# Classic Handguns: John Mos

**By John Marshall**

Arguably *the* classic handgun of all time is John Moses Browning's Model of 1911 pistol. No other handgun in history has been so widely accepted and copied. The basic 1911 design lives on in pistols made by scores of manufacturers, and even today – nearly a century after its birth – the 1911 design is favored by professional pistoleros, including police officers, civilian competitors, and the military.

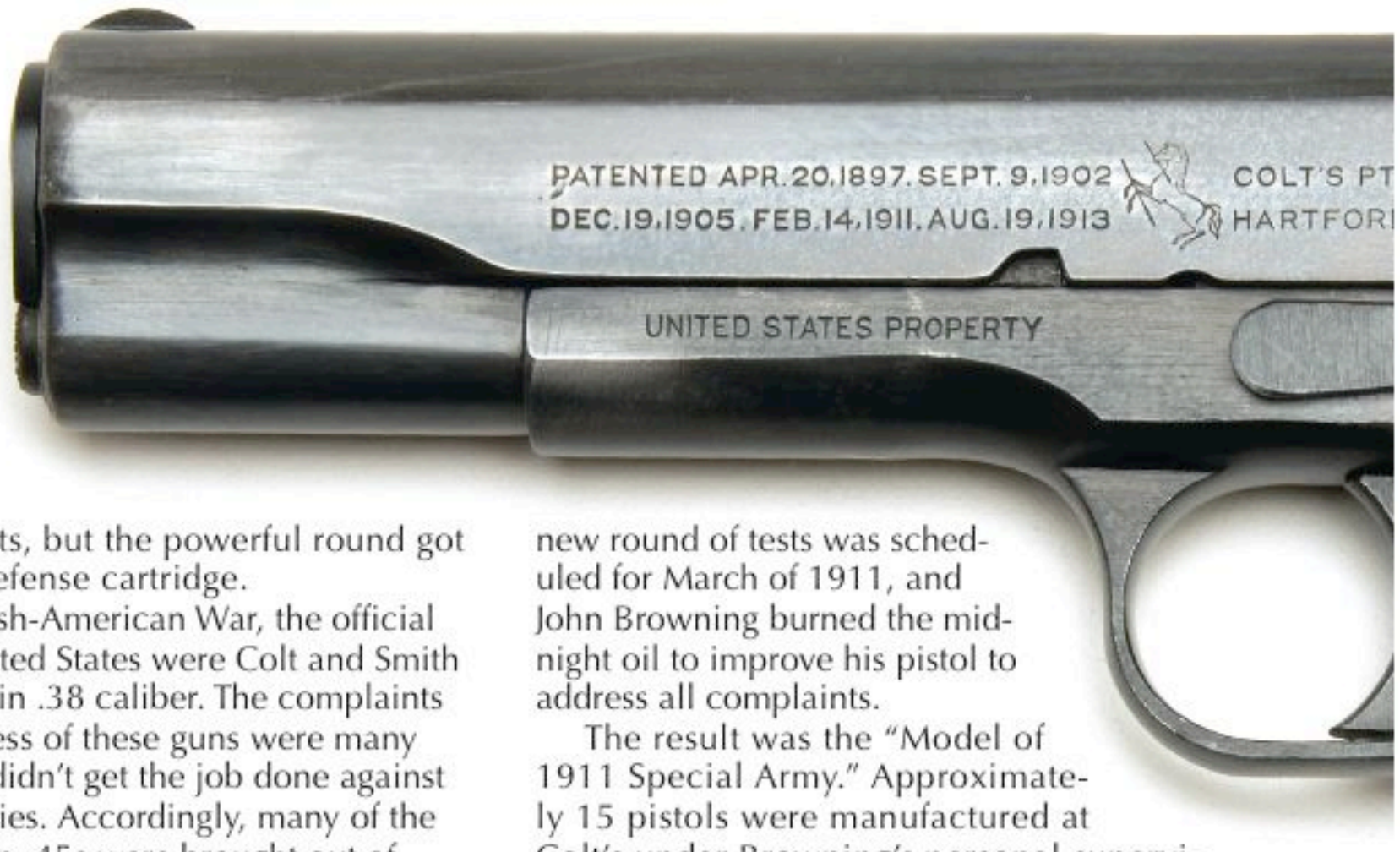
The story of the 1911's development is a fascinating tale, with its beginnings in the latter part of the 19th century. In that time period, the .45 caliber revolvers made by Colt and Smith & Wesson achieved an enviable reputation as effective man-stoppers. The .45 caliber seemed an ideal compromise between power and ease of handling. Recoil was not so stiff as to preclude rapid follow-on shots, but the powerful round got the job done as a defense cartridge.

During the Spanish-American War, the official handguns of the United States were Colt and Smith & Wesson revolvers in .38 caliber. The complaints about the effectiveness of these guns were many and loud. They just didn't get the job done against determined adversaries. Accordingly, many of the old Colt single-action .45s were brought out of mothballs and still served effectively to down the enemy in close quarters battle. The U.S. Army wanted a .45 caliber semiautomatic, but those under development were still not ready for prime time. So in 1909, the Army adopted a Colt revolver chambered for a slightly altered .45 Colt cartridge. This was a big and effective sidearm, but the Army still wanted a .45 semiauto.

Enter John Browning. He, partnering with Colt's, had brought out the first .45 semiauto pistol, the Model 1905. In 1907, the Army Ordnance Dept had tested the Model 1905, and ordered 200 of the pistols for field trials, along with some pistols in .45 auto caliber made by the Savage Arms Company. The early Colt .45s were not received well, as they jammed and broke parts during the tests. One soldier was struck by the slide of the pistol he was shooting as it flew off the frame! The Savage pistols didn't do any better, suffering from jams, parts breakage, and reports of very sharp recoil. Many of them also dropped their magazines during firing.

John Browning went back to the drawing board and developed an improved pistol in 1909. Colt's reps went on the road with this pistol, demonstrating it to Army officers. Very impressed with this pistol was Army Lt. Col. John Thompson (later to be father of the Thompson submachine gun). He set up special tests at Springfield Army with a view towards further improving these prototypes, preparing them for the announced Army trials of 1910.

In November of 1910, an improved Colt was entered in the Army trials, in competition with another Savage pistol. The 1910 Colt was very close to its final configuration, with a manual safety and a grip safety. However, when the smoke cleared, neither the Colt nor the Savage won official approval. Reliability was still a problem with both pistols, and the Colt developed cracks in the barrel and frame. A new round of tests was scheduled for March of 1911, and John Browning burned the midnight oil to improve his pistol to address all complaints.




The result was the "Model of 1911 Special Army." Approximately 15 pistols were manufactured at Colt's under Browning's personal supervision. Colt's tested these pistols, and one was selected out of the initial six as the most trouble-free. Colt's and Browning would stake their future on this one pistol!

The results of the trials of 1911 were astounding to all concerned. The pistol selected by Colt's as their standard bearer fired 6,000 full-power rounds without a hiccup, and on March 28, 1911, the Army formally adopted it as the Model 1911! Colt's secured a contract for 31,344 pistols. The design became an instant classic.

The 1911 was a big and robust pistol, recoil-operated with a tilt-barrel design actuated by a rotating link to the frame. The magazine held seven rounds, and featured a lanyard ring on the bottom. The pistol itself also had a lanyard ring at the base of its mainspring housing. The slide locked back after firing the last round, a signal to the user that a fresh magazine needed to be inserted. A grip safety blocked the trigger until the pistol was properly gripped, and there was a manual safety that blocked the sear until disengaged. All controls were quite ergonomic. The magazine was dropped by a release button just aft of the trigger on the left side of the pistol. These first pistols were handsomely blued and boasted elegant checkered wood stocks, with