

George Will's reply to "A Nation of Cowards"

The Last Word, George F. Will

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Are We 'a Nation of Cowards'? Jeffrey Snyder's timing is either perfect or perfectly awful. Just as there seems to be a coalescing consensus that the keys to controlling violent crime are more police and fewer guns, along comes Snyder to trouble the conscience of anyone who thinks so. In his essay "A Nation of Cowards" in The Public Interest quarterly, he argues, with a potent blend of philosophy and fact, as follows:

"Crime is rampant because the law-abiding, each of us, condone it, excuse it, permit it, submit to it. We permit and encourage it because we do not fight back immediately, then and there, where it happens ... The defect is there, in our character. We are a nation of cowards and shirkers."

Strong words, those, but not stronger than his argument, the gravamen of which is that the crime problem cannot be addressed without confronting the moral responsibility of the intended victim. Taking responsibility for one's life, family and community requires fighting back when threatened with violence. How? By possessing and mastering the means of resistance. He means an "equalizer" - a handgun. A responsible citizen, he says, will be trained in the use of his weapon, and will defend himself when faced with lethal violence.

Before examining his argument for an armed citizenry, consider the freshest evidence of the nation's quickened concern about crime. On Election Day voters in liberal Washington state gave emphatic (76 percent) approval to the "three strikes and you're out" initiative which mandates life imprisonment without parole for people convicted of three major felonies. California, although taxaphobic, nevertheless voted to make permanent an existing tax to provide \$1.5 billion for public safety - more police and firemen. (Arson has made fire a facet of California's anxiety about crime.) Fiscally conservative Texas endorsed a \$1 billion bond issue to build more prisons and mental health facilities.

The day after the elections the House of Representatives, with a familiar mixture of posturing and false advertising, passed yet another crime bill, this one purporting to subsidize the hiring of 50,000 police officers. It probably would fund fewer. The Senate promptly pumped up the money. For 40 years Congress has passed a crime bill in every two-year session, except the last one. The criminal class has not been impressed.

The day after the elections the president held a ceremony to push the bill that would require a five-day waiting period for the purchase of a gun. The attention given to this "Brady bill" seems disproportionate, given that 93 percent of the guns obtained by violent criminals are not obtained through lawful transactions that are the focus of most gun control legislation.

More interesting, the day after the elections Sen. Pat Moynihan proposed whopping tax increases on various kinds of handgun ammunition. He even favors a 10,000 percent tax on the Winchester 9mm hollow-tipped Black Talon cartridge. ("Penetrates soft tissue like a throwing star - very nasty," boasts an advertisement.) That tax would make 20 cartridges cost about \$1,500. In large portions of Moynihan's New York City people are slain by stray - that's right, stray - bullets. Moynihan says: Guns do not kill people, bullets do. We have a 200-year supply of guns and a four-year supply of ammunition, so concentrate on the latter.

Snyder, an attorney in Washington, where the mayor begs for military help against crime, demurs, comprehensively. America, he says, is wrongly called an "armed society." He thinks we would be better off if it were. Most of the guns owned by law-abiding citizens are kept at home, but 87 percent of violent crimes occur outside the home. The constantly armed portion of the community consists primarily of the police and violent criminals. Multiplying the former cannot make us safe from the latter.

Self-respect: It is, says Snyder, foolish and craven to expect police to perform as personal bodyguards. The existence of

police does not relieve individuals of all responsibility for self-protection. That judgment has both prudential and moral dimensions. Gun owners like to say, "Call for a cop, call for an ambulance and call for a pizza. See which comes first." The Department of Justice reports that in 1991, for all crimes of violence, only 23 percent of calls to the police were responded to within five minutes. And it is now more likely that an American will be injured by violent crime than that he will be injured in an auto accident.

Feminists, says Snyder, rightly insist that rape is not about sex but about domination. What is at issue in crime is not just property but dignity. Crime, he says, always violates the victim's dignity, which can hardly be said to exist if the victim does not deem it worth fighting for. Crime is "an act of enslavement" and a personal readiness to resist it should be regarded as a prerequisite of self-respect, properly understood. He notes that "self-respect," which implies standards by which one judges oneself, has been supplanted in public discourse by the locution "self-esteem," which simply means having warm feelings about oneself. Repeating the shibboleths of the gun control movement makes many people feel good about themselves. Snyder's argument should disturb their peace.

Much gun control advocacy is directed against normal citizens, who are depicted as at best benighted and at worst barbaric. Gun owners are routinely characterized as uneducated, intolerant, possibly paranoid rednecks - people urgently in need of re-education and 'consciousness-raising' from the liberal agenda. In Mario Cuomo's depiction, gun owners are "hunters who drink beer, don't vote and lie to their wives about where they were all weekend." (Cuomo quickly recanted this. Gun owners do vote.) Actually, the gun-owning population is pretty much like the general population because approximately one of every two households has a gun.

Now, Snyder is right that the gun control movement often radiates distrust of average citizens, whose supposed mental and moral deficiencies are such that "only lack of immediate access to guns prevents the blood from flowing in the streets." Nevertheless, it is reasonable to wonder whether a nation whose citizens cannot program their VCRs and who increasingly will not respect stop-lights (surely you have noticed the increasing lawlessness of drivers) is a nation whose citizens are insufficiently dexterous and too aggressive to be safely armed.

Snyder says the idea that only the police are qualified to use firearms is akin to saying that "only concert pianists may play the piano and only professional athletes may play sports." The flaw in Snyder's analogy is that if you play the piano unskillfully, you neither kill nor wound anyone. However, Snyder has evidence more powerful than his analogy.

In 13 states citizens who wish to carry arms may do so, having met certain requirements. Consider Florida, which in 1987 enacted a concealed-carry law guaranteeing a gun permit to any resident who is at least 21, has no record of crime, mental illness or drug or alcohol abuse, and who has completed a firearms safety course. Florida's homicide rate fell following the enactment of this law, as did the rate in Oregon after the enactment of a similar law. Through June 1993, there had been 160,823 permits issued in Florida. Only 530, or 0.33 percent, of the applicants have been denied permits. This indicates that the law is serving the law-abiding. Only 16 permits, less than 1/100th of 1 percent have been rescinded because of the commission, after issuance, of a crime involving a firearm.

Ninety percent of violent crimes are committed by persons not carrying handguns. This is one reason why the mere brandishing of a gun by a potential victim of violence often is a sufficient response to a would-be attacker. In most cases where a gun is used in self-defense, it is not fired. Can the average citizen be trusted to judge accurately when he or she is in jeopardy? Snyder answers that "rape, robbery and attempted murder are not typically actions rife with ambiguity or subtlety." Furthermore:

"Florida State University criminologist Gary Kleck, using surveys and other data, has determined that armed citizens defend their lives or property with firearms against criminals approximately 1 million times a year. In 98 percent of these instances, the citizen merely brandishes the weapon or fires a warning shot. Only in 2 percent of the cases do citizens actually shoot their assailants. In defending themselves with their firearms, armed citizens kill 2,000 to 3,000 criminals each year, three times the number killed by the police. A nationwide study by Don Kates, the constitutional lawyer and criminologist, found that only 2 percent of civilian shootings involved an innocent person mistakenly identified as a criminal. 'The 'error rate' for the police, however, was 11 percent, more than five times as high." Concerning what we may call "the running of red lights syndrome" in contemporary America, I put the point to Snyder and he fired back a fax:

"Regarding your observation about our society's general level of aggressiveness and disregard for rules, you may wish

to consider Robert Heinlein's famous dictum that 'An armed society is a polite society.' Knowing that one's fellow citizens are armed, greater care is naturally taken not to give offense. The proposition is, of course, difficult to prove, but you can find some support for it in English literature. Observe the polite formality with which strangers address each other in inns in, for example, Fielding's 'Tom Jones' or (with comedic exaggeration) in Dickens's 'Pickwick Papers.' While no doubt attributable in part to England's class structure and the education received by the aristocracy, I would hesitate to say that it has nothing to do with the fact that gentlemen generally were armed.

" Or as is famously said in American literature, by the hero of Owen Wister's "The Virginian," "When you call me that, smile!" Such was politeness in the armed society of 19th-century Wyoming.

Finally, there is the matter of the Second Amendment. This Republic's Founders constitutionalized, which means they made fundamental, the right to possess firearms, and they did not do so unreflectively. They placed that right second in the Bill of Rights, yielding precedence only to rights pertaining to speech, worship and association, and they did that for philosophically serious reasons. The philosophy of classical republicanism recognizes a crucial relationship between personal liberty and possession of arms by a people prepared to use them. Snyder believes that the Second Amendment is as much a product of this philosophy as of the Revolutionary War experience or the exigencies of frontier life: "To own firearms is to affirm that freedom is not a gift from government... As the founding fathers knew well, a government that does not trust its honest, law-abiding, taxpaying citizens with the means of self-defense is not itself worthy of trust."

Yes, and yet... no society can be called successful where violence is so prevalent and random that lawful citizens must go about prepared to dispense violence in self-defense. No one wants to live, raise children and grow old in such a society. But government is constituted to provide, first and foremost, tranquility sufficient to make unnecessary the sort of personal measures that Snyder recommends. If such measures are becoming necessary, do not blame Snyder.

Snyder writes that "the association of personal disarmament with civilized behavior is one of the great unexamined beliefs of our time." Not anymore it isn't. His searching examination of it may not compel your assent - I remain unpersuaded - but it must shake some soothing assumptions regarding crime and civic responsibilities. I am among those whom Snyder faults, civilly but firmly, for insufficient rigor in reasoning about these matters. I find being reproved by him a bracing experience because it enlarges my understanding while subtracting from my certainties. I salute him and thank him.