

Practical Aspects of Gun Control, Part 2

Edward D. Duvall
3 Feb 2013

In my previous essay on this topic [1], I addressed the importance of national culture with respect to the ownership of arms. This essay reviews gun control, or as it is more properly called, citizen disarmament, in its historical context.

2 The Historical Aspect

It is no secret that governments always lust for more power, and the one clear path to power is to make the people defenseless. A few examples will show that an unarmed population is ripe for any brand of tyranny the powerful care to dish out, not to mention the professional criminal element.

The Roman Empire

The correct name of the "Roman Empire" was "The Senate and People of Rome". The fact is that the people never mattered too much; and after a while, neither did the Senators as the emperors increased their powers. The empire declined gradually from many causes, most of them related to exorbitant taxes: so bad in fact, that although Italy has the best farmland in Europe, the empire ultimately had to import food because the farmers were literally taxed off their land. The people were always unarmed, and always subject to the caprices of the higher ranks. But things became much worse for the people once the Germanic tribes began to encroach on the territory. Consider the words of the historian de Sismondi, regarding the results of domestic civil wars and the subsequent attitudes of the barbarians upon entering Italy in the middle of the third century AD [2]:

Ninety-two years of nearly incessant civil war taught the world on what a frail and unstable foundation of virtue of the Antonines had reared the felicity of the empire. The people took no share whatever of these intestine wars; the sovereignty had passed into the hands of the legions, and they disposed of it at their leisure; while the cities, indifferent to the claims of the pretenders, having neither garrisons, fortifications, nor armed population, awaited the decision of the legions without a thought of resistance. Yet their helpless and despicable neutrality did not save them from the ferocity or rapacity of the combatants, who wanted other enemies than soldiers, richer plunder than that of a camp; and the slightest mark of favor shown by a city to one pretender to the empire, was avenged by his successful competitor by military executions, and often by the sale of the whole body of the citizens as slaves. ...

In all their invasions, the barbarians preserved the recollection of the long terrors and the long resentment with which the Romans had inspired them. Their hatred was still too fresh and fervent to allow them to show any pity to the vanquished foes. Till then they had seen nothing of the Romans but their soldiers; but when they suddenly penetrated into the midst of these magnificent and populous cities, at first they feared that they should be crushed by a multitude so superior to their own; but, when they saw and understood the cowardice of the enervated masses, their fear changed into the deepest scorn. Their cruelty was in proportion to these two sentiments, and their object was rather destruction than conquest. The population, which had been thinned by the operation of wealth and luxury, was now further reduced by that of poverty. The human species seemed to vanish before the sword of the barbarians. Sometimes they massacred all the inhabitants of a town; sometimes they sent them into slavery, far from the country of their birth.

The Frankish Empire under Charlemagne, Louis I, and Charles II (the Bald)

The famous Charlemagne (whom the French regard as Charles I, one of their greatest kings) presided over a system of continuous foreign warfare and increasing domestic poverty and serfdom. He engaged in no less than 53 military campaigns during his reign (768 - 814), mostly against the Saxons and Slavs [3]. Meanwhile, the main domestic feature of his reign was internal disintegration as evidenced by the growth of servitude and the expansion of overt slavery. These trends came about because the small freeholders were ruined by the wars; the politically-connected nobility deprived freemen of inheritances through court intrigue; and some people voluntarily became serfs in return for protection, since the disarmed population could no longer defend their rights or property [4].

The domestic situation became slightly better under the just Louis I (814-843), but very much worse under the corrupt and incompetent Charles II (843-877). The general trends of the empire included a growing irresponsibility of the nobility, interested now only in their wealth and power, continual degradation of the once-free farmers, overall weakness, both morally and spiritually, and exposure of the unarmed people to every evil, foreign and domestic alike. The consequences of these trends came to their fruition during the invasions of the Danes beginning in 841 [5]:

In the year 841, Oscar, duke of the Northmen or Danes, ascended the Seine as far as Rouen, took and pillaged that great city, to which he set fire on the 14th of May, and continued to lay waste and plunder the banks of the Seine during a fortnight. Not an individual appeared to resist him. The inhabitants of the country were confounded in one common state of degradation and servitude with the cattle, which aided them in their labors; those of the towns were vexed, oppressed, unprotected; all were disarmed; all had lost the requisite determination, as well as physical strength, to defend their lives as well as the slender remnant of property which the nobles had left them. ... The progress of cowardice and debasement among the sons of Charlemagne's soldiers, -- among the French, in whom courage seems generated by the very air they breathe, -- is one of the most remarkable phenomena, but also one of the best attested, of the age we are contemplating: it proves to what a degree slavery can annihilate every virtue, and what a nation may become in which one caste arrogates to itself the exclusive privilege of bearing arms. ... Another division, leaving their boats at Rouen, had advanced by land as far as Beauvais, and had spread desolation throughout the adjacent country. The Danes passed two hundred and eighty-seven days in the country lying on the Seine; and when they quitted it, with their ships laden with the spoil of France, it was not to return home, but to transfer the scene of their depredations to Bordeaux. Yet, we do not hear what either Lothaire or Charles the Bald were doing during this period; nor why those nobles who had reserved to themselves the exclusive right of bearing arms, could not draw a sword in defense of their country. Those ambitious chiefs, who had destroyed at once the power of the king and of the people, seemed now to rival each other only in abject pusillanimity."

The Byzantine Empire

The risk of civilian disarmament is not limited to foreign invasion. The Byzantine Empire, oriental successor to the Eastern Roman Empire, likewise continued the old tradition of rendering the population unarmed and defenseless. By the twelfth century the empire came to be dominated by a military aristocracy, which preyed upon the people as it wished [6]:

The military were the ruling class in the state and they lived off the rest of the population. ... Military service had become the only lucrative profession. The people were crushed by intolerable burdens. The state increased its demands for taxation, and the last straw was provided by the usual extortions of the tax-collectors, who now included a number of foreigners to the great resent-

ment of the taxpayers. In the cities a great many sold their freedom in order to find protection in the service of some powerful lord, a practice by no means unusual in Byzantium. ... But the whole trend of the times, with the growth of the great estates, and the overburdening and impoverishment of the lower classes, made it inevitable that ever wider strata of the population were bartering their freedom to become, if not slaves, then at least serfs.

France during the Hundred Years War

People are often forced to fend for themselves when the government either turns out to be derelict in its duty, or becomes part of the criminal element itself. Guizot, quoting the contemporary chronicler William of Nangis, writes of conditions in France between 1350 and 1390 [7]:

"There was not", he says, "in Anjou, in Touraine, in Beauce, near Orleans and up to the approaches in Paris, any corner of the country which was free from plunderers and robbers. They were so numerous everywhere, either in little forts occupied by them or in the villages and country-places, that peasants and tradesfolks could not travel but at great expense and great peril. The very guards told off to defend cultivators and travelers took part most shamefully in harassing and despoiling them. It was the same in Burgundy and the neighboring countries. Some knights who called themselves friends of the king and of the king's majesty, and whose names I am not minded to set down here, kept in their service brigands who were quite as bad. What is far more strange is that when those folks went into the cities, Paris or elsewhere, everybody knew them and pointed them out, but none durst lay a hand upon them."

England under Henry VII and Henry VIII

The risk of consolidation of power is evident in the history of the first two Tudor kings of England, Henry VII (1485-1509) and Henry VIII (1509-1547). The social structure of feudalism was rapidly declining, and Henry VII enforced the Statute of Livery and Maintenance in order to reduce the nobility [8, 9]:

The introduction of gunpowder had ruined feudalism. The mounted and heavily-armed knight gave way to the meaner footman. Fortresses which had been impregnable against the attacks of the Middle Ages crumbled before the new artillery. Although gunpowder had been in use as early as Crecy, it was not until the accession of the House of Lancaster that it was really brought into effective employment as a military resource. But the revolution in warfare was immediate. ... Broken as was the strength of the baronage [from the civil wars of 1453-1485] there still remained lords whom the new monarch [Henry VII] watched with jealous solicitude. Their power lay in the hosts of disorderly retainers who swarmed around their houses, ready to furnish a force in case of revolt, while in peace they became centers of outrage and defiance to the law. Edward [V] had ordered the dissolution of military households in his Statute of Liveries, and the Statue was enforced by Henry with the utmost severity.

Here we see Henry VII suppressing the organized bands of nobles who had caused the civil unrest during the War of the Roses and afterward. But to concentrate power in one place did not work out too well; we see that within 40 years under Henry VIII, the unarmed people became subject to the worst tyranny in England's history [10]:

The ten years which follow the fall of Wolsey [1531] are among the most momentous in our history. The New Monarchy at last realized its power, and the work for which Wolsey had paved the way was carried out with a terrible thoroughness. The one great institution which could still offer resistance to the royal will was struck down. The Church became a mere instrument of the central des-

potism. The people learned their helplessness in rebellions easily suppressed and avenged with ruthless severity. A reign of terror, organized with consummate skill, held England panic-stricken at Henry's feet. The noblest heads rolled on the block. Virtue and learning could not save Thomas More: royal descent could not save Lady Salisbury. The putting away of one queen, the execution of another, taught England that nothing was too high for Henry's "courage" or too sacred for his "appetite". Parliament assembled only to sanction acts of unscrupulous tyranny, or to build up by its own statutes the great fabric of absolute rule. All the constitutional safeguards of English freedom were swept away. Arbitrary taxation, arbitrary legislation, arbitrary imprisonment were powers claimed without dispute and unsparingly exercised by the Crown.

In the space of a few pages, the great historians de Sismondi, Ostrogorsky, Guizot, and Green demonstrate that an unarmed population is regarded with contempt by foreigners and domestic tyrants alike. All the other honest historians have reached like conclusions. These are but a few instances where history shows the risk of disarmament -- I mean risk to the people, not to the government; governments are never disarmed. It should not be necessary to add to these the more recent examples: a) the policy of universal starvation-and-gulag under Lenin and Stalin in Russia; b) the same under the Kim regimes in North Korea; c) the genocide of the Jews by Hitler, d) the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks; e) the genocide of his fellow Cambodians by Pol Pot; f) the garden-variety tyrannies of Pinochet in Chile, Amin in Uganda, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, and Castro in Cuba; g) the genocide of the recently-disarmed Tutsi's by the Hutu's in Rwanda (as the American administration stood by and watched); and last but not least, h) Mao Zedong [Tse-tung] of China. Together, these regimes murdered about 200 million of their own people in the 20th century alone. Why would we expect any better behavior from governments in the 21st century?

When disarmed, people are executed, massacred, and sold into slavery according to the whims of the armed. We in America may have little fear of an invasion by Canada or Mexico, but be certain that every domestic government contains the possibility of tyranny, and there is of course no need to mention the deeds of criminals who take the same opportunity whenever offered. We shall see a similar case of tyranny in America as enacted by the southern Democrats against the newly-freed slaves. But first, in the next edition, I will address the true context of the Second Amendment to the U. S. Constitution.

References:

- [1] Edward D. Duvall, "Practical Aspects of Gun Control, Part 1", 20 Jan 2013
- [2] J. C. L. de Sismondi, *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire*, London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, and John Taylor, 1834, Vol. 1, pp. 37 - 40
- [3] Francois P. G. Guizot, *The History of France*, New York: John B. Alden, 1885, Vol. 1, p. 168
- [4] J. C. L. de Sismondi, *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire*, London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, and John Taylor, 1834, Vol. 2, pp. 82, 83, 100, 101
- [5] *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 134, 137 - 139
- [6] George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, Revised Edition, 1969, pp. 393, 394
- [7] Francois P. G. Guizot, *The History of France*, New York: John B. Alden, 1885, Vol. 2, pp. 153, 154
- [8] John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People*, New York: American Book Company, 1880, p. 301
- [9] W. F. Finlason, *Reeves' History of the English Law*, London: Reeves and Turner, 1869, Vol. 2, p. 444; Vol. 3, p. 196
- [10] John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People*, New York: American Book Company, 1880, pp. 331, 332