

Guns, Legislation, Security and Solutions

By: John M. Del Vecchio

I am from Newtown.

I am a Viet Nam Vet.

My degree is in psychology; I have been a journalist, a race relations specialist, and a historical novelist.

I am a small businessman. I've worked construction, and in both residential and commercial real estate finance.

I am a husband, a father, a grandfather.

I am an American.

I am a patriot.

Self-images are complex, and balancing one's identity in the face of tragedy is challenging. This is as true for nations as it is for individuals.

The contentious issue raging in our country over gun rights is not close to being over. It divides not just political parties, but families, friends, colleagues, and our own thoughts. The matter is urgent; the ramifications of our actions may last for centuries.

The Most Urgent Question

What can we do, and what should we do, to ensure the security of our children? Not just our children... all citizens. What comprehensive legislation might be passed to increase security; what program initiated? Will new laws, programs or initiatives make Americans more, or less, secure? What complications, what unintended consequences, might these enactments produce?

Fallacious statements and falsification of argument fly from all sides. Calls for complete confiscation, and replies of "From my cold dead hands," are no more productive than other knee-jerk reactions from left or right self-serving pundits and politicians.

I do not know where this debate may take us, but for me, I stand on the side of life, on the side of security for our children, our homes, ourselves and our futures. We likely agree upon these ideals; we may not agree on the ways and means which will best achieve them.

Tragedy in Our Town

I live two miles from Sandy Hook Elementary. On December 14, 2012, like everyone in Newtown and so many nationwide, I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest and stomped. Twenty-year-old Adam Lanza had returned to his elementary school. According to a recent release from the state police, he took revenge for bullying he allegedly endured within those walls more than a decade earlier; took wicked, vile revenge upon twenty beautiful, innocent first graders plus six adults before killing himself. Again, according to official releases,

this disturbed individual had planned and practiced his assault for months, perhaps for over a year, shooting quickly with his computer controller at monsters on video screens, and with an air pistol at images in his mind as they huddled in fear against his basement wall. The results for the families, the town, the state and the nation were devastating agony, gut-wrenching sorrow, and mind-numbing despair. How? How could this happen? How... in Newtown? Quiet Newtown?

What can we do, and what should we do, to ensure this never happens again? To ensure that the deaths from gun violence are minimized? Will banning guns, ammo or the size of magazines help; or will these acts be counter-productive? Have other nations attempted any of the various proposed policies? If so, what conclusions may we draw from their experiences? Banning and restricting by nature are negative acts. Are there more positive and effective ways to approach the problem?

On War and Arms

I am a Viet Nam veteran. I spent much of 1970 and 1971 with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). Our role was to provide security for the civilian population in the densely inhabited lowlands by engaging a heavily armed, infiltrating force in the uninhabited mountainous jungles below the DMZ and along the Laotian border. For me, the murders in Newtown evoked thoughts of the war, of terror and genocide, of the massacre at My Lai, of innocents butchered beyond our minds' ability to comprehend. It evoked news coverage and historical records of these events.

For more than a quarter century I studied the war, and analyzed the political, social and military causes and effects of terror, massacres and genocide. A Viet Nam Era poster reads—WHAT IF THEY GAVE A WAR AND NO ONE SHOWED UP? Alter the question: What if they gave a war and only one side showed up? That happens. In war, one side showing up is a prescription for disaster. The holocaust in Cambodian—far worse than the war—is an example. Contributing, perhaps dominating, factors in the tragedies included a skewed information environment, distorted public beliefs, and counter-productive political actions.

I mentioned My Lai. It was an American war crime: no excuse, no justification. However, this atrocity was used by “anti-war” elements to paint the American war effort as evil, and all American troops as baby-killers—a blanket indictment which was false, offensive and absurd. Media coverage of that incident masked enemy atrocities a thousand times worse.

Some media coverage today seems to wish to portray all legal gun owners as potential Adam Lanzas. Is there truth or rationale to these charges, or do they mask more serious concerns? Is there a correlation between the degree of legal gun ownership and violent crime? Do *more guns mean more death, and fewer guns mean fewer deaths*? We'll delve into that below. Allow me to back up.

Little known facts about Viet Nam may be exemplary. In January of 1959 the Politburo of the Communist Party of The Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (North Viet Nam), in secret session, declared war on the South. During that month-long meeting three logistic routes from the North into the South were authorized. These were known as 559, 759, and 959 for the month

and year of their inception. Trail 959 went west from Hanoi into Laos, then south into Cambodia; 759 was a series of sea lanes and landing areas, including the circumnavigation of the Ca Mau peninsula to land men and materiel at the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville; and 559 became the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The first waves of communist fighters were political terrorists. By 1960 they were assassinating between 50 and 100 South Viet Nameese hamlet, district or province officials, including school teachers, each month. The terror grew to 100 assassinations and approximately 800 kidnappings per month by 1962. Terrorists terrorize! That was the stated policy of the communist 'Elimination Of Tyrants' campaign. The 1962 numbers would be the equivalent of terrorists killing or kidnapping 250,000 people in 2013 American. 250,000! This was before the war "heated up."

At this time South Viet Nameese civilians were essentially unarmed, and were dependent upon nascent military forces (regional, provisional and national) for their security. (US forces were minimal—900 in 1960, 12,000 at the end of 1962). Over the next six years of increasing communist infiltration and matching US escalation, the civilian population remained largely vulnerable to terror attacks. Then, in the wake of Hanoi's 1968 Tet Offensive, the weaponry of Southern military forces was upgraded and their older arms were passed down to a growing People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF). The PSDF consisted of those too old or too young or too disabled to serve in regular military units. This was the home guard, a militia at hamlet-level without mobility or the capacity to conduct offensive operations, but capable of home/hamlet defense. The civilian population, now with approximately 400,000 WW II rifles and carbines, was finally armed.

Over the next three years, while US forces were reduced by 58%, communist terror attacks (assassinations, abductions and bombings) on villages and hamlets dropped 30%, small-unit attacks dropped 41%, and battalion-size attacks dropped 98%! At the same time, rice production increased by nearly 10%, war related civilian injuries dropped 55%, and enemy defections increased to the highest levels of the war. The South Viet Nameese citizenry had become an effective force in protecting themselves and their property from an organized terror campaign.

Could it possibly be relevant to the gun control issue facing America today? Errors and abuses were made in the pursuit of freedom in Southeast Asia. By 1968 America was no longer focused on the pursuit and defense of freedom, but only on the errors and abuses. Recall My Lai: from 1969 to 1972, 473 nightly TV news stories focused on that incident, yet not a single story was aired about the 6000 communist assassinations of government personnel in 1970 alone.

Although many errors and abuses were addressed; although all American ground forces were withdrawn by early-1972; although the armed southern population was carrying the bulk of their own local defense; America's focus remained on "the American atrocity." This political momentum lead to the abandonment of the people of Southeast Asia as can be inferred by economic support. The US budget for Southeast Asia, adjusted for inflation, fell over 95% from 1969 to 1974. Weapons and ammo in the South became relatively scarce. In comparison, the final communist offensive which toppled the Saigon government employed 500 Soviet tanks, 400 long-range artillery pieces and over 18,000 military trucks moving an army of 400,000

troops. This offensive was supported by a 400% increase in aid and materiel by China and the Soviet Union.

U.S. abandonment of the South Viet Nameese people, and their resulting lack of weapons and ammunition, lead directly to 70,000 executions in the first 90 days of communist control of the South; to the deaths of millions in Cambodia, to a million Boat People fleeing South Viet Nam with many of those dying at sea; to more than a million being incarcerated in gulag re-education camps; and to the communist ethnic cleansing of Laos.

Was Southeast Asia an isolated case? Did skewing of the story distort public beliefs and enable millions of deaths? And does an unarmed civilian population increase atrocity and murder?

More Guns, More Deaths...

The deterrence of crime created by a legally armed citizenry is difficult to measure. We can, however, extrapolate from other societies which have been fully or partially disarmed; and we can project the ramifications of various actions.

In the study, Would Banning Firearms Reduce Murder and Suicide? A Review of International And Some Domestic Evidence, by Don B. Kates and Gary Mauser, which appeared in *The Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* (Vol. 30; Jan 2007) the authors explored the maxim, "more guns mean more deaths and... fewer guns, therefore, mean fewer deaths." This paper is a review of dozens of studies which compare gun ownership to murder and suicide rates in a score of European countries, the U.S. and Canada. Some of these nations have a long history of banning guns, others a shorter history, and some varying degrees of legal ownership. The authors found (all emphasis is mine):

That the "endlessly repeated" assertions that "...guns are uniquely available in the United States... (and) the United States has by far the highest murder rate..." to be false.

If the U.S. does not have "by far the highest murder rate," how did this assertion become part of our common national narrative? The authors noted a Cold War disinformation campaign begun in 1965 "and possibly earlier" which spread "...the false assertion that the United States has the industrialized world's highest murder rate..." The motivation seems to have been to disguise murder rates within the USSR.

Since well before ('65), the Soviet Union possessed extremely stringent gun controls that were effectuated by a police state apparatus providing stringent enforcement. So successful was that regime that few Russian civilians now (2007) have firearms and very few murders involve them. Yet, manifest success in keeping its people disarmed did not prevent the Soviet Union from having far and away the highest murder rate in the developed world. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the gun-less Soviet Union's murder rates paralleled or generally exceeded those of gun-ridden America. While American rates stabilized and then steeply declined... Russian murder increased so drastically that by the early 1990s the Russian rate was three times higher than that of the United States. Between 1998-2004... the Russian murder rates were nearly four times higher than American rates. Similar

murder rates also characterize the Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania... (these) homicide results suggest that where guns are scarce other weapons are substituted in killings.

More points from the review: Gun ownership in America, Norway, Finland, Germany, France and Denmark, is high. "These countries, however, have murder rates as low or lower than many developed nations in which gun ownership is much rarer."

The authors examined hundreds of studies by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and found neither organization able to "...identify any gun control that had reduced violent crime, suicide, or gun accidents."

Perhaps the best data for projecting results of programs comes from England.

Handguns are banned but the Kingdom has millions of illegal firearms. Criminals have no trouble finding them and (have) exhibit(ed) a new willingness to use them... In the decade after 1957 (first ban), the use of guns in serious crime increased a hundredfold... In the late 1990s, England moved from stringent controls to a complete ban of all handguns and many types of long guns. Hundreds of thousands of guns were confiscated from those owners law-abiding enough to turn them in to authorities. ...by the year 2000 violent crime had so increased that England and Wales had Europe's highest violent crime rate, far surpassing even the United States.

Contrast the above with their finding: "...despite constant and substantially increasing gun ownership, the United States saw progressive and dramatic reductions in criminal violence in the 1990s."

In other publications we find anecdotal indications that in England, prior to gun confiscation, approximately 80% of all home robberies occurred while residents were absent. That figure is similar to current estimate in the U.S. After the English confiscation the figure there flipped. Today, nearly 80% of home robberies in England occur with the unarmed—and essentially defenseless—residents present.

Forty of America's 50 states allow qualified citizens to carry concealed handguns, and some 3.5 million do. In one paper reviewed by Kates and Mauser, economists John Lott and David Mustard "conclude that adoption of (concealed handgun permits) has deterred criminals from confrontation crime, and caused murder and violent crime to fall faster in states that adopted this policy..." They further expressed that "... the burden of proof rests on the proponents of the more guns equal more death..." argument "... especially since they argue public policy ought to be based on that mantra."

In another study, Less Guns, More Violence: Evidence from Disarmament in Uganda by Laura Ralston of MIT, *Job Market Paper, Nov 2012*, the author's motivation was "to understand how guns influence violent conflict and to understand the effectiveness of... (the) disarmament campaign in (a) highly volatile region..." What she discovered was that "within Uganda the deterrent effect of guns outweighs their impact as a tool of aggression."

If the national or ambient cultural story is skewed from reality will proposed legislation based upon that bias be counter-productive? As with Viet Nam, will a skewed information environment lead to horrific, unintended consequences?

The “Bad Boy” Syndrome: Trust, Story, Self-Image, Behavior

An ancient Greek adage, *Ethos anthropou daimon*, translates as a man’s story is his fate. The story we tell ourselves of our selves builds our self-image. Behavior tends to be consistent with self-image. Story controls behavior. This is true of individuals and of nations.

If asked, “Who are you?” you may answer with your name, but if the question is pursued you’ll explain that you are a reader or a runner, a businessman or a patriot. Each of these identities is built upon a self-image; and behavior tends to be consistent with those images. Runners run. Readers read. Self-image and behavior are complex—more so when we consider cultural or national self-image, and macro behavior, yet in simplified form we can use the formula—internalized story creates self-image; behavior is consistent with self-image; story controls behavior. This is why a skewed information environment is detrimental to rational personal or policy decisions.

Who or what creates the story we internalize as individuals or as a nation? Tyrants and politicians put great emphasis on this—be it Mao’s ‘new communist man,’ Pol Pot’s purposeful campaign to destroy all cultural memory and return to ‘Year Zero,’ or a American spin doctors manipulating our knowledge of gun ownership.

Proposed gun control legislation sends overt and subtle messages. These statutes tell us who we are, what we are like. When authority does not trust legal citizens, what story is being projected? What self-images are being formed, challenged or altered? This should be criteria of review for all mandates, policies and programs. The less authority trusts citizens, and restricting legal citizens of rights is a form of distrust, the more those citizens will believe they are untrustworthy, and the more their behavior will match the new self-image. The action produces a “bad boy” syndrome similar to a continuously scolded child who internalizes the self-image of being bad and endlessly acts out. Thus, restricting gun ownership, apart from the constitutional dilemma, is counter-productive.

Is there a more positive way to approach the problem of gun violence and killings?

Solutions To Lessen Gun Deaths and To Make Our Children and Our Society More Secure

Go after illegal guns. This should be obvious yet reports from major cities lead us to believe this is not always the case. Most gun violence is committed by weapons in the hands of organized crime, drug cartels or street gangs. More children die in Chicago every two weeks from thugs with illegal weapons than died in the Newtown massacre. Laws do not need to be enacted, they exist. Begin aggressive campaigns, exert maximum law enforcement efforts, and remove illegal guns. Not removing this threat increase everyone’s vulnerability. Disarming the legal and responsible citizenry of a nation enables criminal and violent elements.

People are afraid of guns. The fear is broad and deep. Some people become tense and upset just seeing a weapon. This fear must be addressed. It makes little difference that guns are inanimate objects, or that less lethal weapons are used in the commission of most murders. It is this fear which motivates many sincere supporters of 'gun control.' Their ideals and desires are not misguided, but their knowledge and experience base with firearms is lacking. This imbalance is exacerbated by media and political slant. The resulting internalization and self-image cause unreasonable actions.

Reconsider politically correct mental health initiatives. Society is vulnerable to the criminally insane. David Kopel opined in the Wall Street Journal only days after the tragedy here, "People who are serious about preventing the next Newtown should embrace much greater funding for mental health, strong laws for civil commitment of the violently mentally ill—and stop kidding themselves that pretend gun-free zones will stop killers."

Expand licensing classes. Every sane and legal citizen should be eligible to own and carry a firearm—pistol or long gun. Every gun owner should be fully trained in the discipline and art of owning, caring for, and handling a weapon. I recently took Connecticut's prescribed pistol permit class, and found the course to be inadequate. It does not train one how to shoot, and teaches only the rudiments of how to handle the responsibility of a powerful weapon. Training should include enough practice so owners are at least minimal proficiency in handling their weapon. You would not expect a 16-year old to drive a powerful sports car or a duel-wheeled pick-up with half a day of classroom instruction and 5 minutes of practice! Offering firearms training in high school, a la driver's education, might also alleviate irrational fears.

Conclusion

An evil man walks into a school and murders 26 innocent people. Two men bomb a public event killing three and wounding 200. As a nation we are overcome with shattering pain and horror. We want to do something. Our ambient cultural story contains the mantra: More guns mean more violence; fewer guns mean less violence. But this is wrong.

There is an undeniable deterrent affect which comes from a legally armed citizenry. Disarming them and taking away their rights and abilities to defend themselves, enables criminals and terrorists. People become more vulnerable and are more likely to fall victim to violent crime.

Ignorance of likely ramifications of proposed legislation is forgivable for the public, but it is unforgivable in leaders. Pundits and politician who know the figures and still promote gun control are either demonstrating a willful disregard for the truth, a hidden and self-serving agenda, a neurotic fear—or all three. Reactive legislation makes our children more likely to be victims.

Killings and bombings are abuses. They are no more justifications for abandoning the 2nd (and the 4th) Amendment than a driver killing someone with a car is justification to outlaw motorized transportation. We must correct abuses and punish abusers, but abandonment of deterrence only enables future increases in the rates of violent crime and murder. To seek security and to purposefully increase vulnerability is a form of psychotic insanity.

If we wish to protect our children from future “Newtowns,” we should encourage expanded legal, responsible and capable gun ownership.

Do it for the children.

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The Viet Nam Trilogy by John M. Del Vecchio

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Also see: <http://www.johnmdelvecchio.blogspot.com/> for more information on The Importance Of Story.

Bio data and current photo: Astride the Continental Divide in Montana, contemplating how the contentious issue of gun control has divided the continent. Del Vecchio is a NY Times bestselling author. His novels include The 13th Valley, Carry Me Home, For The Sake of All Living Things, and Darkness Falls; other writings: *The Importance of Story*. He is a 32-year resident of Newtown, Connecticut.

