

back to <http://www.claytoncramer.com>

The Value of Values

A few months back, I wrote a column about the disparity between Al Gore's America and George Bush's America. That column was titled, "Behind Enemy Lines," because that's where I was: in Al Gore's America, a place where many parents regard alcohol and drug use by their kids as more acceptable than hunting or target shooting.

A lot has changed since then. The electronics startup for which I worked ran out of money. (It would have been nice if the CEO had told the employees this little detail when he knew it, rather than waiting until the company owed us many weeks of pay.) A big chunk of the telecommunications equipment industry in which I worked for many years withered on the vine, dried up, and blew away. For the first time since 1979, I was out of work, and it didn't matter where I sent my resume, no one was hiring.

After several anxious months, I started work for a company in Boise, Idaho. I am no longer behind enemy lines. I am in a place where the values of the population largely align with mine.

One of the areas where this is most dramatically obvious is the gun control laws. Idaho's concealed weapon permit law is non-discretionary. If you are an adult with no criminal or mental illness history, no dishonorable discharge, and can show that you have received training with a firearm, you will almost certainly get a permit. Significantly, the

language of the statute providing for permits declares that this is a “citizen's constitutional right to bear arms....”¹

Idaho is still part of the United States, and subject to federal laws, but how Idaho deals with those federal laws says quite a bit about how Idahoans regard guns. For example, Idaho has no machine gun regulation beyond that imposed by the federal government under the National Firearms Act.

Idaho is subject to the Brady Law's requirements for background checks on handguns purchased from licensed dealers, of course, but when the Brady Law was passed, the Idaho legislature expressed its opinion of the procedure: “The legislature finds the procedure imposed in the federal act to be unworkable and burdensome. This act will better serve the interests of the citizens of this state while fulfilling the basic purposes of the federal act.”² If you have a concealed weapon permit issued by Idaho after March 22, 1995, there is no waiting period or background check. If the state police can do a records check on you immediately, you are exempt from the Brady Law's five day waiting period.³ Of course, private party sales of guns are common, and are not restricted.

Nor do the people of Idaho just rely on a sensible legislature. Idaho's state constitution contains this amazing guarantee:

The people have the right to keep and bear arms, which right shall not be abridged; but this provision shall not prevent the passage of laws to govern the carrying of weapons concealed on the person nor prevent passage of legislation providing minimum sentences for crimes committed while in possession of a firearm, nor prevent the passage of legislation providing penalties for the possession of firearms by a convicted felon, nor prevent the passage of any legislation punishing the use of a firearm. No law shall impose licensure, registration or special taxation on the ownership or possession of firearms or ammunition. Nor shall any law permit the confiscation of firearms, except

¹ Clayton E. Cramer and David B. Kopel, “‘Shall Issue’: The New Wave of Concealed Handgun Permit Laws”, *Tennessee Law Review* 62:3 [Spring, 1995] 679-757. See Idaho Code 18-3302 for the details.

² Idaho Code § 19-5401.

³ Idaho Code § 19-5403.

those actually used in the commission of a felony.⁴

So, how well does it work? To hear the gun control advocates tell the story, this utter lack of “reasonable gun control laws” should make Idaho a place where human life is cheap, and murder happens all the time. So how much gun violence does this place have?

Idaho is a largely rural state. It would not be fair to compare Idaho’s crime rates to somewhere like California or Massachusetts, whose population is concentrated in a few big cities. Idaho has only one big city, and that’s the state capital, Boise. Boise is growing rapidly, and has about 174,000 people now. In 2000, it had one murder; the year before, it had two murders.

That’s a murder rate of 0.9 per 100,000 people per year. By comparison, the murder rate of England & Wales in the years 1985-94 was 1.1 per 100,000 people per year; for Scotland it was 1.9 per 100,000 per year in that same period.⁵ During the years 1985-94, throughout the United Kingdom, handguns were very restrictively licensed (and are now completely illegal), rifles were very restrictively licensed, and even shotguns were not easy to lawfully own.

Yes, there are lots of differences between Boise and Britain. But if the gun control advocates are right—that restrictive gun control laws are an important step towards making a peaceful and civilized society—you would expect a big city like Boise to have a much higher murder rate than Britain—and it doesn’t. The best that the gun control

⁴ Idaho Constitution, art. I, § 11.

⁵ “Scotland tops murder league,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/scotland/newsid_664000/664845.stm.

advocates can argue is that there are other factors that have a larger influence on murder rates than gun control. For some odd reason, gun control advocates don't like to talk about these "other factors."

What are those other factors? There is the violence associated with intoxication—alcohol or illegal drugs are present in a majority of murders (as well as crimes like rape, child abuse, and surprisingly enough, robbery). There is also enormous violence associated with the illegal drug trade, as gangs fight for control over turf—though fortunately, some of this has subsided in the last few years.

The absence of fathers deprives teenaged boys of positive and responsible male role models. Not every father does a great job at this, but I'll take the average father over the alternative available to lots of boys today—an older teenaged gang member.

The failure of the criminal justice system to lock up violent criminals is another big factor in high murder rates. This is not just because criminals are free to commit more crimes. It is also because once a significant fraction of the population perceives that the criminal justice system won't protect them or their property, the logical response is to work at *appearing* tough, so that no one messes with you. What is commonly called "respect" in the crime-torn ghettos of America is really, "I'm tough. I'm dangerous. Don't mess with me, or I'll kill you."

The important factor that explains why a place like Boise has little crime —and yet very lax gun laws—is the values of the people that live here. The BBC quoted Scottish Justice Minister Jim Wallace that: "The real problem is one of young men, drink and knives. We need to educate young people away from the 'hard man' approach to life which results in a man in Scotland being more than twice as likely to be murdered as a

man in England and Wales.”⁶ Of course, being Britain, the laws are focused on knives, even though the same BBC article reported that it was not just murders with knives that were more common in Scotland, but, “other objects as well as hitting and kicking were significantly more common in Scotland.”⁷ Scotland’s moral values are obviously quite degraded, compared not only to England, but also compared to Boise.

The next time a gun control advocate insists that gun control laws are needed to deal with America’s violence problem, or pulls out the example of wonderfully safe Britain, throw this example of Boise at them, and ask them to explain why Boise has such a low murder rate with such lax gun laws. Then ask them, “Which do you think would reduce murder rates more? Imposing California’s gun laws on Boise? Or teaching Boise’s morals to California?” Part of why gun control has become such a large part of liberalism’s agenda is that liberalism’s values unintentionally promote violence. A society in which brutality and selfishness are tolerated or encouraged is going to be a society with serious violence problems—regardless of the weapons available. It is easier to focus on inanimate objects used in violence than the moral problems that promote violence.

⁶ “Scotland tops murder league,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/scotland/newsid_664000/664845.stm.

⁷ “Scotland tops murder league,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/scotland/newsid_664000/664845.stm.

Boise isn't perfect, but somehow, the population has ready access to guns, and yet behaves quite a bit better than the people of Britain, who have almost no access to guns at all.

Clayton E. Cramer is a software engineer and historian. His last book was *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Praeger Press, 1999). His web site is <http://www.claytoncramer.com>.