GUNS AND VIOLENCE: PREJUDICE AND SHORT-SIGHTEDNESS

There is some context that I think is important before proceeding with the substance of my remarks. First, since I am here at a university, let me state that I am not an academic; I do not even have a college or university degree. I have been a journalist all of my professional life and that stretches across almost 50 years in a variety of print and broadcast agencies. I also write books. If I may take advantage of this subject, my latest book, *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, is very relevant. I will, however, resist the temptation to summarize it.

As an African-American I have always lived in predominately Black communities and my thinking is very much grounded by life in these communities. What I see and experience in Black American life does not often make it into the conversation, or perhaps more accurately stated, most often makes it into the conversation in misguided, even prejudicial ways. Nowhere more so than on the issues of guns and violence. And this is a large part of what distorts the current gun debate. And, I think, is what underlay the words of 11-year-old Naomi Wadler speaking at the March 2018 Parkland demonstration in Washington DC: “I am here to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don’t lead on the evening news. . . .I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence, who are simply statistics instead of vibrant, beautiful girls full of potential.” If I substituted African-American “boys” for “girls” what this young woman said would be just as applicable. Removing gender entirely from the equation, Centers for Disease Control researchers have found that gun-
related deaths—homicides, suicides and unintentional deaths—of black children is 10 times the rate for white children.

That horrifying fact stated, and well worth discussion, let me also state that in my view guns themselves are not central to gun violence. My thinking on this is shaped by my experience as a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—SNCC—organizer in Mississippi in the 1960s, where guns helped keep us alive. Indeed, the centuries-long history of Black armed rebellion against slavery and resistance to white supremacist terror illustrates that guns have always been vital to Black lives. Georgia State University professor Akinyele Umoja has written extensively about this and I appreciate and admire his good work. Let me just say here at this point that the absence of the long history of African-American gun use keeps discussion of gun violence in the United States muddled.

Given the violence in this country let me say that I greatly admire what the young marchers raised with their protest in Washington, DC this spring. And what they raised, it seems to me, was a call and a challenge for this nation—the United States—to *civilize* itself. Doing that will require many changes, most of which are beyond the parameters of my discussion today; and the hint of which, as with the young Movement for Black Lives that has emerged in the wake of the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida generates unease and even fear. But surely we can agree that discussion of guns and gun violence, especially, is an important part of any discussion of what the United States should be. Such a discussion is by definition a political discussion and that gets in the way of what could and should be a narrower, reasoned discussion about the practicalities of gun control and gun violence. As a consequence, despite there being no shortage of
ideas about gun control and gun violence, that discussion barely exists in the political arenas where those who rule us live.

The National Rifle Association bears much of the blame for this. At its annual conference on May 21, 1977 what is sometimes called the “Revolt in Cincinnati” took place. Gun rights extremists wearing orange hunting caps took over the organization and the NRA changed from a largely nonpolitical organization primarily focused on gun safety, hunting, conservation and marksmanship to the lobbying organization it is today—extreme and absolutist in its advocacy of 2nd Amendment rights.

This was really part of a growing right-wing political surge reacting to the anti-war movement, civil rights and Black Power movements, the Black Panther Party, the feminist movement and gay rights movement that had been emerging with growing strength since the early 1960s. This reaction, still with us today, can have terrifying manifestations that reveal the violence threaded throughout U.S. culture. A few years ago, for example, Rev. Steven L. Anderson of Faithful Word Baptist Church in Tempe, Arizona, said in a Sunday sermon he titled, Why I Hate Barack Obama, "I'm not going to pray for his good, I'm going to pray he dies and goes to hell." The next day, a member of Anderson’s congregation showed up at an Obama speech in Arizona with an AR-15 rifle and a pistol. He said he brought the weapons to exercise his right to bear arms. This deserves an emphatic crude response but I’ll refrain, confining myself to just uttering BS. I ask you, though, does it really matter what kind of weapon he brought? Is that what’s central to this? And really, do you think this man’s action was about the Second Amendment?
We see something like this over and over again from the so-called Conservative Right today; hypocritically proclaiming the need to defend 2nd Amendment rights with expressions of fear and hostility—fear of immigrants, of Black people, of a government they consider inherently oppressive. NRA head Wayne LaPierre defended gun rights at the Conservative Political Action Conference just a week after the Parkland, Fla. shootings denouncing Barack Obama, media, Hollywood, European-style socialist control of the Democratic Party, philanthropist/businessman George Soros, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, Mexicans, China, Black Lives Matter and NFL players. Not much about the second amendment in his remarks but he does have a first Amendment right to express himself no matter how backward his thoughts.

And just a day after the Parkland protest marches, former Pennsylvania GOP Sen. Rick Santorum suggested the students marching for gun control legislation would be better served by taking CPR classes.

"How about kids instead of looking to someone else to solve their problem, do something about maybe taking CPR classes or trying to deal with situations that when there is a violent shooter that you can actually respond to that," Santorum said on CNN's "State of the Union." I really don’t know what to do about this kind of stupidity from someone who purports to leadership. Maybe ignoring him is part of gun control. I do hope you are aware, however, that a campaign to demonize these high school kids is underway. Shortly after the march, conservative St. Louis radio host Jamie Allman tweeted about one of these young march leaders, “I’ve been hanging out getting ready to ram a hot poker up David Hogg’s ass. Busy working; preparing.”

Meanwhile from the Left-liberal arena’s often elite and entitled quarters, we hear
a kind of class bias; the idea that there is something off, even dangerous, in the minds of
gun proponents; that anyone wanting to possess an AR-15, or has a multiplicity of guns,
or even has a gun of any type, is some kind of trailer-trash yahoo preparing to join, if not
already a member of, the Ku Klux Klan or Nazi party. Hillary Clinton comes to mind
with her declaration during the 2016 presidential campaign that half of Donald Trump’s
supporters were “a basket of deplorables.” She went on to say, “they’re racist, sexist,
homophobic—Islamophobic—you name it.” Or take Obama’s comment during his 2008
presidential campaign that small-town residents in this country “cling to guns and
religion.” This too is ignorance and prejudice.

I do not think that the insistent voices calling for gun control that always pop up
following mass killings like those that occurred at Columbine, Sandy Hook, Mandalay
Bay, Parkland and other places, contribute much to serious discussion about gun control.

I do not know why anyone needs an AR-15. But there are people in the city where
I live who like to shoot paintball guns and pretend they are Rambo, and I do not
understand this, either. What I do understand is that guns are uniquely romanticized in
this country. “Violence is as American as cherry pie,” SNCC’s fifth chairman, H. “Rap”
Brown pointed out in 1967. For those who desire them, an AR-15 is the lethal equivalent
of the toy cowboy pistol kids were given at Christmas when I was a boy. Or as I heard
someone describe them not so long ago, a kind of macho barbie doll. I’d like to see them
outlawed, but if they are I doubt banning them will make much of a dent in the gun
violence that plagues this country every day. Why? Slave revolts notwithstanding—
romanticized in my own African-American family life—it is often the worst aspects of
gun use that are most romanticized. The fantasies around their use is a narcotic worse
than heroin, meth, opioids, or crack in some ways: their use, for example, in “the westward expansion” which is best described as the conquest of Native Americans and the seizure of their lands, their use by gangsters, killers like Al Capone or Bonnie and Clyde; the violence found in virtual reality games. There is in U.S. culture a close and tight embrace of guns and gun violence unlike in any other nation. An important but very large and difficult question that belongs in any gun violence discussion therefore, is, How do we come to grips with the culture of violence that has structured this country since its beginning days? This in my view is the crucial issue and I see few signs that this question is being approached in any significant way. On the optimistic side of my thinking, the current surge of protest, not just in response to Parkland, but the Movement for Black Lives too, may signal the beginning of change on this as the sit-ins I was involved with in 1960 were with regard to segregation and other forms of denial and discrimination in the South.

Many people are often startled when I insist that guns helped make that movement possible; but guns were a routine part of Southern life. They helped put food on the table in poor rural communities. They were used to fend off night riders seeking to murder civil rights activists and their supporters. Indeed, few Southern homes—Black or White—were without guns.

Guns were not the problem—but how they were used defined their danger or their necessity. Klansmen and the like defended White supremacy through aggressive violence. Their actions were backed by state and local governments and largely ignored by the federal government. The armed resistance of local movement supporters was invaluable to the movement’s survival. Groups such as the Deacons for Defense and
Justice of Louisiana, formed to protect nonviolent workers of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), or the “Black Guard” formed in Monroe, N.C. by NAACP leader Robert Williams, were consciously political, highly disciplined and visibly active in protecting movement activists. But this important tradition has been erased by a canon that narrowly defines the Movement as “nonviolent.” The gun tradition which I am standing here to affirm, represents the “Black” piece of American gun tradition and in some respects represents the best part of American gun tradition.

So in today’s world, how should we focus a real discussion of guns and gun violence? Gun violence has unquestionably grown, and more guns are in more hands. But it remains unproven whether the latter is the primary cause of the former.

Start with basic fact instead of political hysteria. To consider a few: There are more than 300 million guns in private hands. Yet there are just—and I use that word cautiously and reluctantly—just a little more than 30,000 gun deaths annually; both a horrifyingly large number and a relatively small number given how many guns are in private hands. About half of gun deaths are suicides. Coherent discussion should begin with these numbers. Gun deaths vary greatly by gender, race, class and geography. CDC 2013 figures—and they haven’t changed that much—put homicide as the cause of 19 percent of white gun deaths; suicide at over 80 percent. In the U.S. black population, however, just 14 percent of gun deaths are due to suicide; 82 percent are homicides. And most of these homicides are in the poorest quarter of urban inner cities. So what should be pushed forward in discussion of gun violence and gun rights? In inner cities mostly populated by poor black and brown people, the problem of gun violence seems to have grown at least in part—in large part I think—because of society’s willful refusal to create
a level playing field. Banning certain types of weapons will not solve the issues of rage, alienation and lack of opportunity that underlie such problems. As I once heard Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan remark: “If you create a jungle don’t be surprised if there are predators in it.” And that’s the reason in neighborhoods like mine—not a “jungle” by any stretch of the imagination, but a predominantly Black working class community with a substantial number of retirees—so many households have guns.

And let me say here that while I have great concern over the violence that exists in some inner city communities, I do not use the term Black-on-Black violence. We do not say White-on-White violence after all. We know the connection between the desperation that exists in some of these communities and violence. To control guns and violence in them, we have to deal with the causes of this desperation. Otherwise, we are kidding ourselves.

But getting directly back to the topic of this conference: Only militarized confiscation will even begin to remove the hundreds of millions of guns in private hands. I think that is impossible. It may be possible nonetheless to achieve some limited forms of gun control: I like to suggest mandatory gun insurance, national registration and proficiency testing, a 21-year-old age requirement and tough penalties for the wrongful use of guns. There is, in fact strong support among gun owners for “common sense” gun control, which is what these suggestions are. This support could form the basis for discussion. But so far Congressional cowardice has prevented that. But in any case, real gun control, that which could reduce or end gun violence, requires a values revolution, a radical humanistic reset of our thoughts and behavior toward ourselves and others. This is not an abstract idea, though not something that will occur overnight, but a principle of
struggle—slow, difficult struggle—that should guide our way toward meaningful gun control through making a better nation.

Thank you.

Charles E. Cobb Jr.
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University of Rochester
Rochester, NY