

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT PUBLIC SCHIZOPHRENIA

July 17, 2016

The black man who killed five police officers in Dallas a few days ago was not a Muslim. He would have killed more if he could. In Baton Rouge, another man shot three officers today, and wounded several. No one would claim these murderous frenzies were religiously motivated.

Likewise, the killer in Nice, who never set foot in a mosque, is no more a Muslim than I am a Catholic (although I was baptized). He is a so-called Arab, which is the French equivalent of the American Black, although much lower socially and blatantly despised and segregated against by the general population since the beginning of the 20th century. The killing was a rampage, not much different from killing rampages in the U.S., except for the choice of the weapon, and it seems a truck is much more effective than a machine gun. ISIS could have been his ultimate excuse, but he never claimed it was. Would anyone blame the Lockerbie bombing, that killed 270, on Muslim terrorism, although it was Arab terrorism indeed? (Strangely, the much more frequent and lethal pre-CNN terrorist attacks have been largely forgotten, especially those of the 70's and 80's.)

There will be more rampage killings, whether firearms are available or not. The problem is not the existence of the mad killers, the problem is how societies choose to protect themselves. Mixing up issues will not help devise solutions. Bouncing from one simplistic and disingenuous explanation to the next won't help either. Many believe that banning firearms would be the paramount miraculous cure in America. From recent events in Europe it would obviously not be. In relation to their respective populations, there were 25 times as many victims of rampage killings in France, where firearms are banned, than in America in the last year and a half. The problem, which is a problem of law enforcement, is elsewhere. Public hysteria, paranoia, and schizophrenia won't be of any help, not any more than idiotic public declarations, such as the French President declaring that the Nice killings were engineered to hurt the Republic on a Day of Celebration of Freedom (more likely, the killer would chose that night because large crowds would be on the street), or the French Prime Minister declaring that from now on the Nation will have to live with that sort of killings (in effect conceding defeat before he even starts the fight, directly in line with the spirit of the June 1940 Armistice), or Mr. Trump declaring that he will ask Congress for a Declaration of War (war against which nation is unclear. The U.S. are fighting ISIS already. Before declaring war on ISIS Congress would first have to recognize ISIS as a nation. Are we willing to do that?), or some other commentators asking for NATO to be involved (the whole of NATO, against a lone killer whom it is impossible in current circumstances to identify beforehand?). Laughable, if it were not so sad.

We don't even know what the real motives for the rampage were, yet. Public imbecility will not ease the current feeling of helplessness. Incidentally, the horrible and unacceptable Nice rampage was equal to only one month of everyday murders in a country where supposedly murdering others is all but impossible.

The current wave of killing rampages is a real issue, although it is far from jeopardizing the survival of civilization: one killing is as unacceptable as a thousand, and by the way, the maximum penalty for killing one is the same as that for killing a million.

It seems to me that identifying the real causes of insecurity is paramount, if a cure is to be devised. These causes are probably multiple and quite complex and if we knew what they are the problem would already be solved. The solutions loudly advocated by the demagogues will not only fail to be productive, they will also exacerbate the problem by increasing the level of international hatred. How could anyone think that bombing more widows and babies in Damascus could in any way prevent a lone madman in France from perpetrating his murderous feat? Grow up, People! Think!

Moreover, it seems France is prone to severe and repeated mass killings. Either French killers are oddly craftier than elsewhere, or the French law enforcement system is seriously, and repeatedly, deficient. I would lean toward the latter.

If you get wet in the rain but neglected to take an umbrella, you can rant all you want against the rain, it won't make you any dryer.

PS: the crash of EgyptAir flight 804 on May 19th, for which Muslim terrorism was immediately blamed, seems after investigation to be accidental. Although the terrorist theory made all international front pages, I don't see that the actual sober explanation does.

July 7, 2016

Trying to communicate a sense of proportion.

In the image below, which originally had a size of 1440 x 900 pixels, a common good quality monitor size (65% larger than an iPad screen), the blue background represents the population of the United States, about 250 people per pixel.

The green rectangle near the right bottom corner represents the annual births.

On the left, the 7 top rectangles represent from top to bottom the number of deaths from tobacco consumption, followed by the victims of alcohol, suicide, poison (cyan), motor vehicles, falls, and murder (maroon).

The red center left rectangle represents all the other deaths.

The tiny white spot at the center of the image is the smallest I could draw. It has the size of one pixel. I hope your screen has enough definition to display it. It represents 5 times the deaths from lightning, 10 times the deaths from rampage kills, and 50 times the deaths from terrorism. The recent events don't change anything in the averages.

To show all the annual victims of terrorism in one single pixel, you would need a 10120 x 6325 pixel screen. The biggest screen available at BestBuy sports 3840 x 2160 pixels. You would need 9 units of it, which would cost you \$30,000, just to show all the annual victims of terrorism in one tiny pixel at the center of the central screen. The whole thing would be 225 inches across (19 ft, or 5.7 m).

Terrorism? Who in his or her right mind feels terrorized?



June 14, 2016

From a purely unbiased, detached, non-partisan, legalistic standpoint, how does one understand the following (punctuation not altered)?

Amendment 2 to the U.S. Constitution - Right to Bear Arms. Ratified 12/15/1791.

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

The way I understanding it:

1. Whether the two halves of the sentence are correlated or uncorrelated, nothing confines the amendment to firearms, which means that there is no Constitutional ground for infringing the right of the people to keep and bear arms other than firearms, such as hand grenades, mines, howitzers, rockets, or biological, chemical, and nuclear arms, among others.
2. If the two halves of the sentence are correlated, and if the first half relates only to the National Guards, the State Defense Forces, and the Reserve Militias, all well regulated and well organized organizations that issue equipment and arms to their recruits upon mobilization, then the second half loses its relevance.
3. If the two halves of the sentence are correlated, and if the people themselves constitute the Militia, then in order to retain the right to keep and bear arms their Militia is required to be well regulated. The current right to keep and bear arms is in fact widely regulated, which does not necessarily mean it is well regulated, but the people's Militia, assuming it exists, is not regulated at all, let alone well regulated.
4. If the two halves of the sentence are correlated, and if private paramilitary organizations are considered part of a well regulated militia, then the second half of the sentence could find its relevance again, although if these organizations are not regulated, let alone well regulated, the relevance is lost. It appears these organizations are not regulated at all.

There exists throughout the nation an array of de-facto legal restrictions that already infringe rigorously the right of the people to keep and bear arms, in particular arms other than firearms, despite the fact that the Amendment does not specify the nature of the arms under consideration. There seems to be a wide collection of abundant and broadly accepted precedents that limit, although do not remove, the right of the people to keep and bear arms. There is ample legal precedent to regulate the type of arms that the people have the right to keep and bear, if such were the wish of Congress.

Because immediate police protection is not instantly available everywhere in the land, and because criminals do keep and bear arms, whether legally or illegally, the issue is as usual quite complex and depends on many factors. A unique solution will not address the true circumstances of every single individual in a population that numbers more people than there are seconds in a decade*.

It seems that if the Town Mouse inflexibly demands the total removal of any right to bear any arm, since he doesn't need any, while the Country Mouse inflexibly demands an absolute unrestricted right to bear any kind of arm, since he needs some, a mutually acceptable understanding is unlikely be reached.

**: for reference, the world population numbers as many individuals as there are seconds in nearly two and a half centuries.*

June 13, 2016

The hysteria continues, only louder. Fifty horrible fatalities last night in Orlando, at the hands of a lunatic, an American citizen born in New York, and people everywhere are talking of barricading their doors for fear of Muslim terrorists on a Christian-killing binge. Don't they have any sense of proportion? Fifty fall victims to murder every single day of the year, and another fifty get run over, while every day 1,300 die of tobacco. As horrible as the event seems at first sight, it is not World War II, with its 40,000 dead men, women and children every single day of the year for 6 long years, worldwide. Forty-thousand, every single day.

One part of the public blames the carnage on Muslims killing Christians (which it is probably not), and the other on easily available weapons (as if the Paris terrorists had been hampered in any way by the total ban on automatic weapons in Europe). Everyone in the media, journalists or readers alike, has a quick and ready explanation and cure for the event, and no one apparently ponders that the problem is very complex and anyhow does not measurably threaten society as a whole.

The average annual number of victims of terrorism (if this was anti-Christian terrorism and not anti-homosexual bigotry), went from 3 to 6 overnight, and the probability of being killed by a terrorist in the next twelve months increased from 0.0000009% to 0.0000018%.

Hysteria, panic, and a wrong assessment of the real magnitude of the problem will not help us design sensible policies.

June 6, 2016

A sense of perspective and proportion

Every year in America:

- Death claims 2,600,000 lives, of which:
- Tobacco kills 480,000 (18.5% of total)
- Alcohol kills 88,000 (3.4%)
- Suicide kills 42,000 (1.6%)
- Poisons kill 39,000 unintentionally (1.5%)
- Motor vehicles kill 35,000, of which nearly one half are pedestrians (1.3%)
- Falls kill 30,000 unintentionally (1.2%)
- Murder kills 16,000 (0.6%)
- Suffocation kills 7,000 unintentionally (0.3%)
- Drowning kills 3,500 unintentionally (0.1%)
- Lightning kills 50 (0.002%)
- Killers on a rampage kill 24 (0.0009%), of which 8 in schoolyards (0.0003%), 5 in the workplace (0.0002%), and 11 on the street (0.0004%)
- Terrorism kills 3 (0.0001%)

We can also say that for each individual the average annual overall probability of dying is 0.8% (across all ages, but much higher as we grow older), while the probability of being run over by an automobile in any given year is 0.005%, of dying at the hands of a common murderer also 0.005%, of being struck by lightning 0.000015%, killed in a schoolyard shooting rampage 0.0000025%, and killed by a terrorist 0.0000009% (less than one millionth of one percent). Count the zeroes.

It could also be said that the life insurance premium for a hypothetical \$100,000,000 (one hundred million dollar) policy covering the lethal risk of terrorism could be as low as \$1 annually, and less than \$2 to cover the risk of schoolyard shooting rampage.

Still, it seems the general population feels much more threatened by terrorists and killers on a rampage than by lightning. I infer from the wide popular success of horror movies that the public must thoroughly relish the thrill of being scared by largely imaginary dangers.

For reference, the overall probability of dying one day has historically been 100%.

PS: seeing the face of the lottery jackpot winner on television does not make me a winner.