



Moral Capitalism at Work

**Business and Public Policy Round Table
January 17, 2013
University Club of St. Paul**

**“Moral Responsibility and the Right to Bear Arms -
an Open Discussion on the Sandy Hook Elementary School Killings”**

Chair: Steve Young, Global Executive Director, Caux Round Table

Participants: Grant Abbott; Barb Bergseth; Rich Broderick; John Buettner; Tom Campbell; Nicholas Conant; John Harrington; Tom Prichard; Dick Primuth; Mike Schissel; Matt Wille

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The round table discussion can be summarized in a few words: in the American debate over the regulation of the right to bear arms, fear and mistrust predominate.

Guns have acquired a metaphorical and symbolic expressive power that readily overlooks facts and reasoned argument. The emotional association of guns as representations of security moves this debate on public policy outside the boundaries of easily found accommodation and compromise. The character of the debate over gun control is more antagonistic than usual, more akin to deep cultural conflicts, such as differences in religious beliefs and practices.

For example, it was noted that in many blogs defending an unlimited right to bear arms, there can be found a notion of strangers, the lack of a common bond with others requiring felt concern for them.

It was also noted that if one loses trust in government, an American instinct is to turn to self-protection, associated with armed defense of oneself and one's family. To want to protect is to be aware of something to be feared.

The divide over the proper degree of gun control reflects a cultural divide in a country where a moral consensus has been lost, along with the role of moral laws that should be respected. Many Americans have perceived that fundamental moral laws of nature and nature's God are no longer respected. This gives rise to fear for the future out of a corresponding belief that where such laws are violated, one must suffer consequences. A struggling economy seems to give proof that something is not right; too much debt and indulgence also raise fears over an inability to restore moral coherence. For many on the right, President Obama embodies this sense that we have to fear what is coming.

One should note, it was argued, that the power to upset the moral order by the most powerful normative institution in our culture is – the media. The media – unlike families, churches and schools – is expressly a for-profit institution, driven by the desire to make money from its products, lacking countervailing, internal, moral responsibilities. The values promoted by contemporary media are hedonistic, “me first,” materialistic, envious and emotionally damaging. The moral vision of the media is that happiness can be found in things and that even other people are just objects. From this comes a callous culture of narcissism and profligacy. More importantly, for perceptions of the need for guns, this culture leaves people feeling very alone and insecure.

Some media – FOX news was named – use fear as a driver of market penetration.

In reality, crime has dropped significantly, a fact that should assuage fears. Unfortunately, news coverage of this fact has been scarce. Only if it bleeds, does it lead. More and more, people have been boxed in for good behavior, but in the media, even the weather and traffic have been “catastrophized.”

For example, reductions in murders in St. Paul came about not because of gun control, but more due to control of circumstances where guns are put to use – family violence. Early intervention in escalating family discord can stop the violence before a gun is used murderously.

Many Baby Boomers were, due to the Cold War, socialized to fear air raid drills and the very potent thought of nuclear war suddenly breaking out. Since the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. has been in a state of near-perpetual war, with the notion that there is always an enemy “out there” becoming normalized.

Then, there is the theme of race – which often seeps through rhetoric on the right, where Whites tie a need for guns to protection against “others.” Rifle sales were up after Barack Obama’s election in 2008 and 2012. Derogatory references to “the little man in the White House” intertwine a lack confidence in the current president, with deep-seated racial unease.

It was noted that in environments of fear, people turn for psychic security to religions and ideologies as their trust in the good will of others evaporates.

Others agreed that America is a house divided and recalled Lincoln’s reference to Biblical warnings that a house divided cannot stand.

A primary function of leaders and leadership, it was noted, should be to address fears and help us overcome them. But, few leaders are to be found these days. Spokespersons yes, leaders, no. Political office has become the domain of political correctness. Competence in problem solving is less media-friendly.

When leadership fails, bad behaviors emerge and we come to “eat our young.” Higher values are trumped by fear. The capacity for building consensus is lost. Followers, being fearful, do not let leaders emerge.

A related thought was the movement of American culture towards moral relativism since the 1960s with a decline in the teaching of common values of good character and citizenship.

In a parallel development, as American culture has become more secularized in many ways, we have turned to state laws for solutions, not to families and churches, for moral instruction.

Moreover, economic evolution has undermined the socialization capability of the family. In the agricultural era, families were extended and influential. In the industrial age, families became nuclear and more and more urban. Now, with globalization, families have decentralized to individuals – men and women in the work force, mobile, no job security. The capacity for having good personal character has been eroded. A growing lack of community adds to the fears that drive our cultural proxies for debates.

Civility is needed to ratchet down fear. Even when in disagreement, we need to assume good will in those who disagree with us. How can we deal with issues if we can't have good conversations?

But, here we see that leadership has failed, even within families. Parents have checked-out on their responsibilities, leaving many children in all socio-economic statuses in dysfunctional home environments.

With reference to history, it was remarked that America grew out of a warrior culture, with war glorified to defend and protect good values against threats. In this tradition, the gun took on a very positive meaning. Consider the image of the Revolution being the Minuteman Statue with the farmer standing with a rifle at his side. Guns, therefore, represent power and freedom, two iconic values. To take away personal possession of these values by taking away guns is a threat to personal identity, causing fear. Additionally, shooting guns provides a feeling of power, temporarily reassuring, like a drug rush.

Perhaps, one participant suggested, the current divide among Americans is prelude to a new consensus. We are in a confused time, such as precedes the shift to a new paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn described the forward evolution of scientific understanding. We are living now with two spent views and need someone to reorient our culture in a new direction. Each side of the current debate is on the defensive, turning to ideology over the facts, fighting against what appears as heresy and so refusing to compromise.

In this environment, it is easy for each side of the debate over gun ownership to see the other side demanding extreme solutions – those who can't tolerate the murder of children want regulation and those who want to own guns fear laws that will take away all their guns.

Turning to the dynamic element of the mind of those who kill with guns, there seems to be a bias in diagnosis of murderous potential. Often, a person of questionable intent is diagnosed with a mental illness, requiring suppressive medications, rather than with a character disorder, which requires intensive counseling. With medication, the vulnerable person does not learn self-discipline, how to establish a workable structure for living, or tactics for coping with challenges. When the medications end, for whatever reason, the triggers of psychopathology are released.

Inculcation of the ability for higher moral reasoning, part of social and emotional learning, needs attention with so many fatherless families.

It makes sense to do more to keep guns from those disposed to misuse them. For example, only 1% of gun dealers sell to the worst users. Better record keeping, monitoring, or imposing indemnities for misuse should be considered. Those who release moral hazard into society should be made more accountable to society.