

The San Diego
Union-Tribune.

Life and Death in the City: Two restaurants, Two robberies, Two Outcomes

Timothy Wheeler, a physician, is director of Doctors for Responsible Gun Ownership, a project of the Claremont Institute. The institute's Web address is <http://www.claremont.org>.

PUBLICATION: San Diego Union-Tribune (CA)

SECTION: OPINION

DATE: May 31, 2000

EDITION: 1,2,7

Page: B-7:2,7 B-9:1

By now it is an all-too-familiar nightmare. Violent armed robbers take over a restaurant, terrorizing employees and customers. The predators herd the hapless victims into a refrigerator with the intention of killing them. Shots are fired, and the gruesome disaster ends.

Wait. This isn't the story of a Wendy's restaurant in New York City last week. It is the eerily similar drama played out in a Shoney's restaurant in Anniston, Ala., in 1991. But this story had a just, if not exactly happy ending. That time, it was the criminals, not the good guys, who were shot.

In nearly identical scenarios—the violent takeover of a restaurant by armed criminals—one outcome was a hideous tragedy, and the other a triumph of courage. The difference in results was no accident. It was the logical conclusion of deliberate and widely divergent public policy in the two states in which the crimes occurred.

New York doesn't trust its citizens to arm themselves for self-defense. Alabama does. Thomas Terry, the hero of Anniston, was discreetly but legally carrying a .45-caliber handgun when the robbers took over the restaurant. Facing two armed thugs, Terry shot one dead and severely wounded the other. No patrons were harmed, other than Terry, who sustained a grazing wound to the hip.

Alabama law allows broad discretion for local law enforcement officers to grant handgun carry licenses to "suitable person[s]." Thomas Terry amply proved himself such a suitable person by risking his life to save the lives of nearly two dozen customers. What an incalculably precious gift he gave them! Affirming Alabama's statutory recognition of the right to carry a gun, the state

constitution proclaims “that every citizen has a right to bear arms in defense of himself and the state.”

By contrast, the New York gunmen faced no meaningful opposition to their unspeakable cruelty. In fact, under New York’s strict gun control laws, any restaurant employee or patron who had armed himself would be considered as guilty as the murderers. Only the wealthy and the politically connected can lawfully carry a handgun.

And so it was by this dictate of law that the New York killers enjoyed the unfettered opportunity to force six men and one woman into a walk-in refrigerator, bind and gag them, and shoot each one in the head. Five died and two were gravely injured.

Civilized people recoil from such vile acts. Those who would ban firearms seek comfort in the vain hope that if we pass laws to get rid of guns, such horrors would cease. Against all experience, against all that science tells us about the protective value of guns in responsible hands, the gun banners babble on.

The most recent spectacle of babblers was the Million Mom March. According to a Washington Times report, fewer than 500,000 gun control advocates gathered on the Mall in Washington, D.C. to call for more gun laws. They believe, apparently, that the 20,000 or more gun control laws we already have are not enough.

The chief babbler was daytime TV “Queen of Nice”, Rosie O’Donnell. But O’Donnell wasn’t so nice last year, when she savaged guest Tom Selleck on the air for being a spokesman for the NRA, a charge he denied. In another pronouncement, she recommended the imprisonment of all gun owners.

This year, O’Donnell has relaxed her stringent anti-gun stance—for herself, anyway—by employing a private security guard. It seems the guard has applied for a permit to carry a gun. But Rosie insists her security measures are for the safety of her child, so her flip-flopping really isn’t rank hypocrisy.

Such elitism is an undercurrent of all laws prohibiting citizen self-defense. In the post-Civil War South, that elitism was directed against blacks. In New York at the beginning of the 20th century, it was directed at people marked as foreign-born anarchists and revolutionaries.

Today the elitism is more egalitarian. In those states without “shall issue” carry laws, police chiefs practice the elitism of local politics. Under discretionary firearm carry laws, affluent celebrities and politicians are often deemed “suitable persons,” but everyday people—Wendy’s employees, for example—are not.

The November elections will be in part a referendum on gun ownership. To vote intelligently, we must consider that firearms are used to save lives far more often than they are used to take them. As decades of criminology research has shown, it is the career criminal, not the regular citizen, who misuses guns most.

We should remember the life-saving utility of firearms in good hands. At the polls, we should vote to preserve that right of self-defense in memory of five innocent souls in New York City.