

Guest editorial: America's vigilante gun-love affair

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Although a recent GOP debate focused on terrorism and national security, none of the candidates drew a connection to the availability of guns, as though it's not a problem.

What brings people to violence and what brings Americans who have no will to violence to so defend guns—and fear giving them up? The issue is not gun rights vs. gun control but why we are so jumpy with each other, so ready to shoot, and especially jumpy about government.

Other nations aren't. Compared with countries not in economic or political demise or in the grips of gang rule, the United States has high rates of gun violence—more than 3.8 homicides per 100,000 people. That's compared with nations that have quite different cultures (Japan, 0.3) and nations with similar ones, like the Anglo-Saxon settler countries that are now, like America, culturally diverse—Canada, 1.4; Australia, 1.1; and the U.K., 1.0. Canadians and Australians hunt and watch much of the same media as Americans do. But they don't shoot each other.

Violence triggers

Two triggers—fear and a sense of meaninglessness—cause much of the violence. We aren't moved to violence to get what others have, but because we fear they will take what we have—physical resources, dignity, a sense of control of our lives.

A lack of meaning beyond survival and “lifestyle” is corrosive, leading to substance abuse, crime and vulnerability to any “meaning” that comes one's way. The willingness to die in war or suicide bombing can seem the

greatest meaning of all.

A sense of meaninglessness may afflict all demographic groups, but the two causes come together when economic duress leads to loss of purpose. The worst version—young men with nothing to do.

Some Americans have good reason to fear their livelihoods and purpose are at risk, given globalization that threatens entire industries. Some turn to violence. In the 1980s farm crisis, thousands lost their sustenance and sense of purpose. Suicide and substance abuse spiked, as did spousal abuse and child abuse—along with membership in far-right groups with arsenals of guns. As Joel Dyer notes in *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning*, the fallout—while details differ—included shootouts at Ruby Ridge, Idaho (1992); the Branch Davidian Compound (1993); and Timothy McVeigh's massacre at the Oklahoma City federal building (1995).

Buying protection

Yet millions of Americans who have no intentions to violence act as if they do—as if they fear their livelihoods and ability to live as they choose are at risk. They buy weapons to protect themselves.

From whom?

In part, each other and in larger part, government. It's not only that things will be taken but that government is doing the taking. Gun ownership, former NRA Assistant General Counsel Thomas Moncure Jr. wrote in the *Harvard Law Journal*, is "to protect against the tyranny of our own government."

An "honest" fear

It's a fear America came by honestly. The earliest settlers immigrated already wary of Charles I's efforts to centralize power under the British

crown. Many were Europe's religious dissenters, who had suffered under official government churches. Add to this the rough nature of settlement, which prioritized self-reliance and lasted until the last frontier closed in the 20th century. Add again the central tenets of Protestantism—the mandate to read the Bible oneself and strive inwardly for one's personal bond with God.

The value and habits of individualist striving, while initially directed toward the divine, became individualist striving per se, a well-exercised muscle that was flexed—because it was laudable—in many arenas, sacred and mundane. For those with an apocalyptic eschatology, personal responsibility now—the end times are near—was even more pressing.

The Methodism that John and Charles Wesley brought to the United States held God's grace enables salvation. Yet each person, by dint of grace, becomes God's effective partner. "He will not save us," John Wesley wrote, "unless we 'save ourselves.'"

Saving ourselves

Saving ourselves was just the religion for do-it-yourself Colonials, and Methodism became America's predominant faith into the 20th century.

The upshot—of rough settlement, the dissenter's wariness of government and American Protestantism—is that our "social imaginary" is one of individualism, do-it-yourself survivalism and anti-authoritarian suspicion of the state. When Ronald Reagan said government is not the solution but the problem, he was tapping into the foundations of our culture.

It gives America much of its energetic, self-responsible can-do-ism but also a cultural, emotional vigilantism—me in contest with others and in defense against them, and, most of all, against government. We deem Washington too incompetent to do the job yet just competent enough to take away our rights, resources and chosen way of living—our sense of meaning.

Guns represent retaining control over and against government, even for those with no violent agendas.

Gun rights advocates want to keep weapons away from criminals, the mentally unstable and terrorists. But it's difficult to pass even this legislation, because many don't want the fox guarding the henhouse—don't want government supervising a program that hobbles resistance to government.

The issue is not gun rights vs. gun control, but whether it's productive in the 21st century to continue the culture of vigilantism.

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