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Who's protecting whom from what? Who's protecting what from whom?

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

Here's an American statistic for you about "American exceptionalism" that seems to get lost under the headlines about a slowly recovering economy and a growing number of billionaires. This figure -- at least between attempted massacres like in Austin, Texas, Virginia Tech, Columbine, Aurora and the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, to name a few -- rarely surfaces. The fact that we lose 48,000 people a year in this country to the attacks of private people using privately owned guns seldom makes headlines. Only the atrocities they leave behind them sell newspapers.

There is not another country in the world with that much gun violence on their streets. In the United States, there are 88 guns for every 100 people. That means we already have a privately owned gun for almost every man, woman and child in the country. Only the Arabian Peninsula nation* of Yemen comes anywhere close to that kind of civilian firepower, with a ratio of 54 guns to every 100 Yemeni. So does democracy work or doesn't it? Clearly, "the land of the free and the home of the brave" is fast threatening to become the land of the gun and the home of the dead.

But oh, we cling to them. We shout treason, in fact, in the face of anyone who questions their numbers, their types, their easy availability. "It's un-American," we argue, to dare to challenge even the sale of them, let alone their use. On few other subjects does the pitch of the public discourse reach such frenzy. Politicians shout and pound desks; otherwise mild men turn blue in the face at the thought of even allowing a public discussion of the issue.

You've heard all the arguments against gun control, I know: "Guns don't kill people," the posters say, "people do." As if anybody is arguing that guns, as in "Toy Story 3," just get up at midnight and shoot

people.

Or better yet, these days the argument goes: "If everybody else in the theater in Aurora, Colo., had a gun, so many other people would not have been shot" -- all notion of body armor and strategic weaponry notwithstanding.

Or, as a young man told me yesterday, the purpose of the Second Amendment is to protect the First Amendment. As if that is all that assures the continued functioning of the First Amendment in this country.

Or, this is a free country -- and, apparently, the reduction of violence is an impediment to that.

Or it's unfair to hunters to control gun sales. As if 6,000 rounds of ammunition is necessary during deer season.

Or, a new one: If we take away the right to bear arms, "the government will lead us where we don't want to go, and there won't be a thing we can do about it." As if voting or going to court or passing new laws or protesting peacefully doesn't work, despite the fact that it did during the labor and the suffragette and the civil rights movements. Massive and unrelenting gun wars on the streets have never solved America's problems before. Why would we set ourselves up to do it now?

More to the point, perhaps: If we pass gun-control laws, the National Rifle Association will not be able to buy so much influence in Washington. The NRA will not be contributing so much money to congressional election campaigns. Representatives and senators will not get the big campaign chests that assure their re-election and so guarantee that the country will never get gun-control laws.

Indeed, under all those social tensions, two questions beg to be considered. First: Is federal control of public behavior ever possible in a free country? And second: If so, what kind of controls, if any, can possibly be acceptable?

Well, think about it: The government regulates drugs, even drugs that are critical to a citizen's self-preservation.

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We don't think twice about the necessity to regulate driving speeds even of cars capable of speeds of over 100 mph on highways that are surely capable of holding them.

We regulate alcohol and restrict its public use in order to assure the greatest degree of safety for all.

We regulate food sources, animal care, food products and food processing in the interest of the public good.

We define certification requirements to assure competence in life-altering professions like medicine, air travel, police personnel, lifeguards and lawyers.

And in the midst of it all, in response to the second question about the kinds of controls possible, the Supreme Court has ruled that though U.S. citizens have the right to bear arms, the Second Amendment is liable to "reasonable restrictions."

We also, then, must have a right to be protected from the wanton, uncontrolled, unbalanced, dangerous use of guns in the public arena. We have a right to be protected from Wild West gunfights masking as personal or public defense in our public life. We have a right to protect people who are in no mental state to protect either themselves or someone else from the demons with which they struggle but have no little or no control over themselves. We have a right to be protected from the rise of private arsenals in a country that claims to be a nation of law and order.

We have a right to be protected from chaos promoted in the name of security. Otherwise, dissolve the police forces. Save your money and do it yourself.

What we really need is the right to be protected from an uncontrolled NRA that refuses to be controlled, even reasonably.

Or to put it another way: Why is it that both Gov. Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama were clearly for gun control before they were elected, but not now? Now one won't discuss it at all. The other one finally talked about the problem -- quietly, a bit, sort of -- but notice that there's no specific proposal and definitely no clamor from either side of Congress to support it. No one's lining up to press for such legislation on-camera for this one. Not in an election year. Even as they tell us that they are brave enough to be president, none of them is apparently brave enough to take on the NRA? So much for leadership.

From where I stand, this is a conversation long overdue. Our record for violence in this country is a blight on our public presence as a rational nation among the community of nations. Our refusal to seek a common solution -- better yet, the insistence by some that the answer to violence is more violence, more guns, more shooting, more civilian warfare -- approaches the irrational. At very least, it is a dangerous moment of public docility in the face of one more invisible bully in a nation where bullying has become a national disease -- this time, it seems, by adults.

And, oh yes, by the way, I do come from a family of hunters who never, ever set out to terrify rabbits with AK-47s, 6,000 rounds of ammunition and a drum magazine.

**An earlier version of the story misidentified the location of Yemen.*

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