

Guns and Minds\*  
E. James Lieberman

People come in many shapes, sizes and strengths but no one is born bulletproof. If that makes the gun an equalizer then our country, with some 200 million firearms, is democratic to a fault. Guns enable children to qualify as grownups without aging. Too young to vote, drink, or sign a contract, they may be tried as adults if they manage to shoot people, hardly a sign of maturity. To whom does the insanity defense apply, kids who murder or politicians and parents who make it possible?

At bedtime American grownups watch selected carnage on TV, the newsroom guideline being, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Why do we imbibe this nightcap? While the homicide rate has fallen 20 percent in this decade, news media coverage of murders has increased six-fold. Why? Although he died before the television era, Viennese-American psychologist Otto Rank (1884-1939) has some answers.

First, we gain from a stranger’s violent death even while deploring it. We the audience, by witnessing, confirm that we survived another day in a world full of lethal danger: killers, storms, crashes.

Second, as individuals and groups we must interpret the random, the bizarre, whatever threatens. We need to make sense of it with a theory of good and evil. But our theories may be comforting illusions, ending in paradox: long life is good; but “the good die young.” Sacrifice in war is noble and immortalizes heroes. Heaven waits but we must wait our turn: suicide is cheating.

Psychiatrists familiar with post-traumatic stress disorder know that victims of crime or disaster often blame themselves. Guilt seems better than impotence, and any causality seems better than none. The dominant ideology holds that we get what we deserve. They—we all—struggle to make meaningful tragedy out of accidents, cruelty, indifference and stupidity and, regarding our gun culture, collective irresponsibility.

Rank points out that, although we do not sacrifice children to propitiate gods of war and weather, vestiges of “primitive” magic lurk beneath cultural rituals and rationalizations. In this sense we sacrifice many innocents in order to indulge a paranoid interpretation of the Second Amendment, the clear intent of which is to have a “well-regulated militia.”

Deaths by murder, accident, storm, war or capital punishment distract us from the fact that death is natural and inevitable. Every day most of us routinely avoid calamities that claim the unlucky few. The media barrage fuels our sense of superiority, our survivorship, our need to be told that we don’t have to worry about dying for a long, long time.

Rank’s fourth and last point concerns the primitive idea that, by stopping those who want to kill us, we can stop death itself. As long as we have gun-toting enemies at home or abroad, the magic keeps working. No wonder these ideas, spelled out in Rank’s *Psychology and the Soul*, formed the basis for Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death*.

Denying ordinary, mundane death employs a lot of people and some amazing technology. We have our military-industrial complex and our medical-industrial complex to fight premature death, and an information-industrial complex to keep us emotionally alive with a strange concoction of shock and consolation. And we buy it.

With the notorious exception of Dr. Kevorkian, television dramatizes killing when the victim is unwilling. Threats enhance the will to live, so murder becomes “pro-life,” a jolting tonic. The real problem arises when a person wants to die.

Most Americans—even psychiatrists--would hardly suspect that suicides outnumber murders by about 30,000 to 20,000 in the U.S. every year. Of course guns are often used in suicide, mostly by men.

Legalizing physician-assisted suicide would probably prevent many sick and disabled people from taking their own lives in desperation. Studies show that people fear becoming helpless at the end of life more than they fear pain, but it's murder that gets covered while suicide is covered up.

Also covered up is our tendency to be nonviolent. Assuming 200 million guns and 20,000 gun-related deaths annually in the U.S., just one gun in 10,000 kills in a year. A silver lining, but the cloud is still ominous: murder becomes child's play when guns are plentiful.

We know that "criminal" and "law abiding" are not hard-and-fast, unchanging categories. We cannot predict who will break into the news as the "fellow who kept to himself," who had no criminal or psychiatric record before unleashing a deadly attack.

Calming paranoia, individual or social, is difficult. It is impossible to be protected against any imaginable attack. But the fearful mind-set keeps the primitive magic going on television with morbid news and violent drama, yes, but even in sports (the perfect defense), medicine (the magic bullet; ER), and lotteries (beating the odds).

Most countries control gun ownership strictly and have practically no gun deaths. It remains to be seen how long it will take us to prevent needless carnage so effectively. It may take longer for the nightly news to realistically dramatize the overwhelmingly nonviolent conduct of most people everywhere. For that we can wait: nobody is forcing us to watch.

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