

Culture Wars Rage

A look at Keys to the Next Elections

By Rev. Charles Brock

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Following is the first in a series of articles by the Rev. Charles Brock, scholar and Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock examines how culture wars in America are linked politically, religiously, in businesses, sociologically, and psychologically. Today's subject is guns, including a discussion of the Constitution, masculinity, Hollywood, the National Rifle Association, and evangelicals.

Culture wars may well determine the next several elections unless a major national event intercedes, such as a war, recession or even another huge national infection. These issues have been stewing since the 1990s and there are many going on at this moment.

They have political, religious, business, sociological, and psychological aspects. Regarding religiousness, Pat Buchanan was the first major political figure to bring it to the foreground. In the 1993 Republican National Convention, he said: "There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America."

Culture clashes have raged since then and the determinates are before us now. There are around 20 major issues, and I want to concentrate on these seven:

1. **Guns (Constitution, masculinity, Hollywood, NRA, evangelicals)**
2. **Abortion**
3. **Gender (including book bans, anti-LGBTQ laws, trans sports, etc.)**
4. **Race**
5. **Climate Change**
6. **Welfare and Healthcare**
7. **Immigration and white supremacy (Christian nationalism)**

Within each are variants and differences between the advocates and the scholars who study them. I will try to simplify as much as I can, keeping in mind the

broader picture and the interrelationships.

GUNS

Let us begin with the Constitution and the famed Second Amendment.

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.

The meaning of this tortured sentence has long been debated, at least from 1789. The Supreme Court has weighed in several times. The question of how the Second Amendment applies to carrying guns in public is an open one. When the Supreme Court established an individual right to own guns in 2008 by a 5 to 4 vote in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, it addressed only the right to keep firearms in the home for self-defense.

Looking at the Second Amendment, one can see that the placement of commas is crucial. Drop the commas and the meaning changes. Some state-ratified versions omitted the first or final commas. For example, ratification acts from New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and South Carolina contained only one comma, but with differences in capitalization. Pennsylvania's act 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.

The ratification act from New Jersey has no commas:

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.

The New Jersey variant makes more sense and links the holding of personal arms to being in a government militia.

I think it should have read, “A well-regulated militia, when necessary to defend against unlawful aggression, can be organized by citizens bearing arms and answerable to the national government.” That seems to me what the Founders intended.

Before the Constitution was approved, there were rebellions that had to be put down to make America a nation and not a collection of individuals going wildly their own way. Of Shay's Rebellion in New England in 1786, George Washington wrote, “If three years ago any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws and constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite – a fit subject for a mad house.” The Whiskey Rebellion in Western Pennsylvania in 1794 was put down by a national militia led by Washington.

Can there be authorized private militias? Certainly not to overthrow the government, as some duly advocate. That is sheer treason. A “well-regulated militia” historically refers to a government agency, not a private one. And it would appear that the “right of the people to keep and bear arms” refers to being in the militia, not a personal right to own guns. But the conservative majority of the Supreme Court decided otherwise in 2008.

That is what helped set off the National Rifle Association to push further for open and closed carry regulations. The gun business flourishes. So now the Republican-controlled state government of Tennessee, for example, is advocating open carry for 18-year-olds. Wow. Kids that age don't have the necessary brain development to be trusted with weapons or cars, as we have found out to our deep dismay. (I remember how daredevilish I drove way back then. And though I won a sharpshooting medal in the Army, I didn't open-carry my M1 in civvies into Louisville. I'd have been jailed before I could say "Daniel Boone forever").

Many Americans love their guns. My economically poor Pennsylvania relatives rejoiced when they legally bagged a deer for the winter that gave them ample meat for months of cold weather. They also enjoyed the hunt, bonding with our Neanderthal ancestors. The downside of this is the high death rate in the United States due to guns. We are second in the world, after Brazil, in gun deaths. There are more guns than people in the United States.

That brings up another issue that is related to guns – masculinity. "In her recent book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, Calvin University historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez [writes about] a long line of white, alpha-male leaders whose devotion to a militant Christian patriarchy and nationalism inevitably led to exuberant support, among large numbers of white evangelicals, for Donald Trump as president – despite his clear deviation from anything evangelical in a spiritual or behavioral sense. As it turned out, Du Mez argues, obedience wasn't as much about goodness and grace as it was about power and who wielded it." [1]

The title says it well relating John Wayne (and Hollywood generally) to the American cowboy mentality – slow of speech and not saying much at all but good with the pistol. And red-blooded cowboys just got to have a weapon always carried with them. Evangelicals like that – and so have many others (consider Teddy Roosevelt). Actions, not words. Be manly, not girlie. "Man up" was a favorite phrase of 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin when she criticized Democrats, whom she and others thought favored a feminine approach to America's problems. To paraphrase: Target them there Democratic policy wonks who want to bring socialism to the nation. Line them up. Shoot 'em dead, at least metaphorically. What might that mean? The usual cultural war items as listed above and only the Right have it right.

I vividly remember touring with my cousins in Arizona and stopping in a café for lunch. A big sign "*God, Guts, and Guns made this Country*" was above the counter. All the men wore cowboy hats and stared at us Easterners like we were from Mars. We were, in that café. Though we didn't ask, I somewhat suspect they saw us as representing the Eastern effete.

But that is all wrong. Others may have been misled by this effete idea. But as Nobel Laureate in economics Paul Krugman writes: "(Vladimir) Putin effectively bet that an effete West would stand by as he carried out his conquest [of Ukraine]. Instead, President Biden very effectively mobilized a democratic alliance that has rushed aid to Ukraine and helped humiliate the aggressor. But the next time something like this happens, America might not lead an effective alliance of democracies, because we ourselves will have given up on democratic values" [2] and thus succumbed to a truly dreadful effeteness.

Men and Women. "Regardless of identification as a man or a woman, more

stereotypically “masculine” individuals (male and female) – aggressive, assertive, defends beliefs, dominant, forceful, leadership ability, independent, strong personality, willing to take a stand, and willing to take risks – tend to identify with the Republican Party. Individuals (men and women) who are more stereotypically “feminine” – affectionate, compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings, gentle, loves children, sensitive to the needs of others, sympathetic, tender, understanding, and warm – tend to identify with the Democratic Party.”[3] Guess who the gun lovers are. Misogynist Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* sung it: “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?”

How much is authoritarian thinking related to guns? The jury is still out on this, but I suspect there is a relationship. If so, it begs us to take notice. America is on a democratic decline. A leading New York Times opinion columnist claims: “For Democrats, and especially for Democratic leadership, the upshot of all of this is that they should give up whatever hope they had that the Republican Party will somehow return to normal, that the fever will break and American politics will snap back to reality. From its base to its leaders, the modern Republican Party is fully in the grip of an authoritarian movement animated by extreme beliefs and fringe conspiracy theories.”[4] And guns, guns, guns.

Are there ways to cross the divide on this? Liberals can listen to gun owners who mainly want to protect themselves from a crime-ridden society, and that is fair enough. The NRA should become realistic about the unlimited access to guns and insist on background checks for unsuitable people. We all need to understand our cultural differences, and work on love of each other. Tough, but necessary.

Well, I hope the above gives us something to ponder deeply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and as Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is also acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pennsylvania. He is a founding member of the Jefferson Education Society, where he serves as the secretary of the Board of Trustees.



End Notes

1. Cf: Daniel Harrell, *The Alpha-Male Style in American Evangelicalism*, CT, October 27, 2020
 2. Paul Krugman, *Putin and the myths of Western decadence*, NY Times, March 29, 2022
 3. Heather L. Ondercin in Thomas Edsall, *What We Know About the Women Who Vote for Republicans and the Men Who Do Not*, NY Times March 30, 2022
 4. JAMELLE BOUIE, *Ginni Thomas Is No Outlier*, NY Times, March 29, 2022
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In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #95: Several 'Amazing' 19th Century Women Lost to History](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Bay Rat Shortcuts: The American Alleyway](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew

[Economic Consequences of the War in Ukraine](#) written by professor at Marie Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin, Poland Dr. Pawel Pasierbiak

[Is Ukraine Invasion a Holy War, a Clash of Civilizations, or Both?](#) written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education Rev. Charles Brock

