

Confessions of an Unarmed American

In October, Brazilians will be asked to vote on the following referendum: Should the commerce of firearms and ammunition be forbidden in Brazil? The storm of debate over the issue has prompted many discussions with my Brazilian friends and colleagues, and I realize that in the eyes of many Brazilians, to be American is to be a gun-lover.

The truth is, I'm not a big fan of guns, but I'll shoot one if you put it in my hands. As a longtime expatriate, I have to be re-aculturated sometimes, and I can think of no better way to do that than by blasting a rusty car with a shotgun and hollerin' "yeeehaaww!" During my last trip to the States, my wife and I visited her parents' farm in Gleeed, Washington, and I shot off at least five different firearms. It made me feel American again.

I have to remind myself to be more American every once in a while since—as I learned in Mr. Purdom's U.S. history class—people tend to melt into the pot their stewing in. For several years now, Jennifer and I have been working at an international school in Rio de Janeiro. A fellow expat who works for a US oil company tells me that corporate policy prohibits employees from staying in any one foreign local for more than four years, because there's more risk of going native.

This made me worried that I might be in danger of losing something quintessentially American about myself. These fears were heightened when, while drinking caipirinhas and watching a Vasco futbol game, my Brazilian friend Paolo said:

"You're not a typical American."

“What do you mean by that,” I asked, wondering what he thought was typical behavior for Americans.

“You know,” he said, “all that cowboy stuff.”

I didn’t know exactly what essential “cowboy stuff” I had been lacking, but since he knew I rode horses I suspected he meant that I wasn’t a gun fanatic.

“I have a gun,” I lied.

“Ha!” he replied. Which is Portuguese for “bullshit!”

So I resolved to fire off a few rounds when I got home, just to show him.

For foreigners, the association between Americans and gunslingers—a stereotype long perpetuated by Westerns and cop shows—is a cherished prejudice. It’s not fair really, but we do it too. Much in the same way, many Americans think that all French people are snobby and all Mexicans want to sneak across the border.

George W. Bush has done his fair share to reinforce our national gunslinger image by wearing cowboy hats and using phrases like “smoke ‘em out” and “dead or alive” whenever possible. I must admit, there is something appealing to elements of the cowboy myth: the mean-what-I say swagger, the lone man with a badge, and the gun as the final arbiter of all conflicts.

That appeal is not lost on Brazilians. With the increase in crime associated with drug trafficking, the public outcry for strong measures has created a Wild West scenario in Rio. Frustrated by reports of increasingly frequent muggings at gunpoint, Cariocas (residents of Rio) are demanding that the mayor take back the city. Paolo echoed this sentiment during our cowboy discussion.

“We’re too soft,” he lamented. “We should take a lesson from you Americans and let the police shoot at will.” I could see the Clint Eastwood film running behind his eyelids.

When I tried to explain to him that American police are not the trigger-happy posse he imagined, (I should know: my brother’s a cop) he just stared blankly at me for a few seconds and then said:

“Ha!”

In response to fears that the city was on the verge of descending into anarchy, the military police in Rio have adopted a cowboy get-tough-on-crime stance in which guns play a key role. This may explain why I have seen more guns in Brazil than I ever saw in the U.S. Armor re-enforced trucks bristling with rifles routinely patrol the roads near Rocinha, one of the largest favelas in Rio. I have seen drug traffickers on rooftops with machine guns, and from my classroom I could hear the pop of automatic weapons on a daily basis.

One day while walking in Leblon, one of the “safe” neighborhoods in Rio, Jennifer was nearly knocked down by a thug running by with a pistol. Close on his heels, a cop careened down the crowded sidewalk waving a gun. In another incident at a police checkpoint, we were directed to get out of our car while six para-militaries trained their rifles at us and searched the trunk. Driving home from work one afternoon, we passed a bullet-riddled corpse sprawled out on the sidewalk in front of the science museum—police standing over it, guns still in hand.

Clearly, guns are not exclusively an American phenomenon.

Why, then, are guns so much a part of the American national identity? Maybe it's because we encoded gun ownership in our Constitution. Possessing a gun is elevated to a level of import equal to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Not wanting to be denied of something so essential, I decided that full repatriation could only be accomplished with a gun in hand. I explained my dilemma to my father-in-law, and—as a gun owner and enthusiast—he helped me get back in touch with my heritage.

In the field adjacent to the apple orchard, we leaned a cardboard box against a wooden pallet. Using a black marker, I drew the outline of a man's head and shoulders, and, trying to get into the spirit of Homeland Defense, I wrote "TERRORIST" above his head. Then Jim brought out the guns: sawed off shotgun, 22 rifle, snub nose 38, a Chinese version of some kind of squarish handgun, and an old fashioned six-shooter.

It had been fifteen years or more since I had been hunting with my high school buddies, so I needed a refresher course.

"How do you do this again?" I asked Jim, shotgun in hand.

"Point and shoot," he replied, as if it were obvious.

So I did.

About broke my wrist with the kick, too. I'd forgotten just how explosive and violent guns are, but I guess that's what they're all about. The point, after all, is to kill something.

"How'd I do," I asked, opening my eyes.

"He's still alive," said Jim.

I shot all afternoon and missed all afternoon. We finally stopped when the neighbor yelled at us from the adjoining orchard.

“Your dog’s over here terrified!” he hollered.

“Sorry! Here Simba. Come Simba!” called Jim. Simba didn’t come.

“Dogs have sensitive ears,” I observed.

Before we put the guns away, I belted on Jim’s holster, stuck if full of handguns, shouldered the rifle and gripped the shotgun. I was going for the High Plains Drifter look.

“Can you take a picture?” I asked.

“Sure,” he obliged, clicking my digital. “What’s it for?”

“I want to show my Brazilian friends,” I explained.

When I returned to Rio, I emailed the photo to my friends and titled it “gunslinger.” I emailed one to my principal, too, just to make sure that my employers knew that I hadn’t forgotten my American roots.

Paolo was most impressed.

“You shoot all those guns?”

“Yep,” I said, slipping unconsciously into a Texas drawl.

“Which one was your favorite?”

“The sawed off shotgun,” I replied, rubbing my wrist.

“So, when your contract is done and you return to the United States, are you going to buy a gun?”

“No, I don’t think so.” He looked disappointed. “But I can borrow one any time I want,” I assured him.

“Can I ask you something?” continued Paolo.

“Shoot.”

“Huh?”

“It’s slang,” I explained. “It means go ahead.”

“You don’t like guns?”

“Not too much,” I shrugged.

“Why did you take the picture with all the guns?”

“I was just playing, just joking around.”

“Did you have fun?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted.

He smiled like he finally understood me, which I thought was strange since I don’t understand myself most of the time.

“You may be more American than I thought after all,” he concluded.

“Being American has nothing to do with liking guns!” I reiterated.

“Ha!”

I couldn’t blame Paolo for being confused. How can I explain my ambivalence? For me, guns are both a toy and a weapon. It’s hard sometimes to separate the two, but I gave it a try for the sake of international understanding.

“I like the boom! when the gun fires,” I told him. “My blood gets pumping. I appreciate the skill of someone who’s a good shot like my father-in-law. He can hit a flying pheasant from twenty yards,” I explained.

“Twenty yards? Is that far?”

“About fifteen meters.”

“That’s far,” he agrees.

“But I don’t want to carry a gun around for self-defense.”

“You’re *maluco*,” said Paolo shaking his head. “If Brazilian law allowed it, I would carry a gun around all the time. Not to use on anyone, but just to feel safe.” He pulled his index finger out of an imaginary holster and pointed at the favela, squinting down the barrel.

“I’d just feel worried,” I explained.

“About what?”

“Worried I’d shoot myself. Shoot a teen knocking on the door to sell newspapers.”

He holstered his finger and laughed.

“Good thing you don’t carry a gun!”

Not long after, I heard from a colleague that her friend had been shot at a stoplight. An attempted car-jacking. The driver resisted. The would-be thief fired through the window, then ran off, leaving the bleeding driver fatally wounded in the car.

For a while, every stoplight looked like a potential crime scene with me as the victim. When Jennifer was in the car with me, I became even more anxious and protective. At home, I installed motion detectors above the front door that were supposed to make me feel more secure. But after a few sleepless nights of re-setting the alarm as a result of stray cats, I felt even more vulnerable.

“I wish it were legal for me to own a gun here,” I told Jennifer lying awake in the dark. For the first time, I truly wanted one.

“But what would you do with it, really?” she asked.

“Just as a deterrent,” I explained.

“To be an effective deterrent, the gun needs to be visible. That’s not possible. And against the random attack, you need to have it at the ready at all times. What would you do, sleep with it under the pillow?”

I’m a light sleeper, so the lumpy pillow didn’t sound too practical. “I guess it doesn’t make sense,” I agreed.

Not long after, we left Rio. We moved to a rural Brazilian town in the interior called Tiradentes. It has a thriving artisan community, and much of the town is a historic district with cobblestone streets. You can still get farm fresh milk delivered in huge tin jugs, and the kids ride to school in a horse-drawn carriage.

Did we move to escape the violence? Not primarily, but I must admit that the increasing gunfire was one factor that contributed to our decision to change our lives. Compared to Rio, it’s blessedly tranquil here most of the time.

But the other day I heard a loud bang just outside my window. My heart raced for a moment, and I feared the guns had followed me here. I reached for a hammer to bludgeon any potential burglars to death. Then I parted the curtains and looked out over the lane and saw kids playing with firecrackers.

I laughed a little at how on edge I had become. I expected my world to be violent and was prepared to respond to that threat, tooth and claw. That’s the darker side of the

American cowboy myth. The gun strapped on the hip and at the ready is an assertion by the cowboy that the world is a dangerous and malevolent place. His intention is to gun down any and all suspected villains before they shoot him. In some ways, we have all come to live like the flinchy cowboy. Sleep with one eye open, boots on, gun cocked and loaded!

I'm not naïve. I've seen enough violence to know that there are, in fact, places where danger lurks around every corner. But I also know that there are places like Glee and Tiradentes where you are not going to be shot by psychopaths or blown up by terrorists every time you set foot out the door.

When our overseas jobs come to an end, Jen and I look forward to our return to the U.S. Preferably to a place where shooting at one another is not a local pastime. I may even borrow a gun and go hunting with Jim every once in a while. But I don't anticipate ever buying a handgun. And I don't see myself toting one around all day in a concealed holster on the chance that I might need to defend myself in a back alley somewhere.

So does that make me less American?

I don't think so, since my reason for not owning a gun is quintessentially American: I want to be free.

On a practical level, I want to be free from the weight of the damn thing. For those who haven't packed a gun before, they're heavy. Even the little ones. And those back-strap and thigh-grip holsters couldn't be too comfortable either. Especially climbing in and out of a car.

On another level, I want to be free of the worry. Let the police deal with patrolling the streets and confronting suspicious characters. And looking at the stats for

accidental shootings, chances are that I'd put a bullet through my own foot before some thug gunned me down.

Finally, I want to be free of the fear that comes with carrying a gun. Not because I feel morally superior to those who cling to their weapons, but because I know how easy it would be for me to take up a weapon and treat every waking hour as if life were one big showdown at high noon and all my neighbors potential assassins.