

“A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”

Mark Twain

Is American gun culture racist and paranoid?

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Canada's leading newspapers, including *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, recently gave sympathetic reviews to a book by A.J. Somerset that portrayed American gun culture as racist and paranoid. In his book, *Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun*, Somerset's approach to American gun culture is to search for what he calls “the Wellspring of Crazy.” As he says, “This is the gun culture I am after in this book: the weird stuff.” Somerset dissects movie dialogues and relates juicy newspaper stories to paint a picture of Americans as driven by unreasonable fears to buy guns, or worse, as merely using their fear to excuse racist violence. He claims he is searching for cultural myths but his approach seems more like an excuse to rant than a serious attempt to understand actual cultural norms.

American gun culture

Somerset decries the NRA's influence on American attitudes towards guns, and he slams groups in Canada that support gun rights as “importing the values of the American gun nut.” Claiming to have served in the military, Somerset says he likes guns but not “gun nuts.” He equates American gun culture with “that strange and paranoid corner of America represented by the NRA ... represented by wackos and weirdos (sic) and rednecks” who irrationally arm themselves to shoot “any animal that moves, and fantasizing about the day some criminal will walk up the wrong garden path where they lie in wait, armed, protecting their Second Amendment rights against their own government.” These are the kinds of lurid stereotypes that Somerset hopes appeal to Canadians who are made uneasy by the brash republic to the south. Ultimately, his rambling polemic against American gun culture fails to convince because Somerset relies upon bizarre examples and outrageous sources.

Somerset's portrayal of American gun culture goes awry from the start because his search ignores history in preference to dialogue from selected movies and plays. This is not an honest appraisal of the role of armed citizens or American gun culture. Rather it's a collection of stereotypes that journalists and Hollywood producers hold about American gun culture. Stereotypes are only loosely connected to reality. He spends many pages describing Western movies and even a Shakespearean play, but he ignores what armed citizens actually did as individual family members in settling the frontier, and as militia members in the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars.

To understand American gun culture, one must start with history. Even the most cursory reading of the American Constitution shows that, from the beginning, Americans placed their faith in part-time citizen soldiers to protect their communities -- from threats foreign and domestic -- because the founders steadfastly rejected standing armies, seeing them as an instrument of tyranny. Somerset wrongly imagines that the American public only became interested in firearms after the US Civil War under the influence of commercial advertising and the “frontier myth.” Here he merely echoes the discredited claims of Bellesiles and Brown.

Somerset ridicules the Second Amendment as obsolete. He cannot accept that ordinary citizens, whether organized as militias or acting as individuals, could function effectively in a modern country, whether defending democracy or protecting against criminal violence. Somerset profoundly misunderstands the United States. Unlike Canada, the US was forged by revolution which unsurprisingly involved armed citizens. He fails to appreciate the continued importance of individual freedom (even in Canada). The American Constitution makes clear that the people are sovereign and only grants limited power to the government. Despite government having vastly expanded in the 20th century, and, consequentially having reduced the scope for individual liberty, thanks to the Bill of Rights ordinary citizens still retain considerable freedom. The US is unique among nations in having such a robust Bill of Rights. It is not just the Second Amendment that sets the US apart from Europe or Canada, but the First Amendment does as well. No other country has such robust guarantees for individual freedom of speech as does the US.

Americans have long viewed a standing army as a threat to the republic, preferring to place their trust in the citizenry to protect them from criminal violence, foreign invasion, and governmental tyranny. This may shock Canadians, who, being generally disarmed, are content to rely upon professional military or para-military forces, such as British Regulars during the colonial period, and, more recently, the RMCP to protect them. Historically, Americans, in contrast, recoiled in horror at the same British Red Coats that Canadians love, preferring instead to trust average citizens. Thanks to widespread former military service on the ever-expanding frontier or their experience in hunting to feed their families, many civilians developed the necessary skills with firearms as well as the organizational competence necessary to cooperate with their neighbors in community defence.

Citizen militias remain important in a number of modern countries, not just the US: Switzerland, Israel, Norway, Finland, and Singapore. A militia is distinct from regular military forces, which are units of professional soldiers maintained both in war and peace by the federal government. Unsurprisingly, the reasons civilians decide to form armed groups of civilians are diverse. Somerset points his finger at neo-Nazi groups as well as at government strike breakers. But he fails to mention the black Deacons for Defence who protected the civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s, or other armed groups of blacks who have defended their community from white mobs (Hill 2004; Johnson 2014). Somerset also ignores the socialist union activists known as the “Wobblies” in the early 20th century and other armed unionists who defended themselves from company goons (Krause 1992; Renshaw 1967). His is a strikingly one-sided view of the Second Amendment. By staking out this position, Somerset misunderstands republican ideas of government. In the US, the people are sovereign, and power springs from individuals and flows upwards, first to local communities, then to the state governments, and then eventually to the federal government. This differs radically from the situation in Canada or the UK where power flows downwards from the Queen and is first devolved to provinces, then granted to municipalities, and lastly to individuals.

### Owning firearms for protection

Why do Americans own firearms? As in Canada, a majority of Americans say they own guns because they enjoy hunting and target shooting. However, a roughly equal number of Americans also say that personal safety is the reason. In 2013, Gallup found that 57% reported having firearms for

“hunting/target shooting/recreation/sport,” while 60% also said “personal safety/protection.” Since the sample error ( $\pm 7\%$ ) is larger than this difference, these percentages are practically identical.

Somerset leans heavily on the stereotype that owning firearms for protection indicates paranoia. But he can not close the deal. He does not do the research. To be sure, he identifies examples of paranoid gun owners, but finding weird examples does not prove a general rule. By definition, it is not paranoia when a person has a legitimate reason for fear. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over 6 million Americans were victimized by criminal violence in 2013 (Truman and Langton 2014). It is a truism that the state cannot always protect us. The author may live in a quiet neighborhood, but others do not. If it is prudent to have car insurance or life insurance in order to hedge against catastrophe, certainly it is reasonable to prepare for other kinds of perils, whether regional, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, or power outages, as well as more isolated threats, such an attack by a criminal, terrorist or wild animal. The probability may be small, even minuscule, but the consequences of such events are enormous, even life threatening. Each individual is best situated to weigh the costs and benefits of having a firearm for protection for him or herself.

Somerset misleads the reader by deliberately equating self defence with retribution. By denying the legitimacy of self defence, Somerset assumes his conclusion that all gun use is retaliation for imagined slights. It is an intellectual sleight of hand to conflate self defence with retribution, as they are quite different. It is illegal, as well as immoral, for a citizen to punish another person (of whatever race) who has injured them. By definition, independently deciding to punish or retaliate against another person is “taking the law into your own hands.” That is vigilante action, not self defence. However, it is legal -- even morally justifiable -- to use violence, including deadly force, to protect oneself or one’s family from criminal attack. Stopping an attacker from injuring someone is not vigilantism; it is merely self defence. Legitimate defence cannot be racism, even if the attacking criminal is black. But Somerset, by assuming that self defence is always illusory, pretends that all uses of violence are deliberate acts of retribution.

Somerset has so little respect for average citizens that he pretends they are irresponsible and incompetent. He ignores solid research by respected scholars, such as Gary Kleck and John Lott, that shows fighting back is effective against criminal attack and that an armed response is the most successful tactic (Tark and Kleck 2004; Lott 2015). Kleck and Lott use respected statistical methods to study actual shootings, not media-concocted scenarios, and their conclusions are mutually supporting even though they adopt radically different methodologies.

As Interpol Secretary General Ronald Noble has publicly argued, arming a large number of responsible citizens could be an effective way to defend the public in the face of increasing threats of terrorism. It is impossible to predict where the next attack will occur, and the police cannot be everywhere. A distributed threat demands a distributed response. Armed citizens fill that gap, if well trained and responsible. This is the strategy that the United States is pursuing more broadly against crime with the concealed-carry laws.

Research shows that Americans use firearms responsibly and effectively when they act to protect themselves and their families. Analyzing a series of studies, Kleck established that civilians use guns in self-defence against offenders between 1 million and 2.5 million times each year (Kleck, 1997). Further

research shows that resisting criminal attack is often successful, and that firearm use is the most effective method (Tark and Kleck, 2004)

Americans who decide to arm themselves because of a legitimate fear of crime are extremely law abiding. A study of over 2 million Florida concealed-carry permit holders found that there were 168 revocations for firearms related violations. 168/2 million, or 0.008%. For comparison: a study of American law-enforcement in 2006 found that 118 out of 683,396 full-time police members faced weapons violations, or 0.02% (Lott 2015). In other words, members of the police are 2.5 times more likely to face weapon violation than ordinary citizens with concealed carry permits.

Are Americans who own firearms racist?

This is an inflammatory claim, but other than pointing to the existence of a small number of violent racists, Somerset fails to provide convincing evidence that racism is widespread among American firearms owners. It is undeniable that race in the US is extremely important, and blacks and whites differ considerably. According to surveys (Morin 2015), twice as many whites legally own firearms as blacks (41% to 19%). As well, murder rates for blacks are much higher than those for whites. Blacks constitute just 13% of the population, but 43% of murder victims were black (FBI 2015). But that hardly constitutes racism because 90% of those accused of murdering blacks are black themselves (FBI 2015). Defending oneself or one's family from criminal attack is not racism, even if the attacking criminal is black. But Somerset, by assuming that self defence is illusory, pretends that all uses of violence are deliberate acts of retribution.

To bolster his accusations that American gun owners are racist and paranoid, Somerset portrays the 2012 George Zimmerman case as emblematic. Zimmerman did shoot and kill the teen-aged Trayvon Martin, but was he justified in doing so? Somerset relies exclusively upon biased media reports while ignoring court testimony that exonerated Zimmerman of murder and contradicted spurious claims of racism.

According to court transcripts, Zimmerman confronted a suspicious stranger while on duty one night, while acting as a neighborhood watch volunteer in a gated Florida community that had been troubled by recent break-ins. The suspicious person turned out to be Trayvon Martin, an unemployed teenager temporarily staying in a nearby municipality. Zimmerman related the episode to a 9-1-1 operator as it happened, including when he was forced to defend himself with a handgun after being attacked and overpowered. The police did not initially bring charges against Zimmerman, judging the shooting as a legitimate example of self defence, but because Martin was black, race baiters such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton spurred the media to relentlessly paint Zimmerman as a racist vigilante. Even President Obama weighed in saying Trayvon Martin "could have been me 35 years ago."

Under political pressure, the local District Attorney eventually brought charges against Zimmerman. In the end, a jury of six women acquitted him of all charges, accepting that the evidence was consistent with Zimmerman's claims that he had reasonable grounds to believe he was in danger, and acted without the "ill will, hatred and spite" necessary to prove second-degree murder.

Curiously, media reports typically referred to Zimmerman as a "white Hispanic," even though he was "mixed race," as his mother was Peruvian with a black parent. Zimmerman's black ancestry was ignored

while focusing on Trayvon Martin's. It is impossible to prove that someone is not racist, but Zimmerman's personal history showed no indication of racial bias; he had even volunteered to tutor young black teenagers.

Arguably, Zimmerman could be considered a hero, because, as a neighborhood watch volunteer, he undertook to defend his community, putting himself at risk of being injured, possibly even killed. But the media lionize victimhood, while simultaneously depicting self defence, even heroism, as paranoia and racism. Gun owners may accept and even celebrate self reliance, but the media and the general culture in Canada act as if they are shocked by the idea that individuals can and should assume responsibility for their own lives.

## Conclusion

I cannot recommend this book as it comes across as a dyspeptic rant against American culture. The author's idea of 'cultural analysis' is to cherry pick weird examples. Any culture may be made to look bad through this approach. Worse, he does not understand the concepts of individual freedom or heroism, both of which are central to the American character. The United States encourages individual initiative more than many other countries. Shockingly, the author dishonestly misrepresents both American history and recent events, blaming what he sees as a racist, paranoid American gun culture for spreading gun violence. He cannot accept that some people may need firearms because they have legitimate reasons to fear for their own safety or for the safety of their family. And that such individuals may acquire the skills to use firearms legally, effectively and responsibly. The author may live in a quiet neighborhood, but others do not. It seems excessively naive to ignore the real danger of terrorism or violent crime. The state cannot always protect us. Somerset undercuts his arguments by deliberately ignoring solid research by respected scholars, such as Gary Kleck and John Lott; instead, he relies upon pseudo-scientific public health activists to bolster his claims.

It is a fascinating question about how to identify the myths of American gun culture. Anthropologists have a variety of ways to discover culture, but searching for what Somerset calls "the Wellspring of Crazy" is not one of them. It's not clear why it is acceptable to cherry-pick disgusting anecdotes while ignoring or ridiculing more positive examples. Such an approach would be called racism or sexism if it were used to depict other social groups, such as immigrants, Native Indians or women.

Armed Americans take seriously the tripartite division of people into "wolves," "sheep," and "sheepdogs," which seems to be so disdained by Somerset and Canadian journalists. But people are alive today because other people accepted the responsibility for protecting them. This was expressed perhaps somewhat bombastically by Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice-president: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." As a characterization of American Culture this mantra is more realistic than Somerset's.

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