

Tale of Two Cultures

By Brent deMerville, Ph.D.

The United States is caught in the midst of an emotion driven debate that is dividing the nation into two distinct ideological camps. No, I am not talking about abortion; I am talking about the gun rights/gun control debate. On each side of the issue we have good people with the highest ideals who feel strongly that their opponent's viewpoint is the sure path to destruction for our nation. I know this because I find myself caught in this emotional and philosophical web along with close friends who are on one side or the other of this debate. This conflict drew me to think about the issue from a systems perspective to attempt to understand the assumptions that underlie much of this debate and the probable systemic implication of single point change, like banning the private ownership of guns.

A basic principle in approaching an issue from a systems perspective is to understand the assumptions and mental models that drive the situation. As I thought about this, I came to the belief that there exist two very distinct "gun cultures" within the United States. The first culture is one that I will call "Traditional." The Traditional culture grows from a predominantly rural base where the ownership of guns is common and viewed the same as owning any other tool from a fishing pole to a hammer. In this culture, children are taught from an early age about the proper use of a gun and the safety procedures that must be followed in handling a firearm. In this culture, the gun is associated with hunting, sport shooting, and self-defense. It is viewed as a tool. In this culture, gun ownership is not a mystery to children and children are well aware of the personnel responsibility that goes with the safe ownership of guns. Adults in the

Traditional culture are largely law-abiding with strong beliefs in the American principles of justice. People who don't own guns in this culture are tolerant of those who do and are not afraid of the idea of gun ownership.

The second gun culture is one that I will call the "Gangster" culture. The Gangster culture is predominantly urban where the law often forbids personal gun ownership. The only individuals who own firearms in this culture are police officers and criminals. In this culture, knowledge of firearms often comes from violent movies and television programs. The gun is a symbol of power and manhood. It is used to commit crime, intimidate, oppress the innocent, and defend against others who are doing the same. Individuals who don't own guns in this culture rightly view anyone other than a police officer who has a gun as a criminal and someone to be feared.

Unfortunately, most of the primary media sources in the United States reside in urban areas where the Gangster Culture is predominant. As a result, they focus on guns as instruments of murder and mayhem and present that image to the nation. These images fuel the passion of those who want to control and ultimately eliminate the private ownership of guns. This group shares the following beliefs:

- Guns are solely instruments of destruction.
- Violence will be reduced if the number of guns is reduced.
- Gun violence is widespread and is a growing problem.
- Guns and gun violence can only be reduced through more restrictive gun laws.
- Children are particularly at risk and the only way to make them safe is to remove guns from the home or have them locked away.
- The Constitution does not guarantee private gun ownership.
- Defensive responses to criminals should be left to the police.

Members of the Traditional Culture also hold certain beliefs about guns and violence:

- The right to bear arms is a personal right guaranteed by the Constitution.
- Criminals are the problem, not the weapon of choice.
- Gun safety is achieved through education and understanding about guns.
- The existing gun laws are more than sufficient to control criminal use of firearms if they are vigorously enforced.
- The agenda of gun control advocates is the ultimate confiscation of personal firearms as evidenced by campaigns in England and Australia.
- Recent tragedies involving youth and firearms are symptoms of larger societal problems that must be addressed through stronger family involvement — not through the elimination of firearms.
- Only law-abiding citizens obey firearms laws — the criminals could care less.
- There will never be enough police officers to completely control crime so it is the responsibility of the armed citizen to be prepared to defend his person and property against criminal assault.

Law-abiding individuals from both cultures are concerned about the criminal use of firearms and the reduction of crime and violence within the nation. However, as a result of their respective experience and exposure to firearms, they pursue radically different paths to resolving the issue.

Nature of the Debate

For those who view the gun debate from the Gangster Culture, the debate is about stopping the criminal use of guns in order to save lives. For those who view the debate from the Traditional Culture, the debate is about freedom and the ability to maintain the rights guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. If the “gun” were removed from the debate, I suspect that both sides would be in full support of the aims of protecting human life and maintaining personal freedom. Unfortunately the “gun” remains in the debate and symbolically represents the ability to maintain personal protection and freedom for one

camp while representing evil, destructive, and mindless violence to the other. Both sides point to extensive research conducted by respected scholars to support the value of gun control or to support the value of an armed citizenry. Both deny the legitimacy of the other camp's studies.

Is the System out of Control?

In many ways, it is interesting that this debate is as hotly emotional as it is, given that the number of firearms related deaths has been declining for a number of years. In spite of recent sensational stories like Columbine and the Michigan 6-year old shooting, the level of school violence has also declined. In the case of this debate, it is not the overall societal impact of the cause, but rather the sensational nature of the reported events fueled by both political parties using the issue as a magnet to attract voters that fans the flames.

If we were to look at gun deaths as a system under statistical control, we would see that the system's common cause variation is improving over time with the upper control limit moving downward as the annual deaths by firearms continues to reduce. On that same chart, however, we would see individual spikes like the incident in Columbine, which are examples of special cause variation. In other words, the normal pattern of gun deaths is improving but we have the occasional spike due to aberrant individuals. I think it is those spikes due to aberrant behavior that is disturbing people the most. Those examples are not firearm deaths related to crime, accident, or suicide — events that can at least be understood. Instead these are deaths that are far out of the mainstream which occur in places like churches and schools that are traditionally exempt from such violence. Without exception, they are the work of demented individuals pursuing personal

nihilistic goals. These events rightfully frighten all of us and drive us to seek answers. Unfortunately, by their very nature, these events will continue to defy our attempts to control or prevent them.

Search for Solutions

The Columbine High School shooters violated over 38 different laws that existed on the books at the time of the massacre. It is an unpopular truth that no law is going to prevent determined individuals from wreaking terror upon us all. We cannot legislate a safe world. Instead, we can ensure, through education, that people know how to behave in a safe manner and that they understand the consequences of behaving in an unsafe manner. For those who put others at risk, we can ensure that they bear the consequences of their actions. Programs like Project Exile, which guarantees mandatory prison sentences for those who use guns in the commission of a crime, ensure long-term consequences. States that allow concealed carry help to ensure the possibility of immediate consequences for those who would commit violent acts. In all of the reporting on school violence, one underreported fact is that two of the incidents were stopped because there was an armed citizen present. In a third incident, it was knowledge of how firearms operate that allowed a student to tackle a perpetrator while he was reloading.

It is time for the two cultures to put aside their ideology and work together to address the real root causes of violence and to put real actions in place that will further reduce the declining accidental gun deaths. It means that we must move far beyond the “there outa’ be a law” mentality to a search for deeper answers that will address the problems not the tools. At the same time, we must vigorously enforce those gun laws that are on the books and let everyone know that violence is unacceptable.