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Freedom and Fear:

Reflections on American Gun Violence in Response to My Father's Shooting

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I have probably written between twenty and thirty pages in total about the March 5th, 2015 shooting of my father. I write about it now again, for what I doubt will be the last time, looking not to the incident itself, but to the narratives fashioned around it. Talking to my sister on the phone outside a hospital room, I told her that when I heard the gunshot I didn't feel afraid or brave. I just started acting, saw my mom bent over dad on the front porch and dialed 911 without thinking. I remember talking to my dad in his bed after surgery, when he told me how scared he was looking down the barrel of a .45, wondering if he could escape with a quick shove and a sprint inside our house. I still wonder what was going through the head of my father's shooter (you can look him up but I'll omit his name here) who, when told by my dad that he would not be allowed to enter our home, fired a single shot into my dad's kneecap and fled with his conspirators. One thing probably not on his mind was the fact that my father is a federal judge; had he known, he may have been dissuaded from such rash action.

After offering these reflections on the actions of individuals during and immediately after my father's shooting, I now turn to the responses which followed its aftermath, and hope to consider which (if any) of my opinions on the long-term response would be different today. At the time of the shooting, I probably knew slightly more about this phenomenon than the average teenager given my strong interest in political issues, but had never been personally affected by it and did not expect to be. Indeed, the details of my father's shooting, beyond the fact that it occurred in Detroit, are exceptional for a number of reasons. He is not only an upper-middle class, aging white man, but a federal judge to boot, of whom only a handful have suffered from gun violence (Harrison Trial). However, being the passionate, politically minded teenager that I was, I could not help but try to reframe the shooting in terms of America's much more general malady of gun violence; I also could not help but think, with my bracketed worldview, that my experience somehow entitled me to address this problem.

Roughly a year following the shooting, I wrote and performed a speech entitled "Freedom from Fear," in which I compared what I viewed as the senselessness and preventability of the shooting, with the senselessness of American gun violence *in general*, concluding that "common-sense gun-control"

solutions could have a huge positive impact. I refer to a number of policies, including but not limited to ammunition assault weapons bans, background checks and other measures increasing the safety of guns. As evidence of the plausibility and efficiency of these solutions, I referred to examples of European nations which successfully implemented similar policies and saw their levels of gun violence decisively decline. In response to the charge that America has a unique and culturally-influenced relationship with guns, I argued that the European and other first-world nation examples indicate that such policies would still have a positive effect in the US, even if these policies are not enough to address the problem in its entirety.

In my regurgitation of the policies typically associated with the Democratic Party, I neglected to make important distinctions between the different kinds of gun violence, and to defend my positions against more than the Republican Party's opposition. To begin with, this opposition often refers to the fact that a majority of the gun deaths in the United States are from suicides; while this can be used to illegitimately belittle the seriousness of guns in America because of the self-inflicted nature of these deaths, it does indicate that these specific policies would do little to address this largest category of violence (Drexler). Recognition of distinct categories within gun violence allows one to examine their respective causes and effects, and presumably take these into account when formulating policy. When it comes to guns within political discourse, there is another distinction which, while less harped on by Republicans, is vital. The distinction is between the phenomenon of high death-rate and high-profile mass shootings, and gun violence related to more conventional criminal activity. The former category has claimed the lives of many in recent years and receives extensive media coverage, while the latter, purportedly addressed by the common-sense controls discussed in "Freedom from Fear", has claimed far more and receives far less ("Mass Shootings").

The majority of gun homicides fall into the secondary category, which dwarfs the high-profile cases of mass shootings in the sheer quantity of deaths (FBI UCR). It seems impossible to deny that the Democratic Party's proposed policy solutions (the ones I support in "Freedom from Fear") are largely in

response to these high-profile examples of mass shootings in schools and other public spaces, and not the much larger problem of conventional gun crime, even if the solutions may have a positive impact on the larger problem. In the case of mass shootings, mental health and the guns themselves are blamed, whereas conventional gun violence is frequently discussed in relation to larger issues like gang activity, drugs, and poverty. This categorical distinction may reflect poorly on the motivations for the policies expressed in “Freedom from Fear”, but it does not seem to immediately negate the value of these policies. If the policies could succeed in one category of gun violence while failing in another, why not still support these policies while keeping the larger problem of gun violence in sight? Because if these policies were enacted, they would create much more violence in the other category, than prevent it in the one they wish to address.

Ironically, in recent years the Democratic Party has become increasingly anti-authoritarian regarding issues of policing, particularly as these issues relate to race in America (Weitzer). But this anti-authoritarian attitude has not taken root in their approach to gun policy, in a failure to associate clearly related issues. The supporters of gun control are obligated to consider its effect on communities that supposedly represent part of the Democratic constituency. They might consider how the war on drugs affected levels of violence in poor and inner-city communities; there is a time-honored American precedent of sacrificing freedom for supposed safety, and those whose freedom is already challenged are the individuals that make this sacrifice for the rest of us (Hari). In other words, regardless of the good intentions behind the Democratic Party’s call for increased gun regulations, the move to give law enforcement even more power to exercise within poor communities is irresponsible, and seemingly antithetical to many liberal positions. It will lead to more oppression, more poverty, and more violence in already afflicted communities, which quite simply outweighs the benefits of possibly decreasing the frequency of mass shootings.

With this reflection, I certainly do not wish to express a right-wing point of view. Far from it, I believe that the policy solutions which will truly address the second category of violence must be far

more encompassing than mere gun control. Members of violent, impoverished communities must be empowered through community policing and local governmental control, not the increased power of large police forces which occupy their neighborhoods like foreign armies. That is why I believe it is vitally important for our politicians to continue to look at the realities which have persisted in America for decades, and not succumb to authoritarianism because of being fearful. If they wish to represent their constituencies, they must be empathetic even to the kinds of violence which do not directly threaten them.

A few years after the shooting, my dad told me that he had a new perspective on serving as a judge. He referred to the rather strange experience of reading about the various gunshot wounds of defendants who would go before him, comparing them to his own and wondering what their recovery was like. As confused as I was on that winter night, I remember having at least one thought which I continue to think about and value to this day. Surrounded by the mass of cop cars which arrived minutes after the shooting, I found myself wondering how many fathers had been shot in Detroit while they waited for police or a medical response which could not arrive in time, or arrive at all. Though this thought sometimes inspires gratitude, and sometimes guilt, it always inspires my conviction that justice cannot be won out of fear. In other words, those who fight for justice have a responsibility to disregard themselves, their own wants, desires, and the dangers that threaten them, to fight fairly for the greater good and equality for all.

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