: Why do gun control efforts in the United States continue to struggle in the face of countless mass shootings over the last several years?

: That is the big question, of course. There are a variety of reasons for that. The easy answer is that the gun lobby is well-organized and motivated, and they use their money and power effectively. They also use intimidation well.

There is also a minority of voters who do support radical gun rights – gun rights absolutism about any kind of regulation at all. They're motivated and passionate, and they have an outsized voice. They're reliable voters. The rest of the electorate, which according to polls support some gun control, are not fitted with the same passion, or at least not the same passion that matches that of the gun rights side.

So there have been numerous incidences where the electorate who supports gun control fails to show up at the polls to outbalance the vociferous minority that do support them.

: Even after tragedies such as in Charleston or Sandy Hook?

:Yes, and the Sandy Hook shooting really shook everyone in the gun control movement because it revealed the power of the National Rifle Association (NRA). They were still able to scuttle the gun control legislation after an incident like that. That caused everyone on the gun control side to rename themselves as the gun safety movement, instead of gun control, and

These are the arguments they like to make.

What I wanted to do in this book is turn the eye of political theory on those arguments and analyze them – subject them to scrutiny – and undo them. For example, the gun rights movement likes to cite John Locke as one of their intellectual heirs. I point out in my book that he is actually not their heir but their enemy.

The project that I've done here is something that needed to be done because it had not been done before. I think it paves a way for the gun safety movement, which is struggling at the moment. If we can undo the political arguments of the NRA, that will help the cause of gun control. That's why I tried to subject them to the thinking of political philosophers and political philosophy as such. So I consider it a political philosophy analysis.

: You make an argument in one of your articles about gun proliferation and police brutality, and how one leads to the other. How does that tie to mass incarceration in this country? Do you see the proliferation of guns having any direct correlation to mass incarceration?

: It is very much related. It's also related to the point that's always lurking beneath the surface of the gun rights movement, which is its profound and deep racism. Gun righters deny it all the time, but it rears its head. When I write these articles for The Washington Post, I don't bother to read the comments because I've been told about the nastiness that comes out after me. I learned early on not to read them. My colleagues read them, and then they warn me in the hall not to read them. What routinely comes out in those comments is their abundant racism.

In my book, I link the profound fear-mongering of the NRA to what I call a Manichean view of the universe. What that means is that it neatly divides the universe into forces of good and evil. Wayne LaPierre talks about the good guys with a gun versus the bad guys with a gun. If only it were that simple. Neatly dividing society up into good and bad and then dealing harshly with people as a result without any kind of moral nuance – that is part of the cause of mass incarceration. It's part of the growing cruelty of our society.

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What does the NRA say to these mass shootings? It says, this is a mental health issue. Then what does it say to deal with that? As if Wayne LaPierre is some expert on how to deal with mental health people. In one terrible quote he calls them lunatics, and then he says they need to be on their meds, they're being let out of the institutions, and they need to be rounded up. That's part and parcel of this Manichean outlook.

I have seen articles arguing that police brutality is related to it, and in fact policemen themselves have told me so. It makes a lot of sense – maybe not here in Massachusetts, but other parts of the country. When you pull over someone for a routine traffic stop, you have to think they're armed. And you have to be on edge. There was an article in The Washington Post just a few months ago – there have been 400 police shootings over the year so far and in 80% of them the civilian had a gun.

: Does the Second Amend-

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vidual right to gun ownership in order to protect oneself on the frontier or for hunting purposes. That's not controversial.

So then why did they write the Second Amendment? It seems there was a political purpose in writing it. In the context of the Federalist Papers, it seems that it was written to assuage the antifederalists. Those are the groups that did not want a standing army, because they were afraid of what a standing army meant, and especially at the hands of a centralized government. They wanted to bolster the militia movement to counterbalance it.

James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay were essentially in favor of a more centralized government. They had George Washington's blessing, because apparently Washington learned in the Revolutionary War that he couldn't count on militias, which is interesting. He wanted a standing army. The Founders came to a compromise, writing, "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 political purpose was a balancing act, to satisfy both sides.

: Is there any longer a balance between the strength and capacity of the armed forces and militias or private gun owners?

: If you read John Locke and Rousseau, it's clear that our founding fathers came out of their philosophical heritage and were worried about centralized government. That is a very real concern. But the question is how do you counterbalance that? If the Second Amendment was written to counterbalance centralized government, it may have been applicable once, but likely not anymore. What does gun ownership, as it's currently practiced in this country, mean as a counterbalance to centralized government? It doesn't mean much. I argue it means quite the opposite, which should be a retort to the gun rights people, who claim that it is a counterbalance.

The gun rights people like to say that the Second Amendment is a loaded gun held to the head of government. The way it's currently practiced, it's far from the truth. I argue that in a collective reading, the Second Amendment might make sense, but they banished the collective reading. Now it's the individual. But what are all these unaffiliated gun owners supposed to do against this government and this military, which is the most richly endowed on earth? It seems implausig.oTsiat

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not going to be encouraged to approach anyone in public places. What does that mean for charity? There was the case in Michigan where the woman had a car accident, and she went to a guy's house and knocked on the door, and he shot her through the screen.

: That was also a racially charged incident.

: It was. I believe he plead stand your ground in that case. But this is a pretty deadly blow to any normal interaction in society, any reaching out to others and helping them. I say in one of my articles, what if your outreach to someone is interpreted as aggression or suspicion or a threat? They might shoot you.

: Have there been any statements from the NRA condemning the shootings of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice or the killing of Freddie Gray? Do they care when police officers use deadly force against citizens?

: That's a good question. I think they offer summary statements, like "that's an inappropriate use of a gun."

One of the most reliable sectors of the population that are in favor of gun control is the African American population. In my book I argue that that makes perfect sense, because they're on the front lines. And yet, in the last year, there was a poll for the first time revealing that a majority of African Americans are turning to gun rights. This pastor from Martin Luther King's group, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, said African Americans need to start arming themselves. He was subsequently banned from the group. His point however was that they need to start arming themselves because of these incidents with police.

: But that could mean only more police shootings?

: I would think so. On the anniversary of Ferguson protests this past August a group called the Oath Keepers showed up. They are all white, and they are radically in favor of gun rights. They walked among the protestors with assault weapons. There's nothing you can do about them because, in Missouri, they have open carry laws. But there were no black protestors who were armed. If the protesters had been armed with an AR-15, I don't think they would have been tolerated at all.

: Would the gun control movement be more effective if they pushed it as a public health issue?

: They are and that's precisely why they're failing. That's why my book is needed. I admire what the public health movement is doing. I'm full of admiration for what they're doing.

But it's just remarkable that they cannot make headway with the American electorate. There are data and studies aplenty that point out what is rather commonsensical. They sum up as follows – the more guns in any given society, the more gun fatalities. Yes, of course, obviously. And then that all the democracies around the world that have imposed stronger gun control legislation – England and Australia come to mind – have seen remarkable decreases in the numbers of shootings, which is what should be expected. They're beating Americans over the head with this stuff. By the way, the NRA pressures Congress not to fund the CDC and NIH to do more studies or any studies. The studies are there. They're done by private institutions, like Hopkins.

So actually we've come back to the beginning of our interview. The problem is the public. There are people who feel that the public health arguments, if they're just repeated enough, will break through. Maybe. I am not optimistic that you can reason with the American population on this issue

That might have to do with my philosophical suspicions. I am a fan of Machiavelli and Spinoza and if people cannot be dealt with rationally in an electorate, then you need to go another route. This is why I try to argue that this armed society undermines our basic freedoms.

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