

OMP-Nowlan-The Politics of Guns in America

The Politics of Guns in America

By Jim Nowlan

I write a column for a major Chinese newspaper on “Understanding America” (wish I did). The paper asked for a piece on the issue of guns in America. The following is a shortened version of the column. Am I explaining things correctly?

Americans own 300 million guns, about one for every person, although most gun owners possess more than one gun. According to a recent article in the New Yorker magazine, 100,000 Americans are killed or wounded with guns in an average year.

Culture and politics have brought us to this place, and little of real substance is likely to be done about it, even in the wake of 11 mass murders in the U.S. this year, including the recent horrific slaying of 20 very young schoolchildren.

Guns have been a part of America since before our founding, to settle the new continent and shoot game and Indians. Today, especially in rural America where I live, it is a rite of passage for a father to take his young son out hunting deer with shot-guns for the first time. In deer season, hunters dressed in canvas camouflage outfits go out in the woods in the cold before dawn to sit up in a tree and wait for deer to come by.

For many the gun is almost like a religion, something revered like our Constitution and for protection from evil-doers.

But even in the early West of America, there was regulation of guns. Towns on the frontier often required visitors to check their guns with the sheriff until they left town.

Yet the confrontation between gun control advocates and those who claim freedom from any gun regulation whatsoever, under the 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, has largely been a fight of the past half-century. And the gun owners have won hands down.

Immediately after our constitution was adopted in 1789, a Bill of Rights of 10 amendments to the charter was promulgated. This was to reassure the new citizenry that rights such as freedom of speech, religion and the press could not be infringed as they had been under the British.

In order to guarantee that the states, still wary of the new national government, could maintain their own militias, the 2nd Amendment states: “A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

Interpretation of just what that language meant and means today has become a matter of emotional contention between gun-rights advocates and opponents.

Just this past month an important appellate court (just under the Supreme Court) in Chicago held in a 2-1 decision that even a ban on concealed weapons carried in public was unconstitutional. Since the 1980s, all of the 49 other states have, based on lobbying by the NRA’s state affiliates, enacted what we call “conceal-and-carry” laws; Illinois was the only hold-out.

Originally a rather bland organization that promoted hunting and gun safety, the NRA became transformed in 1977 under new leadership into a fire-breathing opponent of any and all gun regulation. The NRA has subsequently struck fear into the hearts of most state and federal elected officials.

The NRA has accomplished this by one word: intensity, the burning intensity of feeling among its core members, whom I would estimate at several hundred thousand nationwide out of the four million members of the NRA. This intense, true believer core will harangue, harass, threaten, work against, raise money to defeat, and generally make life miserable for elected officials who are not 100 percent committed to NRA principles.

Just the threat of an NRA campaign against a candidate seeking re-election will cause many officials to toe the NRA line.

Where do we go from here? Because of the NRA, not far. There may be legislation enacted that will outlaw ownership of assault weapons like the AR-15, which was originally developed by the Army for killing people in combat. The legislation may also limit the size of bullet clips that can be used.

This won't stop mass murders. Unfortunately, nothing that I know of will.

Our Constitution would not permit the government to try to collect the 300 million guns that are awash in our society. That would be what we call an ex post facto or retroactive law, prohibited by our Constitution.

There are some conundrums that seemingly cannot be resolved in a free society.