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The argument for arming everyone

Joan Chittister | May. 3, 2007 From Where I Stand

After the violent rampage at Virginia Tech in April, after the dead had been counted and the wounded tended to in hospitals, and after the parents of the young students who matriculated at that campus had finally been assured that it was safe to send their children back to school, the conversation about gun control in our country emerged again. And, as we can see, the idea of gun control is being vigorously rejected.

The arguments are interesting ones.

"How do you suppose we will ever resolve this gun violence crisis in the United States?" I asked one of the finest men I know. "Well," he answered quickly, "I can tell you one thing: if every student on the Virginia Tech campus had been armed, 32 of them wouldn't be dead right now."

"In one little place in Texas," he went on, "they required every house in the county to have a gun and you know what happened? All the robbers moved to the next county."

I admit that the comment stopped me for awhile. After all, the story may or may not be apocryphal but it is an argument that gives you pause, doesn't it? What's more, the person promoting it is one of the gentlest men I know. No doubt about it. You have to give that one a little thought.

But here's what confuses me: We believe in guns, yes. But not for everyone. Just for ourselves.

When it comes to nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, we want to control the use of firepower in the hands of nations we consider "rogue" states. We don't want them armed. In fact, we want to limit their ability to wage violence, even at the cost of not being able to defend themselves against people who do.

But we are also another kind of people. We are a people who say that we ourselves, every adult U.S. citizen, must have the right to be armed at all times. Maybe even ought to be armed at all times.

We say that we have the right "to bear arms," to live by intimidation, to barter life for property, to endanger the

innocent in the name of justice. We wage elections over this issue.

We know ourselves to have some kind of God-given warrant to be armed to the teeth. Just in case. As a letter writer put it recently, "If we take guns away from the good citizens, only the criminals will have them."

So, we take guns away from other people but keep them for ourselves. It's constitutional, we say. For us, apparently, but not for anybody else. By limiting the firepower of other people but keeping -- enlarging -- our own, we will contain whatever violence others might inflict on us, we argue.

Or to put it another way, by legitimating public violence to contain personal violence, we will become peaceful, we say. As if giving guns to "good citizens" will in any way limit the brutality, the scope, or the impact of professional criminals. Tell that to Jesse James and the Dalton Gang who terrorized the vigilante West, to al-Quaeda and the Taliban as they face U.S. power and elude it.

But if it's true that the best way to control violence is to arm us all, then what are we waiting for? By all means, as the good man said to me, let's arm everybody -- and as soon as possible -- because violence is clearly out of hand in this country.

"Maybe they have a point," I said to myself about the idea of universal arms. After all, it only makes sense. Some one of those students, had they all been armed on the Virginia Tech campus, would surely have stopped the shooter in his tracks -- and early."

But then I heard the other side of my soul speaking. Right, I thought. Thirty-two people probably would *not* have died then. Not at *that* moment. In *that* place. But how many of them would have survived the rest of the gunfire in their lives: The shots coming from all the testosterone-fueled males on all the Friday and Saturday nights of their lives? Or all the road rage that would soon be punctuated by gunfire? Or all the domestic arguments that happened one time too many to be tolerated any longer? Or all the alienation that shadows this big, impersonal, anonymous, lonely society we live in that drives the isolated to choose the pain of death over the pain of living?

Taking guns away from the certifiably disturbed will surely not lessen the violence spawned by all the balanced but frightened, frustrated, drinking, arguing, angry people around us whose nerves are frayed and whose guns are handy. "Guns don't kill people," they tell us. "People do." Exactly. According to the Brady Campaign Web site (www.bradycampaign.org): "In 2004, guns were used to murder 5 people in New Zealand, 37 in Sweden, 56 in Australia, 73 in England and Wales, 184 in Canada and 11,344 in the United States."

Strict gun laws exist in all of those other countries. In the end then, that translates into a very different reality. In New Zealand, death from handguns is 1 for every 800,000 people. In the United States, it's 1 death for every 27,000 people.

Surely it's time for us to examine our disparate positions, to face our contradictions, to get it together. For once and for all.

Till we're willing to arm the rest of the world to the same degree as we arm ourselves, we fool ourselves when we say we believe that guns bring peace. Until we're willing to tell the police that every distraught person on the streets of our cities will hereafter be armed so we won't be needing police anymore, we don't really believe that universal firearms make us safer than we are now. Until we're willing to go to bed at night knowing that all our children are sitting in all the clubs, bars and house parties of the country where everyone there is armed, learning to drink and to shoot at the same time, there's something specious about our rejection of gun control.

From where I stand, it's time to either do it or control it. It's time to stop pretending. It's time to decide what kind of society we really want to be.

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