

Guns do kill best

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Nowhere is the defeatist liberal approach to American politics more evident than in the post-Newtown campaign for gun control. Liberals are rushing to repeat, like a devout incantation, hand on one's heart, that "we believe in the Second Amendment" - in an "individual's right to own a gun." Half of the legal and moral battle is lost right there and then. Instead, liberals should emphasize that throughout the total American legal history until 2008, the Supreme Court - which at times has been very conservative - has always held that the right to own guns belongs not to the individual but, as the Second Amendment states, to a "well regulated militia."² That the right to own guns is a communitarian right, not an individualized one. True, the Roberts Court recently ruled otherwise, but liberals are still free to urge the court to reconsider this ruling and fashion arguments that will make it easier for the Court to fall back in line with all who preceded it. It would also help to recall that other civilized societies hold that the fewer guns there are out there, the fewer people will be murdered by guns.

Next, liberals have started their gun control campaign, as they sadly so often do, by conceding most of their ground before the give-and-take is even underway. Thus, when dealing with health care, they did not start with a true liberal position (a call for a single-payer system) because they assume that such a position will not play and hence - being the reasonable people that they are - they proposed an option close to the conservatives' preferred policy. Then the give-and-take ensues - further watering down what was a very thin gruel to begin with.

As someone who fired guns for over two years in combat, I hate to tell you that the conservatives are right when they argue that banning big magazines and assault rifles - the current "liberal" opening gambits - will make very little difference. It takes only a second or so to replace an empty magazine with a loaded one, and there are so many assault rifles out there that it would take at least a generation (assuming no new ones were sold nor imported nor smuggled in nor stolen from military bases) before these guns would become significantly less available than they are at present.

Liberals, when challenged with these facts, engage in a rhetorical manoeuvre. True, they say, our favourite (mini) bans will not solve the problem, nothing will, but we can, as Obama put it in his State of the Union address, at least "make it harder for criminals to get their hands on a gun." True, but the difference, unfortunately, will be marginal. Indeed, in many of the jurisdictions that have gun control laws of the kind that liberals typically call for - and even in ones where the laws are stricter, still (Chicago, for instance) - murder by gun is very common.

A true liberal position, the place to start, is to call for domestic disarmament. That is the banning of the sale of all guns to private parties coupled with a buyback of those on the street (Mexico just moved to so control guns). Collectors can keep their guns as long as they remove the firing pin or fill the barrel with cement. Gun sports can be allowed - in closed shooting ranges. And hunters can be allowed to have long guns (if they pass background checks) with no scopes, which are not sporting.

¹ Parts of this text were previously published in the *Huffington Post* as: 'Gun Control? We Need Domestic Disarmament' (19 February 2013, Available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/amitai-etzioni/gun-control-we-need-domes_b_2718536.html), and 'Gun-Free Homes and Communities' (18 December 2012, Available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/amitai-etzioni/gun-free-homes-and-commun_b_2322773.html)

² For details on the cases involved, see: Etzioni, A. (2012) 'NRA and bad law block a way to catch killers', *CNN Online*, 16 August, Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/06/26/opinion/etzioni-guns/index.html>

But, these exceptions aside, liberals should call for a gun-free nation and point out the much lower murder rates and fewer deaths due to accidental discharge of fire arms found in those civilized nations where most guns have been removed from private hands - and often even from those of the police.

Let the conservatives - who, of course, will reject such a policy, however strongly it is supported by evidence - tell us what they are going to do about gun violence. Improve mental health services? A good idea, assuming they will vote for the required spending, as well as recognize that there is no way such an improvement will make more than a marginal difference given the difficulties in both diagnosing who is prone to violence and in treating those individuals. Limit violence video games? Let them show that such a measure would make a difference. Enforce the laws on the books? Let them remove the blocks they have put in place to prevent these laws from being enforced. A good place to start: Let Obama appoint a director for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

I acknowledge that the result, even after Newtown, of a truly liberal approach to gun control might not be very different from the current one. Conservatives are not about to allow sensible measures to be enacted. However, at least we shall have an honest, compelling, mobilizing vision of what liberals stand for regarding what it takes to save many thousands of lives that would be otherwise lost to guns. Domestic disarmament is a vision that can educate future generations of voters about that which must be done and that which the Second Amendment fully permits.

We should not wait for our elected officials, in President Obama's good words, "to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics." We should do our share. One way to proceed is to mark our homes, apartments and condos, with a "gun free" sign. Parents should notify their friends that they would be reluctant to send their child over for a play date unless the home was safe from guns. Residential communities should pass rules that ban bringing guns onto their premises, clearly marking them as gun free.

Anyone who puts up such signs will become an ambassador for gun control, because they are sure to be challenged by gun advocates to explain their anti-gun positions. Here are some pointers they may wish to use against the typical pro-gun talking points.

"Guns don't kill people, people kill people."

- Tragically, it is the case that there will always be dangerous individuals, but they can kill a lot more with easy access to guns. On the same day as the massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, a knife-wielding man targeted a primary school in a Chinese village. Twenty-two children and one adult were wounded, but none were killed.

"Guns deter crimes and save lives."

- Of the 30,000 gun deaths in America every year, only 200 are caused by self-defense. Studies have shown that a higher rate of gun ownership is correlated with higher rates of homicide, suicide and unintentional shootings. The U.S. has a firearms homicide rate 19.5 times higher than the combined rate of 22 high income countries with similar non-lethal crime and violence rates.

"Criminals would obtain guns anyway."

- Weak gun laws that exempt many private companies and gun shows from background checks already enable a thriving criminal market for guns. According to the Brady Campaign, "In most states convicted felons, domestic violence abusers, and those who are dangerously mentally ill can walk into any gun show, flea market, or even log on to the Internet and buy weapons from unlicensed sellers, no questions asked." True, dangerous people may still be able get their hands on weapons if tighter gun control laws are passed, but certainly less will do so when it is illegal.

“The right to private gun ownership is guaranteed by the Constitution.”

- No right is absolute. Even the right to free speech, considered the strongest of them all, is limited. You cannot shout “fire” in a crowded theatre - precisely because it endangers life. You can’t always make a speech with a loudspeaker at 2 a.m. in a residential area. We can limit gun ownership to people who have neither criminal nor mental health records and ban assault rifles for starters. Meanwhile, make our children safer by not allowing them to go to places that are not gun free.

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