

Presidents, Debates, and Guns

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have not and do not want to watch presidents or prime ministers debate on television. Politicians are salesmen who will tell you what is good about their products but will cover up any faults. Watching them try to curry favor reminds me why I once made the decision not to enter politics.

Money plays such an important part in the game. Candidates are in hock to their funders to get elected and then, of course, to their parties once they get in. Trade unions fund the Left and rich men fund the Right. Only rarely does an independent rise like a shooting star, and then fall back into obscurity. And in the USA, as in Europe, recent immigrants are changing the political spectrum. This will probably be the last opportunity of rightwing whites to get their candidate into the White House.

I recall in my student days how we debated about political systems. When a speaker criticized the Communist Party for censoring the press, the left wingers argued that the Soviet Union system was preferable to the West where capitalists decided what news to print that would attract advertisers and money. The fact is that both, all systems are defective, simply because humans are. I dislike our so-called democracy because human cupidity undermines it. On the other hand, I can't think of any human system, religious, civil, or sporting that are not undermined by cheats, powerbrokers, and manipulators. Even apparently good guys often make terrible decisions. That's humanity for you. I am only amazed when I do actually meet honest, good human beings in any of these areas.

In the USA, both candidates want Jewish votes and money as well as all the others'. They will say what it takes to win that support. So if you recall last time round Obama addressed AIPAC and said that Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish state, then the next day backtracked to appease the anti-Israel lobbies and the State Department. Romney says the same thing this time round.

But regardless of who is elected, the American embassy will remain in Tel Aviv and the USA will continue to refuse to register children born in Jerusalem as citizens of Israel. (In 2002, Congress passed legislation that said that American citizens born in Jerusalem may list "Israel" as their country of birth, although Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have not allowed it.) And no matter what presidents have said or will say, regardless of who they are, nothing will change. National interests will determine policy in the end, regardless of style of leadership, ideology, or alliances, as they always have in the Americas, the Middle East, or the Far East. Yes I am a cynic, but also a realist and pragmatist. One puts prioritizes one's country or one's religion first, in whichever order one chooses.

The most obvious proof of my contention that money dictates is the

unbelievable American policy on guns. If there is one thing that I find completely incomprehensible about the USA it is its attitude towards guns. It is almost as if they have a death wish.

But both Presidential candidates are scared witless by the gun lobby and refuse to make reform a plank in their platform. The facts (see New York Times Editorial October 19th) are that 4.5 million firearms are sold in the USA each year and more than one million Americans have been killed by firearms in the USA over the past forty years. US gun homicide rates are 6.9 times higher than any other country and it is overwhelmingly the racial minorities and the poor who suffer most. People claim they buy guns for self-defense and whenever there's a mass shooting sales rocket. But most gun deaths come from gang warfare and home accidents where kids get hold of their parents' firearms, or family conflicts are resolved by the available means. You'd have thought the Democrats would have made an issue of this.

The gun lovers argue that it is part of American history, the Constitutional right to bear arms to fight off the British army, even if that was three hundred years ago when there was no effective police or armed forces. They argue that precisely because the USA is so lawless you need guns to defend yourself. If ever there was a circular argument this is a good example. But it also implies that having guns actually deters criminals. Quite the contrary. They come better armed.

The NRA (National Rifle Association) was initially founded by Civil War veterans to improve marksmanship and added the hunters' rights people until WWII. But now they just turned into a bullying lobby with no regard for what is good for America, only what they claim is good for them. Since it now battles to protect the whole array of assault weapons it should change its name to the National Murder Association.

There's the hunting aspect. Not being a huntin', shootin', and fishin' man myself, I would have thought that's the best argument against letting people have guns altogether. But let's allow for sporting guns; after all, we allow poor inadequate humans to drive dangerous cars that often kill them, so why be a spoilsport about hunting. But then why does the NRA fight so hard against banning assault weapons? Do you need an Uzi to bag a wabbit? Not only, but the NRA fights against tougher registration and security checks, despite the fact it seems the vast majority of Americans who own guns are in favor of tighter controls. The NRA is no longer about rifles.

For many, guns are a matter of myth, the myth of the free and easy glory days of the Wild West. For others, it looks like an alliance with the mafia to block anyone or anything that interferes with their fun and crime. It cannot make any sense to have such loose and dangerous laws. Responsible mayors like Bloomberg are aghast that neither of the candidates is honestly prepared to deal with the issue. Obama claimed he would when he wanted to be elected first time, but then, as with most of his pledges, he chickened out when the buck appeared in his rifle sight! I have no doubt Romney would be the same.

I don't trust either, and yet there is nowhere else I (as a refugee from Britain), or the millions of Americans, or the billions of anti-Americans

would rather live, given the stated preference of all those refugees fleeing their homelands. That says something.