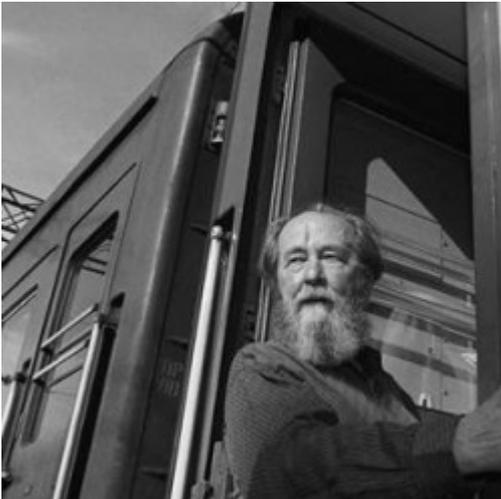


Guns, Vaccines, and Rekindling Our American Sense of Duty



By Alex Berezow — August 5, 2019



Credit: I, Evstafiev/Wikipedia ^[1]

For Americans, this past weekend was painful. On Saturday, an evil, deranged person murdered 22 people in El Paso, Texas. Not even 24 hours later, another evil, deranged person murdered nine in Dayton, Ohio.

Much will be said by politicians and political pundits in the coming days, most of which we've heard before. We will not repeat these arguments or policy debates here. Instead, we would like to focus on something far more profound: The state of the American psyche.

The great Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose [time in a Soviet gulag](#) ^[2] converted him from communism to Orthodox Christianity, [wrote](#) ^[3] in 1991:

"Human rights' are a fine thing, but how can we make ourselves sure that our rights do not expand at the expense of the rights of others... A stable society is achieved not by balancing opposing forces but by conscious self-limitation: by the principle that we are always duty-bound to defer to the sense of moral justice."

This wasn't the first time he had expressed such thoughts. At Harvard's commencement address in 1978, Solzhenitsyn touched upon the same theme, as [summarized](#) ^[4] by legal scholar and Princeton professor Robert P. George:

"Solzhenitsyn... warned America and the West that we had become too focused on rights and needed to refocus on obligations. We had come to embrace a false idea of liberty, conceiving of it as doing as one pleases, rather than as the freedom to fulfill one's human potential and honor one's conscientious duties to God and neighbor."

This criticism rings particularly true today. Indeed, it may serve as the underlying explanation for what otherwise appear to be disparate phenomena.

What Gun Violence and Anti-Vaxxerism Have in Common

Too many Americans seem to have a misunderstanding of what freedom actually means, and that misunderstanding may take hold at a very young age. I specifically recall instances in grade school in which a fellow classmate would behave badly (e.g., by taking a toy from another student) and when confronted would respond, "It's a free country."

That's certainly true, but it's beside the point. Your freedoms end where another person's freedoms begin. Yet, by our collective behavior, it would seem that some of our fellow Americans never grew beyond that childish understanding of freedom.

How else can we explain anti-vaccine activists, who knowingly and willingly put the lives of young children and the immunocompromised at risk by their selfish behavior? How else can we explain senseless gun violence? How else can we explain allowing homeless people, who are often drug-addicted and/or mentally ill, to suffer and die on the street? How else can we explain the epidemics of loneliness and suicide that are gripping our nation? How else can we explain the hyperpartisanship and nastiness that pervade our interactions on social media?

Yes, laws could probably address some of the problems just mentioned. But laws can't fix the American psyche. Laws can't make you love your neighbor. Laws can't make you feel a sense of duty or moral obligation to your fellow Americans. Laws can't fix a broken culture.

Historically, America has gone through cycles of moral turpitude followed by a reawakening. Let us strive today for a new dawn.

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[2] <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1829150,00.html>

[3] <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/761274-rebuilding-russia>

[4] <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/06/solzhenitsyns-prophecy>