

THE GOOD GUYS WITH GUNS

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After almost a year of living in New York, my impression of the United States has been ambivalent. I learned that on Valentine's Day 2018, in Parkland, Florida, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout named Nikolas Cruz went back to his school and slaughtered seventeen students and faculty members. At the time of writing this, there has been an average of one school shooting per week in 2018 (Ahmed). With their increasing frequency and publicity, these incidents of gun violence, particularly in schools, are no longer mere statistics, but instead lucid, horrible realities in the daily lives of students and teachers. As a foreigner unaccustomed to American politics, it seems obvious to me that people would unanimously agree on gun control after such incidents. After all, is it not universally agreed that children must be protected?

Interestingly, there are opposing voices, like that of NRA Vice President Wayne LaPierre, who said in 2012 that “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun” (LaPierre qtd. in “NRA”). The phrase “good guy with a gun” and the ideology it symbolizes are now so deeply ingrained in the conservative American life that there is even a children's book series of the same name—*Good Guys With Guns At Home*. Written by Susan Swift, “an actor, lawyer, and mother of seven children” who “loves the U.S. Constitution and reveres the regular everyday heroes,” this picture book for preschool children portrays people in uniforms and guns with friendly cartoonish illustrations (Swift 14).

I know what LaPierre means by the “good guys”—in fact, that concept is the very first thing I learned about America. My first conscious contact with American media, I recall, was through a superhero cartoon. It was probably the 1994 *Spider-Man*, or a variation of the old *Batman* TV series, unofficially sold in Korea during a time when people believed subliminal exposure to American media would lead to naturally bilingual children. As a kid watching cartoons in a language I had yet to understand, I remember facing a deeply troubling ques-

tion: is the protagonist a good guy or a bad guy? I recall seeing something absurd: the heroes were being chased by people with guns, not the other way around.

Being from a nation defined by and born from war, I should be no stranger to violence. Violence is the bedrock of Korean society. Approximately half its population is composed of either soldiers or veterans. Despite such an upbringing, I am a stranger to guns. The only guns I saw until recently were owned by the well-groomed, gentle neighborhood police officers who visited the classroom to teach us how to avoid bad people, just as Susan Swift taught in her picture books. All guns shown to civilians in Korea carried a silent, federal, authoritative message: with guns, justice is strong and evil is weak. However, the American superheroes from my childhood cartoons were chased by bullets all the time. They were not police officers or gun owners. It was a stark change of perspective—all this time the only ‘good’ side I had seen was the side that shoots, with heavy regulations and control, but then I learned the side of the story that gets fired at nonchalantly from sub-machine guns. Every moment I imitated pulling the trigger of my toy airsoft guns as a kid, I wondered if pulling a real gun trigger would not be very different from pulling the plastic copy I was playing with. It felt that simple, and in retrospect, it probably was.

Returning to the world of March 2018, I am now in America. So far, I have learned to accept the fact that the friendly neighborhood police officers in New York wear semi-automatic Glock 17s, and that in the most recent school shooting, which happened in a high school in Lexington Park, Maryland, the killer, a seventeen year old named Austin Wyatt Rollins, was “stopped” by a school resource officer with a 9mm after two other students were killed (Levenson). I think of what has become of the job of a school officer in United States high schools and feel uncomfortable. In America, are the good guys those who blast holes in the heads of children, even if those children were killing others with a gun? Does being skilled at neutralizing or eliminating the target make one a good guy? The answers vary by person, but we can presumably agree that this is not how we envisioned heroes to be. Such proximity to an extreme, fatal power immediately creates a discontinuity, a fault suddenly opened through the mantle, in the

bedrock of our morality. But guns are only the modality in which the debate is presented; the true debate is about power. And the presence of such power naturally comes with an uncomfortable, unforgettable feeling of wrongness.

This discomfort is understood by George Orwell as the inevitable byproduct of being able to kill a person from a hundred-yard distance. In his essay "A Hanging," Orwell sees a prisoner on his way to the gallows step aside to avoid a puddle and discovers that "till that moment [he] had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man" (12). His epiphany comes from discovering that the prisoner "was alive just as we were alive . . . his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles" (13). The body of the prisoner, every organ, cell, and tissue regenerating and pumping with life, builds up to only end with a sudden snap at the gallows. After watching the hanging, Orwell wonders whether any of us are justified in stopping another sentient being's existence, reducing their life to oblivion. The essay is his confession, written decades after his service in Burma. Although he had the power to find out, he did not know of any justification for the hanging, for the "mystery, [the] unspeakable wrongness" of the execution (13). The act of killing must not be this easy, Orwell insists. The world should not be the same after such a wrongful, disastrous violence. But in the prison where Orwell works, the morning routine of the wardens handing out breakfast happens just as usual—even after this abrupt ending of a life. "It seemed quite a homely, jolly scene, after the hanging," he writes, as if he were the only person in the prison who had noticed the absurdity of the situation. Power, according to Orwell, defies our common sense of morality and cause and effect, whether the power be that of the colonial Burmese Imperial Police or of a school officer with a 9mm Glock pistol. The very power to kill—the ease of killing compared to what it can end—is simply a great wrong beyond reason.

But it seems to many Americans that such power has been promised to them from birth. Robert Leonard, a local news director in Knoxville, Iowa, points out that gun culture in rural America is rooted far deeper than guns themselves, and even more deeply than the Second Amendment (Leonard). Quoting former congressman J. C. Watts, Leonard claims that the controversy around gun culture in

America boils down to the millennium-old debate of intrinsic good or evil:

Democrats think people were born basically good, so when good people did bad things, something in society (in this case, guns) needed to be controlled. Republicans think the fault lies with the person—the perpetrator of the evil. Bad choices result in bad things being done, in part because the perpetrator lacks the moral guidance the Christian faith provides. (Watts qtd. in Leonard)

Leonard suggests that this difference of belief is the true reason why there is such a discrepancy in attitudes towards gun violence. While horrific incidents like the Florida shooting are tragic to everyone, Leonard emphasizes that Republicans' belief in evil-doers keeps the virtuous from agreeing to gun control. The American belief in justice is as strong as any other belief. It is not a problem of their inability to sympathize, as many 'liberals' incorrectly assume, but a problem of disagreement on whom to hold accountable, whether it be society or the individual shooter. The gun debate is ultimately a debate on the ancient question of liability. It is not about the just, educated left versus the corrupt, uneducated right. A society that approves free access to guns is a society that oversees power over the loosely controlled humans who wield them. A society that regulates access to guns is a society that regulates freedom of power, and regulated freedom is not freedom in the first place. These beliefs are moral parallels, and while they can sympathize with each other, they can never agree as long as their identities remain intact. There is a deep ravine between these two worlds of morality, and no bridge has yet been built.

The human condition is at risk within this debate over power. Superheroes question their humanity after being gifted with sudden power. A surprising commonality among superheroes is that none of them have asked for their superpowers, the very reason why these are not just powers, but "super"—unexplainable, inherently random, and utterly reasonless. Spiderman was bitten by a radioactive spider, the Hulk was exposed to radiation, Captain America was a subject of a lab experiment, and Superman, the archetype of all superheroes, is not even from Earth. Superman, in the TV show *Justice League*

Unlimited, addresses being not of this Earth by describing the world he lives in as “a world made of cardboard” where he has to relentlessly control himself with a stoic will to not destroy the world around him (“Destroyer”). His proximity to power makes it incredibly easy for him to kill and destroy; while he identifies as a “man,” he is in a relentless battle with himself to control his power and maintain his humanity, lest he become evil. While superhero comics and cartoons often borrow themes that have already been explored in older literature, this existential questioning of superpowers is specific to superheroes and is thus specifically American. The American obsession with power gave birth to Superman—Superman’s dilemma is in many ways a twisted, magnified reflection of the American dilemma. The everyday American is not made of steel. Their guns provide them a totalizing power beyond their human means, but they are not also provided with a superhuman self-control as Superman was. Thus, it is a life of incessant fear and self-control that the gun-wielding American conservatives live in—they are fully aware of the risks, yet they bear their guns anyway, since that right was given to them, just as their race, their name, and other things were given in life beyond one’s choices. Perhaps this is why advocates adamantly insist that gun control cannot work—guns, to them, were never controlled in the first place. Like Superman, they can only control themselves.

In “The Concept of Dread,” Søren Kierkegaard discusses “the dizziness of freedom,” where he describes a man looking “down into the yawning abyss” (54). The man feels dizziness, or dread, because his spirit “gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at its own finiteness to sustain itself” (54). The man’s power to access his free will and drop himself into the abyss exists, and he is being sustained purely by his free will. The man is even more terrified because of the mere existence of a possibility to do such a terrifying thing. So is the person with a gun in his pocket, a life and death immediately available. Just as in Superman’s speech, even staying put without killing anyone is a result of one’s choice and an exercise of free will. Every day that passes without Superman destroying the entire city is a day saved by Superman. Similarly, every day that passes without a shootout in a society filled with guns is a day saved by nothing other than “the good guys with guns.” I do not question the gun owners’ self-restraint nor

their goodness, for those are exactly the reasons why I have yet to be shot. I instead question the meaning of “good.”

If good means merely sustaining life, and often fails miserably as it did in Parkland and Columbine, I must ask: is “good” all we need? Can a constantly dreading human being doomed to a constant trial of will, whether good or evil, comply with the human condition in the first place? Can I, as a living being, compensate the very security of my life with a freedom that only gives me anxiety? My answers, as well as yours, do not mean much. What matters is understanding the philosophical implications of the American society behind these questions. America is the very opposite of what Hannah Arendt, author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, feared; while she dreaded a society of unthinking, indecisive, and normalized humans, America is a society of perpetually agonized, constantly deciding humans whose humanity is challenged at every moment. The fault in the bedrock I felt from the moral dilemma over shooting a person is not considered an anomaly, nor is it challenging for the gun-owning American. It is like the air they breathe, a belief they were originally born and raised in, upon which their culture and religions were built. It boils down to the human condition that raised the pioneers of the Wild West—a thousand miles from home, their hereditary origin an ocean away, depending on the pistols on their belts because their lives depended on them. Perhaps for some it still does. Young Clark Kent, who had just discovered his superpowers on the farmlands of Smallville, Kansas, was only a subconscious self-reflection of Americans as a whole: young, lonely, and yearning for an identity in the face of a vast, foreign continent. If guns are the only things they can hold onto, then gun owners will do everything in their power to keep them.

Regardless, I am constantly afraid. I come from a society that would never rescind the right to live in exchange for the right to be free. I still believe guns and heroism are overly romanticized in America. Yet we cannot blame a single group—not the NRA nor Republican politicians—for creating such a society. They only pander to the existing society. There is no one to blame because before modern Americans could give an answer as to whether they would be better off without power, that power had already been given to them by their forefathers. Guns and violence exist within American society as

much as any of us do. The “good guys with guns”—agonized, frightened, and absolutely “heroic”—are no better than our fellow humans who just happened to be born near the edge of a metaphorical cliff. If romanticizing guns and heroism is their coping mechanism, then let them be, because none of us are any different. Understanding that we are all the same, that there are no especially good or bad guys, only a huddled mass born on a cliff, we can see the world for what it is. We have been on this cliff since the moment the first rock was thrown; we have been on this cliff since we realized that there is “me,” that “I” control myself. This cliff is the first anger, the first torch, the first shard of flint that fell off from a volcanic boulder, the first arquebus, the ever-silent missile silos of the Cold War, and all the tools of violence that have ever been and will ever be.

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