

Gun control? No thanks

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Almost before Reagan knew that a bullet had entered his body (He noticed only some minutes after the shooting was reported round the world) British TV commentators were snarling about "the need for proper gun control in America". The editors of British newspapers were mentally reconstructing the cliches for the following morning's editorials.

The shooting of Lennon had already prepared the easy phrases. No thought was required. It is abundantly obvious to every sensible citizen of the UK that the United States is a land of violence largely because of easily-available guns. What needs to be done to reduce that violence at a stroke is to enact laws similar to those in Britain "and nearly every civilised country", making it extraordinarily difficult for ordinary people to get hold of usable guns, especially "handguns" (pistols).

Obvious though this be, it is mistaken. The British pontificators on the subject are almost always abysmally ignorant of American society and its violence, and of the scholarly literature on the consequences of gun control.

FALLACIES OF GUN OWNERSHIP

Even the little, inessential tidbits of gossip which they shove into their homilies betray this profound ignorance. In order to account for the curious fact that guns are so freely available in (parts of) the richest and most successful civilisation in the history of the world, the pundits always mention the words "gun lobby". The phrase suggests (and often this is spelled out) that the US gun manufacturers benefit from lack of controls, and are behind the inexplicable refusal of the US to fall in with every civilised country.

Wrong. The manufacturers of handguns, rifles and shotguns are, in any case, a tiny

industry with puny lobbying powers, but what they have they throw behind the movement for stricter gun controls. They would benefit from controls because (a) the bulk of their custom comes from various branches of the US and other *governments* (who are not, of course, to have *their* guns "controlled"), and (b) restriction hits particularly hard the major companies' competitors, especially distributors of cheap foreign imports.

The US "gun lobby" is simply a matter of sheer numbers: millions upon millions of ordinary, unprivileged, unrich and individually uninfluential people. The rich, the privileged and the influential are generally in favour of stricter gun control, and have been working hard at it for a hundred years, with some success.

Another such tidbit is the assertion that ready availability of handguns is a relic of the frontier or even of "the Wild West". Wrong again. First, the old West wasn't actually wild; the incidence of violent attack was exceptionally low, especially before the sheriffs, state-appointed judges and other emissaries of the authorities were installed. The settlers were peaceable, non-aggressive respecters of the lives and property of their neighbours (except Indians), and generally did not bother to make the financial sacrifice of acquiring a gun, since the probability of any assault was so remote. Second, very few people in the West could afford handguns. If a family could afford to invest in a gun, it would be a rifle or shotgun. Third, the movement for gun control originated in the West, at a time when the rest of the US (as the UK) had no licensing or prohibition of guns. The first state laws were only against carrying "concealed weapons". In the more affluent and industrialized East of the US, carrying of concealed pistols was so common-place that tailors routinely made trousers with sewn-in holsters.

Gun control then appeared in the South, as part of the concerted endeavour to keep down the emancipated slaves. (Much modern infringement of liberty has a racist origin. For example, the contemporary fad for

persecuting users of opium and heroin began with the racist trade unions in the US, who wanted to keep out Chinese immigrants. Many Chinese used opium, and it was widely believed that this enabled them to work harder than Whites. The first anti-opium laws applied only to Chinese.) What spread gun control to the Eastern US was the arrival of millions of immigrants, somewhat swarthy in appearance and Catholic or Jewish in religion. A handful of violent outrages by Italian "anarchists" led (along with other influences) to the dominant view that only Protestants of Northern European extraction could be trusted with guns. This was the background to the severe gun controls introduced in many states.

Widespread gun ownership in the US is a modern development, a product of industry and urban life. It is not a relic. It is as up-to-date as the silicon chip. Gun ownership has been spreading rapidly for some decades, and today nearly half of American households have at least one gun. (Bear in mind that in much of the US very few families can get guns, or will risk getting them, because of the strict local controls.) Early this century opinion swung towards strict control, even prohibition, of guns, just as it did towards prohibition of alcohol (and for much the same simple-minded reasons. Alcohol, after all, unlike guns, *is* involved in the majority of violence.) Today American popular opinion has turned round completely, and is probably more militantly in favour of the right to bear arms than it has ever been since the revolution. Several state and city gun controls have been repealed. More will follow.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

It is doubtful if any sensible citizen of the UK has read this far, but if he has, he will be growing impatient. Do the historical origins matter? Does the background matter? Isn't it clear that America today is an anomaly, with both an exceptionally high crime rate and exceptionally easy access to guns? Isn't it simple and straightforward to reduce the former by restricting the latter?

In Switzerland they have a very severe form of gun control. Every male householder must keep ready in his house a fully automatic

rifle (in effect a light machine gun) with ammunition. This sort of weapon is completely illegal in the United States (except for the state's hirelings) and is enormously more destructive than any pistol. The obligation to keep such a firearm arises because virtually all adult males are military reservists. *In addition*, there is massive private ownership of, and trade in, all sorts of firearms. Many Swiss homes have guns openly and proudly displayed.

Numerous articles and one or two books have been written about the "miraculously" low level of crime, especially violent crime in Switzerland. Crime with guns is almost non-existent.

Switzerland is the extreme case, but it is not anomalous. Switzerland leads the world in private ownership of guns. Israel is a close second. Denmark and Finland are far behind, third and fourth - but still way ahead of the US. Israel, Denmark and Finland all have quite low levels of violent crime.

At the other extreme, Mexico has among the strictest gun controls, and among the highest rates of violent crime, in the world.

At this point the sensible citizen of the UK is getting a little out of his depth, so we will take over the conduct of his defence. It ought to be pointed out that a mere lack of correlation between effective gun control and low rates of violent crime does not prove there is no causal relation. It might be that crime rates would be even *lower* in Switzerland if the Swiss weren't armed to the teeth, and higher in Mexico if controls were lifted.

As luck would have it, we can turn to the United States itself. Because of its large size and the high geographical mobility of its population, that country is a ready-made laboratory, with numerous different areas that can be compared, to eliminate the effects of other crime-related factors. It also happens that the states with strict control, more lax control, and virtually no gun control are a well-mixed range of different social conditions.

US EVIDENCE

Several studies of different US regions indicate that where there is easier availability of guns, violent crime is less frequent. Gun control raises the level of violent crime.

Is this surprising? Surely it is precisely what we ought to expect. It is impracticable to stop the habitual, professional criminal getting hold of guns. Even in a totalitarian regime this could hardly be achieved. Prohibition of guns, like prohibition of alcohol or marijuana, does not eliminate what is prohibited, but does ensure that it must be associated with professional crime. In practice, strict gun control leaves the predators armed whilst disarming their prey.

A firearm is a great equalizer. It enables a peaceable, productive person, with a modicum of practice, to defend herself against an attacker, or at least to make the attack extremely risky. No amount of Tai Kwon Do or other tricks can enable the great majority of women to fight off the great majority of men. Men are on average considerably heavier and more muscular than women, a matter of ineradicable biology. But watch the rapes dwindle when it becomes known that women might well be carrying automatic pistols, or even CS gas canisters.

On behalf of the sensible UK citizen we must bring up the possibility that the strict gun control, high-crime parts of the US have more assaults because weapons are easily brought in from neighbouring places where they can be legally procured. This obvious possibility has been investigated, however, and can definitely be ruled out. For example, it is just as easy, or easier, to take a pistol into Canada from the US, than to take one into New York from Pennsylvania. It would also be pointless, since handgun permits are issued almost on demand in Canada to anyone without a criminal record. Yet Canada's level of violent crime is like Britain's - much lower than in the US. The difference between US and Canada is presumably in different traditions and values, not in availability of guns.

Furthermore, although violent crime is higher with gun control, violent crime using

guns is lower with gun control. Professional criminals will still get guns under gun control, and have the incentive of knowing that their victims have been disarmed. But many violent attacks are committed by those who are not habitual criminals. These attacks are normally within the home and family. In such cases, guns will be used where available. When they are not available, numerous other implements found around any house can easily be substituted, with equally injurious effects. As an instrument for killing or maiming an exasperating member of your household, a bread knife is about as good as a handgun.

It has not proved easy to stem the flow of arms into Northern Ireland. But even if the state could stop importation of guns, they can be illegally manufactured, as the Russians have found in Afghanistan. The tribal Afghans' capacity for making replicas of factory-made guns is not such a marvel, and no problem at all with the tools available in Manchester or Birmingham. Making guns is a fairly elementary job of metalwork. The only reason it is not resorted to frequently is that illegal mass-produced weapons are so cheap. Even so, ten per cent of guns used in crimes in New York City are "zip guns", made from umbrella tubing.

New York, where Lennon was shot, and Washington DC, where Reagan was shot, have gun control *considerably* more strict than in Britain. Although both Chapman and Hinckley brought in weapons from out of town, there would have been little difficulty in obtaining them locally. When people in Britain react to news of such shootings by supposing they result from lack of gun control, these people overlook the obvious question: how difficult would it be today in London to obtain a gun and shoot a public figure? It would be quite a simple matter. The reason it does not happen is that British society does not produce many Chapmans or Hinckleys, whereas American society produces quite a number.

UK EVIDENCE

Only one detailed study of firearms control in Britain has been made, by Police Superintendent Colin Greenwood, who was already an outstanding authority on the

subject before he became, in 1970, a research Fellow at the Cambridge University Institute of Criminology. Greenwood is sharply critical of gun control in Britain, and scathing in his ridicule of those who cry "Look at America" without knowing the first thing about it.

Greenwood finds that there is no evidence that gun control in Britain has had the slightest effect in reducing violent crime. (He does not discuss the possibility that it might have increased it.) Control has led to an enormous diversion of police resources into an utterly futile operation, and pointless harassment of those wanting guns for non-criminal purposes. Greenwood argues that the reason why British people permitted the state to take away their freedom to own guns (Pistols were licensed in 1920) was that Britain had become such a peaceful society (under conditions where anyone could get a gun) that few people bothered to keep a gun for self-defence. He does not speculate on the possibility that this is now ceasing to be the case, so that in coming decades the state may be forced to concede popular demands for the right to self-defence, including the right to acquire the means of self-defence.

British people often profess to be astounded that in parts of the US "anyone can go into a shop and buy a gun, no questions asked". Actually there usually are questions asked, in the US. But on which planet have these sensitive British souls been living? In Britain until 1968, anyone could buy a shotgun. No questions were asked. Ironmongers kept shotguns on open shelves. Anyone could buy one, or for that matter, a thousand.

This situation was changed by Roy Jenkins, as a result of the public outcry following the shooting of three London policemen. The police were shot with pistols which had been strictly controlled for decades. Why then respond by controlling shotguns? Deaths by shotgun were not very frequent. The answer is simple. There was massive popular anger at the inability of the state to protect people from violent attack, and a rising chorus of demands for tougher sentences, especially execution for murder. People like Jenkins are so clever that they cannot understand what nine-tenths of people easily see. That crime occurs because crime pays, and can be

reduced by attending it with unpleasant consequences for the criminal, the more unpleasant the consequences, the greater the reduction. This, of course, does not automatically demonstrate that any nastiness visited upon criminals is justified, but it is an elementary fact of life which the likes of Jenkins find too painful to acknowledge. Therefore, they are incapable of coming up with a coherent answer to demands for tougher sentencing. Jenkins' recorded statements prior to 1966 show that he (or his Civil Service advisors) understood perfectly that shotgun control was entirely useless at best. It is clear that he changed his public mind in 1966, in order to be seen to be "doing something", however irrelevant. It muddied the waters, and relieved the pressure to step up the severity of punishment. Needless to say, the shotgun controls have had no effect in abating criminal shootings, which are more common in Britain today, under tight controls, than they have ever been, and will of course inevitably become increasingly commonplace.

OPPOSITION ON PRINCIPLE

Gun control increases violent crime. Though this appears to be an empirical fact, it is not an *a priori* fact. Availability of guns decreases violence in some ways, and increases violence in others. Which effect is the stronger is a matter for empirical research. For example, if it is known that many people carry guns, this will cause some muggers to stop mugging, and others to arm themselves more heavily. Which consequence outweighs the other can be tested only in practice. Although a lot of research shows what we have said above, some knowledgeable students of the subject disagree. We have been protesting here at the fact that British media gurus are prepared to hold forth smugly on a topic about which they know nothing.

Yet even if it turned out that violent crime was reduced by government control on guns, libertarians would still oppose it utterly. Two considerations are important. 1. It is despicable that the state, which draws most of its legitimacy from its claim to be uniquely qualified to defend individuals against violent attack, should fall miserably

The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.

in that defensive role, and then deny individuals the liberty to defend themselves. But the biggest predator is the state. Gun control can only be enforced by guns. Gun control means that the state keeps its guns and decides who else shall have them.

The highly progressive Frei government in Chile introduced "gun control". The even more progressive Allende regime strengthened it. The people of Chile were disarmed. Progressive-minded folk around the world liked this very much, but they did not like it when Pinochet's brutal thugs took over. They applauded when the victim was blindfolded and propped against a wall, and then started booing when the firing squad appeared. Progressive-minded people are like that. (Frei and Allende paved the way for Pinochet in other ways too, but that's another story.) *We must have arms to defend ourselves against the state.* 2. Enmeshed in the advocacy of state gun control, a perfectly valid point may be lurking. One way for an individual to defend himself is to carry weapons. Another is to enter into a voluntary association, by which he might contract to go about unarmed, and entrust the task of communal defence to specialists. Division of labour is admirable for most lines of production, and presumably may work well in the production of protection.

In a libertarian society, public places such as streets, roads and squares will be privately owned, just as shopping arcades are today. ("Private ownership" includes ownership by voluntary associations such as workers' co-operatives, communes, *kibbutzim*, and residents' associations.) Some owners of streets might take no interest in protection. This would be a matter of street-users' "own risk". Others might provide armed patrolmen, just as they would provide street lighting and sewage. Yet others might provide patrolmen *and* require a contractual undertaking from street-users that they be unarmed. In the free market, you can choose to have "gun control" or not, and practices might vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

The customer is always right.

Free Life

(For those wishing to pursue the study of gun control, the libertarian magazine *Reason* published in Santa Barbara, occasionally carries good articles. An excellent introduction to the subject is *Restricting Handguns, The Liberal Skeptics Speak Out*, edited by Don Kates, published in the US in 1979. On Britain, see Colin Greenwood, *Firearms Control: a Study of Armed Crime and Firearms Control in England and Wales*, Routledge, 1972. On the American West, see the article by Anderson and Hill, "An American Experiment in Anarcho-Capitalism: the Not so Wild, Wild West" in the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Volume III, No. I.)