

# Language under the Gun

*The obsession with guns and its influence on American thought*

by Joe Lurie



When I was a Peace Corps high school teacher in Kenya, my students' stunned reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther King triggered my first consciousness about guns in America. There I was in a village classroom, trying to explain to my students and myself how such a killing could occur in a "civilized" country.

Reflecting on the "cross-hair," "target," and "reload" rhetoric of gun control debates in the US, I'm reminded that our language is "shot through" with gun metaphors and associations. And perhaps it was my Peace Corps experience that helped me understand that language usage is often shaped by a culture's history and preoccupations.

Now, more than forty years later, I've learned that guns are in at least half of all American homes and that 6 percent of US high school students say they have brought a gun to school at least once. Each year, about 30,000 Americans are either injured or killed by gun fire. And according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Violence, in one year there were 17 murders in Finland, 35 in Australia, 39 in England and Wales, 60 in Spain, 194 in Germany, 200 in Canada and 9,484 in the United States.

As I click through tv channels, watching left and right wing politicians and pundits battling in a "cross-fire" of blame, each side looking for a "smoking gun" to explain or cast

blame for horrifying gun-related catastrophes, I've become increasingly aware of how we US Americans unconsciously use gun language to express ourselves, even during the most innocent "shooting the breeze" interactions.

In conversation, we often value the "straight shooter," yet are wary of those who "shoot their mouths off," those who "shoot from the hip" or glibly end an argument with a "parting shot." We caution our friends and colleagues to avoid "shooting themselves in the foot," and counsel them not to "shoot the messenger."

At home, without suspecting what drives our language, we are "blown away" by adorable photos of loved ones; and at the movies, many audiences enjoy "double barreled action" and watching car chases where actors "gun" their engines.

I often ask friends to "shoot me" an email, or have encouraged job seekers to give an interview their "best shot" and to "stick to their guns" if principles are at stake during salary discussions. And if a job is offered, I might congratulate them for doing a "bang up" job.

In other kinds of sensitive business negotiations, I've advised patience, urging colleagues to avoid "jumping the gun" and to be aware of "loaded" questions." When the moment is right

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# Language under the gun...

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An advertisement for gun training in Arizona

for getting the biggest “bang for the buck,” I’ve agreed to bring the “big guns” to the table. We look for “silver bullet” solutions, hoping for “bulletproof” results. And when success is in sight, we say: “Keep at it — you’re going great guns!”

We encourage entrepreneurial risk taking, despite suspecting the project doesn’t have a “shot in hell.” Just “fire away” when you make that “killer” presentation, and if your idea is “shot down,” don’t be “gun shy.” Just “bite the bullet” and go at it again, with “guns blazing.” Don’t be afraid to “shoot for the moon,” even if it looks like a “shot in the dark.”

Having worked as a university executive with students from more than 80 countries, I’ve noticed students from abroad are particularly struck by the violent language in our songs and video games, and they see it bleeding into our political discourse. Many have asked me in amazement why it is even necessary to state that guns and ammunition are banned from university residence halls. Yet, “son of a gun,” already 26 colleges in 3 states permit guns on college campuses. And gun liberalization legislation for colleges is under discussion in at least 9 more states.

I’ve heard staff and students alike stressed by an approaching deadline, instinctively describing themselves as being “under the gun.” Sometimes my colleagues have described emotional co-workers as “loose cannons” or having “hair

trigger” personalities. And from time to time, when a student has gone off ‘half cocked,” psychologists have advised employees to “keep their powders dry” and to review “bullet point” guidelines for handling volatile personalities.

In the same way that the US is flooded with millions of guns (there are 90 guns per one hundred Americans), so our newscasts — “sure as shootin’ ” — are exploding almost nightly with murder stories, reflecting the newsroom mantra: “If it bleeds, it leads.”

When the local story becomes a national tragedy, there is “new ammunition” for both gun control supporters and those who are opposed to fire arm bans in such places as state houses, the halls of Congress, or even the neighborhood bar!

The world of guns has had our rhetoric in its sights for a very long time. And our wounded language — now more than ever with a gun to its head — is telling us that our culture is on the firing line.

*Joe Lurie, cross-cultural communications consultant, trainer and university lecturer, is Executive Director Emeritus at University of California Berkeley’s International House, and a Cultural Detective certified facilitator.*

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