**Trading lives for guns**

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Mass shootings are good for gun sales. In the days following the horrific massacre of 19 children and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, firearm manufacturers’ stock prices predictably rose. Gun owners, who have been conditioned to purchase weapons out of fear of not being able to buy more guns, tend to run out and buy more weapons in anticipation of coming restrictions. That in turn boosts gun profits and stock prices. It is a macabre cycle that appears to be fueled by Republican-led fear-based culture wars.

Gun buyers behave in ways that suggest they logically anticipate that lawmakers will respond to a mass shooting by making it harder to buy a gun. After all, when consumer products are found to be a danger to humans, they are often regulated.

The federal government routinely recalls dangerous products – such as a line of children’s bunk beds whose defective ladder resulted in the death of a 2-year-old child from Ohio. In that case, nearly 40,000 units sold to the public were recalled. The US Public Interest Research Group has a lengthy list of toys that the federal government has recalled that have posed choking hazards for kids.

It makes sense to regulate harmful products, especially where children’s health and safety are concerned. The government doesn’t sidestep the issue by saying that it was the fault of the child or the parents that a product caused harm. Instead, it acts on the assumption that only safe products should be available for purchase, and it punishes the manufacturer.

But, time and again, gun owners’ very rational fears remain unfounded as thousands of children are victims of gun violence each year, and yet firearms manufacturers are absolved of blame and weapons of war remain easily available for purchase. The Uvalde shooter reportedly bought two AR-15-style rifles legally from a federally licensed gun store just days before the massacre and used one of them to end 21 lives.

A group of pediatricians published a plea in Scientific American in response to the Uvalde shooting and to the fact that gun violence is now the leading cause of death among young people aged 1 to 19. The doctors wrote, “We must do better for our children,” and pointed to “the politicization of guns taking priority over public health.”

How else to explain the endless proliferation of deadly killing machines, when we won’t even tolerate a faulty ladder on a bunk bed?

It’s true that gun sales are big business, with millions of firearm sales each year. Some gun manufacturers with lucrative federal contracts are even using their profits to lobby the government against gun control. But the hold that guns have on the nation goes deeper than plain economics.

It’s also true that the National Rifle Association holds great sway in Washington via its political affiliates making large campaign donations to GOP politicians like Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) to ensure inaction on gun control. But the NRA alone is not driving the tightened grasp on guns.

At the heart of the matter is how guns have become central to the right-wing culture wars in the US today. They have become synonymous with ‘freedom’, or rather, with a perverse interpretation of the word. They are also associated with ‘defense’, a word that appears in the name of the manufacturer, Daniel Defense, whose rifle was used to kill the Uvalde elementary school victims.

The ‘freedom to defend’ oneself has become a powerfully compelling cultural idea for a shrinking white population whose paranoia is being stoked incessantly by Fox News, the Republican Party, and gun manufacturers like Daniel Defense.

The gun-maker engages in aggressive marketing. In one commercial, founder Marty Daniel narrated, “There are two types of people in the world, good people and evil people.” He continued, “And just in case evil people get in charge, good people need to have the ability to fight back.”

While the language of ‘good versus evil’ sounds simple and even benign, in fact, it is often coded language for good white heterosexual guys versus evil Black and Brown people. Or LGBTQ folks. Or undocumented immigrants. Or ‘woke’ white folks.

What is often left unanswered is the question of guns offering the freedom to defend oneself from what, or from whom? It’s certainly not wild animals, in spite of Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy’s recently ludicrous assertion that Americans need AR-15 rifles because of “feral pigs.”

There is a fear that “there are all these criminals out there; they’re going to break into your house in the middle of the night,” Michael Siegel, a visiting professor in the department of public health and community medicine at the Tufts University School of Medicine, told me in a recent interview. “It’s a racialized fear,” he added.

So convinced are right-wing (mostly white, male) gun owners that they need to defend themselves against imagined evil ‘others’ that in the hours after the Uvalde shooting, some went as far as speculating that since Border Patrol had killed the shooter, he must have been an ‘illegal alien’. Others were convinced the shooter was a transgender woman.

The facts about gun ownership and self-defense show just how ludicrous the idea of ‘freedom to defend’ is. The polling company Gallup found that in 2000, 65 percent of Americans cited “protection against crime” as a reason for owning firearms. In 2021, that number jumped to 88 percent. At the same time, violent crime and property crime rates nationwide have dramatically fallen since the 1990s. Meanwhile, studies show that guns are extremely rarely used in self-defense and that it is far more common that they are used to commit assaults, homicides, or suicides or are accidentally discharged.

“This is a charade,” said Siegel of the self-defense trope. “This is not an issue of freedom. The Republicans who are refusing to support these laws, they’re not standing up for freedom.” If parents and children are justifiably afraid of school because of gun violence, “that’s not much of a free society,” he asserted.

Hollywood also bears some blame, using gun violence as a way to raise tension in the plotlines of movies and television shows in what amounts to a massive public relations campaign for gun manufacturers. Researchers Brad Bushman and Dan Romer writing in Quartz found that “acts of gun violence in PG-13 movies nearly tripled over the 30 years between 1985 (the year after the rating was introduced) and 2015.”

Excerpted: ‘Our Country is Trading Children’s Lives for Guns’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org