

The “good guy with a gun” concept in the American gun culture and gun control policy

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Abstract— The United States has one of the most controversial gun laws in the modern world. The characteristic feature of this country is a gun culture legitimate in constitutional law. An important aspect of gun culture is a set of concepts used by gun rights activists. One of them is the term described in the American discourse as the “good guy with a gun”. The article contains information on this concept and its interpretation as well as presentation of its forming elements. Also, it attempts to offer an understanding of the phenomenon of its popularity in the public debate

Index Terms— good guy with a gun, right to keep and bear arms, gun culture, Second Amendment

I. THE “GOOD GUY WITH A GUN” - AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE A CONCEPT

The issue of the “good guy with a gun”, which will be discussed in this article, does not currently have any exhaustive description in the Polish research literature. In American literature, this concept appears frequently but it is not fully systematized for research purposes. In Poland, the law seems to be clear on the right to access a gun (Bacia, 2018). In turn, in the United States, the discussion continues about whether this law applies to the individual right to possess weapons by citizens or is it justification for the formation of state militias (Lund and Winkler, 2015). For the purposes of our discussion, we will not discuss issues related to the regulated access to guns in individual states of America. Although, as we know, researchers who analyze crime rates distinguish between open carry law and concealed carry law (Ciyou, 2018). Gun rights vary by state.

It is convenient to start our considerations by outlining the origins of the “good guy with a gun” idea in the modern political gun debate and the time frame for the first appearance of this term in the public. Its popularization happened after the tragic event that took place on December 14, 2012 at Sandy Hook

Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. A shooting occurred there, in which a total of 28 people died, mainly children. This event is considered to be one of the most important moments after which the debate on access to firearms was resumed (Spitzer, 2018, p. 214). The shooting caused a huge wave of social outrage. It also recalled the disappointment that a large proportion of Americans had with the US law regulating gun rights. Social activists, such as the National Rifle Association, Gun Owners of America (GOA) or The Second Amendment Foundation (SAF), are among the groups which are most involved in the general discussion. These organizations are mainly responsible for popularizing the “good guy with a gun” concept and phenomenon. It appeared in the public debate for the first time, right after the tragic incident in Newtown. This phrase was used by one of the NRA leaders, Wayne R. LaPierre Jr, it read; “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun”(Cook and Goss, 2014, p. 55). The quoted words constitute the starting point for understanding the issue at hand. Weapons activists try to avoid discussions about the relationship between the amount of firearms in households and the problem of shootings in the United States. They mainly pay attention to a simple dependence in confrontation with criminals: whoever has a gun has a better chance of surviving; hence the “good guy with a gun” appears to be a legitimate answer to the crime events.

According to various statistics, between 30 and 35 thousand people are killed by guns for a year in the United States, annually (Cook and Goss, 2014, p. 34). Crime researcher Louis Klarevas from the University of Boston suggests, however, that the above-mentioned words of the NRA leader did not refer to the Sandy Hook tragedy itself, they had a much wider context, as they were also addressed to the initiators of changes in the law (Klarevas, 2016, p. 251). The leadership of the NRA believed and still believes that there is a permanent, real political threat to limit the 2nd Amendment to the Constitution (Klarevas, 2016, p. 252). The organization has



therefore taken steps to convince the public that the proposed new regulations are unlikely to help in the fight against crime, and may significantly limit civil rights (Obama's Now is the Time). The NRA mobilized a relatively large social group to propaganda activity, commonly referred to as the so-called defenders of the 2nd Amendment (Waldman, 2014). This group consisted not only of ordinary citizens, but also of influential politicians (Bacon, 2019). A behavioral dissemination process has been initiated to highlight the positive, perhaps neglected or less publicized aspects of gun culture.

This narrative continues to this day, and its message is surprisingly simple. The "good guy with a gun" is every American, regardless of property status, origin or profession, who has a firearm and is able to prevent tragedies and crimes, including those related to the use of weapons. This is a person who prevents, for example, a terrorist attack, an assault or simply eliminating some other phenomena of violence. The scope of this definition also includes people defending the weaker, people who are often incapable of self-defense.

However, when attempting to define properly the phenomenon, it is worth mentioning that the "good guy with a gun" is presented to the public as primarily a law-abiding person, the so-called "good citizen", whose approach to his gun is treated with great responsibility (Myers, 2020, p. 62).

This kind of message is part of the broadly defined American weapon culture. Weapons culture has two important parts. There are two components the cultivation of which has survived over the years, which today shape the modern perception of firearms and guns in American society. These components are as follows:

- 1) the hunting ethos (the hunting / sporting ethos),
- 2) ethos of civic militia (the militia / frontier ethos) (Spitzer, 2018, p.18).

Of course, there are also other aspects following the above (Young, 1989, pp. 300-309), although these two essential elements gained the greatest publicity. Psychological premises also seem to be of importance here. Some researchers have even suggested that the desire to have a gun, pistol, revolver or shotgun simply symbolizes masculinity and is its best expression (Stround, 2012). The alleged motivation of men to have a gun is the fantasy of fulfilling the role of defenders of their wives and children. It should be noted here that the term a "good guy with a gun" does not apply only to men; it is only heavily constructed and widely popularized on their basis. The result of such an image is the specification of two civic poles relating to the issue of weapons. It is a classic scheme of social polarization. According to the division criteria adopted in this way, it is possible, as a result, to shape the preferences of appropriate actions and behaviours without major obstacles.

In this way, the "good guy with a gun" creates a template of ethical behaviour that speaks for the one who is always right and the one who is on the right side. It is also worth adding that interesting surveys created by the NCVS (National Crime Victimization Survey) come to the aid of the advocates of this term. They represent a relatively simple measure of the whole problem. This research shows how often Americans turn to weapons in self-defense. The matter is not simple; the weakness

of the survey is that despite its simplicity and apparent reliability, the conclusions drawn on its basis, unfortunately, seem to be very often different (Henigan, 2016, pp. 109–131). It depends, of course, on the methodology adopted in the study itself.

There are many critics of this phenomenon. One of them is David Hemenway from Harvard University, who is also one of the most engaged figures in the public debate, which calls for a strong restriction on access to firearms. Hemenway completely rejects the idealized vision of a "good man with a gun". He finds the "good guy" vs "bad guy" look too simplistic. Within his field of activity, i.e. public health, he calls this type of analysis "wrong medicine" (Hemenway, 2017, p. 20). In his research, he takes into account almost all aspects related to the legal and illegal possession of weapons, finally reaching the conclusion that the models based on this dichotomy do not even assume the possibility of misuse of weapons also by law-abiding citizens. The "Good guy with a gun" promoters, however, seem to ignore this criticism of some academia and suggest that there is no way to adopt a different perspective on dealing with crime. They point out that an attitude of this kind is, after all, a role model, and life in America provides compelling evidence of this.

II. THE LEGACY OF THE WILD WEST AND FRONTIER

One of the main elements that contributed to the view of gun culture in the United States in terms of the "good man with a gun" confronted with the "bad man with a gun" are mentions, interpretations and historical testimonies dating back to the times of Wild West (*American West*) and the Frontier. This is the first of two important elements to understand the concept in question. Over the years, the image of the Wild West seemed to have undergone a gradual evolution, both from a sociological point of view and as part of an assessment of historical sources. Polish readers usually know the history of the Frontier only from the novels of James F. Cooper, Karl F. May or James O. Curwood.

In the discussion on the extent of violence in the Frontier, it can be noticed that the perception of local events depends simply on who and for whose needs is writing scenarios and books on history today (McMaken, 2004). The depiction of the events of the Wild West is dominated by several leading interpretations. On the one hand, the heritage of the Frontier appears in the form of macabre images of violent, fighting with indigenous peoples, which was supposed to be a common and acceptable practice. On the other hand, there are also voices of historians presenting relatively romantic visions of the Frontier, showing not only the peaceful coexistence of indigenous people with colonists, but also the carefree life of all inhabitants in the bosom of unspoiled nature (Wojtczak, 2016, pp. 314-315).

The history of violence in the United States is full of controversial theses and conflicting conclusions but is dominated by the "weapons paradigm" (Cornell, 2008, pp.6-7). However, there is no shortage of historical revisionists, and the

most famous of them is the historian Michael A. Bellesiles. In addition to the controversy surrounding his high-profile publication *Arming America*, for many years he was involved in the analysis of the culture of weapons in a historical cross-section (Cramer, 2006, pp. x-xx.). He collected and published a compilation of interesting articles by various researchers. The conclusions in these studies suggested that the Frontier life was, in fact, incredibly boring and peaceful (Bellesiles, 1999). The undoubted merit of such researchers is the significant and needed revision of the interpretation of American history. All this allows us to provoke the deepening of the scientific debate. Critics of Bellesiles, however, accuse that such positions, unfortunately, are motivated by a predetermined view of the issue of the dispute. It very often results from bias, from opposition to too lenient rules on gun ownership, or simply from a personal aversion to the culture that sets the standards of discussion (Lindgren, J. L. Heather, 2002).

It cannot be denied that the temptation to combine my view on the matter with historical sources seems irresistible. The collected data allow us, however, to dispel doubts as to the situation of the Frontier. For example, between 1870 and 1885, only 45 homicides are reported in cities in Kansas. In Dodge City, 15 people died between 1876 and 1885, an average of 1.5 per year. In Deadwood, South Dakota and Tombstone, Arizona, there were only four and five murders respectively in the years with the highest rates of violence (McMaken, 2004).

Regardless of the history of the Frontier, arguing about the level of violence is an extremely important element in the general discussion on the culture of weapons because it can nowadays indicate proposals for possible legal modifications. References to the heritage of the Frontier allow us to better understand the power of social impact of this tradition. It shows why the “good guy with a gun” is so eagerly cultivated, not only by politically engaged circles, but also by ordinary citizens. After all, this mechanism appears from the bottom up and does not necessarily have to be identified with any political or even ideological formation.

Pulitzer Prize Winner Daniel Boorstin says that the omnipresence of firearms and the respect for those who had good reflexes meant that only a sharpshooter was considered a real man. Firearms have been common household equipment in America since the earliest colonial times, when settlers were plagued by wildlife and the threat of Indian attack (Boorstin, 1995, p. 41).

The perception of this tradition in the form of a simple dichotomy of “good” and “bad” meant that the “good guy with a gun” had to move to another plane as well. The classic procedure is inspiration by coloring the biographies of famous historical figures who are part of the mythology of a gunslinger from the Frontier, including Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holiday and Buffalo Bill. This is reflected in the cultural, literary and artistic activities that touch upon the adventures of various figures from that period.

It is also worth mentioning that in support of the thesis favoring the great role of the Frontier in the final shaping of the United States, there is a work by a historian from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Frederick J. entitled *The Significance*

of the Frontier in American History. The theses contained in this book are still discussed and analyzed in the American scientific community (Swinford, 2021). One of Turner's main conclusions was that the gradual expansion of settlement was creating norms that persisted among Americans. The nature of the current law, its elements and assumptions seem to confirm this idea. The events of the Frontier were to determine the final shape of American democracy (Turner, 2014).

In research on the history of the Frontier there are also positions that the history of access to firearms in America is too idealized, built on overly noble interpretations that historians themselves fall into. The voices of some specialists even directly indicate that the firearms allegedly intended to serve for self-defense and to protect against the tyranny of centralized authorities were in practice only used to fight the Indians and to maintain the integrity of the immoral system of slavery (Lichtman, 2020, pp. 30-31). Carl T. Bogus even goes so far as to formulate a revisionist thesis concerning the very genesis of the 2nd Amendment. Based on the historical data from Virginia, he claims that the firearms in the hands of the colonists were used only to suppress slave revolts (Bogus, 1998). This was especially about the American south where black people were more concentrated. Bogus thus equates the “Well-Regulated Militia” referred to in the 2nd Amendment with the Slave Patrols (Hadden, 2003).

III. THE ROLE OF MOVIES AND POP CULTURE IN SHAPING THE CONCEPT OF THE “GOOD GUY WITH A GUN”

Coming to the last element of my considerations, it is advisable to focus on the sociological aspects of the influence of popular culture and the entertainment industry in relation to firearms. The theme of defending the weaker, resulting from the previous aspect, fits perfectly into the legacy of the Frontier. It is a very attractive proposition for creating specific scenarios and popularizing the culture of weapons. Over the years, this pattern was built not only by writers and poets, but also by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which was most important in this role. It created a very large canon of films on this type of subject. Interestingly, this subject also made its way to European creators in the form of the so-called spaghetti westerns. It is important, however, that the image of the Frontier in American cinematography is marked by a large dose of violence, which has a very strong impact on the viewer. Any problem or argument in these kinds of films is usually solved with firearms (Cramer, 1999).

If we look at a few examples of movies related to the history of the Wild West, such as “Dances with Wolves”, “3:10 to Yuma”, “Unforgiven”, “True Grit” or the TV series “Deadwood”, it can be observed that firearms are not only something common there, but they are an expression of an extension of the law, often even unwritten, which allowed the use of firearms without trial, e.g. in the form of legal duelling.

Indeed, before the legal rules of the United States were formed, the natural machine for the formation of customary law, resulting from the initiative of free settlers, was responsible

for the determinant of civilized rules. This initiative emerged based on experiences and the evolution of social structures, gradually constructing the rules of coexistence. However, from the previous element subject to my analysis, we know that the image of the Frontier is quite ambiguous, at least when it comes to historical interpretations.

On the other hand, the vision of Hollywood artists, apart from a few exceptions, leaves no doubt. They present life in those times, in the Frontier, in the form of constant rivalry and a permanent specter of shootings and murders. Therefore, the role of films, journalism and people of culture in mapping a specific image of those times is focused on one pattern, inclining permanent, bloody violence, which is eliminated by a “good guy with a gun”. The leading people of culture who played a significant role in creating the image of a “good guy with a gun” include John Wayne, Kirk Douglas, Robert Mitchum, Charlton Heston and Clint Eastwood. Action cinema, especially the western one, had to have a specific message, so adopting the aforementioned simple dichotomy of “good versus bad” was best for building a fast-paced, interesting and moralizing plot.

A banal account in westerns, the “good guy with a gun” playing the role of a positive hero, challenges criminals, defending the victims (Carter, 2014, pp. 29–76). The scripts of these films therefore create the myth of the need to possess a gun based on three aspects:

1. 1. defense against the lurking evil, because the world is not perfect,
2. 2. support for the institutions of the emerging state that was imperfect in building security and order,
3. 3. selfless, positive hero (Mencken and Froese, 2019, p. 5).

The concept of the “good guy with a gun” was also popular with the media, television centers and the Internet. In recent years, social media have played a special role. When reporting events with firearms, the rhetoric of its promoters is very often used, intentionally or not, showing the positive aspects of the phenomenon (Britschgi, 2020).

Apart from people of broadly understood culture, actors and writers, journalists are also participants in this debate. Here too, the differentiation of world views allows ranking points of view, adjusting them to a specific position.

It is also interesting that wealthy, well-known personalities from the world of culture or politics, who opt for restriction of access to firearms on a daily basis, do not give up their rights to own it (Lott, 2013, p. 16). Such a picture entails, perhaps underestimated, but undoubtedly significant consequences. Poor people or worse off people who cannot afford certain things receive a clear signal that the worldview declarations of people who are to some extent opinion makers are one thing, but the realism of life is another (Lott, 2017). Celebrities naturally contribute to the popularization of the culture of weapons and the stereotypes associated with it. This, in turn, raises the socially justified question, why should it be so that some citizens are allowed to exercise this right, and others are not?

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Małgorzata Odachowska rightly notices that the history of each country is the key to understanding its institutions, social mentality and processes taking place in it. It shapes the attitude of the citizens of a given country to issues such as education and security policy (Kwiatkowska-Wójcikiewicz, Stępka et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, Polish scientific literature, both political sciences, sociological and cultural studies, lacks an in-depth analysis and studies of the discussed phenomenon. The “good guy with a gun” seems to be, after all, an important term for the social and cultural analysis of the United States.

Professor of political science Robert J. Spitzer notes and tries to convince about historical reference and regulations, that: „Gun laws are as old as the country; more to the point, the idea of gun laws and regulation is as old as the country” (Spitzer, 2017, p. 83). Unfortunately, the term “good guy with a gun” is underestimated by researchers. Maybe this is because the idea of the whole issue is extremely controversial and, nevertheless, foreign to the European view. However, if one looks at the issue from the point of view of social impact, it is impossible not to get the impression that more research is needed on this phenomenon. The interdisciplinary nature of this research undoubtedly points to the perspective of its great potential (Yamane, 2017). However, the multidimensionality of this concept is the main problem in formulating final conclusions for the assessment of the entire phenomenon.

The parties that led to social polarization are not without their arguments throughout the entire discussion. The perception of the “good guy with a gun”, therefore, will not soon disappear, if at all, from the cultural life of Americans. On the other hand, weapons, although they have been present since the beginning of the history of the United States, are nevertheless subject to regulations, and thus restrictions on their possession, also in a way (Spitzer, 2015, p. 183).

The discussion on the problem of the availability of firearms cannot be blocked by historical references alone. Some researchers, however, perceive the history of building American values as a monolith, a bundle of different values that are so closely intertwined and so interdependent that the whole problem cannot be considered without a holistic approach (Harsanyi, 2018, p. 248). In their opinion, it is impossible to separate the culture of arms in the United States from other important social issues of this country.

Critics of the “good guy with a gun” seem right on one fundamental issue. Easy access to firearms may increase the likelihood of misuse. Arms-in-hand violence is a disturbing fact in the United States. The current realities do not allow us to assume the schematic nature of events within the “good guy with a gun” construct, especially since they relate to human behavior depending on a specific situation. The allegation about the low effectiveness of the “good guy with a gun” in preventing tragedies should also be regarded as unfounded. The Gun Control Movement rightly demands figures. How many of such events occur? How many of these Americans with guns in their hands are preventing? How many are they frustrating?

Michael A. Waldman notes that time is working against the

gun culture in the United States and not only under state laws and regulations. Based on the two aforementioned components of this culture, i.e. the tradition of hunting and the tradition of "civic militia", he notices their slow disappearance. According to Waldman, the role of these elements in the lives of Americans is diminishing. Hunting is gradually being supplanted, not only due to changes in ethics and law, but also due to the disappearance of areas where such practices may take place (Waldman, 2014, p.166). As for the second issue, Waldman states that the key to change is also the demographic change in the United States. He states that over 80% of US firearms holders are citizens with European heritage and ancestors, whose role will decline over the years (Johnson, 2014). Ultimately, this process may lead to the erosion of the entire tradition (Waldman, 2014, p. 167).

Here is an important voice from historians who claim that: "history may not help us chart a clear path toward a solution to America's bitter conflict over the role of guns in American society; some appreciation for how we have arrived at our current deadlock is an important first step to moving forward in this debate" (Cornell, 2008, p. 7).

These considerations are only an outline of a broader subject that requires more discussion. The "good guy with a gun" concept is not a social fantasy; cases of such an attitude are fairly well documented in the scientific literature and research (Kleck, 2020). It is hard to dismiss convincing evidence, especially since it is backed up by historical evidence and today also by statistics monitoring crime levels. But the problem, however, is much more complex than the "good guy with a gun" apologists assume. The model of behavior they perceive in crisis situations does not always lead to results that are distributed in the general discourse. Although the "good guy with a gun" seems to be a tempting pattern for many Americans, but its definition is, unfortunately, as was said before, based on a schematic, simplified, and sometimes even a priori, mechanical perception of human actions and motivations. Americans still have to answer the question of whether to follow this pattern in future.

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