

## The Right To Survive

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“It’s him! He is coming for me!” The 66-year-old woman screamed as panic gripped her. Coworkers fleeing the office building tried to help her find some place to hide, but as bullets pierced the walls and sailed past their heads, they fled leaving the woman to fend for herself. In the parking lot outside, as if in a scene from a horror movie, the shooter with a freshly broken ankle dragged himself along the ground in the direction of her office. He had already shot two people, killing one of them and leaving the other for dead, and he was methodically making his way to the terrified woman as she cowered behind a printer in an office cubicle.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for her, she escaped that day after the perpetrator was shot and killed by a state patrolman. Many others are not so lucky. In the 18 years I’ve been studying homicides, I’ve seen dozens of bodies scattered across desks and cubicles, hallways and parking lots, restaurants, gymnasiums, and classrooms. These are not movie images. These are real life-and-death situations where death is often the victor.

Each time I see bodies on autopsy tables, I wonder if they were gun-control advocates. I wonder if in their last seconds of life they would have wanted to have the resources to protect themselves and I wonder if in the time between the first and last shots in a workplace shooting they realized that no matter how quickly the police were summoned, it would not be in time to save them. I doubt that in those brief seconds before the end they were all that concerned about Supreme Court decisions or local laws regarding handgun laws. They most likely were only concerned with the fact that they didn’t want to die.

### The Data On Guns And Violence

The gun control crowd makes it seem as if gun rights advocates don’t care about safety. I’m all in favor of making the country a safe place. Why wouldn’t I be? My children attend public schools and colleges, my wife shops in local markets, and I regularly travel in public places. Safety is something everyone wants. My argument with advocates of gun control is their false premise – that restricting the right to bear arms makes the world safer. That belief is not based in fact. “The National Academy of Sciences reviewed dozens of studies and could not find a single gun regulation that clearly led to reduced violent crime or murder.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, instead of decreasing deaths, just the opposite appears to be true. For example, one year after a total gun ban in Australia, assaults rose 8.6%, armed robberies rose by 44%, and homicides by firearms rose an unbelievable 300%.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, between 1976 and 1991, after Washington, D.C.’s ban on handguns, homicide rose 200% compared to 2% for the rest of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Not only is there no decline in gun violence when strict laws control gun ownership, but research demonstrates that when people have access to firearms, they are able to defend themselves. One study showed that people use firearms to defend themselves 764,000 times a year.<sup>5</sup> When Florida adopted a right to carry law in 1987, homicides declined over the next ten years by 37%.<sup>6</sup> In 1982, Kennesaw, Georgia required the head of every household to have at least one weapon in the house. The city saw an 89% drop in the burglary rate that year and 10 years later “the residential burglary rate was still 72% lower than it had been” prior to the enactment of the 1982 law.<sup>7</sup>

The reason is obvious. Criminals don’t want to get shot at. “A survey of 1,874 felons in 10 states found that most worry more about meeting an armed victim than about running into police” and the majority of these felons agreed that when a store owner is known to have a gun he is less likely to be robbed.<sup>8</sup> It is clear. When citizens have the right to own and carry weapons, violent crime rates drop and people protect themselves.

## Arguments Against Guns

Some argue that licensed gun ownership increases deaths of civilians and police alike. This is a myth. In 1998, only one person in the state of Florida who was licensed to carry used a firearm and a court ruled self-defense and in the same year, not a single police officer was shot by a licensed individual.<sup>9</sup>

Others argue that if you could ensure that absolutely no one had a gun, certainly the death toll would drop dramatically. Yet this is impossible, as we've seen in U.S. airports. We search every single passenger and crewman, and their possessions. However, the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) still misses machetes, knives, and guns many times each year. Between 2002 and 2003, the TSA has confiscated 1500 firearms, 2.3 million knives and a variety of explosive devices.<sup>10</sup> Yet, numerous tests of the TSA system have demonstrated that undercover TSA agents as well as reporters and citizens have been able to sneak weapons past screeners. For example, in 2003, five Homeland Security undercover agents were able to smuggle firearms past screeners at Boston's Logan International Airport.<sup>11</sup> Yet another report indicated that TSA screeners were missing as many as 24% of mock weapons in undercover tests.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, even in a tightly controlled and finite environment, those who are motivated to have weapons on board are able to find a way to do so, leaving the rest of the passengers at their mercy. If it is impossible to ensure that all 200 passengers in a confined space like an airplane are unarmed, it is impossible to ensure an entire state is disarmed.

Following the Virginia Tech shooting, one citizen responded to a reporter's questions about gun control by saying, "There has to be tighter gun control; we can't let another Virginia Tech to happen. And we're just not doing it, we're sitting around, we're doing nothing. We let the opportunity arise for more massacres."<sup>13</sup> But how are we doing nothing? We have gun control laws already and criminals continue to find ways around them. The belief that more gun laws would keep criminals from getting guns is ridiculous. Honest people follow the law. Criminals do not. As ABC correspondent John Stossel notes, "Last I checked, murder is against the law everywhere."<sup>14</sup>

I've personally studied a number of homicides that were committed both in U.S. states where guns are tightly controlled as well as in other countries where guns are nearly impossible to acquire. Even when tightly regulated, gun control laws do not prohibit criminals from acquiring them. Laws don't prevent people from doing anything illegal. Just look at the war on drugs. Laws are tougher, sentencing is tougher, and administrations have focused attention on both the buyer and the supplier. The U.S. government has even taken the war on drugs to the source, destroying marijuana fields and cocaine operations in Columbia, Mexico, and other countries and yet illegal drugs are just as ubiquitous as ever.

Just before the Supreme Court heard the case of a challenge to gun control in Washington, D.C. (*District of Columbia v. Heller*), an editorial in the New York Times suggested what appeared to be a compromise between gun rights advocates and gun control advocates. Among other ideas, the editorial writer suggested a national database to screen gun buyers and closing loopholes that allows people to sell guns at gun shows.<sup>15</sup> These two suggestions seem logical, but to my knowledge there is no data to support the idea that these regulations would indeed reduce gun violence. Likewise, it seems logical that the Brady Bill would have helped us as well. Yet of the 242,000 background checks in 1994, only 9 people were convicted of illegally trying to buy guns.<sup>16</sup> For those of you who are challenged by math, that constitutes only .0003%. We would be better served by finding the source of weapons acquired by the criminals and stopping that source rather than stopping or slowing the source of guns that are legally acquired by nonviolent citizens. Otherwise, we simply will be creating more government and more regulations for naught.

Gun control advocates use inconsistent arguments. On the one hand they cite the number of accidents involving guns each year as a good reason to ban them. Indeed there are a number of gun accidents each

year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 789 accidental firearms deaths in 2005.<sup>17</sup> During that same year there were 3582 deaths by drowning.<sup>18</sup> In 1994, approximately 17% of US households had access to a swimming pool.<sup>19</sup> Firearms, on the other hand, are represented in 49% of US households.<sup>20</sup> Nobody is calling for a ban on swimming pools and nobody is suggesting that we regulate water. Similarly, in 1998, assault weapons were used in 1% of all homicides (exactly the same percentage as it was before the 1994 assault rifle ban was enacted) while 13% of all homicides involved knives.<sup>21</sup> Should we ban knives? Finally, there are about 40,000 deaths every year in the US in automobiles.<sup>22</sup> Should we ban cars? In fact, just the opposite happens here. When Georgia tried to raise the minimum driving age a few years ago to reduce the number of teen deaths in auto accidents, not only did the legislation not pass, but it was met with massive public resistance.

One person expressing frustration over the gun ban in Washington, D.C., commented, “I have an alarm, I have bars, I have a dog, what more am I supposed to do?”<sup>23</sup> What indeed? Criminals see barred windows, dogs, and alarms as a challenge. They see guns as a threat. I don’t fear swimming pools, I don’t fear knives, and I don’t fear cars. I use them for what they were intended and when I do, the results are positive. The same is true with firearms.

## CONCLUSION

On March 18, 2008 the U.S. Supreme Court heard the case of a man in Washington, D.C. who has challenged the ban on guns in D.C. (*District of Columbia v. Heller*). This will be a major test case for the rest of the United States and both sides of the controversy will be watching closely. As of this writing, it appears the Supreme Court, which hasn’t ruled on the Second Amendment since 1939, is poised to rule against the gun ban. Either way the court rules, it is clear the people of the United States are heavily in favor of gun ownership. Almost half of all Americans own guns and two-thirds of them oppose a ban on guns.<sup>24</sup>

The debate over guns is heavily driven by emotion with little logic. For example, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, pilots sought the right to carry firearms in the cockpit. The public resistance was comical. Could pilots be trusted? What if they made a mistake and someone got hurt? How ridiculous. We already trusted them with the entire aircraft. It is illogical to suppose that a pilot could be trained to fly a 250,000 pound aircraft with 300 passengers and crew, but for some reason gun control proponents believed they couldn’t be trusted to manage a 20 ounce weapon. We trust them to assess at an instant hundreds of variables at once, to manage the complicated computers and electronics in commercial aircraft, and to make decisions correctly every single time with absolutely no mistakes. Yet some people weren’t sure they could be trusted to shoot a terrorist. Please.

In July 1999, 44-year-old Mark Barton walked into an Atlanta day trading office where he had worked and began shooting. He fired at terminals, walls, doors, and employees. When he finished there, he walked out of the building and went next door where he continued to shoot unarmed and helpless people. (Ironically, as he left the first day trading office, he walked right past armed police who were unaware of what was going on and who he was.) In the end, he killed nine people and injured more than a dozen others before taking his own life. If only one person had been armed on the third floor of that first building, the shooting might have ended there. Just one gun could have saved nine lives. Even if they couldn’t stop him, they might have cornered him or at least slowed him down until the police arrived on the floor. As it was, the helpless employees were given only three options – sit and be killed, run, or hide. As I’ve seen dozens of times, these three options often end in death.

I understand the emotion. People who have lost loved ones to gun violence can hardly be expected to be objective. But the data just doesn’t support their arguments. We have a lot to lose if we act without logic and I don’t want to see our country go the route of Great Britain. In 1999, a 55-year-old man named Tony

Martin confronted two burglars in his home in the middle of the night. He shot and killed one man. The other burglar served 18 months in jail while Martin was sentenced to 10 years for having an unregistered gun.<sup>25</sup> I'm in favor of law and order, but come on. Martin had to choose between prison and his life. That is a choice I don't want to be forced to make. If you don't want a gun, don't buy one, but I will protect myself and my family in any way I am legally able.

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