



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Guns and Privacy **by Scott McPherson**

Ask a member of the mainstream political Left whether he would be willing to have a camera installed in his house — by the government — with the explicit purpose of monitoring his activities for any potential wrongdoing. Like any self-respecting human being, he would very likely recoil in disgust against so blatant a violation of his privacy.

Next, assure him that, though you recognize the issue at stake, it is merely a means of guaranteeing that he is a law-abiding citizen. Still, he won't budge.

Finally, promise him that all footage of his personal activities will be immediately destroyed after being reviewed for unlawful conduct. Rest assured he will still want nothing to do with your crimefighting agenda.

Now, ask him to extend the same courtesy to gun owners and repeal the background check for firearms purchases. You'll not have to wait long before every rationalization under the sun is brought to bear in an attempt to show you how "that's different."

"We have to know if someone is a criminal before allowing him to have a gun," he might proclaim. "How else are we to know if someone is a good person?" he will ask. And finally, "Of course all the records will be destroyed. You're so paranoid!" And then he will wander off, utterly astonished by your knee-jerk, gun-nut response to what everyone knows are just "commonsense" safety measures, while shaking his head in amazement that you would place so hallowed an institution as personal privacy on the same plane as *owning a gun*.

How barbaric.

What the Left doesn't get is that gun control is an issue of privacy. In a free society, more is at stake than what we're allowed to do and not do. Granted, this is a major factor, but free people, by

definition, should also enjoy the pleasure of going about their daily lives without having to justify themselves to anyone. They do not live their lives by another's leave.

Evolving out of a millennium of feudalistic, collectivist thinking, dignified human beings blazed a trail that was expressed by the immortal words, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident ..." The entire concept of freedom required a paradigm shift away from the Old World notion that people understand the limits of what they *could* do, to a new worldview expressing the need for humans to live their lives free of the shackles of their fellows. As Ayn Rand observed, "Civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men."

Privacy is about dignity. It's about free men and women being trusted to live their lives, choose their morality, make their decisions, and generally function in society without having to prove to anyone that they deserve to exercise their rights. Dignity and self-respect require that others prove wrongdoing before our liberties are proscribed or restricted — as opposed to the constant battle of pleading with others to trust us with our own affairs.

Privacy and the political Left

Today, in our highly complex society, the political Left views most privacy issues as essential to that worldview. For them, privacy is an outgrowth of the presumption of innocence. Asked why they might object to a video camera's being placed in their house or in a crowded shopping district, you'll hear it explained as simply a "matter of principle." This isn't a knee-jerk reaction — they're actually right. The idea of freedom is a principle, a universal truth that lies as the foundation for human relationships. It doesn't need to be questioned, justified, modified, quantified, or explained. When told, "You don't have to worry if you're not doing anything wrong," the principled privacy advocate responds, "I'm not going to lower myself to the level of a child in need of supervision." Such a position requires nothing less than dignity and self-respect.

Sadly, those on the Left who speak so eloquently about the need for personal privacy are unwilling to extend that deference to those who wish to make a private, personal decision about purchasing a firearm. For them, privacy is about principles — except when it comes to guns. Ask a Leftist to fill out a credit application and he'll grill you mercilessly about corporate domination and the potential for "winding up on some list." Yet, strangely, when a person wants a gun, it's the idea of a list that the Leftist sees as panacea. With bitter irony he will ask, "If you haven't done anything wrong, why should you object to a background check?"

But if we can justify forcing those who wish to own a firearm to prove themselves worthy of the privilege, then why not subject other activities to the same rigorous standard? Surely being a parent is as large a responsibility as owning a gun, if not a larger one. After all, parents raise the next generation. Why not demand they get a license before having a child, as some gun-control advocates have suggested we do with guns? Child abuse is a horrid and widespread problem. Why not require all parents to have their children regularly checked by a government-approved specialist for physical or psychological mistreatment? No, dear Progressive soul? Not even if they promise to destroy the records afterwards? If it will save just one child . . . ?

Another favorite cause of the Left these days is so-called ballistic fingerprinting, whereby the barrel markings or “DNA-equivalent” of every firearm is put on file with law-enforcement authorities. Allegedly this technique has helped solve some crimes. So of course we should begin fingerprinting and taking DNA from every American citizen and filing them with the FBI, right? It could only prove even more effective at catching bad guys.

The fact is, if we can argue which freedoms people will be allowed to enjoy on utilitarian premises, then the whole caper is blown, because there is no government control that cannot be justified on such grounds. The Soviet Union managed for decades to suppress all basic freedoms because of the damage that a maverick individual might cause if allowed to speak, trade, worship, travel without restriction, or own a gun. That’s why a free society is so dependent on its participants’ hands being tied when they begin to worry too much about what someone else is doing. Every now and then, the Left slips up and properly identifies this as privacy.

Scott McPherson is a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation in Fairfax, Va.

This article was originally published in the January 2003 edition of *Freedom Daily*.