

Posted 3/9/08

SAFE AT HOME -- NOT!

The presence of guns can instigate violence

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On February 5, 2008 a 20-year old San Fernando Valley man with mental problems and a history of violence **shot and killed** his father and two brothers at the home they shared, called 911 to let the police know, then killed a SWAT officer and seriously wounded his partner when officers, thinking there were victims to rescue, rushed in. The assailant, who was armed with a shotgun and a handgun, was shot dead.

Less than three weeks later, in a prosperous Orange County community about forty miles away, a 41-year old man **shotgunned his family**, killing his wife, their two girls, ages 8 and 9, their 5-year old boy, and finally himself. A sixth victim, a 14-year old son, was also wounded but is recovering. Police were alerted by neighbors who heard gunfire. The couple had separated in the past and were apparently having financial problems.

Two days later, in a working class L.A. suburb about sixteen miles away, a 28-year old man with mental problems used a handgun to **shoot and kill** his mother. He then broke into the house next door, killed a woman and her child and wounded two other children, one critically. He was arrested by police while standing on the street with the gun in his hands.

It's not just California. Consider Tennessee. On February 27, in a rural town that prominently bills itself "a good place to live," a romantically distraught 26-year old man armed with a .45 pistol visited his ex-girlfriend's apartment under a pretext. He **shot and killed** the young woman's mother, a current boyfriend and two other adults, then fled and committed suicide as police closed in.

Eleven days later, officers responding to a call by a concerned relative discovered six persons -- two men, two women and two children under five -- **shot dead** in a Memphis home. Two other children and an infant were found in extremely critical condition. The shootings, which police said occurred hours earlier, were overheard by neighbors but ignored as gunfire was not uncommon. On March 8 police arrested one of the occupant's brothers, who had just been released from prison after serving a term for murder. Authorities said that the slayings were motivated by an argument.

What's to be done? Online gun retailer Eric Thompson, who sold ammo magazines to N.I.U. shooter Steven Kazmierczak and a pistol to Virginia Tech killer

Seung-Hui Cho, has a [ready solution](#): guns for everyone! But would the N.R.A.'s main prescription for domestic tranquility really help? Shootings in public places, such as on school grounds, usually take place quickly and with no forewarning. If a madman suddenly strikes, would armed citizens have the opportunity let alone the skill and presence of mind to engage the shooter effectively, and without placing innocents at risk? Preventing massacres in private residences seems well-nigh impossible. Must mom, dad, the kids, everyone down to the family dog pack a gun while watching T.V.? ("Honey," she says, a thin smile crossing her lips, "*please* don't change the channel!")

In December 1791, when the Second Amendment went into effect, a "handgun" wasn't a .40 caliber Glock with a fifteen-round magazine. It was a bulky, muzzle-loading single-shot flintlock that could take nearly a minute to prepare for a second round. Such weapons, even those newly manufactured, aren't considered to be firearms under [Federal law](#) (18 USC 921[a][3] and [16]). No matter the N.R.A.'s glib assertions, the combination of gun lethality and human fallibility make the idea of a ubiquitously armed citizenry intolerable. Exactly how many incidents of road rage with a gun -- or *any* rage with a gun -- are we willing to accept?

[Academic studies](#) have demonstrated that exposure to violence can lead to aggressive behavior. Is it too far a stretch to suggest that guns might do the same? That they're not merely instruments of violence, but can actually *instigate it*? Anyone who's spent time on the streets knows that firearms create their own atmosphere. It's another kind of climate change we'd be smart to avoid.