

ABC News Perspective: Assault Weapons
by Hugh Downs

Years ago, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy distinguished himself from his opponent Richard M. Nixon by saying that he, Kennedy, knew who he was and that Nixon did not know who he was.

Knowing who you are suggests maturity and a sense of self hood. Nations, just like individuals, also have identities and nationals can understand who they are, too. Members of any civilization can realize their uniqueness.

Sometimes some Americans seem to have difficulty understanding who they are. The United States is unique and we shouldn't feel guilty or envious because we aren't like other nations.

One issue that seems to magnify our lack of self confidence in who we are is the gun debate. Some Americans think we should be like the Japanese when it comes to guns. Other think we should behave like the British, or the Swiss, or maybe some other foreign nationals.

The recent vote to repeal the so-called assault weapons ban seemed to kick up the dust once again in the gun debate. Patrick Kennedy, a Democrat from Rhode Island, equated weapons with satanic forces. "Play with the devil, die with the devil," Kennedy said. Jim Chapman, another Democrat from Texas, said banning certain rifles was like outlawing Rolls Royce's because of drunk drivers and the damage they do. But the two sides couldn't be more opposed.

Before we plunge into the question of what a so-called assault weapon is, let's back up a few million years and consider their evolution. Our most ancient hominid ancestors learned to throw stones to kill game. Later when they learned how to throw spears, Anthropologists and paleontologists theorized that the act of throwing was a tremendously stressful thing. Combining binocular vision and distance estimation with delicate hand-eye coordination had never been attempted before in nature. Humans pioneered the technique.

And one of the consequences of mastering this technique was a more robust nervous system; a nervous system that may be responsible for opening the door to humanity's unique intellectual activity.

Spears turned into bows and arrows. And arrows turned to crossbow bolts, and then to firearms. The development of field artillery created a demand for sophisticated mathematics and mathematicians solved problems of ballistic velocities and trajectories.

The manufacture of firearms gave birth to precision engineering, concepts of mass production, and breakthrough insights in metallurgy.

As a result of the intellectual achievements, master gunsmiths in New England and elsewhere created an economic powerhouse. Guns and intellectual progress seemed to have been intertwined. Rocket science is a direct outgrowth of humankind's fascination with ballistics.

Perhaps the most stunning of all these fruits is the development of the computer. The purpose of the world's first computer, Eniac, was to calculate artillery and missile trajectories. In other words, humanity's most astonishing intellectual artifact, the computer, is an offspring of our love affair with guns.

Well, that's a truth about guns. Guns exercised our unique intellectual ability. They stimulated many scientific disciplines. They created wealth. And they have defeated enemies from Adolph Hitler to Saddam Hussein.

Some people may not like the idea, but a large measure of our success as a species is due to our passion for firearms. This is an uncomfortable truth, because guns serve a dark side of humanity also. War is our dark side. War destroys life and property. And everyone, even brave warriors, justifiably fear it. Weaponry provided food for our tables and served us well in certain crises.

But as instruments of war they play a cacophonous distasteful tune. Nobody likes it. People who claim they like war, I believe, are lying to themselves and to the world.

But guns do not make war. Guns can hold neither grudges nor hate. Guns are merely instruments. A machine gun can no more launch an attack without a machine gunner than an oboe is to play Mozart without a musician. Instruments are extensions of people. Firearms are merely extensions of people.

Firearms, in whatever numbers or whatever configurations, are not the problem. The problem would seem to have its roots in national attitude we have toward correcting things. Where did we develop the idea that personal grievances or social wrongs can be redressed by shooting the bad guy?

For example, we do not have the greatest number of handguns per capita. We just have (the) greatest number of deaths from these weapons. Israel and Switzerland are both ahead of us in number of handguns per capita. But they don't have very much of this kind of crime. Almost every home in these countries has at least one sidearm, given a person on completion of compulsory military service. They have the guns, but they just don't seem inclined to shoot each other.

The assault rifle debate takes our attention away from the underlying problem: how to effect a change in our national attitude toward settling differences by violence. This is what we should be focused on. But we seem to (be) fixated on a buzzword like "assault."

Hunters, professional armors, and firearm historians say the term is imprecise. Some claim there is no such thing. One common term, known as an assault rifle, refers to a long arm or carbine capable of automatic fire with ordinary military ammunition or big-game ammunition.

Fully automatic weapons, true machine guns, have been banned since the 1930s and that ban remains in effect. So the "assault weapon" ban cannot refer to machine guns, although many people, I think, mistakenly think so. All the banned weapons are semi-automatic.

Legislators who initiated the ban claim that semi- automatic weapons have no sporting use. But semi- automatic rifles have long history in hunting and other sports. The famous BAR, or Browning Automatic Rifle, is a semi-automatic hunting rifle; so is the Remington Model 7400. Semi-automatic shotguns have been on the market for many years.

The banned rifles differ from non-banned ones only in small decorative details: decorations like a folding stock, a bayonet mount, or a flash suppresser. Otherwise, the banned "assault weapons" are ordinary rifles. They are not automatic military weapons.

But the Republicans are now embarrassed by a perceived necessity of lifting the ban on so-called assault weapons. And they've elected to do so as quickly and quietly as can be done to get it behind them so it's not an issue later on when the elections looms. Many of them feel it will not get past both houses of Congress anyway and they can then say to the NRA, "We did our best."

Unlike Britons, Americans are citizens and not subjects. And there's a very great difference between the two. Americans do not worship their government as god, which is a thousand-year-old tradition in Japan. Nor, like the Japanese, do we believe that government is infallible, as if government authority were an extension of family authority.

Americans are not Canadians either. We are unlike both the strict Quebecoise and the English-speaking subjects of the British monarch. Americans are different and require different rules and laws.

Maybe when we Americans learn to responsibly manage our guns, and our drugs, and our automobiles, or any other of the dangerous things in life, maybe then we will know who we are.