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Some Observations on the Gun Control Debate

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December 14, 2012

As tends to happen after each such horrific occurrence, the school shooting in Connecticut was the occasion for reviving the debate over gun control in the United States.

Given the quality of this debate, I'm not really interested in engaging either the smug liberal challenges of "well, are you people finally ready to come to your senses" or the right-wing hysteria of "The Kenyan Marxist Muslim is coming to take our guns away!" I'll just say for the record I'm an anarchist, and I don't care much for the idea of the same state responsible for warrantless wiretapping and the NDAA regulating the public's access to weaponry for self-defense. And I don't want a new War on Guns carried out by the same lawless paramilitary thugs in kevlar who're already fighting the wars on drugs and terrorism. At the same time, I can't say I'm too crazy about the loudest anti-gun control voices on the right.

Instead, I'll just make a few general observations. First, I doubt the level of gun violence in the United States has much to do with the kinds of gun laws that are in effect. This country would have a high rate of gun violence regardless of the

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laws on the books, just because of our culture. There's a lot of truth in the liberal arguments against America's "gun culture." The United States has more gun violence than other Western countries for the same reason it has a culture of flag-worship and "supporting the troops" unequaled anywhere else in the West, for the same reason Christian Zionism is such a powerful political force in our country, and for the same reason a large plurality of our population actually believes the earth is 6000 years old.

Part of it stems from the unique role of what the late Joe Bageant called Borderers, Ulster Scots or Scots-Irish in shaping American culture. As a result American political culture is more predisposed than most to a kind of Type-A authoritarianism fixated on the use of violence to "show them who's boss" or "teach them a lesson." The worship of the military and the executive goes back to the Ulster Scots inside the Pale, with their adulation for King Billy.

And part of it probably stems from the Second Great Awakening, which is — directly or indirectly — at the root of so many of the ways in which American culture went off the rails in comparison to the rest of Western Christendom. The "Premillennial Dispensationalism" of John Darby, shared by the Southern Baptists and other fundamentalist sects and publicized by Hal Lindsey and the Left Behind series, traces back to this. So do our puritanical attitudes toward alcohol, and our weird attachment to Israel.

Second, I expect strict gun laws to be about as effective as the post-9/11 "counter-terrorism" police state, the Drug War, or the strict digital copyright regime in actually reducing the activity they're ostensibly intended to reduce. Strict gun laws will hardly put a dent in either gun ownership or gun crime. In the places touted as examples of the benefits of gun control, like Europe and Japan, levels of gun ownership and violence were already far lower than in the United States even before such laws were passed.

But third, what strict gun laws will do is take the level of police statism, lawlessness and general social pathology up a notch in the same way Prohibition and the Drug War have done. I'd expect a War on Guns to expand the volume of organized crime, and to empower criminal gangs fighting over control over the black market, in exactly the same way Prohibition did in the 1920s and strict drug laws have done since the 1980s. I'd expect it to lead to further erosion of Fourth Amendment protections against search and seizure, further militarization of local police via SWAT teams, and further expansion of the squalid empire of civil forfeiture, perjured jailhouse snitch testimony, entrapment, planted evidence, and plea deal blackmail. In short, a War on Guns will take us even further in the direction of a society handed entirely over to violent criminal gangs, and the biggest gang of all: The criminal beasts of prey in uniform.