



Gun Control: Beyond the Myths

Separating fact from fiction in the gun control war

Introduction

The growing number of tragic, gruesome mass murders in public places in the United States has provoked a much-needed national dialogue on gun violence. Unfortunately, the sensational nature of news agencies and the current polarization of political leaders make logical discussion difficult. Indeed, separating fact from fiction about guns is a chore. Myths are spread as facts. Somehow, we must get beyond beliefs to facts.

The answer to gun violence is not a simple one; it will not be to eliminate all guns, nor will it be to arm teachers in every classroom. Both sides of this debate must seek an honest balance of honoring two constitutional rights: the right to keep and bear arms and the right of “domestic tranquility.” People should not be afraid to go see a movie or send their children to school for fear of a deranged killer who was able to legally purchase a semiautomatic gun from the neighborhood Walmart.

The following statistics are enough to convince most people that something is very wrong and that a change of course is needed:

- Eighty-six Americans die from gunshot wounds every day. Thirty-two are murdered. Twelve are children and youth under eighteen. There are over 30,000 deaths a year.¹
- The war in Iraq, which lasted nine years from 2003 to 2012, took the lives of 4,486 American servicemen and women.² That number is less than one-sixth the

number of Americans murdered by firearms in the U.S. in any single year during the same time period.

- The third leading cause of death by injury in the U.S. is being killed by a gun. Eighteen percent of all deaths by injury in the U.S. are caused by guns³.
- A study in the *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* found that the gun murder rate in the U.S. is almost 20 times higher than the next 22 richest and most populous nations combined.⁴
- There are almost 300 million privately-owned firearms in this country — almost enough to arm every man, woman, and child. There is a gun in four out of every ten American homes, with many homes containing multiple guns.⁵
- Among the world’s twenty-three wealthiest countries, 80 percent of all gun deaths are American deaths and 87 percent of all kids killed by guns are American kids.⁶

Too often, the right of anyone to own a gun triumphs over commonsense measures for public safety, including the safety of guns themselves.

- In the eighteen years between 1979 and 1997, more Americans were killed by guns (651,697) than all servicemen and women killed in battle in all of the United States’ wars since 1775 (650,858).⁷

A powerful gun industry has been successful in influencing hearts and minds through a sustained strategy that infiltrates our media and political organizations, including Congress. The industry’s skillful framing of the issues around guns is too often misleading, and many believe

that now is a time to take the wraps off the myths in order to save lives. The purpose of this study is to examine some of these myths, which dominate our thinking about guns and find the fact and fiction in each of them.

Myth 1

Guns Don't Kill; People Kill

Whenever the media reports a mass shooting, a drive-by shooting, a murder in a high-class boutique or in a back alley, some respond as former Vice-President Dan Quayle did when informed of the Columbine High School massacre, "I hope they don't blame this on guns." Gun lovers certainly grieve every time there is a horrible shooting, not only for the terrible loss of life, but because their love for guns will be thoroughly questioned and/or misunderstood by millions.

A common argument used by gun lovers is that guns are not the problem. Guns are inanimate objects that cannot come off the shelf or out of a purse and start firing all by themselves. No one could deny that when guns *are* fired, people are involved and pull the triggers for whatever the reasons.

Gun lovers admit that guns are dangerous but insist that they are not to be feared—only respected. Many gun enthusiasts collect guns as others collect stamps, baseball cards, or coins. And thankfully, most collectors responsibly keep their firearms under lock and key.

The problem with this argument is that too often guns are misused. And they are lethal. Can we all agree that whether feared or respected, a gun is the most lethal weapon available to consumers? Knives, clubs, broken bottles, baseball bats, brass knuckles, and rope are much less efficient in maiming or killing when compared with a gun.

Many people buy guns to protect their families. Unfortunately, large numbers of gun owners keep their guns loaded and unlocked to be ready at a moment's notice to use them in self-defense, arguing that, for example, "a gun that isn't loaded and unlocked is like a car in the garage without gas." This practice endangers everyone in the household.

Here are some facts that challenge the logic of the "guns don't kill people" argument:

- Nearly 1.7 million kids under the age of eighteen live in homes with firearms that are both loaded and

unlocked.⁸ Children, inquisitive by nature, explore their homes. If they discover a gun in a dresser or closet, *even if they have been told not to touch it*, they will frequently pull the trigger, killing themselves, a playmate, or a family member. About half of the youth gun deaths in the U.S. each year are due to the fact that an adult did not secure the gun.

- American women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of gun violence in the home. One third of all murders of women are committed by their intimate partners, compared to only 4 percent of murders committed against men.⁹ Between 1995 and 2003, after Canada tightened its gun laws, gun homicides for women dropped 40 percent.¹⁰

Myth 2

If Guns Are Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Have Guns

First, the facts: No leader, political party, or widely supported organization today is working to ban guns. There are three reasons why a gun ban in America is impossible:

1. It is logistically impossible. Collecting 300 million guns in the country is unachievable.
2. The majority of gun owners treat guns responsibly and therefore should have a right to own them.
3. The Second Amendment protects an individual's right to own arms.

After so many mass shootings, there is, however, a cry to ban *a class of guns*: i.e., the assault rifle, which is a military battlefield weapon, and if equipped with a large

Current Legislative Measures Supporting Gun Control

1. Require universal background checks for all guns and ammunition sold.
2. Institute an assault weapons and high-capacity magazine ban.
3. Repeal the Tiahrt amendment and make gun trafficking a federal crime.
4. Improve mental health reporting to the background check system.

magazine can shoot 100 rounds per minute. These guns can and do kill many people quickly. Every major Christian denomination and religious body in the country, along with police and professional associations, have called for a ban on this class of weapon.

Assault weapons are weapons of mass destruction. That is what they were made to do. It is dishonest to say a ban on assault weapons is a slippery slope leading to the confiscation of *all* guns. Yet gun manufacturers are selling a lot of guns these days by promoting the myth that big government wants to ban all gun sales. It is very unfortunate that when people believe this myth, they grow so full of suspicion that honest conversation about the rights and responsibilities of gun ownership becomes impossible.

A gun kept in the home for self-defense is twelve times more likely to injure or kill a member of the household than it is to stop an intruder.

This myth has an accompanying argument: “Most gun owners are good citizens and would obey the law, turning in their guns. Criminals would not obey the law and eventually would have all the guns and everyone would be at their mercy.” The gun lobby has successfully used this logic to convince many gun owners and political leaders that there is no such thing as a *good* gun law and have worked steadfastly to protect the sales of all guns instead of the lives of U. S. citizens.

The result of their work has been an increase in gun crime. With all restrictions on gun purchases removed, criminals, terrorists, and violent individuals are free to buy guns with no questions asked at the nation’s thousands of gun shows. From September 11, 2001 through February 2010, over a thousand persons on the FBI’s no-fly list have legally purchased guns and explosives.¹¹

Some still proclaim, “Freedom isn’t free. This is the price America has to pay for freedom.” The question is whether a free society should make it easier or harder for violent persons to get guns. Is it a genuine hardship for citizens to undergo an instantaneous background check for all guns sold? Is this really a restriction on freedom?

Myth 3

An Armed Society Is a Polite Society

“Self-defense works,” says Wayne La Pierre, leader of the National Rifle Association (NRA). He argues that if a thief, rapist, or killer knows the owner of the house has a gun, or is *likely* to have a gun, the house will be safe. It is a matter of self-preservation.¹² After the horror of Newtown, CT La Pierre intoned, “The *only* thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” His antidote to keep other mass shootings from happening is to recruit and arm more good guys to fight the bad guys.

The argument is not without logic and appeals to many. But, does it not make more sense to keep a “bad guy” from getting a gun in the first place? Overlooked by

those who propose arming teachers is what really happens the instant a gun is fired in a crowd: utter chaos. Calm and cool reasoning by average citizens is not part of a shootout. When Arizona Congresswoman Gabby Gifford was shot and almost killed at a January 2011 public meeting in Tucson, Joe Zamudio pulled his gun and confessed he almost shot the very man who tackled Jared

Loughner, the shooter, when he tried to put a new magazine into his gun.¹³

Some gun lovers feel safe when they are packing heat, but total security in this fallen world is itself a myth. In almost all cases an individual holding a gun who surprises another will prevail. It is not the *modus operandi* of robbers, rapists, or murderers to announce their presence or intentions in order to give a potential victim the chance to meet their deadly force with one’s own. If one tries to take one’s gun off the table, out of a drawer, or remove it from a holster or purse, he or she will most likely be killed.

On February 2, 2013, Chris Kyle and a colleague befriended a fellow Marine suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and took him to a shooting range. Kyle was a highly trained Navy SEAL who served four tours of duty in Iraq, where he earned a reputation as one of the military’s most lethal snipers. Although credited with 150 kills and although he had a gun in his hand, he was shot dead along with his friend, at the shooting range. The assailant shot first and Kyle’s gun could not protect him.¹⁴

We are the most heavily armed country in the free world. If more arms really made a society polite, we should be able to see more evidence of it. The United States should already be the most polite country in the world. Unfortunately, the reality is the opposite.

Myth 4

New Gun Laws Aren't Necessary; Just Enforce the 20,000 Existing Ones

Twenty thousand laws on the books? We have heard the number so frequently we think it is true. It isn't. Literally *no one* knows where the figure came from. It is often quoted but never with a source. Research has revealed that there are "about 300 major state and federal laws on guns and an unknown but shrinking number of local laws due to the fact that forty of our states have preempted all or most local gun laws."¹⁵

Of the laws that do exist regarding guns, many actually pose a threat to our nation's security by exacerbating crime. Many laws were passed by Congress that make it easier for *anyone* to get a gun at any time, and that make it more difficult for law enforcement (the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives [ATF] and the FBI) to stop the sale. Law enforcement is actually prevented from effective and efficient oversight of guns in America by laws that do not make much sense. Too often, the right of anyone to own a gun triumphs over commonsense measures for public safety, including the safety of guns themselves. Society pays a heavy price in death and injury when absurd laws hold sway.

Two examples of these nonsensical laws follow: First, the Consumer Protection Act of 1972 prohibits the Consumer Protection Commission (or any other agency) from examining the quality or safety of any gun or any piece of ammunition. Second, concealed carry permits for weapons may be issued to the blind.¹⁶

Myth 5

Guns Save Lives

We have all heard stories of individuals who fired their guns to foil a burglar or an attacker who attempted to enter a home or do harm. Such reports make for sensational news on evening television. According to statistics of the FBI and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are very few cases of justifiable

homicide each year and the person using the gun is usually a trained police officer, not a private citizen.

Every year there are only about 200 legally justified self-defense homicides by private citizens. A gun in the home is eleven times more likely to be used in a completed or attempted suicide, seven times more likely to be used in a criminal assault or homicide, and four times more likely to be used during an unintentional shooting death or injury than it is to be used in a self-defense shooting.¹⁶

The NRA and gun manufacturers reject these statistics as "biased" and therefore provide their own data to gun shops using the research of their own statistician, Dr. Gary Kleck of Florida State University. Kleck claimed that there are 2.5 million defensive gun uses every year.¹⁷ His study has been highly touted by the NRA as scientific. Yet that number far exceeds the annual number of gun crimes committed each year.

Gun dealers frequently quote the 2.5 million figure to prospective customers and use it to argue that guns are used an impressive 6,850 times a day. These numbers bolster a common refrain heard in gun shops: "Can your home be *too safe*, especially when seconds count and the police are minutes away?" If you were a gun dealer needing to make a sale, whose stats would you use?

It should be plain to us all that guns do save some lives, but they *take many more* lives and at incredible rates. Credible research has shown that a gun kept in the home for self-defense is twelve times more likely to injure or kill a member of the household than it is to stop an intruder.¹⁸

Myth 6

Gun Control Doesn't Work

This slogan usually cites cities such as Washington, DC or Chicago, that have strong gun control laws, but still suffer high crime rates. However, looking closely at the evidence, there is highly developed gun trafficking in neighboring and even far away states with criminal entrepreneurs, traffickers, straw buyers, and gun dealers who look the other way when an illegal sale is made. For example, 10 percent of guns used in crimes in Chicago have been traced to Mississippi, whose laws are almost nonexistent.

The ATF claims that most gun dealers are honest and respect the law. Yet despite this general trend, the small minority that disobeys the law creates a major problem: only 1 percent of gun dealers nationwide account for 60 percent of the guns recovered from crime scenes.²⁰ Washington, DC, has strong gun laws but is only a ten-minute drive away from Virginia and its lax gun laws. It is a simple task to find a straw buyer (someone who can pass a background check and purchase the gun for someone who cannot) who needs some extra cash. It is easier still to get a gun at one of Virginia's omnipresent gun shows where unlicensed sellers ask no questions and everything is cash and carry.

The fact is that gun control does work and works well. Five states with the strongest laws (Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey) claim the lowest gun-related death rates per 100,000 persons. Conversely, five states with the weakest gun laws (Alaska, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Wyoming) have the highest death rates. The states with strong gun laws restrict access to highly dangerous weapons, set minimum safety standards on guns, enforce age requirements, and restrict open and concealed carry. It is really a simple equation: Access to more guns leads to more gun deaths. Limiting exposure to guns saves lives.²¹

Myth 7

The Second Amendment Was Written to Fight Government Tyranny

The Second Amendment reads, "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." Gun enthusiasts often quote it, or the second half of it, much more than those who are advocates for gun safety. Nevertheless, the Second Amendment is a good friend to both sides. It addresses both gun rights and good regulations that provide security for all. The amendment, contrary to popular opinion, is not the property of pro-gun people; it belongs to every American.

In 2008, after the *Heller v. District of Columbia* debate affirmed an individual's right to guns, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote for the 5–4 majority, "like most rights, the Second Amendment is not unlimited. It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose. The Court's opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on longstand-

ing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms."²²

The purpose of the amendment was not to use one's guns against a democratically elected government. There are reports of armed militias and others who have begun carrying firearms to demonstrate that they are ready to fight the U.S. government. They believe that President Obama wants to make America a socialist state. This kind of citizen militarization is a reactionary distortion of the Second Amendment. It is a fear-driven response with little base in reality. The Second Amendment was not written to assist attempts against democratically elected officials who continue to work within the parameters of the democratic process.

Former Arkansas Governor and Baptist Minister, Mike Huckabee, while campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 2007 said, "The Second Amendment is not about duck hunting. I was the first governor in America to have a concealed carry permit; so don't mess with me. But I'm always amused, if not amazed, when some political candidate tries to tell me the purpose of the Second Amendment is largely about hunting. My friends, its purpose is to preserve our very freedom. Our founding fathers understood it clearly as the last line of defense against even the tyranny of my own government."²³

David Kopel, a leading gun rights theorist calls guns "the tools of political dissent," and stresses that, "gun owners have no obligation to obey or respect any law that has been made through our established democratic process, if they happen to disagree with it."²⁴ Wayne La Pierre adds, "Those with the guns make the rules. . . . The people have the right, must have the right, to take whatever measures are necessary, including force, to abolish oppressive government."²⁵ What these men do not mention is that the Constitution several times declares armed resistance against our government "treason." (e.g., Article 3; section 3.)

But, who defines tyranny? Do gun owners have a more compelling *right* to do so because they have a gun or a more powerful gun or more guns than most? Do gun owners rule over unarmed Americans? Does might make right? No interest group, no matter how well armed, has the right to define tyranny on behalf of 300

million others. In the United States, we make changes to our government through ballots, not bullets or threats.

Conclusion

A discussion about what to do in the face of so many unnecessary killings is long overdue. There is a sea change in public opinion that is finally putting this issue on the front burner. People are sick and tired of mass shootings and the violence we blithely permit. They want to know how we got to this point in America and how we can reverse course. They want to know why the NRA is so unbending when the vast majority of its members disagree with its chief spokespersons and want stronger laws to keep guns out of dangerous hands. There is a growing rage over the senseless laws Congress has written that make it easier for criminals to get guns and harder for law enforcement to stop them.

There are many things that people of faith can do. We can educate ourselves about the issue, pray, offer help to victims of violence, and mobilize for political action. We must refuse to believe that nothing can be done in the face of the gun lobby's power.

Gun violence will decline in America when people start talking about it and learn to separate fact from fiction. This is especially important in the church. Discussions about preventing gun violence have a crucial place in the pulpit, in officer's meetings, in Sunday schools, and at fellowship dinners. We will not all agree about exactly what needs to happen, but the myths will cease to have the paralyzing power over us that they once had. Let the conversations begin!

About the Writer

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Endnotes

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