songs and making speeches.

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:34] ...and why is it taking them...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:35] And waving banners decrying police brutality.

Richmond crowd audio [00:00:40] [singing] No! It's about you!

Will Hitchcock [00:00:46] But on this day...

Amanda Chase [00:00:48] Hey, how's everybody doing?

Will Hitchcock [00:00:51] In the shadow of the State House and the governor's mansion, the rally goes - a predominantly white crowd - were there to defend gun rights. And like arch conservative state senator Amanda Chase, most of them were armed to the hilt.

Amanda Chase [00:01:06] Legislators who are American legislators should never vote against any bill that would infringe upon a person's - a law abiding citizen - the ability to protect themselves. Can I get an amen?

Richmond crowd audio [00:01:20] Yes.

Amanda Chase [00:01:23] Can I get an amen?

Richmond crowd audio [00:01:24] Amen!

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:25] From the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:32] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Today we're going to share with you an interview we did recently with the historian Carol Anderson about her new book, *The Second*, which looks at the long and, of course, sordid history of the right to bear arms in America. But first, we want to dwell on that gun rally in Richmond a year and a half ago, and we have our producer, Robert Armengol, in the studio with us right now to help us do that. So, Robert, you went down to that demonstration. Why did you go and what did you see?

Robert Armengol [00:02:01] Yeah, right. So I went there with Sidney Halleman. She's one of our other producers. She recorded the tape we've been hearing, and at the time, you'll remember we were just getting started with *Democracy in Danger*. And I wanted to see on one hand what was going on up the street, actually on Richmond's Monument Avenue. The protesters supporting Black Lives Matter had occupied that basically that entire boulevard and had been clashing with police.

Local reporter [00:02:29] A police car has reportedly been set on fire...

Robert Armengol [00:02:32] In Richmond, of course, which was once the capital of the Confederacy, this movement carried added significance.

Local reporter [00:02:38] For signs of unity and projection. I spoke with...

Robert Armengol [00:02:41] The protesters had managed to do something pretty incredible.

Local reporter [00:02:45] The Lee Monument has been the center of artistry in Richmond as of late.

Robert Armengol [00:02:47] And they covered with graffiti what had been huge statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. All testaments to white supremacy and the myth of the lost cause.

Local reporter [00:02:59] And the mood in Virginia's capital appears to be more celebratory,

Robert Armengol [00:03:02] And they turned these statues into startling, even beautiful protest art.

Richmond protestor [00:03:07] So it feels really empowering, and I hope it also sends a message to fellow young people that you are capable of doing this and so much more.

Robert Armengol [00:03:17] But then...there was also this gun rally just blocks away, and that protest had been planned by far right extremists.

Richmond crowd audio [00:03:26] Does it bother you?

Robert Armengol [00:03:28] There were boogaloo boys dressed in Hawaiian T-shirts. There were militia men in camo and tactical gear wearing helmets. And like everywhere you look, there were semi-automatic rifles and all kinds of other firearms. So, you know, it just seemed like an interesting day to be in Richmond.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:03:45] Yeah, definitely interesting. Please remind us of the context for that rally. Why Richmond and why the 4th of July?

Robert Armengol [00:03:53] Right? Well, a series of new gun safety measures had just gone into effect in Virginia on the first of the month. The Democrats were in control of the Legislature and the governorship at the time, and they did a number of things. They expanded background checks. They kept handgun purchases at one per month. They gave judges the authority to seize weapons from people who were deemed to be a threat to themselves or others. And of course, the gun rights movement swung into action.

Richmond protestor [00:04:21] It's important for us to own weapons.

Robert Armengol [00:04:24] And it coalesced essentially with the cause of protecting those Confederate statues. The cause of quote heritage, not hate. Here's why the rally goes we spoke with a guy named Asher. He said he was a U.S. marine stationed in Quantico.

Richmond protestor [00:04:38] Obviously, violence should always be a last resort, but people need to understand that it is it's sometimes it's necessary. There's only so far that people can back up before they have to to take a stand. I'm not encouraging or inciting any sort of violence. I just want to be left alone.

Robert Armengol [00:04:57] Tell me about your rifle.

Richmond protestor [00:04:58] Sure. Yeah, it's a scar. 17.

Robert Armengol [00:05:00] So I don't know anything about rifles.

Richmond protestor [00:05:03] It is a semi-automatic 762 by 51, or 308 chambered rifle. I've got a ACSS raptor. It's made by Primary Arms. LPVO on top. It's a...

Robert Armengol [00:05:17] It's got a scope?

Richmond protestor [00:05:18] It's it's it is a scope.

Robert Armengol [00:05:22] As far as you guys coming out today, is this mainly a response to the enactment of the Virginia gun laws that went into effect July 1?

Richmond protestor [00:05:31] I don't agree with any of the gun laws that stand in the state of Virginia period, but my views are pretty radical too. I mean, I think I should be able to walk into a store and buy a machine gun and not pay a special tax for it.

Will Hitchcock [00:05:47] Whoa. Robert, Asher here is defending an unqualified right to bear arms, it's basically the NRA's rhetoric, right?

Robert Armengol [00:05:57] Yeah, taken right out of the NRA playbook. And you know, that was in line with a lot of what we heard that day. But there was another aspect to this rally that really stood out to Sydney and me, and it made things hard to understand. Confusing. A little messy.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:13] Oh, what was that?

Robert Armengol [00:06:15] Well, a bunch of the gun toting pro-Second Amendment crowd, maybe a couple of dozen of the 250 people who were there were black.

Richmond protestor [00:06:24] We here for the Second Amendment, not First Amendment.

Robert Armengol [00:06:27] So here were these men and women quite explicitly defending their own right to bear arms surrounded by a lot of avowed white supremacists.

Richmond protestor [00:06:37] And I was told that this was a white Second Amendment rally. The Second Amendment is for everyone, not just white people.

Robert Armengol [00:06:42] This is Brant Holmes. He lives in the Richmond area. He also said he has a military background.

Richmond protestor [00:06:48] You know, one of my favorite sayings is it ain't no fun when the rabbit got the gun, because a lot of people don't like us to have it, but they want to walk around and intimidate us. We have no fear anymore. We walked up in here amongst hostile people. This KKK here, the skinheads here, there's all kinds of stuff here. We're not afraid. We are not afraid. So those days are over. Our voices will be heard and we will be heard on the same scale - equal scale as their voices.

Robert Armengol [00:07:11] Tell me about what you're packing today.

Richmond protestor [00:07:14] I'm going. I'm going a little late today. I got a AR15 right here. I got a 40 cal Smith & Wesson right here. I got another 9mm right here that has 33 rounds in it. And I have about...

Robert Armengol [00:07:24] Everything else is loaded?

Richmond protestor [00:07:25] I have about five hundred rounds with me. Absolutely. Unloaded gun is useless. It's useless. You might as well have a brick in your hand, right? Because because whoever is attacking you is not going to wait for you to put one in the chamber before they try to kill you. I might as well be swinging a fly swatter.

Robert Armengol [00:07:45] Now, to be clear, guys, when Amanda Chase - that state senator we heard from a moment ago -when she spoke, she made it a point to welcome the presence of the African-American folks in the crowd as well. And she spoke, if somewhat awkwardly, of racial unity and equality.

Amanda Chase [00:08:04] And you know what? There are some out there that want to destroy us from the inside out. They want to divide us based on race. I'm not about that.

Richmond crowd audio [00:08:14] That's right.

Amanda Chase [00:08:14] I love all people. I don't care what color of skin. I don't care. I don't care if you're a zebra. You know I'm a mom. Moms love people. You know what I'm saying? Souls don't know colors. A lot of people think Republicans hate people of other colors. We don't. We love you and we believe in limited government. We believe the government should stay out of your business. We don't want you all about our personal business.

Richmond crowd audio [00:08:41] That's right.

Amanda Chase [00:08:42] What do you at your house is your business!

Richmond crowd audio [00:08:44] That's right. Thank you!

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:08:45] Oh yeah. I mean, you know, if you listen closely, she's basically implying that Republicans, as far as she can tell, are all white. But don't worry, they're OK with other colors.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:56] Well, it's the old colorblind routine. If you just ignore race and racism, hey, it'll just go away. And in the meantime, let the far-right militias stockpile their assault weapons.

Robert Armengol [00:09:07] Yeah, but the thing is, I mean, look, I'll be honest, I'm not a big fan of guns. My cousin died as a kid at the hands of another kid who was showing off a handgun. So this issue really hits a chord with me. At the same time, I got to say the Black Lives Matter activists who were there walking in that crowd, which felt threatening and they were carrying their own rifles, making their own point. Well, they demand our attention. You know, I'll never forget this one woman who goes by the name McQueen. She told us about the effect that showing up armed has on police.

Robert Armengol [00:09:46] You're also packing today. Can you tell me what you are armed with?

Richmond protestor [00:09:50] AR15, a 556, and a 9. .

Robert Armengol [00:09:53] When you first get into carrying weapons?

Richmond protestor [00:09:57] Since I was young, my dad is a marine.

Robert Armengol [00:09:59] So do you bring your weapons? Do you come armed to Black Lives Matter protests, too?

Richmond protestor [00:10:03] Sometimes. Sometimes I just go straight as a regular protestor and sometimes I become armed. I become armed when different protests and people ask for security because our protestors have been denied protection in the streets to exercise their First Amendment by the police.

Robert Armengol [00:10:18] I just want to ask you one more thing when you when you're at that kind of a protest, not like today, but one that specifically for black lives, for racial justice and your packing. Do you feel like it has a diffusing effect?

Richmond protestor [00:10:32] It actually does.

Robert Armengol [00:10:32] So tell me about that. How does that work?

Richmond protestor [00:10:35] I have been tear gassed. I have been maced. I have whatever when I'm not dressed like this. They attack the group...hundreds of people.

Robert Armengol [00:10:45] You're talking about the police, and you're saying they're less likely to do that if they see that some people are heavily armed.

Richmond protestor [00:10:50] They have. Some of the time that came out there and even me, my team, we a regular protest that I'll be in front of the police officer and I'll be like asking for a lieutenant trying to have a conversation. And I have literally just been maced in my face for talking. I have did the same thing with this and they have talked to me. It demands respect. Apparently, I guess that they're packing. So I guess it feels I guess we need to do that to give respect back. And I don't understand why we have to take it there to get that.

Robert Armengol [00:11:18] You have some very nuanced views, and I really appreciate you.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:20] Well, if you remember, we saw this phenomenon in reverse here in Charlottesville in 2017, with the Unite the Right rally. Hundreds of neo-Nazis came heavily armed. The police were outnumbered and outgunned, and they stood by as the violence unfolded.

Robert Armengol [00:11:36] Yes, exactly. And fortunately, there was no violence in Richmond that day. I mean, everyone was armed and the police were there too, of course. And let me tell you, they kept their distance.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:48] Robert, what's really interesting about that conversation are the set of conversations you had is that the white people you talked to did not specify their threat, like what part of society is threatening them. It's this amorphous threat. Now we can fill in the blanks, right? We kind of get what they're saying, who they are afraid of. The black people you talk to have a specific threat in mind and that threat is the police. That's what they're saying that in this country in 2022, in order to achieve any measure of equal respect in society, especially respect from state actors, depends on one's willingness to display firearms.

Robert Armengol [00:12:31] That's right. And while it might seem that the folks who were there that day, black and white were on the same side, so to speak of this particular issue, it was very clear that they were actually speaking two different languages.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:46] That's because they don't share an ideology. They don't share a common vocabulary or a common theory of how they've arrived at this moment. For those black gun owners who were at the protest, they were not only speaking up for themselves, but they were challenging, openly challenging the rights of white gun owners to speak for black people. So there was, you know, there was a contradiction in their presence there that I think is part of the tension around this debate. And it just reminds us that if you have lots and lots of people of different colors and backgrounds carrying guns and coming out into public to argue these things out, it's going to end badly.

Robert Armengol [00:13:22] Yeah, it didn't end badly that, but it's bound to end badly at some point.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:26] Well, Robert, thank you, and thanks to Sydney for bringing us that story.

Robert Armengol [00:13:30] You're welcome.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:13:36] We'll be right back.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:52] Well, we're going to turn now to the deeper history of gun rights and democracy in the United States. In her new book, historian Carol Anderson of Emory University says the national conversation on gun control all but ignores the significance of race and the way that fears of slave uprisings were embedded in the right to bear arms from the very beginning.

Carol Anderson [00:14:14] We get this sense of the Second Amendment being about either the militia or the individual right to bear arms. And what we lose is the anti-blackness that drove the creation of the Second Amendment.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:32] Much like the Constitution itself, Carrol told us, the Second Amendment was essentially a bribe offered to the South to preserve the union. As ratified in 1789, the Constitution had preserved slavery. It gave the slave holding states extra representation in Congress through the infamous Three-Fifths clause. It called for the return of fugitive slaves to their owners, and those compromises had made it possible for southern leaders to accept a strong central government, one with authority to call on and control their militias.

Carol Anderson [00:15:06] We have this narrative in modern day America that the militia was the stalwart group that stood up and took on the British. Well, kind of sorta. They were not reliable. Sometimes they show up, sometimes they wouldn't. Sometimes they fight. Sometimes they take off running.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:31] Whatever their effectiveness as a military force, however, the state militias were central to law enforcement in the south. Law enforcement that is of a particular kind.

Carol Anderson [00:15:41] The role of the militia in American society at that time was slave control. Was to put down slave revolts. Was to protect the white community from black people.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:01] And so when it came time to draft the Bill of Rights, those first 10 amendments to the Constitution, big names like Patrick Henry and George Mason, both Virginians, both slave owners, were intent on keeping the militias and their members armed. If you study their deliberation on the Second Amendment, Carrol says, the framers left nothing to the imagination. It was all about slavery.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:16:29] It didn't take long for the consequences of that second compromise to start playing themselves out in real time. Carol documents numerous rebellions that white southerners put down. Cases where enslaved people tried to take up arms and seek the same rights, pursue the same enlightenment ideals as the citizens who bought and sold them. As our conversation unfolded, I asked her to tell us about one of those a conspiracy organized in 1800 by a slave named Gabriel, who lived on a plantation in Henrico County, just west of Richmond.

Carol Anderson [00:17:02] Gabriel was an enslaved man who was able to hire himself out to other plantation owners and to other folks because he was a blacksmith. He had incredible skills and the sense that he should be free and he should be able to control his own wages. That he worked, and so those wages were his. And so Gabriel begins to organize groups among several counties for this uprising to be able to create a multiracial, multiethnic, multi-religious republic that is baptized in freedom and liberty and equality.

And to be clear, he's not talking about a black republic. He is talking about a republic for those who love freedom, for those who love liberty. And when James Monroe, who was the governor of Virginia at the time, gets word that there is this massive uprising that's getting ready to happen. He was like, we were alarmed. And he calls out the militia to go track these these folks in revolt down. To track down Gabriel, to track down, to figure out who's all involved in this multi county multi-city uprising. And when they began to hunt them down and there's like five hundred militia men going through the state tracking down who's involved, they round up dozens of them. And there are these trials. And in these trials? Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. And you have these mass public hangings as a way to send the signal that this freedom, this liberty, this democracy is not for you. It is not for you. This is marked whites only. Know that. And we have the machinery to make that happen. That was the role of the militia.

Will Hitchcock [00:19:04] Wow, I mean, Carol, there's so much in this story that's that's wound up in the early history of the Republic and the shaping of our constitutional documents. After all, this is about the Second Amendment, but the Second Amendment kind of has like, you know, it's like Bancor's ghost. It just keeps coming back and back and back in different times, in different ways. And I'm particularly interested in the period after the Civil War. I mean, look, slavery is abolished during the Civil War and then begins a process of reconstruction. So you figure, all right, here is where things are going to change. We're going to read this the bill of rights differently. But as you write about, you know, free black people began to claim their freedoms and their rights as specified in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and this only inflamed white fears. And now you get a new code, a new unwritten set of rights that whites take for themselves. Talk a little bit about this ideology of sort of appropriating certain kinds of rights in the post-Civil War era.

Carol Anderson [00:19:58] Right. So it didn't matter what the legal status of black folks were, this access to the Second Amendment did not apply to them. This access to the right to bear arms, the right to self-defense, the right to a well-regulated militia. That was verboten. And so after the Civil War, when you have the 13th Amendment and black folks are no longer enslaved, this should be Hallelujah time. Instead, what you get is you get Andrew Johnson, the president of the United States, basically providing amnesty for the Confederates. And then these folks come back into power into these states and they start writing these constitutions, like in Louisiana that says this is a white man's government built and meant for white people. People of African descent have no claims to citizenship. And you get the creation of black codes and black codes are about reinstalling slavery by another name. So it's about labor conditions so that black people have to sign off on labor contracts, annual labor contracts and can't leave their employers, which is so violating the basic rules of capitalism. They can't leave their employer. But it also has things in there like black people cannot testify in court against somebody white. You also have black people cannot have guns because this how do you control this population, if this population is able to defend itself? And in that you also had this mass wave of terror raining down on black folk, just, you know, Carl Schurz, who was an emissary coming down for Andrew Johnson and writes this horrific report about the decomposing bodies, black bodies that he's seeing everywhere. The kind of torture that they endured and that there's no accountability. Part of that no accountability that is happening in the system is that you have black troops who are there, who try to get between the white terrorists and the freedmen, the freed people and white folks seeing black men in uniform who have authority that simply enrages them. White's plea to Andrew Johnson. Look, if you just got rid of the black troops, the violence would stop. It is their presence that incites this violence. Now, think about the illogic of that. And Johnson, who is like racist 101, is like

cool. And so he orders the black troops removed from the interior and first sends them out to the coast and then removes them altogether from the south.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:48] Carol, let me let me ask you a story you talk, you write about it that took place in your own, the city in which you live and work. Atlanta, 1906, a horrific massacre. But what sparked it? What triggered it?

Carol Anderson [00:23:02] What triggered it were these rumors milling about about black men, raping white women or assaulting white women. And then there was one documented rape, and then the mob came after that black man and they lynched him. They lynched him. And that became the kind of proof positive. See, we've got these black rapist beasts out here and that the police can't handle it. It's going to require us. It's going to require good, honest, hard working white folk to be able to put these black rapist beasts under control. And you know, it is that protection of the sanctity of white womanhood that becomes one of the key rationales for lynching. And so you have these newspapers with all of these stories just feeding the flames. You have the political leadership feeding the flames. And then you have this spark that happens where you have one white man in the crowd saying, Are we going to let them just do this to us? Are we going to defend our women? And then it is hunting black folk for days on end. The images of the of the city, just this downtown, just blood coursing through the streets, brain splatter on the walls, black people being pulled off of the trolleys and beaten. And so black folk have said e-doggone-nough already. And so the mob is heading to an area called Dark Town, the black working class neighborhood. And they are ready. They have their guns. The mob comes. Black, folks -boom - shoot to protect to defend. The mob goes back to like what just happened here? Did they just shoot at us? And it's like, yeah, so they like, OK, I know what we're going to do is we're going to go where the softer blacks are in the area called Brownsville, where you have the black doctors, you had the black professors. You have, you know, the black teachers that the black middle class neighborhood around those colleges of Morehouse, Spelman. And so they had to Brownsville. Brownsville also has its their guns ready. Well, they see whites coming in and they shoot - the sentries shoot. Turns out they were police officers, not in uniform. Well, oh my god, you just shot cops. And so whoooo.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:34] And past is prolog, huh?

Carol Anderson [00:25:36] I'm telling you. So then the governor calls in the militia and the militia comes in and they're like, We're rough. Were tough. We can't kill enough. And they go through, they are just ransacking the place and stripping people of their guns and corralling them and rounding them up. And it becomes a way to defend this white community from these black rapist beasts.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:03] But this is a case where black people use guns to defend themselves, and that is crossing the red line. That is not allowed in the not just the code of the South, but really the way the Second Amendment had been conceived to begin with.

Carol Anderson [00:26:18] Right. That black folks do not have the right to self-defense. And this was part of the language that I saw coming out of a law in the 1600s in Virginia that the enslaved and free blacks did not have the right to strike back if somebody's white hit them. So already it's embedded in the operating code that self-defense is not available to black people when they are attacked by somebody white.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:48] Well, and you know, we can jump right into our current century and do some comparing and contrasting and find a pretty straight line between the 17th century and the 21st century, right? I mean, you open your book with the story of Philando Castile in Minnesota, who, you know, was stopped by the police, was trying to let the officer know that he had a legal concealed firearm in his possession so the officer would not be alarmed, and he didn't really get the chance. As soon as he announced that he had this in his possession the officer opened fire. That was in 2016, and then in 2018 we saw an army veteran named Amount Bradford Jr., who tried to save people from a gunman who had opened fire at a shopping mall in Alabama. He was that good guy with the gun the National Rifle Association always claims will save us. And what happened? The police walked in. They saw the good guy with the gun and assumed because he was black he must be the bad guy. Right? And you know what happens then? So you make this point quite clear upfront at the beginning that the National Rifle Association does not read the Second Amendment as something that protects Americans or grants a right to Americans in general.

Carol Anderson [00:28:17] Yes.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:17] So what is going on here? What are we missing, right? Because we're taught to think of those first 10 amendments as applying to all of us, at least since the 14th Amendment, which explicitly says it's all supposed to apply to all of us, right?

Carol Anderson [00:28:31] Right.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:32] So how come we don't have this conversation in the larger public whenever there is a conflagration like this?

Carol Anderson [00:28:41] It's because part of it has been the marketing of what the Second Amendment is. And so you get the marketing of the Second Amendment as this arbiter of citizenship, and it defines citizenship, frankly, as white. When you have that discussion, you're having a very different discussion about the founding of this nation. You're having a very different discussion about the complexity of the founding fathers. You're having a very different discussion about rights in this nation. And that is a discussion, as we can see from the backlash against the teaching of the 1619 project, the backlash against the teaching of African-American history, the backlash against so-called critical race theory, which of course, they're not teaching in kindergarten. But I digress. But this sense of if we teach that racism has been part of the operating code of the United States, then this glorious history that we are taught becomes not so glorious it becomes much more complex. And it means then that we have an entire society that is not able to engage with facts, not able to engage with the reality of what we are seeing. Therefore, we're not able to come up with adequate solutions to deal with these issues.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:10] That's well said, Carol. And actually, let me just push you just a little bit now because you open the door to the solutions question. You know, your book is not really pro-gun or anti-gun. It's about the history of the Second Amendment, and it's a it's a window into the racist origins of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights in America. I see that. But what should we be talking about today, about gun rights and its relationship to race and racism and the problems we have to overcome? What would you like to see done? How how can we begin to to move towards some kind of common understanding? I mean, not to be too abstract about it. Are there are there particular legislative initiatives

one could take to try to bring this from the stalemate that it feels like it's been in four decades to some kind of conversation that might yield some progress?

Carol Anderson [00:31:02] Part of what has to happen is we have to have a norm shift when it comes to the Second Amendment. It's being treated on this ultimately hallowed ground when it's not hallowed is actually sullied and we have to understand how sullied it is. We have to have a very different conversation about what real safety and real security looks like. Right now the narrative has guns protect us. Guns are our defense. Guns keep us safe. We have what, about 400 million guns in the United States. We are not safe. We are not secure. So if you've got 400 million guns, you've got more guns than you have people and you're not safe. It tells you that that definition of safety has basically been bastardized, and we have got to rethink what real true safety looks like. We have also to do the work of dismantling anti-Blackness. Jonathan Metzler wrote this fabulous book, *Dying for Whiteness* and in there one of the studies that he does looks at folks in rural Missouri who have suffered gun violence in their families. And in this kind of self-help group they start talking about gun safety legislation and what they say is, Oh no, you're not going to take my gun because all of those folks from St. Louis will come down here and they'll try to take everything that we have. We have to defend ourselves. And so that sense that those folks from St. Louis are going to take everything that we have and we're going to be left defenseless is the same language that George Mason was using at the Virginia Constitutional Ratification Convention that the enslaved were going to rise up and take everything that these plantation owners had. We have to defend ourselves.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:00] So, Carol, right now we're faced with a situation where, you know, gun violence of all kinds is an epidemic in this country. It has been for my entire lifetime. It ebbs and flows. But you know it, it's a constant concern. And there is widespread public support for reasonable interventions that might treat gun violence as a public health problem and might actually do something to curb the risks. Right? Widespread public support. And yet our state legislatures or Congress seem uninterested in meeting this need. And you know, we've been pointing out time and time again on this show the gap between public opinion and public policy as a pretty clear sign that our democracy is not accountable or the extent to which we are actually avoiding the core function of democracy.

Carol Anderson [00:33:55] Mm hmm. Oh, there's so much to unpack in there. So let me deal with a component of that, which is why the seeming inaction. And I would say, in fact, we have seen action. The action that we have seen, for instance, is having the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Heller* decision in 2008 and then the *McDonald* decision in 2010 write an individual right to bear arms into the Second Amendment. Those two cases deal with gun safety laws in Washington, D.C., because Washington, D.C., was absolutely concerned about the number of homicides that they were having. And so they did this really easy calculation. If we can remove access to weapons, then the homicides will go down. Chicago that's the *McDonald* decision. Chicago did the same thing, saying if we remove the access to these guns, homicides will go down. With the *Heller* decision and the *McDonald* decision you see guns flooding back into those communities. It is dealing with that narrative of black pathology that is so tough in this society. So when a cop shoots somebody black and there's a protest, what you will hear from the right wing is, well, you know, Chicago. Well, you know, Chicago, well, you know, Chicago tried to deal with it, and the U.S. Supreme Court said, No, no, not today. And all of the structures that can create a vibrant, sustainable community have been wiped out underneath black Chicago. Lauren Boebert, the congresswoman out of Colorado, she did this social media post where she talked about, you know, they're trying to defund the police and take the guns away from

us. That means we will be left defenseless against the thugs, the gangbangers and the drug dealers. Thugs, gang bangers and drug dealers become the dog whistles for African-Americans. It is the way that you say black people in this society. So we're willing to be unsafe in our grocery stores. We're willing to be unsafe in our churches. We are willing to be unsafe in our schools because of the fear of black people. And so we often hear about black on black crime. Over 80 percent of black folks are killed by black folks, but over 80 percent of white folk are killed by white folk. But you don't hear white on white crime. Why is that? Because that narrative does not do the work that this society wants it to do. That is the way anti-Blackness works.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:54] Carol Anderson is a historian on the Charles Howard Candler, professor of African-American studies at Emory University. She's the author of the New York Times bestseller *White Rage* and of *One Person No Vote*, a finalist for the Pen Galbraith Award for Nonfiction. Her latest book is about the history of Race and Guns in America. It's called *The Second*.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:15] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all of our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Will Hitchcock [00:38:07] Siva with this conversation with Carol and the reporting that Robert did and brought back to us just reminds us that racism and slavery are central to the American experience and in particular that they run like a red thread right through all of our founding documents. So when we look at the Second Amendment in the context in which was written, we're reminded, yes, it's about slavery, but that's also true of so many other components of the Constitution. And if there's any one takeaway from this, it's simply that as much as Americans, white Americans want to turn their back on the divisive concepts of slavery, it's central to our founding documents and will never fundamentally get at the heart of those documents unless we embrace the ugly history behind it.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:38:50] Yeah. And from what we heard earlier in this program, when Sidney and Robert were in Richmond speaking to the pro-gun protesters, they made it also very clear that race runs through all aspects of gun debates today, even when it's not explicitly out there you know, that's what's going on. In this country we are so afraid of each other. We are so paranoid that we're willing to invest in these devices that can tear apart a human body and display them as a demand for respect. I think that's a deeply troubling facet of our national consciousness and going beyond the numbers of people killed by guns every year unnecessarily, we have to look into our souls and say, Is this the value embedded so deeply in our founding documents that we want to continue to exploit and depend on?

Will Hitchcock [00:39:54] Is there something going on here between the Second Amendment rights that everybody is so eager to seize on and First Amendment rights of speech and gathering in public and participating in a democracy?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:40:06] Yeah. Look, you know, one of the things we heard from the people in Richmond is this argument that you need the Second Amendment to protect the First Amendment, right? At the same time, what we see in all kinds of other moments in America is that the Second Amendment trumps the First Amendment. What we saw in Charlottesville in August of 2017 was a clear difference between the ways in which those who carried firearms and threatened other people were able to get their message out. And those of us who were on the other side, when you bring a firearm to a public display of

expression and citizenship, the person with the firearm gets to speak and the person without has to cower. And that is not healthy for any democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:40:55] This is reminding us of Europe in the 1930s, when every political party was accompanied by a group of, you know, brown shirts or black shirts or silver shirts or whatever it was in order to beat up people that they disagreed with. In a sense, the public arena was taken over by violence, and ideas were the things that were crushed. So this is a sign of the breakdown of civic society. It's a sign of the breakdown of democracy that you need to be armed in order to be heard, right?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:41:25] You know, the very presence of a firearm warps a communicative moment, right? It's really impossible for the person without the firearm to be heard at all. But it's also really impossible for the person with the firearm to be taken seriously because the only message that gets through is, Look what I have in my hand.

Will Hitchcock [00:41:57] Well, that's all for this week's history lesson from Democracy in Danger. We're going to take a short break next time and repost a past episode that offers some perspective on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Serjii Phlokii [00:42:09] And in 2004, there was an attempt actually to reverse the democratic course of the development of Ukraine to steal the elections, to impose elements of authoritarian regime. And the Ukrainians said no.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:42:24] Coming up later in the season, we'll cover more hot button topics in American politics, including abortion. Send us your thoughts. In the meantime, shoot us a tweet @Dindpodcast that's DIND podcast.

Will Hitchcock [00:42:39] And there's much more to read and see on our web page. DinDanger.org. Check it out.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:42:48] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

Will Hitchcock [00:42:59] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA is Deliberative Media Lab, where distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:43:14] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.