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THE GLOBAL GUN CULTURE

Small arms are the real global “weapons of mass destruction”. While attention is focused on the risks of potential nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, small arms are the main weapons of daily destruction. Small arms and light weapons (SALW) were responsible for about half a million deaths in 2003 and by 2020 the number of deaths and injuries as a result of SALW violence will overtake the number of deaths caused by killer diseases such as malaria . Every year, SALW kill more people than were killed in 1945 at both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are about 640 million firearms in the world . The weapons are popular because: they are cheap, they require no training and so just about anyone can use them, they are lightweight and so can be carried by virtually anyone, they are easy to conceal and smuggle, and they have a long” life” with some weapons from the two World Wars still in use today . Work is continuing at the United Nations to limit the availability of SALW but progress is only very slow. The global gun culture will be around for many years to come.

This article is in three parts. The first part looks at the global situation, especially attempts to limit the availability of guns. Given the only slow progress at the international level, the main strategy has to be at the national level. The other two parts of the article provide contrasting case studies of two countries that are often seen as in agreement on most issues: the United States and Australia. The US is seen as a country with an easy availability of guns, while Australia in the last decade or so has become an international benchmark for limiting the availability of guns. The article concludes with a plea for more research as a way of trying to throw more light on the contrasting viewpoints.



The Global Situation

Disarmament has been one of the UN’s main areas of work since its creation in 1945. But for most of its history, SALW have not been on the agenda. The focus was on nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Some progress has been made in all three areas. SALW seemed off-limits. Nuclear weapons seemed the most obvious target for effort given their capacity for mass destruction. SALW meanwhile were seen as more of a “domestic” matter and so largely outside the UN’s remit. Although mentions of SALW conjure up thoughts of international conflict, many who die via SALW are not in combat situation, such as domestic violence and other crimes of violence or suicide. It is not heavy weaponry and sophisticated devices that kill most people – but cheap, easy-to-get small arms that have flooded the world in recent decades. Many developed countries, otherwise seen as at “peace”, may have guns as a cause of death: “The costs

among vulnerable populations are particularly high in both industrialized and developing contexts. Women are seldom users of firearms but are often victims, both in the context of war and in domestic violence. In many developed countries, firearms are a leading cause of mortality among children and youth and these groups represent a large percentage of the victims of conflict, both as combatants and casualties.”

Additionally the international regulation of the arms trade was seen as a lost cause. The post-World War I revulsion against the violence led to a reaction against the “merchants of death” but public opinion was never successfully converted into public policy. The young UN had no appetite to go back over the failed work of the Inter-War international community. Besides, as noted, nuclear weapons loomed as a larger potential risk. Governments that made money from the sale of weapons (including the permanent members of the UN Security Council) naturally had no desire to see the UN try to restrict their business.

Meanwhile political activists were divided over the issue. Some (particularly with sympathy for the pacifist outlook) were opposed to all weapons in all circumstances. But others argued that weapons should be supplied to assist in particular campaigns, such as the need to assist African national liberation movements against the then minority white racist regimes. Additionally the governmental perception of the importance of getting rid of nuclear weapons was also shared by the general public. The UK Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) for example, failed to get the membership size and impact of (for example) the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

Despite the bleak chances of success, some countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continued to campaign on this issue. The campaign acquired momentum in the 1990s. The Cold War was over, some nuclear weapons were being scrapped and the rapid expansion of various “peacekeeping operations” had seen troops from around the world being killed by weapons from around the world. Additionally the international campaign against land mines had been successful and showed how even “lost” causes can in fact be won. Additionally improvements in information and communications technology (ICT), such as the growing use of the Internet and e-mail, enabled information and opinions to be mobilized across national frontiers. In October 1998 the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) was formed.

The first major international conference on this subject took place in July 2001 at the UN in New York. The conference created a Programme of Action aiming at preventing illicit trafficking, as well as the excessive accumulation of SALW, and the creation of public awareness and political will in support of these objectives. The conference agreed on a non-legally binding Programme of Action.

Progress since 2001 has been slow. The UN has not been attempting a global ban on gun ownership by civilians and each country is sovereign and has its own laws governing gun ownership. But gun NGOs and the US Bush Administration opposed the UN’s work. The follow up conferences have a long way to go . There will evidently be no major breakthrough as was

achieved with the landmines treaty. Meanwhile, it is interesting to see how two – normally very allied countries – have dealt with their own respective gun cultures: the United States and Australia .

✓ The United States

“My guns are the best peacemakers”. This was the claim of Samuel Colt. He was the Bill Gates of his day: a revolutionary in business who created new ways of manufacturing items. Prior to him, guns were loaded with one bullet at a time. They were cumbersome, inaccurate and often unreliable. Colt helped make guns a household commodity in the United States. There are now almost as many guns in the US as there are people.

Samuel Colt died in 1862, aged 47, of natural causes brought on by the stress and exhaustion of his work. He was the US’s richest inventor at the time of his death.

He had a national and international impact. Gunshots are the second most common cause of death for Americans aged between 10 and 24 and the leading cause of death for young Blacks. Every year about 20,000 Americans are killed by guns (by contrast 3,000 people were killed by Osama bin Laden’s team on September 11 2001).

Samuel Colt deserves his legendary status, not least for his contribution to manufacturing. He invented a system of mass manufacturing. He helped make the Hartford River Valley the “Silicon Valley” of the 19th Century. He had a system for the mass production of guns as complex metal instruments, which could later be used as a format for producing other metal instruments, such as typewriters, sewing machines and still later cars and cameras. Hartford Valley was the centre of the American industrial revolution. His mass production ideas were an inspiration to people like Henry Ford.

He was a pioneer of the current “quality” revolution, with the emphasis on making products that work well. His guns were to be used in life and death situations. Customers needed to know that they could rely on Colt guns. He estimated that 80 per cent of his manufacturing costs went on equipment and 20 per cent on labour. Colt guns rarely failed their owners.

Additionally, he was a pioneer in American marketing and self-promotion. He called himself “Colonel” Colt but had never done any military service. He made a donation to a political party and this rank was his reward. He made the maximum use of his “rank”. He knew how to develop close links with journalists so that they would write favourable stories about his guns. Editors were sent free guns as gifts if they published stories about him he liked. He linked his name with his product to give his product added celebrity status. Other companies made guns but there was something special about

a Colt. When people thought of “guns”, they thought “Colt”. In sum, the real impact of Colt was not so much on the creation of revolvers themselves as the model he provided for manufacturing, marketing and sales.

Despite its violent image, the US has not always been a country with a gun culture. Prior to Samuel Colt, gun ownership was not widespread. Until about 1850, fewer than 10 per cent of American citizens had guns. Even in the Wild West in the 19th Century, many towns had strict gun controls, which meant that weapons had to be left at the city limits – and this gave them a very low murder rate. The change begins at the end of the 19th Century. The mass production of guns brought down the unit cost and so guns became far more affordable.

Government attempts to limit the availability of guns usually run up against a phrase in the US Constitution adopted in 1789: “A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed”.

The phrase has kept lawyers busy. There have been many political attempts to limit the availability of guns and many court challenges to those attempts.

There are now over 20,000 US national, state and local gun laws. Many of them are unenforceable because of the number involved and their complexity. There is a great deal of variation between different localities, with some states trying to make it harder than others to acquire guns. Ironically the wording in 1789 received little debate. The politicians agreed to the phrase without any dissenting vote. The US was a new political entity.

It had thrown off British control by 1783 in the War of Independence. The original 13 colonies were now joined by the Articles of Confederation in a very loose association, with hardly any federal power. There were border disputes between them and even an attempted rebellion. It was agreed that there was a need for a strong central government.

In 1787 representatives of the new states came together in Philadelphia to produce a stronger constitution. The 1787 document remains one of the most important documents in world history and a model for other countries. The original 13 colonies had rebelled against a British dictator (King George III) and now the new country had a dilemma. On the one hand, the new country had to have a strong central government to maintain order between the states. On the other hand, the Americans did not want to create a new dictatorial central government.

The inventive way out of the dilemma was a Bill of Rights to be incorporated into the US Constitution to guarantee the rights of the individual against the government. The Bill of Rights was sent out to the states to ratify. On December 15 1791, the legislature in Virginia ratified the document, thereby gaining sufficient state votes for the document to be incorporated into the US Constitution. No one at the time predicted just how controversial this amendment – the Second Amendment – would become. It seemed a sensible idea at the time.

The 1789 wording partly reflects the era which created it. People recognized that the US was a violent place. The US was a new country and there was a risk of foreign invasion by the European colonial powers (such as the Spanish and French in the south and west, and the British in the north). The US went on to have a war with Britain in 1812 (in which the British invaded Washington DC and burnt the president's residence). Meanwhile within the US, there were still many conflicts with the Indians to come. There was also a need for white slave owners to have guns to put down slave rebellions.

However, by the late 19th century, the US was becoming more settled and civilized. The Old West was becoming more a matter for entertainment (such as the Buffalo Bill shows) rather than a reality. The US was also aware that its reputation for violence (such as lynching and the Ku Klux Klan) was eroding its image overseas. In the 1930s there were federal attempts to limit some types of guns (such as machine guns) because of the rise of gangster violence. After each major assassination in the 20th century there were further attempts at gun control (such as the 1964 law following the November 1963 President Kennedy assassination).

Despite all these efforts, the US is still the most significant country in the developed western world where it is possible to obtain guns of all sorts easily. Gun control remains a controversial political issue and most politicians running for office are opposed to restrictions on the Second Amendment.

Gun control advocates are up against major lobbying organizations. The National Rifle Association (NRA) has beaten (or at least watered down) every gun control project in Congress in recent decades. The NRA was founded in 1872 by two Union soldiers as a rifle club for army sharpshooters and it had close links with preparing people for military service. It had little to do with politics or formulating policy. Its work expanded after World War II to include training courses for hunters, teaching classes in gun safety and assisting with the US Olympic teams. It retained its apolitical culture.

The NRA changed in the 1970s when it saw its role as far more political. NGOs were changing the nature of the political process in developed countries and the NRA decided that it would need to be the lobbyist for gun owners. It endorsed its first presidential candidate (Ronald Reagan) in 1980. It acquired a far higher political profile. It is now the most influential NGO in the US. Most recent US presidents (except Bill Clinton) have been members of the NRA or at least sympathetic to it.

There is currently no Democrat appetite at the national political level to have a renewed campaign for gun control. Democrats decided not to alienate blue collar workers in the 2008 November elections with gun control matters. These people had been traditional Democrat voters in the Roosevelt era. But over recent decades they had been courted in the "culture wars" by Republicans who knew how to attract their support with "God, gays and guns".

They focussed on issues such as endorsing family values, opposing gay law reform and endorsing the right to own guns. They portrayed the Democrats as rich, elitist, city-based dwellers who no longer had much connection with mainstream Main Street America.

Meanwhile, gun control advocates have largely given up on the political process, such as by now trying to sue gun shop owners for selling guns later used in violent crimes. They see the politicians as too influenced by the gun lobby. Like the anti-smoking movement, they have decided to work through the legal system and the courts, in the hope that they are less influenced by the gun lobby. I sometimes feel that it is now easier to buy a gun in the US than a packet of cigarettes – there are certainly fewer restrictions on carrying guns than smoking in public places!

Americans seem reluctant now to address the issue of access. Following each massacre there is the soul-searching about violent media, broken families, failed romances, economic hardships, and disturbed teenagers. But these factors are found in other developed countries. For example, many male teenagers have violent tendencies. The difference in the US is that they can also get access to guns.

✓ Australia

The Australian tourist industry benefits from America's violent image. Many Japanese would love to visit the US but they go to Australia because they are worried about the high level of American violence.

Guns now kill about 350 Australians per year (out of 22 million people). While the shoot-outs make the media headlines, most gun deaths occur through young men committing suicide or as the result of domestic violence. Guns in homes are a major factor in determining whether an assault will become a fatality. Guns are also the quickest way to turn intolerance into death. There is also the militarisation of Australia's illegal drug trade.

Guns have had far less economic impact in Australia. Australia has not had an equivalent of Samuel Colt. The SALW manufacturing sector is now very small (it was much larger when arming Australia for war). Of course, the country's Indigenous Peoples would argue that white Australia has always had a gun culture and that the Europeans got control over the continent two centuries ago because they had guns and Indigenous Peoples did not.

As in the US, there has been soul-searching following massacres. A National Committee on Violence (to which I gave evidence) was formed following two (unrelated) massacres in Melbourne in 1987, in which two lone gunmen killed a total of 15 people. The recommendations were largely ignored: as in the US, gun control is a politically risky topic. The politicians run for cover at the first sound of gunfire.

The most controversial developments have occurred around the Port Arthur massacre in June 1996, when Martin Bryant, a lone gunman, killed 35 people at a Tasmanian tourist attraction. This forced politicians to pay more attention to restricting access to guns. The then Prime Minister John Howard was forced by public and media outrage to restrict access to guns. He introduced a world first: a national taxation levy to buy back guns from owners and there was encouragement to people to surrender unregistered ones with no questions asked. Over 640,000 weapons were handed in.

✓ Need for Research

The 1996 Australian gun buy-back scheme has generated much controversy over its effectiveness. Certainly fewer Australians are dying each year via guns. But Sydney-based researchers Dr Jeanine Baker and Dr Sandra McPedran (both gun owners coincidentally) claimed that the decline was due to other factors, such as improved methods of detecting a potentially suicidal person. Alternatively gun-related murder is only about 50 per year and so guns are not a major Australian form of killing, thereby suggesting that the criminal use of guns is not as dramatic as suggested by the “law and order” obsessed mass media.

It is interesting that, given the impact guns have had on so many countries, there has been so little research done into their use and impact. There is now a growing recognition that guns are a major public health problem and so perhaps we should hope that more research will be done into them.

Keith Suter

NOTES

1. “Small Arms Pose Big Threats”, *New Routes* (Stockholm), 3/2005, p 13.
2. “Small Arms and Light Weapons: The Tools Used to Violate Human Rights”, *Disarmament Forum* (Geneva), 3/2004, p 38
3. Michael Renner “An Epidemic of Guns”, *World Watch* (Washington DC), July 1998, pp 24-25
4. Wendy Cukier, Antoine Chapdelaine and Cindy Collins “Globalization and Small Firearms: A Public Health Perspective”, *Development* (Rome), December 1999, p 40
5. Harold Wilson’s British Labour Governments (1964-70) had two novelties: the creation of both a minister for disarmament and a department to encourage the export of British weapons. The Prime Minister saw no

contradiction in this development – he told me that Britain would continue to sell weapons until the world agreed on disarmament. He was simply keeping all his options open.

6. The landmines campaign was one of the best post-World War II examples of mobilizing public opinion. One of the most inspiring days of my life was when (as chair of the Australian Red Cross (NSW) International Law Committee) I chaired a packed Sydney public meeting to hear from two young victims of landmines from Africa and Asia. One of them was made internationally famous by being photographed with Diana the Princess of Wales one single photograph that went around the world.
7. See: Keith Krause “Multilateral Diplomacy, Norm Building and UN Conferences: The Case of Small Arms and Light Weapons”, Global Governance (New York), April 2002, pp 247-263
8. See: Amnesty International, IANSA, Oxfam International Towards an Arms Trade Treaty: Next Steps for the UN Programme of Action, June 2005 (available on online at www.controlarms.org)
9. One of the few areas in which former minister Prime Minister John Howard and outgoing President Bush disagreed was over gun control. Australian diplomats were surprised by Mr Howard’s depth of feeling on the matter.
10. See; Joe Bageant Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America’s Class War, Melbourne: Scribe, 2007
11. “Guns Buyback Has No Effect on Murder Rate”, The Sydney Morning Herald, October 24 2006, p 3
12. Don Weatherburn “Study No Excuse to Shoot Down the Law”, The Sydney Morning Herald, October 26 2006, p 9