

THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS

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Although there are many commonalities between practicing psychotherapy in Britain and in the U.S., there is at least one grave difference. Relatively few British therapists will need to develop an expertise in the treatment of people who are victims of gun violence. In contrast, every therapist in the U.S. must confront at some point in his or her career – the impact of living in a country where almost anyone can, and often does, keep a lethal weapon close at hand. I have treated victims of shooting as well as the shooters, family members and friends of murder victims and their assailants. My colleagues have confronted grieving children, terrified parents, and guilty husbands – all the secondary victims of gun violence. This is simply the reality of practicing psychiatry in America.

On February 29 shots rang out in a first-grade classroom of Buell Elementary School in Mount Morris Township, Michigan, a suburb of Flint, Michigan, the home of General Motors, the heartland of America. The killer was a six-year old boy who pulled a handgun from his pants pocket, shot Kayla Rolland, another six year-old, in the chest, put the gun into a wastebasket and headed to the bathroom where he was found by the school principle. Kayla died on the way to the hospital. The boy has been suspended from school for ninety days and was sent to live with his aunt. When interviewed by the police, the boy did not “seem to understand what he has done” but instead “appeared to take this as something that happens, like on television” (CNN, 2000f). The boy had previously been suspended from school for fighting and stabbing a classmate with a pencil.

To someone who has never lived in the United States, such a report must appear startling, horrifying, rare and certainly a cause for public outcry. The citizens of America, accustomed now to the latest of what have become almost routine reports on school shootings, reacted in various, but typical ways. Some demanded that the law be changed so that six-year olds can be held criminally liable – which thankfully they cannot. (Even the mother of the slain girl pleaded that the little boy be offered the help and counseling that he needs). Many

others wanted to hold the child's negligent parents liable for this boy being raised in a "crack" house and having access to guns. In fact, according to an ABC News poll (Fuller, 2000), an overwhelming majority of Americans say parents should be charged with a crime if their child uses their gun to shoot someone. But in this case, the boy's mother has already been evicted from the home where she had lived with the boy and his brother – the reason given for why the boy was living with his uncle in a drug-dealer's house. And the boy's father is already in jail on drug charges, abashed and shamefaced when asked to talk on camera. More than anything else attention focused on how the child got the gun until another young man – of the legally prosecutable age of 19 – was arrested.

Our President, speaking at a Democratic fund-raiser in Florida used the incident as a means for illustrating his renewed call for tougher gun laws, and in the process reminding everyone that the United States has a higher child gun death rate than the next 24 biggest countries *combined* and that every day, 13 children are killed by guns in America (Hunt, 2000). The county prosecutor responsible for dealing with the case noted that "We've had other schoolchildren take guns to elementary schools before . . . but it never went this far. It's a sign of our times where we have a fully armed society that doesn't take its responsibility to secure its weapons seriously" (CNN, 2000b). Arguably, the most succinct and intelligent comment came from a third-grade student at the same elementary school as the murdered little girl. Darien Coolin remarked through his tears, "I'm just sad for that family because she's too young to die. I don't think there should be no guns made. I hope there won't be more shootings in no more school" (CNN, 2000e).

Every state in the country now has laws requiring school districts to expel students who bring guns to school. Michigan schools are not required to report expulsions to the state, but among those who have made reports voluntarily, 659 students were expelled for carrying a weapon during the last three school years. A national study found that more than 100,000 American children carry a gun to school each day. According to the United States Department of Justice, 20 out of every 100 suburban high school boys are likely to own a gun and 45% of suburban high school boys report being threatened with a gun (MSNBC, 2000)

Despite all this, the United States still has refused to do much about the guns. The House Democrats have been trying since last fall to pass legislation that would require trigger locks on guns and establish gun-free zones around schools, day care centers, churches, libraries, hospitals and other public places, a bill passed eight months ago by the Senate after Vice President Al Gore cast a tie-breaking vote. But the bills have gone nowhere because the Republican-controlled House, powerfully influenced by the National Rifle Association (NRA) believe that the existing laws that ban guns in schools and allow for a child's

school locker to be searched, are sufficient to address the problem (CNN, 2000d).

Let's go over that again for the Non-American reader. When addressing the possible legislation of gun-control laws, we are not talking here about taking guns away from ANYONE. We are talking about requirements for safety locks to come with every new handgun, making it slightly more difficult for people to obtain over-the-counter guns at gun shows, and banning the importation of ammunition clips with more than 10 rounds. We are also talking about restrictions that the majority of the American public wants to see enacted. According to an ABCNEWS poll, one of many similar polls, 67% of Americans favor stricter gun-control laws; 89% want background checks on buyers at gun shows; 75% favor mandatory trigger locks on stored guns, and 70% support a ban on selling guns by mail order or over the Internet (Simpson, 2000).

So, why, despite the fact that pediatric firearm homicides have tripled since 1985, is our Congress so reluctant to enact such apparently commonsense laws? When 30% of white high school students and 70% of black high school students in 1994 indicated that they knew someone who had been shot within the previous five years, why don't our leaders consider some kind of meaningful gun safety regulations a mandatory part of their electoral responsibility (Christoffel, 1997)? An American child dies of gunshot wounds every 1 1/2 hours and every 2 days, the equivalent of a classroom of children are lost (Powell, 1996). Why is this allowed to continue?

In part, the answer to these questions revolves around the relationship between Congress and the seemingly all-powerful National Rifle Association. President Clinton observed, "I don't think most Americans have any idea what a stranglehold the NRA has had on this Congress . . . The reason they can't act is the heat the NRA has put on them" (Hunter, 2000). Since January of 1999, the NRA has contributed nearly half a million dollars to individual congressional candidates. Gun-control advocates have put up only \$15,000. The NRA has gotten 14 states to block legislation to sue gun manufacturers. And they have launched a 20-million dollar campaign to defeat members of Congress who support gun-safety laws. (Simpson, 2000). The NRA mounts opposition to any individual or organization that supports gun control and even for the research that substantiates the toll firearm injuries are taking on our national health. In 1995, they mounted a campaign to cut appropriations to the Centers for Disease Control because \$2.4 million of the center's annual appropriations goes toward research on firearms injuries (Anderson, 1996). As for the NRA, one telling and typical response to the school shootings comes from Wayne LaPierre, Executive Vice President, "The battle over gun control is no longer about crime and criminals. The battle is about kids – our kids – stepping into an America dominated by the anti-gun media and politicians" (Handgun Control, 2000).

So the NRA, is clearly one of the social, political and economic reasons for the American failure to adequately protect its children. There are other reasons as well, however. Armaments are very big business, nationally and internationally. In 1997, according to one U.S. government estimate, the United States shipped over \$16 billion of newly manufactured arms abroad, nearly as much as all other countries combined. The American public, through their taxes, pays a substantial amount – an estimated \$7.6 billion in 1995 - to underwrite weapons sales through public assistance given to promote and finance weapons exports (Lumpe, 1999). And then there are the internal sales. Over 200 million firearms are owned by U.S. civilians. Of these, approximately one third are handguns and of the handguns, approximately 30 million are semi-automatic weapons (Schwab, 1993). In 1994 alone the firearms industry sold \$670 million worth of new handguns (Anderson, 1996).

But there are also deeper, harder-to-define, but no less real psychological pressures that must be understood if we are to even begin to understand the American love affair with the gun and therefore American violence, sold and resold through news reports, television drama and movies all over the globe. And ironically, these deep psychological pressures have some connection to our history and to our British and European roots.

For many Americans – and perhaps, in the collective unconscious, for all of us - guns are associated, not with danger but with safety. Americans buy guns and keep them loaded in their homes, not just for the sense of power they convey but in order to feel safe. Regardless of how many school shootings there are, or how many times we hear that 37,000 people died of gunshot wounds in one year – homicides, suicides and accidents – we still refuse to ban handguns and we still keep buying more. The reason is relatively simple. We are not really buying lethal destruction – we are buying protection from danger and a long-established bulwark against both fear and helplessness. Collective memory is real and we must remember that less than a hundred years ago in the western part of the country, settlers were still defending their families against the native tribal peoples who they had displaced as well as dangerous animals. Being armed and being prepared to “shoot to kill” is still a part of intergenerational memory for many families.

What may also be part of this intergenerational, albeit unconscious memory, is the relationship between guns and freedom from the political oppression of the state. When de Tocqueville visited the young American state in the late 18th century he was struck by the pervasive influence of English opinion, custom and law. Englishmen were lured to emigrate by promises that they would continue to possess all the rights of English subjects. And one of those vital, 17th century English rights was the right to bear arms. This derived from a long-established conviction that civilians, not a standing army, must have control of the sword. The English Bill of Rights of 1689 stated, “that the subjects which

are Protestants may have Armes for their defence Suitable to their Condition and as allowed by Law". Citizens of every town were expected to be part of a militia, duty-bound to bring arms to bear should the occasion arise, and the occasion did arise several times throughout the centuries (Malcolm, 1994).

A hundred years later in 1791, Americans of British descent wrote the American Bill of Rights and the second amendment read, "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". Until the last thirty years, Americans appear to have accepted this "right" as more of a duty, and were likely to treat their guns with deference and a sense of responsibility. But America has changed a great deal in the last thirty years. Anti-government sentiment has been growing, at least since the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, and increases with every new revelation of governmental malfeasance. In its extreme form this sense of disillusionment is manifest in the right-wing militia movement, many of whom stockpile weapons as a guarantee against what they consider to be the inevitable invasion of their property and lives by governmental force. But this sentiment can be perceived in a more attenuated form in the general population as a majority of citizens fail to vote in elections and are unwillingness to participate in civic life.

For reasons such as these, gun control is nowhere on the horizon and regardless of how many children are killed on our playgrounds, American will alter her course on guns only very gradually over time. Only a public health approach to violence can hope to break the unique American connection between guns and safety and establish a more realistic equation of guns with danger. So when you hear American reports about "childproofing" guns and using new technology to "personalize" weapons so only their owners can use them, recognize that for years, people tried to reduce the highway death toll by getting people to drive safer to no avail, while redesigning cars and highways for safety has saved millions of lives (Thompson, 1998). Until we can change the "collective unconscious" of America, such an environmental, public health approach may be the only way that fewer lives will be touched by gun violence. Meanwhile, therapists here will continue to assuage the human torment that accompanies every fatal shot of a gun.

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