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Unknown author

The Polemicist: The Rifle on the Wall: A Left Argument for Gun Rights

An essay in seven sections.



The Fundamental Political Principle

"That rifle on the wall of the labourer's cottage or working class flat is the symbol of democracy. It is our job to see that it stays there." -- George Orwell¹

Let's start with this: The citizen's right to possess firearms is a fundamental political right. The political principle at stake is quite simple: to deny the state the monopoly of armed force. This should

perhaps be stated in the obverse: to empower the citizenry, to distribute the power of armed force among the citizenry as a whole. The history of arguments and struggles over this principle, throughout the world, is long and clear. Instituted in the context of a revolutionary struggle based on the most democratic concepts of its day, the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution is perhaps the clearest legal/constitutional expression of this principle, and as such, I think, is one of the most radical statutes in the world.

The question of gun rights is a political question, in the broad sense that it touches on the distribution of power in a polity. Thus, although it incorporates all these perfectly legitimate “sub-political” activities, it is not fundamentally about hunting, or collecting, or target practice; it is about empowering the citizen relative to the state. Denying the importance of, or even refusing to understand, this fundamental point of the Second Amendment right, and sneering at people who do, symptomizes a politics of paternalist statism – not (actually the opposite of) a politics of revolutionary liberation.

I’ll pause right here. For me, and for most supporters of gun rights, however inartfully they may put it, this is the core issue. To have an honest discussion of what’s at stake when we talk about “gun rights,” “gun control,” etc., everyone has to know, and acknowledge, his/her position on this fundamental political principle. Do you hold that the right to possess firearms is a fundamental political right?

If you do, then you are ascribing it a strong positive value, you will be predisposed to favor its extension to all citizens, you will consider whatever “regulations” you think are necessary (because some might be) with the greatest circumspection (because those “regulations” are *limitations on a right*, and rights, though never as absolute as we may like, are to be cherished), you will never seek, overtly or surreptitiously, to eliminate that right entirely – and your discourse will reflect all of that. If you understand gun ownership as a political right, then, for you, if there weren’t a second amendment, there should be.

If, on the other hand, you do not hold that the right to possess firearms is a fundamental political right, if you think it is some kind of luxury or peculiarity or special prerogative, then, of course, you really won’t give a damn about how restricted that non-right is, or whether it is ignored or eliminated altogether. If you reject, or don’t understand, gun ownership as a political right, then you probably think the Second Amendment should never have been.

It is my perception, based on public evidence, as well as countless conversations on the subject, that the latter position is that of most self-identified American liberals. However they may occasionally, tactically, craft their discourse to pretend, for an audience that does value the right of citizens to arm themselves, that they too value that right, most American liberals just do not. They do not even understand why it should be considered a right at all, in the sense elaborated above. They would love to restrict it as much as possible, and they would just as soon be done with the American constitutional guarantee of that right, the Second Amendment, which they see as some kind of embarrassing anachronism.

I think we should have this discussion honestly. If the latter is your position, say it. If you want to eliminate the Second Amendment right, mount a forthright political campaign to do so. Do not pussy-foot around with “I am not against the Second Amendment. I do not want to take your hunting rifles and your shotguns and your antique muskets,” when you really don’t like the Second Amendment at all, would love to see it repealed, and wouldn’t mind if everybody was forced to turn in every weapon that they owned.

‘Cause, guess what: You’re not fooling anybody. When your discourse reeks with intellectual and moral disdain for gun-rights and gun-rights advocates, when it never endorses, and indeed at best

studiously avoids, the issue of gun ownership as a fundamental political right, it shows. And it certainly shows when you say outright that you'd love to confiscate all guns, no matter how you try to waffle on that later. Despite what's implied in the ever-present disdain, gun rights advocates are not, *ipso facto*, stupid (or violent, or crazy), and certainly not too stupid to see where you're heading. So let's stop gaslighting gun-rights supporters as paranoid when they state what they see:

Dianne Feinstein, who [had a concealed carry permit](#) when she felt a "sense of helplessness," saying: "If I could have gotten 51 votes in the Senate of the United States for an outright ban, picking up every one of them.... Mr. and Mrs. American turn 'em all in. I would have done it."

Not to mention [Andrew Cuomo's](#) more recent: "Confiscation could be an option. Mandatory sale to the state could be an option."

Of course, you could counter that nobody should believe a word of anything these politicians say, anyway. How persuasive is this performance by pry-it-from-my-cold-dead-hands Joe?

Those who understand gun ownership as a fundamental political right correctly perceive, and are right to resist, the intended threat of its incremental elimination in gun-control laws that will have little to no practical effect, other than to demand more acts of compliance and submission to the armed authority of the state. And those who do want to take that right away must be – and they are, aren't they? – willing to use the armed force of the state to enforce the rescission of that right on the fifty million or so Americans who own guns and never have done or will do anything murderous or illegal with them. That'll institute a peaceful new society.

Guns, Gun Rights, and Liberal "Pacifism"

I am not talking about guns but gun rights. This is not about whether anybody likes or dislikes guns, and certainly nobody should fetishize them. It is unfortunate that, as with many debates in this country, the gun-rights debate is cast in the media as a clash between two extremely silly camps – those who fetishize guns positively, and those who fetishize them negatively. For there to be a serious political debate, both of these attitudes really have to be recognized, and dropped, by those who inhabit them. I don't own a gun. I'm not defending my gun. I'm defending my right.

I think there should be fewer guns. I think we should have a more pacific society, one in which violence isn't as alluring as [apple pie](#), and we don't have street parties to celebrate assassinations. I *definitely* think that the cultural representation of armed violence as a quick, effective, and attractive solution for all kinds of personal and social problems, which is ubiquitous in America, is ridiculous and pernicious. The answer to that is to do a lot of determined political and cultural work, not to pass a law and call in the armed police, the courts, and the penal system to enforce it *on people who have done nothing wrong*.

Guns are neither magic talismans against tyranny nor anathematic objects that cause crime and violence. Guns – certainly the personal firearms that are in question – carry a limited but real measure of inherent power, and therefore danger, that everyone should respect. (Indeed it is *because* they are powerful and dangerous that they are the nexus of an important political right.) But guns are not agents of history. They are not, *per se*, going to free a polity from oppression or generate unrestrained social violence. Within an insurgent political movement, they can at certain moments be useful, even crucial, for the former outcome; and, within a context of social decay brought on by other factors, they can seriously exacerbate the latter. Their overall positive or negative effect is only determined by the political and social context in which they are used, and the character of the agents who use them.

American liberals can all too easily recognize and disparage the positive fetishism regarding guns, but can be blind to their own negative fetishism. Underlying this *noli me tangere* negative fetishism

are confusions and contradictions regarding what I'll call the casual "imaginary pacifism" that crops up repeatedly as a constituent of American liberal ideology. I am not here referring to the kind of consistent and absolute, usually religious-based, pacifism that we traditionally associate, rightly or wrongly, with figures like Martin Luther King, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Amish – the kind of pacifism that would, under all circumstances, "turn the other cheek" and abjure the use of armed force to defend one's self (or anybody else), let alone to advance or defend a political movement. Such a consistent, rigorous, pacifism is an honorable position, and those who hold and live it deserve respect.

They are, however, few and far between, and most American liberals are not among them. The vast majority of American liberals – like persons of all other groups – while they want to live peaceful lives, free of violence, for themselves and everyone else in the world, support the use of armed force in defense of themselves, their loved ones, and some political agenda or another. While they actually hold a position that accepts legitimate uses of armed force, a lot of American liberals like to imagine that they are living in some kind of sympathetic identity with their edited, angelic versions of King and Gandhi, and they are shocked, shocked, and react with utter revulsion, at the discourse of people who proclaim upfront that they are not.

(They are even more shocked to be confronted with the idea that maybe King and Gandhi were not exactly the kind of "pacifists" they imagine them to have been. For King: "Violence exercised merely in self-defense, all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi."²)

This kind of pretend pacifism is most repugnant when it issues from the mouth of the commander-in-chief of the world's most elaborate killing apparatus, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," as King put it. Nothing is more – "hypocritical" is hardly a sufficient word – than seeing an American president lecturing political movements throughout the world on the need for "non-violence," as if he were some kind of pacifist, using pseudo-pacifism as a ground for being unapologetically self-righteous.

But this kind of presumption is annoying wherever it saturates liberal discourse – which is kind of everywhere. Take, for example, [this gem](#): "As a lifelong pacifist, I support all protests against the use of torture, and, quite simply, inhumane treatment of any kind," followed a few sentences later by: "We should never forget the brave work of those professionals in the military and intelligence communities ... who fought bravely even as they *sometimes* crossed moral lines, .., for the defense of this nation" [emphasis in original]. *Zero Dark Thirty*, you see, is a *pacifist* document. (Or at least the document *of* a pacifist.) That a person of obvious intelligence and cultural sophistication can utter such contradictory nonsense, without recognizing it as such, is a symptom of how deeply this presumptive imaginary "pacifism" I am evoking is ingrained in American liberal ideology.

This position seeps down through the "sub-political" issues of self-defense and personal responsibility. Not-really-pacifist "pacifist" liberals, I find, often get wrapped up in a recurring ideological process of shedding and assigning guilt. *I* wouldn't touch a gun. I'll just call my paid servant the policeman to come and shoot my assailant for me. *My* hands stay clean of gunshot residue and other stains; *he* wields the horrid gun and the moral responsibility, and quandary, of using deadly force – which I'll endlessly analyze with my colleagues over dinner. And if it really was my ass that was saved, we'll all congratulate ourselves for maintaining our "pacifist" guiltlessness, while romanticizing the guy who did the dirty work for us. Katherine Bigelow speaks for many, who actually think there is some kind of extra moral virtue in this way of living in the world. I find a more cogent description in the Sartrean term "bad faith."

For myself, since I neither am nor pretend to be a pacifist, if I were in some mortal danger that called for the self-defensive use of deadly force, I would rather take on myself the responsibility for using that force – moral quandary, dirty hands and all – than shift it onto someone from a quasi-professional caste created to be my absolving wet workers.

If we are going to hold police and other armed agents of the state responsible for using armed force appropriately – and we should – then we should be willing to assume the same responsibility for which we hold them. What we should not do is essentially absolve them of responsibility because they're doing the dirty work we would neeeever do ourselves, work from which we have distanced ourselves morally and intellectually, work that we consider *for us* but *not ours*.

In my vision of a liberated society, first of all, the number of persons who, functioning like our police and/or armed forces, might have to spend more time than most prepared for confrontation would be reduced to a minimum; secondly, they really would be defensive and protective; and, finally, importantly, they would function, and be felt, as extensions of the responsibilities that all citizens share and embrace, not as a separate moral species, specially bred for violence, to be called from their fortified compound to vacuum up problems and guilt. That our society is not like that is symptomatized both by how its police and armed forces are organized in relation to the whole of society, and by how they are segregated in the “pacifist” mind as both feared and indispensable – moral Morlocks to the moral Eloi of the liberal elite.

As one [trenchant feminist promoter](#) of gun rights (Inge Anna Laris) summarized it: “Police forces were established to *augment* citizen self-protection, not to *displace* the citizens' right of self-protection” And, I would add, to *share*, not *displace*, citizens' individual and collective responsibilities and quandaries in all of that.

Gun Rights and The Prohibition Impulse

It often seems to me that guns are to liberals what drugs are to conservatives. Liberals respond to the real damage that guns do as factors that exacerbate (but do not cause) destructive behaviors in the same way conservatives have responded to the real damage that drugs do in exacerbating destructive behaviors – with the impulse for prohibition, enforced by the law and its armed agents, the police. *Quick, pass a law! Call the cops!* has become a virtually automatic reaction of conservatives and liberals alike, according to their various tastes; it's “the same inability to understand the fundamental nature of the problem at hand coupled with a perpetual, short-sighted faith in the inherent justness of well-meaning legislation.” ([Mike King](#))

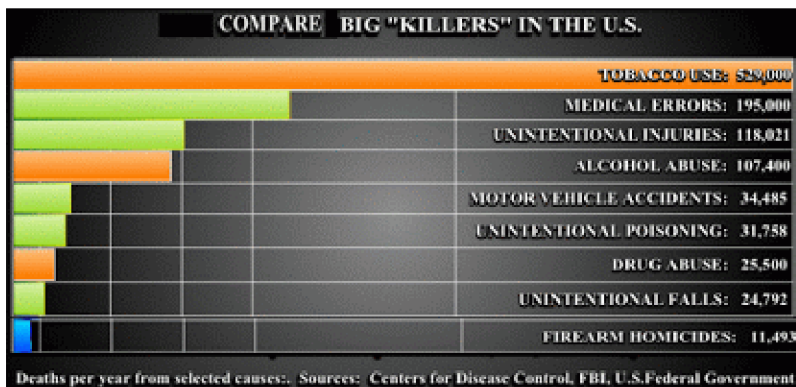
The prohibition impulse is as problematic for guns as it is for drugs (and alcohol), which are ten times more deadly than guns (see chart below), and at least as damaging to families. Indeed, because they can change states of mind, drugs can be said to *cause*, and not just exacerbate, destructive behaviors. Let's not forget that the prohibition impulse for alcohol and drugs was driven by sincere reformist concern about the widespread damage these substances did, especially to children of society's poorest families. The alcohol prohibition movement was driven by (mainly middle-class) women, and the punishing disparity in crack cocaine sentencing was originally championed by African-American legislators, for these reasons.³ Neither worked out so well. Both provide cogent examples of how the law can be worse than the crime.

(I won't get into the academic arguments that gun control does not reduce crime, which come from self-described “member of the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International USA, ... Democrats 2000, ...Common Cause, [and] other politically liberal organizations,...lifelong registered Democrat, [and] contributor to liberal Democratic candidates,” [Gary Kleck](#), as well as conservative [John Lott](#).⁴)

Liberals have to recognize that, when you ban guns, you are not just eliminating a right, you are *creating a criminal offense* – in fact a whole set of new crimes. How many months or years will you have to be confined by the armed guards of the state for having a rifle with a pistol grip or a 10-round magazine? How many of those fifty million gun owners are you going to lock up, after raiding their homes? You better have stiff sentences, right? Every prosecutor running for office will tell you so.

One has to be kind of obtuse not to understand that a War on Guns, no matter how liberally inspired, will end up like all other such campaigns. It will *create crime* and pre-crime, and "take the level of police statism, lawlessness and general social pathology up a notch in the same way Prohibition and the Drug War have done. [It will] expand the volume of organized crime, ... to empower criminal gangs fighting over control over the black market, ... lead to further erosion of Fourth Amendment protections against search and seizure, further militarization of local police via SWAT teams, and further expansion of the squalid empire of civil forfeiture, perjured jailhouse snitch testimony, entrapment, planted evidence, and plea deal blackmail." ([Kevin Carson](#))

Speaking of the War on Drugs: Is there any greater source of "gun violence" in America? "[Most of the nonsuicide gun deaths](#) in this country happen in densely populated, lower-income urban environments, [where] gangs and poverty are the proximate causes of the violence." You know, the Drug War Theater, where "addressing the incentives that lead young people in our inner cities to gravitate toward crime—incentives like the ability to gain money and status by trafficking in drugs when few other opportunities are available—would do more to begin to address the gun violence endemic in America than any of the well-intentioned but likely ineffectual 'gun control' laws that could be passed."⁵ Liberals all know and talk all the time about the horrors of the War on Drugs. Is there peep one in any of the gun control proposals from liberal politicians or pundits about ending this disastrous crusade, arguably the greatest single source of gun violence in America? Silly me for asking.



Gun Rights and the American State

What the modern American capitalist state has done is *invert* the relative valorization of a standing army vs. an armed people that was held by a long tradition of radical democrats, and by many, if not most, "Founding Fathers."⁶ This skews the minds of everyone in society, and is no progressive achievement.

In the current gun rights debate, one does not have to think too hard to catch the tiny little fact that anti-gun-rights liberals, besides not really being pacifists, **are not really proposing to eliminate guns at all**. Is there one liberal gun-control proposal being put forward that makes the teensiest move toward diminishing the use of guns, including military

assault weapons, by the police? Is there one that addresses, in the weensiest way, the continuing, [massive militarization](#) of the police that has been taking place in this country? Is there one that will take away one gun, one bullet, one armed personnel carrier, one drone, or one dollar from the bloated internal security apparatus (let's not even mention the foreign war machine) of the American nouveau police state? From its [corporate militia comrades](#)?

No. What all liberal gun-control proposals seek to do, and all they seek to do, is to reduce and eventually eliminate the right of ordinary citizens to possess firearms. These proposals treat the armed power of the state with, at best, benign indifference. They ignore, or dismiss as of no importance, the way these policies will further weaken the power of the citizen relative to the state. There is a definite ideology underlying all this: That the state – the American capitalist state we live in – *should* have a monopoly of armed force; that this state is a benign, neutral arbiter which will use its armed force in support of and not against its citizens, to mediate conflicts fairly and promote just outcomes in ways that the citizens themselves cannot be trusted to do.

All the liberal gun-control proposals do, and I would suggest the anti-gun-rights position in general must, rest on this premise. For reasons set forth below, I think it's wrong-headed, and I do not see how one can deny that it is elitist and authoritarian.

This ideology is most likely to exude from those whose lived experience is that the armed power of the state *does* overwhelmingly act on their behalf, that the police *are* their friends – people who are secure in their implicit understanding that they have nothing to fear, personally or politically, from the armed agents of the state, and that when they call those agents to help them, they will come and help them, and not beat them down or shoot them on sight, “by accident.”

At many levels, this ideology promotes the phony notion of what the American capitalist state is, an ideology that we should be helping to extirpate from people's minds, not helping to perpetuate in the name of ensuring their safety. Under the guise of nonviolent pacifism, this ideology only occludes the violence of the armed state that underlies all of our lives in capitalist society. The state we live in is not a neutral class-agnostic arbiter. It is the instantiation of a relation of forces between classes, which “uses social crises to reinforce a range of social relationships and control certain populations.”⁷ In our case, it exists to guarantee, by armed force locked and loaded in advance and on call 24-7, the absolute hegemony of the corporations and the banksters (the ruling class/the 1%/your-euphemism-for-avoiding-marxist-language-here) over the working people and dispossessed (the 99% and such). We should dispense with any of the comforting illusions about this. This state of postwar Euro-American felicity – the liberal, democratic capitalist welfare/social-democratic state – has reverted to its core class function.

Indeed, we have [just seen](#) that the armed police forces of the state, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, “are treating protests against the corporate and banking structure of America as potential criminal and terrorist activity[,] functioning as a de facto intelligence and enforcement arm of Wall Street and Corporate America.” At this point, it is blindingly obvious that, as [Etienne Balibar](#) so cogently put it over thirty years ago, the modern capitalist state, ours included, “is **expressly organized as the State of pre-emptive counter-revolution.**”

It might help to understand Balibar's conclusion in terms of a rough Kuhnian distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” politics.⁸ In the normal political paradigm, which endures over a relatively long period of stability, everybody plays by the same legal and constitutional rules, everyone's rights are respected equally, and disputes are settled in transparently fair and equal political and legal processes, with minimal and similarly fair and transparent uses of armed force. In the revolutionary situation, which predominates in relatively brief and compressed periods of upheaval, the point is to completely replace one paradigm with another. In this situation, established and insurgent factions seek each to overcome the other. Each seeks to increase its own hegemony and

powers while reducing the other's autonomous rights and powers. Disputes, clearly understood as aspects of the one big conflict over which social and political paradigm will rule, are settled by the frankly unequal application of force – whether the force of money, law, political pressure, or arms.

The curious thing is that we are not in “revolutionary” politics, since (unfortunately) there is no serious political force threatening or seeking to overthrow the political paradigm of the capitalist state. But we are not exactly in a “normal” paradigm either, since the deep instability, unfairness, and precarity of the capitalist state are just too visible. We are, as Balibar suggests, in *pre-emptively counter-revolutionary* politics, where the capitalist state, on behalf of the tiny minority faction (I call it a class) it empowers, is preparing in advance to repel the fundamental, paradigm-changing, challenges it anticipates. It is doing this by the increasing, and increasingly aggressive and obvious, unequal application of money, laws, political power, and armed force.

In other words, it's a “revolutionary” political period without the revolutionary politics. With *only* the counter-revolutionary politics. It's a period where the paradigm is being radically changed, not by an insurgent, but by the establishment faction. In the midst of this, too many American liberals are clinging to a nostalgic, wish-fulfillment dream society where, if they can just, over the next few election cycles, get the right mix of *noblesse-oblige* economics and equal-opportunity imperialist identity-politics, everything will be peachy keen once again. (*Isn't it great to watch Barack and Hillary order Seal Team Six into action! If only we can reform the filibuster.*) Welcome to the world of unchallenged counter-revolution.

Well, the first counter-revolutionary act of every government is to collect the guns, and a necessary element of pre-emptive counter-revolution in the American polity is the disarming of the people. Nobody on the left, nobody interested in the radically democratic transformation of our society, should be interested in helping with that.

Yet all liberal gun-control schemes remain blithely indifferent to, when not aggressively dismissive of, these concerns. Somehow, a lot of people have come to imagine that depreciating versus valuing citizens' gun rights is a left-right dichotomy. Only in the ridiculous political discourse of the United States, where Barack Obama is a “marxist” (or any kind of “leftist” at all), can citizens' right to gun ownership be considered a purely right-wing demand. The notion that an armed populace should have a measure of power of resistance to the heavily armed power of the state is, if anything, a [populist](#) principle, and has always been part of the revolutionary democratic traditions of the left. The notion that disarming the people in a capitalist state – and one in severe socio-economic crisis, at that – would be some kind of victory for progressive, democratic forces, something that might help move us toward an emancipatory transformation of society, derives from no position on the political left. As [one commentator](#) puts it: “I can't imagine why anyone would expect the state's gun control policies to display any less of a class character than other areas of policy. Regardless of the ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ rhetoric used to defend gun control, you can safely bet it will come down harder on the cottagers than on the gentry, harder on the workers than on the Pinkertons, and harder on the Black Panthers than on murdering cops.”

There's no way around it: The net effect of eliminating the right of citizens to possess firearms will be to increase the power of the armed capitalist state. It will not be a more pacifistic, but a more authoritarian society, one in which the whole panoply of armed police we've already come to accept as part of the social landscape will be even more ubiquitous, while citizens' compliance and submission will be more thoroughly assured. As [Patrick Higgins](#) puts it: “The formula for gun control seems pretty obvious to me. Less guns for the people who are most likely to need them, more guns for cops and soldiers and those sympathetic to them.” If you're good with that, then go for it. I am not.

As Higgins implies, cops and soldiers will *not* be the only ones left holding guns. My friends have kids in an elite New York City private school. A few years back, during seventh-grade *bar/bat mitzvah*

season – which, in these social circles, is like a months-long Hollywood after-party for thirteen-year olds – their son was invited to his classmate’s party. Not the *bar mitzvah* where the parents flew a bunch of parents and kids to Paris for their son’s coming of age. No, the *bat mitzvah* held in Rockefeller Center. Ceremony in the Rainbow Room. Party in the skating rink. Closed to the public. On a Saturday night. When my friend went to pick his son up to bring him home, he was stopped at the perimeter of the promenade, just inside the ring of limos, by armed guards with those really fully automatic weapons, who would not let him in because he didn’t have an invitation. He had to wait outside for his son to come out. Thank goodness for cell phones, which, of course, every thirteen-year-old has.

Here’s the thing, and *everybody knows it*: Whatever strictest possible gun-control regime is instituted by favored liberal politicians, the family who threw that party will still have all the guns that it wants at its disposal. Donald Trump will still have his carry permit. Goldman Sachs will have all the weapons it wants for its private army, which will still be working as an allied brigade of the supposedly public branch of the ruling class’s armed forces, and which its PR people will make sure is never crudely referred to as a “militia.” And don’t worry, Joe, no one will be taking *your* Beretta. Forty-nine million nine-hundred thousand ninety-nine hundred or so Americans who have never done a wrong thing will be disarmed by force, but every one of this class will have all the guns s/he wants at his or her disposal. There will be a system of waivers, fees and private security armies for anyone in the .01%. Keeping in mind the incredible growing socio-economic inequality in this country – which, of course, the push for strict gun control has nothing to do with – the American social landscape is going to be populated with more, not fewer, gun-toting characters like these, who will have less, not more, accountability, and among whom there are no imaginary Gandhis:



It’s too bad that we Americans, with liberals much too complicit in this, have accepted – along with the growth of obscene social inequality – the incremental loss of many of our fundamental rights – from privacy (warrantless surveillance) to the right of judicial due process before being summarily executed by our elected king. If some fifty million or so gun owners want to stand up militantly for one fundamental right at this point, good for them. If, in the ridiculous American political context, a lot of them self-identify as right-wing, well, bad on them, and let’s by all means tell them they should be standing up for a lot of other rights, including their own right to a decent socio-economic life.

At the same time, folks on the left should be ashamed if gun owners become the first to stand up militantly against the pre-emptively counter-revolutionary assault on our rights. Maybe self-identified liberals should do more than trash those folk for defending a right they think is important; maybe liberals should consider how they have continually undermined the building of a populist left, by steering discontent into conventional political support for their favored Lord High Executioners, and teaching – by example, exhortation, and outright collaboration – servility and compliance in the face of right after right, and social benefit after social benefit, being stolen by those same elected autocrats. The problem with militant right-wing populism is not that it's militant or populist. And a large part of the reason there is not the militant left-wing populism there should be is that most liberals are neither left, nor militant, nor populist.

The concentration of wealth, and the concentration of armed power, in the hands of a few, are both bad ideas. And the one has everything to do with the other.*

I have a sneaking suspicion that a lot of the urbane liberal revulsion to guns has to do with the picture in the urbane liberal's mind of who has them – you know, the wrong sort of people, right-wing “wingnuts,” whose brains are addled by moonshine and Fox News. There is no question that a lot of people with ridiculous right-wing political and economic ideas are among the loudest defenders and proudest exercisers of the right to bear arms. But, you know, there's this other empowering, infinitely more dangerous right, one that more than fifty million people use to authorize the truly nutty killing of hundreds of thousands of people, and a whole host of truly nutty actions that endanger us all. That's the right to vote. I am horrified about how the great majority of voters – conservative and liberal, wingnut and Serious – use that right to authorize massively homicidal and criminal policies. Still, my understanding of the emancipatory democratic political tradition precludes any thought that, in the course of normal politics, depriving any of them – even those whose brains are addled by Jamba Juice and MSNBC – of that right would be an appropriate way for me to try to change the policies I abhor.

Rights empower. Power is dangerous. The right to vote is as dangerous a power as any. Those who have been deprived of it grasp it eagerly when they get it because for so long it's been on display but out of reach, just like the master's shiny new gun. Once everyone gets their hands on those rights/powers, they may use them – or, gee, think about them – in all kinds of ways I would find objectionable and damaging. They also *will* find out that those rights/powers are not in themselves effective of their liberation. The task is not to deprive people of fundamental rights, but to persuade them to think about and use them in different and more effective ways. And one has to know that's possible. It's happened before, and will again.

Recent Objections and the Contentious History of Gun Rights in America

Recently, some progressives⁹ have argued that, all the rhetoric about arming the people to resist tyranny notwithstanding, the real intent of the authors of the Second Amendment was to preserve slavery, and that, therefore, those who cite the Second Amendment as supporting every citizen's right to bear arms today are – well, ignorant wingnut enablers of slaveholding racism, I guess.

The logic escapes me here. Sure, the Second Amendment was ratified in a context where most of the framers -- certainly those of the Southern plantocracy – assumed that the right it guaranteed was – *like every other right instituted by the Constitution at time* – meant to be limited to free white males, who were the only fully-enfranchised citizens. But, really, Thomas Jefferson was a slaveholder, so there's something wrong with us using his words to promote equal rights? As do the authors of every law, indeed every text, the framers wrote something whose significance and effect exceeds what they could have imagined. The text, the law, that the framers wrote now stands apart from and beyond

their personal intentions. Perhaps it is *because* they could not imagine the extension of a certain right that they wrote a text that does not exclude it. I'll take that. We all do.

In this case however, we have clear evidence of subsequent law that was intended by *its* framers to extend the right to bear arms not only beyond, but against, the purposes of slavery. One might have noticed that, through a series of excruciating struggles during the course of American history, including a Civil War, the full enfranchisement of citizenship with all its attendant rights, including the right to keep and bear arms, was extended to all the previously excluded groups of American society. It is crystal clear that the intention of the framers of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments was to guarantee the right to bear arms to freed slaves. As [Adam Winkler](#) points out: “Whether or not the Founding Fathers thought the Second Amendment was primarily about state militias, the men behind the Fourteenth Amendment—America’s most sacred and significant civil-rights law—clearly believed that the right of individuals to have guns for self-defense was an essential element of citizenship. As Yale law professor Akhil Reed Amar has observed, ‘Between 1775 and 1866 the poster boy of arms morphed from the Concord minuteman to the Carolina freedman.’”

Whatever the intentions of the framers in the eighteenth century, the right to keep and bear arms is *today* treated as a right of *all* citizens – for sure, *only*, as with every other right – because it was fought for as such. That – the fruit of that fight – is the right we are talking about in today’s political and historical context. Far from using the framers’ prejudices to dismiss this particular right, liberals and progressives should be celebrating this extension of it, as they do so many other rights that have, by the twenty-first century, been achieved through legal, political, and, yes, armed struggle, sometimes using constitutional statutes in ways their authors could never, in their wildest dreams, have imagined. Like, you know, gay marriage.

These superficial historical arguments actually confirm that, historically, in America as elsewhere, guns have been recognized as *tools of empowerment*, to be distributed as widely as possible among those considered worthy of empowerment, and to be denied to those deemed unworthy of empowerment and eligible for subjugation. Who, in today’s America, do these liberal commentators think is unworthy of that empowerment?

The argument that tries to wed the Second Amendment to slavery for all time is particularly misleading, because it has to deny all the ways in which the right to bear arms was fought for and used by African-Americans, with great courage, throughout our history, in order to defend and extend their rights. [Winkler describes](#) the freedmen’s struggle and revanchist racist resistance over this right after the Civil War, including the role of the Ku Klux Klan as “disarmament posse”:

[A]t the end of the Civil War, the Union army allowed soldiers of any color to take home their rifles... [M]any blacks knew that white Southerners were not going to go along easily with such a vision [of their freedom]. As one freedman in Louisiana recalled, “I would say to every colored soldier, ‘Bring your gun home.’”

...Southern states quickly adopted the Black Codes ...One common provision barred blacks from possessing firearms. To enforce the gun ban, white men riding in posses began terrorizing black communities. ...The most infamous of these disarmament posses, of course, was the Ku Klux Klan.

In response to the Black Codes ...General Daniel E. Sickles, the commanding Union officer enforcing Reconstruction in South Carolina, ordered in January 1866 that “the constitutional rights of all loyal and well-disposed inhabitants to bear arms will not be infringed.” When South Carolinians ignored Sickles’s order and others like it, Congress passed the Freedmen’s Bureau Act of July 1866, which assured ex-slaves the “full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings concerning personal liberty ... including the constitutional right to bear arms.”

That same year, Congress passed the nation's first Civil Rights Act, which defined the freedmen as United States citizens and made it a federal offense to deprive them of their rights on the basis of race. Senator James Nye... told his colleagues that the freedmen now had an "equal right to protection, and to keep and bear arms for self-defense."

Unfortunately, when "the old landed gentry managed to successfully assert its power against the Reconstruction regime, former slaves were disarmed by house-to-house patrols, either under the Black Codes or by such irregular bodies as the Klan,"¹⁰ which enabled the subjugation of African-Americans in the South to the new nightmare of Jim Crow.

In the cauldron of the Klan's lynching fever, writing in 1892, [Ida B. Wells](#) learned and taught a valuable lesson (that George Orwell would later echo):

Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did not occur, was where the men armed themselves ... and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.

The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.

([Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases](#))

Ida Wells: another "wingnut."

Ida and the Klan both understood what the latter's ideological confrère later repeated:

The most foolish mistake we could possibly make would be to allow the subject races to possess arms. History shows that all conquerors who have allowed the subject races to carry arms have prepared their own downfall by so doing. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the supply of arms to the underdogs is a sine qua non for the overthrow of any sovereignty. -- Adolf Hitler (in [Hitler's Table Talk 1941-44: His Private Conversations, pp. 425-426.](#))

Regarding the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century, and without diminishing for a second the powerful non-violent struggle led by MLK, we should be aware of the ways in which that history has been edited to create "pacifist" saints who are safe for the Imperial hagiography, while rendering invisible the ways in which the renewal of armed resistance by African-Americans in the South after WWII helped to galvanize the final offensive against Jim Crow:

The same was true of the Civil Rights struggle a century later, after World War II. In areas where armed self-defense efforts by civil rights activists were widespread, they significantly improved the balance of power against the Klan and other racist vigilante movements. Numerous armed self-defense groups — e.g. the Deacons for Defense and Justice, whose members used rifles and shotguns to repel attacks by white vigilantes in Louisiana in the 1960s — helped equalize the correlation of forces between civil rights activists and racists in many small towns throughout the south.

Especially notable was Robert Williams, who in 1957 organized an armed defense of the Monroe, NC NAACP chapter president's home against a Klan raid and sent the vigilantes fleeing for their lives. Williams's book *Negroes With Guns* later inspired Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panthers Party. ([Carson](#), and, on Robert Williams, see my related post [Sealed With A Kiss: Mabel and Kathleen Talk Armed Self-Defense](#))

Indeed, as [Higgins](#) points out: "The modern day gun rights movement was not pioneered by the NRA ... but by the Black Panthers, whose co-founder, Huey Newton, found genuine protective value in the

Second Amendment.” And the modern gun-control movement began as a response to this by conservative Republicans, who were scared witless when Newton and the Panthers showed up on the California State Capitol steps ostentatiously carrying their perfectly legal firearms: “Republicans in California eagerly supported increased gun control. Governor Reagan told reporters that afternoon that he saw ‘no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons’.”

([Winkler](#))

The riots of 1967, which included armed resistance, also brought new gun control initiatives by the American elite:

The fear inspired by black people with guns also led the United States Congress to consider new gun restrictions, after the summer of 1967 brought what the historian Harvard Sitkoff called the “most intense and destructive wave of racial violence the nation had ever witnessed.” Devastating riots engulfed Detroit and Newark. Police and National Guardsmen who tried to help restore order were greeted with sniper fire.

A 1968 federal report blamed the unrest at least partly on the easy availability of guns. Because rioters used guns to keep law enforcement at bay, the report’s authors asserted that a recent spike in firearms sales and permit applications was “directly related to the actuality and prospect of civil disorders.” They drew “the firm conclusion that effective firearms controls are an essential contribution to domestic peace and tranquility.” ([Winkler](#))

The non-violent civil disobedience strategy of the MLK wing of the Civil Rights movement, based on ostentatiously unarmed submission to arrest and detention by the armed agents of the state, was enormously effective, but it was not the only thing that had a profound effect in concentrating the minds of the white American elite on the urgent need to change things substantively and quickly. I mean *real fast*. Anyone who does not know that Martin’s voice was in constant tension with the growing influence of those like Malcolm and Huey, that a lot of black people and their white supporters had had quite enough of submission to the armed police of the racist state, and that the fear of armed black insurrections was on the minds and in the political equations of the ruling class and its armed agents, is enmeshed in a pacifistic dream history.

Gun Rights and the Dynamics of Radical or Revolutionary Contestation

"*Power concedes* nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will," Frederick Douglass said, and true that. And there’s no demand without, somewhere behind it, an “or else.”

Do not get me wrong: *Militant* unarmed non-violent resistance is a very powerful political tactic. I would say that it’s the most effective mode of protest, resistance, and contestation for building crucial popular support against modern state oppression, and it is certainly the preferred mode of contestation for progressives, no matter how radical their goals, in the United States today.

Yet today is not forever, and while there is no power more crucial for radical change than a unified mass movement that represents the majority of people, it is also true that there are powers, privileges, prerogatives, supremacies, and wealth that will not be conceded by the group or class that holds them to any movement of any size or moral quality, except under threat of deadly force. To rephrase Douglass: Armed power, arrayed in defense of national, ethnic, racial, and/or class supremacy, will not concede to moral suasion alone. It never has and it never will.

Every successful mass movement for radical or revolutionary change will reach that point where it has to decide if it has had enough of beatings, arrests, detentions, and killings by the armed forces of the regime it is challenging. It will have to decide whether to finally submit, or to advance decisively, with new forms of resistance.

No one has put this more eloquently in recent years than did the leaders of the 2011 Egyptian revolt, in their [solidarity message](#) to Occupy Wall Street:

It is not our desire to participate in violence, but it is even less our desire to lose. If we do not resist, actively, when they come to take what we have won back, then we will surely lose. Do not confuse the tactics that we used when we shouted “peaceful” with fetishizing nonviolence; if the state had given up immediately we would have been overjoyed, but as they sought to abuse us, beat us, kill us, we knew that there was no other option than to fight back. Had we laid down and allowed ourselves to be arrested, tortured, and martyred to “make a point”, we would be no less bloodied, beaten and dead. Be prepared to defend these things you have occupied, that you are building, because, after everything else has been taken from us, these reclaimed spaces are so very precious.

Let’s dispense with the straw men. *Do you really think you’re going to defeat the US Army with your puny little rifles?* No, and not just because I have understood all along that any “military-style” civilian rifle is no match for an actual military weapon. No, I understand that the idea that every gun owner showing up on Pennsylvania Avenue tomorrow could possibly result in serious, systemic political and socio-economic change is ridiculous – maybe even as ridiculous as the idea that voting for the next Democratic presidential candidate could do so. I understand that, for there to be any prospect of the change of the sort I would like, there is no shortcut around building a political movement. I am talking about political principles that are fundamental to a movement in the long run, not magic solutions in the short run.

I also understand that, in the US or any modern state, any plausible regime of gun rights will leave the state with a *supremacy* of armed force, even if not a *monopoly*. Still, the state’s lack of a monopoly on that does not count for nothing. In the process of building a mass movement that undermines the authority and legitimacy of the state, and the morale of its armed agents, there will be many discrete moments of confrontation, presumably getting progressively more militant and threatening to the status quo. A modicum of armed power among the citizenry may not exactly equalize, but can noticeably recalibrate, the correlation of forces. If there is some armed resistance to the armed forces of the state, this will change the calculus, especially in a state which claims popular legitimacy. In the eruptions of armed resistance in the Civil Rights era, this is exactly what we saw, not so long ago, in this country.

Even if the state constantly wins such battles, it may suffer politically debilitating losses. (Who “won” the Newark and Detroit and Los Angeles riots?) Its political leaders and police and military agents will have different, more difficult, political costs to calculate. Yes, as long as the young working-class men and women driving the tanks and shooting the really fully automatic weapons on its behalf keep doing so, the Imperial High Command may be able to crush everything from sporadic uprisings to a massive popular rebellion. But it will be at great cost to the state’s legitimacy. And, human beings that they are, the willingness of those men and women to keep doing that on behalf of their masters – their defection calculus – will be affected not just by political and moral appeals (Do you really want to shoot your brothers and sisters who are fighting for their pensions?), but also by the real possibility that they might get shot doing so. Militant, radical and revolutionary movements are filled with hundreds of unpredictable moments of decision, which can become game-changing tipping points. Unpredictable, but not entirely unforeseeable.

I’m pretty sure, too, that if, after the development of an overwhelming mass movement, there is some kind crucial insurrectionary moment, it will be settled not by the power of personal civilian weapons, but by the power of the armed forces that the besieged state has built up for itself. The key moment is not the defeat, but the defection, of the armed forces of the state. The ultimate power does not rest with who starts out with the most guns, or even with who shoots them the most (or at all), but with who ends up determining which way they are pointed. The most successful insurrectionary

moment is one in which no bullet has to be fired; everyone just has to know at whom they will be headed if they are.

That is still a struggle over the use and control of arms. Pointing a gun is using it.

Understanding the dynamic of radical and revolutionary change, not repeating platitudes about how omnipotent is the state and how unchangeable is society, is really thinking historically. I heard someone ridiculing a gun-rights supporter on TV the other day, along these lines: *Do you realize how ridiculous you sound when you talk about tyranny or resistance to tyranny, in the United States?* Really? Let's roll the videotape back a few years, and try that out again: Do you realize how ridiculous you sound when you talk about American presidents, Republican and Democrat, torturing, kidnapping for torture, nullifying *habeas corpus*, spying without warrants on everybody, setting up [a separate justice system for Muslims](#), rewarding billions in bonuses to bankers who crashed the economy, offering Social Security and Medicare as sacrifices to those bankers, aggressively prosecuting whistleblowers and journalists while granting complete immunity and government favor to torturers and banksters, personally overseeing the assassination of anyone they want anywhere in the world, including American citizens, starting seven or eight secret wars? Do you realize how ridiculous you sound when you talk about the great European social-democratic states, Socialist governments included, overseeing forced austerity on behalf of banksters, selling off the land and assets of their countries, reneging on the pensions of their citizens, ushering in 25-30% unemployment, facing riots and pitched battles with police in the streets?

Understanding that things can and will change, radically at times, is an historical attitude. Asserting that the society and moment we live in today is omnipotent and unchangeable –proclaiming, essentially, that history is over – is what I understand as pure ideology. “Tyranny” – or whatever you prefer to call it – has, not so long ago, already been here *and* been successfully resisted, with non-violent and not non-violent tactics – unless you think Jim Crow doesn't qualify. And whatever-you-want-to-call-it is back – unless you think a regime that practices assassination, unilateral war-making, unlimited surveillance, austerity imposition, and issues from a completely corrupt electoral process, etc., doesn't qualify. And it may well be resisted again. I don't know how the street protests and occupations of state capitols and such by workers and pensioners and student debt-slaves and people thrown out of their homes and out of their jobs may unfold in America in the near future, but they very well may take lessons from more than the edited history of such struggles in our country and around the world. Nothing ridiculous there, as far as I'm concerned. History is not over.

I am certainly as stumped as [Glenn Greenwald](#) by the unfortunate state of American political passivity he describes (and which never ceases to amaze my foreign friends):

The real mystery from all of this is that it has not led to greater social unrest. To some extent, both the early version of the Tea Party and the Occupy movements were spurred by the government's protection of Wall Street at the expense of everyone else. Still, Americans continue to be plagued by massive unemployment, foreclosures, the threat of austerity and economic insecurity while those who caused those problems have more power and profit than ever. And they watch millions of their fellow citizens be put in cages for relatively minor offenses while the most powerful are free to commit far more serious crimes with complete impunity. Far less injustice than this has spurred serious unrest in other societies.

According to my understanding of history, though, I would say, “Wait a minute.” As Greenwald points out, the deep-seated problems are all there and are likely to worsen, and the Obama effect *will* wear out. I'll refer back to the example above of the Civil Rights movement. Change – significant but not quite revolutionary change – happened, and it happened faster, I contend, because of the reality and threat of armed resistance.

Gun Rights and the Problematic of Mass Killings and School Shootings

Don't we have to save the children?

Just after midnight on August 1, 1966, [Charles Whitman](#), a 25-year-old former Marine, killed his mother and wife by stabbing them in the heart. A few hours later, he called his wife's office to let them know she wouldn't be in that day, packed up an M1 .30-caliber carbine, a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun, a 6mm bolt-action hunting rifle, a .35 caliber pump rifle, a 9mm Luger pistol, a 25-caliber pistol, a .357 Magnum revolver, 700+ rounds of ammunition, Dexedrine, Excedrin, toilet paper, deodorant, and other sundries, and went up on the Tower on the University of Texas campus in Austin, where he methodically murdered 12 people, and wounded 32 others. Whitman picked off people – mostly young kids in their teens and twenties – at random. From up to 1500 feet away – no one could see it coming – he rained sudden, instant death on solitary strollers and couples walking together – boyfriend and girlfriend, sisters. He'd shoot first one, then the other, and then he'd shoot people who tried to drag wounded friends and strangers to safety. This went on for almost two hours, with police and armed citizens returning fire, until two cops and an armed civilian got to the top of the tower, and killed Whitman. I remember it vividly. From my safe redoubt in New York, I was terrified. It still shakes me up to think about it.

Are the guns the problem here?

This is not a flippant question. Clearly, the world would be a better place if Charles Whitman had never had a gun that day. Does saying that mean we are impelled to ban guns, and to effectively eliminate a fundamental political right, criminalizing fifty million people who have done nothing wrong? I do not think so. Clearly, armed civilians helped minimize and end the carnage. Does saying that mean we are impelled to recognize how wonderful guns are and how great it would be for everyone to be packing all the time? I do not think so. For me, whatever the role of guns in exacerbating and ending the harm caused in incidents like this, what such incidents really demonstrate is that guns are neither the problem nor the answer, precisely *to incidents like this*, and that incidents like this are not what's at stake in the problematic of "gun control."

The primary causal factor in an incident like this is something much more powerful than a gun; it's, for lack of a better term, a *state of mind*. We have all been horrified that there have been too many mass killings by young men in opportunistic venues, with guns. If they had been with different weapons – one with a gun killing ten people in a school, one with an ax who killed eight people in a mall, and one with a can of gasoline who burned fifteen people to death in a movie theater – what would the central focus of our concern be? What would we be asking about why this is happening, about what might be causing more young men to engage in spates of seemingly senseless, suicidal-homicidal mass violence, about what we might do to recognize and eliminate, as far as possible, those causes? What programs and policies would we be exploring? Because *those are the same questions, with the same central focus, that we should be asking now*. And that focus would not be on the weapons used.

The fundamental problem we have to deal with in incidents like these is that, once someone is in the state of mind where he is *impelled* to do such a thing, he is going to do it, with one weapon or another, and you're going to have horror and grief. Yes, the ability of such a person to get his hand on a gun – legally or illegally, bolt action or semi-automatic, with or without a "thumbhole stock," he really won't care – exacerbates the damage he can do, but it is not the cause of the problem, and addressing guns in any way does exactly nothing to address the cause of the problem. We have to look at what causes that *state of mind*.

This is a *very* difficult problem. As I suggested above, I do think that the ubiquitous cultural representation of armed violence as a quick, effective, and attractive solution for all kinds of personal

and social problems is pernicious. It steers someone in such a state of mind to go for the gun. [Adam Lanza](#) was in the SWAT team of his mind. But for someone in his state of mind, his choice of targets, his need to eliminate them brutally and *right now*, could as easily have come from watching a rerun of [Village of the Damned](#) as from playing *Call of Duty*.

One thing for sure, if one wants to deal with that difficult problem, all the hoopla about “military-style assault weapons” is pure distraction. “Assault weapons” is a term [invented by the gun industry](#) to conflate civilian and military weapons for marketing purposes, and anti-gun rights politicians have jumped on that confusion for their own agenda. And “style” is, well, just that. It’s clear to me, from many conversations, that a lot of people do not understand that “semi-automatic” means “shoots one bullet per trigger pull,” and not “fires continuously as long as you hold the trigger” (“automatic”), and that many people think “military-style” refers to some special enhanced functionality rather than to design components like [“thumbhole stocks”](#) or [“a pistol grip that extends beneath the action,”](#) which do nothing to increase the lethality of the weapon. The true power is in the ammunition, not the rifle, and [the most powerful ammunition](#), loaded to bring down 300-500 pound animals, is used in popular “hunting” and “deer” rifles of the kind Charles Whitman used, not in these “military-style assault weapons.”

The only item on the list of anathematized “assault weapons” features that can be construed to have any significant functional value in this kind of mass shooting incident is the magazine. If you imagine that banning 100-round magazines will be helpful, go ahead. But be aware that a knowledgeable shooter wouldn’t use one; the Colorado movie shooter was taken down *because* he used a 100-round magazine, which jammed, as they are known to do. A shooter with a 30- or 10-round magazine, or even with a revolver and [speedloaders](#), will still kill a whole lot of unarmed people. And legally limiting magazine capacity to seven bullets is just silly, as Gov. Cuomo found when he realized he had outlawed police handguns. (Of course, he’ll re-write the law to make an exception for those armed agents of the state.) A magazine is also a very easy item to fabricate (as [guns themselves soon will be](#) via the 3D printer). Trying to stop mass shootings by outlawing large-capacity magazines is like going after lung cancer by outlawing big cigarette cases.

This “assault weapons” burst of gun control fervor may make you feel like you’re doing something about mass shootings and saving the children, but it’s as much a silly shortcut around the real problem as is the idea that everyone packing heat is going to make us suddenly free of tyranny. The only way you can make yourself feel that you’ve substantially eliminated the damage guns do in such situations is by outlawing all guns, handguns included, *and* believing that will actually mean that guns will not be available. And, after all the personal, political, and social energy spent trying to capture and imprison everyone with an “assault weapon” having a “thumbhole stock” or a handgun with an eight-round magazine, or a 3D printer, after all the (even further) erosion of constitutional protections against search and seizure, and further militarization of police and SWAT teams, and further filling of the prisons with people who had never done any harm to any other human being, you would not have done one thing – not one single thing – to address the cause(s) of the problem you were claiming to want to solve.

If you want to address the fundamental problem in *these kinds of incidents*, then you’d better look somewhere else, at something that can explain the state of mind that drives them. Charles Whitman, who was medicating himself with Valium and Dexedrine, had, the autopsy revealed, a glioblastoma, an aggressive brain tumor that would have killed him within a year. Before the shootings, he had visited a psychiatrist, who [noted](#): “This massive, muscular youth seemed to be oozing with hostility ... He readily admits having overwhelming periods of hostility with a very minimum of provocation. Repeated inquiries ... were not too successful with the exception of his vivid reference to 'thinking about going up on the tower with a deer rifle and start shooting people'.”

So, fair question or not: Were the guns the problem there?

In April 2001, 16-year-old Cory Baadsgaard took a rifle to his high school in Washington state and held 23 classmates and a teacher hostage. Fortunately, he didn't kill anybody. After being held for 14 months, he was released under community supervision, based on the testimony of psychiatrists about the adverse effects of the drugs he was taking. Cory remembered nothing of his violence. The incident took place after he had been switched, cold-turkey, from Paxil to a high dose of Effexor to treat "situational depression."

Here's [what Cory's father said](#):

"The morning that Cory went to school and did what he did, my wife and I just knew that it had to be something with the drugs. That morning he had taken about 300 milligrams of Effexor, and I thought it was something about him going off one of the drugs and then the high dose of the other. One of Cory's friends told us that Cory was yelling and then he just stopped, looked down and saw the gun in his hand and woke up....I guess I could blame myself for having the gun available, but if I'd known then just what these drugs could do it would have been the drugs that would not have been in our home. They always talk about how the kids who do these things are the ones who get picked on by the jocks and stuff, but Cory was a jock. He was on the varsity basketball team, played football and golf, and was very popular in school. I pray every night that the media will get ahold of this issue. If Cory had been on PCP the media would say 'Oh, he needs drug rehabilitation,' but because these were prescribed medications they say 'Oh, it can't be that,' but now we know it can be."¹¹

How about it? Were the guns the problem there? The fundamental, causal problem? If Cory had killed those 23 kids, would it be pistol grips and thumbhole stocks we should be obsessing about?

Both Paxil's and Effexor's [manufacturers' inserts](#) state explicitly that the drugs "increase the risk of suicidal behavior," and that analysis of "antidepressant drugs (SSRIs and others) showed that these drugs increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior (suicidality) in children, adolescents, and young adults (ages 18-24)."

Columbine? Perhaps you missed the [story of Mark Allen Taylor](#), who was shot at least six times by Columbine shooter Eric Harris. At the time of the shooting, Harris had taken Luvox for his anger, anxiety, depression, disorganized thoughts, homicidal thoughts, suspiciousness and a temper – having been switched from Zoloft. Taylor, along with a New Jersey police officer who killed six people while on Luvox, sued Solvay, the drug's maker. (Matthew Beck, from Connecticut, who killed four of his co-workers and himself while on Luvox, couldn't join them.) Taylor [said](#): "I'm suing Solvay because I believe that Eric Harris did what he did because of this drug." Dr. Peter Breggin's [report](#) to the court stated: "[At] the time he committed multiple homicides and suicide, Eric Harris was suffering from a substance induced (Luvox-induced) mood disorder with depressive and manic features that had reached a psychotic level of violence and suicide....Absent persistent exposure to Luvox, Eric Harris probably would not have committed violence and suicide."¹²

Paxil, Effexor, and Luvox are on Time Magazine's list of the "[Top Ten Legal Drugs Linked to Violence](#)." (Respectively, 10.3x, 8.3x, and 8.4x more likely to be associated with violence than other drugs.) In [a 2001 study](#), Yale researchers reported that 8.1 percent of all admissions to a university psychiatric hospital were "owing to antidepressant-associated mania or psychosis."³⁵ If the same percentage of all the 10.7 million US psychiatric hospital admissions at the time of the study were "antidepressant-associated" manic or psychotic episodes, that would be 860,000 people.

As one researcher [testified to the FDA](#) about drugs of this type: "We have never seen drugs so similar to LSD and PCP as these SSRI antidepressants. All of these drugs produce dreaming during periods of wakefulness."¹³

Let's make sure we eliminate those pistol grips.

Did these SSRI-antidepressants cause these mass shootings, or the other [60+ incidents](#) of school violence of the kind we're so horrified about that are also linked to antidepressant drugs?⁴¹ I don't know. I don't know because, well, there isn't much talk, investigation or concern about that, what with the hunt for "military-style" guns taking up so much attention.

It's a complicated question, because, as one [Italian researcher noted](#): "Antidepressant-induced mania is not simply a temporary and reversible phenomenon, but a complex biochemical mechanism of illness deterioration." It's not just a matter of what drug you take, but of how doctors now cycle kids through one antidepressant after another. It's often the withdrawal phase of a drug that causes the most problems: "As patients are switched from one antidepressant to another or to a polypharmacy regimen, their illness may be propelled 'into a refractory phase, characterized by low remission, high relapse and high intolerance.' Antidepressants increase the risk of a 'switch' into mania, and thus into bipolar illness."

(There is no verification of what drugs Adam Lanza was taking. As of [January 11th](#), the toxicology report on his autopsy was still "weeks" away.)

I do think that those who are concerned about these mass shootings, and about the increase in the number of these incidents over the last 15 years, might want to spend at least as much time and energy looking at factors that could actually be **causing** the extremely bizarre states of mind that propel adolescents and young adults into such violence, as they do haranguing society about exacerbating factors. Because I know that guns do not cause these states of mind.

What changes have taken place in American society over the past couple of decades that are likely to be producing these states of mind more often among adolescents and young adults? Is it that evolution produced a new generation of [excitable boys](#), genetically predisposed to psychotic violence? That guns are intrinsically more lethal (ask Charles Whitman), or more prone to jump into young people's hands? Or that kids are, for the first time in history, being constantly dosed with powerful, psychoactive, literally mind-altering, drugs, whose effects have been seriously and repeatedly challenged (even if in ways that are kept largely invisible to most media consumers)?

"Imagine how people would totally rethink things."

The most deadly school massacre in American history was not Sandy Hook. It occurred in 1927, in [Bath, Michigan](#). Andrew Kehoe bludgeoned his wife to death, firebombed his house and farm buildings, blew up the Bath Consolidated School with explosives he had secretly planted for months, killing 38 grade-school children, and then blew himself up in his truck filled with dynamite and shrapnel, taking out the school superintendent and a few others.⁴³

No guns. A state of mind. It'll find a way.

(OK, he did use a rifle to detonate the dynamite in his truck. Not the same.)

I had a pretty tough holiday season, including the death of a close family member. In the midst of all that, seeing the faces and imagining the last moments of those 20 children killed at Sandy Hook shook me to the core. I'd really like to see a discussion of how a young man like Adam Lanza could set himself to do such a thing. Tirades against pistol grips and magazines, and attempts to criminalize fifty-million people who have done nothing wrong, aren't doing it for me. They are not that discussion, and only divert from it.

So, the right to own guns is a fundamental political right, and guns don't cause psychosis-driven mass shootings, therefore no regulations, right?

Wrong. No right is "god-given" or "natural" (although there are some that we, for good reason, treat in our socio-political discourse *as if* they were). Rights are the achievements of historical struggle, which, in my book, makes them even more precious. Nor are rights absolute. The "free-speech" right comes as close as you can for me, but there's still "Fire!"-in-a-crowded-theater. It is not plausible that, in any modern society, guns would be entirely unregulated. No modern state is going to allow the unregulated possession of Stingers or fifty-caliber machine guns.

There will be gun regulation, and *there is*, a lot of it. And, often, in those [toddling towns](#) where the regulation is "[toughest](#)," gun violence is highest. I'm not sure what else we need, but I'll listen. Let's have a discussion about reasonable gun regulations that, on all sides, firmly and sincerely recognizes that gun ownership is a fundamental political right, which deserves a place of honor on our wall of historical achievements.

Given that shared assumption, we can proceed to confront all the devils in the details. Some regulations I will find legitimate. I can't go on about the dangers of states of mind, and then object to any notion of a background check. I do object, however, to those proposals that are silly ("military-style") and whose main purpose is to train citizens into more thorough compliance, to those that have no respect for what the fundamental right of gun ownership means, to those that have obvious confiscatory intent (register and re-register everything), and to those that will criminalize fifty-million people who have done nothing wrong. Like the New York State law passed by Cuomo. "*I support the Second Amendment, I really do. You can keep your musket and your Derringer,*" is transparently insincere, and won't cut it.

Above all, let's not, because of a fearful reaction to horrific events, jump on gun-control proposals that are *not* going to stop those horrors, and will play into an elite agenda of complete citizen disempowerment and loss of hard-won rights. That is exactly what we have done since 9/11, and it is past time to say, "No more!"

One of the things I'm open to is the idea that a prospective gun owner should have to get some training. (At no expense, of course. *It's a right*, and if it's reasonable for the state to require training to exercise it, it's necessary for the state to provide that training for everybody, of every class, who wants it.) I've fired guns, and learned how to handle them – and I actually think everybody should, which I also think would help change the debate – but, as I said, I don't own any. Haven't felt the need for it. If I moved to one of those dangerous neighborhoods, like the pretty towns in New Jersey or Colorado I have visited, where the bears come in to use your swimming pool, I might feel that need real quick. (I'm with Stephen Colbert on the bears.) The only thing that might get me to rush out and purchase a gun, as it's [already got 2.2 million people](#) to do, is the threat that my right to do so was about to be eliminated.⁴⁵ And I might now have to consider going armed, to fend off those of my liberal friends who will come gunning for me after reading this.

Update (2/3/2013): I removed an incorrect number from the chart on "Big Killers."

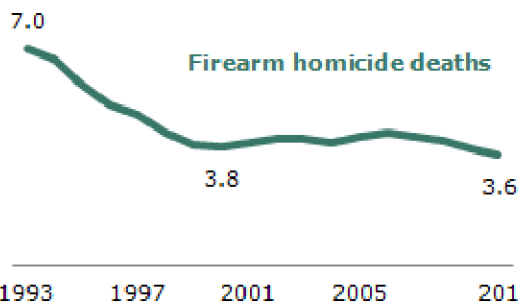
Update (2/10/2013): I removed statement suggesting that all of Charles Whitman's rifles were bolt-action. The M-1 had a semi-automatic mechanism.

***Update** (4/16/2013) Sentence added ("The concentration of wealth, and the concentration of armed power, in the hands of a few, are both bad ideas. And the one has everything to do with the other.")

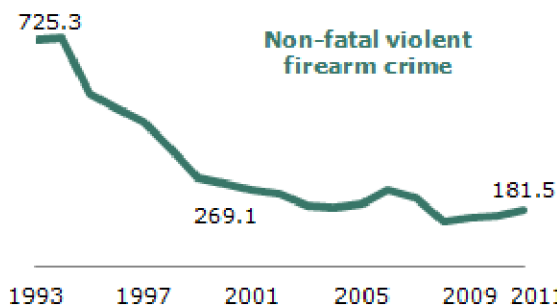
Update (2/9/2014): "Public Unaware." A couple of recent charts::

Crime Rates Drop in 1990s, Then Decline More Slowly

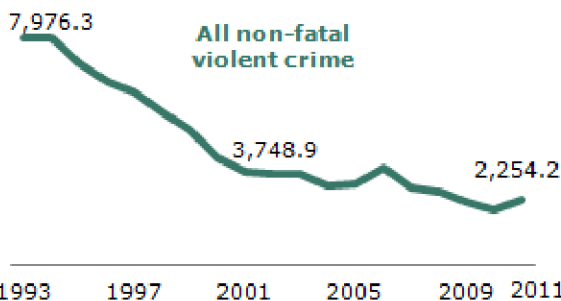
Deaths per 100,000 people (all ages)



Victimizations per 100,000 people ages 12 and older



Victimizations per 100,000 people ages 12 and older



Note: Data labels shown for 1993, 2000 and 2011. 2006 NCVS victimization estimates are not comparable with those in other years. See Methodology for details.

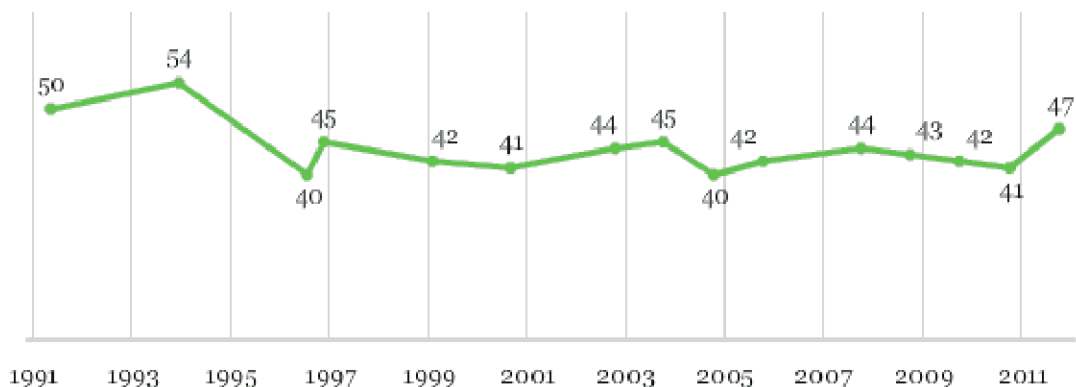
Sources: For firearm homicide deaths, CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS); for non-fatal victimizations, Pew Research Center tabulations of National Crime Victimization Survey, U.S. Justice Department

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

U.S. Gun Households, 1991-2011

Do you have a gun in your home? (If no: Do you have a gun anywhere else on your property such as in your garage, barn, shed, or in your car or truck?)

■ Gun in home/elsewhere on property



GALLUP

¹“The totalitarian states can do great things, but there is one thing they cannot do, they cannot give the factory worker a rifle and tell him to take it home and keep it in his bedroom. That rifle hanging on the wall of the working-class flat or labourer's cottage is the symbol of democracy. It is our job to see it stays there.”

"The Complete Works of George Orwell", Edited by Peter Davison, 1998, volume 12 of the 20 volume set. Pages 362-365 contain a reprint of the entire article, "Don't Let Colonel Blimp Ruin the Home Guard," Evening Standard, 8 January 1941.

As the quote indicates, King never eschewed violence entirely. Early in his career, King's home was described as an “arsenal” of guns, with armed supporters often posted to prevent a Klan assassination. King even applied for a concealed carry permit, which was refused by the local police in Alabama, who “used any wiggle room in the law to discriminate against African Americans” – an historical example used by advocates of “shall issue” vs. “may issue” laws about carry permits. (Adam Winkler, “[MLK and His Guns](#).”)

And there's Gandhi's famous quote: “Among the many misdeeds of the British rule in India, history will look upon the Act depriving a whole nation of arms as the blackest.” The full context doesn't make it any better for anti-gun-rights faux-pacifists. The quote continues: “If we want the Arms Act to be repealed, if we want to learn the use of arms, here is a golden opportunity. If the middle classes render voluntary help to Government in the hour of its trial, distrust will disappear, and the ban on possessing arms will be withdrawn.” Gandhi was exhorting Indians to join the British army in WWI, as a tactical move that might persuade the British of their loyalty, thereby hastening the repeal of the hated Arms Act, and at the same time getting training that might later be useful in the independence struggle.

The Arms Act was one of a series of measures adopted by the British in response to a serious Indian rebellion, the mutiny of 1857: “[T]he Indian masses were systematically being disarmed and the means of local firearm production destroyed, to ensure that they (the Indian masses) would never again have the means to rise in rebellion against their colonial masters. Towards this end the colonial government ... brought into existence the Indian Arms Act, 1878 (11 of 1878); an act which, exempted Europeans and ensured that no Indian could possess a weapon of any description unless the British

masters considered him a "loyal" subject of the British Empire."

<http://www.abhijeetsingh.com/arms/india/>

And let's not even get into Gandhi's even more notorious: "We adopted it [the weapon of non-violence] out of our helplessness. If we had the atom bomb, we would have used it against the British."

The full quote is debated, with some suggesting that Gandhi's "we" was not meant to include himself and his movement and/or that he was really trying to emphasize the power of non-violence. I'm not persuaded, but judge for yourself: "Had we adopted non-violence as the weapon of the strong, because we realised that it was more effective than any other weapon, in fact the mightiest force in the world, we would have made use of its full potency and not have discarded it as soon as the fight against the British was over or we were in a position to wield conventional weapons. But as I have already said, we adopted it out of our helplessness. If we had the atom bomb, we would have used it against the British."

The general point: For both MLK and Gandhi: "No Justice, No Peace" was, I would suggest, a more cogent slogan than "Disarm the People."

⁶Google "standing army founding fathers" and you'll find a ton of references. A few links:

⁸Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962, has been one of the most influential books on the history and philosophy of science. In it, Kuhn argues that the history of scientific thought and practice is not steadily and continuously incremental. It is marked, rather, by periods of conceptual stability – "normal science" – that are interrupted by conjunctures of "revolutionary science" which cause comprehensive and radical "paradigm shifts."

¹²The suit was settled with a small no-fault payment by Solvay, and Luvox was taken off the market for five years.
