

### Youth Violence: An “Over-Determined” Problem

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Conservative Republicans are right when they tell us, in response to the tragedy in Littleton—which has become a symbol for the recent slew of such attacks—that “gun control will not solve the problem of youth violence.” Liberal Democrats are right when they claim that it is ludicrous to assert that parents and educators could solve the problem by bringing kids up right. Free speech advocates make a good case when they maintain that putting filters on the Internet will not stop youngsters from making pipe bombs. All these advocates unwittingly fall into one and the same logical trap, or deliberately use half-truths, to stop us from embracing those measures that they oppose. It is true that no measure will solve the problem; there are, though, several that would significantly curb youth violence.

The lesson from Columbine High School is as dull as it is important: social phenomena are “over-determined.” They are caused by a combination of several factors and, therefore, attacking any one of them will not eliminate the problem. There is no silver bullet and no magic cure. But this valid observation should not be used to conceal the fact that guns, the culture, and the Internet each carry some of the blame. It follows that if we tackle any of them, we shall reduce the problem some; if we treat several, we shall do even better. But, truth be told, it cannot be completely licked.

## Guns

The gun lobbies argue that guns do not kill people; people kill people. There's no question that they are half right. People make a difference—more about this shortly. But so do guns. Think about the 1,000 or so children who die each year from accidental discharge of firearms they find in their homes and play with. Think about Charles Whitman, who stood on the tower of the University of Texas and killed 16 students with a gun. Obviously, he would not have killed that many if all he had was a knife or a monkey wrench. And the two killers in Denver would have long been wrestled to the ground if they weren't armed with rapid-fire guns, which sent even the swat teams with their bulletproof vests and semi-military training cowering.

The gun lobbies have been making a lot of political noise over the fact that in some parts of the country, New England for instance, in which there are numerous guns, the murder rates are much lower than in the South, also awash with guns. See, they say, the difference is in the culture, not in the availability of the tools of mayhem. But if one is going to draw on cross-cultural comparisons, why stop in New England? If England, and all other democracies, are also included, we see that whatever the culture, the fewer guns, the less killing.

Given that guns account for a chunk of the problem—that is the way to think about single factors, in terms of what social scientists call “variance”—several more points need to be made. First, there is no individual “right to bear arms.” The second amendment reads, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The meaning of this has been tested before the highest court in the land five times over the last 155 years. In each and every case the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that there are no constitutional impediments to imposing gun controls on individuals. This is the reason the NRA as a rule does not challenge gun control measures in courts, but instead makes large campaign contributions to legislators, in order to block gun control legislation or repeal it. It should be noted that NRA monies played a major role in defeating 24 Democratic members of Congress in the last election who supported the Bradley bill.

Second, the NRA is damn right that the diluted Bradley bill, and other such measures, will not do much good. The reason is that they

are very limited in scope and gun sellers get around them through loopholes larger than ocean liners. (Examples: “mandatory” background checks of people buying guns are not required at gun shows; and if a manufacturer changes the name of an assault weapon, forbidden guns can become legal because Congress banned a specific list of guns—by name.) But the conclusion from the fact that current gun control measures are rather weak is the opposite of what the NRA implies: our children’s safety requires not *fewer* gun controls, but *more*, of the sweeping and encompassing kind Canada, Britain, France, and Germany have.

Finally, the NRA reminds us that Colorado is one of two states in which minors are not able to legally own guns, and ‘look how much good it did.’ Well, laws are of little value unless they are enforced. See the low budgets of those in charge of controlling firearms, especially the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and see where the inaction lies. If the NRA, with their tremendous lobbying power, allowed Congress and state legislatures to provide the budgets and other means gun control laws require, law enforcement agencies would be able to do their jobs.

## Education

Parents and teachers should teach youngsters values, which will make them into good, peace-loving people, we are told. There is little doubt that education does make a difference (as do the economic conditions of the neighborhoods in which youth violence takes place, and the historical factors that lead some people to be more alienated than others). One should realize, though, that education centered around negative prohibitions, like “Just Say No,” is not going to work; we need messages that youngsters find meaningful and compelling, values and missions to “Say Yes” to.

Our society asks parents and teachers to teach young people not to use drugs and alcohol, not to have premarital sex, not to smoke, and not to express their aggressive feelings. In short, it seeks to repress just about everything that the culture tempts young people to do, those acts that appeal to their raging hormones and impulses.

The most relevant argument for education against violence is that teaching self-restraint and responsible conduct is most successful

when young people are *positively* involved in other activities. Look at dedicated young Mormons, orthodox Jews, Black Muslims, and many others who have strong religious convictions. Look at those truly engaged in a quest for a healthy body so they can excel in sports, or those deeply involved in community service. None of these young people are perfect or immune to the siren calls of our culture or their bodies. But on average—and this is what we must keep our eyes glued to, not on individual outliers—they do much better than those who are just asked to refrain.

Most important, the debate in public schools as to which values we should teach—a debate which unfortunately is so often used to block much needed character education—is off the mark. What schools should help youngsters develop are two crucial behavioral characteristics: impulse control, or more specifically the capacity to channel impulses into prosocial outlets, and empathy for others. Teens can learn to channel their aroused urges into activities that do not harm others and yet are self-fulfilling. Sports, if properly conducted, provide a major opportunity.

I refer to Physical Education more than to competitive sports, and sports conducted in the British manner, where whether you win or lose matters less. While jocks often pick on other students, such behavior is not inherent to athletic activities. Indeed, when any group of students picks on others, or isolates them, this should not be viewed as a reason to cut back on their activities but as an opportunity for education, to develop the other much needed capacity, that of empathy. Empathy makes it much less likely that we shall hurt, taunt, or isolate others.

Once given these two essential behavioral character traits, specific values that presuppose them can be readily grafted at home, in churches, etc. Public schools can dedicate education for specific values, once the two basic personality capacities (or character traits) have been developed, to those values we all share—a richer catalog than many assume.

## Culture

In discussing the role of movies, video games, and the Internet in making our youngsters more violent than they would otherwise be, it

is as fallacious to argue that these cultural products cause violence as it is to argue that they play no role.

Among studies showing that what people watch on television does have effects is a particularly interesting one conducted in three Canadian villages, which for years were prevented from receiving TV signals because of their peculiar location. Shortly after these communities started watching TV as a result of the introduction of cable, crime rose significantly more than in other Canadian villages. To a social scientist, this natural experiment shows that TV added something to the causes of crime.

I myself studied a videotape of a toddler watching a violent TV show while playing with his teddy bear. At the beginning of the program the kid was all smiles. By the time the tape was winding down, the toddler had torn the head off his teddy. In a similar vein, children who have viewed pornographic material are, according to court testimony by a UCLA psychologist, more likely to engage in “orally copulating with another child” and “inserting an object into their anus or vagina or that of another child.”

The Columbine killers downloaded both their neo-Nazi propaganda and specific designs for making pipe bombs from the Internet. In response, Vice President Gore has worked out an agreement with several major Internet companies to set up web pages that will help parents protect their children from vile and violent material. And there are already a fairly large variety of software products that can assist parents, educators, and librarians in screening out dangerous materials. These include Internet filters such as Net Nanny, Cyber Patrol, and V-chips which are now required to be included in all new TV sets. Some of these block access to given lists of web sites and TV shows; others block access to ‘texts’ that include specific, explicit terms.

These filters are attacked by the same false logic and rhetorical tricks that by now are all too familiar. These filters, we are told, will not solve the problem. Hackers can disable them; they will allow some vile and violent material through; and they will prevent access to some material children might find useful. All this is true—and beside the point. Filters do not prevent violence any more than locks on our

front doors prevent burglaries or cooking hamburger meat ensures that e-coli will never infect us. They “just” make it less likely.

Filters unfortunately also seem to make some people foolish and others immoderate. There are those who argue that parents and educators should “talk” to their children, communicate more with them, take responsibility for their children’s conduct, and teach them to be responsible. What is foolish about these arguments is that they overlook the merit of getting help in discharging our parental and educational duties, from wherever we can. Example: in my household children were not allowed to watch TV on school days, and their TV time on other days was rather limited. Yes, we talked plenty—“why” is young children’s favorite word. However, given that I worked outside the home, and given that the children were young and hence both their will power and sense of responsibility were still being developed, locks on the TV sets helped prevent them from undue temptation until they matured. And, these locks allowed me to do something other than keeping an eye on two TV sets in a household with four children.

To reiterate, to argue that we should not “rely” on gadgets is all too true; God forgive the parents who install a Net Nanny and a V-chip and believe they have discharged their educational duties. But to argue that we should refuse the help of such devices is like saying that we don’t need seat belts and should instead simply teach young people in driver’s ed to drive “responsibly.”

The immoderate opposition to filters, led by the ACLU and the American Library Association (ALA), deserves particular attention because it raises a major question of educational philosophy: Are we to view children as developing creatures or as undersized adults, with all the rights thereof? By “developing creatures” I mean human beings that begin their lives highly dependent on adults for their well-being and quite unable to form judgments of their own or exercise self-restraint, and who gradually acquire an increasing ability over the years to act in a responsible manner, toward themselves, others, and the community. The fact that children are developmental may seem so self-evident that we rarely articulate this elementary fact. It is not so for the ACLU, the ALA, and some extreme children’s rights advocates.

These associations and advocates take the position that children are basically to be accorded the same rights as adults. For instance, the ACLU opposed limitations on the so-called Joe Camel cigarette advertising campaign, aimed at enticing children to smoke, on several grounds, one of which is that children's access to information should not be denied. For the same reason, the ACLU went to court and got filters on computers thrown out of public libraries in Virginia and in California. The ACLU made it clear that it is opposed to setting any age limit whatsoever on the rights of children to access any and all material.

The ALA takes a similar position. It denies parents of children of any age the right to find out which books their children have checked out. In a policy that is humorous if not absurd, the ALA tells parents—who must sign a statement accepting liability for books their children lose—that if such parents wish to find out which books they are being fined for, they need a note from their children permitting the library to disclose such information!

As I see it, parents and teachers have not merely a right but a duty to find out what their charges are reading, screening, or playing with. They have a duty to help shape the educational environment of their children, help them choose which books they should read, which music they should listen to, which TV programs they should watch, and which they should avoid. This seems indisputable when we're talking about pre-teens; and even for teenagers, parents and educators need to be involved rather than shut out. If a classmate of my son committed suicide, and my son seems rather depressed and is spending long hours alone in the library, it is my duty at a minimum to find out if he merely reads Dostoyevsky or The Hemlock Society's "how-to" books. I also had better find out if one of my children is deep into "Mein Kampf," "The Anarchist's Cookbook," or the Unabomber's manifesto, so I can help him learn to properly deal with these poisonous works.

Helping children develop the moral and intellectual faculties needed to make responsible choices when they grow up is what raising kids is all about. Anybody can provide room and board, and love comes naturally. But developing a child's character is a parent's highest duty, one they share with educators, who often do stand in for parents.

## Not Letting the Perfect Be the Enemy of the Good

Truth be told, the Lord, nature, and social science have not given us what it takes to lick most social problems. Hence, it is rather easy to show that any specific measure will not solve youth violence or much of anything else. But if we do not allow the quest for the perfect person and society to stop us, we will be able to make it much less likely that we shall face other Columbine tragedies. There is very little in our personal and collective lives that is more important than saving the lives of our children. We should dedicate more of our energy and resources to doing so even if this means we have to protect one child at a time. By helping one, we may save fifteen.