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Preventing Gun Violence: from Africa to the Americas

Keynote Address by Bill Durston, MD
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I'd like to thank Dr. Uwazie for the honor of being invited to speak this evening and also for the work that he and his colleagues do through the AfriPeace Foundation.

The late South African leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Nelson Mandela, once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world."¹ The AfriPeace Foundation embodies this principle with the work it does in promoting peace through cultural and educational exchanges between US and African youth and educators.

I'll admit at the outset that I've never been to Africa. I have had quite a bit of personal experience with guns and gun violence, though, including my experience as a former Marine Corps expert marksman and combat veteran of the Vietnam War and my experience in treating gunshot victims for more than 35 years as an emergency physician in the Sacramento area.

I've also had experience in the area of gun violence prevention policy work with various organizations, including the American College of Emergency Physicians, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the International Action Network on Small Arms, also known as IANSA. With my wife Diane, who has been to Africa, I attended the United Nations Biennial Meeting of States to review the Programme of Action to Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons as a representative of IANSA in 2014 and 2016. At these week long meetings, Diane and I met and talked with IANSA representatives from around the world, including a number of representatives from African nations, and we learned that many of these representatives had been personally affected by gun violence in their countries.

Physicians for Social Responsibility was founded in the 1960's to address the threat of nuclear war. President John F. Kennedy warned in a speech at the UN in

1961 that a nuclear war, triggered by a miscalculation, an accident, or madness, could eradicate all of human civilization virtually overnight.² But as the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kofi Annan of Ghana stated in 2006, near the end of his 10 year tenure as UN Secretary General:

The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems – and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as “weapons of mass destruction.”³

The Small Arms Survey estimates that half a million people die violent deaths every year, with firearms being used in half of interpersonal homicides and a third of war related deaths.⁴ The African nations of Libya, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Africa have some of the highest annual rates of violent deaths in the world along with the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the Central and South American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, and Brazil.⁵ The countries with the next highest rates of violent deaths, between 10 and 30 per 100,000 population per year, include most of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, other countries of Central and South America, Mexico, and, regrettably, the United States of America.⁶

Almost 40,000 people die of gunshot wounds every year in the United States.⁷ Compared with other high income democratic countries, the United States is an extreme outlier, with a rate of gun related homicide that is 25 times higher than the average rate in the other high income democratic countries of the world.⁸ It's no coincidence that the United States is also an extreme outlier in the number of guns in circulation, with more than one privately owned gun for every man, woman, and child in the country.⁹ Within the United States, the gun homicide rate in persons categorized as being “Black” is eight times higher than the rate in persons categorized as being “White.”¹⁰¹¹ With rates of gun violence that are similar to many African countries, and with extraordinarily high rates of gun homicides in African Americans, we're not in a very good position to advise African nations on how to reduce gun violence on the African continent. We'd have much greater credibility if we first stopped the epidemic of gun violence in our own country.

The roots of violence, including the roots of the differences in rates of violence among different countries and among different racial and socio-economic groups within individual countries, are complex. I applaud the AfriPeace Foundation for addressing the complex roots of violence. But the final common pathway by which all gun violence is committed is simple. It's with guns.

At the international level, there is a direct correlation between rates of civilian gun ownership in a country and the rates not only of gun deaths in the country, but the rates of homicide by any means, and in most cases, suicide by any means.¹² These same correlations hold for different regions within the United States.¹³ And when countries reduce their rates of gun ownership by banning certain categories

of guns, as Australia¹⁴ and the United Kingdom¹⁵ did following mass shootings in both of those countries in 1996 – and as Washington DC did in 1976¹⁶ - not only do rates of gun deaths drop, but overall rates of homicide and suicide decline as well. In other words, if guns are not readily available, people usually don't substitute other lethal means for committing homicide or suicide.

As with any rule, of course, there are exceptions. Japan has a high rate of suicide despite having a very low rate of gun ownership.¹⁷ And the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which was committed in part with machetes and other farm tools, is a reminder that mass murders can be committed with weapons other than guns when large numbers of poorly educated people are whipped into a frenzy through the politics of tribalism, hatred, and fear.¹⁸

In general, though, reducing the availability of guns results in reducing the rate of violent deaths. Recognizing this principle, following the assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut stated in a press release and a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate:

Pious condolences will no longer suffice....Quarter measures and half measures will no longer suffice....The time has now come that we must enact stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world.¹⁹

Unfortunately, in the 50 years since Senator Dodd gave that speech, we haven't heeded his advice. And as a result, during that 50 years, more U.S. civilians have died of gunshot wounds than all the U.S. soldiers killed in all the wars in which the United States has ever been involved.²⁰

Why haven't we adopted stringent gun control laws, including stringent restrictions, if not complete bans, on civilian ownership of handguns and all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, comparable to the laws that have long been in place in other high income democratic countries – countries which, in most cases, still allow legitimate hunters and target shooters to practice their sports, but in which mass shootings, shootings of civilians by police, and shootings of police by civilians are rare or non-existent and in which the overall rate of gun homicide is 25 times lower than in the USA?²¹

This is a question I've asked myself repeatedly over the more than two decades that I've been working on the gun violence issue, and I've come to the conclusion that there are five widely held myths that are obstructing our efforts to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country. Some of these myths are actually promoted by some of the most prominent gun violence prevention organizations in our country. Some colleagues and I formed a new non-profit organization in 2016, Americans Against Gun Violence, in order to help dispel these myths, and I hope that we can find ways to collaborate with the AfriPeace Foundation in this effort.

The first myth is that we owe the democratic freedoms we have in the United States to a highly armed citizenry. The fact is, the American Revolution was won by a professional army equipped mainly with firearms imported from Europe, not by a highly armed citizens militia.²² Some of the most violent and undemocratic countries in the world have high rates of civilian gun ownership.²³

The second myth is that honest, law abiding people should own guns “for protection.” The fact is, guns in our homes and in our communities are much more likely to be used to kill, injure, or intimidate honest, law abiding people than to protect them.²⁴ One well known study showed that a gun in the home was 43 times more likely to be used to kill a household member than to kill an intruder.²⁵ Another study showed that someone carrying a gun at the time of an assault was four times more likely to be killed than someone who was not carrying a gun.²⁶

The third myth is that we need more research before adopting definitive gun control laws. The fact is, there is already an abundance of evidence demonstrating that the reason why rates of gun homicide in the United States are 25 times higher than in the other high income democratic countries of the world is that US gun control laws are far more lax and guns are far more available.²⁷ More research, in the absence of stringent gun control laws, will only document more senseless, preventable gun deaths and injuries.

A fourth myth, and one that I think that the AfriPeace Foundation can be particularly helpful in dispelling, is myth that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns. The Second Amendment states, in its entirety:

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 fact is, prior to 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on four separate occasions²⁸ that the Second Amendment did not confer an individual right to own guns. Specifically, the Court ruled in *Miller*²⁹ in 1939 and reiterated in *Lewis* in 1980:

The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have “some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.”³⁰

The late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment as guaranteeing an individual right to own guns “one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American people” by special interests that he had seen in his lifetime.³¹ Sadly, a

narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court became a party to this fraud in the 2008 *Heller* decision in which the Court ruled that Washington DC's partial handgun ban violated the Second Amendment.³² The *Heller* decision created a constitutional right to keep a handgun in the home "for self defense" where no such right previously existed. Strictly speaking, the *Heller* decision guarantees only a right only to keep a handgun in the home. Since the *Heller* decision, though, there have been more than 1,000 challenges to all kinds of gun control laws.³³ And as an ominous warning of court decisions to come, in 2011, while was a judge on the Washington DC Court of Appeals, Brett Kavanaugh wrote a dissenting opinion in which he claimed that the Second Amendment also guarantees an individual right to own an assault rifle with a high capacity magazine.³⁴

But the history of the Second Amendment is even darker than what I've described so far. There is scant evidence that the Second Amendment was included in the Bill of Rights to guarantee an individual right to own guns,³⁵ and there is no evidence whatsoever to support the insurrectionists' theory that the Second Amendment was included to confer a constitutional right for citizens to assassinate government officials with whom they disagreed.³⁶

The most "politically correct" theory for the inclusion of the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights is that the founding fathers wanted to avoid having a standing army by relying on a volunteer citizens' militia instead.³⁷ But by the time the Second Amendment was adopted in 1791, the founders knew that volunteer militias had been largely ineffective during the American Revolution. George Washington himself mocked the volunteer militias as "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy," and he dismissed the idea of defending the country with a volunteer militia as "chimerical."³⁸ The most likely reason for including the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights was to induce the southern colonies to join the Union by assuring them that they could keep their armed slave patrols.³⁹

When I tell people that the Second Amendment was most likely included in the Bill of Rights to preserve the institution of slavery, not democracy, I usually see some heads shake and eyes roll. But who can tell me how many other sections of the US Constitution were indisputably included to assure the southern colonies that they could keep their slaves?

The correct answer is three.⁴⁰ Although the word, "slave," does not appear in the U.S. Constitution, there are three sections in addition to the Second Amendment that include euphemisms in place of the word "slave" and that were indisputably included to induce the southern colonies to join the Union by assuring them that they could maintain the institution of slavery.

Article I, Section 2, which was later repealed by the 14th Amendment, states that

the number of representatives each state gets in Congress is apportioned by adding to the total number of “free persons” three fifths of **“all other persons,”** excluding Indians.

Article I, Section 9, prohibited Congress from abolishing the slave trade until 1808 or of imposing an import tax of more than ten dollars per slave, substituting the term, **“such persons as any of the states now existing shall think proper to admit”** for the word, “slave.”

And Article IV, Section 2, which was repealed by the 13th Amendment, provided that slaves who escaped across state lines into free states must be returned to their owners. In this section, the term, **“person held to service or labour”** was used euphemistically to refer to slaves.

In summary, the claim that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns is a fraud. The Second Amendment does not deserve the reverential treatment that it is usually accorded. At best, it was a chimerical attempt to substitute a volunteer citizens’ militia for a standing army. More likely, it was one of four sections included in the U.S. Constitution to induce southern colonies to join the Union by assuring them that they could keep their slaves. In the short term, the *Heller* decision should be overturned. In the long term, the Second Amendment should be repealed, just as the other three sections of the Constitution that were included as inducements for the slave owning colonies to join the Union were repealed more than a hundred years ago.

The fifth myth, and the most pernicious one, is the myth that we will never be able to stop the epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our country. Corollaries to this myth include the myth that the NRA is more powerful than the rest of us; the myth that it’s logistically impossible to substantially reduce the estimated pool of 350 million guns already in circulation in our country; and the myth that it’s “politically incorrect” to even advocate the adoption of stringent gun control laws in our country comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in every other high income democratic country of the world.

I began my talk with a quote from Nelson Mandela concerning the power of education. I’ll address this fifth myth with another quote attributed to Nelson Mandela: “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” If Nelson Mandela could spend 27 years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement, and emerge to lead South Africa out of apartheid, to become the first democratically elected president of the country, and to win the Nobel Peace Prize, then the rest of us should be able to take the obvious steps necessary to stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts the United States; and after we do that, to move on to help stop armed violence in other countries, including the nations of Africa.

I’m confident that one day, we will, to paraphrase Nelson Mandela, “get it done.” The only question is, how many more innocent people will die of gunshot wounds before that day arrives. I look forward to working with all of you to make that day

come sooner rather than later.

Thank you.

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