

# Lock, Stock & Barrel

While many wish to rewrite history or restrict the right to gun ownership, the firearm has made an indelible mark upon both our history and our language. Many phrases in common use find their etymology in firearms. One might reasonably question attempts to ban something that has left such a profound mark upon our language. Several examples are discussed below.

The title of this page gives a clue to our first example. When we say something is being provided **lock, stock and barrel**, we mean that everything needed to use the item is present. The term has its origins in the early days of the U.S. firearms industry. Early on, the three primary firearm components were each made by separate craftsmen. Thus, one would build the firing mechanism or “Lock” (what we now would call the receiver but in those days was called a lock because of the flintlock firing mechanism), another would build the wooden stock, and a third would build the barrel. The owner would need to acquire all three components and assemble them or have someone do it. Eventually, manufacturers began providing all three components, sometimes fully assembled. From them an owner could acquire everything needed; i.e. “Lock, Stock and Barrel”.

But there are many other examples in common use.

Someone acting impetuously is often said to be going off **half-cocked**. The term again finds its origin in early flintlock firearms. Because of the way they are loaded, primed and fired, the flintlock has three basic states: the hammer resting on the flash pan, half-cocked to allow priming, and full-cocked or ready to fire. When one acts without preparation or readiness for the task, they are half-cocked.

A momentary, often spectacular but ultimately ineffectual event or person is deemed a **flash in the pan**. Once again, the term derives from the flintlock. The pan of the firearm holds loose gunpowder that is ignited by the striking flint. The resulting flame/flash transmits through

an opening thereby igniting the primary charge within the barrel of the firearm and launching the projectile. If only the loose powder ignites, there will be just a flash in the pan – and nothing else. If you load a muzzle loading firearm with powder and wadding but forget the bullet, then you will simply **blow your wad**. You **misfire** when you fail to achieve your intended result. Wet gunpowder is unlikely to ignite. One who takes precautions and is ready when needed is said to **keep their powder dry**.

A soldier standing rigidly at attention or something perfectly aligned may be described as **ramrod straight** reflecting the rod used to ram home the powder and projectile in a muzzle loading firearm.

A quick-tempered person is often said to have a **hair trigger**. The term derives from a firearm trigger mechanism so light or short that it can be fired with minimal effort or thought – and perhaps even inadvertently. Such triggers were often favored by gunslingers or others who survived largely by their proficiency with a firearm.

Additional terms in common usage derive from a marksman who fires without consideration of the consequences or circumstances and therefore is **trigger happy** or from one who fires without carefully aiming and **shoots from the hip**.

When travelling with a friend, many people prefer to **ride shotgun**. When doing so, they are duplicating the armed stagecoach guard who rode in that passenger position next to the driver and was usually armed with...a shotgun.

One who attacks a challenge with maximum speed or effort is going **full bore**. The term refers to the cylindrical hole within a firearm barrel that is made by boring. As a general rule, the larger the bore diameter, the faster and more powerful the projectile.

One who gives their all to a challenge is often said to have used or gone the **whole nine yards**. While it sounds like a sports metaphor, the term has its origin in the machine guns of World War II fighter

aircraft. Those firearms used belt-fed ammunition and the standard length of such belts was 27 feet or nine yards. Giving or going the whole nine yards meant firing the entire belt.

Someone that can be trusted, especially in a difficult situation, is regarded as a **straight shooter**, just like the marksman who consistently hits the target. A pitcher, quarterback or other athlete who consistently misses the mark **cannot hit the broad side of a barn**. That phrase originated with shooters who lacked proficiency and accuracy. Someone who acts without seeing or knowing the true circumstances or with little chance of success is taking **a shot in the dark**. When you do or say something that causes problems for you rather than the intended person or object you **shoot yourself in the foot**.

The most powerful people in an organization are the **big guns**. If they target you for blame or criticism, then you are **in the line of fire**. Alternatively, you may be **in the cross-hairs** (referring to the reticle of a scope) or **have the guns trained on you**. When your ideas are criticized, then you may have been **shot down**. When facing an urgent deadline, you are **under the gun**. If you are in the thick of things you are in the **line of fire**. Refusing to shirk from a task means you are **sticking to your guns** while being well prepared for argument means you are **armed with the facts**. Someone who perseveres to the end **goes down with both guns firing**. When you narrowly avoid misfortune you have **dodged the bullet**. A person or thing that survives despite repeated attack is **bulletproof**.

Attempting something against the odds is a **long shot**. If those odds are overwhelming, then you are likely **outgunned**. If you nevertheless make a determined effort then you are taking your **best shot**. In contrast, someone overly prepared for a task is **armed to the teeth** when accomplishing something simple requires only a **potshot**. Being afraid to engage in an activity means you are **gun shy**. Finally acting on a decision is **pulling the trigger**.

Acting in an under-handed manner is ***taking a cheap shot***. When speaking without reflection or factual basis, you are ***shooting your mouth off***. Having the last word in an argument as you walk away is a ***parting shot***. If overeager to engage you may be a ***hotshot***. When you are extremely angry about something then you are ***up in arms***.

Those who approach a difficult or painful situation with fortitude are ***biting the bullet***. If facing a difficult situation or deadline, you are ***staring down the barrel***. When someone scolds or judges with extreme vigor, they are ***unloading or shooting both barrels***, just like someone firing both barrels of a shotgun at the same time. When making lots of noise or trouble with little effect you are ***shooting blanks*** (that term can also refer to the inability to produce offspring). Being prepared for almost any situation means you are ***loaded for bear***. Compelling evidence that a particular event happened is a ***smoking gun***.

Finally, we should not ignore the forced nuptials of a ***shotgun wedding*** where the reluctant groom is persuaded to honor his obligations or face the shotguns of the bride's relatives.

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**Author Note:** Like many young men growing up in the rural South, the author owned a .22 caliber rifle and a shotgun, both of which were used for hunting and sport shooting. He no longer hunts and has passed the .22 rifle on to his son, but he still owns firearms for recreation and personal defense. He is not a member of the NRA and has no vested interest in the gun debate, but is tired of hearing heated arguments presented on both sides of the issue without bothering to learn the facts.