

Gun Control in America

*Steering
the debate
to vital
issues*



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Some years back I penned a short commentary on the issue of gun control in the United States of America, and despite the fact that some thirty odd years have gone by, the key points which I made in that piece remain quite current and thus very relevant to the present debate being waged.¹ I will revisit these points in the following discussion as a way of contributing a few additional thoughts to the present discourse on gun control in that country.

The gun as symbol of security and power

The problem of gun control in America is not purely social or legal, but it is also cultural, political and economic. The gun occupies a central place in the American psyche as a symbol of security and power. This symbolism is part and parcel of the American heritage.

One need not look into the distant past to find evidence for this phenomenon. In a story covering an increase in the Florida crime rate in the early 1980s, Toronto's *Globe and Mail* quoted a former

local police chief whose words echo sentiments which could be aptly used to describe the present atmosphere that prevails in America:

"The population is terrified. The court system in the United States has deteriorated to the point that it is now non-existent. The only way to get into trouble in this country is not to pay your income tax."²

As a direct result, the people, fearful of the rampant increase in violent crimes, simply resort to arming themselves. The same article goes on to highlight the different posters which covered the walls of a Fort Lauderdale armory, The Kings Arms Ltd, at the time. The captions found on those posters speak to an arms-industry narrative which has remained unchanged to this very day: *The Only Gun Control This Country Needs is a Sharp Eye and a Steady Hand, When Guns Are Outlawed, I'll Report Mine Stolen, and Support Gun Control--It Was Effective in Nazi Germany, Russia and Cuba.*³

The recent sudden increase in gun purchases, sparked by the fear that politicians will propose tougher legislation for the sales of assault arms

and ammunition in light of the Aurora and Sandy Hook killings is also a clear reflection of the deeply embedded mind set expressed in the above captions.

NRA champion of Second Amendment Rights

This mind set is constitutionally enshrined in the United States Constitution's Second Amendment, which gives Americans the right to bear arms. Since 1934 Second Amendment rights have also been championed and guarded by The National Rifle Association (NRA), which was founded in 1871 to promote primarily good marksmanship--to promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis."⁴ Its role as a strong Second Amendment advocate evolved gradually during this past century resulting in 1971 with the creation of the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), a powerful lobbying group whose mandate is to defend the Second Amendment rights not only of NRA members but of all Americans.⁵ With the support of NRA membership of almost four million, the ILA is one of the most powerful lobbying groups on Capitol Hill.

The true strength of the NRA and its lobbying arm the ILA, however, does not consist solely in its

membership. It consists of the widespread support it enjoys among Americans as the defender of their Second Amendment rights and, of course, of the support it receives from the defense and arms industries whose well-being depends on a constant and secure demand for their products and services.

Key means of securing the safety, liberty and happiness of the people

More importantly, the NRA and what it stands for depend on the value that most Americans attribute to the gun as an important means of securing their safety, liberty and happiness. To the extent that the social consciousness of America remains captivated by this symbolism of the gun, politicians, legislators and the courts will exert very little effort in pressing for the kind of changes sufficient enough to stem the ever-increasing use of assault weapons in the carrying out of violence and any other criminal activity. This is not to say that we believe that such measures will ever have any chance of success. These kinds of measures are misguided and whatever short-term positive effects they will have, they will be short lived.

This value of the gun as a key means for securing the safety, liberty and happiness of Americans has been a driving force behind the United States' ascendancy to superpower status. During this past century, the gun was used in defending the life and freedom of millions of people around the globe through the United States' participation in two horrific world wars in which America lost approximately 521,915 of its young men and women.⁶ Since the end of World war II, the United States has continued to use the gun in policing the world, in defending freedom around the world as emerging conflicts warranted, and in protecting its commercial and economic interests.

Being a superpower is good for business

Being a superpower has required the United States to become mightily equipped resulting in the creation of a military establishment and an arms industry as well as spinoff industries which rely directly on the continuance of this role and its exercise worldwide. The world's military expenditures in 2012 have been estimated to have been 1.7 trillion dollars, of which 41% were incurred by the United States,⁷ representing 3.2% of its GDP.⁸

In recent years the United States has been a major supplier of arms and military technology to many of the world's conflicts, many of which take place in developing countries.⁹ In 2011, according to a *New York Times* article, United States' contribution reached a record high of \$66.3 billion, representing about 75% of the entire global market which totalled \$85.3 billion.¹⁰ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimated that in 2012 US arms exports would be \$60 billion.¹¹

America in a very dangerous double bind

The current gun control debate, spurred especially by the Aurora and Sandy Hook killings, has focussed solely on the mortal costs that handguns and assault weapons inflict in America each year. Meanwhile very little is said about the human costs that are inflicted on the people of other nations by the thousands of hand guns and assault weapons which are yearly exported by American firms and other private arms dealers, not to mention the countless others which are bought and sold via the hundreds of black markets around the world.

Supply and demand seem to rule the day and economic factors seem to outweigh the human costs

which the people of these countries suffer from the eventual use of these tools of violence and destruction. The American people and the media should become equally horrified whenever American handguns and assault weapons are used to carry out all kinds of violent activities in other parts of the world.

Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to state that indeed the interests of government, the military establishment, the arms industry and those of the economic community at large have become very closely interdependent. Hence, the unintended, perhaps, consequence of these existing political and economic interdependencies has been the placement of top-level decision making of both government and industry in a very dangerous double bind.

The need to sustain these interdependencies for economic reasons prevents the government from ever being able to consider the possibility of undertaking a significant downsizing of its armed forces and thus of its military arsenal. Likewise, it cannot in any way bring about a value shift in the minds of people about the importance of the gun and of all that it symbolizes. To do so would not only be a challenge to the United States' superpower status,

but it would also be a challenge to the American way of life for which the gun plays and has played an important role in defending.

As for the military establishment and the arms industry, its bureaucrats and CEOs cannot support any legislative attempt to curtail people's rights under the Second Amendment in support of some higher cause, i.e., reduction of gun violence and gun related criminal activities without compromising the integrity of the politico-economic systems of which they form an integral part. In other words, the double bind prevents these bureaucrats and CEOs from being able to exercise any serious and genuine form of corporate social responsibility on behalf of the nation and its people.

More legislative action is not the answer

The socio-cultural-economic conditions which form the source of this double bind are irreversible in the short term without a complete reinvention of the nation. Similarly, the double bind which is sadly constraining effective decision making is equally extremely difficult to undo in the short term.

For these reasons alone any proposed legislative action, e.g., Senator Dianne Feinstein's bill *Assault Weapons Ban 2013* is not viable and hence is not likely to have any significant impact in curbing the ever-recurring acts of violence.¹² The bill's main thrust is summarized in what Senator Feinstein considers the two main goals of the proposed legislation:

“First, the bill prohibits the sale, manufacture, transfer and importation of 157 of the most commonly-owned military-style assault weapons. It also bans an additional group of assault weapons that can accept a detachable ammunition magazine and have one or more military characteristics.

“Second, the bill bans large capacity magazines and ammunition feeding devices holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition. The devices allow shooters to fire numerous rounds in rapid succession without having to stop and reload.”¹³

As noted by Katy Steinmetz in her article, "After Newton, Democrats Propose an Assault-Weapons Ban," Feinstein herself admitted that the sole

purpose of the proposed bill is to dry up current supply.¹⁴

The proposed legislative action is well intended and for that reason will help in appeasing the millions of individuals calling for stricter gun control measures in light of the Sandy Hook and Aurora killings. It will also reap political points for its proponents and in many cases soothe their conscience for having made an effort at the very least.

Feinstein's bill, if passed in Congress, might dry up the supply of guns available in the marketplace. However, to state the obvious, it will not affect the supply side of the economic equation when applied to the black market, the main source of the guns and assault weapons used by criminals and terrorists.

Besides, Senator's Feinstein's bill does not address the over 300 millions firearms and assault weapons presently in the hands of ordinary Americans. In fact, the bill goes out of its way to reassure Americans that their rights under the Second Amendment would not be in any ways compromised. The bill states:

“The legislation also protects the rights of law-abiding citizens who use guns for

hunting, household defense or legitimate recreational purposes. The Assault Weapons Ban includes a grandfather clause that specifically exempts all assault weapons lawfully possessed at the date of enactment from the ban.

“The legislation also excludes:

“More than 2,200 legitimate hunting and sporting rifles by specific make and model; any gun manually operated by bolt, pump, lever or slide action; and Weapons used by government officials, law enforcement and retired law enforcement.”¹⁵

The inclusion of the above provisions clearly indicates that Senator Feinstein and the other co-sponsors are sensitive to the critical issues regarding the rights protected under the Second Amendment. There is no question that any legislative attempt at this point in time to compromise Second Amendment rights would set ablaze a public revolt which would have highly volatile consequences.

Americans themselves doubly bound

Legislators, public officials, and economic decision makers are not the only ones finding themselves in

a double bind situation. Most ordinary Americans are equally bound by the pernicious mind set described earlier.

On the one hand, Americans love their freedom of being able to pursue their dreams and thus achieve happiness. They also love their rights and liberties which were courageously won for them in the war of independence and defended in numerous horrific conflicts and wars thereafter, and at a great price and sacrifice. They enjoy the personal and national security that the rule of law and the acquired superpower status have provided for them during the last two hundred and thirty-six years. But they are also keenly aware of the fact that these accomplishments could never have been realized without the brute force of the gun.

On the other hand, an ever-increasing number of people have become intensely frustrated in their pursuit of the American dream. For a vast number of Americans the dream remains elusive. The United States Census Bureau estimated that in 2011 15% of Americans, or 46.2 million people, were living in poverty.¹⁶ The real median household income in 2011 was \$50,054, 8.1% lower than 2007, the year prior to the financial debacle on Wall Street which triggered the most serious

recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.¹⁷ While there was a small decline in the number of people without health insurance coverage in 2011, the estimated number of 48.6 million who are without insurance is a sad reminder that the American dream was merely just that, a fanciful dream.¹⁸

Lastly, during the last two years, the Gini Index, a measure of household income inequality between the very rich and the very poor, increased by 1.6% reaching a high of 0.477 in 2011—with 0 representing complete equality and 1 total inequality.¹⁹ These statistics are consistent with the trend described in a special report produced by *The Economist* last year on the world's economy. The report indicates that between 1973 and 2007, the real household income of the top 1% of Americans quadrupled, while the real household income of the lower 20% increased by only 40%.²⁰ As the previous Gini index confirmed, during the last three years, this gap has become even wider.²¹

The above economic picture cannot bode too well for most Americans. The picture is made even more bleak when they look at the political dynamics on Capitol Hill and discover that the very individuals that they elected to lead and manage the

affairs of the nation are not really focussed on promoting their best interest, but on advancing the interests of the special interest groups and sectors who funded their political campaigns—the majority of whom is part of the 1% of the population, the economic elite of the country.

Thus, a rapidly increasing number of Americans are coming to the conclusion that the democratic ideals proclaimed in the *Declaration of Independence* are also simply a mirage. This heightening awareness of the true nature of Washington politics, boosted during the last five years by the social media, coupled with much economic uncertainty and inequality, are making Americans feel more helpless than ever, and thus less secure and safe in their pursuit of happiness. These truths, as heralded in the *Declaration of Independence*, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”,²² are not as self-evident as they once were for previous generations and for the founders of this great nation.

How then can legislators on Capitol Hill dare ask the American people to give up their arms? Asking them to disarm themselves is like demanding that

they hand over the very means of last resort which they might be felt to use in regaining their sovereignty anew so that they can resume their pursuit of happiness, a good life for themselves and their children, unencumbered by the will and power of the few. While most Americans are very saddened and gravely concerned by the high death rates due to handguns and assault weapons in the country, they are equally fearful for their own life and liberty and equally mindful more than ever of the need to protect them.

A call to America to reinvent itself before it's too late

The pursuit of happiness, building the largest and strongest economy in the world, and acquiring and sustaining its superpower status were not realized without cost to the nation. In addition to the great number of casualties suffered in World War II—405,399 deaths and 671,846 wounded—the United States incurred 95,166 deaths and 257,054 wounded in the Korean, Viet Nam, and Iraq wars combined; and over 4500 deaths and 52,000 wounded in the present Afghan theatre of operation.²³ And since the booming economic times of the 1960s, the people have gone through six economic downturns and one major recession from

which the country is still recovering, and which has created living conditions for millions of Americans not unlike those experienced in the 1930s during the Great Depression. The pursuit of the American dream, the pursuit of happiness in recent decades have been laden with much hardship and suffering, taking its toll on the quality of life of several generations of Americans.

A cluster graph, showing numerous clusters scattered evenly throughout its area, is best apt to depict the present socio-economic conditions of the United States. Each cluster consists of a mix of socio-economic and health bundles of data which tell a very depressing story about the quality of the American way of life:

- from the low regard with which human life is treated in the abortion clinics of America to the insatiable greed driving the financial markets of this past decade—a main cause of the 2008 economic crisis;
- from the fractured state of the American family to the dysfunctions of government, especially at the highest level;
- from the mental health and obesity crisis gripping and crippling a significant percentage of the population to a health care labyrinth failing

millions who do not have the wherewithal to negotiate and traverse successfully;²⁴

- from the shameful level of poverty to the equally embarrassing level of corruption pervading financial and corporate practices, which in 2008 brought the country and the entire world to the brink of an unprecedented financial disaster;
- and lastly, from the millions of unemployed persons, marginally attached and discouraged workers, and the unemployed young people (currently standing at a depressing 23.5%),²⁵ to a generation of adults forming the top1% basking in their achievements and wealth mainly ignorant of or in denial of the pressure points they share in the social and political dynamics of the country.

The different clusters on the graph also represent the socio-economic pressure points of the community and the body politic in general. When the conditions forming these pressure points reach their critical mass, very unpredictable consequences follow. It is not mere speculation to state that the massacres in Littleton, Colorado; Tucson, Arizona; Aurora, Colorado; and Newtown, Connecticut are not simply random occurrences, but upsurges of the critical mass in these regions resulting in highly

explosive outbursts of violence in individuals and/or groups.

Brief concluding remarks

The current gun control debate is missing the target by a mile. The problems are systemic and go beyond gun control. It is simply too late to exercise any kind of gun control in America short of establishing a military dictatorship having as one of its prime purposes the enforcement of existing and new gun control measures. Of course, any attempt to do so would be met with strong armed resistance from the people, who would be forced to once again defend their rights and liberties against a despotic form of government.

It would be easy for us to offer numerous recommendations to the United States Government and its sovereign people. We will, however, resist that temptation in the hope that they themselves will be able to discern more clearly the true nature of the problems relating to the brute violence being carried out with handguns and assault weapons in that country. We also trust that the analysis and ideas presented above will help in providing some guidance to them as they muddle through these most dangerous times in their history. At the end of the day they need to optimize their decision

making and select only those options which are in the best interest of the nation.

The pressure points of the American social fabric and body politic are reaching a critical mass. The recent massacres are a preview of more grim and fateful scenarios yet to follow if a significant shift is not made in the direction the country is presently taking, if a new set of priorities is not drafted for the future, and sound values not adopted, declared and modelled at all levels of the Republic.

We are certain that executive orders from the President and legislative initiatives are not sufficient to help prevent more serious outbreaks of violence or avert a national upheaval.

Notes

¹As quoted in Albert Fiorino, "NRA and Gun Control," Toronto: Faculty of Management Studies, University of Toronto, Postdoctoral Fellow, 1982-1983, p. 1.

²*Ibid*

³*Ibid*, p. 2

⁴National Rifle Association, "A Brief History of the NRA", <http://membership.nrahq.org/about-us.as>.

⁵*Ibid*

⁶United States. Department of Defense, document entitled *Principal Wars in Which the United States Participated. U.S. Military*

Personnel Serving and Casualties, <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/WCPRINCIPAL>.

⁷Anup Shah, "Global Military Spending," *Global Issues*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending>, updated May 6, 2012.

⁸*Ibid*

⁹Federation of American Scientists, "Fast Facts," <http://www.org/about/staff.html>.

¹⁰Thom Shanker, "U.S. Arms Sales Make Up Most of Global Market," *New York Times*, Aug 26, 2012 issue, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/world/middleeast/us-foreign-arms-sales-reach-66-3-billion-in-2011.html?_r=0

¹¹Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "Background paper on SIPRI military expenditure data, 2011," Stockholm, Sweden: April 17, 2012, 10p. See also Jim Wolf, "U.S. expects record of \$60 billion in arms sales in 2012," Washington, DC: Reuters, June 21, 2012.

¹²United States Senate. 113 Congress 1st Session, "A Bill to regulate assault weapons, to ensure that the right to keep and bear arms is not unlimited, and for other purposes," pp. 14ff.

¹³United States Senate. Senator Dianne Feinstein, "Feinstein Introduces Bill on Assault Weapons, High-Capacity Magazines," in online *Newsletter*, January 24, 2013.

¹⁴Katy Steinmetz, "After Newtown, Democrats Propose an Assault-Weapons Ban," accessible on: <http://swamp-land.time.com/2013/01/24/after-newtown-democrats-propose-an-assault-weapons-ban/#ixzz2J1ObKX2p>, January 24, 2013.

¹⁵United States Senate. Senator Dianne Feinstein, *op cit*

¹⁶United States. Department of Commerce, United State Census Bureau, "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2011," Washington, DC: September 12, 2012, p. 1.

¹⁷*Ibid*

¹⁸*Ibid*, 1, 3

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 2

²⁰The Economist, "World Economy," special report, London, UK: October 13, 2012, pp. 12ff.

²¹United States. Department of Commerce, United State Census Bureau, *op cit*, p. 2.

²²United States. Continental Congress, "Preamble" to *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776

²³United States. Department of Defense, *op cit*, for the wars up and including the Persian Gulf War. See *The Washington Post*, "Faces of the Fallen" at: <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen/search/?q=Afghanistan>.

²⁴United States. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Surgeon General, *The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity 2001*, Rockville, MD: 2001; See also *Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda*, 2000; and *Mental Health, A Report of the Surgeon General*, 1999.

²⁵United States. Department of Labour. Bureau of Labour Statistics, "Economic News Release: Employment Situation Summary," Washington, DC: January 4, 2013, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>.