

Visiting Britain: A Sobering Experience

Last month's column talked about the failure of British gun control, and the rising crime problem—now worse than the U.S. in categories like robbery, assault, burglary, and car theft. Statistics are the most effective way to understand the failure of British gun control, but visiting Britain was an interesting experience as well.

This last summer I visited Britain with my family, and I was astonished. There were many wonderful and beautiful parts of Britain (once we left London). Nearly all Britons were polite and even friendly, in a reserved sort of way (again, once we left London). But we also saw a lot of very disturbing signs of the rising criminal culture there. These signs were especially disturbing since, by law, we were completely disarmed—even tear gas is prohibited.

When we first arrived in London, I was amazed to find myself conversing with employees of London's subway system through bulletproof glass. Even when we left London, we saw continual reminders of the fear of robbery. In newer motels, even in rural areas, we were often buzzed into the lobby by the desk clerk in the early evening. Once inside the lobby, there were often bulletproof glass enclosures around the clerk (though some had the window open on the enclosure—I guess my family didn't look dangerous). In subway stations, we saw signs asking for the public's help solved armed robberies.

Car alarms seemed to be a big business everywhere we went in Britain—not just in London, where you would expect there to be a problem. In London I saw something that I had never seen before—an alarm system protecting the scaffolding around a building that was under renovation.

Another startling sign was a newspaper article about a person who had made threats, was arrested, determined to be mentally ill, then released. Within a few days, he had acquired a Kalashnikov (as the AK-47 is commonly known over there), and murdered the person he had originally threatened. The Kalashnikov should have been unavailable at least ten years, since all semiauto rifles were banned after the Hungerford Massacre. Of greater importance, it appears that Britain is starting down the same road as the U.S. and Australia, releasing violent mentally ill people back to society, rather than locking them up for treatment.

It is true that I saw very few police carrying guns in Britain. The policemen at the entrance to Downing Street, where the Prime Minister's official residence is located, had what appeared to be Smith & Wesson semiauto pistols on lanyard loops. (A former British policeman tells me, however, that there are more British police carrying concealed handguns than the British public knows about—or wants to know about.) But perhaps the most startling thing I saw during my two weeks in Britain was something that I have never seen in the U.S.—police officers carrying submachines.

As we were waiting for our flight home at Heathrow Airport, a policewoman and a policeman walked by us. They were each carrying an H&K MP5 submachine at port arms, looking straight ahead, in what was almost a ceremonial march. All I could think as I watched them was, “Gee, at 600 rpm, a one second burst would put at least three bullets in each of them. It would make so much more sense from a security standpoint to have them either 10 yards apart, or both of them plainclothes carrying a concealed handgun, with the submachine gunner behind a closed door, ready to deploy if needed.”

Like so many other aspects of Britain's gun control fetish, the symbolism seemed to matter more than whether it worked.

One of the disturbing messages about British gun control for America is that gun owners are easily divided into small, easily digested factions. Each set of successively more restrictive controls affected only a small group. Only at the very end—when Parliament considered the handgun ban—did the various groups finally work together. But by then, it was too late. *Every* gun owner in America, even the single shot, black powder shooters, need to realize that the gun control movement is not going to stop when they have banned handguns, or banned semiauto rifles and shotguns, or restricted rifles and shotguns to licensed hunters *only*. We are confronting a movement that finds guns of any sort distasteful, and will not stop until they have made guns either a complete monopoly of the government, or licensed the remaining guns so tightly that most Americans will never have a chance to own a firearm of any sort. As Benjamin Franklin observed, “We shall all hang together, or we shall all hang separately.”

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