

icans has, rightly or wrongly, been strictly regulated by the federal government since 1934, and many states ban civilians from owning such guns. Semi-automatics have been used by Americans for sport and other legitimate purposes since the turn of the century (before the military started using them), and after World War II, the federal government sold surplus semi-automatic rifles, carbines, and pistols to the public at bargain prices.

In the five years that followed the 1989 Stockton, California, schoolyard shooting which involved the use of a semi-automatic version of the full-automatic AK-47, every time I viewed NBC coverage of “assault weapon” legislation, the gun shown firing was a full-automatic. For five years, NBC led its viewers to believe that the machine guns they were showing were the guns to be covered by the proposed ban on “semi-automatic assault weapons” (which they weren’t), that opponents of the ban want to hunt with machine guns (which they don’t), and that sport is the only legitimate use Americans have for guns (which it isn’t).

I’ve seen the same misleading juxtaposition of machine-gun demonstration and discussion of semi-automatics on CNN. *Newsweek’s* 1985 cover story, “Machine Gun USA,” presented readers with illustrations of several semi-automatic versions of full-automatic guns accompanied by captions citing the much higher firing rates of the latter. This *Newsweek* article and a March 16, 1989, CBS special on “assault weapons” also made light of the difference between semi-automatics and full-automatics on the questionable and irrelevant grounds that the latter can be quickly converted to the former. Yet parts that make some semi-automatics easily convertible to machine guns are themselves classified and regulated as machine guns, while a semi-automatic AK-47 conversion to full-automatic involves a time-consuming and complicated process. Besides, ease of conversion as a criteria for regulation would affect all rifles and shotguns, because they can all be quickly and easily sawed off under legal length.

Nor is “sporting use” the only justification for gun ownership. There is also the Second Amendment. According to the very clear paper trail left by the Founders (detailed in numerous law review articles), these concerns have nothing to do with sport or, for that matter, with the National Guard. The people who put this country together made it very clear

that they wanted an armed citizenry as a check against tyranny. Consider the following comment on the Second Amendment by James Madison’s friend Tench Coxe:

As civil rulers, not having their duty to the people before them, may attempt to tyrannize, and as the military forces which must be occasionally raised to defend our country, might pervert their power to the injury of their fellow citizens, the people are confirmed by the next article in their right to keep and bear their *private* arms [emphasis added].

These same sentiments have been expressed by prominent Americans ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Mr. Liberal himself, Hubert H. Humphrey, but today, in mainstream journalistic circles, such views are labeled extremist.

Given the amount of misinformation the public has received, should we credit polls that show Americans support the now-passed ban on “assault weapons” by over 70 percent? Do those who support the ban want to ban machine guns, which have been regulated by the federal government since 1934 and have long been banned in some states, or do they really want to ban guns that might look like machine guns but work like the ordinary semi-automatics many of them own? Even if we take these polls at face value, since when does public opinion override constitutionally guaranteed rights?

I started following mainstream press coverage of the gun-control movement way back in the late 1950’s when it resurfaced after a 20-year hiatus. Over the past four decades, I have read or viewed thousands of commentaries on the gun issue—newspaper and magazine stories, editorials, columns, political cartoons, and comic strips; TV news reports, documentaries, situation comedies, dramas, and talk shows. My gun-control clipping collection from local newspapers alone is a foot or so high, and I only started systematically collecting in 1981. I am extremely familiar with the media through which most Americans get what they assume to be the facts about guns and gun control.

But unlike most Americans, I’m in a position not only to judge the accuracy of the reported “facts,” but to know what isn’t reported about guns and the contro-

versy over their control. I have spent the six-plus decades of my life around guns and people who know them and use them legitimately, and I’ve read about guns since I was a child. Since the late 1960’s, when I started thinking about doing my sociology doctoral dissertation on the social, cultural, and historical roots of the interest in firearms in the free industrial world, I’ve read hundreds of scholarly articles and books relevant to the gun issue, including historical investigations of the meaning of the Second Amendment, and criminological examinations of the relationship between gun-ownership rates and violent-crime rates. So I know both guns and the scholarly literature relevant to them (a literature to which I have contributed), and I know how to conduct and evaluate social science research. Yet the mainstream media coverage of the gun issue seldom reflects anything that I know about guns from firsthand experience or scholarship.

With a few notable exceptions (among them Henry Allen of the *Washington Post*, Ted Gest of *U.S. News & World Report*, and Hugh Downs of ABC), mainstream journalists are not only ignorant about guns and the legitimate uses to which they are put, but make no effort to overcome their ignorance. They accept uncritically the premises of gun prohibitionists. Among other achievements, the press has made mythical “Saturday night specials,” “cop killer bullets,” “plastic pistols,” and “semi-automatic assault weapons” household terms—all properly demonized, of course.

“Saturday night specials,” you may recall, are the easily-concealed, cheap (talk about definitional precision), small-caliber handguns allegedly of absolutely no use to anyone but criminals. (The label seems to have been derived from the racist phrase “nigger town Saturday night,” as opponents of bans on them have pointed out for over 20 years. Perhaps that’s why liberal Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer of California now calls these weapons “junk guns.”) Whatever these guns are called, reporters are not inclined to ask penetrating questions about them. What reason do we have to believe that criminals prefer shoddy, low-powered handguns, and if they do, why should we encourage them to change to good quality, high-powered handguns? And how can any handgun be so useful to criminals but of no use at

all to honest folks trying to protect themselves? If small, inexpensive guns can be as easily used to defend against crime as they can be used to commit crime, how can you justify bans on the only guns the poor can afford—the poor who enjoy less police protection than the rest of us do?

What about those “cop killer bullets” that NBC first warned the public about back in 1982? You know, those Teflon-coated slugs that can zip right through body armor. Have you ever seen a casualty list of cops laid low by bullets of this sort? Two cops, neither of whom were wearing body armor, were allegedly killed with armor-piercing bullets in 1976, and two years earlier another cop was crippled by a bullet that did penetrate his armor. That’s all I can find for the period before these bullets were banned in 1984. While the Clinton administration is pushing for a wider ban on bullets that can pierce armor, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms has recently released a report indicating that between 1985 and 1994, no bullet fired from a handgun penetrated body armor to kill a police officer.

Did NBC save civilization as we know it by warning us about these things so that they could be banned before they started further thinning the thin blue line? Hardly! Teflon-coated slugs had been around since 1966 or so, they were developed for the police, and they were not sold to the public. It’s also worth noting that practically any slug fired from a center-fire rifle of the kind commonly used by hunters will defeat police body armor. The right combination of shape, speed, and hardness of the projectile is what does the job.

Or take those terrorist-choice “plastic pistols” which Jack Anderson brought to the public’s attention back in 1986. They actually contain about a pound of steel and have become the favorites of many cops across the United States. How were the terrorist demons exorcised from these guns, and why hasn’t the press informed the public accordingly?

In his 1988 report on “assault weapons,” gun-prohibitionist Josh Sugarmann wrote:

The weapons’ menacing looks, coupled with the public’s confusion over fully automatic machine guns versus semi-automatic assault weapons—anything that looks like a machine gun is assumed to be a machine gun—can only increase

the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons. In addition, few people can envision a practical use for these guns.

Note that Sugarmann accurately predicted public support for restrictions on “semi-automatic assault weapons” (an oxymoron; if it’s semi-automatic it’s not an “assault” anything) not because the public was informed, but because it wasn’t informed or likely to become so.

Back in May 1994, I finally became aggravated enough with NBC’s juxtapositions of machine-gun demonstrations and discussions of semi-automatics to call in a complaint. The woman I spoke to confidently told me that they were no longer doing the juxtapositions. Her confidence faded when I told her that I had just seen one. On August 15, 1994, after viewing another juxtaposition, I called in another complaint. The gentleman I spoke to said nothing in reply until I opined that it apparently did no good to call in complaints. He responded that anyone could make a mistake. When I replied that NBC had been making that same mistake for five years, he hung up. I called back immediately to get his name, and he told me that he didn’t have to take that kind of abuse and hung up again.

The next day, I called NBC again and ended up talking to David McCormick, the man in charge of broadcast standards. McCormick was quite pleasant and explained to me that efforts had been made to put a halt to the juxtapositions, but that NBC’s people, affiliates included, were so numerous and far-flung that monitoring them was difficult.

On August 25, 1994, I related my complaints about the juxtapositions and my conversations with NBC staffers to Andrew Lack, president of NBC’s News Division, via letter, with copies to the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and the general manager of NBC’s local affiliate. I have never received an acknowledgment of that letter. NBC did stop showing its misleading juxtapositions shortly before the crime bill with its ban on “semi-automatic assault weapons” was passed. However, NBC has yet to inform its viewers that for five years it led them to believe that the guns to be banned were already regulated machine guns rather than common, if exotic-looking, semi-automatics.

No wonder a recent Pew Research Center survey found that 67 percent of

the public believes that “[i]n dealing with political & social issues news organizations . . . [t]end to favor one side.”

William R. Tonso, a professor of sociology at the University of Evansville, is the editor of The Gun Culture and Its Enemies.

LANGUAGE

The Reality of Written Words

by John Lukacs

In the beginning was the Word. (Not the picture. Or the number.) We are now at the cusp of a movement into a new age when, for large masses of people, verbal images and verbal imagination seem gradually to be replaced by pictorial images and pictorial imagination. I shall attempt to describe one, perhaps seldom observed, aspect of verbal imagination. (“Aspect” is a word I do not like, but, in this case, it may be proper.)

Not only the sound but the visual impression of a word has a powerful, and durable, impact on our minds, indeed on our imagination. That impression, of course, is the consequence of literacy. And we must consider literacy not only a chapter in the long evolving history of human communications but also an increment of human consciousness. Still, I must begin with the sounds of words. That there is a difference between the spoken and the written word, and that in the historical evolution of mankind the first preceded the second, is obvious. (Consider only the origins of the word *language*, related in almost every language to the *tongue*. The *manufacture*—that is, the writing—of words came later.) Many of our earliest and basic words are onomatopoeic, sound-connected. This condition is more than an ancient survival or an aesthetic element. It gives an added meaning to words, a substantial dimension that numbers or scientific categories cannot offer.

There are still “progressives” who think that it is within the province of mankind to produce a universal and scientific world in which human commu-