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THE JOY OF SHOOTING: PRESERVING FREEDOMS BY MAKING REGULAR USE OF THEM



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A SENSE OF RELAXATION

I pointed the large chunk of blueish-grey metal in front of me, right hand clasped around the gun's butt and index finger close to the trigger. My left hand supported the gun. Ear defenders stifled outside noise. The target, a ringed silhouette of a man's torso, hung in front of me from a flimsy-looking frame attached to an electric-powered track moving along the ceiling.

BANG! My hand jolted with the recoil and a hot shell casing flew past my left ear, the smell of cordite almost overwhelming my senses. I felt shocked at the experience of firing my first shot. I saw a bullet hole in the top right-hand corner of the target. Oh well, I consoled myself that at least my first attempt was not a fiasco.

This was the first shot in what was my first actual experience in firing a handgun. The gun in question was a Browning 9mm automatic, one of the smaller guns favoured by handgun shooters. A delightful, well-balanced gun, in my opinion. Later, I went on to fire guns of larger calibre, such as a .44mm Smith and Wesson. Fantastic!

I returned a second time to the gun range — in Santa Clara, to be exact — and enjoyed the shooting even more, becoming more relaxed and confident of my ability with each shot. Except, that is, right at the very end when my arms began to get tired with the concentration required and my scores declined somewhat.

The strangest thing was that I have never felt so relaxed as I did after coming off the range, putting the bullet-ridden target on the shop counter and settling my bill for hire of the gun, use of bullets and other equipment. I also felt extremely safe, both as a result of the strictness of range etiquette and the fact that the sort of people who seem to like the sport take personal safety and well-being very seriously. Many also tend to work out regularly, enjoy martial arts, and, to make a Green point, take a close interest in the natural environment.

The sense of relaxation, coming from accomplishing something different from normal experience, was not in the least sinister. It wasn't as though I felt superior to other people, still less did I feel aggressive to my fellow man or woman. Some people may gibe that the target at which I was shooting involved a human silhouette, and therefore that there is something sinister or unpleasant about this. But to be honest I did not feel this way at all. In fact, I felt calmer and more relaxed than after watching a boxing bout or a violent movie where strong emotions are involved. Indeed, the obvious power of the handgun, the knowledge of what it could do, filled me with a kind of humility. (The knowledge that there are shooters a million times better than me also contributed to this.)

Indeed, I was struck by the yawning gap which exists between the actual experience of firing a Smith and Wesson .44 and watching Clint Eastwood do it in the movies. For me the experience was, as they say in California, awesome. Clint Eastwood makes it look casual, easy. To be fair, Clint is much better at demonstrating the true skills involved than most film stars. Most of them make shooting look like firing a child's water pistol.

Anyway, my sense of relaxation and enjoyment, which was remarked by a close friend at the time, was soon followed by anger, anger at the knowledge that I could not possibly take part in this venerable sport back home in the UK without facing extremely severe penalties under the criminal law. Standing in sunny California, Britain seemed an awful long way away, both physically and politically.

CREATING CONSTITUENCIES FOR FREEDOM

Since the legislation banning virtually all categories of handguns passed into law in 1997 following the Dunblane massacre of 1996, it is no longer possible for a British citizen to take part in the sport in the UK.¹ The massacre of schoolchildren in the small Scottish town sent shockwaves not just through the UK but elsewhere, and the majority of the British political and media establishment came out for a ban, with some newspapers disgracing their reputations for sound journalism by the nature of their reports.² As a result, the choice facing a British firearms owner is either to sell the guns, surrender them into the custody of the authorities, or go to the expense of practising the sport overseas, as I did in the far away west coast of the United States.

My personal experience of firing a gun, learning to master the art of handgun target shooting, learning the strict disciplines and etiquette of shooting in a range, brought home to me a crucial lesson: that if we wish to preserve our freedoms from attack, it is essential that we take advantage of those freedoms in sufficient numbers to create thereby a constituency in favour of protecting them. How do I come to this perhaps controversial conclusion?

I come to this conclusion largely for tactical reasons. (If I was living in an anarcho-capitalist environment with polycentric laws, my argument would become somewhat redundant, I think.) Nowadays politicians increasingly act not because of any over-arching ideological world-view, but in response to the shifting sands of opinion, whether are expressed in MPs' post bags, focus group findings, opinion polls or newspaper campaigns. This may be the inevitable — and welcome — consequence of the end of the Cold War, the all-too apparent intellectual and economic bankruptcy of socialism, and the realignment of politics as a result. Whatever the cause of this shift, it means that politicians have new groups to consider, consult and respond to, and will be less inclined to consider legislation and actions on some principled assessment connected to individual liberty, equality, or whatever. What is particularly clear from this form of politics is that vocal,

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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well-organised and confident groups of persons are more likely to resist interference in their activities than those which have become small and disorganised, either due to apathy or for some other reason.

Apathy and disorganisation, lack of intellectual elan and coherence — they sum up the state of the U.K. firearms lobby at the time of the post-Dunblane debate. Now admittedly, in a relatively tranquil country such as Britain, the impact of Dunblane was such that even a much larger civilian gun lobby would have encountered trouble. But I somehow feel that if a larger proportion of the British adult law-abiding public had been involved in the sport, then the politicians would have been more nervous about attacking it. Maybe this writer suffers from the cynicism that is an occupational hazard of his job, but I can't help feeling that one very simple explanation for the extinction of handgun shooting in Britain was that so few people — relatively speaking — actually practised it on a regular basis. The politicians, as a result, had an easy target. There were not enough votes in standing up for the right to own and use handguns for sport, let alone in self-defence against initiated force.

In the US, by contrast, the handgun lobby, though not necessarily a majority of the adult populace, is sufficiently big to make an impact, both on the consciousness of the public as a whole and on the minds of American senators and congressmen. Americans take advantage of their freedom to pursue the sport. The libertarian gun-lobby, exploiting the resources of the Internet with great vigour, was recently able to mobilise opposition to a gun-control measure in Washington State last year, despite the fact that the gun-control lobby had the likes of Bill Gates on their side.³ And the moral for libertarians here is that if there is a pastime you care passionately about and do not want to see extinguished from your life by a nanny-state politician, then go out and do it!

REMOVING THE ABILITY TO DEFEND ONESELF

Simply by having a lot of people involved in an activity creates fear in the mind of any politician who may be contemplating banning it. Consider the case of hunting with hounds. Now, I am sure there are libertarians, not just vegetarians, who may thoroughly disapprove of this activity and never wish to take part in it. (I am not a vegetarian although I can't say I have ever felt a burning desire to follow a hunt, let alone ride a horse with a red jacket on). But the foxhunting lobby, although allegedly outnumbered among the general voting populace, is big enough to make a considerable stink in the debate about the issue, so big in fact that Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair may have cause to squash anti-hunting legislation during the current parliament out of fear of alienating opinion in the countryside.

Some activities and pastimes pass into disuse as fashions change, mores and taboos alter, and so forth. Cigarette smoking, although still indulged in by millions here in Britain, is no longer a majority adult activity. Consumption of certain food-stuffs, such as red meat, may also go into significant decline due to dietary fads, medical scares and campaigns, and so on. And so long as the right of adults to engage in any consensual activity is not violated, no libertarian can complain if particular activities fade away. (Spitting and snuff-taking are both virtually non-existent today.)

But there are certain activities that have a bearing on our status as free, sovereign persons that need to be widely practised, or else fall into disuse with disastrous consequences. The ban on handguns, possibly followed by a ban on all kinds of other weapons, falls into this category, since removing the ability to defend oneself in an increasingly lawless and crime-ridden world constitutes a threat to one's own sovereign rights. Also, freedom of speech needs to be regularly exercised by people of

every viewpoint or else atrophy through disuse. The right to own private property in some form or other is something most people in the West and other parts of the globe — I hope — take for granted. But again, if people become increasingly tolerant of State violations of their property rights, then politicians may lose that fear of outlawing certain rights altogether.

Other practices, which may not fall into the category of those which can directly protect liberty, such as self-defence, but which are a manifestation of human diversity and tolerance and which make one value liberty, are rather like those racy sexual experiences in Amsterdam catalogued in steamy detail by Danny Frederick in several Libertarian Alliance pamphlets.⁴ This kind of sexual freedom is similar to handgun shooting inasmuch as there is clearly opposition from "respectable" society, and a constant awareness by those who enjoy it that such practises are under threat. Danny Frederick is struck by the contrast he sees between liberal-minded Holland and stuffy old Britain, as I am struck by the contrast between the gun rights of California and the zero-rights of the UK. Would the Amsterdam sex experience last long if suddenly people became ashamed or embarrassed about engaging in it, as some may have become embarrassed or ashamed of shooting over the years? I cannot be sure, but my hunch is that more authoritarian Dutch politicians would seize on a decline in the sex industry to push through restrictive laws. Keep visiting the place, Danny.

NEW FRIENDS, ALLIES AND CONVERTS

There is another, tactical point I would draw from my experience in a gun range, and in mixing with those interested in self-defence activities. Many, even without consciously realising it, are libertarians. The simple activity of learning how to defend oneself and acquire a skill in the process forces one to think about the proper relations between oneself and others, and oneself and the State. If a person thinks that it is okay to ward off an attack and is not resigned to becoming a crime statistic, then the chances are that such a person will be amenable to libertarian views on broader issues of personal responsibility, freedom and respect for others.

It may follow, therefore, that libertarians can find new friends, allies and converts in such fields. For example, in the martial arts, there may be practitioners who fear that at some point the government may try to outlaw or heavily restrict their pastimes in response to some moral panic. Libertarians can make allies among such people and spread general ideas at the same time. What is also clear is that the right to self-defence needs to be more widely proclaimed, so that others don't suffer the same fate as the gun lobby.⁵

NOTES

1. An excellent recent overview of the Dunblane massacre and the subsequent uproar, media campaigns and behaviour of politicians of all parties is contained in David Botsford's *Fear of Violence and the Current British Anti-Gun Hysteria: Blaming Objects Instead of Criminals For Crime*, Political Notes No. 132, Libertarian Alliance, 1996.
2. See Botsford, above.
3. Sorry, but I cannot identify the specific Proposition number proposed in Washington State last year to control guns. The proposed law was voted down in the autumn, as I recall, in November.
4. Danny Frederick, *Amsterdam Revisited*, Personal Perspectives No. 9, Libertarian Alliance, 1996. See also *A Weekend in Amsterdam: One Libertarian's Experience of Freedom*, Personal Perspectives No 5, Libertarian Alliance, 1992.
5. LA. author and editor of the Libertarian Alliance journal *Free Life*, Sean Gabb, has written of the frustrations in defending the right to possess firearms and the often ineffectual behaviour of the gun lobby at the time of the Dunblane debate. In a more positive vein, see his *Putting the Case Against Gun Control: Reflections on an Outrageously Effective Television Performance* — May 2nd 1996, Tactical Notes No. 17, Libertarian Alliance, 1996.