

Shooting Down Some Myths About Gun Control

by Polly Toynbee

Gun control can mean anything you want it to. To the gun industry it means getting cheap or foreign guns off the market. To the National Rifle Association (NRA) it means getting unreliable, back-firing, "dangerous" guns off the market. To the police it means getting everyone else's guns out of the way. And to hard-line gun control enthusiasts it presumably means rounding up some 200 million guns in a nationwide house-to-house search.

To many on the political left, gun control means a quick and easy answer to the problem of crime. Take away the guns and maybe crime rates will go down, we keep telling ourselves. It won't hurt anybody—except maybe those nasty, gun-toting right-wingers—to ban the guns, and it would be a nice, clean solution to a situation that otherwise raises ugly complications. The only thing wrong is it won't work. Robert Sherrill's *The Saturday Night Special** makes us face the fact that gun control is a security blanket we have to wean ourselves from if we really want to face the law and order issue.

The book is a splendid description of the cant and confusion talked about guns and gun control. As an avowed anti-gun man, Sherrill plays such a good devil's advocate that by

**The Saturday Night Special*. Robert Sherrill. Charterhouse, \$7.95.

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the end of the book he has almost talked himself into thinking that controlling guns isn't possible, practically or politically, and that it probably wouldn't make much difference anyway. He concludes, with de Tocqueville and many others, that America is a violent nation built on violence by a breed of outcasts from the civilized world.

Bob Bates is the gun control specialist in Senator Edward Kennedy's office. "As an issue, I'd put it as



Diana Walker

number one. I mean, at the very top. Effective gun control, in my view, would do more for society than anything else I can think of." Bob Bates has been working to this end for years. "Guns are the *symbol* of all American violence. I don't really think it's meaningful to label ourselves as particularly violent, but with so many guns around it's hard to have another image of ourselves." He hates guns and says, "I feel deeply uneasy when there's a gun around. I had one

in the army and as a child I had a cap gun, but my mother hated that. I wouldn't let my children have guns. Do you realize more guns have been made since the mid-sixties than were produced in the whole rest of the century? Possession of guns has no basis in logic. It's a whole mystic machismo thing, I think there is something repulsive about the power a gun confers on someone who has no right to that power. You don't have to be strong, or agile, or clever. If I have a fight with someone with a knife, I can duck, I can see where he's coming at me, and when. Who ever heard of ducking a bullet? And you can't even see the moment when he pulls the trigger. . . .

"America is about wholesomeness, of that I am convinced, not about guns. America is all about family life, earning money, nutritious food. It's the whole good life thing, it isn't the violence. But perhaps I'm wrong." Drawing on his pipe in a ruminative fashion, Bates ended with, "Of course, the rate of death from wounds with knives and other weapons is much lower, that can be shown. And although I can't prove it, I'm sure there would be fewer murders and attempted murders altogether. Look at England, your country. You don't have these problems. But then you're a mature country, and I consider that America is still only adolescent."

Without being in any way sure of how many lives he might save, or how crime and violence patterns might

change, Bob Bates is convinced that gun control is the answer. When I suggested that might be a liberal cop-out, that real crime control might involve more ruthless and right-wing measures, he simply denied it and wouldn't talk about it at all. He is entirely dedicated to banning guns.

George III's Revenge

George Knight, attorney at law, who retired from the State Department last year, is the kind of character that comes to mind when phrases like "a violent nation built on violence" are mentioned. Knight is a founder of a citizens' action group in Fairfax, Virginia, called "Virginians Organized to Eliminate Suppressive Gun Ordinances." Sitting at his desk in his law office, Knight wears a pair of cowboy boots and conforms in every way to the liberal gun-controller's stereotype of a right-wing gun-lover. "Miss Toynbee, I want you to know," he said before I could sit down, "a gun is a beautiful thing." He collects antique guns, hunts, and takes part in target shooting contests. He has a hand gun for protection in every room of his house, and he also collects knives and swords.

"All the bad things that are happening in this country come from England," he said almost at once on noticing that I was English. "Your bad welfare laws, your gun controls, they're even talking of sending our police out on the streets unarmed, like yours." Without using the word, he perceives society as an anarchy, where every man must look after himself and his own and has no right to expect protection from anyone else. The police are doing a good job, the best that can be expected of them, but Knight no more feels it his right to be entirely protected by them than he expects to be supported on welfare. I asked whether he thought, like Rousseau, that man had made a social contract when he came out of the jungle and began living together in a community with other men, a con-

tract to lay down his arms and invest them in the police and the army, to pay taxes and abide by mutually agreed upon laws. "What kind of a contract is that? We in this country didn't make any contract. We *are* living in a jungle. You go down to 7th Street in Washington, D. C., one dark night if you don't believe me," he said. And he has a point.

The NRA estimates that there are at least 200 million guns in circulation in this country. That's almost one for each citizen. The National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Crime has estimated that half the households in America keep a gun. This means that, criminals and gun nuts apart, a vast number of ordinary, decent people, of every political opinion and social class, carry guns. Running a quick check among liberal friends, friends of friends, and their relatives, I found a surprising number admitting, some of them rather shamefacedly, that they had guns, "Oh, somewhere around the house. I don't know why. I bought it once when there was a scare. I'd be happy to see them banned. I probably wouldn't use it anyhow." A New York advertising man, a California doctor, an elderly lady in Charlottesville, Virginia, an International Monetary Fund official, a journalist in Washington, a lawyer, and more, all of them McGovern supporters. The editor of this magazine said he would have one if it weren't for the statistics that showed that guns are more often used to shoot members of the family than to wipe out intruders.

Clearly, more people, down in their guts, feel some sympathy for George Knight's view of society than like to admit it, or than will openly relate it to their other political views. For example, no one would castigate a liberal for rescuing his child from the D. C. high-school system—which is ridden with crime and drugs, is poverty-stricken and inadequate—yet somehow the liberals' direct contact with these gritty problems, however they deal with them, rarely gets incor-

porated into their political ideology. But there is a strong case for believing that the social contract has broken down. We agreed to lay down our weapons in exchange for an efficient police force and legal system, but the courts and the police don't seem able to fulfill their side of the bargain. They have our weapons, often making bad use of them, but don't adequately protect us from each other. Perhaps we shall have to face up to the fact that we are living in an uncivilized, jungle state.

It Pays to Be Choosy

Robert Sherrill has a good section on this in his book. Although writing tongue-in-cheek and with the somewhat unpleasant sneer that sometimes creeps into his prose, he is, I suspect, testing what stuff the liberal conscience is made of. Sherrill quotes statistics compiled by the Senate Juvenile Delinquency subcommittee that build a profile of the typical gun killer:

He had been piling up a criminal record for 10 years prior to his most recent charge of murder; 62 per cent of the gun murderers had previously been arrested for crimes of violence; on an average he had been arrested 2.4 times for serious crimes. As for the victims and the occasion, 81 per cent of the murderers chose their wives or friends or relatives to kill, and in 88 per cent of the cases killed them during a lover's quarrel or a drunken brawl.

And again, someone else giving evidence in Washington stated, "All the statistics show that if you choose with care the people who will share your bedroom with you, or your kitchen, or the adjacent barstool, you will improve your chances from one in 20,000 to one in 60,000" of not being murdered by a gun. Writes Sherrill, "The prototype who emerges from such evidence is white or black trash: a low-class, squabbling, drunken ne'er-do-well."

Now, examining our consciences carefully, don't those facts make us feel a bit better about the crime

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see page 1.

statistics? *We* are not the ones who are in much danger. Sherrill puts it neatly:

None of [the above facts] comes as a surprise at all: it has been known for years that most murders are the ultimate expression of an already long-established chumminess between low-lives. The only surprising thing about such revelations is that our opinion shapers still pretend to care about what happens to such people, pretend to argue earnestly that in losing the friends and family of such men we are losing something we cannot muddle along without quite comfortably. . . . And if the riddance is not always exactly good, it is very often tolerable.

This callousness about the 10,000 murders committed each year upset Sherrill's editor, who fired off an angry memo:

Do you *mean* that? I don't believe that—or let's say I don't *want* to believe that. First, a thousand tragic deaths is a lot of deaths, and if it all came down to just that, I'd say that was a lot of unnecessary killing in no way defensible. Second, you take a remarkably elitist/reactionary-sounding position on the remaining 9,000+ gun deaths, saying in effect (and indeed quite specifically) Good Riddance to this human trash. . . .

Unless you think there is not a jot of chance for improving American society and its inequities, what you're doing here is reinforcing the school that holds that there will always be human dross among us and there is nothing we can do to prevent it. If you can laugh it off, as you sort of do here by saying repeatedly that their self slaughter may be a blessing in disguise, you're just tossing in the towel on America. . . . To say that most of the fatal crimes involve the trash among us is not only unhumane in the extreme; it overlooks the price that all of us pay in money, anxiety, hostility, etc., for allowing this rate of crime to fester.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

I was interested in this outburst, as it reveals that the writer, in spite of his apparent indignation about Sherrill's callousness, is seduced by it himself to some extent. His first point is that 1,000 non-low-life deaths (maybe middle-class deaths) is too many to tolerate. His concern for the 9,000 others comes a poor second. In the last paragraph, he tosses away quite lightly the inhumanity of allowing trash to kill itself, and zeroes in on what really disturbs him, the threat to "all of us."

Sherrill's reply, of course, isn't quite adequate, but then he was only playing devil's advocate in the first place. He answers boldly to his editor, "If the nation wants to let thousands of its citizens live like stray dogs, it has to expect some of them to go mad. Then, when they kill other stray dogs, it is rather silly to sigh and say their teeth were to blame; it is even sillier to pretend that we are sorry a few are killed when we do nothing to salvage the rest. Affluent Americans do not care one whit what happens to their trashier neighbors, and it is hypocritical, at best, to suggest that we are improving their lives by depriving them of their guns."

Now it may be that we are all really familiar with the pattern of crime. We know that it is something that happens in the ghetto, but we are easily scared by such events as the shooting of Senator John Stennis on his very doorstep, and enough other incidents to grab the headlines, even though they don't amount to much in the statistics. We are easily hoodwinked by the alarms put out by politicians, gun salesmen, and appropriations-seekers like the chief of the U. S. Capitol police (whose force protects the Capitol and its grounds). When asking Congress for appropriations this year, the chief said he needed more guns, cars, electronic surveillance, and a computer keyboard linked to the FBI. To support his claim, he said the Capitol grounds harbored hoodlums and underworld criminals from all over the East Coast.

In fact, his 1,000 men had arrested only eight people for felonies in the last year. There are plenty of people interested in hyping up the crime-fear fever. That's not to say there isn't any crime, or there isn't any serious problem. Clearly there is, but perhaps we all don't take it as seriously as we think we do. We know that it doesn't happen too much to nice people. We don't know many people who've been killed, not sensible people who keep out of dark corners at night.

Herod's Revenge

In one of the most significant parts of the book, Sherrill carefully analyzes who the murderers and other serious criminals are. Half of them are 18 and younger. One fifth are under 14. Seventy-two per cent of all those arrested for serious crimes were between 13 and 29, and the percentage goes up to 82 per cent when those under 13 are included. From 1965 to 1971 the number of FBI-listed crimes doubled from three million to six million a year. The number of young people aged 17 to 24 also rose by a substantial amount, 47 per cent.

When postulating something Sherrill really finds fairly preposterous, he lapses into his coyest phraseology, but he makes his point: "Confirming the fears of us honkies who are convinced that the darkies will eventually do us in, half of those arrested for murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault were black. The ratio is rather impressive when one considers that blacks make up only one tenth of the total population." He proceeds to inform us that the white population between 1966 and 1975 will have increased by 9.5 per cent, while the black population increase will be 17.7 per cent, and the number of 15- to 24-year-old blacks will grow much faster than the white population of the same age group. A Chicago study shows that the homicide rate of blacks in this age group in 1970 was 30 times higher than that of whites.

Sherrill here drifts off into a fan-

tasy. Or is it? "The final solution of the youth/gun problem would seem logically to be a super-Herod experiment: the extermination of all young males living in cities of 250,000 and over. Get rid of urban young people and you get rid of virtually all violent urban crime.

"In fairness, society should supply each person of sound mind over the age of 30 with a hand gun and a kind of gift certificate awarding him one free *prima facie* legal assumption that the shooting of anyone between the ages of 15 and 24 was done in self-defense." And adds, "Aw, I'm only kidding—I think." But just for one second, as you read these facts, don't you toy with the idea yourself? How we could weep over the mass graves and castigate the politicians who did it, but wouldn't some small corner of our minds rejoice? Sherrill quotes Thomas Henry Huxley, who said we are neither wise nor just but we make up for all our folly and injustice by "being damnably sentimental."

But, of course, we could never say we were interested in anything like the Herod plan, and so many of us react to the statistics about the violent young males by pretending the numbers don't exist. Instead, we rely on gun control, hoping that it will keep the teenagers from killing us without necessitating the ugly measures Sherrill proposes. If there were a chance that we could ever get rid of all the guns, it might be a good way to cut our losses. It's easier to run away from someone attacking you with a knife or a poker than to escape from a gunman. But when we remind ourselves how many guns are already around and how quickly they would go into hiding when the first serious control proposals were made, aren't we kidding ourselves to think that gun control is the solution to the more basic problem of violence among the young? Sherrill does us a service by pulling away the veil of gun control and making us look at the real issue directly.

Being English, I have always tended towards the view that Sherrill concludes with—America is a crazy, ungovernably gun-toting nation—but I believed that if only Americans would give up their guns they'd be more like us. These days, at the sound of an English voice, NRA officials reach for a little-known book by an English policeman showing that armed crime there is growing rapidly and the number of guns of all kinds in circulation is increasing. Compared to this country, however, England is a nation with few guns and a low crime rate.

Our Lovable Desperadoes

It is interesting to look at Switzerland, where every man on reaching the age of majority is compelled by law to keep a rifle and maintain it in working order. In fact, the government actually issues every man a gun, and yet the crime rate is particularly low. It has to have something to do with national character and self-image. Americans love crime. It's not sur-

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prising that in an ordinary night's viewing on TV, between two and three out of six programs between 7:00 and 11:00 on each of the channels are about crime. Movies currently in town include 16 films about crime and only 13 about love, sex, baseball, and other aspects of people's normal lives. It seems that there isn't *enough* real-life crime for everyone's tastes and what's needed is more: manufactured, synthetic, celluloid crime has to substitute.

This isn't a very new thought, but it may be another point in the whole question of why so little is done about crime and why no one has gotten anywhere near to passing a sensible law on gun control. Sherrill has a chapter called "Our Lovable Desperados" in which he traces the bizarre glamorization of small-time stick-up men like Jesse James, even in their own lifetimes. When James and two companions robbed the Kansas City Fair of less than \$1,000 and escaped, leaving a small girl shot in the leg, *The Kansas City Times* described the robbery as "so diabolically daring and so utterly in contempt of fear that we are bound to admire it and revere its perpetrators. . . . It was as though three bandits had come to us from storied Odenwald, with the halo of medieval chivalry upon their garments, and shown us how things were done that poets sing of." And when, after 16 killings, Jesse died, *The Kansas City Journal* mourned, "Goodbye, Jesse." Perhaps there just isn't the public will to end the shootings and the violence.

George Knight put it a little too forcefully for my comfort when he picked up a very heavy ashtray and waved it in the direction of my head. "If I wanted to, I could kill you with this, right now. Or with this," he said, warming to his theme and jabbing a ballpoint pen in my direction. "I could throw acid in your face. I could blind you with a detergent spray. I could choke you with my bare hands. I don't need a gun to kill you, you know."

All the arguments in favor of controlling guns are familiar and convincing. Even if unrestricted guns caused only one extra death a year, it would be worth banning them. There are other deaths that might be prevented by gun control. All the assassins and would-be assassins of Presidents bought their guns across the counter or through the mail legitimately, not on the black market. Collectively, it cost them only \$75 to do it. Booth shot Lincoln for \$15; it cost Guiteau only \$10 to buy a gun to shoot Garfield. Czolgosz killed McKinley with a \$4.50 revolver. Zangia took a pot shot at Roosevelt with an \$8 rod, and it cost Oswald only \$21.45 to murder Kennedy. Since they were all certifiably insane, it might have been something as little as the easy availability of guns that persuaded them to do it. Just a little more difficulty in getting hold of the weapons might have deterred the assassins' unhinged brains. And if there is even a chance that this might be the case we should, with no further hesitation, restrict the sale of guns. But no one, of course, is in a position to claim with any certainty that these men mightn't with almost the same ease have gotten one of the 200 million guns already lying around the place. It would be a question of just trying to reduce the odds in the only way we can.

Enfant Terrible

But perhaps there is more than a tinge of blindness, even hypocrisy, in the shouting, name-calling, and hell-raising that liberals go in for at the sight of a gun. With 200 million of the things around, squeamishness about guns must be pretty rare. On arriving in this country, one of the first texts it seemed necessary to acquire was the report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. And when one has read through that, with all its careful study of social and historical causes, it would be hard to stand up and honestly aver that

guns are a major factor in creating crime or violence.

We accept violent death with great equanimity. Every time a great bridge is to be built, a new high-rise complex, or any ambitious engineering feat, we can be pretty sure that the life and limb of several construction workers will be lost. The reason we delicate liberals hate guns is the same reason that gun nuts love them—machismo. Machismo is not a quality much admired these days by the left (not that we don't have our quota of masculinity hang-ups). It isn't really that the statistics show how many fewer deaths there would be if we banned guns—there aren't any. We hate guns, same as we hate everything that is openly and aggressively masculine, coarse, vulgar, and brutish, and the right-wing NRA fans love guns because they are all those things.

Sherrill's book is a clear, concise canter around the whole problem of gun control, mocking those who have half-heartedly attempted reforms and sneering at the police and the NRA almost too much for pleasure. What Sherrill does is to defuse the situation by throwing in any number of conflicting attitudes, but in the end he has escaped making a serious comment on guns and crime. He prefers to play jester than chief adviser. One suspects that is because his rational thinking goes trespassing all over his liberal prejudices, and he isn't about to give up his liberal label, not even that little corner of it. All the same, when I showed the book to John Rector, Deputy Chief Counsel of the Senate subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, a Bayh appointee, I got the feeling that Sherrill had really got under the skin of old gun-controllers. In an office where there is a poster showing a hand gun with the slogan, "Danger—keep out of reach of adults," Rector rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully and said that he, and others who had read the book, were asking themselves seriously whether the man had been got at or was on the take from the NRA.

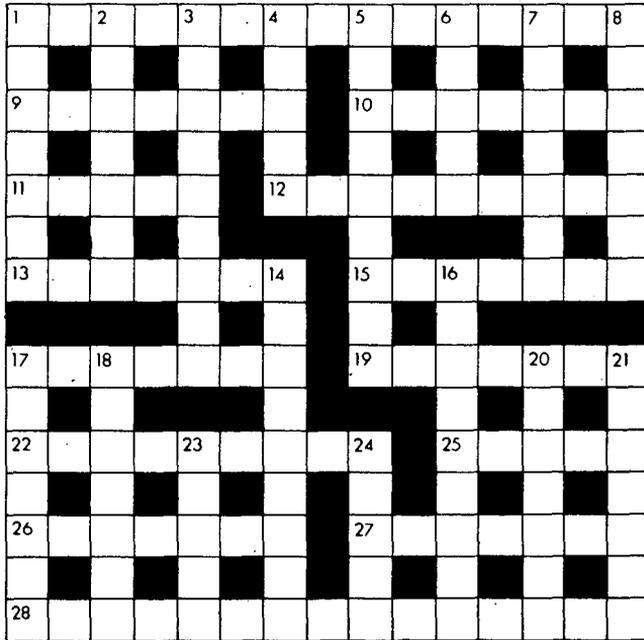
Sherrill, as *enfant terrible*, goes crashing through soft spots in liberal thinking—using shock tactics, like the Herod massacre suggestion. He brings us up sharply against some nasty realities—well, what *are* we going to do about it? The problem that crime and the whole law and order issue present to the liberal is a painful one. The sight of a small gray gun lying in a friend's bedside drawer sent a nasty chill down my spine. Was this nice and decent person really going to shoot some poor, underprivileged, down-trodden black kid trespassing on his property, whose only real crime, as we all know, is poverty and misery?

Well, I didn't actually think that way, but there's something of that in one's horror of guns—a gentle and woolly love of all humanity. At the same time, we are chilled to the bones at the thought of those delinquents out there, ready to shoot, stone, or burn us for the fun of it, and like everyone else, we want them off the streets. But we know they aren't really to blame, and as Albert Seedman, former Chief of Detectives of the New York Police Department said, "Take away our white-collar jobs, our bank accounts, our expense accounts, our stable families, our nice homes, our air conditioners; add some drugs and booze for solace, and we might kill someone on a Saturday night too." So we don't like to be too hard on them. We don't much care for the suggestions that come from the right—long-term prison sentences for even minor offenses, oppressive police powers, maybe a wide use of capital punishment for repeated offenders. We reach for a nice, clean answer to crime—gun control.

It is humane and simple, and that's why we cling to it with such determination. But we really know that only a handful of accidents and crimes would be prevented, and we know too that a lot of harm is done with knives and baseball bats. This should help us to realize that if we are serious about facing crime and violence we must look beyond gun control. ■

the political puzzle

by John Barclay



DOWN

1. Are you so glad he's lasted on Court? (7)
2. African native active in plug and anvil line. (7)
3. Lion hanging around tiger. (9)
4. Mr. Lee meet Mr. Davis! (5)
5. Lee script may sound dry, but it's all wet. (6 3)
6. Love in sisters may be common. (5)
7. Nader's men air Red's complaints! (7)
8. In songs, he comes aboard. (5, 2)
14. Back up about massive show of support. (9)
16. Note large results from him. (9)
17. Shine and send tingles

- up my spine. (7)
18. Woo turn caused by shabby clothes. (7)
20. Take cab back between greetings to light grill. (7)
21. Transmitters from Charlie Dressen. (7)
23. Expect to throw it away? No, why? (5)
24. Joke about straw? (5)

ACROSS

1. Short editor finds neuter blondes in bad taste. (6, 9)
9. Element that will ruin Mau Mau society... (7)
10. ... and go right on ruining it. (7)
11. Della's in and out of the soup. (5)

12. With pleasure they say short relative belongs to her. (9)
13. Find better light by Northeast ruins. (7)
15. Near relative who spent so much. (7)
17. Which king came first, i.e., egg or chicken? (6, 1)
19. Put closet in them or vice versa. (7)
22. Set out in craft if you want to join crowd. (2, 7)
25. Life is no bag of cherries back in Africa. (5)
26. Kings and queens make paw riot. (3, 4)
27. Even when definite, clear it with editor. (7)
28. Leave nonentities free to reminisce about war years. (8, 7)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 48.