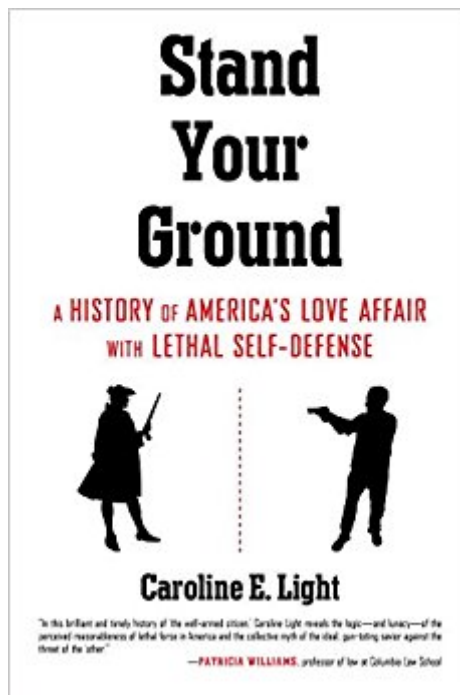




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Stand Your Ground: A History Of America's Love Affair With Lethal Self-Defense



Synopsis

A history of America's Stand Your Ground gun laws, from Reconstruction to Trayvon Martin

After a young, white gunman killed twenty-six people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, conservative legislators lamented that the tragedy could have been avoided if the schoolteachers had been armed and the classrooms equipped with guns. Similar claims were repeated in the aftermath of other recent shootings—after nine were killed in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, and in the aftermath of the massacre in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Despite inevitable questions about gun control, there is a sharp increase in firearm sales in the wake of every mass shooting. Yet, this kind of DIY-security activism predates the contemporary gun rights movement—and even the stand-your-ground self-defense laws adopted in thirty-three states, or the thirteen million civilians currently licensed to carry concealed firearms. As scholar Caroline Light proves, support for “good guys with guns” relies on the entrenched belief that certain “bad guys with guns” threaten us all. Stand Your Ground explores the development of the American right to self-defense and reveals how the original “duty to retreat” from threat was transformed into a selective right to kill. In her rigorous genealogy, Light traces white America's attachment to racialized, lethal self-defense by unearthing its complex legal and social histories—from the original “castle laws” of the 1600s, which gave white men the right to protect their homes, to the brutal lynching of “criminal” Black bodies during the Jim Crow era and the radicalization of the NRA as it transitioned from a sporting organization to one of our country's most powerful lobbying forces. In this convincing treatise on the United States' unprecedented ascension as the world's foremost stand-your-ground nation, Light exposes a history hidden in plain sight, showing how violent self-defense has been legalized for the most privileged and used as a weapon against the most vulnerable.

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Customer Reviews

“The author is a keen legal analyst, deftly examining obscure cases that underlie this historical narrative...A weighty consideration of the cultural politics behind disturbing flash points like the death of Trayvon Martin.”
•Kirkus Reviews
“Light’s readable account deserves strong notice by those seeking understanding of the roots of today’s polarizing debate over gun laws.”
•Booklist
“Light makes a compelling case that appeals to self-defense throughout American history have never been an equal-opportunity recourse...Light does not shy away from historical facts that popular memory and contemporary debates often erase. She unsparingly describes how many white suffragists supported extrajudicial violence to protect white chastity, and likewise calls attention to the under-acknowledged role of armed self-defense by black Americans during the sixties and seventies.”
•The New Inquiry
“A timely and far-reaching new book...Light deftly analyzes how this lop-sided treatment has survived, in our legal system and also in the distortions that help define the historical memory of white America...It’s far from obvious that repealing Stand Your Ground laws would break that loop. As Light shows, the right to claim the protective mantle of self-defense has never been equally distributed in America. Stand Your Ground laws may be stark symbols of that reality, but they didn’t create it. Stand Your Ground didn’t kill Martin or keep Zimmerman out of jail. And it didn’t protect Peterson. Truly facing the problems of violence in America will mean following Light’s lead and digging deeper.”
•Peter C. Baker, Pacific Standard
“A powerful new book...studded with striking statistics and sobering facts.”
•Nina MacLaughlin, The Boston Globe
“While some may believe that the prevalence of stand-your-ground narratives is a new phenomenon, Caroline Light’s Stand Your Ground is timely and sharp, and a potent antidote to historical amnesia. Light reminds us that these defenses are as old as the republic; they have always protected those with privilege and jeopardized those at the margins.”
•Mark Anthony Neal, author of New Black Man
“In this brilliant and timely history of the well-armed citizen, Caroline Light reveals the logic and lunacy of the perceived reasonableness of lethal force in America and the collective myth of the ideal, gun-toting savior against the threat of the

Another. Caroline Light traces the history of self-defense in America from the early republic to the present and reveals how gun-use policies have consistently compromised the contours of our democracy. Paying careful attention to the roles of race and gender in structuring gun control politics, Light ultimately provides us with a profound reflection on belonging and exclusion in American society. Essential reading.

•Elizabeth Hinton, award-winning author of *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*

•Mike Weissner, author of the *Guns in America* series

Caroline Light is director of undergraduate studies in the Program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Harvard University. She is the author of *That Pride of Race and Character: The Roots of Jewish Benevolence in the Jim Crow South*.

This terrific book helped me understand the variable ways that people have experienced the stand your ground phenomenon through our history. As an older, white male, I do not always think of the gender and racial aspects of this tradition. Of course, women and people of color have experienced this very differently than I have. I appreciate a new level of understanding just how we've gotten to this otherwise incomprehensible point.

A MUST READ-- brilliant, incisive, and all-too timely. Caroline Light deftly excavates the legal and social structures of the United States's historical past to make sense of our tumultuous present. Highly readable and engaging, Light's book shows how our cultural debates about violence, property, and citizenship are not recent inventions, but deeply rooted in the foundational myths of America. FIVE STARS.

"A powerful new book..." - the Boston Globe (2/10/17) praises the author's research which resulted in this fascinating history of "Do-It-Yourself Security Citizenship." I loved this book!

tremendous work and timely

To be fair, this is not strictly the usual anti-gun polemic. The eternal villains here are not guns, conservatives, or the NRA, but a much bigger target: The Patriarchy itself, an apparently toxic brew

of white men, American history, and the very concept of self-defense. Any reader who habitually checks under the bed to see that there are no men hiding there ... or racists ... or anything else nasty, like white people ... or printed copies of the Bill of Rights ... or legal concepts such as the right to self-defense, or the presumption of innocence ... will feel right at home with this book. And anyone who peppers conversations with words like "normative" or "cis-" anything will just love it. But anyone else, not so much. Consider a few samples. These are entirely typical; note that throughout 200-plus pages, the author puts a great deal of weight on imaginary crimes, crimes which are not even argued to be real, but are just assumed to be so. "The Heller decision conveniently ignored the race and gender exclusions of the amendment's original historical moment, where a 'law-abiding citizen' was a white, property-owning man, who openly carried a rifle not only to defend his 'hearth and home,' but also to assert his dominance over enslaved labor and his access to land seized from Native Americans." (Page 7) "In spite of widespread efforts by DIY-security proponents to recruit women, nonwhites, and LGBT people to the cause of armed citizenship, the adjudication of lethal self-defense continues to privilege white hetero/cis-masculinity." (Page 15) "That contemporary celebrations of armed citizenship can *appear* to be race- and gender-inclusive attests to the power of collective amnesia." (Page 16) Etc cetera, et cetera. One more, from a bit further along ... more of the same; "Now, more than ever, a man's castle - the sanctuary of white, property-owning heteromascularity - seems under siege by forces within as well as beyond the nation's boundaries." (Page 155) The modern so-called "stand your ground" laws do indeed have a history, but if that legal history is anywhere in this book, my eyes must have glazed over before I reached it. But I don't think I missed much of substance, because I have no great confidence that the author has any idea what the SYG laws are. I base that statement on the author's comments on the Zimmerman/Martin case; her apparent belief that the case had anything at all to do with Florida's SYG law shows the grossest misunderstanding of both the trial and the relevant law. SYG was not cited by either prosecution or defense at any point in the Zimmerman trial, although the press was obsessive in its pretense that SYG was somehow involved. (But one would expect a researcher to be able to distinguish between a hysterical Press and a slightly less hysterical Court.) The author glosses over the actual evidence presented at trial with an airy "accounts are mixed as to what happened next

This thoughtful, balanced, deeply researched book is a powerful weapon in the fight against the view that gun violence is strictly contemporary, mysterious or inevitable, and a symptom of the equal franchise of rights in the United States. As a historian, Light brings scrupulous attention to bear on the ways in which laws travel through time and intersect one another: laws about self-defense and

what constitutes a man's "castle" operate together with laws about who may own property and who is considered a full citizen to create a situation in which, even if legal texts about lethal self defense have no language about race, the way that law enforcement, the judiciary, and the public perceive force has everything to do with race and gender. WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT: A polemic against gun ownership. WHAT THIS BOOK IS: A mirror that shows us the origins of our unjust system of armed citizenship.

I was frankly blown away by the history presented here, having been previously unaware of just how closely gun proliferation has been entwined with sexism and racism. The US now has 4 percent of the world's population and between 40 and 50 percent of privately owned guns. There are more guns in the US than people. But those weapons are in the hands of an increasingly small percentage of the US population. Meanwhile, women, non-whites and LGBT are increasingly LESS safe. This is essential reading for anyone wondering how we got here. Highly recommended.

This book provides a deep historical dive into the logic behind the self-defense laws that have recently drawn attention and scrutiny in the US as a result of high-profile racially-charged killings. Caroline Light makes a persuasive argument for how our current legal and cultural ideas about self-defense are rooted in notions of proprietary whiteness and masculinity. Stand Your Ground offers a nuanced account of how US legal doctrine produced an ideology of individualized armed defense over the course of centuries. Rather than rehearse the incendiary pro-/anti-gun debate, Light explores how the idea of armed self-reliance and its role in marginalizing vulnerable populations became a peculiar matter of common sense.

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