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If We Are a 'Civilized' Society, We Must Find a Way to Stop Violence

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If We Are a 'Civilized' Society, We Must Find a Way to Stop Violence

By David Houghton
UCF Forum columnist
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Other nations genuinely look to America as an example, a shining “city upon a hill,” as Massachusetts Bay colony’s first Gov. John Winthrop famously put it. But they cannot understand what they often call America’s “love affair” with guns.

In most European countries, private ownership of military-style assault weapons has long been banned, considered a threat to public safety and wholly unnecessary to the protection of political liberty in a developed democracy. Gun-control issues have also been depoliticized, and fatalities from gun-related crimes are much lower.

But in Connecticut, on the morning of Dec. 14, a mentally disturbed 20-year-old man shot his mother to death at the family home in the idyllic small town of Newtown. He then broke into nearby Sandy Hook Elementary School, killing the principal – who heroically tried to stop him, even though she was only 5-2 and unarmed – as well as five other adult staff members.

Rampaging through the school grounds, the man murdered 20 terrified children, all of them only 6 or 7 years old. He then turned his weapons on himself, shooting himself through the head. A Bushmaster AR-15 rifle, a Glock 10 mm handgun and Sig Sauer 9 mm handgun were recovered at the scene.

The gunman used an assault rifle that almost certainly would have been prohibited before the nation’s ban on some semi-automatic weapons was allowed to expire eight years ago by members of Congress who feared the power of the gun lobby. The law had been signed into law by President Clinton.

The slaughter of innocents at Sandy Hook Elementary was only the latest in a stream of senseless violence. It followed the killings at Columbine High School in 1999 (12 killed)

and the Virginia Tech massacre of 2007 (32 killed). It also came on the heels of more recent attacks on innocent civilians by deranged individuals in the 2011 wounding of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ariz. (6 killed), the 2012 Aurora, Colo., theater shooting (12 killed) , the 2012 Sikh Temple shooting in Wisconsin (6 killed), and other cases.

Europeans understand that our 2nd Amendment – little more than a collection of notes rather than a coherent or grammatically correct statement – is much prized in this country, but they cannot understand why it is so important to place the right to own a gun over basic public safety, especially in a country that has so many safeguards against the abuse of executive-branch power that its most recurrent feature is political gridlock.

In the unlikely event that there were to be another revolution in this country, the 2nd Amendment would be null and void in any case, since the Constitution would cease to exist in its current form and there would no longer be a codified “right” to own a gun. Instead, we would just assert that right, assuming that we wanted to. We would not look to – or need – a piece of paper to codify our right to rebel.

Unsophisticated European observers have referred to what they call America’s “culture of death,” but those who know more about the American political system still cannot understand why we so often constrain and limit 1st Amendment rights – the right to free speech, a free press and so on – but are unwilling to limit gun-ownership rights in any way, shape or form.

Outsiders are right to question us on this.

We call ourselves a “civilized” society. If that is so, then there has to be a way to stop the carnage, which threatens our basic American values as well as our image in the rest of the world.

As with free speech, there has to be a proper balance. And in this case, that is between one person’s right to own a gun and another’s right to be free from the destruction of life, liberty and property that occurs when we allow unrestricted gun rights and the spread of weapons whose only real use is the indiscriminate slaughter of other human beings.

The tiny victims of Sandy Hook Elementary School now bear testimony to the fact that we no longer have such a balance in this country, and we will fail to honor their memory if we do not now re-establish it.

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