



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2023 National High School Essay Contest Third Place Winner (\$2,000 Award)

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A Cosmetic Reply to Gun Violence

Parallels are being drawn between school lockdown drills and Civil Defense exercises during the Cold War [1]. Both tactics are of questionable value if the threat materializes; meanwhile, they add to the culture of fear and normalize the status quo.

In 1949, the former Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb, joining the U.S. as a nuclear superpower [2]. By the early 1950s, American schools were training students to dive under their desks and cover their heads in the event of thermonuclear war, implying that would protect them [3]. The school drills included a film, "Duck and Cover," that featured a turtle that retreated into its shell after a blast, as if trying to avoid a sunburn [4]. The idea was laughable, even then.

Behind the scenes, New York's 1951 school budget included \$87,000 for student dog tags to help first responders identify the bodies [10]. That sounds like a "solution" even the National Rifle Association could support today.

It was a grossly inadequate response. The Soviets were detonating nuclear devices with a force equivalent to all of the explosives used in World War II. The U.S. government sanitized the danger. Instead of instilling a false sense of security, it might have been more productive to remind baby boomers of Nikita Khrushchev's warning, "The living will envy the dead," if such weapons are ever unleashed [5]. "Duck and Cover" created a detached perception of nuclear war.

The similarity with school lockdowns is alarming. The new mantra is "Locks, Lights, Out of Sight." Sometimes, the drills are accompanied by fake blood and recorded gunfire [6]. Survival mode would tell students to take cover when bullets fly, but empty slogans seem irresistible. School administrators should talk to trauma surgeons about wound ballistics.

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Locking the doors only kept police at bay in Uvalde, Texas, as 19 students and two teachers were massacred [7]. And who would have thought a 6-year-old boy would be packing heat at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia, this year? [8] Guns may not be as deadly as a nuclear bomb, but they are ubiquitous in America.

Bulletproof backpacks have ironically joined the list of back-to-school essentials. Generations of children are being raised to fear for their lives in public places. We have only anecdotal evidence to evaluate the effects of anti-shooter drills, but the National Association of School Psychologists has found that lockdowns traumatize students and staff [9]. Small wonder.

The country needs to recalibrate its relationship with guns, not pinpoint closets to hide in. Cold War fears concerning the threat of a nuclear holocaust haven't materialized - not yet, at least - but repeated school shootings are a horrific reality. Lockdowns mean we are adjusting to gun violence when we should be doing everything in our power to stop it. When will the country tire of navigating endless grief?

The threat of nuclear war still hangs over our heads. Efforts to abolish nuclear weapons continue, but they're thwarted by the fact that international cooperation is required, and some world leaders use nuclear blackmail as a key component of their foreign policy.

Rampant civilian gun violence, including the regular occurrence of school shootings, is unique to the United States of America. We don't need international cooperation to stop this epidemic. We simply need to follow the examples set by all the other high income democratic countries of the world decades ago and adopt comparably stringent gun control laws, including laws that will drastically reduce the extraordinarily high number of privately owned guns in our country.

The biggest obstacle to the adoption of such laws is a lack of a demand for them on the part of the American public. It's long past time for us to decide as a society, which do we love more, our children or our guns? If it's really our children that we love the most, then we need to demand of our elected leaders that ineffective lockdown drills be replaced urgently with definitive gun control laws.

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