

Posted 8/12/19

GOING BALLISTIC

Stop with the tangential! Gun lethality, first and foremost, is about the projectile

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Many years ago, while working as an ATF agent in Phoenix, I became acquainted with a physician whose name came up during one of my investigations. Dr. John, an avid hunter and target shooter, was unmoved when I explained that a man with whom he traded guns was an unlicensed dealer, and that local police had been seizing guns that went through him from thugs on the street.

[That's how most trafficking casework begins.](#) Agents follow the paper trail from a gun's manufacturer to its initial retailer, then "hit the streets" to find out how it wound up in the wrong hands. Illegal "street dealers" often get guns one at a time from individuals such as Dr. John. Some deploy "straw buyers" to buy them in stores. Corrupt licensees are often in the mix, falsifying records and supplying firearms in quantity "out the back door."

Best I knew Dr. John had committed no crime. He was cordial and helpful and we eventually got to know one another quite well. Possibly too well. On my final visit I knocked on the door of his home. Dr. John greeted me warmly. Then with a flourish he pointed to the floor. Somewhere below, he proudly announced, lay the pistol that Big Brother wouldn't get when they came for his guns.

I, too, had once enjoyed firing guns. Proficiency with a firearm, especially a powerful semi-automatic, offers many personal rewards, from the tangible pleasure of operating an intricate gadget to the thrills of accurately striking targets at range. It may be pop psychology, but some also seem to find in guns a sense of power and autonomy that is otherwise lacking.

Perhaps all the above applied to Dr. John, perhaps not. Still, we both knew that whether he really buried a gun wasn't the point. His diatribe about confiscation was meant to signal his commitment to that particular ideological space where Government can't be trusted and it's ultimately everyone for themselves.

Dr. John's point of view wasn't uncommon in Arizona nor in Montana, where I was later posted. Yet while neither I nor my colleagues considered rugged individualism inherently dangerous, extremist baggage occasionally made threat assessments tricky.

How should one deal with the eccentric, reportedly unstable loners who hole up in remote mountain cabins? (One turned out to be the Unabomber.)

Yet when it comes to guns, commercialism confounds things. My first trial in Phoenix involved an unlicensed older gentleman who bought handguns in quantity from a local retailer, then resold them for a tidy profit at gun shows, no paperwork or ID needed. In his opinion, that's how the good Lord decreed guns ought to be dispensed, and if some wound up with criminals, as a police officer testified, that was simply a cost of liberty.

I was pleased that jurors ultimately found the man guilty. It didn't happen quickly, as several were conflicted about pinning a felony on a seemingly well-intended entrepreneur.

Out-and-out greed by commercial gun stores was the subtext for my final years with ATF, when I supervised a trafficking squad in Los Angeles. Methodically tracing guns recovered by police led us to an array of licensed dealers who sold guns under-the-table to street marketers. [My published research paper](#) discussed the appalling contribution of such practices to street crime. One instance, the murder of an LAPD officer, stuck with me through the years. An affecting example of how making a buck can lead so-called "businesspersons" to make terrible decisions, it eventually inspired a screenplay. Alas, the lack of a happy ending probably dooms it in Hollywood-land.

Guns aren't only about street crime. [Waves of mass shootings](#), most recently in [Dayton](#) and [El Paso](#), have renewed attention on assault weapons. These ballistically-formidable darlings of the gun culture fire projectiles that easily penetrate so-called "[bulletproof](#)" vests. When their bullets pierce flesh they create [massive wound cavities](#), shattering blood vessels and pulverizing nearby organs, with predictable consequences. (Vincent Di Maio's "[Gunshot Wounds](#)" is the standard work on the subject.)

[According to the FBI](#), 510 police officers were feloniously murdered during the past decade. Gunfire claimed 472 officer lives, including 336 by handgun and 108 by rifle. Two rifle calibers characteristic of assault-style weapons, .223/5.56 and 7.62, were responsible for sixty-five deaths. Twenty-one officers were killed by rounds that penetrated their body armor; all but one of these fatalities was caused by a rifle.

When it comes to what's available to the hateful, we're talking lethality, on steroids. There's a good reason why police have increasingly turned to armored cars.

But wait: haven't many states banned assault weapons? Yes, but. Their go-by, [the lapsed 1994 Federal ban](#), limited magazines to ten rounds and prohibited external

baubles such as handgrips. Yet it was silent about what really drives lethality – ballistics. Every state that's dared to institute a "ban" has followed suit.

Why?

For a simple reason. Focusing on ballistics would effectively doom the assault-style pistols and rifles that enthusiasts cherish. That would drive the NRA berserk and, not incidentally, threaten the survival of the firearms industry, whose profits depend on cranking out ever-more-lethal hardware. Instead, lawmakers boast about regulating peripheral aspects such as magazine capacity, [bump stocks](#) and the like. These "controls" are ridiculously easy to circumvent. Most recently, [authorities breathlessly announced](#) that Connor Betts, who perpetrated the [Dayton](#) massacre, bought a readily-available "shoulder brace" to help steady the so-called .223 "pistol" he legally purchased, thus transforming it into an illegal short-barreled rifle. And consider the December 2015 [San Bernardino massacre](#) in supposedly gun-stern California, where a married couple murdered fourteen and wounded twenty with a pair of state-legal AR-15 clones, both modified to increase ammunition capacity, a simple process that's clearly described online.

In any event, whether high-powered weapons are short or long, or have bump stocks or extended magazines, their killing power centers on *ballistics*. That's clearly how the rest of the civilized world perceives it. In 1988, one year after an angry [Hungerford](#) man used a handgun and two rifles to gun down sixteen persons, Britain banned all semi-automatic rifles beyond .22 rimfire. And despite its vibrant gun culture, New Zealand is presently buying back semi-auto rifles, which were largely banned after this year's murderous rampage in [Christchurch](#).

But in our polarized land we prefer to make-believe. Consider, for example, the drive to expand the use of ["red flag" laws](#), which empower judges to order gun seizures from the allegedly violence-prone. While there's no question that dangerous characters shouldn't have guns, liberty interests and practical issues unavoidably constrain the laws' reach. While occasionally useful, they are certainly no answer to the gun massacres that bedevil society. Considering that many perpetrators obtain their guns legally, and that guns are readily availability through the unofficial marketplace, neither are background checks.

How to make a difference? We could devise [a scale that emphasizes what really counts](#). Points (demerits) would be assessed for the factor that most directly affects lethality – ballistics. Secondary issues such as ammunition capacity, cyclic rate and accuracy at range could also be considered. Guns with high scores would be banned outright, while others might be subject to a range of controls. Of course, no system is

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perfect or immune to manipulation. Americans would have to set aside selfish preoccupations and cherished beliefs for the common good. Alas, given our tolerance for mass slaughter, the prognosis is not good.