

# **THE COLT REVOLVER AND ITS ROLE IN AMERICAN GUN CULTURE**

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When discussing the unique culture of the United States, a popular topic of conversation is often the pervasiveness and widespread acceptance of guns within our society. Unlike most countries that have stringent firearm laws, the United States guarantees all of its citizens the right to bear arms with the Second Amendment to our Constitution, and Americans are known for taking full advantage of this right. Since our Constitution was ratified, guns have become an integral part of American society and culture, and nobody is more responsible for this than Samuel Colt. Colt created a legendary series of guns known as the Colt revolvers that outclassed its competitors by being relatively inexpensive, easy to use and durable. One of the most influential models of the Colt revolvers currently resides in Houston Baptist University's Southern History Museum and is known as the 1860 Colt Model Army Revolver. The 1860 Colt Model Army revolver, along with the other Colt revolvers, revolutionized America's gun culture by being affordable and reliable enough so that it was a practical purchase for even the average American.

Samuel Colt's mechanical ingenuity was first apparent during his early teenage years. He would often dismantle machines and firearms at his father's mill and the adjacent farm he worked at so he could discover how they operated. Colt first conceived the idea for his rotating revolver mechanism at the age of sixteen while onboard a large ship named the Corvo. "Aboard the Corvo, Colt became fascinated with the ship's wheel, particularly the way it could alternately spin or be locked in a fixed position through the use of a clutch. He translated this controlled rotation to firearms and a means whereby a single-shot pistol could be adapted to fire multiple rounds in quick succession" (History.com Staff). With his ideas in place, Colt carved the prototype for his first revolver out of wood while at sea. After improving the design through a series of prototypes, Colt received a patent for his first revolver in 1836, known as the "Patterson".

Although Colt's revolvers did end up dominating America's firearm industry, they were not an instant success. The United States Army denied his first attempt for a contract because they feared that his design was potentially unreliable, although ironically, Colt's revolvers later became known for being one of the most dependable firearms on the market. Nevertheless, Colt's manufacturing company continued to struggle until 1846, when General Zachary Taylor heard about the gun's success with the Texas Rangers in fighting the Native Americans. The ability to fire five or six bullets in relatively rapid succession had made the Colt an invaluable resource to the Rangers, and Taylor reasoned that the Colt would be equally effective on the battlefield. The Army collaborated with Colt to make a more powerful version of the Colt revolver and ordered 1,000 of these new model Colts to be used during the Mexican War. With this contract, the Colt revolver became the first cartridge revolver ever to be embraced by the United States Army.

The Colt's military service did not end with the Mexican War. During the American Civil War, "the hand firearm used more than any other on both sides was the .44 caliber Colt percussion revolver, Army Model of 1860" (Parsons). The Army Model of 1860, the Colt model currently displayed in the Southern History Museum, played an integral role in the outcome of the American Civil War. Although Colt did supply the southern states with arms while tensions were rising between the north and the south, after violence broke out, Colt focused almost solely on selling his revolvers to the Union. The firearm advantage in the North provided by the 1860 Army model was a significant factor in why the South was eventually defeated. During the years of the Civil War, nearly 400,000 Colt revolvers were manufactured, and of these guns, more than a fourth were Army Models purchased by the United States government. Although the number of Colt revolvers produced during the Civil War is certainly a staggering statistic, the number used "would have undoubtedly been greater still had not a disastrous fire at the Colt factory in February, 1864 destroyed the building where the revolvers were made" (Parsons). Samuel Colt's influence on America's military history cannot be understated, since without his innovative design that made the revolver practical for military use, several wars, including the Mexican War and American Civil War, could have had vastly different outcomes.

Along with its influence on America's military, Samuel Colt's revolver also completely revolutionized America's culture by transforming the way Americans view firearms. Before the Colt revolver, firearms were impractical to purchase for most American families. They were expensive, unreliable, and complex enough that most people could not operate them effectively. Handheld guns were more of a novelty than a realistic means of protecting oneself, but this all changed with the Colt revolver. "Colt had hit on a perfect weapon for a gun culture: his revolvers were relatively inexpensive; fired several rounds quickly, negating the need for skill; were perfect for urban life, being easy to conceal" (Bellesiles 34). Some Americans viewed firearms as immoral, but Colt counteracted this view with an ingenious advertising campaign. Colt's advertising techniques ranged from engraving his guns with heroic scenes of men protecting their families with a Colt revolver to using newspapers and magazines to associate the Colt with the freedom and beauty of Western life. Not only did Colt succeed in producing one of the first practical firearms, he even managed to portray his products in a way that made owning a gun seem like a moral obligation rather than an impractical novelty.

With its key role in advancing America's military and transforming its gun culture, the Colt revolver will undoubtedly be forever remembered as an icon of American spirit and freedom. The Colt helped Americans conquer the West in its dream of Manifest Destiny while giving the average American family a means to feel safe and protected. Recent firearm manufacturers have not come even remotely close to an innovation of equal magnitude to Colt's use of the revolving cartridge. When viewing the 1860 Colt Model Army revolver in the Southern History Museum, I do not see an antiquated artifact from the American Civil War. Instead, I view the revolver as a true representation of the courage and mechanical ingenuity of my ancestors.

### Works Cited

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