

## Reading Homework

### The Great Gun Debate



Mrs. Starrett tells Shane, “Guns aren’t going to be my boy’s life” to which Shane replies with the same argument used by gun owners in America today, “A gun is as good or bad as the man who uses it”. But when he says this in the film the year is around 1889, towards the end of the era of the Wild West when virtually every man (and some women) carried firearms just as we would a cell phone today. In 1889 they perhaps had a need and use for their guns just as we have a need and use for our phones, but in the year 2020 as I write this it would be hard for any private citizen in America to say they “need” a gun.

Americans don’t *need* guns, they *want* them. American gun owners declare (loudly) that the supreme law of the land, the U.S. Constitution, *guarantees* them the right to own guns. The exact wording of the second amendment of The U.S. Constitution is “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”. This is open to different interpretations. One is that it would permit the people to keep and bear arms *only* for the purposes of keeping a “well regulated militia”. A “militia” is a military force that is raised from the civil population to supplement a regular army in an emergency. According to Wikipedia, “From the time of the American Revolution until after the Spanish–American War (1776-1898), state militias and volunteer regiments organized by the states (but thereafter controlled by federal authorities and federal generals in time of war) supported the smaller Regular Army of the United States. These volunteer regiments came to be called United States Volunteers (USV) in contrast to the Regular United States Army (USA). During the American Civil War, about 97 percent of the Union Army was United States Volunteers”.

But today the United States has approximately 1.3 million active-duty troops, with another 865,000 in reserve, one of the largest fighting forces of any country. There is clearly no longer any need for militias to supplement the professional army. But, gun rights advocates make a bizarre argument at this point. They argue that it is the people’s right to bear arms in order to protect them *from* their own government! They argue that it is because Americans are armed with guns that prevents our citizens from losing their freedoms to too much government control. They seem to ignore the far more obvious reason we have our freedoms, i.e., because we have a democracy and choose the men and women who make our laws for us. But there are many Americans who argue that even our democratically-elected representatives do not have the right to “infringe” on their right to own guns because of the second amendment.

When the Constitution (and the second amendment) were written, the “arms” referred to were mostly long-barreled



muskets (much like the Japanese *tanegashima*). They were single-shot weapons (usually used for hunting) which took the best-trained professionals at least 30 seconds to reload. The average hunter took more like three full minutes to reload his musket. Today, according to the owner's manual, the popular AR7 Bushmaster semi-automatic rifle can fire *forty-five* rounds per minute, (but others have claimed that when it is fully automatic it can fire six hundred rounds per minute).

According to Wikipedia, "On the night of October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock, a 64-year-old man from Mesquite, Nevada, opened fire upon the crowd attending the Route 91 Harvest music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in Nevada. Between 10:05 and 10:15 p.m., PDT, he fired more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition from his 32<sup>nd</sup>-floor suite in the Mandalay Bay Hotel.



*Vigil for the victims of the Mass Shooting in Las Vegas*

Sixty people were killed and 411 wounded, with the ensuing panic bringing the injury total to 867"; 411 people shot in ten minutes, 60 of them fatally.

Did the framers of the U.S. Constitution mean that any U.S. citizen should be able to have a weapon capable of killing so many people so quickly? Mr. Paddock was not "helping the security of a free state", he was committing an act of mass murder. Yet Paddock bought all of his guns legally. In the United States, almost anyone over the age of 18 can buy as many guns as they want. This includes weapons like the AR47, which was originally designed for professional soldiers to use in time of war. An 18-year-old is perfectly free to buy this weapon and there is no test he must pass or background check for most gun purchases (to check and see if the person is a criminal or has a history of mental illness or is on a terrorist watch list).

Mr. Paddock is but one example of the "mass shooter" phenomenon in the United States. Mass shootings in the U.S. now occur almost every other day (a "mass shooting" is one in which three or more people are shot). There were 176 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2018. But this is only the tip of the iceberg of gun-related injuries and deaths, however. In 2017, the most recent year for which complete data is available, 39,773 people died from gun-related injuries in the U.S. That is more deaths of U.S. civilians in one year than all the U.S. soldiers who died in the three years of the Korean War. By comparison, Japan averages about *ten* (10) gun-related deaths per year. The Japan National Police Agency announced that in 2017 there were only 22 shooting crimes throughout Japan and only three (3) of these shootings resulted in deaths. The population of the United States is about 330,000,000. But the number of privately owned guns is about 380,000,000. There are more guns in America than people. Yet only 30% of Americans over the age of eighteen own guns.

You have been studying Western films for some time now and you certainly understand that guns were part of the culture of the Wild West just as much as swords were a part of the culture of feudal Japan. There were reasons why American cowboys and Japanese samurai carried guns and swords. Some Americans argue that guns are such an important part of American history and culture that we should never get rid of them. But what about Japan? Swords were part of Japanese culture for more than a thousand years. The samurai thought of his sword as an extension of his soul. But today, nobody in Japan wears a sword while walking down the street. In fact, it is *very* difficult to even own a sword in Japan. It is almost *impossible* for any Japanese to own a gun except for hunting guns (and even those are very hard to get). If the Japanese can give up their swords and do without guns, why can't Americans?

I love teaching this course on the Western and of course, 99.9% of Westerns contain scenes of gun violence just as samurai movies contain scenes of sword violence. You might think that while there are no more samurai there still are cowboys in America so that is why Americans still need guns. But you also know that my father was in the cattle business and spent lots of time in the west with cowboys and ranchers. In all the years my father did business with cowboys and ranchers he never carried a gun. When I was growing up, we did not have a gun in our house. In fact, the only time my father ever carried a gun was when he was a soldier in World War Two. If you were learning about Japanese *jidaigeki* instead of American Westerns, would you expect your film professor to own a sword? Even though I am an expert in the American Western, I have never fired a gun in my entire life and I have no interest in doing so. I *teach* about Westerns, but I understand that those movies are about a time in American history when people had reasons for owning and carrying guns. Today, however, I agree

with Mrs. Starrett when she said, “We would all be much happier if there were no guns in the valley”. I would say the same for America as a nation. We would all be much happier if there were no guns in America. What do you think?