

A Disarming Lesson from the Pacific

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Australia is often held up as an example in US gun control debates, but the country might learn more from a close look at Pacific Island nations.

America's epidemic of gun violence has seen both [President Obama](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#) wondering aloud if Australia might have part of the answer. But there's much more to this for the Asia-Pacific region than a brief, doomed flicker in the US election debate.

True, stringent gun controls [bullied through](#) by a determined Prime Minister following a mass shooting in Tasmania nearly 20 years ago appear to have had an effect. For an Australian, the risk of dying by gunshot [dropped by more than half](#), and has not risen since. Gun homicide and gun suicide – even homicide and suicide by any means – saw [remarkable decreases](#). Most notably, there hasn't been a mass shooting in two decades. But that's only Australia.

By one common measure, while America's gun laws are ranked 'permissive', those of every nation in Asia and the Pacific are judged 'restrictive'. No country in our region has anything resembling the US Constitution's Second Amendment right to bear arms, most discourage or prohibit private guns for self-defence, and mass shootings are rare. Our populations have much lower rates of gun ownership and gun death, and above all very different attitudes, particularly in Oceania.

Across the south-west Pacific a [consensus for disarmament](#) has emerged, remarkably without government coordination. Since the Bougainville war and its smaller, but locally more damaging sequels of ethnic/criminal armed violence, the Pacific almost unconsciously forged a new way – disarm the neighbourhood. Instead of flying in more guns to enforce peace, unarmed peacekeepers quietly [built sturdy armouries](#), [secured or destroyed](#) firearms, [linked disarmament to aspirations for self-determination](#), and restored much of the Pacific's reputation for being pacific.

This consensus for disarmament sprang from fertile soil. In three-quarters of southern Pacific nations, police patrol unarmed. Ten countries have no military, and three now prohibit private possession of guns. Ironically, former US Pacific territories boast some of the most stringent firearm restrictions in the world. Palau, the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia enforce gun controls which on the American mainland would provoke insurrection. In Oceania, as we watch the carnage fuelled by guns in other hemispheres, our regional preference for non-proliferation of firearms seems to have grown.

Solomon Islands, after destroying more firearms than anyone knew it had, is now by law a gun free nation. Papua New Guinea [scrapped](#) a larger proportion of its military small arms than almost any other country in the world. In Timor Leste, the first priority of a regional intervention force was to ['disarm everybody'](#). A decade or more later, not one of these

moves has been reversed. In each country human rights, health care, justice and development all benefit from the absence of loose weapons required for armed violence.

It would be silly to suggest that others simply follow the Pacific example. Arms trafficking and illicit drug routes largely pass us by, gang violence is not endemic and we haven't seen a major local conflict since the nineties. Instead, think of the Pacific as a laboratory worth watching. What effects might a community of 620,000 people (Solomon Islands) experience after its first decade as a gun free zone? Answer: [zero gun homicides](#). And what could a population of 23 million (Australia) have to show two decades after destroying one-third of its private firearms? Answer: [greatly reduced gun homicide](#), [gun suicide](#) and [zero mass shootings](#).

Despite these examples Obama and Clinton are whistling in the wind, doomed to backtrack when confronted with reality. Under threat of imprisonment, the Australian Gun Buyback [purchased and destroyed](#) three-quarters of a million firearms from gun owners who until then held them legally. Even if this was not at the heart of one of the most polarised and acrimonious debates in the United States, such confiscation of private property, compensated or otherwise, is not the American way.

Instead, President Obama is constrained to baby steps – forcing a few gun sellers to perform character checks. In Asia-Pacific such vetting has always been routine. In America, anyone who wishes to avoid an FBI background check can still legally make an unrecorded purchase from a private seller, commonly after meeting online. Not even the White House pretends that Obama's latest moves will make much of a dent in America's annual toll of 30,000 gun deaths.

Ever since the 1999 Columbine mass shooting, the most common question put to foreign observers of gun control is: "When will America move to reduce gun violence?" For the foreseeable future, the best response might be to cite Stein's Law: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop."

When, nobody knows.