

U.S. gun laws not even on the election radar

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Recently In a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, 12 people were shot to death and 70 others were injured. The massacre follows a pattern in the United States where, on average, there are 20 mass killings annually (Time Magazine, *How Guns Won* Aug.6, 2012). The response in the United States was predictably one of shock and horror, followed by the question, “Why did this horrible event happen?”

Several studies and surveys indicate the U.S. has a gun ownership rate of almost 90 for every 100 people. This rate far surpasses any other country, with the runner-up usually coming in around 60 guns per 100 people. And these figures do not include guns controlled by the military, police and other law enforcers.

There are many occasions when normally rational citizens, under stress, in domestic disagreements, road rages, and other frustrations of modern life, become sufficiently upset and irritated to resort to guns. This situation happens more readily when guns are easily available.

The second amendment of the United States constitution endorses the right of citizens to procure and bear arms. This Bill of Rights (the second amendment) has often been challenged since its inception in December 15, 1791, but has always been upheld by the USA Supreme Court with some minor modifications and clarifications. For example, the Supreme Court has reaffirmed that American citizens have the right to bear arms and possess firearms independent of the militia. During the Katrina hurricane disaster, American Coast Guard personnel were permitted to wear their service-issued heavy firearms off-base and within the territory affected by Katrina.

There are some regulations in the United States meant to keep heavy rapid-fire weapons out of the hands of criminals and the mentally ill. But frequently these regulations do not come into effect until an individual has at least one gun-related misdemeanor which may or may not result in an individual’s legal prohibition from owning guns.

Many young people can now have access to computer games in which they may easily “zap” out the life of the imagined “enemy”. There is a built-in excitement and sense of power that motivates children and teenagers to spend hours becoming proficient, as well as addicted, to these types of computer games.

Many movies, violent stories and television programs present the hero as the person who can shoot the quickest and the most accurately. The power of a gun becomes an immediate “equalizer” for many in everyday life who feel threatened by other students, co-workers, or domestic quarrels.

In the early days of the American Constitution, bearing a gun, even for military personnel, usually meant owning a single shot musket type gun. For this type of weapon, preparing each shot required inserting gun powder and shot pellets into the barrel of the gun, and pressing the ammunition carefully into place, taking aim and firing..... a procedure which took up to 30 seconds for the experienced soldier, and usually longer for the typical hunter or ordinary citizen. Today, semi-automatic and fully automatic firearms such as AK-47s make it possible to fire off over one hundred heavy calibre bullets within a few seconds.

From time to time politicians have vowed to take some meaningful action to tighten gun control laws. In 1992 President Clinton’s crime bill included a section controlling assault weapons. The legislation was strongly opposed by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Political supporters of the Democrats were worried about the Crime Bill losing votes for their party. The crime bill passed narrowly by a 214 to 212 vote, but in the following election many Democrats lost their seats and the Republicans took control of the Senate. Eventually remnants of the original crime bill and Clinton’s gun control bill eroded under the Bush administration. Today, in the present pre-election speeches, neither major political leader has commented on new gun control measures. In fact, polls indicate fewer Americans want to strengthen controls than was the case previously; this, despite continued annual massacres.

In a country like the United States, where guns are easily purchased, there is a social climate that drives frustrated citizens to make use of such easily attainable weapons. I hope, as Canadians, we do not choose to travel a similarly unwise course.