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Gun Control on the Ropes?

There are momentous events that, overnight, change how a whole society thinks and acts, when the fantasies that many people hold must be abandoned. The change to our lives is sudden and obvious—like turning a light switch on or off. Suddenly, everything that went before seems quaint, or naive, or just overwhelmingly old-fashioned. These moments are the great dividing lines of a society, and while some of the changes are immediately visible, others may take weeks, months, or years to be noticed.

Pearl Harbor was one of those events. America had a large community of isolationists and pacifists who sincerely held to a certain misplaced understanding of our place in the world, and how our nation should operate. With a few notable exceptions, such as Rep. Jeanette Rankin, who ended her career in politics by casting the only vote against the declaration of war on Japan, isolationists and pacifists changed their position; the evidence of their error was too strong to ignore.

The discovery of the Holocaust was another of those moments, even though it spread out over many months, as each camp's liberation added to the list of horrors. For many intellectuals, the death camp crematoria did more than burn bodies; also up in smoke went the then-fashionable delusions about the goodness of human nature. It is no surprise that Americans in the 1950s were as God-fearing and church-going a bunch as we had seen in a generation. You cannot confront real Evil, without starting to ask hard questions about right and wrong.

September 11th is one of those moments when the average American's universe—how we understand the world and what makes it work—changed. In the somber days

afterwards, we saw sights and read words that would have been unimaginable two years ago. We saw live media coverage of a somber worship service in the National Cathedral, with that most politically incorrect of songs, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, sung with an intensity and reverence that could not be exceeded. We saw all but the most fanatical of the left close ranks with the rest of America, in agreement that there are some problems that can only be resolved by military force. We saw Hollywood, the most self-absorbed and selfish part of American life, scrap movies and TV shows that, in retrospect, served no purpose. We saw, at least for a few weeks, political leaders looking for what was right for America, not what was politically advantageous.

One of the changes that startled me most of all, however, is the effect that September 11th has had on the politics of gun control. I ate lunch recently with a friend of mine. We worked together for many years, and surprisingly enough, over lunch we would often get into political discussions. My friend is a liberal, and like most liberals, he has generally supported gun control. Not crazy, “ban ‘em all” gun control, but most gun control laws didn’t bother him.

You will imagine my surprise when my friend raised the issue of September 11th and told me that he was of the opinion that the airline security measures that we have used for a generation—metal detectors, X-ray machines for carry-on luggage, and so on—were a waste of time, and that the pilots should be armed, and perhaps even the passengers. He directly compared his argument to the arguments that I have advanced over lunches these many years, that the people primarily disarmed by gun control laws were the victims, and that the victims should be in a position to fight back.

My friend's argument surprised me. Even I wouldn't go that far with respect to letting passengers carry guns onto airliners, because I can foresee some problems letting anyone and everyone carry a gun onto a plane. These are, after all, confined places where tempers flare, and people drink too much to deal with their fear and discomfort.

Is my friend just one case of this changed attitude? Apparently not. George Will, a conservative who writes for the *Washington Post*, is a long time supporter of gun control. To Will's credit, in the past he has acknowledged that the Second Amendment creates certain problems for many gun control laws, and has argued therefore that the Second Amendment needs to be repealed or amended—not ignored.

George Will also seems to have learned a lot from what happened September 11th. Will's November 4 column concerned the 5th Court of Appeals decision in *USA v. Emerson*. Will's columns are always well written, but never so eloquent as when he wrote, "Widespread possession of guns is justified by considerations of public safety, individual dignity and healthy democracy.... Public safety is the public's business. Public authorities take the lead and some of them work at it full time. However, at all times, and especially in times like these, it is every citizen's business."¹

These sentiments, which have always been more popular among working Americans than among the chattering classes, are reaching astonishing proportions among the masses. A Zogby International/Associated Television News poll conducted October 8-10 of this year found that 56% of Americans "feel the National Rifle Association speaks for them at least some of the time. Fifty-one percent of Americans also said they own a gun or plan to own a gun...."

Another question the poll asked that has obvious application to the fear of terrorist attack, was whether “a man or woman who has had a background check by a law enforcement agency or had a safety course, has the right to carry a firearm on their person or in their car for protection?” An astonishing 46% said, “Strongly agree” and another 20% said “Somewhat agree.”² These are amazing numbers—2/3 of the American public now agree with a position that used to be characterized as a policy of “NRA extremists.”

The Virginia Democratic Party is also learning. A recent *Washington Post* article reports that Democratic Mark Warner’s win of the Virginia governor’s race—as well as the astonishing loss by the Democratic candidate for Attorney General, and losses for Democrats in the Virginia legislature—have convinced party leaders “that Warner’s decision to embrace gun rights and avoid divisive social issues was key, and other candidates must follow that model...”³ (I can only hope that California Democrats learn as well—gun control is still the path to victory for Democrats where I live.)

This is bad news for gun control advocates. What used to be Handgun Control, Inc. (before they foolishly changed their name to the hard to remember “Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence”) sent out a sobbing fundraising letter November 8th that opened with, “Regretfully, I must report to you that in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks on America, we have been forced to make significant cut backs in our programs, threatening our ability to fight for a safer America.” The letter does not acknowledge what the polls are showing—that gun control is losing support—but instead

¹ George Will, “Armed Against Terrorism,” *Washington Post*, November 4, 2001, B07, also at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33026-2001Nov2.html>.

² http://biz.yahoo.com/iw/011015/02033037_1.html.

³ Craig Timberg, “Democrats Scrutinize Tuesday’s Defeats,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2001, B01.

claims that “fundraising for just about every non-profit organization in the country has been seriously crippled as donors nationwide have mourned the loss of more than 6,000 precious lives and have rightly focused on helping the victims of the tragedy.”

Perhaps the Brady Campaign is right about why they are in trouble, but it seems more likely that the collapse of the World Trade Center also crushed one of the most destructive of delusions: that if you are nice to others, they will be nice to you. This is one of the sillier forms of pacifism: the argument that you won’t be hurt unless you are willing to hurt others; that the gentle person who would not hurt a fly has nothing to fear.

At the core of gun control extremism is this silly form of pacifism. While many moderate gun control advocates are not pacifists, and are merely misinformed, the “I can’t hurt you, you won’t hurt me” school is the energy behind the whole movement. To still believe in this theory after September 11 requires an astonishing inability to see the world as it is—like Rep. Jeanette Rankin’s 1941 vote against war with Japan.

There are values that are true in any place or time, and one of them is your right to defend yourself from criminal attack. The Second Amendment is one of the expressions of that right. For many Americans, a childhood of believing that you do not need to defend one’s self, is over. Adults must be prepared to protect themselves and their loved ones, and all the warm and comfortable fantasies that gun control groups have long lived under, will be filed in between Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

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