

## Second thoughts about gun control

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**G**UN CONTROL, it has been said, is the acid test of liberalism. All good liberals favor stricter gun controls. After all, doesn't the United States have the most heavily armed population on earth? Are we not the world's most violent people? Surely these facts must be causally connected. The apparently desperate need to "do something" about the vast quantity of firearms and firearms abuse is, to the good liberal, obvious.

At one time, it seemed evident to me, we needed to mount a campaign to resolve the crisis of handgun proliferation. Guns are employed in an enormous number of crimes in this country. In other countries with stricter gun laws, gun crime is rare. Many of the firearms involved in crime are cheap handguns, so-called Saturday Night Specials, for which no legitimate use or need exists. Many families buy these guns because they feel the need to protect themselves; eventually, they end up shooting one another. If there were fewer guns around, there would also be less crime and less violence. Most of the public also believes this, and has supported stricter gun control for as long as pollsters have been asking the question. Yet Congress has refused to act in a meaningful way, owing mainly to the all-powerful "gun lobby" headed by the National Rifle Associa-

tion. Were the power of this lobby somehow effectively countered by the power of public opinion, stricter gun laws would follow quickly, and we would begin to achieve a safer and more civilized society.

When I first began research on the topic of private firearms, in the mid-1970s, I shared this conventional and widely held view of the issue. Indeed, much of it struck me as self-evidently true. My initial interest in the topic resulted from a life-long fascination with the bizarre: I certainly did not own a gun (I still don't), and neither, as far as I knew, did many of my friends. Still, readily available survey evidence showed that half the families in the United States did own one, and I wondered what unspeakable oddities or even pathologies an analysis of this half of the American population would reveal.

My first scholarly paper on the topic, "The Ownership of the Means of Destruction," appeared in 1975. This demographic comparison between gun-owning and non-gun-owning households revealed no shocking information. Gun owners, it turned out, were largely small-town and rural Protestants of higher-than-average income. Fear of crime, interestingly enough, did not seem to be related to gun ownership. The general tone of my piece remained unmistakably "anti-gun," but the findings did not provide much new information to strengthen the "anti-gun" lobby's arguments. At about the same time, I prepared a more polemical version of the paper, which was eventually published in the *Nation*. The General Counsel of the National Rifle Association described the piece as "emotionally supercharged drum-beating masquerading as scholarly analysis." Clearly, I was on the right track; I had managed to offend the right people.

The *Nation* article was abridged and reprinted in the Sunday Chicago *Tribune*, a newspaper read by about two million people, many of whom saw fit to write me after the piece appeared. Almost all the letters I received were provocative; some were very favorable, but most were vitriolic attacks from gun nuts. I was accused of being "incredibly biased," "strange and contradictory," of telling "many outright 100% lies," of being "sophistic" and "intellectually dishonest," of being "unable to grasp truth," and of taking "thousands of words to say *nothing* constructive." I answered every letter I received. In a few cases, a long and profitable correspondence developed. The first wave of correspondence over the *Tribune* piece affirmed my assumption that many gun owners were crazy. Subsequent waves, however, convinced me that many were indeed

thoughtful, intelligent, often remarkably well-read people who were passionately concerned about their “right to keep and bear arms,” but were willing, nonetheless, to listen to reason.

Two years later, in 1977, my colleague Peter Rossi and I received a grant from the National Institute of Justice to undertake a comprehensive, critical overview of the research literature on guns, crime, and violence in America. The results of this overview were published in 1981 in a three-volume government report and in 1983 as a commercial monograph, entitled *Under the Gun*. Subsequent to this work, we received another grant to gather original data on gun acquisition, ownership, and use from about 2,000 men doing felony time in ten state prisons all over the United States. We assembled this information in a government report and later in a monograph, *Armed and Considered Dangerous*. The felon survey marked the temporary end of my firearms research program, one that ran roughly from 1974 through 1986, when *Armed and Considered Dangerous* was finally published.

As I have already suggested, at the outset of the research program I had a strong feeling that the pro-gun-control forces had never marshalled their evidence in the most compelling way, that they were being seriously undercut by the more artful polemics of the National Rifle Association and related pro-gun groups. That the best available evidence, critically considered, would eventually prove favorable to the pro-control viewpoint was not in serious doubt—at least not to me, not in the beginning.

In the course of my research, however, I have come to question nearly every element of the conventional wisdom about guns, crime, and violence. Indeed, I am now of the opinion that a compelling case for “stricter gun control” *cannot be made*, at least not on empirical grounds. I have nothing but respect for the various pro-gun-control advocates with whom I have come into contact over the past years. They are, for the most part, sensitive, humane, and intelligent people, and their ultimate aim, to reduce death and violence in our society, is one that every civilized person must share. I have, however, come to be convinced that they are barking up the wrong tree.

### What is “gun control”?

Before I describe the intellectual odyssey that led to my change in thinking, it is critical to stress that “gun control” is an exceedingly nebulous concept. To say that one favors gun control, or opposes it, is to speak in ambiguities. In the present-day American political

context, "stricter gun control" can mean anything from federal registration of firearms, to mandatory sentences for gun use in crime, to outright bans on the manufacture, sale, or possession of certain types of firearms. One can control the manufacturers of firearms, the wholesalers, the retailers, or the purchasers; one can control the firearms themselves, the ammunition they require, or the uses to which they are put. And one can likewise control their purchase, their carrying, or their mere possession. "Gun control" thus covers a wide range of specific interventions, and it would be useful indeed if the people who say they favor or oppose gun control were explicit about what, exactly, they are for and against.

In doing the research for *Under the Gun*, I learned that there are approximately 20,000 gun laws of various sorts already on the books in the United States. A few of these are federal laws (such as the Gun Control Act of 1968), but most are state and local regulations. It is a misstatement to say, as pro-gun-control advocates sometimes do, that the United States has "no meaningful gun control legislation." The problem is not that laws do not exist but that the regulations in force vary enormously from one place to the next, or, in some cases, that the regulations carried on the books are not or cannot be enforced.

Much of the gun legislation now in force, whether enacted by federal, state, or local statutes, falls into the category of reasonable social precaution, being neither more nor less stringent than measures taken to safeguard against abuses of other potentially life-threatening objects, such as automobiles. It seems reasonable, for example, that people should be required to obtain a permit to carry a concealed weapon, as they are virtually everywhere in the United States. It is likewise reasonable that people not be allowed to own automatic weapons without special permission, and that felons, drug addicts, and other sociopaths be prevented from legally acquiring guns. Both these restrictions are in force everywhere in the United States, because they are elements of federal law. About three-fourths of the American population lives in jurisdictions where the registration of firearms purchases is required. It is thus apparent that many states and localities also find this to be a useful precaution against something. And many jurisdictions also require "waiting periods" or "cooling off" periods between application and actual possession of a new firearms purchase. These too seem reasonable, since there are very few legitimate purposes to which a firearm might be put that would be thwarted if the user had to wait a few days, or even a few weeks, to get the gun.

Thus, when I state that “a compelling case for ‘stricter gun control’ cannot be made,” I do not refer to the sorts of obvious and reasonable precautions discussed above, or to related precautionary measures. I refer, rather, to measures substantially more strict than “reasonable precaution,” and more specifically, to measures that would deny or seriously restrict the right of the general population to own a firearm, or that would ban the sale or possession of certain kinds of firearms, such as handguns or even the small, cheap handguns known colloquially as “Saturday Night Specials.”

### Effects of gun laws

One wonders, with some 20,000 firearms regulations now on the books, why the clamor continues for even more laws. The answer is obvious: none of the laws so far enacted has significantly reduced the rate of criminal violence. *Under the Gun* reviewed several dozen research studies that had attempted to measure the effects of gun laws in reducing crime; none of them showed any conclusive long-term benefits.

As it happens, both sides of the gun-control debate grant this point; they disagree, though, as to why there is no apparent connection between gun-control laws and crime rates. The NRA maintains that gun laws don't work because they can't work. Widely ignored (especially by criminals) and unenforceable, gun-control laws go about the problem in the wrong way. For this reason, the NRA has long supported mandatory and severe sentences for the use of firearms in felonies, contending that we should punish firearms abusers once it is proven that an abuse has occurred, and leave legitimate users alone until they have actually done something illegal with their weapon.

The pro-control forces argue that gun laws don't work because there are too many of them, because they are indifferently enforced, and because the laws vary widely from one jurisdiction to the next. What we need, they would argue, are federal firearms regulations that are strictly enforced all across the nation. They would say that we have never given gun control a fair test, because we lack an aggressive *national* firearms policy.

This example illustrates an important point that I have learned and relearned throughout my career in applied social research: the policy consequences of a scientific finding are seldom obvious. On this particular point, the science is reasonably clear-cut: gun control laws do not reduce crime. But what is the implication? One possible implication is that we should stop trying to control crime by con-

trolling guns. The other possible implication is that we need to get much more serious than we have been thus far about controlling guns, with much stricter, nationally-standardized gun-control policies. There is little or nothing in the scientific literature that would allow one to choose between these possibilities; either could well be correct.

### Guns, crimes, and numbers

What is the annual firearms toll in this country? Our review of the data sources revealed that some components of the toll, especially the annual fatality count, are well known, whereas other components are not. In recent years, the total number of homicides occurring in the United States has been right around 20,000. Of these, approximately 60 percent are committed with firearms. There are somewhat fewer than 30,000 suicides committed in an average recent year, of which about half involve a firearm. Deaths from firearms accidents have represented about 2 percent of the total accidental deaths in the nation for as long as data have been collected, and add about 2,000 deaths per year to the toll. Taken together, then, there are about 30,000 deaths from firearms in an average year; this amounts to some 1-2 percent of all deaths from any cause.

Both camps in the gun control war like to spew out exaggerated rhetoric. In the case of gun deaths, the anti-control forces shout that the total deaths due to firearms in a year are less than the deaths due to automobile accidents (about 50,000)—“but nobody wants to ban cars!” To counter, the pro-control people express the gun toll as a number of deaths per unit of time. The resulting figure is dramatic: on average, someone in the United States dies from a firearm every seventeen or eighteen minutes.

Death is not the whole story, of course. One must also include non-fatal but injurious firearms accidents, crimes other than homicide or suicide committed with guns, unsuccessful suicide attempts involving firearms, and so on. None of these things is known with much precision, and the lack of firm data is an invitation to exuberant formulations on both sides. Still, reasonable compromise values for the various components suggest a total incident count of fewer than a million per year—that is, incidents in which a firearm of some sort was involved in some way in some kind of violent or criminal incident (intentional or accidental, fatal or not). Pro-gun people have dismissed this estimate as much too high, and anti-gun people have dismissed it as much too low, so I figure it can't be too far off.

When we shift to the guns side of the “guns and crime” equation, the numbers jump by a few orders of magnitude, although here, too, some caution is needed. In the course of the twentieth century, so far as can be told, some 250 million total firearms (excluding military weapons) have been manufactured in or imported into the United States. Published guesses about the number of guns in private hands in this country run upwards to a billion—an absurd and inconceivably large estimate. Most of the published estimates are produced by advocates and thus are not to be trusted, most of all since both sides have vested interests in publishing the largest possible numbers: the pro-gun people, to show the vast number of people whose rights would be infringed by stricter gun controls; the anti-gun people, to show the obvious urgency of the situation.

It is not known for certain how many of the 250 million guns of the twentieth century remain in private hands; 150 million is a sensible guess. Survey evidence dating from at least 1959 routinely shows that about 50 percent of all American households possess at least one firearm, with the average number owned (among those owning at least one) being just over three. Whatever the exact number, it is obvious that there are lots and lots of guns out there—many tens of millions at the very least.

Both sides trumpet these large numbers with relish. To the NRA, these big numbers show clearly that “nothing can be done.” The vast size of the private U.S. arsenal renders any effort to control it utterly futile. To the pro-control forces, these same numbers demonstrate, with equal clarity, that “something must be done.” The vast size of the private U.S. arsenal makes the effort to control it essential.

The numbers do speak clearly to at least one point: if we are going to try to “control” guns as a means of controlling crime, then we are going to have to deal with the guns already in private hands; controls over new purchases alone will not suffice. Taking the highest plausible value for the number of gun incidents—1 million per year—and the lowest plausible value for the number of guns presently owned—say, 100 million—we see rather quickly that the guns now owned exceed the annual incident count by a factor of at least a hundred; in other words, the existing stock is adequate to supply all conceivable nefarious purposes for at least the next century.

These figures can be considered in another way. Suppose we did embark on a program of firearms confiscation, with the ultimate aim of achieving a “no guns” condition. We would have to confiscate at least a hundred guns to get just one gun that, in any typical

year, would be involved in any kind of gun incident; several hundred to get just one that would otherwise be involved in a chargeable gun crime; and several thousand to get just one that would otherwise be used to bring about someone's death. Whatever else one might want to say about such a policy, it is not very efficient.

### Demand creates its own supply

One of the favorite aphorisms of the pro-gun forces is that "if guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." Sophisticated liberals laugh at this point, but they shouldn't. No matter what laws we enact, they will be obeyed only by the law-abiding—this follows by definition. If we were to outlaw, say, the ownership of handguns, millions of law-abiding handgun owners would no doubt turn theirs in. But why should we expect the average armed robber or street thug to do likewise? Why should we expect felons to comply with a gun law when they readily violate laws against robbery, assault, and murder?

For the average criminal, a firearm is an income-producing tool with a consequent value that is several times its initial cost. According to data published by Phillip Cook of Duke University, the average "take" in a robbery committed with a firearm is more than \$150 (in 1976 dollars) and is three times the take for a robbery committed with any other weapon; the major reason for the difference is that criminals with guns rob more lucrative targets. Right now, one can acquire a handgun in any major American city in a matter of a few hours for roughly \$100. Even if the street price of handguns tripled, a robber armed with a handgun could (on the average) recoup his entire capital outlay in the first two or three transactions.

As long as there are *any* handguns around (and even "ban handgun" advocates make an exception for police or military handguns), they will obviously be available to anyone *at some price*. Given Cook's data, the average street thug would come out well ahead even if he spent several hundred—perhaps even a few thousand—on a suitable weapon. At those prices, demand will always create its own supply: just as there will always be cocaine available to anyone willing to pay \$200 a gram for it, so too will handguns always be available to anyone willing to pay a thousand dollars to obtain one.

The more militant "ban handgun" advocates urge what is easily recognized as the handgun equivalent of Prohibition. Why would we expect the outcome of "handgun prohibition" to differ from its 1920s predecessor? A black market in guns, run by organized crime, would almost certainly spring up to service the demand. It is, after



all, no more difficult to manufacture a serviceable firearm in one's basement than to brew up a batch of home-made gin. Afghani tribesmen, using wood fires and metal-working equipment much inferior to what can be ordered from a Sears catalogue, hand-manufacture rifles that fire the Russian AK-47 cartridge. Do we ascribe less ability to the Mafia or the average do-it-yourselfer?

A recent poll of the U.S. adult population asked people to agree or disagree with this proposition: "Gun control laws affect only law-abiding citizens; criminals will always be able to find guns." Seventy-eight percent agreed. There is no reasonable doubt that the majority, in this case, is right.

### Crimes of passion

Sophisticated advocates on both sides by now grant most of the preceding points. No one still expects "stricter gun control" to solve the problem of hard-core criminal violence, or even make a dent in it. Much of the argument has thus shifted toward violence perpetrated not for economic gain, or for any other good reason, but rather in the "heat of the moment"—the so-called "crimes of passion" that turn injurious or lethal not so much because anyone intended them to, but because, in a moment of rage, a firearm was at hand. Certainly, we could expect incidents of this sort to decline if we could somehow reduce the availability of firearms for the purpose. Or could we?

Crimes of passion certainly occur, but how often? Are "heat of the moment" homicides common or rare? The fact is, nobody knows. The assumption that they are very common, characteristic of the pro-control world view, is derived from the well-known fact that most homicides involve persons known to one another before the event—typically family members, friends, or other acquaintances. But ordinarily, the only people one would ever have any good reason to kill would be people known intimately to oneself. Contrary to the common assumption, prior acquaintance definitely does *not* rule out willful, murderous intent.

The "crime of passion" most often discussed is that of family members killing one another. One pertinent study, conducted in Kansas City, looked into every family homicide that occurred in a single year. In 85 percent of the cases examined, the police had previously (within the prior five years) been called to the family residence to break up a domestic quarrel; in half the cases, the police had been there five or more times. It would therefore be misleading to see these homicides as isolated and unfortunate outbursts occur-

ring among normally placid and loving individuals. They are, rather, the culminating episodes of an extended history of violence and abuse among the parties.

Analysis of the family homicide data reveals an interesting pattern. When women kill men, they often use a gun. When men kill women, they usually do it in some more degrading or brutalizing way— such as strangulation or knifing. The reason for the difference seems obvious: although the world is full of potentially lethal objects, almost all of them are better suited to male than to female use. The gun is the single exception: all else held constant, it is equally deadly in anyone's hands. Firearms equalize the means of physical terror between men and women. In denying the wife of an abusive man the right to have a firearm, we may only be guaranteeing her husband the right to beat her at his pleasure. One argument against "stricter gun control" is thus that a woman should have as much right to kill her husband as a man has to kill his wife.

Some will gasp at this statement; no one, after all, has a "right" to kill anyone. But this, of course, is false: every jurisdiction in the United States recognizes justifiable homicides in at least some extenuating circumstances, and increasingly a persistent and long-standing pattern of physical abuse is acknowledged to be one of them. True, in the best of all possible worlds, we would simply do away with whatever gives rise to murderous rage. This is not, regrettably, the world in which we live.

### International comparisons

Comparing the United States with other civilized nations in terms of guns, crime, and violence is the "service revolver" in the pro-control armament, the first line of defense against all disputation. The essentials are well-known: there are, in the United States, no strict federal controls over civilian arms, vast numbers of firearms in private hands, and an enormous amount of gun crime and violence. In other nations (England and Japan, for example), there are strict national controls, few guns, and little or no gun crime. Is this not conclusive evidence that strong gun laws reduce gun violence? One would be hard-pressed to find a single example of pro-control writing in which these points are not featured prominently.

It does not take advanced training in research methods to see that in the absence of more detailed analyses, such comparisons are vacuous. Any two nations will differ along many dimensions—history, culture, social structure, and legal precedent, to name a few—and any of these differences (no less than the difference in gun laws

or in the number of guns available) might well account for the difference in violent crime rates. Without some examination of these other potentially relevant factors, attributing the crime difference to the gun-law or gun-availability difference begs the question.

The English case is commonly cited. It is quite clear, however, that the rates of firearm ownership and violent crime were both extremely low in England for decades *before* that nation's strict gun law was passed, and also that the gun laws have not prevented a very sharp increase in gun crime in England in the past decade. Japan is also commonly cited. In fact, the rate of *non-gun* homicide in the United States is many times higher than the total homicide rate of Japan, so there is also much more to the U.S.-Japan difference than meets the eye.

What is true of comparisons among nations is equally true of other geographic aggregates—for example, regions, states, or counties. Any two aggregates, like any two countries, will have any number of differences—differences that must somehow be held constant in order to make any sense of the differences in crime rates. The methodological point is easy to demonstrate with a single example: it is well known that gun ownership is much more widespread in small towns and rural areas than in big cities. Violent crime, in contrast, is disproportionately a big-city problem. Should we therefore conclude from this evidence alone that guns are not the cause of crime, or that high rates of gun ownership actually reduce crime? Probably not: rather, we should demand something more from the analysis. Without that “something more,” nothing of value can be inferred; this is also the case with crude comparisons between the United States and other countries.

### Public opinion

Public opinion has always played a key role in the case for stricter gun control. If the effectiveness of “gun control” in reducing crime is in some doubt, as it obviously is, at least little apparent harm would be done by such controls, and the public clearly favors them. If majority sentiment has counted for little or nothing, it is only because of the Machiavellian workings of the gun lobby.

The first “gun control” question in a national poll was apparently asked in the 1930s. Even at that early date, large majorities responded favorably. In 1959, Gallup instituted what is now the standard “gun control” question, asking whether one would favor or oppose a law that required a person to acquire a police permit before purchasing a gun. In the original study, and in many subse-

quent studies, the proportions favoring such a law have seldom dropped below 70 percent.

These large majorities are interpreted by gun-control advocates as evidence of wide popular demand for stricter gun controls, but the fact is that two-thirds to three-quarters of the American population resides in political jurisdictions in which something similar to the Gallup "police permit" mechanism is *already* in force. The majority sentiment may only represent an endorsement of the status quo, not a demand for bold new gun-control initiatives.

Other gun-control measures that are sometimes asked about—those substantially more stringent than registration or permit requirements—are not, in general, received with much popular enthusiasm. Bans on the manufacture, sale, or ownership of handguns, for example, are rejected by good-sized majorities; government use of public funds to buy back guns and destroy them is rejected by an even larger majority. Mandatory sentencing for the criminal use of a firearm is enormously popular; mandatory sentencing for the illegal carrying or possession of a firearm is less so. In general, the poll evidence suggests that most people support most of the "reasonable social precautions" I discussed earlier, but do not wish to see government go much further. Not incidentally, immense majorities of the population, approaching 90 percent, believe that the Constitution guarantees them the right to own a gun. Pro-control advocates who effusively cite "public opinion" as a principal rationale for stricter gun control rarely comment on this finding.

### The Saturday Night Special

The notorious Saturday Night Special has received a great deal of attention. The term is used loosely: it can refer to a gun of low price, inferior quality, small caliber, short barrel length, or some combination of these. The attention is typically justified on two grounds: first, these guns have no legitimate sport or recreational use, and secondly, they are the firearms preferred by criminals. Thus, the argument goes, we could just ban them altogether; in doing so, we would directly reduce the number of guns available to criminals without restricting anyone's legitimate ownership rights.

The idea that the Saturday Night Special is the criminal's gun of choice turns out to be wrong. Our felon survey showed, overwhelmingly, that serious criminals both prefer to carry and actually do carry relatively large, big-bore, well-made handguns. Indeed, not more than about one in seven of these criminals' handguns would

qualify as small and cheap. Most of the felons wanted to be and actually were at least as well armed as their most likely adversaries, the police. There may well be good reason to ban Saturday Night Specials, but the criminal interest in such weapons is not one of them. Most serious felons look on the Saturday Night Special with considerable contempt.

It is too early to tell how these data will be interpreted among "Ban Saturday Night Special" advocates. The most recent wrinkle I have encountered is that they should be banned not because they are preferred or used by criminals, but because, being cheap, they tend to be owned by unknowledgeable, inexperienced, or irresponsible people. One may assume that cheap handguns, like cheap commodities of all sorts, tend to be owned by poor people. The further implication—that poor gun owners are less knowledgeable, experienced, or responsible than more affluent owners—has, however, never been researched; it is also the sort of "elitist" argument that ordinarily arouses liberal indignation.

What about the other side of the argument—that these guns have no legitimate use? It is amazing how easily people who know little about guns render such judgments. When I commenced my own research, it occurred to me that I ought to find out what gun owners themselves had to say on some of these matters. So I picked up the latest issues of about a half-dozen gun magazines. It is remarkable how informative this simple exercise turned out to be.

One magazine that surfaced is called *Handgunning*, which is specifically for devotees of handgun sports. Every issue of the magazine is full of articles on the sporting and recreational uses of handguns of all kinds. I learned, for example, that people actually hunt game with handguns, which never would have occurred to me. In reading a few articles, the reason quickly became obvious: it is more sporting than hunting with shoulder weapons, and it requires much more skill, which makes a successful handgun hunt a much more satisfying accomplishment.

In my journey through this alien turf, I came upon what are called "trail guns" or "pack guns." These are handguns carried outdoors, in the woods or the wilds, for no particular reason except to have a gun available "just in case" one encounters unfriendly fauna, or gets lost and needs small game for food, or is injured and needs to signal for help. The more I read about trail guns, the more it seemed that people who spend a lot of time alone in the wilds, in isolated and out-of-the-way places, are probably being pretty sensible in carrying these weapons.

One discussion went on in some detail about the characteristics to look for in a trail gun. It ought to be small and light, of course, for the same reason that serious backpackers carry nylon rather than canvas tents. "Small and light" implies small caliber (a .22 or .25), a short barrel, and a stainless-steel frame (to afford greater protection from the elements). The article mentioned that some of the finest weapons of this sort were being manufactured in Europe, and at very reasonable prices. And suddenly it dawned on me: the small, low-caliber, short-barreled, imported, not-too-expensive guns the article was describing were what are otherwise known as Saturday Night Specials. And thus I came to learn that we cannot say that Saturday Night Specials have "no legitimate sport or recreational use."

It would be sophistic to claim that most Saturday Night Specials are purchased for use as trail guns; my point is only that some are. Most small, cheap handguns are probably purchased by persons of modest means to protect themselves against crime. It is arguable whether protection against crime is a "legitimate" or "illegitimate" use; the issues involved are too complex to treat fairly in this article. It is worth stressing, however, that poor, black, central-city residents are by far the most likely potential victims of crime; if self-protection justifies owning a gun, then a ban on small, cheap handguns would effectively deny the means of self-protection to those most evidently in need of it.

There is another argument against banning small, cheap handguns: a ban on Saturday Night Specials would leave heavy-duty handguns available as substitute weapons. It is convenient to suppose that in the absence of small, cheap handguns, most people would just give up and not use guns for whatever they had in mind. But certainly some of them, and perhaps many of them, would move up to bigger and better handguns instead. We would do well to remember that the most commonly owned handgun in America today is a .38 caliber double-action revolver, the so-called Police Special that functions as the service revolver for about 90 percent of American police. If we somehow got rid of all the junk handguns, how many thugs, assailants, and assassins would choose to use this gun, or other guns like it, instead? And what consequences might we then anticipate?

The handgun used by John Hinckley in his attack on President Reagan was a .22 caliber revolver, a Saturday Night Special. Some have supported banning the Saturday Night Special so as to thwart psychopaths in search of weapons. But would a psychopath intent

on assassinating a President simply give up in the absence of a cheap handgun? Or would he, in that event, naturally pick up some other gun instead? Suppose he did pick up the most commonly owned handgun available in the United States, the .38 Special. Suppose further that he got off the same six rounds and inflicted the same wounds that he inflicted with the .22. A .38 slug entering Jim Brady's head where the .22 entered would, at the range in question, probably have killed him instantly. The Washington policeman would not have had a severed artery but would have been missing the larger part of his neck. The round deflected from its path to President Reagan's heart might have reached its target. One can readily imagine at least three deaths, including the President's, had Hinckley fired a more powerful weapon.

### Reactions

The preceding does not exhaust my skepticism about gun-control doxology; it merely illustrates some of the doubts I have come to entertain. As far as I can tell, the arguments in favor of "stricter gun control" fail nearly every empirical test, although in many cases, I hasten to add, the "failure" is simply that the appropriate research is not available.

There is an interesting asymmetry in the gun-control debate. For rather obvious reasons, the pro-control people want to change things, and the anti-control people are happy enough with the status quo. This implies that the burden of proof typically rests on the pro-control side; they have to show that the suggested changes, whatever they are, would improve conditions. Thus, the pro-control argument is far more commonly advanced via recitation of research findings, statistics, and the like; in many cases, the anti-control argument involves nothing more complicated than a reference to the Second Amendment.

My gun research has been more enthusiastically received in anti-control circles than among pro-control advocates. One prominent pro-control luminary described some of the research in *Under the Gun* as "constructed on an incomplete and misconceived reading of the relevant research, an unwillingness to cumulate circumstantial evidence, and standards of proof that inherently rule out non-experimental conclusions." The NRA reaction was more positive although not uncritical; the entry on *Under the Gun* in the *American Rifleman* read: "Although the authors' anti-gun bias leads them to exaggerate the amount of gun abuse and to praise too readily some poor research, this book is fairly objective and probably the

best summary of scholarly research on the issue.” Much to my relief, however, the reactions of putatively neutral outsiders were neither harsh nor guarded. Thus the review in *Contemporary Sociology* described it as “the most comprehensive review of gun control research yet published,” and noted later that “it is the highest compliment to say that this book should have something to offend, or at least annoy, everyone. Both ‘gun nuts’ and ‘gun control nuts’ will be discomfited.”

*Armed and Considered Dangerous* came out several years later, in 1986, so all the returns are not yet in. I have taken some fairly hard knocks from pro-control people for believing too literally what the felons in the survey told me—a criticism I accept. And in general, the reaction in pro-gun circles was along the lines of “we told you so,” with a subtext that, once again, the sociologists had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars belaboring some very obvious points. But here, too, the reaction in the professional social-science community was largely favorable. The review in *Contemporary Sociology* called it “a must for those interested in firearms, crime, or policy research” and concluded that “the gun control debate will never be the same again.”

Grateful though I am for this last comment, it is assuredly wrong. In the “Great American Gun War,” as B. Bruce-Briggs has described it in this journal (Fall 1976), as in most other areas of public policy, relatively little turns on factual matters that could be resolved through more and better research; most of what is at issue turns on values, ideologies, and world views that are remarkably impervious to refutation by social-science research. No one who believes deeply that gun control would make this a better world—or that it wouldn’t—will be persuaded otherwise by any of the research I or anyone else has done.

Applied social research can often describe a problem well, but it can seldom suggest a viable solution. Most of the implications I have seen fit to draw from my gun research are negative in character: this won’t work for this reason, that won’t work for that reason, and so on. What to do about guns, crime, and violence in America is a question that has occupied many intelligent and capable people for decades, and no one has yet come up with a compelling, workable, legal answer. It is unlikely that “research” will provide that answer. As for social scientists with an interest in the topic, I think we ought simply to resign ourselves to doing what we do best—capable, informative research—and leave the search for “solutions” to the political process itself. Few of us will be entirely satisfied with the out-



come; but a political process that proceeds in ignorance of or contempt for the best information we can provide is undesirable. On the other hand, to make too much of the "policy implications" of our research is to suggest that we command an expertise that is not usually at our disposal.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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