

**RICHARD
RORTY'S AMERICA**
DAVID BROOKS

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plan to rescue Magdalena. "There's a difference between quitting and knowing when you're beat. . . . I guess you don't believe that." "No," he said. "I guess I don't."

The word "Border" in the title of the trilogy holds various meanings. It denotes the contrasting cultures of the United States and Mexico that are intricately woven into the three novels. It means the border between hope and illusion, between aspiration and the perversity of how events defeat or deflate hope. Mostly, "Border" refers to the line between what was and what is—the irreparable subtractions of life: "The world past, the world to come. Their common transcendencies. Above all a knowing deep in the bone that beauty and loss are one."

A gritty and stunningly written climax swiftly follows, consistent with the fatalism that pervades all of Cormac McCarthy's haunting tales.

And yet, as embedded as fatalism is in McCarthy's fiction, there is a more compelling quality in his work. And that is his belief that the individual must not acquiesce, no matter the odds, no matter how stacked the deck against intentions. To endure in a course of action once chosen is a defining characteristic of McCarthy protagonists.

Not all that long ago, this trait would have been called "manliness"—which points to another noticeable feature of the trilogy: Women occasionally appear, and not just as lace and curls; but when they do appear, they are never central to the narrative. Readers will judge this as they will. But McCarthy's virtue as a writer derives from his keen observation of the land and its creatures and his incisive sense of individuals contending in a universe not inclined to accommodate them. ♦

scholars that his work deserves a central place both in future academic inquiry and in popular and political debate. Unfortunately, Lott's book may not get its due.

As the title suggests, *More Guns, Less Crime* concludes that the proliferation of firearms among the civilian population has good effects. Lott shows that giving ordinary citizens the freedom to carry concealed weapons in public is followed by reductions in such crimes as murder, rape, and robbery. This conclusion should come as no surprise, though the media reacted to its initial announcement as though Lott had claimed to find an exception to the law of gravity. But what does seem surprising is how dramatically crime rates fall when laws regulating concealed weapons are liberalized. This finding has profound implications for public policy, and the real importance of Lott's book lies in the extraordinary care and objectivity with which he comes to his conclusions.

The thesis that guns lessen crime is plausible, but not self-evident. And even if it is true, legislators and policy analysts need to know how much harm is done by laws that forbid the carrying of arms. Lott's research, which applies sophisticated statistical analysis to an unusually large and high-quality set of data, provides estimates of the magnitude of the harm caused by certain forms of gun control.

In evaluating Lott's study of the correlation between changes in gun laws and changes in crime rates—and his conclusion that liberalizing concealed-carry laws has strong deterrent effects on violent crimes—it is important to note that no such study can ever be definitive. The first reason is that such a correlation can never conclusively establish causation: Even a perfect correlation between roosters crowing and the sun rising wouldn't prove that roosters cause the sun to rise—just as it wouldn't prove that the rising sun causes roosters to crow, for the data leave



GUNNING DOWN CRIME

The Statistics of Concealed Weapons

By Nelson Lund

For thirty years, crime and guns have been among the most hotly disputed and politically potent issues in America. Not surprisingly, slogans and anecdotes have been the principal ammunition. When empirical evidence has been allowed at all into debates

about gun control, it has been notable mostly for its crudity. Proponents of gun control never tire of praising the low murder rates in Japan and Great Britain (which tight-

ly restrict civilian access to firearms), while their opponents are equally tireless in pointing out the low murder rates in Switzerland and Israel (where gun ownership is widespread).

John R. Lott Jr.
More Guns, Less Crime
Understanding Crime
and Gun Control Laws

University of Chicago Press, 232 pp., \$23

With few exceptions, academic studies of gun control have barely exceeded the quality

of the sound bites fired off by warring interest groups. John R. Lott Jr., an economist who specializes in measuring the effects of legal rules, has now published the results of empirical research that is much more detailed and far more sophisticated. Indeed, Lott has gone so far beyond other

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open the possibility that other factors are causing both the crowing and the rising. Statistical relations are informative only to the extent that they tend to confirm or falsify a theory of causation.

The second reason such studies can never be definitive is that perfect data sets do not exist. Testing a new drug on a hundred patients for five years might indicate whether the drug lacks significant adverse side effects, but a study of a thousand patients over twenty years would necessarily produce a more reliable indication, and a thirty-year study of a hundred thousand patients would be better still.

And yet, although such research can never claim finality, Lott's results are unusually powerful. The theory of causation that he tests is simple and plausible: Making crime riskier reduces the likelihood that crimes will be committed. Just as we would expect burglar alarms and guard dogs to reduce the incidence of burglaries, so should we expect an increase in the number of potential victims who are armed to reduce the incidence of violent crimes. So too, Lott's data cover more than three thousand jurisdictions over a period of eighteen years, which provides him with many more observations than used in previous studies. And finally, Lott has been extremely industrious, imaginative, and scrupulous in performing statistical tests designed to control for factors other than changes in concealed-carry laws that might influence crime rates.

The data show what one should expect: States that liberalize their concealed-carry laws experience an immediate reduction in violent crime, which increases over time as more citizens obtain permits to carry weapons. These effects, moreover, are most pronounced in densely populated urban areas. The groups that benefit most from liberalization are those (like black Americans) who are most at risk of being victimized by violent crime, and those (like women) who

are least able to defend themselves by means other than firearms.

Lott's most striking findings concern the magnitude of these effects. Using a variety of alternative-estimation techniques, he concludes that nationwide liberalization of concealed-carry laws in 1992 would have prevented 1,400-1,800 murders, 3,700-4,800 rapes, and 60,000-94,000 aggravated assaults in that year alone. Based on government calculations of the costs of various crimes (and using jury verdicts as a measure of pain and suffering), the nation would have saved somewhere between \$5.7 billion and \$8.3 billion in 1992. No such effects were associated with gun-control measures like waiting periods and background checks, which

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appear to have no effect or even to increase violent crime.

The beneficial effects of liberalizing the concealed-carry laws far outweigh their costs. Permit holders almost never misuse their guns (either intentionally or by accident), and they pay the direct costs through licensing fees and purchases of their own guns and training. In return for these relatively small costs (at most a few hundred dollars for each permit holder), each permit creates a deterrent effect that saves society something like \$3,000-\$5,000, plus any unmeasured benefits such as a greater sense of safety and peacefulness. Even taking account of evidence that some criminals substitute crimes of stealth (like burglary) for crimes of violence (like robbery) and that some criminals migrate to jurisdictions that forbid their citizens to carry guns, concealed-carry permits re-

main the most cost effective crime-control measure ever studied. Such laws are cheaper than increased law enforcement or incarceration, and they do not rely on tax dollars.

These findings should change the course of political debate over crime and gun control. But they probably won't. One reason is that *More Guns, Less Crime* is not well written. The book's core is based on a technical paper previously published in an academic journal, and Lott's new effort to make his argument accessible to a more general audience is half-hearted and incomplete. Despite the addition of anecdotes and some attempt to explain the statistical techniques he has used, Lott has buried many of his most important findings in long stretches of academic prose. Those discussions, in turn, offer an odd mélange of technically imprecise formulations (which are corrected in the endnotes and appendixes) and unexplained technical terminology that will be incomprehensible to those without a background in statistics. Lott's book needed a literate and demanding editor.

But a more significant reason for fearing that Lott's book will have little real impact is that its conclusions are anathema to most opinion leaders in the media. Lott himself has already been subjected to a vicious campaign of lies and distortions suggesting that his research was paid for by the firearms industry. After attempting to prevent his original academic study from receiving any publicity at all, gun-control advocates have made spurious claims about flaws in the study, and a number of prominent academics have chimed in with phony objections that can be based only on stupidity or bad faith. In his new book-length treatment, Lott devotes a chapter to patiently and calmly refuting his critics, but the mere existence of so much opposition will leave commentators free to treat his work as "controversial" and "dubious." Expect them to do just that. ♦