

4. Aaron Karp, "Small Arms: Back to the Future," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Volume IX, Issue 1 (Spring 2002): 189.

5. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Volume IX, Issue 1 (Spring 2002): 161.

Firearms and Responsibility

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Robert Glock regrets that the *Brown Journal of World Affairs* symposium offered "no examination or acknowledgement of the positive elements of centuries-old safe and responsible gun ownership." He has a point. It is easy to sympathize with law-abiding firms and private owners who only want to pursue their interests in peace. It is not an unreasonable plea, but it ignores the essential realities of technology. Small arms differ from other consumer goods. They require special rules and care. In the long run, liberties can be assured best by accepting special responsibilities, too.

If only one had to look harder for the reasons. While Glock's letter sat on my desk, an otherwise ordinary rifle became a tool of mass terror. Through October 2002, a sniper killed and maimed in the Washington D.C. area. The sniper forced millions of ordinary people to fearful distraction every time they fuelled their vehicles. It is ironic, but also quite likely, that the sniper's rifle was completely legal until the second it was turned upon a person.

As the sniper reminded everyone, the line between civilian and military—or legal and illegal—is not always the key to effective small arms policy. This is a problem domestic and international policy-making has faced before. Separating

firearms by their good or bad owners does not alleviate gun problems like suicide, homicide, crime, intimidation, and repression, not when legal guns can be transformed into something else with a trigger squeeze.

Sometimes it does not even take that much. Very few illegal firearms start out illegal. More commonly, it is from legal origins that a particular weapon turns into a problem. Latin America and Canada, for example, have serious difficulties with the firearms "ant trade": guns bought legally in the United States and infiltrated by small-time smugglers across their borders. Although these guns often move only one at a time, the cumulative effect is large enough to exacerbate crime and undermine domestic efforts to keep guns out of criminal hands. Not just civilian firearms, but former police weapons and decommissioned military small arms have also been found in the hands of illicit users.

Since the line between legal and illegal can be perilously thin, the inherent capabilities of small arms must be considered. Glock is right, of course—most of the world's firearms never hurt anyone. But the same is true of most of the world's dogs, cars, tactical aircraft, and nuclear weapons. We try to keep close watch on those, not because they are uniformly dangerous, but because of their capabilities. Rather than focusing exclusively on a buyer's original intentions, small arms policy has to take capabilities into account, as well. Definitions have to be broad enough to characterize the full dimension of small arms risks and dangers. They have to be meaningful in the face of the facile descent from the responsible to the deadly.

Gun-for-gun, the automatic military rifles that Glock wants the international community to stress are almost certainly the most deadly. But already large numbers of these weapons have reached civilian hands. Other weapons, moreover, while not so deadly by technical criteria, are no less dangerous. The Washington sniper's gun may or may not be fully automatic, but is the distinction important?

In the original UN exercise in 1997, government representatives agreed to define small arms empirically, with broad categories to include as much as possible of what are commonly thought of as small arms. Glock, however, would prefer a politically conceived definition "not so broad as to include firearms which are legitimately possessed by civilians." There is something disingenuous about a definition that would narrow international deliberations exclusively to military weapons. Instead of technical criteria, the empirical approach would rely on judgments about which weapons should be of greatest concern. Instead of categorizing them based on what they are or what they are designed to do, this approach would base policy on who has them. Instead of relying on the nature of the weapon, it focuses on the identity of their owner.

The political approach was considered at the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference. African delegations led a campaign to ban transfers of small arms

to rebel insurgencies and non-state actors. The plan died because many other governments had a rebel group they want to see supplied. Less than ten weeks after the Small Arms Conference ended, the United States, Russia, and many others were rushing arms to the Afghan Northern Alliance—a rebel group, but suddenly a very popular one.

While in the abstract it would be ideal to regulate specifically those weapons that pose the gravest dangers, in practice there is no way to make such distinctions in advance. A deadly gun is one that has just been used. There can be no substitute for a regulatory environment that insures responsibility for each small arm and light weapon at every stage in its long life. Because almost every gun is designed with the capability to kill, it is imperative always to know where it is and who is responsible for it. Such measures will not guarantee the safety of the innocent, nor will they erode the rights of law-abiding gun owners. But they are essential if the international community is to begin to reverse the growing fear of firearms anarchy. 