Gun Control: Context and Purpose

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Discussions of gun control, like climate change, welfare, immigration, and other complex social issues get reduced to single variables for political purposes. This reduction leads to political strife and gridlock. It also leads to poor laws that do not solve the problem they are supposed to address, and often creates other unwanted or unforeseen problems.

Whenever an incident like the Parkland, Florida, school shooting occurs, the political right promotes the sanctity of the Second Amendment and the political left promotes gun control as a solution. The focus on these two simplistic approaches, pushed by special interests, and magnified by political parties and the press, obscures genuine understanding of the reasons for mass murders and ways to reduce them.

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The Larger context

Human society is complex like an ecosystem. There are many interrelated variables in which some correlate with each other more directly than others. But a butterfly effect can occur in which a small, nearly unpredictable factor, influences dramatic events. To understand how components of a system affect each other requires a knowledge of all the variables and their relationship.

It is useful to look at the history of predicting the weather. Some have believed the weather was an arbitrary decision of gods. Others noticed it had something to do with geographical location. But even in areas where it rains many times a year, it is difficult to predict when it will rain or when the wind will blow without a lot more data and complex weather models.

Today's weather models are far more accurate than just a few decades ago because they use computers to integrate variables like day of the year, angle of the sun, atmospheric pressure, albedo, proximity of large weather systems, jet stream location, and many other factors.

People commit murder for many reasons and in many ways. They kill for anger and revenge; because they are forced to; to rob or commit other crimes; to impress others; because they feel threatened; to find out what it feels like; and many other reasons. They kill with guns, bombs, knives, bats, fists, cars, fire, gas, water (drowning), pushing off of a building, and in virtually any way that will get the job done.

Guns are easier and more effective in killing than many other ways. Murder can be an uncontrolled instinctual reaction or premeditated and well-planned.

To determine a motive, many factors about the killer need to be considered: whether they have a criminal record, what are their normal behavior patterns, the type of family and social environment that shaped them, who their friends are, whether they are employed or financially broke, whether they were recently divorced or betrayed, whether they are addicted to some substance, whether they are under enormous stress, whether they normally respond to frustration with violence or problem solving, and whether a gun is readily available.

Guns are not the reason people murder, but they may be preferable instruments of murder if available. Removing the availability of guns from someone who wants to commit murder seems common sense and might save some potential murder victims. However, people who want to murder and do not have guns usually figure out a way to kill without them.

We also need to understand who is the most likely victim of a murder, and whether they are likely to be shot by a gun. Again, many factors need to be considered: whether they recently committed a crime or harmed someone, whether they are having an affair, whether they are carrying large amounts of money, whether they belong to a gang, whether they are a helpless target and unable to defend themselves -- perhaps with their own gun, whether they are in a safe place (a real protected place and not a place proclaimed a safe space), and whether they are collateral damage.

By thinking about answers to these questions about murderers and victims, we can conclude that both people who want to kill and those who want to be able to defend themselves will want to own a gun. There is another category of people who neither want to kill nor defend themselves, and wish there was a way to guarantee others -- like the police -- will defend them. This group gets frustrated when the police kill an innocent person, especially if they belong to a different racial, ethnic, or economic group, because it is a sign there is no guarantee others will protect them all the time.

This leads to a new set of variables related to law enforcement officers: their training, their psychological makeup, whether the neighborhoods they patrol are prone to violence, whether they need to carry a gun, or whether other methods of stopping criminals are available, etc. Data related to these variables, along with motives of murderers, vulnerability of targets, and competencies of police needs to be added into forecast models to determine the likelihood of different kinds of murders and shootings and the best way to prevent them.

Centering on the purpose

The irony is that both the simple solutions, promoting Second Amendment rights and "banning guns from these premises," have led to unwanted consequences. The purpose of the Second Amendment was to prevent the federal government from having power over the states. The federal government got that power over the states in other ways, without firing a bullet. The purpose of "banning guns from these premises" was to prevent shootings at those locations, but such notices were signals to deranged shooters that these would be easy targets, where little resistance would be encountered. These signs have contributed to the increase in the number of school shootings.

Real solutions require asking about purposes and motives behind political rhetoric. Why do people appeal to the Second Amendment? Why do they advocate banning guns? Are these solutions being advocated as knee-jerk reactions? Are they being proposed by people with ulterior political motives? Are they being promoted by the press for ratings and dollars? Can their purpose be better accomplished in other ways? Are these simple solutions like praying to the weather gods? Can we develop more complex and accurate models?

The Divine Principle teaches that everything centers on a purpose, so it is valuable to first consider the purposes that are behind the concerns of different interests and whether either an absolutist commitment to the Second Amendment or to banning guns will address those purposes effectively.

The purpose of the Second Amendment: The right to self-defense

The U.S. Founders were primarily concerned with defense of the states from a tyrannical federal government. They specifically sought to prevent a professional federal army from seizing power. Section 8, Article 16 of the Constitution reserves the power of appointment of officers and the authority for training militias to the states. States would provide militias to serve the United States in times of emergency. The creation of a large professional U.S. Army, and federal military bases and training facilities were what the Founders sought to prevent. From that standpoint, the intents of the Constitution and the Second Amendment have already been violated.

However, the concern that the federal government would oppress the states carries over to the state level where individuals are concerned to protect themselves from the arbitrary power of the state. Nearly all of the other amendments seek to guarantee citizens protections from the government. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The Bill of Rights are what the people are entitled to against every government on earth."

Every individual, community, and country wants to protect itself from murder, death, or slavery, whether it be at the hands of another individual or a government. Self-defense is one of the most basic survival instincts and related to the "right to life." People do not want their life to be determined by an oppressor that would use them in pursuit of its own ends. This is the ultimate motivation behind the Bill of Rights -- including the Second Amendment.

The purpose of banning guns

People want to ban guns in order to be safe. Horrified by mass shootings and the number of people

murdered with guns, many people believe that banning guns would greatly reduce these murders. There are some studies in social psychology that partly support this position.

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis (put forward by Dollard, Doob, *et. al.,* in 1939) argues that when people are frustrated, e.g., thwarted from attaining desired goals, they are likely to react with aggression. This thesis is consistent with the instinctual reaction of "fight or flight," when confronting an obstacle. Further research shows that:

- Aggression is more likely if a person is thwarted when almost reaching the goal.

- Aggression is more likely if it will go unpunished.

- Aggression is more likely if a person has an instrument of aggression, like a knife or a gun, nearby.

- Aggression is more likely if a person has not learned to respond to frustration non-violently.

The third point above suggests that banning guns would make a difference in some cases, as would strong consistent punishment for murder. However, the most important factor is educating people to respond to frustration nonviolently.

Developmental theories in psychology support the idea that nonviolent approaches to frustration can and should be learned by about age 12, and that violent behavior is largely caused by improper upbringing of a child. This includes the role of parents, schools, the community, social environment, and the media, all of which share responsibility for raising productive and nonviolent citizens, and promoting behavioral norms.

Too often parents blame teachers, teachers blame parents, they both blame violent video games and movies, and the press just reports violent incidents and asks people how they feel. All of these behaviors are irresponsible. Blaming other adults and asking other people to fix the problem is an escape from personal responsibility and unlikely to produce any solution to the problem of violence in society.

Blaming guns can be the easiest action because it is easy to create posters "banning guns on these premises" and to protest for passing laws that will "fix" the problem. However, gun control and banning guns has tended to produce the opposite of the desired effect in cities like Chicago, with the strictest gun control laws and higher murder rates. Schools, movie theaters, and other places that officially ban guns from their premises have become the primary targets of mass murders because they offer little resistance.

The possibility of achieving lower murder rates comes about because of two factors: (1) a secure environment, where people are well-defended against aggression, and (2) a higher level of psychosocial development that comes from education and culture. This parallels the U.S. Founder's idea of good government requiring (1) checks and balances against corruption and conflicts of interest, and (2) a high moral character of citizens who desire to look after one another. Right-wing politics tends to support the first factor and left-wing politics emphasize the second, but neither side's view is comprehensive enough to address the problem satisfactorily.

In order to achieve greater safety and fewer mass shootings, the apparent purpose behind banning guns, you would have to eliminate guns from everyone: police, citizens, and criminals. Short of that, innocent law-abiding people will disproportionately suffer because (1) criminals will get guns illegally and find law-abiding citizens easier targets, and (2) police will be more tempted to use excessive force because they are on-the-spot arbiters of justice, some of whom put their own lives, those of their fellow officers, and their racial group above the lives of others.

Requirements for police to wear bodycams and preferences for stun guns, rubber bullets, and tear gas are all ways that police violence can be checked without preventing them from providing a secure environment. The justice system also has a role in both locking up dangerous offenders and creating rehabilitating prison environments so inmates have a better chance to succeed in society after they are released. This involves many more variables to plug into homicide forecasting models.

Defense, not offense

The ultimate reason behind the right to bear arms is to guarantee self-defense and prevent subjugation by another person or a government. If this can be accomplished without bearing arms, an alternative method of self-protection should be in place before the present one is removed. People will consider asking them to give up their means of self-defense to be a threat on their own life.

The principle of defense and the illegality of aggression is a foundational principle of just war theory that dates back to Hugo Grotius' *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625) and enabled the Treaty of Westphalia

(1648). In order to create enough trust for an international system of states to develop, one of the first tenets of international law was the protection of state sovereignty. This meant no state had a right to attack another or violate its sovereignty, but every state had a right to defend itself and respond to aggression proportionally, with no right to conquer or totally destroy the aggressor.

This same principle applied to the creation of a system of United States in North America, which the states would not have joined without the Second Amendment. On an individual level, this principle generally applies to any person consenting to any government. Every individual desires his or her own sovereignty and does not want to be abused by the aggression of anyone else. Taking away this right leads to the possibility of slavery or annihilation, and will be met with understandable resistance.

Conclusions

Here are three conclusions I draw for the gun control debate from the above discussion:

1.   **Citizens ought to have the right to self-defense from attacks by individuals or oppression by governments.** However, I would qualify the word "citizen" to mean a responsible adult. Individuals would lose the rights of citizenship when engaged in criminal behavior or are too mentally impaired to care for themselves. Loss of citizenship in this sense does not mean deportation from the country, but loss of rights related to civic responsibility. This would include the right to purchase a gun. Similar arguments would also hold for rights related to other civic responsibilities, like the right to vote.

2.   **The more a device can be used for self-defense but not offense, the higher the morality associated with that device.** For example, it is more justifiable to stop an attacker with a stun gun or mace than to kill them with a gun. It would be more justifiable to shoot an intruder with one bullet to stop his aggression and send him to the hospital than to destroy him with a burst of 30 rounds from an AR-15.

3.   **Ultimately, the best way to prevent mass shootings is to raise people to learn and develop non-violent responses to frustration.** This means more responsible parenting, increased courses on citizenship and civil discourse in schools, a more responsible press, and more responsible entertainment that portrays police and others with higher moral standards. This requires a major evolution in cultural and social norms.

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Photo at top: *The Minute Man statue in Minute Man National Historical Park in Concord, Massachusetts.*