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Beyond the Gun Fight: The Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Massacre

Donald Braman & Dan Kahan

Legal Times
April 30, 2007

The talking heads have been busy since the horrific shootings at Virginia Tech. Journalists have been trying to gauge what this tragedy will mean for the future of gun control, interviewing pundits on both sides of the debate.

So what, exactly, will Virginia Tech mean for gun control? If you look at this and every other major school shooting over the past 20 years, can you guess which way they have driven public opinion?

Neither way. That's right. Each school shooting has had exactly no discernable effect on public opinion regarding gun control.

But doesn't Virginia Tech speak for itself? Isn't it obvious that reform is necessary after this kind of tragedy?

Well, yes, it is obvious to just about everyone what should happen — it's just that precisely which solution is made obvious turns out to depend on where people stood in the gun debate before the shooting. Plenty of newspapers have been running articles or commentaries with headlines like "Guns Fuel Nightmare at Virginia Tech" and "32 Reasons for Gun Control," but plenty also have been running pieces with headlines like "Once Again, Gun Control Does Not Work" and "Gun Control Kills," too. The debate remains split along the same fault lines it always has been.

CULTURAL VIEWS

The reason for this split has to do with what researchers call "cultural cognition." The same cultural norms that construct an individual's vision of the world also determine which risk — in this context, either that insufficient control of weapons will put citizens in danger of shootings or that excessive control will leave citizens helpless to defend themselves — will loom larger in that person's mind.

Numerous studies have shown that culture comes before risk perception in the mind in just this way. Culture constructs our risk perceptions, both through cognitive mechanisms (such as avoiding cognitive dissonance, the tendency of individuals to discount information that conflicts with their existing beliefs and values) and social practices (such as selecting information sources like a favored news outlet). As a result, individuals with varied and durable conceptions of what is noble and what is base form equally varied and durable conceptions about what is beneficial and what is risky.

This turns out to be characteristic of not just the gun debate, but also a host of seemingly empirical debates over the dangers associated with everything from global warming and nuclear power to HIV transmission risks, drug addiction, trade policy, and safety regulation in the workplace. Risks, as anthropologist Mary Douglas and political scientist Aaron Wildavsky famously noted, come in packages, and gun-risk perceptions are part of broader risk profiles that include other hot-button issues. Empirical risk disputes, they noted, reveal deeper disputes over how the social world should be ordered. Those who prize libertarian ideals and private orderings over social membership and group responsibility are, as a result of cultural cognition, more likely to view governmental regulation as posing serious risks to the economy. In contrast, those whose cultural orientations run in the other direction view unfettered free markets as harmful to human welfare. Competing egalitarian and hierarchical visions of the good society produce similar disputes.

It's no wonder, then, that the culture wars are so intractable: Americans not only prize different principles, they view the world as working in fundamentally different ways. In fact, it's probably a good bet that using emotionally laden evidence such as the tragedy at Virginia Tech to illustrate just how good or bad guns are at protecting people is certain not to make headway in the gun debate. Because people conform their understanding of the world to their deepest cultural commitments, claims that school shootings clearly support one side of the debate about guns strike those on the other side as profoundly deceptive and disingenuous. To them, the opposite inference about gun control is just as obviously supported by the same facts.

DELUDED OR DUPLICITOUS?

Sadly, opposing parties come away from this narrowly consequentialist gun debate believing not just that their opponents prize different values (say,

autonomy, martial prowess, and individual self-reliance versus collective responsibility, pacifism, and reliance on the state for protection, for example), but that the opposing side is either deluded or duplicitous about the facts.

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), an advocate of gun control, recently puzzled over what seems to him to be the incoherence of the opposition: “It’s some type of a cult — ‘Don’t touch; don’t take the gun from my dead, cold hands’ — and I don’t understand it.” And there is plenty of incomprehension on the other side as well. Gun-rights advocate and author John Lott has argued that gun-free zones in schools are at least in part the product of the schools’ being exempted from lawsuits, making them free to disregard the public-safety benefits of firearms: “Parents can’t sue the school for the death of their children,” he has said.

The only way Rangel can understand what gun-rights activists want is to imagine them as brainwashed. And the only way Lott can imagine why school administrators are disarming students and teachers is by theorizing that schools are callously exploiting their verdict-proof status.

The less trustworthy the opponents in this debate believe each other to be, the less willing they are to make even reasonable concessions for fear that if they give an inch, they’ll be taken for a mile. As a result, those advocates claiming that school shootings “prove” something are having the paradoxical effect of hardening their opposition and further polarizing the debate. And that’s a shame, if only because it decreases the chance that reasonable, moderate measures will prevail.

There’s some rich irony here. Many people feel that they’re being respectful of their opponents’ values by forgoing a debate over first principles and instead focusing on how to reduce harm. By focusing on something that we all agree is important — human welfare — the debate over material consequences appears to forgo the taboo of the liberal democracy: cultural warfare.

But whereas debates over cultural values tend to be relatively respectful in our pluralistic society, the debate over the facts quickly descends into a series of recriminations as the participants feel free to go for the throat, attacking each other’s sincerity and motives. We Americans don’t seem to mind so much having different perspectives. It’s that our opponents’ perspectives seem to have a biasing influence on their factual arguments that drives us

crazy. But we fail to recognize that our perceptions of the facts are also shaped by our underlying cultural values.

(By the way, social psychologists call this element of cultural cognition — the ability to see this problem in others but not in ourselves — “naive realism,” and it is considered to be so pervasive as to be ubiquitous.)

THE VALUE OF RESPECT

So how should Americans engage the gun debate? As we have argued recently, all participants should approach one another with respect before discussing empirical claims. We don't have to adopt the views or values of our opponents, but we do need an idiom for talking about guns and gun control that's less vituperative.

Centrist politicians are masters of the art of respectful compromise. It didn't take long, for example, for those on both sides of the aisle to find a reform they could all agree upon: Have states do a better job reporting serious mental illnesses to the federal government and coordinate this reporting with the background checks run before over-the-counter gun sales. It's a small compromise on which nearly everyone can agree and by which no one feels threatened. It's also the kind of narrowly tailored solution that shows that tragedy-based legislation doesn't have to be a radical overreaction in one direction or another.

That will probably be the end of what many in the news media undoubtedly hoped would be a bigger debate. The Democratic Party has finally realized that talking about sweeping gun-control measures is culturally distressing to many of their constituents, and Republicans have realized that trying to do away with national background checks is similarly distressing to their constituents. The big-tenters in both parties are focused on cultural respect, and they are willing to work together to make reasonable and practical reforms.

But politicians are only as respectful as the citizens they are accountable to. Thankfully, ordinary Americans are fully capable of repopulating the center of this cultural debate with more thoughtful and respectful dialogue. That center is where most of us live, and that thoughtfulness and respect is what most of us feel. But to actually have a dialogue, we will have to get over our fear of values talk. The vituperative debate over whether guns, on balance, are good or bad generates far more heat than light, but an honest dialogue about how firearms fit into America's diverse cultural landscape can help us

all understand the real contours of the gun debate and the values that give it the peculiar qualities it has.

Guns play some role in some serious problems, but tackling these problems will require thinking across cultural divides. If we can treat each other as deserving the kind of respect that a pluralistic society requires — and surely that respect is an American value we can all agree on — we will have already won half the battle, because reasoned compromise can follow respectful dialogue.

There's no better time to practice this respect than now. This should be a time for mourning, reflection, and healing. It would be a shame to waste it on recriminations that harden the cultural war over guns.

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