

The following paragraph was added by the editor of *Shotgun News*, perhaps because this article was written before the tragedy of September 11. I think it adds something to what I wrote:

Editor's note: We in the gun community are fond of saying that the Second Amendment guarantees Americans the means to overturn a tyrannical government. The words of the Founding Fathers prove they intended an armed citizenry serve as a check on government power. Gun owners have tended, however, to avoid discussing the question that must inevitably follow. What oppressions by the state make an armed uprising morally right? I asked several writers to address this question, and most instinctively shied away. It's not an easy or comfortable topic. Clayton Cramer, however, is not one to let a tough topic dissuade him, as readers of his SHOTGUN NEWS columns know well. What follows may provoke you or disturb you, but these are words that needed to be written and need to be read.

Rights and Revolution

It is one of the most stirring statements of political philosophy that the world has ever seen: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Revolutionaries around the globe in the intervening 225 years have often copied it for their own nation's declaration of freedom from a colonial power—though the resulting

governments have often been a disappointment from the standpoint of human rights. While I uphold the principle of a *right* to revolution, we have depressing reminders that it may not always be the wisest step to take. The sentence immediately following this stirring statement that our rights come from God reminds of us this. “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

In school, we learn about the great success of our Revolution—one in which all the principal leaders died in bed, of old age. This, unfortunately, made the American experience quite remarkable. The French Revolution, though started with a righteous cause, became a bloodbath, with revolutionaries killing royalty—and then turning on each other. Amid the chaos, a military man took control, and crowned himself Emperor Napoleon I.

The Russian Revolution also started with reasonable concerns, but within a few months, the Communists had used their great skill—and greater viciousness—to take over a backward country, and make it even more backward. In five years, the Communists executed more people than the Czars had done in the previous century.

Mexico spent more than ten years in revolution starting in 1910, as warlords roamed the countryside, fighting for control. To save ammunition, some warlords would line up prisoners to be executed so that they could kill three men with one shot. By the time Mexico was finally at peace, millions of Mexicans had fled to the United States, vast

quantities of capital had been squandered, and a corrupt political party ran the country, which only recently has been willing to let its opponents win fair elections.

The Spanish Civil War in the 1930s is another example of what can go wrong on the road to revolution. There were really no good guys in that war—a struggle between a Communist-oriented republic that would not respect the religion of the people, and an authoritarian military government that brought peace at the cost of civil liberties and decades of economic stagnation. There were horrifying atrocities committed on both sides.

A revolution is a dangerous method of righting a wrong. You do not know who will win, but all else being equal, it is wise to bet on the most ruthless forces ending up in charge—and very likely, they will be worse than the corrupt and oppressive government that the revolutionaries originally intended to overthrow.

So why is this article here in *Shotgun News*? For two reasons, the first of which should be obvious. Former Representative Bob Dornan stated it on the floor of the House of Representatives on January 25, 1995, as forcefully as any modern elected politician ever has: “the Second Amendment is not for killing little ducks and leaving Huey and Dewey and Louie without an aunt and uncle. It is for hunting politicians....”

The primary reason that the Second Amendment exists is so that our population can overthrow a tyrannical government. Self-defense? The Framers of our Constitution assumed a right to own guns for self-defense, but that wasn't why the Second Amendment was added. The Second Amendment preserves the means by which the people can exercise their right to revolution.

The second reason that this article is here is because we need to recognize that while there is a *right* to revolution, there is also a responsibility to hold our fire until the last possible moment. There are both practical reasons, and moral reasons. The practical reasons are obvious to those of us who remember the 1960s.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, high school civics classes taught a lot of kids how the government is *supposed* to operate. The reality has never been so attractive. Most serious books about political science have always recognized the important role that bribery and its first cousin, campaign contributions, play in how our government actually operates. In those innocent days of Eisenhower and John Kennedy, high schools don't seem to have taught the ugly reality of how government *really* works.

Unfortunately, crooked politicians are a pretty minor problem compared to some of the actions our government took against lawful dissenters during the Vietnam War period. The antiwar movement (most of whom were actually *not* Communists or hippies) discovered that our government did not operate by the rule of law. There were horrifying things done by the FBI during this time, trying to encourage criminal behavior. An acquaintance who was part of the antiwar movement at the time put it very well: "You could always tell who the undercover FBI agent was in our meetings—he was the one who thought burning down the ROTC building was a neat idea." English has borrowed a wonderful French term to describe someone like this: *agent provocateur*—someone who tries to provoke a destructive act that might not otherwise happen.

There are those who claim that government agents played some murky role in the Oklahoma City bombing. I haven't seen any credible evidence to back this up, but from what I know of the federal government's actions against antiwar activists, civil rights

leaders, and black militants in the 1960s, and the federal government's criminal actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco, I don't find this claim unbelievable.

When 1960s middle and upper-class college kids discovered that what they learned about our government in high school civics class wasn't true, some of them went completely off the deep end, blowing up buildings, robbing armored cars to finance their cause, and occasionally murdering each other in internal power struggles. For all the paranoia they caused, and for all the people killed by their efforts (hint: do not smoke while assembling pipe bombs in a New York brownstone), their efforts failed. Most Americans had a blind respect for our government, and these crazy people setting off bombs and murdering minor public officials (as the Symbionese Liberation Army did), increased this blind respect.

Why did the 1960s radicals fail to start a revolution? Part of it, certainly, was because the radicals had some pretty crazy ideas. But it was also because the radicals spent all their time talking to each other, and not very much time talking to average Americans. One of the results was that they perceived a Marxist revolution almost ready to take off—with just a little bit of fuel required to get it started. If you try to start a revolution without some significant fraction of the population in agreement with you, you will accomplish nothing but angering the vast majority, and make it easier for the government to justify oppressive laws.

Revolutionary violence is not only a question of "When?" but also of "What?" A revolutionary group that engages in attacks on innocent people, or destroys property without a very good reason, only aggravates the masses. Timothy McVeigh destroyed more than a building and hundreds of lives on April 19, 1995. He cut the moral high

ground out from under those in Congress who were genuinely concerned about what had happened at Waco.

There had been a moral imbalance on April 18, 1995, the day before McVeigh blew up the Murrah Building. The crimes of the federal government at Waco cried out for attention, and Republicans in Congress were preparing hearings into what had happened. After the Murrah Building was destroyed, you couldn't hear the victims at Waco crying so loudly, because there were other tears now. The news media was much more ready to listen to the victims in Oklahoma City than the victims of Waco, because Oklahoma City wasn't done by the government.

Timothy McVeigh had a righteous anger about what happened at Ruby Ridge and Waco. He was angry that our government did nothing for two years to pursue the criminals responsible for these atrocities. As his anger grew, he came up with a scheme to take revenge for the murder of innocent people—by murdering other innocent people.

He did *not* take out his rage by assassinating FBI officials, or Congressmen, or members of the Clinton Administration who approved of or assisted in covering up the crimes of Waco. Instead, he blew up a building filled with government workers, most of who work for agencies that could only injure us if their paperwork were airdropped onto a house. McVeigh's bomb killed secretaries, file clerks, engineers, computer programmers. He killed people who were in the building to get their Social Security benefits straightened out. He killed a bunch of kids in a day care center.

These weren't clean, quick, painless deaths, either. The victims were crushed between collapsing floors that operated like a gigantic, grotesque grape press, forcing the

rescuers to wade through streams of bodily fluids.¹ People were cut to shreds by broken windows, and ripped apart. At least one of the dead was buried, dug up, and then reburied again, when the government realized that they had buried a corpse with someone else's leg (exactly whose leg remains undetermined).

If any of you are thinking, "The people at Waco suffered terribly too," you are correct. But two wrongs do not make a right. It just doubles the suffering of the victims, the grief of their next of kin, and the anger that causes people to look for someone to blame. Mahatma Gandhi once observed, "An eye for an eye will blind the world." I'm not a pacifist, but there is a powerful truth contained in his observation. Revenge builds on itself.

If, and let me again emphasize *if* we reach a point where revolutionary violence becomes necessary to rise up against a tyrannical government, the revolutionaries must think long and hard about what their actions will be. Those actions, both for the practical reason of not alienating the masses, and for moral reasons, must be proportionate to the governmental tyranny; must be narrowly focused on particular individuals responsible for those crimes; and avoid innocent loss of life.

Proportionate: no one likes paying income taxes, but you don't kill an IRS employee because they have garnished your wages. It's annoying and time consuming to fill out paperwork when you want to buy a gun or build a structure on your land, but you don't kill people at a government agency because you feel your freedom is being infringed.

Narrowly focused: When a law enforcement officer engages in a criminal homicide, you don't hunt down every member of that agency, nor do you assassinate everyone up

¹ Testimony of Mike Shannon, "OKC Bombing Trial Transcript - 05/21/1997 16:31 CDT/CST.

the chain of command from that criminal law enforcement officer, unless you can *clearly* establish that those superiors knew and approved of that criminal action. (The chances of doing that outside a court of law are pretty tiny.)

Innocent loss of life: One of the greatest moral disasters of the twentieth century was acceptance of the idea that it is okay to bomb cities. Even with the best of intentions and cruise missiles, there were noncombatants killed in Iraq. These were tragedies, but largely caused by Saddam Hussein placing military targets in the immediate vicinity of civilians.

World War II, by comparison, is not one of the prouder moments in the history of civilized behavior. Both sides engaged in reprehensible bombing raids, euphemistically called “Strategic Bombing.” Not only were these raids morally wrong, they weren’t even very effective at breaking the population’s will to resist.

A revolutionary needs to think this through very carefully. *If*, and again I emphasize that this must be the step taken in the gravest extreme, *if* it becomes necessary to kill tyrants and their minions, there is no excuse for using high explosives in cities. There is no excuse for lethal chemical weapons or biological weapons.

It might be tempting, if precision tools, like rifles, have been scooped up by the government, to make poison gas. The raw materials are cheap and readily available at Wal-Mart, but an unselective weapon like that makes no distinctions between friend, foe, and neutral. The next of kin will have a hatred of whoever used such a weapon that no amount of explanation will ever calm. Using unselective weapons of mass destruction can cause generations of bitterness. You might win the revolution, but find that the next of kin’s anger will hopelessly poison the new government’s efforts.

“What should provoke a revolution” is a much harder question than “What are legitimate revolutionary actions?” I am sure that we can all imagine governmental actions so horrible that we would be moral failures if we did *not* rise. For example, if the government started to arrest people for no good reason, ship them off to holding facilities somewhere in Nevada, and we never heard from them again. I think most people—even some gun control advocates—would recognize that this sort of Auschwitz-style event required armed revolutionary violence.

But there are a lot of steps between the random abuse of civil liberties that is common in many big cities, and genocide, and it’s sometimes difficult to determine at what point the government’s crimes require us to take action. After Ruby Ridge and Waco, many Americans viewed the standoff in Montana between the FBI and the Freemen with enormous concern. Quite a number of people showed up at the beginning of that siege, armed, much to the chagrin of the FBI. That siege ended peacefully.

Did the FBI show the restraint with the Freemen that they did because they were worried about getting fired on from their rear? Or had they learned something from Waco about what *not* to do? I know that there were people I talked to at the time who thought long and hard about loading up, and driving to Montana—just in case the FBI decided to Waco the Freemen.

As more details came out, some of them in trials in the county in which I live, the Freemen seemed more and more not to be deluded freedom fighters, but conmen with a high-sounding set of slogans, writing bad checks. Looking back on it now, it is difficult to see the Freemen as victims of government abuse in the same way as the Weavers or the Branch Davidians.

It still would not have justified the FBI sending in tanks to end the siege, and such actions would have justified an attack on the FBI's rear. All in all, it was good that the FBI resolved the Freeman siege without killing anyone—but I am glad that they had to worry about their backside. It is amazing how much more moral people can be if they know that immorality will have painful consequences.

I hope that we never get to the point where these questions become an issue—but just in case, I hope that this essay has provoked you to think a bit about these questions. Ponder them long and hard, so that you aren't making rash decisions later.

These troubling questions are the reason that I consider widespread gun ownership to be one of the important protections from out of control governments. No sensible government engages in widespread acts of lawless brutality when the population is well armed; this risks fomenting a revolution. As long as the population is armed, there is the opportunity to right great wrongs at gunpoint. Once the population is disarmed, the best that the masses can do is beg, "Pretty please, play nice."

I used to buy my ice cream cones from a woman with a serial number tattooed on her arm. The first time I saw that tattoo, I was a child, and it was a little startling. The Nazis had sent her to a concentration camp, and given her a serial number, like a valuable piece of factory equipment, or an automobile. To the Nazis, she was not a young woman, with hopes and dreams of her own; she was a device for converting food into labor. That was what made her valuable, and only as long as she continued to produce labor would they keep her alive.

Some of her fellow inmates in that concentration camp were not as lucky. They were gassed as soon as they arrived. What little labor the Nazis could get from sick or elderly

adults—or small children—did not justify keeping them alive, even for a few weeks. Many of those who were kept alive were serial numbered and fed watery soup and a slice or two of bread a day, died after weeks or months of hard labor.

The woman that dished up my ice cream was lucky. Like a good car, she did what she supposed to do. Had she “broken down,” like millions of others in those years, the Nazis would have done to her what you do to an old car. They would have scrapped her, sold off her parts (hair, gold fillings), and junked the rest of her body.

Sometimes I am asked, “Why does anyone need an assault weapon? Isn’t a violent revolution *always* worse than finding a peaceful solution?” Violent revolution is a horrifying prospect, and one that we should always approach with great reluctance. I think back on that woman behind the counter at Baskin-Robbins in Santa Monica. I contemplate the barbarism of an ideology that would reduce people to “capital goods” that they abused until they were only valuable for their “spare parts.” There are things worse than violent revolution—much worse.

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