

America's unique obsession with guns

In a Jan. 14 commentary, "Regulate guns to protect public health," Nicholas Kristof makes a case for gun control as a public health issue. On the same page, Steve Chapman argues, in "Gun control (still) won't work," that more gun control is unnecessary, asserting that gun ownership by "law-abiding citizens" actually deters violence.

Missing in both essays is any discussion of why guns play such a prominent role in the American mystique; why owning guns has become, for so many, so important.

The fact that using guns can be fun, as Kristof acknowledges, cannot possibly explain the emotional fervor of so many gun advocates.

There are, undoubtedly, multiple explanations for this phenomenon. History is often cited, but neither Canada nor Australia, countries that share our recent frontier experience, have a corresponding love affair with firearms.

So what makes Americans unique among civilized populations with respect to love of guns, particularly love of assault and high-caliber, semiautomatic weapons designed specifically for killing other humans?

I once hunted. I can remember how it felt moving through fields knowing that in my grasp was an instrument that quickly and efficiently could terminate the existence of any living creature I might encounter. Relative to grouse and quail, I was God.

We live in a society that is increasingly impelled by fear, much of it manufactured in the paranoid ravings of talk-show demagogues. Civility and respect have become lost virtues. Ideological rigidity obviates compromise. Simple political disagreement justifies the demonization of others.

I suspect that this largely self-induced social paranoia plays a prominent role in many Americans' idolatry of guns. In a fantastic world of imaginary demons, ubiquitous criminals and mythical hordes of invading illegals, an AR 15 can make a God of anyone for whom Second Amendment remedies are an acceptable means of solving problems.

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