

## THE FALLACY OF GUN CONTROL

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After the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech, many well-intentioned people all over the country have been calling for increased gun control laws. However, economists tend to oppose gun control laws, since such laws generally pay no attention to basic economic issues.

Let's start with the relationship between means and ends. The shooter had his ends: he wanted to kill many people, and he wanted it to be visible and spectacular. He also had his means: guns and bullets. He engaged in forward-looking behavior: he purchased the guns, bullets, chains, locks, and video equipment well in advance. He taped himself in advance explaining what he was going to do and why he was going to do it.

Now let's consider gun control. Many people argue that if the shooter did not have guns and bullets, he would not have been able to *shoot* all of those people. This is surely correct. However, from that, they infer that if he did not have guns and bullets, he would not have been able to *kill* all of those people. This is a whole different question.

In economics, we discuss the idea of *substitutes*. These are goods that can be used to replace each other such as Coke vs. Pepsi, contact lenses vs. eyeglasses, Macs vs. PCs. When a person has ends, a person can select among different means to achieve those ends. These different means are substitutes.

Cho wanted to kill many people, and he wanted it to be visible and spectacular. To that end, he purchases guns, bullets, chains, and locks (to prevent survivors from escaping). Would gun control have prevented this? Or would Cho—who apparently planned this attack for weeks, based on the fact that he acquired guns, bullets, chains, and locks for weeks—have used substitute goods?

What would Cho's substitutes have been? What other means are there by which he could engage in mass murder? Well, he could have purchased a knife, although that is probably a weak substitute for guns and bullets in achieving his ends. He has to be right next to his victim, and he might be defeated in personal combat by another person. Likewise, he could not kill a lot of people in the same time frame, and it would not be as spectacular.

Perhaps he could have resorted to convincing people to engage in mass suicide, as Jim Jones did at Jonestown, or Heaven's Gate cult leader Marshall Herff Applewhite ⇒

did in California. However, since Cho was apparently a noncharismatic loner, this substitute would not likely have been very effective as a means to his end of mass murder.

Consider instead, though, the news we see every day from Iraq and Afghanistan. On the day this was written, a moving car bomb killed 19 and wounded 35 in a restaurant. Meanwhile, a parked car bomb killed several more. That is the sort of visible and spectacular mass destruction that Cho desired, and it is not greatly difficult to produce a car bomb. Clearly, a car bomb is a substitute means to achieving Cho's end of a visible and spectacular killing of many students.

In fact, it is possible that Cho might even have been more effective with such a means. After all, student traffic flows are very predictable, being based on when classes begin and end. Had Cho built a bomb, he could have detonated it at a time and place where hundreds of students might be within the blast radius.

In fact, we see car bombings in the news *almost every day*, but mass shootings are so rare that we remember them all. We remember the Columbine shooting, and we will remember the Virginia Tech shooting. We remember 9/11 and we remember Pearl Harbor. Why do we remember these things? *Because they are so rare!* However, we don't remember how many people were killed in Iraq this week, or last week, or the week before. Why not? Because there are so many car bombings that we are nearly immune to news of them. Mass shootings are extremely rare, which makes them news.

So however much some people might yearn for gun control, it seems unlikely that it would have prevented Cho from achieving his ends. He had substitutes available, he had more than one means available to achieve his ends, and he plotted long enough to hit upon other means—especially since those other means are described in detail on TV, in the newspapers, and on the internet every day.

Economists recognize the relationship between means and ends, including the role played by substitutes. Economists understand that when government restricts one market, consumers merely move into another market, and when government tries to foreclose one means, individuals will simply shift into other means to achieve the same ends.

However horrendous we might find the mass shootings at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other places, the fact is that when disaffected people start planning mass mayhem, the lack of a gun will not stop them. The 1927 Bath Township School bombing, in which 45 people were killed by a school board member, shows that guns are neither necessary nor sufficient for the commission of mass murder at schools.

Economists call for a rethinking of the issue using economic reasoning. As Henry Hazlitt pointed out in his great book *Economics in One Lesson*, good analysis requires people to look past the obvious and short-term effects on some people, and to focus on the longer-term effects to all people. After all, those longer-term economic realities will arise regardless of the good intentions of people who call for market restrictions. ■

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# THE PROBLEM WITH JAIL

Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr.

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American conservatives have long held a casual view toward the police power, viewing it as the thin blue line that stands between freedom and chaos. And while it is true that law itself is critical to freedom, and the police can defend rights of life and property, it does not follow that any tax-paid fellow bearing official arms and sporting jackboots is on the side of the good.

Every government regulation and tax is ultimately backed by the police power, so free-market advocates have every reason to be as suspicious of socialist-style police power as anyone on the Left.

Uncritical attitudes toward the police lead, in the end, to the support of the police state. And to those who doubt that, I would invite a look at the US-backed regime in Iraq, which has been enforcing martial law since the invasion, even while most conservatives have been glad to believe that these methods constitute steps toward freedom.

The problem of police power is hitting Americans very close to home. It is the police, much militarized and federalized, that are charged with enforcing the on-again-off-again states of emergency that characterize American civilian life. It is the police that confiscated guns from New Orleans residents during the flood, kept residents away from their homes, refused to let the kids go home in the Alabama tornado last month, and will be the enforcers of the curfews, checkpoints, and speech controls that the politicians want during the next national emergency.

If we want to see the way the police power could treat US citizens, look

carefully at how the US troops in Iraq are treating the civilians there, or how prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are treated.

A related problem with the conservative view toward law and justice concerns the issue of prisons. The United States now incarcerates 730 people per 100,000, which means that the US leads the world in the number of people it keeps in jails. We have vaulted ahead of Russia in this regard.

Building and maintaining jails is a leading expense by government at all levels. We lock up citizens at rates as high as eight times the rest of the industrialized world. Is it because we have more crime? No. You are more likely to be burglarized in London and Sydney than in New York or Los Angeles. Is this precisely because we jail so many people? Apparently not. Crime explains about 12 percent of the prison rise, while changes in sentencing practices, mostly for drug-related offenses, account for 88 percent.

Overall, spending on prisons, police, and other items related to justice is completely out of control. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in the 20 years ending in 2003, prison spending has soared 423 percent, judicial spending is up 321 percent, and police spending shot up 241 percent. When current data become available, I think we will all be in for a shock, with total spending around a quarter of a trillion dollars per year.

And what do we get for it? More justice, more safety, better protection? No, we are buying the chains of our own slavery.

We might think of prisons as miniature socialist societies, where government is in full control. For that reason, they are a complete failure for everyone but those who get the contracts to build the jails and those who work in them. Many inmates are there for drug offenses, supposedly being punished for their behavior, but meanwhile drug markets thrive in prison. If that isn't the very definition of failure, I don't know what is.

In prison, nothing takes place outside the government's purview. The people therein are wholly and completely controlled by state managers, which means that they are valued by no one and have nothing of value to give anyone. This condition is the surest way to reduce a human life to wreckage.

It is no surprise that prisons are places of monstrous chaos, abuse, and corruption. Nor is it any wonder that people coming out of prison are no better off than before they went in, and are often worse, and scarred for life.

In the US prison and justice system, there is no emphasis at all on the idea of restitution, which is not only an important part of the idea of justice but, truly, its very essence. What justice is achieved by robbing the victim again to pay for the victimizer's total dehumanization?

As Rothbard writes: "The victim not only loses his money, but pays more money besides for the dubious thrill of catching, convicting, and then supporting the criminal; and the criminal is still enslaved, but not to the good purpose of recompensing his victim."

Free-market advocates have long put up with jails on grounds that the state needs to maintain a monopoly on justice. But where in the world is the justice here? And how many jails are too many? How many prisoners must there be before the government has overreached? So let's not celebrate the expansion of prison socialism, as if the application of ever more force was capable of solving any social problem.

A free-market system would emphasize punishment, yes, but mostly restitution. And it would not tax the general population to pay for the crimes of a few. The cost of crime would be focused on those who commit them, and it would be borne in a way that recompenses the victim. That doesn't mean that victims must take indentured servants unto themselves. There would be an industry specializing in criminal justice in the same way that there are industries specializing in every other service required on a market.

We can't know precisely how this system might evolve in a market. The tragedy is that government has monopolized it for so long that, unlike the case of schools or mails, no parallel system of private justice has been allowed to emerge. But we might consider the way the system for financial credit has enforced its rules, largely voluntarily. Those who behave benefit, and those who do not lose out. The damage inflicted by the cheats is focused on those who attempt to cheat the system.

Can justice be provided by the free market? I have every bit of confidence, because if the history of service provision shows us anything it is that there is nothing that society needs that government can provide better than the market can. That principle applies to criminal justice as much as any other sector.

What about that thin blue line between civilization and chaos? Too often, defenders of state-provided police and jails assume a crude form of Hobbesianism, the political philosophy hammered out by the seventeenth-century Englishman Thomas Hobbes. His book *Leviathan* was published in 1651 during the English Civil War in order to justify a tyrannical central government as the price of peace. The natural state of society, he said, was war of all against all. In this world, life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Conflict was the way

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# News from the Institute

## Leaps on the 25th Year

The Mises Institute is advancing dramatically in all our activities on our 25th anniversary. This has become evident in the incredible publications schedule. Rothbard's *Panic of 1819* is now in print for the first time in decades, and now this important study of American banking history is in the hands of students and scholars again. Guido Hülsmann's biography of Mises will be released in October, along with Rothbard's suppressed manuscript *The Betrayal of the American Right*. There are other books in the works, including some by Walter Block, and books including the writings of Bastiat, Hayek, Turgot, and many others.

Our student series of books has brought back into print classics from the past by Nock, Chodorov, Hazlitt, Lachmann, Fetter, Flynn, Petro, Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Kirzner, Machlup, Wicksteed, Greaves, among many others—60 books total. Among the recent entries are the *Review of Austrian Economics*, as edited by Murray Rothbard, and now back in print. See [mises.org/store/Student-Series-C29.aspx](http://mises.org/store/Student-Series-C29.aspx). ■

## Ron Paul's Corpus

We are working hard to get Ron Paul's work back in print, including his *Case for Gold* and *Freedom Under Siege*. As readers know, his increasing public profile provides an opportunity for expanded education in economics. In fact, this is mostly what Ron has seen as the main benefit of office: giving a platform for teaching. Ron was with us at our Houston, Texas, Mises Circle gathering, and he will join us for the October Supporters Summit. ■

## That October Conference

You will not want to miss our 25th anniversary gala dinner and Supporters Summit, so please make your reservations now. The dates are October 12–13, 2007, and it will be held at the Grand Hyatt in New York City. Speakers include: Walter Block, Burt Blumert, John Denson, Thomas DiLorenzo, David Gordon, Jeffrey Herbener, Robert Higgs (Schlarbaum Prize Winner 2007), Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Jörg Guido Hülsmann, Peter Klein, Roderick Long, Ron Paul, Ralph Raico, Joseph Salerno, Gary Schlarbaum, Mark Thornton, Jeffrey Tucker, Thomas Woods, and Lew Rockwell. For more information see [mises.org/events](http://mises.org/events). ■

## The President

Lew Rockwell's writings have been appearing in high-profile venues in recent months, and not just in the United States. An extended interview appeared in Poland, for example. He was asked about US and Polish issues and their parallels: "post-socialist economies are largely in the same boat as the US. We are all beset by fascistic planning structures, monopolistic regulations, socialized health care and education, even as new sectors of freedom pop up every day. So given this, it is long past time that libertarians of the world unite in common cause. The State is vulnerable." ■

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of human engagement. Society is rife with it, and it cannot be otherwise.

What is striking here is the context of this book. Conflict was indeed ubiquitous. But what was the conflict about? It was over who would control the state and how that state would operate. This was not a state of nature but a society under Leviathan's control. It was precisely the Leviathan that bred that very conflict that Hobbes was addressing, and he proposed a cure that was essentially identical to the disease.

In fact, the result of the Civil War was the brutal dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, who ruled under democratic slogans. This was a foreshadowing of some of the worst political violence of the twentieth century. It was Nazism, Fascism, and Communism that transformed formerly peaceful societies into violent communities in which life did indeed become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Leviathan didn't fix the problem; it bred it—and fastened it on society as a permanent condition.

What is striking about Hobbes is that he thought not at all about economic problems. The problem of human material well-being was not part of his intellectual apparatus. He could not have imagined what England would become only a century to a century and a half later: a bastion of freedom and rising prosperity for everyone.

He wrote at the tail end of an epoch before the rise of old-style liberalism. In England, John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* would not be written for

another 30 years, a book that would supply the essential framework of the Declaration of Independence and lead to the formation of the freest and most prosperous society in the history of the world.

Because Hobbes didn't think about economic issues, the essential liberal insight was not part of his thinking. And what is that insight? It is summed up in Frédéric Bastiat's claim that "the great social tendencies are harmonious." What he means by this is that society contains within itself the capacity to resolve conflicts and create and sustain institutions that further social cooperation. By pursuing their individual self-interest, people can come to mutual agreement and engage in exchange to their mutual benefit.

Bastiat did not suppose that everyone in society is smart, enlightened, talented, educated, and peaceful. He was saying that society can deal with malevolence through the exchange economy, and in precisely the way we see today: private security companies, private production of locks and guns, private arbitration, and private insurance. The free market can organize protection better than the state. Private enterprise can and does provide the police function better than the state. As Hayek argued, the state is wildly overrated as a mechanism of order keeping. The state is and has been in history a source of disorder and chaos, and this problem gets worse the more the state grows. If you doubt it, look no further than the jail, a place where the state is fully in charge. ■

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