Weapons of Individual Destruction: A Rhetorical Criticism of the Gun Control Debate in the United States of America

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Introduction

My personal views on gun control have effectively always been that controlling access to guns would be wise. This paper will detail via rhetorical criticism why this has been and will for me, likely always be the case. I will also update in the conclusion how my views have changed over time as well due to the discussion and monitoring of this subject during the period of my class on Rhetorical Criticism (145i) at San José State University. My views on this topic are primarily derived from my father who was in the military, had a MA in History, and was a liberal Democrat. In that light, the issue for me, begins out of history...

The Constitution of The United States of America which, originally amended in 1791, includes the Bill of Rights. The Second Amendment states, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” (U.S. Const. amend. II). In my view, it seems clear that this amendment was included by the founding fathers of this country in that, had they not had access to guns, they would not have been able to form the Union that became the United States of America. For them, freedom required a violent struggle, which guns facilitated.

It is my contention that the founding fathers, having only their experiences of a fight for freedom and liberty, could not foresee the manner in which this country would grow in size and in strength (power), as well as technologically, that such an amendment would lead us to the violence-prone state in which we currently find ourselves. I further contend that if the founders of this nation could envision millions of American lives lost at the hands of it’s own sons and
daughters, they would have “time-bombed” the second amendment so that after the nation’s security had been reasonably assured, the amendment would again be amended to allow for appropriate regulation of guns.

**Guns: a Sign in America Today**

The type of guns available to the average gun buyer in the United States of America (henceforth referred to as America / American – not referring to other countries of North, Central and South America) today ranges from western style six-shooter, to military style semi-automatic weapons. We can assign guns many identifiers from the text on rhetorical criticism by Brummett. Let’s start by stating that indexically (Brummett, 2011 p. 8), having a powerful weapon can be seen as a sign of strength or of power. The gun has also become an icon (Brummett, 2011 p.9) to many of meaningless death. It is clear that guns, in whatever form you take them (positive or negative), hold significant symbolic (Brummett, 2011 p. 10) and widely shared (Brummett, 2011 p. 15) meanings not only in America, but also around the world. Unfortunately, America is also becoming a symbol of the damage guns can do in a society.

In America today, guns have become an artifact (Brummett, 2011 p. 13) of our societal makeup; if a cultural anthropologist from the future were to investigate today’s society in America, they would find much to detail our way of life. It is clear, based on our daily headlines of gun violence, that this future anthropologist would discover such an amount of weapons in private (non-military) use that this would be seen as a significant artifact of American society and it’s societal norms.
American Culture

Brummett notes that simply defining culture is a difficult task; for the purposes of putting the American culture of guns in perspective, we will use the concept of a petri dish that “allows microorganisms to grow and multiply” (Brummett, 2011 p. 21). As an analogy, this definition works quite well; the petri dish is of course the United States of America, the culture is that of guns and their growing use in non-defense uses, and the substrate that allows this growth is the U.S. Constitution.

Having been written into one of the founding documents of this nation, the right to own and bear arms is for many a strong sense of identity. As Brummett states, this is a “highly complex and overlapping set of circumstances,” which “entail(s) consciousness, or ideologies,” and is “experienced through texts” (2011 p. 23). The complexities arise when someone like Gabby Giffords (former member of the U.S. Congress) who was shot in the head and nearly killed by a gunman, also has a history of supporting gun owners rights. Here we see a clear set of overlapping circumstances that has her now holding the position as an advocate for gun rights, but also as an advocate for stricter regulation of the ability to purchase such weapons. The ideologies involved are broad and oddly overlapping. In context, many will be hard pressed to be able to see that both may coexist in cases like Giffords; yet, there she is, Gabby Giffords, sitting in front of congress now, arguing that the rules must change. To me, the wound in her head would seem to make it difficult to argue with this iconic woman. The text we draw out of this set of circumstances is quite interesting to follow. Follow it we must to help unravel the mysteries that lay within the text that is in the culture of guns in this country.
Guns as Power

One of the great challenges the American people face today is that of the gun rights lobby; the NRA (National Rifle Association) and other organizations whose sole reason for existence is to assure that guns are freely and readily available to anyone who wants a gun may acquire one, are powerful groups who spend their members dues and contributions fighting any change to the existing laws as regards gun ownership and use. Brummett notes, “a democracy requires that people govern themselves and to the extent that people are self-governing, they must talk about common problems and devise procedures for shared decision making” (2011 p. 39). At present, we see that an extra-majority of Americans support increased regulation of guns in this country. However, the pro-gun rights lobbyists have been able to successfully deny the American people this desire for stricter gun regulation. How is it possible then that we are actually still considered a democracy? This is of course a rhetorical question. The point here is that Americans are being denied the ability to self govern at the hands of a special interest lobby. It is also clear that in many cases, the use of rhetoric is a key facet of success on either side of the question. Brummett notes, “rhetoric is a form of communication that distributes power widely” (2011 p. 45). He goes on to speak directly to the point on which I am most interested in this section, which is that of power. He states, “if on the other hand, rhetoric is defined unfavorably as something not everyone should do because not everyone should be persuasive, have a voice, or be influential, then public business will be managed by people who have some special status, some special claim to decision making other than persuasiveness” (Brummett, 2011 p. 45). Therein we can see that the gun lobbyists fit neatly in to this description. American culture and power structures are such at this time that the lobbyist has more power than the average
American citizen. This description of gun lobbyist power does not allow for widely distributed power, which we as Americans favor; hence, we must view organizations like the NRA as doing a disservice to the greater American population due to their imbalance of power (having more power than the rest of America).

**A Pluralistic Society**

Brummett defines pluralism as, “the awareness of many perspectives, philosophies, points of view, codes of ethics, aesthetic sensibilities, and so forth, and the awareness of a legitimate grounding for all of these” (2011 p.60). There is no question that America is most certainly now a pluralistic society. The issue is that the collective myriad set of American voices, perspectives, philosophies, ethics, etc., are not heard properly, again, due to the power of money that flows through the gun rights lobby. How then can we as American citizens assert our voices and respect our differences? I suggest that the argument we make as advocates for stricter gun control laws is flawed from the perspective that simply how we talk about it sounds like we seek to take something away.

I suggest that it is time that we change the debate to a different perspective. If we put the light of the concern we voice, the concern of the violence that guns are being used to inflict on the American populace, then perhaps we can once again take control of the debate; let us therefore focus on the issue of controlling violence in this country. The debate we should be having is on violence control not gun control. Seen in that light, perhaps in our pluralistic society, we can begin to make progress towards a land, a shared freedom where we have fewer deaths by guns than we do by say, jay-walking.
I also posit that by leveraging the exceptionally large amount of knowledge Brummett suggests we have gained over time via technology and science (2011 p. 63), we can further leverage our ability to make an impact in this argument. This country has shown our ability to leverage knowledge. By example, consider the massive numbers of deaths on American highways; in the 70’s it was noted that a significant portion of those deaths was due to drunk driving. Over a period of years, a great number of laws were enacted that has driven those numbers down by significant margins. This was knowledge at work in real life. However, this same knowledge does not seem to apply to the violence control efforts many of us make.

Through the Lens of Popular Culture

Brummett details four characteristics of texts found in popular culture; where we understand traditional texts to be “verbal, expository, discrete, and hierarchical,” (Brummett, 2011 p.71), Brummet details how nonverbal texts, metonymy, diffuse, and democratic texts help deliver a view of culture from a popular perspective. Let’s see how those texts impact our perspective on this question…

As regards nonverbal texts, Brummett notes, “people are influenced not only through words but also through the images they see” (Brummett, 2011 p. 71). Visual images are a key facet in the whole of the gun control debate, where we can see that many of us who support gun control laws are horrified at the images like those we saw of grieving families after the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting. Yet, those that argue against gun control are moved by images of guns of many varieties, of those that carry weapons openly, and of their supporters who like to make statements such as, “you can have my gun when you pry it from my cold dead fingers.” All
of these images are central to the whole debate on gun control and factor mightily for both sides. Each is held up as an image that supports their position.

Applying metonymy to the issue, I consider my position to have morphed and now argue that the issue is viewed more clearly if we call the movement to better control access to firearms, violence control; this is not original thought but from a conversation I had with one of my SJSU professors. I believe that the position I favor on this issue is more easily viewed when reduced to this simple fact; much of the violence in this country is due to the ease of availability of guns.

For me, the issue of using guns is most certainly diffuse; I find, having used a shotgun to shoot skeet, that where sport is concerned, using a gun is a lot of fun. As well, there are times when I feel that having a weapon like a shotgun in the house for protection would be wise. The lines blur when we move to consider weapons that allow for many multiple rounds of ammunition to be quickly and easily available to the weapon is use, as in many of today’s semi-automatic weapons. While background checks would help to curb the initial purchase of weapons, it does nothing for second hand markets of weapons, or weapons that may be acquired through theft.

Finally in the analytical perspective of guns, guns are perhaps the least democratic objects available to humans; democracy is defined as favoring social equality. I believe that those who support broad and easy access to guns believe that if everyone had a gun we would all be equal. However, due to the fact that guns are frequently used to commit violent crimes, many people won’t use them for any reason, including sport. Many, like myself, also can’t allow themselves to bring a gun into the house due to the idea that the presence of the weapon will actually increase the potential for violence to enter the home.
**Conclusion**

It is my conclusion that based on the experiences of other cultures (England, Australia, Japan, China, and more), where guns are less available and where violent crime, particularly homicides by means of a gun are much lower than the United States, that as a people, we have lost our way, lost our sense of togetherness. It is clear that we continue to choose a course of expediency to allow existing gun laws to stand at the cost of the lives of thousands of Americans each year. I contend that for such laws to change, those of us in favor of stricter gun control laws need to change our language and argument in the debate; the hard line second amendment side (the NRA, et. al.) will continue to thump that Constitutional article. On the side of controlling access to guns, we need to emphasize that our objective is not to take away constitutional rights, but to reduce violence and to protect the rights of us all, not the least of which is the right to life.

Rhetorically, I further contend that the debate as it stands now supports cultural hegemony (Brummett, 2011 p. 163). The hard facts are that the NRA, their supporters, and other similar groups, are funding the fight, such that when over 90% of American voters favor changes in the laws governing the purchase and sale of guns, specifically adding in background checks; when 55 U.S. Senators (a majority) voted in favor of background checks, these powerful lobbies were able to squelch that vote. It is also my contention that those who believe the laws as they stand now also serve in the hegemonic model and they are active participants in their own repression; these weapons of individual destruction can equally murder these same people. Only after that happens, for them it will be too late.

Finally, it is my view, which has become more adamant due to this focused study on this issue, that as the human culture has long been aware of the risk to the human species of nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, the “perfection of harm” (Brummett, 2011 p. 189), these
weapons, handguns, semi-automatic rifles, and more, are no less the perfection of harm as nuclear weapons. An average of 792.6 persons are dying by guns per month (Kirk and Kois, 2013). In a year, that will equal 9,511.2 people. From the uranium bomb that was dropped in Hiroshima, a weapon of mass destruction, the total number of people that appear to have died on that first day was about 45,000; hence, in a period of about 5 years post Sandy Hook, as many people and more will have died from guns, weapons of individual destruction. We seem well past the point of caring enough about our civilization and our moral center as evidenced by the numerous human rights organizations around the globe. The time for change is now; least we succumb to the inevitable result of our preference of guns and death over life. Let us move to enact laws to restrict violence in the United States of America.
References


U.S. Const. amend. II.