

Workplace Violence Opinion

Run, Hide, Fight

The Case for ‘Common Sense’ Gun Control

By Daniel Hughes, PhD, CEAP

I was first introduced to American gun culture in 1960 when I spent six weeks in Wyoming. I was ten years old and spent the summer with my uncle, Cleo “Doc” Davis. Uncle Cleo was a self-identified “cowboy” who was born in Scotts Bluff, Nebraska and raised in Laramie, Wyoming. He served in the Merchant Marine during World War II and trained as a chiropractor on the GI Bill. Following his marriage to my mother’s sister, they settled in Wyoming where he opened a practice.

I arrived in Casper, Wyoming, after a two-and-a-half-day train journey. We attended a re-enactment of the Pony Express commemorating the 100th anniversary of the legendary trans-continental Postal rides. As I watched, two riders completed a flawless, albeit furious, exchange of a mail pouch. The crowd whooped and cheered with delight. I quickly learned that Wyoming was far from Brooklyn. It was a summer of new experiences. I visited Yellowstone, attended rodeos, wore cowboy boots, explored alpine forests, and was introduced to the thrill of hunting.

Uncle Cleo was a classic outdoorsman. He had grown up hunting and fishing. Each year he would obtain a license and harvest an elk. He would dress out the animal and prepare it for freezing. Elk meat would provide his family protein throughout the year. It was a lifestyle he cherished.

He taught me to shoot responsibly, emphasizing safety. Repeatedly, he would remark that “all guns are loaded and every horse kicks.” He also cautioned that one should respect the power of nature. “*Out here weather can kill you,*” he’d say. These were valuable common sense lessons for a 10-year-old kid from the city. Today, in the wake of multiple school shootings, we teach 10-year-olds to “*run, hide, and fight.*”

The Role of Firearms

The role of firearms in America’s westward expansion would become mythic. Gun culture and the legend of the American West became synonymous. In 1873 Colt introduced the Single Action Army (SAA) revolver known as “the Peacemaker.” It quickly became standard issue among the U.S. Cavalry.

Similarly, Winchester produced its model 1873 repeating rifle. Together these weapons earned the reputation as the guns that “won the west”. A modified version of the SAA known as the Colt Frontier was engineered to use ammunition compatible with the Winchester 1873.

Accordingly, a well-armed cowboy of the day would carry both the Colt Frontier and the Winchester capable of firing the same bullets. Reportedly, these weapons were involved in the historic Arizona Gunfight at the OK Corral.

Fast forward to today and incidents of gun-related mass violence have become commonplace. Schools, workplaces, night clubs, movie theatres, and concert venues are all targets for armed assaults. In 2017, over 50 people were killed at a country music festival in Las Vegas. School shootings, such as Columbine and Sandy Hook, are particularly horrific. Recently, a group of Florida high school students shamed politicians for protecting guns rather than students.

Today the country remains divided over its relationship to firearms. Political arguments on all sides are driven by deeply held positions regarding the ownership and use of firearms. For some, gun ownership is an inalienable right protected by the United States Constitution. For others, guns are driving an American public health crisis. This issue has become a wedge dividing individuals and communities.

Return to Wyoming

In 1991, I returned to Wyoming with my family. We planned a road trip from Riverton to Glacier National Park. I spent some time with “Doc” Davis, who had acquired a valuable collection of over 200 firearms. He had aged and no longer participated in his annual elk hunt. However, he was proud of his gun collection, which included a variety of shotguns, pistols, hunting rifles, and antique muzzle loaders. Each evening he would show me items from his collection including a “Dirty Harry” 357 magnum revolver, a vintage German Luger, and a prized pair of Centennial Commemorative Colt Peacemakers. My young son was mesmerized as he too was instructed that “*all guns are loaded and every horse kicks.*” Following a visit to the local gunsmith, Doc and I spent a day at the firing range where he instructed me in the use of his favorite hunting rifle, a 257 Weatherby.

Owning a gun in Wyoming was as natural as owning blue jeans or boots. He asked his wife to give me the Peacemakers when he died. “Doc” Davis died three years later. To my knowledge he never shot a man nor was he ever involved in a gun-related accident.

The Conundrum Facing America

Herein lies the conundrum facing America, guns are no more evil than hammers, knives, airplanes or automobiles. Each can be used to kill. However, firearms can be and increasingly are used for malevolent purposes. Accordingly, it would seem that common sense solutions to gun ownership are needed.

As a society we have imposed reasonable restrictions on access to alcohol, tobacco, and automobiles. I have no problem restricting access to firearms for violent criminals, including those convicted of domestic violence. Similarly, people with certain mental health conditions such as major depression with suicidal intent should be protected from easy access to guns.

Accordingly, carefully regulated background checks make sense. This will not prevent all homicides or suicides but rather reduce their prevalence and create opportunities for prudent intervention. I oppose arming teachers.

Children should not be allowed unrestricted access to firearms. We don’t give teenagers the keys to the car without instruction. Adults should be held responsible that children are taught basic life skills and safety techniques.

Lastly, access to military grade weapons such as automatic assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and stinger missiles should be regulated. It defies reason that a troubled 16-year-old adolescent could be permitted to purchase an AR-15. Unfortunately, these issues are frequently distorted and manipulated for political and economic advantage.

Summary

Americans have historic attachments to firearms. This is a cultural reality that should not be dismissed nor ignored. Guns are part of America’s material heritage. They are part of our national history and identity.

Eventually, my aunt sold “Doc” Davis’ entire firearm collection including the Peacemakers. I wish she hadn’t. I would have been proud to own them and pass them along to my children.

Uncle Cleo understood that gun ownership was both a privilege and a responsibility. The development of common sense regulations addressing the public health impacts of firearm violence will require flexible solutions and the capacity for reasonable compromise. It would seem that teaching our children that “*all guns are loaded and every horse kicks*” is preferable to teaching them to “*run, hide, and fight.*”

Daniel Hughes, PhD, CEAP, is an Associate Professor of Environmental Medicine and Public Health and an Employee Assistance Professional who lives, works, and writes in New York City. He may be reached at daniel.hughes@mountsinai.org