

Availability of Guns Is Not the Cause of Youth Violence

By John R. Lott Jr.

It takes a lot to shock today's jaded movie audiences, especially those attending a Hollywood preview. Yet, Mel Gibson's new movie about the Revolutionary War, *The Patriot*, drew loud "gasps" at a recent screening.

The outrageous scene? Gibson's character handing over guns to his 10- and 13-year-old sons to help fight off British soldiers. Few critics were soothed by the screenwriter replying that the scenes accurately portrayed the complexities of war or Gibson's assurance that he would let his own children use guns in self-defense.

With the Clinton administration blaming the recent outbreaks of school violence on the greater accessibility of guns, it hardly is surprising that some are shocked by children using guns. Many people, including presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore, support making it a crime for anyone under age 21 to possess a handgun.

Despite the political rhetoric, gun availability in the United States has never been as restricted as it is now. As late as 1968, it was possible for children to walk into a hardware store, virtually anywhere in the United States, and buy a rifle. Few states even had age restrictions for buying handguns. Buying a rifle through the mail was easy. Private transfers of guns to

juveniles were unrestricted.

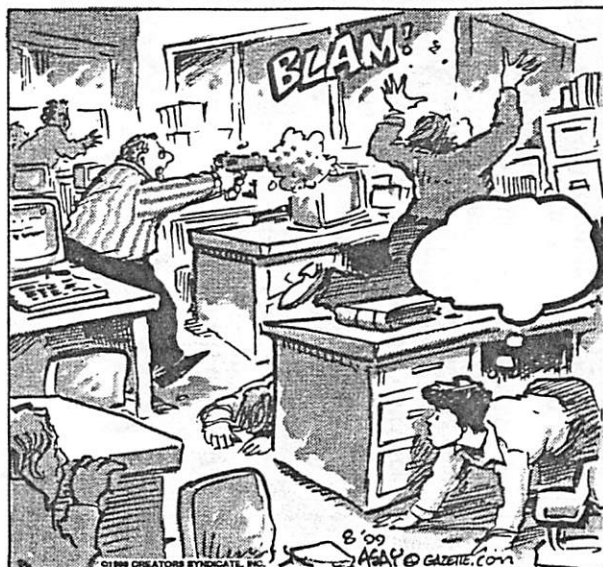
But nowhere were guns more common than at school. Until 1969, virtually every public high school in New York City had a shooting club. High-school students carried their guns to school on the subways in the morning, turned them over to their homeroom teacher or the gym coach and retrieved them after school for target practice. Club members were given their rifles and ammunition by the federal government. Students regularly competed in citywide shooting contests for university scholarships.

Contrast that with what is happening today across the country: college and elementary students expelled from school for even accidentally bringing a water pistol, elementary-school students suspended for carrying a picture of a gun, kindergarten students suspended for playing "cops and robbers" and using their hands as guns and a school superintendent losing his job for even asking whether someone at a school should have a gun to protect the students.

Since the 1960s, the growth of federal gun control has been dramatic. Laws on gun control contained 19,907 words in 1960; by 1999 that figure had quadrupled to 88,413 words. For example, it was not a federal crime for those younger than 18 to possess a handgun until 1994.

State laws have grown similarly.

YOU'RE TRAPPED IN A BUILDING WITH A CRAZED GUNMAN. WHICH THOUGHT DO YOU SUPPOSE WOULD GO THROUGH YOUR MIND?



Even a "gun-friendly" state government such as Texas has gun-control laws containing more than another 41,000 words. None of this includes the burgeoning local regulations.

But whose access really has been restricted by these laws? No academic study shows that waiting periods and background checks have reduced criminal access or resulted in less crime or youth violence, though plenty of research indicates the reverse is true. For the Brady law, delays in the accessibility of guns when women are being stalked or threatened have increased rape rates. While the object obviously is to disarm criminals, the laws primarily are obeyed by good people.

To promote "safe zones" for our children, a 1995 federal law now bans guns within 1,000 feet of a school. Unfortunately, again, it is the law-abiding citizens who disarm — not the criminals intent on harming our children. With the recent school attacks, even the most diehard proponents of this law will be hard-pressed to claim that this law has worked out the way that it was intended.

In Virginia, where rural areas have a long tradition of high-school students going hunting in the morning, before school, the governor tried in vain to get the state Legislature in 1999 to enact an exemption to the federal law allowing high-school students to store their guns in their cars in the school parking lot. Recent attempts in Congress to mandate prosecutions for gun violations will produce unintended results — many good Virginia youths could be headed for jail.

Gibson's movie illustrates some benefits of letting people defend themselves with guns. It is something that sorely has been missing in the current debate. People use guns to stop school shootings or other violent crimes — 2 million defensive uses a year. Yet, when was the last time the national evening news carried a story about someone using his gun to save lives?

The horror with which people react to guns is inversely related to how accessible guns are. Whether it was colonial times or 30 years ago, people had more association with guns but less fear. Gun-control advocates face something of a dilemma: If guns are the problem, why was it that when guns were really accessible, even by students inside schools, we didn't have the problems that plague us now, including the mass school shootings?

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Colorado schools urged to post 'In God We Trust'

Board of Education trying to get religion in schools, critics say

By KATHERINE VOGT
Associated Press

DENVER — Colorado's Board of Education voted yesterday to urge schools to post the words "In God We Trust" — the motto that has been on U.S. currency since the 19th century — in a provocative move that could lead to a court battle over the separation of church and state.

Board Chairman Clair Orr said he proposed the recommendation as a way to celebrate national heritage, traditions and values. "How long can we remain a free nation if our youth don't have civic virtue?" he asked.

But critics accused the board of us-

ing a familiar and generally accepted phrase as a way to inject religion into the public schools.

The resolution calls for the State Board of Education to "encourage the appropriate display in schools and other public buildings of the national motto, 'In God we trust.'"

It was adopted in a 5-1 vote after a meeting that began with a prayer.

Orr said the action would stand up to challenges because it is only a recommendation.

Congress approved "In God We Trust" for the nation's currency in 1864 following a request from a member of the clergy.

The Supreme Court has never decided a direct challenge to the motto. In the past three decades — most recently in 1996 — three federal appeals courts have allowed its use on coins and said it does not amount to an endorsement of religion.

Sue Armstrong, executive director

of the American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado, said she will wait for schools to post "In God We Trust" before deciding whether to take any legal action against it.

"The arguments go back to religious motivation," Armstrong said. "If we're talking about teaching a heritage to our students, then let's put it in our history lessons."

Board member Gully Stanford, who cast the sole dissenting vote, said the measure is insensitive to the religious diversity of students.

"We are a much more pluralistic nation than we were at the founding of our nation," he said. "In this pluralistic society, we must question the proclamation of one belief to the exclusion of another."

Stanford said the timing of the resolution made it more contentious because religion in schools has become "a front-burner issue" recently.

The Colorado legislature this year

refused to require schools to post the Ten Commandments — an idea that has been enacted or is under consideration in more than 10 states. And the U.S. Supreme Court last month banned prayers at high school football games.

A Washington-based watchdog group called Americans United for Separation of Church and State sent a letter to the Colorado school board members urging them to reject the resolution.

"They seem to be trying to inject religion into public schools in an inappropriate way," said Joseph Conn, spokesman for the group.

Some school officials reacted coolly to the resolution.

"I believe so strongly in the separation of church and state that I would be inclined to not support that at this point," said Jon DeStefano, president of the school board for Jefferson County Schools.

Government reports children's vaccination rates at record levels

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The nation's childhood immunization rate reached the highest level on record in 1999.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported yesterday that more than 80 percent of toddlers got five of the six recommended vaccinations.

"Thanks in large part to these high immunization rates, we have seen a breathtaking decline in suffering and death from most vaccine-preventable diseases," Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala said.

The rates for most vaccinations changed only slightly from the year before, though the chicken pox vaccine, first available in 1995, jumped

from 43.2 percent of children in 1998 to 59.4 percent. The immunization rates for the other diseases — measles-mumps-rubella, polio, Haemo-

philus influenza type b, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis and hepatitis B — ranged from 88.1 percent for hepatitis B to 95.9 percent for DTP.