

HOW TO WIN USENET DEBATES: LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH GUN WAR

TIM STARR



As some of my readers will no doubt be aware, I've been participating in a Usenet flame-war against some British hoplophobes for a while now. What you may not be aware of is that I've been doing so as a matter of deliberate experimentation in what used to be called rhetoric and is now a.k.a. "memetics". I'd like to share some of the thinking that went into my strategy and tactics, as well as some of the lessons I've learned from my experience.

For quite some time now, I've been fascinated by the nature of Usenet as a meme-vector. A very different one from the conventional meme-vectors of books, newspapers, radio, TV, etc., in many ways, not least of which being that it's interactive. In my several years as a participant in Usenet debates, I've tried to observe their dynamics in order to master the art of winning them.

SILENCE IS VICTORY

One of the things I've noticed is that on Usenet, when your opponents don't reply to you on any given point, that means you've won. Silence may be death under a totalitarian regime, it may imply consent in the law, but on Usenet, Silence is Victory. People will rarely post just to tell you that they agree with you. Even more rarely will they post to tell you that they were wrong and you were right. That sort of admission is just too much for most people. They'll only post when they think they're

right and you're wrong. This provides an indicator of success. On Usenet, success is measured by the arguments your opponents *stop* making, not necessarily by stopping them from arguing against you at all.

Another thing I've noticed is that often you'll change people's minds about something without them even realizing it. I recently argued for term limits against someone who opposed them using all of the usual arguments. While my opponent never came out and agreed with any one thing said in favor of them, even any one post or set of posts in favor of them, after a while of simply presenting the case for term limits he came out and admitted that his mind had been changed. I've noticed myself that often when presented with a new argument for the first time I'll resist it with all my ability, drop the subject for a while, then find myself not only accepting it but arguing in its favor the next time it comes up. It seems only natural for people to try to figure out what's wrong with new ideas and only accept them once they've failed to find anything wrong with them.

VICTIM DISARMAMENT

Enough preamble. Why'd I pick a fight with a bunch of UK hoplophobes?

Part of it came from the speech L. Neil Smith gave at the 1993 Libertarian Party National Convention in Salt Lake City: "Lever Action: Accept No Substitutes". While I did go to that convention, and had the pleasure of meeting Neil, I wasn't able to go to hear his talk in person. But we listened to it on tape in the car on the drive home. I enjoyed it so much that I wished I hadn't missed hearing it first-hand.

In that speech, Neil outlined his strategy of making the enforcement of the Bill of Rights the mission of the LP, starting with uncompromising defense of the second amendment — never calling it "gun control", always calling it "victim disarmament" instead; promising to repeal or otherwise dispose of every single victim disarmament law on the books; promising to criminally prosecute every public official who votes for or so much as tries to enforce victim disarmament laws. And then:

... once we're done with ... repealing, nullifying, or otherwise disposing of every victim disarmament law in America, we'll go on to Canada, to Japan, and

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk
email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Tim Starr (timstarr@netcom.com) is the Assistant Editor of *Freedom Network News*, the newsletter of The International Society for Individual Liberty (ISIL), 1800 Market St., San Francisco, CA 94102 (ISIL Phone: (415) 864-0952; Fax: (415) 864-7506; isil@isil.org, <http://www.isil.org/>)

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

to England and take *their* victim disarmament laws away from them, because we're sick and tired of being beaten over the head with them — and because we have friends in Canada, Japan, and England who have rights.

This I especially liked, because it reaffirmed the universal character of the right to keep and bear arms. It's not just an American tradition, it's not just a matter of U.S. Constitutional law, it's a matter of natural human rights that apply to each and every non-criminal in the entire world, including those bastions of victim disarmament, Canada, Japan, and England. American hoplophobes just love to compare the USA to those few countries in the world that manage to combine low crime rates with little civilian gun ownership by mere accidents of history. Never mind the facts that there are plenty of countries with just as much victim disarmament and lots more crime, or that there are several countries with comparable amounts of gun ownership but less crime than the USA. Hoplophobes never tire of repeating that countries like the UK have less crime and less guns than anyone else. It would be great to take away their favorite statistical crutch, not to mention spreading freedom to the rest of the world in the process!

But I didn't see much opportunity to do anything about it at the time. Also, Neil had put this last in order of priority, making it seem like we'd have to wait for every last vestige of victim disarmament to be eliminated from America before moving on to other countries.

Still, I continued to read talk.politics.guns and take part in the odd flame-war every now and then. This led me to notice another annoying pattern: every once in a while, someone from some other country with lots more hoplophobia than America would do a "drive-by" post on t.p.g. to the effect of: "You silly Americans! All those guns, and all that crime — when will you ever learn what its like to be a civilized country like mine?"

This invariably led to a comprehensive refutation by those who really knew their stuff on the pro-R(ight) to K(eep and) B(ear) A(arms) side, but the drive-by poster rarely hung around long enough to so much as reply to any of it before going away. Most unsatisfying.

"OUTRAGEOUSLY EFFECTIVE"

Still, I kept trying to learn more about the RKBA so I'd be better able to argue for it. One of the things I came across in my research was the story of a TV appearance by Sean Gabb, a member¹ of the Libertarian Alliance, the umbrella libertarian organization in the UK, and editor of its journal, *Free Life*, in which he spoke out in favor of the RKBA right after the Dunblane Massacre right up near where it happened in Scotland. This seemed a bit like sticking one's head into the lion's mouth to me, which intrigued me. The fact that the subtitle to the piece described the appearance as "outrageously effective" interested me even more.² Part of his story was an explanation of his strategy and tactics:

One of the great falsehoods of modern life is that arguments are won by being "moderate" — by con-

ceding the other side's point and then haggling over the details. They are not ...

Arguments are won by being honest — by saying what you believe as clearly as possible, as often as possible, and never mind how "unconstructive" it seems in the short term. Doing so has three effects. First, it shifts the middle ground in a debate. This is valuable in a country where being moderate is so in fashion. For this middle ground is not an independent point of view, but can be pulled sharply to and fro by what is happening at the extremes. Before about 1975, for example, the public spectrum on economic policy stretched between Soviet communism and social democracy. Accordingly, the moderates were all pink socialists. Now there are libertarians demanding a total free market, the moderates have become blue social democrats. And, though important, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not entirely to blame for this — in those countries without a libertarian fringe, after all, the consensus is still decidedly pink ...

Second, it gets converts. Granted, my audience in the studio was full of glum blockheads. But there must have been dozens of people at home who were hearing what I said for the first time and who agreed with every word of it. Most of these will stay at home. Others — one or two, perhaps — will become committed libertarian activists. They will join the Libertarian Alliance. They will hand out its publications. They will write for it. They will appear in television studios, putting the libertarian case on whatever they have been called in to discuss. Moreover, even the blockheads have a function. If they can remember what I said in the studio — not hard, bearing in mind how clear I was — they will spread it by explaining to friends and relations how scandalised they were by it. Sooner or later, the message will reach someone who is not at all scandalised; and another convert will have been made. And that is how intellectual revolutions get under way.

Third, it establishes a position. Unusual ideas are generally ignored at first. Then, if they continue being put, they are laughed at. Then they must be argued with. Occasionally, they become the common sense of the next generation. That is how it was with socialism in this country. More recently, it was like that with monetarism and council house sales. I do not know if my dream of abolishing gun control will be so lucky. But, to be sure, no one will take notice of it unless someone goes to the trouble of clearly arguing for it.

This made enormous sense to me. It seemed to articulate views I held already about meme-wars, but in a much better way than I'd ever been able to.

Not long after that, a friend of mine from Scotland cross-posted an argument he'd been having with a hoplophobe from England from uk.misc over to t.p.g. He asked for us to help out by providing the facts and figures which

support the pro-RKBA case and refute victim disarmers like his opponent. Recognizing the opportunity to field-test Smith's and Gabb's advice, I jumped in and immediately began to argue for the re-legalization of the natural human right to carry guns in self-defense for all law-abiding people in the UK — *now!* (Quite a mouthful, eh? I kept trying to shorten that down while retaining the meaning I was trying to communicate, eventually settling upon “defensive gun carry”.)

That led to a flame-war which lasted months, and went through several titles such as “Armed Citizens Save Lives” and “Is Britain A Nation of Cowards?” I learned several things from this. One was that the more inflammatory the title of a thread, the more likely it was to attract people who were outraged by it but didn't necessarily know what they were talking about. This provided myself and my allies with lots of easy targets, making us look good and the opposition look bad.

THE USUAL SOPHISTRIES OF THE AMERICAN HOPLOPHOBES

In fact, one of the other things I learned was that the advantages and disadvantages of arguing against victim disarmament in another country pretty much canceled each other out. We couldn't use any of the usual constitutional arguments made in America, because there's no substantive protection for the RKBA under the British Constitution. On the other hand, Brits are so used to simply taking it for granted that private gun ownership is a quaint anachronism that really ought to be done away with outright as civilization progresses that they haven't given it much thought and aren't anywhere near as good at arguing the case for victim disarmament as the American hoplophobes are. They didn't avail themselves of any of the usual sophistries of the American hoplophobes. Not because they had higher standards of debate, but just because they didn't know any better. Gabb had experienced this in his radio debate with a leading victim-disarming Scotswoman whom he'd accused of wanting to live in a slave state. Her reply to being asked by the host of the radio show if she was really in favor of living in a slave state? “Yes, I am. I think he should go live in America!”

Can you imagine an American victim-disarmer admitting in public that they advocated making America into a slave state? Never! If this was the caliber of the opposition there, beating them would be easy!

On the other hand, Brits have one of the worst cases of national hoplophobia in the entire world, with the possible exception of Japan. So, while beating their arguments would be easy, changing their minds would be quite a challenge. A challenge I readily took on, figuring that if I could convert any British hoplophobes then I could convert *anyone!*

After a few months of cross-posting as often as I could to t.p.g. and uk.misc, the preliminary results were clear. We were successful in getting our points across and getting our opponents to give us free publicity by repeating our outrageous demands for the immediate re-legalization of

defensive gun carry to their off-line acquaintances. We succeeded in shifting the grounds of the debate, too. When we started, the Brits were saying things like: “Haven't we all learned the lessons of Dunblane?” With the clear implication being that banning private gun ownership was a foregone conclusion, the only question being whether to only ban handguns or whether to ban rifles and shotguns, too. By the time we were finished with them, they were just calling for enforcement of the existing laws and coming out against any more victim disarmament laws at all.

As for converts, well, that's hard to say. There's lots of stupid arguments for victim disarmament they no longer make, but we don't seem to have gotten anyone to admit their minds had been changed by any of our arguments to the point where they join us in supporting the immediate re-legalization of defensive gun carry. For instance, one of them accused me of holding the British people in contempt because I dared to suggest that they had been misled about victim disarmament. I countered that *he* was the one who held his fellow countrymen in contempt, because he didn't trust them to carry guns. I accused him of insulting each and every law-abiding Brit by presuming them all to be criminals, and called him a coward for being so afraid of his fellow countrymen that he didn't dare let them carry whatever guns they wanted, whenever and wherever they wanted. I let him have it, over and over again, until he'd never even think of accusing any of us of thinking ill of the British people.

I also learned what their favorite counter-measures were. First and foremost is diversion off the subject of victim disarmament to something else, like capital punishment, the relative imperial and colonial records of the UK and the USA, etc. If we didn't keep bringing things back to the subject of why defensive gun carry must be re-legalized *now*, they'd cheerfully waste all our time on irrelevant trivia. So, I decided to adopt a single-issue approach: my mission was to advocate defensive gun carry and defend it against all comers, no matter how hard they tried to steer me off course.

I hoped that my allies would follow my lead. One of my purposes throughout the entire meme-war was to educate my allies, especially those from the UK, so that they'd be more effective advocates of the RKBA in their own right. Unfortunately, few have been as successful as me in sticking to the point rather than going all over the map.

Once that thread died out, I was content to let it rest for a while so I could rest, study up a bit where I'd found my knowledge to be weak, etc. Then the concrete victim disarmament recommendations made by the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into the Dunblane Massacre came out. Once more into the breach I went! This time, though, I made a couple of changes. First off, I cross-posted to more than just t.p.g. and uk.misc. I did this because I figured we'd pretty much exhausted the prospects on uk.misc. I wanted to cast a wider net, both for allies and opponents. It worked. I got lots more allies to join in, as well as hooking lots more new fish to shoot in a barrel. However, I also made the mistake of misunderstanding the purpose of a few newsgroups. Apparently,

uk.politics.elections has little to do with election campaigns, only with whether any election laws are violated or something. And the folks over on uk.politics.constitution insist that the RKBA has nothing to do with the British constitution, although their reasoning in support of this conclusion is not very clear.

CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Another thing I learned is that statistics were nearly useless in just plain getting the point across at all, much less getting anyone to drop a bad argument. No matter how much we cited statistics on the frequency of crime or the effectiveness of defensive gun carry, our opponents kept citing the same old sophistries or simply denying that any figures from studies done in the USA could have any applicability to the UK, whether there was any good reason to think they wouldn't be applicable or not.

The only thing that worked was to give them some concrete examples. That got their attention and clarified things enough for them to get the point. Saying that defensive gun carries been proven to reduce rape by a statistically significant amount here in the USA didn't work. Saying that I know a woman who's twice been the victim of attempted rape on the streets of her own London neighborhood, and that she'd love to be able to carry a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum revolver to protect herself and her children with from any other attackers to come along — *that* worked!

In fact, playing the "rape card" has worked better than almost everything else. It plays upon the natural protectiveness most men feel towards women, as well as exemplifying the tactical advantage given to those who are usually weaker than their attackers by carrying guns. The fact that almost none of the rapists in America are armed deprived our opposition of one of their favorite arguments: that legalizing guns would just result in there being more guns in the hands of criminals. After all, if American rapists don't carry guns despite the fact that it's lots easier to get them here, why should British rapists carry guns?

We also were successful by questioning whether our opponents believed that crime victims had the right to defend themselves with lethal force, if necessary. Some of them said "No", believe it or not. One of them even went so far as to deny that women had the right to kill their rapist attackers if that was the only way they could stop the attack. He was immediately accused of being a "rape advocate" and a prime recruit for the Bosnian Serb Army. One of us put that quote from him in his .sig file. He made his entire side look bad, but he refused to admit it. He then proceeded to make up the most outrageous lies he could think of, accusing us of advocating that rapists have the right to carry guns — lies so obvious to any reader that they couldn't possibly serve his cause.

However, those who answered "Yes", affirming that crime victims do have the right to resist their attackers with lethal force, if necessary, didn't get themselves off the hook, either. They set themselves up for the question of why they didn't support the right to possess the means

of lethal resistance to criminals, thus rendering the right of lethal resistance null and void. Very few of them have been willing to answer this, preferring to change the subject to capital punishment or excessive force instead.

PEOPLE WHO KNEW HOW TO DEAL WITH TYRANTS

Perhaps the final lesson I've learned is that our opponents really hate it when they can't win using their usual arguments. They hate being cornered, stuck between being made out to be "rape advocates" or having to admit they're wrong. Perhaps more than anything else, they hate being quoted as the slavish, cowardly dopes they really are. Every time we quoted them saying something outrageous in favor of victim disarmament, or pointed out the logical implications of their positions, they immediately went into denial about it, saying that they never said any such thing and that we were quoting them out of context. They went to great lengths to re-interpret the plain meaning of their words to try to exculpate themselves.

Perhaps most indicative of this was their hatred for the quotes I put in my .sig file, one from the leader of the latest victim disarmament movement in the UK, the woman who stupidly admitted to Sean Gabb that she favored living in a slave state, and a glowing statement about how the gun on the wall of the homes of the common men of England stood for democracy from that infamous gun-nut George Orwell.³ The contrast between the leader of their movement today and the position of such a renowned critic of totalitarianism as Orwell must've been too much for them, because they went to great lengths to get me to cut out of my .sig. They claimed it was because of its length, but never said a word about any of the other equally long .sigs of anyone else in the debate. They even threatened to have my posts canceled from the news-servers, which was much more than they did to anyone else.

Evidently, they don't want to be reminded that their little island was once inhabited by people who knew what to do with tyrants who went around trying to disarm the people. I intend to make sure that there will always be plenty of reminders for them.

NOTES

1. **Editorial Note:** The Libertarian Alliance doesn't, formally speaking, have members, only subscribers. We thereby dodge arguments about how much we all agree with any "line", or with each other. All we ask is: be interested. But Sean Gabb, as an LA writer (see note 2 below for his latest LA piece) and editor, is certainly a prominent "member" of the team who between them run things.
2. Sean Gabb, *Putting the Case Against Gun Control: Reflections on an Outrageously Effective Television Performance — May 2nd 1996*, Tactical Notes No. 17, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1996.
3. "That rifle on the wall of the laborer's cottage or working class flat is the symbol of democracy. It is our job to see that it stays there!" — George Orwell, 1940, in the democratic socialist weekly *Tribune*, quoted in *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*, by Michael Shelden, Minerva Press, London, 1991.