

GUN CONTROL AND SOUTHERN CULTURE CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION

The continuing debate on gun control has been characterized by rhetorical hyperbole and promiscuous self-serving "data slinging." The arguments presented by both advocates of gun control and their opponents have even descended to the level of stigmatizing sexual innuendo, such as "Shooters are insecure about their masculinity" or "People who are afraid of guns have serious sexual problems." Data from studies focusing on various aspects of crime, gun accidents, and victimization have been used by both sides. Data and statistics relating to the issue of gun control are irrelevant to both factions.

Behind myriad generalizations and pious justifications advanced by both sides, exist two distinctly different ways of looking at reality. The gulf that separates them is largely determined by cultural factors. Gun control advocates are largely of the national elite, or have accepted the elite myth of American society. Many opponents of gun control, live, work, and interact in a completely different cultural milieu. White Southern culture rejects many fondly held elite notions, in particular, elite conceptions about crime, firearms, and individual responsibility.

THE "SOUTHERN VIOLENCE" PATTERN

Early settlement in the South was disorganized, and effective law enforcement was virtually non-existent. Bandits, escaped slaves, Indians, cantankerous neighbors, venomous reptiles, and predatory animals were all at various times very real threats to the settler's well-being. In order to deal with what was perceived as a generally hostile environment, a rural code of chivalry evolved among the Southern elite. This code valued skill in handling firearms, skill in horsemanship, respect for and protection of white women, the use of flamboyant oratory, and lavish hospitality (Franklin 1956 34). The underlying themes on which this code was based were the twin concepts of honor and individual responsibility. These concepts caused the Southerner to defend with his life the slightest suggestion of irregularity in his honesty or integrity. (Franklin 1956 35). Since the individual was viewed as

responsible for the defense of his family's honor as well as his own, the growth of police agencies and courts was retarded. The community at large left law enforcement to the aggrieved individual.

The Southern concept of honor coupled with the lack of effective law enforcement led to the development of a highly stylized mode of settling conflicts--the duel. The *code duello* had many august Southern practitioners Henry Clay, John Randolph, William Yancey, Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson, and governors of several Southern states fought opponents on "the field of honor." Dueling grounds such as the "the Oaks" in New Orleans, and Bladensburg near Washington, D.C., served as "courts of last resort, in which weighty points of etiquette, social and political problems and questions of veracity, propriety and right were expounded by the convincing power of gunpowder". (Kennett & Anderson 1975 14).

While the *code duello* was primarily a characteristic of the ante bellum planter elite, tolerance of interpersonal violence and ideas of personal sovereignty filtered down to the lower classes. These bloody brawls often ended in dismemberment or death. In many cases, after shots were discharged to no effect, daggers were employed. In such lower-class affrays, scratching and eye gouging were *de rigeur*. The legendary Jim Bowie was said to have specialized in shotgun dueling and, of course, on occasion, he employed the knife made famous by his brother's craftsmanship.

Dueling was gradually made illegal by various states and otherwise fell from favor before the Civil War. By the beginning of the Twentieth Century dueling was decidedly *passé*--a relic of the Old South shoved aside by the parvenu Bourbon class. "Southern violence" had taken on less stylized forms in the interim.

Following the Civil War extreme interpretations of personal sovereignty and the predisposition of personal problems spread west with dispossessed Southerners. Many ex-Confederates such as Jesse James exemplified this state of mind and aided in the diffusion of such ideals. Southern attitudes on

violence had found fertile soil in the west. In such a setting, the gunfighter/lawman, in many cases a dispossessed Southerner, "was given the omnipotent role of judge, jury and executioner—a novel constitutional concept." (Kennett & Anderson 1975 123). Such a concept may be novel to the constitutional purist, but not to Southerners imbued from birth with the notion of personal sovereignty.

Although the doctrine of personal sovereignty and other domain assumptions had been repudiated, the Southern pattern of violence stubbornly persisted. In spite of post-Reconstruction "New South" boosterism and late nineteenth century Babbitry, material progress accommodated "continuity in the basic traits of the Southern mind." (Hackney 1969 493). This situation, or more properly, dynamic process, is a case of controlled acculturation, which is the "process by which one culture accepts a practice from another, but integrates the new practice into its own value system. It does not surrender its autonomy or separate identity, although the change may involve a modification of the degree of autonomy." (Eaton 1952).

The South accepted an imposed regime and improvements in its standard of living, it did not accept alien norms. According to Herskovits, (1938 13), "total assimilation is not achieved until a people have attained a unity of thought that underlies the "veneer" of acceptance of traits of a material nature." The culture of post-Reconstruction South and that of the industrializing North by no means attained "unity of thought." Assimilationism and the "myth of the melting pot" simply did not obtain desired results when applied to the ethnically homogeneous White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) populace.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The contemporary South, especially in rural areas, is not far removed from its cultural roots. "Violence in the South is a style of life that is handed down from father to son along with the old hunting rifle and the family Bible." (Hackney 1969). Organized hunting and the gun culture have "deep cultural roots" in the South. "A boy's introduction to guns and hunting is an important rite of passage. The first gun at puberty is the bar mitzvah of the rural WASP." (Bruce-Briggs 1976). Many white

Southerners enjoy hunting and shooting and believe strongly in a constitutionally mandated "right to bear arms" to protect their families and their honor. Although the constitutional issue regarding "the right to bear arms" has been interpreted by contemporary jurists as favoring the gun control advocate, many Southerners prefer to interpret the Constitution according to their own social experience and cultural norms. Therefore, Southerners regard the constitution as many Baptists regard the Bible—Holy Writ, but subject to individual interpretation. This of course, is consistent with the Southern cultural ideal of personal responsibility and sovereignty.

Kahn, social critic and futurist, has emphasized the cultural dilemma that gun control suggests. In essence, "the crusade against the gun is the work of an upper middle class minority, whose views are at variance with the rest of the nation." (1972). The Wall Street Journal has suggested that the gun control debate represents a "battle over the nation's cultural values, a battle in which "cosmopolitan America" is pitted against "bedrock America." According to Kennett and Anderson, "cosmopolitan America foresees a new age when guns and the need for them will disappear: bedrock America conceives of it as 1984." Cosmopolitan America is liberal, educated, prosperous, and internationalistic while bedrock America is nativist and conservative.

According to one conservative commentator "where modern Liberals seem to have lost their way is in becoming so convinced of the rightness of their concepts of liberty and democracy, that they have gone all out in imposing them on everyone else. They fail to understand that by such an imposition they negate the very concepts they profess to uphold.... The nation through its American Dream propaganda attempts to impose orthodoxy on all non-conformist elements. Even though the State's objectives may be worthy, some of the methods used are nonetheless totalitarian." (Lawton 1963 143). "Twentieth century liberals believe they can change men's lives through the exercise of governmental power—end discrimination, abolish poverty, eliminate slums, insure employment, eliminate sickness and disease and improve standards of living." (Dye & Zeigler 1970 120). Gun control is but one manifestation of the idealistic lib-

eral/elite desire to impose "the peaceable kingdom." Thus the problem of regulating Southern violence is accentuated by unrealistic idealism of people who believe that "all America should by now have adopted the standards of New York and New England." (Lawton 1963 146).

THE ARGUMENTS: FALSE ISSUES

Few people in the gun control debate are concerned with objective facts or data. The literature on the subject, unpleasant, shrill and emotional, reflects deep ethnocentric bias in the guise of socio-political sophistry.

Proponents of gun control include Bakal (1966) and Sherrill (1973). Bakal plays on the reader's emotions while regaling him with every conceivable accident and outrage that could be committed with a firearm. He concludes, "would controls of any kind be worthwhile to save 100 lives? Or just one life, that of another President? Or perhaps even your own?" (1966 340). Sherrill states that since "America is built on an awesome amount of wretched human refuse," violence is to be expected. Advancing views that have absolutely no basis in history, genetics, anthropology or reason, he implies that gun owners and Southerners are descended from the convicts of Ogelthorpe's penal colony. In effect, this is an emotional acceptance of discredited biological reductionism at the expense of the liberal ideal of cultural relativism.

Organized gun control opponents are equally prone to the use of emotionalism and constitutional obfuscation. Defensor (1934 102) (surely a pseudonym!) takes a decidedly pugnacious tone: "Do you want to compromise with evil and have a gunless and gutless society or fight for your unalienable rights to keep and bear arms?" Kukla's (1977) more restrained text, backed by NRA, is also marked by the use of simplistic hyperbole and ends on a similar rhetorical note.

Both sides evoke emotional responses and invoke the constitution in order to advance their point of view. In this process, of course, the cultural dimension on the problem of firearms abuse is generally overlooked.

CONCLUSION

Southern violence is not merely a sociological problem that can be reduced to an exercise

in statistics or sophistry, but rather is a culturally determined type of behavior. The gun is an important part of the Southern white culture and world view. For white Southern males the firearm is symbol of manhood and accession to adult responsibilities that the notion of personal sovereignty carries with it. To many Southern adults, the gun serves an additional function as a shared symbol representing the threatening nature of the social and physical environment. In this manner, the gun links the present with the myth of the "golden age" that Southerners so revere. In short, gun ownership and use in the South is part of a behavioral complex which values direct solutions to problems, and a strong emphasis on individual initiative and responsibility.

To those ignorant of the cultural significance of the firearm in Southern society, the problem regulating Southern violence invites simplistic solutions. Licensing, registration, control of ammunition sales, interdiction, and other suggested modes of federal firearms control have met with disfavor in the South and elsewhere. This is due to the fact that liberal/elites, being stubbornly enamoured of sociological solutions and definitions of crime, have ignored basic cultural differences that are central to the issue of gun control. This inability to perceive the reality of the situation is a consequence of "educated incapacity." This culturally specific social-learning dysfunction is marked by ideological bias (sectional bias), simplistic and/or wishful "Utopian" thinking, and being immersed in a political and cultural milieu in which one communicates only with similar individuals (Kahn 1975). The educated incapacity of the liberal/elite class has led this cultural group into a situation of profound conflict with the normative system of bedrock America.

At the core of the gun control issue is an ethical dilemma. Is it ethically defensible for the dominant elite to force their cultural norms on an unwilling cultural group? To do so would seem to invite manifold abuses of human rights and open the Pandora's box of totalitarianism. "Cultural relativism" is used as a rationale for black and minority groups which are politically aligned with the liberal/elite. By virtue of his common language and material culture, the Southern white is expected to forego cultural relativism and to partake of the

American Dream and accept the normative values of the liberal/elites.

White Southernism having had social change forced upon them by the federal government since 1863, will simply not comply with radical gun control laws. The role of the firearm is so secure in the South that attempts to regulate guns would invite either totalitarian moans of enforcement, or non-enforcement. In both cases, the social and financial costs of such an action would be prohibitive.

Southern violence is a cultural expression whose regulation might be best left to individual states. State and municipalities, being smaller governmental entities, have greater responsive capabilities than does the massive federal machine. States and community government more accurately reflect the cultural ideologies of ethnic constituencies than does the federal government. Therefore, the most logical way in which to regulate the misuse of cultural relativism, may be to delegate gun control responsibilities to the individual states. In this manner an individual state would be able to focus its efforts on legislation that is germane to its socio-cultural milieu and that is viewed as appropriate by its citizenry. Thus, gun control laws which are constructive and culturally consistent within one region of the country, would not be applied to radically different culture areas. The appropriate role for federal legislation and enforcement efforts, in such an instance, would be to criminalize interstate violations, such as taking firearms into a state which has a strict gun control regulations.

Policy makers in the field of criminal justice have traditionally employed socio-economic information, crime and victimization statistics, and other so-called hard data in their policy deliberations. In so doing, they have neglected cultural inputs in favour of sociological data or legal precedents. Policy makers need to attempt assessment of their own ethnocentrism in order to realize the ideal of "cultural relativism." Evidence suggests that members of the liberal/elite policymaking class have their own distinct cultural biases. Those biases and dominant assumptions are in conflict with those of mass society, and Southern culture.

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