



## Just whose finger is on trigger?

Mona Charen February 5, 2013

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I stand out among my conservative friends in disliking guns. I favor reasonable restrictions on the Second Amendment, such as bans on fully automatic weapons, background checks for purchases and forbidding the sale of guns to those with histories of mental illness or criminality.

Yet I cannot agree with liberals that more gun control will lead to fewer gun crimes.

President Obama's choice for defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, actually illuminated one of the weaknesses of the gun control case. Hagel had been closely associated with Global Zero (though he's since repudiated it), a movement dedicated to "the elimination of all nuclear weapons." Hagel isn't alone in endorsing this cause. President Obama supports the concept, as well.

Liberals like Hagel and Obama think nuclear weapons are a problem in themselves. Call it the instrumental view. It's the weapon, rather than the person wielding it, that presents the danger. But American possession of nuclear weapons didn't threaten world peace. On the contrary, our nuclear arsenal arguably kept the peace for the whole second half of the 20th century. On the other hand, a nuclear weapon in Iran's hands would be a profound threat to the world.

By the same instrumental logic, many ask how we can tacitly tolerate Israel's possession of nuclear weapons while declaring that Iran must not be permitted to obtain them. The answer is the same. No matter how awful the weapon, the relevant question is about the weapon's owner. Israel is a peace-seeking democracy whose nuclear weapons are clearly intended purely for defense. Iran is ruled by a terrorist gang that managed to gain control of a country.

To propose, as Hagel did, that the existing nuclear powers completely divest themselves of nuclear weapons wouldn't make the world safer. It would make it profoundly less safe because the U.S. would be powerless to prevent smaller powers that acquired nuclear weapons after we had destroyed our own from bullying the world — or worse.

Wouldn't it be a better world if nuclear bombs had never been invented? That's hard to say. History isn't over. The U.S. military projected casualties from an invasion of the Japanese mainland between 500,000 and 1 million American dead and between 5 and 10 million Japanese dead. Dropping two atomic bombs, as terrible as that was, cost about 200,000 lives.

Similar arguments animate the gun control debate. The ready availability of guns, we're told, is responsible for America's extremely high rates of gun crime and for the horrific mass shootings we've experienced in recent years. Possibly, but there are other nations with high rates of gun ownership, such as Switzerland and Israel, that have low rates of gun crime. In our own recent history, we know that many high schools hosted rifle teams and many had ranges in their buildings. Yet school shootings were exceedingly rare and mass shootings unheard of.

We are told that studies have shown that gun ownership does not make home owners safer, but that, on the contrary, having a gun in the home makes it much more likely that the homeowner will be shot by a family member. This claim rests chiefly on a study by Arthur Kellerman that compared 420 homicide victims with others living in the same neighborhood. As Prof. Gary Kleck observed, the subjects of the study lived in a crime-ridden neighborhood, and Kellerman did not control for membership in gangs or participation in the drug trade. Additionally, only 4.7 percent of the homicide victims were killed by spouses, lovers, other relatives or roommates using the gun that was kept at home. The overwhelming majority of the deaths were the result of guns brought into the home from elsewhere.

It's doubtless true that more guns in homes are correlated with more gun accidents, gun suicides and gun homicides. It's hard to find gun deaths in homes without guns. But there are no swimming pool deaths in homes without pools either. There is also no doubt that Americans defend themselves and others with guns quite frequently. Data are difficult to come by for complex reasons including reporting errors, varying state laws and even lying by gun owners. But when the CATO Institute studied news reports of defensive gun uses over an eight-year period ending in 2011, they found more than 5,000 documented instances of gun owners preventing mayhem (murder, rape, robbery and assault) with guns. Interestingly, they found only 11 cases in which the criminal was able to disarm the gun owner, but 227 cases in which the criminal was disarmed.

We can no more make guns disappear than we can uninvent nuclear weapons. The key in both cases is whose finger is on the trigger.

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