



December 20, 2012

On Politics and Markets

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Newtown and Our American Sickness

The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings . . . cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual. Think of the use of the motor-car producing or encouraging certain sicknesses, and mankind being plagued by such sickness until, from some cause or other, as the result of some development or other, it abandons the habit of driving.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

It was W.E.B. DuBois who told us that the problem of the 20th century was the problem of the “color line.” I’m not so sure DuBois was right about that. I’m not so sure that *the* problem was the problem of race and racism. I am more inclined to think that the problem of race – or of the color line – was (and is) simply a species of a much larger problem – human violence. Racial castes, genocides, pogroms, the abuse of women, the denigration of workers, and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful, within and outside of modern capitalism, all of these and many more can be understood as species of violence. Violence is our human sickness. Violence is, most assuredly, our American sickness.

We Americans have a terrible love of violence. We fetishize it, applaud it, swim in it, daily – in our music, on our televisions, in our movies, in our newscasts, in our books, in our video and computer games and, often, even in our personal lives. I am no exception, although I have drawn the line on occasion – alas, on too few occasions. Once, I came into my basement and saw my boys, then in their teens, playing a video game that permitted the main characters to, at my boys’ behest, use bats to crack open the skulls of other characters who were playing the roles of innocent pedestrians, simply going about normal life. In many video games with belligerent themes, one has points *deducted* when *inadvertently* harming or hurting noncombatants. In *this* game, the software developers gave the end users – in this case, my adolescent boys – the ability to kill and maim just for the “fun” of it.

I told the boys to hand over the game disks, and they never saw them again. I wish I had done more of that – a lot more. I knew that this kind of violence in the house, whether in video games or on the television, was eating at our souls, and I said so many times. But in a world immersed in violence, which of us can always look away?

Ironically, some violent presentations can actually teach us to avoid violence, by showing us just what the results of violence really look like. In the 1999 movie *Three Kings*, directed by **David Russell**, we don’t simply see people being shot in an Iraqi desert, or blown to bits by bombs and artillery shells in the



Iraqi sun. Russell takes us along for a ride on single bullets, as though passengers, showing how they pierce the flesh, destroy the organs, and leave bile, air, and fecal matter leaking into the body's cavities.

This is the reality of violence, Russell was trying to tell us. "Love is not a marble arch," as Leonard Cohen sings in his *Hallelujah*, and violence is not properly captured by the belly camera of a drone flying 10,000 feet in the air, its target imaging seen on a computer screen by a sergeant or lieutenant who is piloting with a joystick 80 miles away. Russell shows the destruction done to the human body, up close. "That, ladies and gentlemen," Russell was telling us, "is what war really is." It is the piercing of the flesh. It is the gasping for last breaths. It is shit and blood where they are not supposed to be. It is young men and women where *they* are not supposed to be.

Last Friday in Newtown, Connecticut, a young psychotic got his hands on several guns. (That he was psychotic matters, and matters a lot, but it is not the point of this story.) One of them was made by Bushmaster. To see what sorts of weapon Bushmaster makes and sells, you can simply visit the company's website, www.bushmaster.com. Bushmaster describes itself this way: "Founded in 1973, Bushmaster Firearms International, LLC, is the leading supplier of AR15 type rifles in the United States. We manufacture both aluminum and advanced carbon-fiber-based AR15 type rifles and accessories and our products are known for quality, reliability, accuracy, durability, and value. Bushmaster firearms are used by hundreds of police departments and law enforcement organizations nationwide, by the military of more than 50 countries worldwide, in private security and safety applications, and by consumers for hunting, recreation, competition, and home defense and security."

It is hard to quarrel with the notion that law enforcement organizations and the military need to have firearms such as those made by Bushmaster and other firearms companies. The world is a dangerous place, and law enforcement and the military need powerful weapons at their disposal. But it is not clear to me that an imperative exists for ordinary citizens to have weapons at their disposal that look like this one.



Meet the Bushmaster ACR Adaptive Combat Rifle. Here are its features:

- 16 ½" cold hammer-forged barrel with an innovative protective coating which uses a nitriding process that dramatically reduces wear for the ultimate in longevity and dependability



- A2 birdcage-type hider to control muzzle flash
- Adjustable, two-position, gas piston-driven system for firing suppressed or unsuppressed, supported by hardened internal bearing rails
- Tool-less, quick-change barrel system available in 10.5", 14.5", 16.5" and 18.5" and in multiple calibers
- Multi-caliber bolt carrier assembly quickly and easily changes from 5.56 NATO/223 Rem to 6.8mm Rem SPC
- Free-floating MIL-STD 1913 monolithic top rail for optic mounting
- Magpul® MBUS front/rear flip sights
- Fully ambidextrous controls including magazine release, bolt catch and release, fire selector and non-reciprocating charging handle
- High-impact composite hand guard with heat shield – accepts rail inserts
- High-impact composite lower receiver with textured magazine well and modular grip storage
- Folding and six-position telescoping high-impact polymer stock with rubber butt pad and sling mount (basic folder only)
- Ships in hard case and includes 30-round PMAG™

Undoubtedly, the control of muzzle flashes and a high quality heat shield are important features to have in an Adaptive Combat Rifle – if you are a Fed in a gunfight with drug cartel guards, or a soldier on the front lines of a war zone. In such situations, your muzzle flash could be a serious problem, as would be a magazine that only holds a few rounds.

But why on earth does the average citizen need a weapon that carries so much lethality? Why would a society trust just about everybody and anybody to own and properly secure an instrument of such destructive power? While arguments can be made that we should be “free” to purchase and own such weapons, the argument for “freedom” has come to wear thin against the stacks of bodies – including the bodies of little children – now piled high across the land. “Freedom” for what? To have our kicks? To be a collector of firearms? To take on a possible tyrannical government that possesses missiles and tactical nuclear weapons? Really?

The male bravado of violence needs to be highlighted. From the black ghettos and “hoods,” with their hyper-masculine young men who fetishize petty power and glorify gangsterism, to the Montana militias, who play at war in the mountains and woods of the “heartland,” our violent culture has a phallic face. The double- and triple entendre of “bushmaster” is not lost on the astute. Bushmaster – the conquering of the “bush”; the “killing” of what is behind the “bush.” But the sexual suggestions are not all there are. There is even an ethnic and racial dimension worth exploring. The “bush” is where the folks live who must be controlled, must be made to yield, to obey – or they must pay a price. In recent years, the “bush” has become the desert sands and mountain caves.



If the sickness of our time can only be cured by an alteration in our mode of life and thought, what sorts of alteration might we make to reduce our love of violence? Here are some suggestions.

Let's turn it off. Let's make entertainment choices that reduce violent *ideation*, which has both psychological and social effects on all of us. Let's come to understand what David Russell was trying to tell us – that maiming and killing are not to be viewed as entertainment, but rather are to be viewed as tragic, always and everywhere. Let's start to draw lines. It will feel like deprivation, but that feeling passes. Let's start to re-think masculinity away from the “phallic” and toward the “father” – the strong nurturer, who sees violence – whether against an enemy of the state, or against his neighbors – as a last, and repugnant, resort, rather than as the first proof of his “manhood.” Let's teach ourselves what real violence looks like. It comes in the form of broken bodies, and broken souls. Often, the result of violence expresses itself in the form of emotional dysfunction and mental illnesses which last a lifetime.

What happened in Newtown, Connecticut cannot be blamed on guns alone. Serious mental illness was at the heart of that tragedy, and our society, unfortunately, still gives mental illness short shrift. But one thing seems clear – had the shooter access only to a shotgun or, better yet, a baseball bat, many fewer children and adults would have died. This is the hackneyed conclusion of the moment. But though hackneyed, its truth cannot be denied.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein but in the context of America's love of violence: Think of the use of guns, producing or encouraging certain sicknesses and death, and society being plagued until, from some cause or other, as the result of some development or other, we abandon the taste for violence. One never knows where a tipping point really is until it is reached. Perhaps Newtown is the “some cause or other” that will tip the scales. I sure hope so. I hate to think that we are so obtuse and bestial that we will need dozens more dead children to make us change our ways. But, of course, we just might be.

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