

When I Was Against Gun Control...And Why I Changed My Mind

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Like many of my generation, I was active in the left. From the mid to late 1960s to the late 1970s, I was affiliated with Trotskyist organizations. We considered ourselves revolutionaries and foresaw the day when the working class would rise up against capitalist oppression, overthrow the government, and establish a proletarian dictatorship. There was no doubt in our minds that this could not be accomplished without violence. When the revolutionary situation was ripe, we would need weapons. Therefore, we were opposed on principle to any laws that would interfere with our ability to acquire them. Others on the left shared this perspective. After all, it was fully consistent with the teachings of Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Che, Fanon, etc. Didn't "political power grow out of the barrel of a gun"?

During those years of radicalism at home and revolution abroad, we were thrilled when we saw that poster of Malcolm X with his rifle and the photo of the female Viet Cong soldier with a baby on her back and a rifle in her hand. When Malcolm said "by any means necessary" we did not bother to ask for clarification and when he was murdered by the Nation of Islam, we insisted that the police and the FBI were responsible. As for the Viet Cong woman, no one questioned whether she was endangering the welfare of a minor.

Thankfully, the left did not practice what it preached, realizing that the time was not right for violent revolution here in the USA. The Weathermen were the exception to the rule. They planted a few bombs and participated in the Brinks robbery. But there was one organization at that time that really did pick up the gun—the Black Panther Party, established in Oakland, California in 1966—in response to incidents of police brutality. They openly brandished rifles at the California State House and their newspaper featured drawings of brave Black men and women toting military style weapons. The Panthers were wildly popular with the left.

I vividly recall participating in demonstrations in support of the Black Panthers where we chanted "The Revolution Has Come, Off the Pig, Time to Pick up the Gun, Off the Pig..." over and over again. To "off a pig" was to shoot a policeman dead. No doubt about it. Although the Panthers technically advocated killing policemen only in self-defense, they glorified the use of guns in the "revolutionary struggle" and turned to violence to resolve internal disputes. In 1968, under Governor Ronald Reagan, California reacted to the tactics of the Black Panther Party by enacting a strong gun control law against openly carrying weapons in public. The National Rifle Association (NRA) supported it.

Nowadays, it is those on the right and the far right who have picked up the gun, insisting that their "right to bear arms" is guaranteed by the Second Amendment. Some who hold this belief have joined armed militias, so named because of the Second Amendment's reference to a "well-regulated" militia. This Amendment exists because when the Bill of Rights was drafted and adopted in 1791, the US did not have a standing army. Its citizens were expected to join their state militias in times of crisis. Of course, slaves and Indians were denied the right to bear arms. In fact one of the purposes of the Second Amendment was to enable white people to keep them in line.

The gun advocates deem unlimited gun ownership necessary to defend their freedom. Against whom? Presumably, the federal government — as in Waco, Texas, Ruby Ridge, Idaho and the recent standoff in Nevada outside Cliven Bundy's ranch. The most extreme elements believe they need guns to defend themselves against armed forces in "black helicopters" representing the United Nations or

some international conspiracy, prepared to swoop down and throw them in prison camps. These are paranoid delusions.

It is probably more common, however, for gun advocates to assert that widespread gun ownership is a matter of self-defense against criminals. Declining rates of violent crime appear to have no effect on their fervor. Further, the most common causes of gun violence in American homes are suicide, domestic homicides, and accidents. In fact, there are very few cases of guns used in legitimate self defense. The ratio is 22:1.

The scenario of a criminal breaking into somebody's home with the intention of harming the occupants is exceedingly rare. In a typical "mugging," the criminal's purpose in brandishing his weapon is to force the victim to give up his valuables. More likely scenarios for gun violence are a depressed person killing himself or a fight between drunks in a bar that escalates into a shooting, because guns are easily accessible.

Mass shootings, including work place shootings, admittedly, make up a small percentage of gun violence. But they do make the headlines. Every time there is a mass shooting, the NRA and other gun advocates argue that if only the victims or the bystanders were armed, the "bad guy" could have been stopped dead in his tracks by "a good guy." This assumes that (1) the potential victim will have time to pull his weapon and shoot the bad guy first; (2) the armed bystander can readily tell the difference between the "bad guy" and his potential victim(s); (3) innocent people are not shot in the crossfire; and (4) there are no safer ways to escape the shooter, such as running, ducking, hiding etc.

For good reason, law enforcement officials are rigorously trained in the proper use of firearms, yet still make plenty of mistakes. Can your average Jane or Joe with a gun be trusted to gun down a shooter without getting herself or others killed? It is far more likely that your average person with a gun will misread the situation and fire recklessly or maliciously. Once the bullets start flying, others may join in, not knowing who to shoot. Reach for your wallet or cell phone and you might get shot in "self-defense." In the real world it's vigilante aggressors like George Zimmerman who get to make life and death decisions. Not John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Clint Eastwood.

Statistically, gun use is most prevalent in African American or other poor minority neighborhoods where the perpetrators and the victims are typically people of the same race or ethnicity. These neighborhoods are also the site of most unjustified police shootings. Yet, this segment of the population supports gun control because they know that more guns breed more violence. Rather, the base of the gun rights movement is white men who live in suburban or rural areas with few people of color. Why?

In my opinion, it is a way for white men to assert their manhood in a time of insecurity. White men who fear they are no longer the heads of their household — who are threatened by the assertiveness of gays, who believe that immigrants are taking their jobs, and that their tax dollars are going to support what they see as "lazy Blacks" — express their rage by toting a gun. The "open carry" movement is the purest expression of this disorder — white men carrying weapons into retail stores and fast food restaurants, etc. — just to show how macho they are. The bank may have taken away their home, but no one better try to take away their gun. By their way of thinking, not even hospitals and schools should be off limits.

To be fair, many gun owners and advocates of gun rights are not as fanatical. They are solid members of the middle class who are content to keep their guns at home, but are under the influence of an ideology that emphasizes individual responsibility including personal responsibility for their own and their family's safety. However, I believe there is an undercurrent of fear in their

minds, fear of dark skinned "criminals" invading their homes or rampaging in the streets. It is no accident that the pro-gun movement is nearly all white.

I want to be careful here. The perpetrators of mass shootings are not only right wing nut cases. They have often been troubled youth (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in Columbine, Colorado, James Holmes in Aurora, Colorado, Adam Lanza in Newtown, Connecticut), including a Korean college student (Virginia Tech). In Maryland, it was two Black men who appear to have been partially motivated by Islamic fanaticism (John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo.) But they all purchased guns and ammo effortlessly due to lax laws crafted by politicians beholden to the NRA.

Most gun control advocates do not propose taking away anyone's guns. They have nothing against people keeping guns at home under lock and key, or using them for hunting or target practice. What they do advocate are bans on assault weapons, limits on the size of ammo clips, limits on the number of weapons that can be purchased at one time, mandatory background checks for guns sold on-line or at gun shows, and other restrictions that are already in place in many states, as well as opposition to "stand your ground" and "open carry" laws.

For example, in my home state of New Jersey, where many people legally own guns, residents must apply for a permit from the state police in order to purchase a handgun and may not carry one in public unless they can demonstrate an "urgent necessity for self-protection, as evidenced by specific threats or previous attacks which demonstrate a special danger to the applicant's life that cannot be avoided by means other than by issuance of a permit to carry a handgun." As a result, very few people are allowed to carry. As a matter of public safety, it sounds reasonable to me.

In their crusade for expanded and unrestricted gun ownership, the NRA and their allies have a perverse message for Jews. Nazi Germany banned guns. Jews desperately needed guns to defend themselves. Therefore, Jews should favor gun rights in the United States. This argument has been rejected by nearly all Jewish organizations.

Indeed, there did come a point where Jews needed guns to fight the Nazis — in the ghettos, the camps, and as partisans in the forests. But the United States is a long way from becoming Nazi Germany and the use of guns by the Black Panthers in the late 60s and 70s, when they were, in fact, the target of police violence, did them no good. Harking back to earlier periods in American history, the German anarchists trained with rifles in 1886, but that did not save them from mass arrests and four executions after someone threw a bomb that killed seven policemen in Chicago's Haymarket Square. Sacco and Vanzetti belonged to an anarchist group that engaged in bombings. Vanzetti was carrying a gun when he was arrested. This made it easier, not harder, for the State of Massachusetts to execute them in 1927 for a crime they did not commit.

The US government has engaged in mass repression in the past. The most notorious case affecting the left was the Palmer raids in January 1920 in which 10,000 immigrant radicals were arrested. Armed resistance would have been futile. There have also been numerous strikes in American history in which police or state or federal troops shot down strikers. Mineworkers, in particular, were known to arm themselves. Yet violent strikes were typically unsuccessful.

Coming full circle, what attitude should we on the left have toward gun control? Is there any truth to the far right's claims that we are living under government tyranny and must arm ourselves to protect our freedoms? How much do we trust our police and military and if they turn their guns on us, then what? Do we "pick up the gun"? Would it help if we did, considering the overwhelming firepower available to the authorities?

I think the essential difference between our attitude and theirs is that in our quest for a more just

and cooperative society, we have come to either embrace non-violence as a sacred principle or to conceive of violence as the absolute last resort. The far right, on the other hand, sees the right to carry and use guns as its birthright in a dog-eat-dog society where it is every man for himself. For now and the foreseeable future, our weapons of choice must be the ballot, our checkbooks, pens, computers, picket signs, and our bodies. Or to put it another way, we take our stand on the First Amendment, not the long obsolete Second.

I know that Trotsky called for the formation of "workers' militias" in the Transitional Program of the Fourth International, but that was in 1938 and times have changed.

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