

Column: Monkeys



Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain] said, "I believe our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey." I would go further and speculate that Mother Nature cooked up Homo sapiens to give the other animals on the planet something to joke about. One need only listen to the evening news to realize humanity could not be the product of a stable or serious inventor, whether you believe a multibillion year evolution or a six-day rush to completion fostered this peculiar organism. Some say I am too critical, too negative in my assessment of man and his future, but step back for a moment and look at where we are and where we are headed.

The tropical rain forests are being converted into Ikea sales items faster than the most adept of men or women can put these particle board puzzles together. The atmosphere on our planet started as a carbon dioxide and methane poisonous soup and is rapidly reverting to its original state. The oceans will soon have more disposable plastic items than fish, and the rivers feeding those oceans already have enough toxic waste in them to keep most multicellular creatures land bound.

Nations that have already cleared their rain forests deplore the actions of nations that are only now destroying their own rain forests. Global warming may eliminate the need for central heating. The only sea creatures with a future are those that can mutate to digest our garbage; currently none appears promising.

But these are all relatively longterm threats to our survival: what about the probability that we shall make it to the end of the year or the end of the week. The prospects are grim. In recent weeks we have seen multiple mass shootings. Of course there have always been concerted efforts by some individuals or governments to murder people, but that background noise of genocides, lynchings, honor killings and other such atrocities has a new feature: the lone wolf with a weapon of mass destruction.

Those of us who live near the site of the Sandy Hook Elementary school massacre need no convincing that even the most innocent of our community is at risk. A semi-automatic rifle in the hands of that neighbor who kept to himself and mowed his lawn on Saturdays, a man indistinguishable from thousands of other men, is a weapon of mass destruction as surely as a nuclear weapon in the hands of an autocrat.

We Americans love things that go bang. To avoid limiting our access to things that can kill people, we are willing to give virtually anyone the same access that we want for ourselves. As a consequence, we have more privately held small arms (more than 380 million), such as handguns, than there are people in the U.S. and its territories. Add to that the various rifles and other lethal devices available to the general public, and you have a public ready for combat. But what happens when there is no common enemy? What happens to all those eager shooters when there is no generally accepted target? For too many, shooting paper targets or even unthreatening wildlife is not satisfying. There must be an enemy to kill. There must be an enemy.

Our government derives much of its power from the desire of its citizens to be protected against all enemies, foreign and domestic. That the citizenry demands access to military equipment means it lacks confidence in the government's ability to perform one of its core functions: the maintenance of peace and tranquility. This lack of confidence is in large part fueled by the assertions by legislators, governors, and even presidents that they, the general public, are wise to arm themselves.

If these folks agree that the police, the National Guard, the Army, and the CIA are not

sufficient (or adequately unbiased) to protect us from lethal attacks, then it is easy to understand why law-abiding citizens fear lawless gangs that are waiting for us to lay aside our weapons so that they can rape and pillage our communities. The irony is that our easy access to firearms places us at more danger than those mythical gangs. That irritable guy watching Law and Order reruns poses more of a danger to you than marauding looters incited by a natural disaster (a scenario invoked by Senator Lindsey Graham as why he wants to have a semi-automatic rifle).

People want to use their weapons, whether those weapons are sling shots or atomic bombs. The physicists working on the Manhattan Project claimed they did not realize the bomb they were building would actually be used to kill people. They certainly did not suspect that the primary target chosen by the military would be a totally civilian enclave. General Leslie Groves, the director of the Project, wanted to bomb Kyoto, a city in Japan known only for temples and schools. It had no military value, but Groves argued its destruction would deal a crippling blow to Japanese morale. Fortunately, his choice was overruled, and Kyoto survived as an international treasure.

Now we have enough nuclear weapons in enough countries to assure the annihilation of much, if not all, of humanity if a single individual decides to go ballistic. As I look at the world leaders with access to these awful weapons, I am not reassured. Trillions of dollars have gone into building these weapons. The justification for building these monsters has always been to protect us from our enemies, but who will protect us from our leaders, whether they be elected officials or self-installed dictators? What megalomaniac tyrant will resist the temptation to unleash these manmade atrocities when he sees his own demise is imminent.

Does anyone doubt that in addition to using poison gas on his own citizenry, spilling millions of barrels of oil into the ocean and blowing up hundreds of oil wells in Kuwait that Saddam Hussein would have hesitated to use nuclear weapons to stay in power if he had any? Since the fracture of the Soviet Union there have been numerous nuclear bombs left unaccounted for. North Korea and Iran have made no secret of their progress

toward the manufacture and launch capabilities of nuclear weapons. America, Pakistan, India, Israel, France, England, and Russia have all demonstrated restraint in their use of available weapons of mass destruction, but all that can change overnight with a power grab by a morally neutered strong man.

If these facts do not worry you, I envy you. They keep me awake at night. Many of our fellow citizens have decided to build bunkers and gather weapons in preparation for the coming onslaught, but who do they think is coming for their homes and cars and toaster ovens? We have nurtured a mindset that is destined to destroy us unless we discard it. We are the destroyers: we are our enemy. The monkeys are laughing at us.

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