Safety Versus Freedom: An Eternal Fallacy Unveiled in Modern America

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Abstract—Ayn Rand, a famous Russian-American essayist known for her views on political philosophy, argued in the 1990s that the definition of freedom, in and of itself, was unique in that it was mutually exclusive of the basic fundamentals of security. This is evident today as the public seems to be aware of only two dichotomized mediums in public policy, freedom or safety. The following paper embarks on a chronological journey that analyzes the origins of this false dichotomy in Thomas Hobbes', Leviathan, and later moves toward more contemporary issues that have been entrenched in this century-long debate, ultimately providing a conclusion that will hopefully resolve the enigma between safety and freedom.

Index Terms— Safety, freedom, dichotomy, debate, polarization, Kavi, critical thinking, political, philosophy, societal

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INTRODUCTION

"They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN [1]

Ayn Rand, acclaimed Russian-American essayist, provocatively writes, "Freedom has only one meaning: the absence of physical coercion" [2]. Too often in modern society, freedom and safety are juxtaposed, seen as mutually exclusive concepts that can never coexist in reality without being seen as heretical. However, this is not the case. In fact, when essayist H.L. Mencken writes, "The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe," [3] he is illogically presuming that there is an inherent trade-off between the two concepts, when, in reality, the effectiveness of one is entwined with the potency of the other. This incontrovertible truth solidifies Rand's statement as inherently true: that man is free to act when he is unthreatened by others, that a man's safety is dependent upon the freedom he is given, and that a man who experiences physical coercion and *insecurity* is being violated of his right to live free from oppression.

Freedom and safety are truly symbiotic concepts whose coexistence affects the individual components. Therefore, freedom and safety are intertwined, meant to exist together. Only through a constant, yet balanced securitization can individuals truly exist in an environment that bolsters freedom, and, similarly, only through a careful allotment of rights can individuals exist in an environment that values safety.

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HOBBES

So why does society see security and freedom as mutually exclusive? What are the origins of this enduring fallacy? And how can we break down this fallacy? The root of the debate over freedom vs. safety can be traced to the 17th century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, as his ideas are the primary reason contemporary society sees the concept as security VERSUS freedom as opposed to security AND freedom. On a superficial level, the idea seems to have some veracity as logically, government security enhancements do indeed curtail individual freedom; however, the debate over its utility arises with libertarians

seeing it as yet another method of oppressive bio-political control and conservatives interpreting it as an inherent necessity. So the incendiary question arises, does one choose freedom or safety?

With only one option, one is left in a quandary in which either answer will never result in a positive outcome. Too much freedom leads to the proliferation of atrocities unchecked by government control, and too much security leads to the complete shattering of any "rights." Fortunately, the question and its groundings are misconceptions that originated with a flawed misinterpretation of Hobbes' philosophy and the subsequent creation of a "false alternative." In his novel, Leviathan, Hobbes pursues an answer to the perennial question of freedom and safety through a description of *complete* freedom and *complete* safety. Hobbes views complete freedom as a state of pre-government, in which there is a "war of all against all" and individuals victimize others and protect themselves from predators [4].

This free-for-all concept, free from government coercion and authoritative rule, is Hobbes' concept of complete freedom. At the other end of the spectrum is the image of totalized security, the government controlling with an iron fist. Any act outside the pre-established boundaries of social conventions is punished severely and seen as a threat to the safety of the state. This is Hobbes' conception of complete safety [4]. The juxtaposition of the two extremes and the dichotomy that Hobbes' identified between the two concepts has endured till this day; therefore, in modern society, both liberals and conservatives look down the middle and flock to whichever side they see the lesser of the two evils. For liberals presented with the threat of a bio-political government vs. the threat of terrorists, they see the lesser of two evils as accepting terrorism yet living free. For conservatives presented with the threat of a bio-political government vs. the threat of Islamic terrorism, the lesser of two evils is to accept an oppressive government that protects the people from external threats.

However, both sides are wrong because Hobbes mischaracterized freedom and safety as polarized extremes. This led to the creation of a false conception of reality, and only by accepting this reality is society misled in believing that the interests of those who want freedom and that of those who want security are conflicting when, in fact, they are analogous. Those who want increased security measures are, in fact propagating the expansion of freedom,

as society is only free when unhampered by the "physical coercions" and the insecurity that Rand describes. It is these security measures that allow one to have the rights that he has. And it is these security measures that *protect* one's rights.

A MODERN ANALYSIS OF GUN CONTROL

The coexistence of safety and freedom can be empirically seen in the real world with the debate over gun control and its implications on the American mindset of freedom. The availability of guns directly counters conventional modes of thinking that an increase in freedom
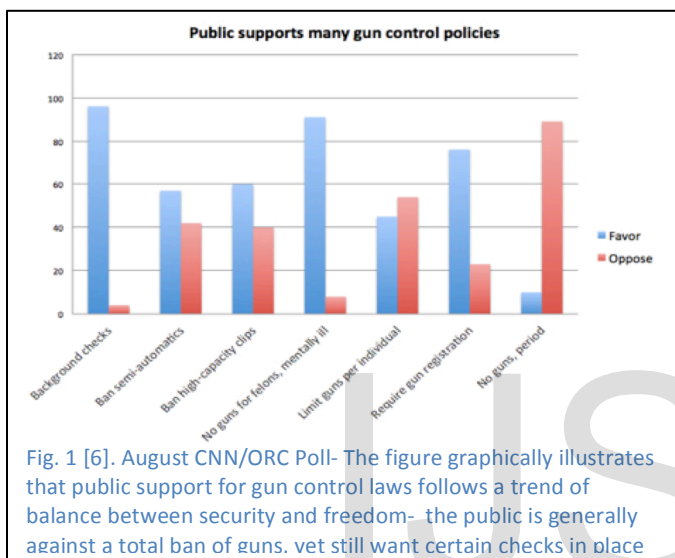

Fig. 1 [6]. August CNN/ORC Poll- The figure graphically illustrates that public support for gun control laws follows a trend of balance between security and freedom- the public is generally against a total ban of guns. yet still want certain checks in place

leads to a decrease in safety.

DiNenna, reporter for the Baltimore Sun, writes in her article that the average police response time in America is six minutes, while the average time it takes to draw a gun is approximately 15 seconds [5]. As a result, opponents of gun control know that freedoms such as the ownership of guns are necessary for the propagation of safety. Though many argue that the increased and sanctioned availability of guns allows a psychopathic murderer to obtain one much more easily, the argument falls apart when one logically takes into consideration that a criminal, with a purpose to kill, will not hesitate to break the law and obtain a gun illegally. Those with a motive will continue to commit atrocities, and only the ownership of guns provides the necessary self-defense to protect helpless victims.

Tucci exposes this truth when he writes that, "gun-control laws have no net effect on violence or crime rates, because the benefits of widespread gun ownership cancel out the costs." Doug Bandow, editor for the American Spectator, expands upon this when he states that gun violence reflects "human evil , not gun ownership" and that gun violence should not be used as a justification "to disarm the responsible and law-abiding" [7]. What Tucci and Bandow are ultimately trying to show is that "guns deter criminals" and there is substantiated evidence that indicates that "burglars are less likely to target occupied homes or businesses in countries with high rates of gun ownership than they are in countries with low rates of gun ownership" [8]. This trend can also be seen at a much larger

scale as Bandow points out that "Gun-owning societies also are notably less corrupt" and that not only does gun-ownership "promote liberty" but can also be used as a tool to enhance safety and "enable a free people to resist foreign invasion and occupation" [7]. In this instance, it is clear that an increase in freedom is not trade off with security and safety.
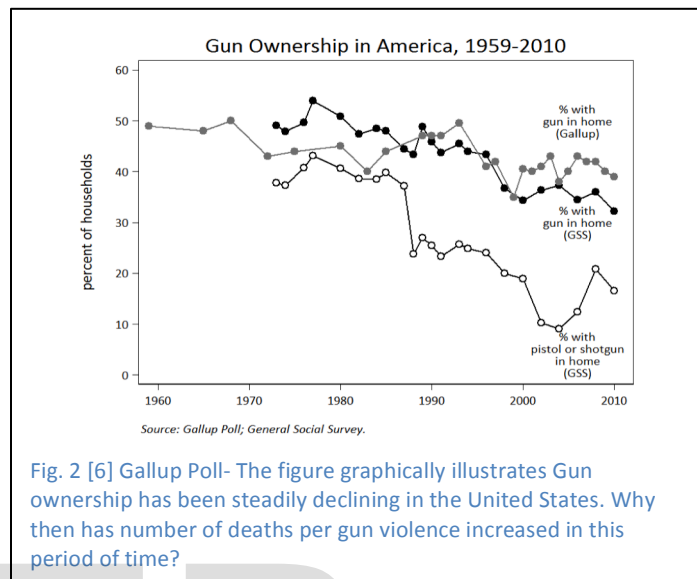

Fig. 2 [6] Gallup Poll- The figure graphically illustrates Gun ownership has been steadily declining in the United States. Why then has number of deaths per gun violence increased in this period of time?

Au contraire, a marginal increase in freedom actually increases safety, proving the two to be mutually inclusive rather than exclusive (fig. 2). The Gallup Poll provides evidence to this very fact. Ezra Klein, Washington Post Journalist, writes, "Of the 11 deadliest shootings in the US, five have happened from 2007 onward [6]." Combine the Gallop Poll study and Klein's analysis of gun violence and you get a very clear picture that the decrease in gun ownership has, in fact, led to more gun violence. This indicates that a decrease in freedom has led to a subsequent decrease in security. Clearly, only a perfect balance can maximize both freedom and safety within a society.

AIRPORT SECURITY — A TESTAMENT FOR CO-EXISTENCE

In order to further prove the argument incontrovertible, one can look towards modern airport security and its impact on safety and freedom. Support for airport security measures such as full-body scans follows a similar line of thought as that of gun control. What's interesting to note is that one viewpoint "supports" freedom (the ownership of guns) whereas the other viewpoint "supports" a limitation of freedom (airport security) for the ultimate purpose of achieving security. By looking at airport security through Hobbes' perspective, it would appear that airport security is a detriment to freedom and yet another tool of manipulation by an overbearing government that places the advancement of safety at its core. However, this viewpoint is parochial in nature because it fails to take into account the long-term effects of increased airport security. Only through airport security can one enjoy the benefits of flying and be free from the threat of terrorists looking to hijack planes. Only

through airport security can one have the right to live. Only through airport security is freedom ultimately heightened. Ian Stevenson mirrors this thought when he states that, "Others also have some rights, including the right to survive" [9].

Fig. 3 [10] CBS New Poll- The figure illustrates that 4 in 5 Americans support the use of full-body scanners in airports – demonstrating the value of a decrease in freedom initially to increase it in the long-run
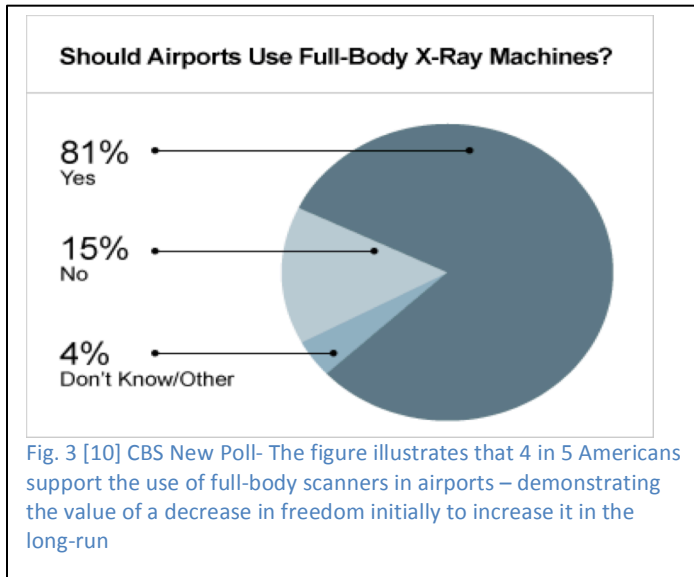
Fig. 3 is yet another testament to the fact that decreasing freedom is just a medium to achieving more freedom in the long-run. With the constant threat of a terrorist attack in a world without comprehensive airport security, citizens would not be able to enjoy the freedom of travelling as they once used to. Freedom and security truly go hand in hand.

An empirical example of this can been seen in the recently held London Olympic games, which thousands of individuals from all over the world attended; in this specific instance, airport security was of the essence to "deliver a safe and secure Games" [11]. Without adequate security, a repeat of the year-prior suicide bomb attempt in London would have been inevitable, and the games would have been canceled as a result. Therefore it is true that the success and freedom to enjoy the Olympic games was a direct result of the safety the government provided. This can also be seen in the attempted hijacking of the Northwest Airlines Flight 253 by a suicide bomber "with explosives sewn into the crotch of his pants" [9]. Only through stringent security measures, revealing x-rays, and scrutinizing body scans was the criminal found and were the lives of the 250 people aboard the plane, saved. Had there been a lack of security, the lives of those on the plane would have been lost, and their right to live would have been shattered.

Conclusion

Clearly, in order to maximize the potency of both, security and freedom must be viewed in conjunction within society, seen as mutually inclusive societal concepts whose coexistence fortifies the benefits of each individual counterpart. Too often has society fallen astray to the fallacy that both cannot exist together as a result of a reliance on Hobbes' incorrect philosophy concerning freedom and safety in Leviathan. In order to perfect society

by balancing both concepts, one must dismiss his predilection towards viewing both as extremes, demystify himself from Hobbes' "false alternative," and wholly accept both as intertwined concepts. Only by doing so can one enjoy the benefits of freedom gained from increased rights, as well as be reassured of safety in an inherently volatile and menacing world. The debate over safety and freedom brings forth an unfortunate truth about society's inclination towards the extremes. Whether it is between security and freedom, justice and revenge, or isolation and immersion, finding a common ground between two concepts is seen as elusive as achieving utopia.

Due to this provincial perspective, society has a predilection to flock to an extreme under the presumption that only one can realistically exist. This, however, leads to a complete stagnation of progress, as society can never move towards fostering an environment in which the benefits of both concepts can be reaped. Therefore, only by accepting the possibility of coexistence can society truly change for the better. So, when one questions whether or not the average man wants to be free or safe, the answer is clearly - BOTH.

Acknowledgments

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