

High Country News

For people who care about the West



The Great Gun-Rights Divide

A liberal gun owner finds 'gun nuts'
on both sides of the debate

By Dan Baum | Page 12

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Everyone in America would like to reduce gun violence. We simply differ on how to achieve that: Put more guns in the hands of “good guys” or increase gun control? We also differ on whether the goal is worth restricting civil liberties, and on what the U.S. Constitution says about guns. Which is not to say we discuss these differences sensibly. After every mass shooting, a “pro-gun” person is shoved under the studio lights with an “anti-gun” person, and they’re urged to tear each other apart on camera. It’s what we have for gladiatorial entertainment, now that we’ve banned dog fighting.

I had a notion a few years ago that I could help bridge the gun divide by writing a book. I am one of the not-so-rare but frequently ignored liberal gun nuts — a third-generation, lifelong tax-and-spend Democrat who believes in national health care, strong environmental protection, reproductive freedom, unions, permissive immigration laws, stiff financial regulation ... and guns. I like to collect guns, shoot them, hunt with them, read about them. As a New York Jew who, decades ago, chose to live in the West — first Alaska, then Montana, and now Boulder, Colorado — I also straddle the great demographic divide.

For my research, I drove around the country and asked gun owners how and why firearms are important to them. To help establish my credentials, I went



through the process of getting a Colorado concealed-carry license, valid in 30 states. Nothing says “gun guy” like a loaded handgun. I wore my concealed pistol everywhere, and it helped: I enjoyed remarkably candid interviews with gun owners of all kinds. Along the way, I found myself shooting a tommy gun at a stick of dynamite in the Arizona desert and gunning down a dozen wild pigs in Texas. At a Nebraska gun show and elsewhere, I was struck by a seething anger that seemed to be based on class resentment against the wealthier urban coasts picking on the poorer rural Interior, which might explain why the temperature of the gun debate has risen during the current recession.

The result was *Gun Guys: A Road Trip*, published in March 2013, intended as apolitical, non-polemical cultural anthropology, played sometimes for laughs. The book’s timing was unfortunate, because the whole country was understandably distraught over the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in

Connecticut, and hardly anyone was in the mood for nuanced discussion. Those who supported stricter controls on gun ownership, including the president I’d twice worked hard to elect, were in a lather to enact a ban on “assault rifles” — a poorly understood term, in and of itself — and the NRA was bellowing, in its typically belligerent tone-deaf way, that what America needed was more guns in schools. The interview bookers for radio and TV “news” shows were delighted to find someone other than the usual suspects to thrust before the microphones.

There’s something oxymoronic about using media as impatient as TV and radio to publicize a book that took 18 months to write. I started out on local AM airwaves, waking before dawn in my Rocky Mountain Time Zone to call one station after another during the listeners’ rush-hour drive-time in places as far-flung as Buffalo and Lubbock. Most interviewees wanted only to know, in our 90 seconds together, whether I was antipasto or provolone: Assault-rifle ban



— for or against? Background checks — for or against? Gun magazine-size limits — for or against? Sorry, that’s all the time we have; now, on to weather and traffic. As for the call-in shows, something about the anonymity of a phone line brings out the rabid on all sides.

Then I got invited onto the national stage, as a guest on *Piers Morgan*, a prime-time CNN show. Morgan, a former London tabloid editor lacking any discernible experience with either guns or gun owners, was crusading for an assault-rifle ban and other gun restrictions. His show sent a long black car to ferry me to a Denver TV studio, where I was powdered, wired for sound, and, this being a “remote” interview, stashed before a camera and a hot light in an otherwise dark room; it was like a police grilling in a gangster picture. Up came the music in my earpiece, and then Morgan’s nasal voice, introducing me and, to my surprise, the celebrity flaming-liberal lawyer, Alan Dershowitz. I’d made the rookie mistake of not asking who the other guests would be. Dershowitz took

off, shrieking into my earpiece, “Guns are destroying America! Guns are destroying America!” He continued without inhaling — and Morgan cheering him on — throughout our entire four-minute segment. As I stared into the camera’s robotic eye, I considered my options. Shout Dershowitz and Morgan down or stick to the high road, as I’d intended, and await my turn? I did the latter — my second mistake. I barely got in a word about my mission to sow a new understanding of guns in the U.S.

While being chauffeured back to Boulder, I thought about the distance from Piers Morgan’s Manhattan to the Rocky Mountains. What are the chances that people in such different worlds would think the same way about anything? I wondered if Morgan had ever met someone who lived 90 minutes from the nearest law enforcement and considered a powerful gun an essential tool. Concepts like self-reliance and danger are so different in Fremont County, Colorado, (30 people per square mile) and Manhat-

tan (70,000 people per square mile) that a firearm can’t possibly represent the same thing in both places. So why are we even talking about guns as a national issue?

Nevertheless, like many authors, I felt obligated to go off to New York City for a couple of surreal “book tour” days, racing from one studio to the next to the next, promoting a sympathetic book about gun owners in the capital of anti-gun sentiment. Everybody was polite, but few had any idea what to make of me, and their faint distaste was often palpable.

For Brian Lehrer at WNYC, the local NPR affiliate, I may as well have taken a road trip across the face of Jupiter; he barely knew what to ask about gun owners, and tried to maneuver me into a dreary debate about background checks. But at least he talked about guns. CNN’s Soledad O’Brien seated me among the guests of her morning show *Starting Point* and expected me to participate in an hour of discussion about celebrity haircuts.

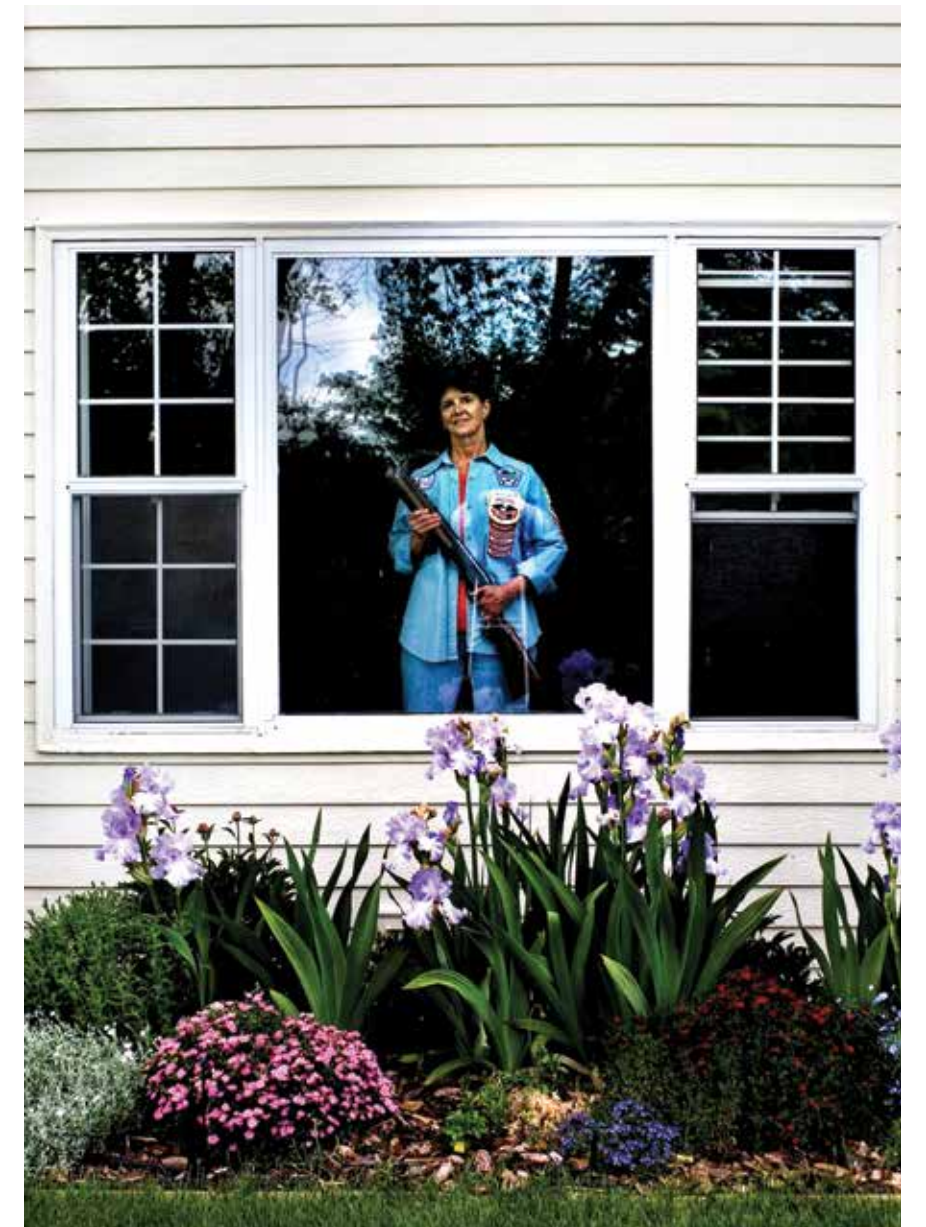
A TV studio is a disorienting place: much smaller than it appears on your

A boy holds a handmade anti-gun sign, facing page, during the 2013 March on Washington for Gun Control, following the massacre of 26 students and staffers at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Above, boys pose for a photo holding Bushmaster rifles during a National Rifle Association convention in Houston, Texas.

YURI GRIPAS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES, LEFT; KAREN BLEIER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES, ABOVE



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"A liberal who happens to like guns is still an enemy."

—A commenter on AR15.com, an avid pro-gun website

home screen, cheaply built and garishly floodlit, a bizarro world bereft of shadows. Everybody's face is shockingly close and eerily painted. People shout as though trying to make themselves understood to deaf toddlers. A floating plasma of microphones, camera lenses and monitors rotates around you at all levels; you are supposed to pretend they don't exist. You watch your precious seconds tick away on a digital clock.

After *Starting Point*, I appeared twice on the liberal TV network, MSNBC, on shows hosted by Chris Hayes, and on conservative Fox News, which introduced me as the network's political pawn: "Obama Supporter Dan Baum Explains Why The President HAS IT ALL WRONG (on guns)!"

The New York Times, which had favorably reviewed my three previous books, chose not to review *Gun Guys*. Maybe no surprise; the *Times*, my daily paper of choice, is a big supporter of restricting gun ownership, and competing viewpoints are unwelcome, even in letters to the editor. But *Times* columnist Joe Nocera, the burly

son of a Providence grocer, invited me to talk on camera for a video that would appear on the *Times* website, and promised to write up the interview for the *Sunday Review* section. The *Times* occupies a glorious new tower that seems to be made of aluminum and sunlight. Nocera, in a trim sportcoat, shook my hand with the air of opposing counsel in a murder trial. A small army of young aides wired us for sound as we sat silently across a table from each other, and then we were given the countdown: "Three, two, one, go!"

Only five of about 45 minutes of that video made it to the website, and what ran in the newspaper was "edited for space and clarity." Yes, and also to make me look so strident that at one point it appears as though I'm arguing that Nocera shouldn't let his children go swimming. The *Times* also edited out Nocera's constant interruptions — "OK, OK, my turn to talk" — an odd interviewing technique. Online *Times* reader comments included, "Your premise, Dan Baum, is absolutely ludicrous," and "Joe understands guns much better than the gun

guy. Guns are frightfully dangerous and without them the massacres would not have happened. What more does anyone need to understand?" What more, indeed, does anyone need to understand beyond what he already believes?

Not that many gun guys appeared more open-minded. They largely rejected *Gun Guys* because of its very premise. "I will not buy it or read it," wrote one commenter on a popular gun blog. "I don't care what some ivory tower dwelling statist thinks about my RIGHT to own the weapon of my choice." ... "Why should I listen to someone who wants to take away a fundamental right?" wrote another, somehow equating an interest in what gun guys think with a desire to ban guns. My favorite, from a commenter on AR15.com, read: "A liberal who happens to like guns is still an enemy." Nuff said.

In fairness, several radio interviewers were genuinely eager to keep the conversation intelligent and non-dogmatic: NPR's Warren Olney and John Hockenberry, Prairie Public Radio's Doug Hamilton, and Tom Gresham of *Gun Talk Radio*

all encouraged viewpoints alien to their own, and explored the reasoning behind them. Even their callers were polite.

Promoting a book is like running for office; by the end you're so tired of hearing yourself talk that you want to cut your own throat. In my second appearance with MSNBC's Hayes, he took up most of my segment with a long rant blaming "gun culture" for Sandy Hook. Pithed like a frog by those magical television lights, I wasn't quick enough to point out that when George Will years ago blamed "gay culture" for AIDS, we progressives jumped all over him. (Nothing like being interviewed on TV to rack up a lot of shoulda-saids.) I did, however, recall the lesson Alan Dershowitz had taught me, and when Hayes brought on Rep. Elijah Cummings, a dignified Democrat from Maryland who described, with endless sadness and in vivid detail, the shooting death of his nephew, I simply talked over the bereaved uncle, ignoring the producer's voice in my earpiece telling me to, "Stop. Stop. *Stop talking!*" I had become what I'd been watching. It was

the lowest moment of my brief career as a gun-debate pundit.

The high point was being summoned to the White House to brief Vice President Joe Biden on "how gun guys think." Biden and others in the administration were already agitating for an assault-rifle ban, but I've always appreciated Biden, gaffes and all. In person he was every bit as charming as on TV. Three of his aides and I sat in his modest West Wing office before a roaring fire, sipping bottled water. Biden luxuriated in a wing chair, spooling out long stories about hanging out with firehouse gun guys and hunting with his dad while growing up in Scranton. We wound up talking for twice my allotted 45 minutes, and I was able to evoke some of the people I'd come to know in the course of writing the book: Terri Proud, a statehouse candidate in Phoenix who felt personally insulted by gun control's implication that she couldn't be trusted to handle her firearms; Rick Ector of Detroit, who didn't want people from nice neighborhoods making self-defense decisions for people from neigh-

borhoods like his; and Bernie Herpin, a city councilman in Colorado Springs, who wondered why the Democrats, ostensibly the party of the working man, were hostile to a tool and a sport — guns and shooting — that working men cherish. The vice president leaned forward as I talked, nodding at his folded hands, and slapped his thigh when I told him, "You're driving away a lot of natural Democrats." My wife thought she heard an echo of my rap in Biden's interview on NPR the next day, when he urged sensitivity, saying that a lot of gun owners take the push for gun control personally. The administration went ahead, however, and impaled itself on a doomed gun-control effort anyway.

Roughly 80 million Americans own guns, but the statistic is deceptive. If many gun owners seem overwrought by the prospect of something as mild as expanded background checks, perhaps it's because they sense what the firearms-industry statistics show: Gun culture is dying. More and more guns are being

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Dan Steinke of Culbertson, Nebraska, facing page, fires a machine gun during a Rocky Mountain Fifty Caliber Shooting Association event in Cheyenne Wells, Colorado. University of Colorado engineering student David Knutzen, center, with a pistol on his hip, has a concealed carry permit and often takes a gun when he's out and about. Above, Chris Morrison, certified as a National Rifle Association "Triple Distinguished Expert" for skills in handling a shotgun, a pistol and a rifle, at home in Centennial, Colorado.

MATT SLABY/LUCEO

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sold, but they're being sold to the same shrinking group of middle-aged rural white men. Statistics collected by the National Shooting Sports Foundation reveal that 20-somethings have almost no interest in firearms, even out West. Young people want to be urban and digital, and guns are neither; those who hunt tend to prefer a bow and arrows, which takes more skill and looks better on the Outdoor Channel. For reasons like that, the Shooting Sports Foundation warned its members in 2008 that the condition of shooting sports was "precarious." Gun control is in many ways the least of the threats facing gun culture.

But obviously, gun culture won't fade without a fight. Last September, for instance, Colorado voters recalled from office two Democrats — State Senate President John Morse and State Sen. Angela Giron — because they pushed a law saying that gun magazines in Colorado could hold no more than 15 bullets. Almost all of Colorado's 62 sheriffs said they wouldn't enforce the law, and sheriffs in Montana and even California have declared that they won't enforce any new restrictions on gun ownership that they don't like. In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, new state laws expanding gun rights outnumbered those restricting them by nearly two to one. A recent

Gallup poll found sharply rising dissatisfaction with American gun laws, but "that mostly reflects those who are dissatisfied because *they believe gun laws are too strict*, rather than not strict enough." (Emphasis Gallup's.)

All of this argument can't possibly be about inanimate pieces of metal and their effect on public safety, because so little

Thus, the gun debate is really a way to talk about bigger differences for which we can't seem to find the vocabulary.

evidence exists to connect the two. Gun laws have grown looser almost everywhere in the U.S. in the past 20 years, the number of privately owned guns about tripled, and in that same period, the rate of gun violence dropped by about half. The real purpose of the fight over gun control, it seems to me, is to serve as a kind of proxy for a much bigger philosophical divide that has divided our country since the founding.

Guns represent a worldview that, broadly defined, values the individual over the collective, vigorous outdoorsiness over pallid intellectualism, certainty

over questioning, patriotism over internationalism, manliness over femininity, action over inaction, the Interior over the Coasts. If instead you value reason over force, skepticism over certainty, internationalism over American exceptionalism, multiculturalism over white-male hegemony, income leveling over jungle capitalism, peace over war — if you're a stereotypical liberal, for lack of a better word — and you feel more at home on the Coasts than in the Interior, you're inclined to see the gun as the emblem of your opponent's worldview: his idol. A lot of my fellow liberals seem to think they can weaken their enemy by smashing his idol. Thus, the gun debate is really a way to talk about bigger differences for which we can't seem to find the vocabulary.

The rhetoric that I'd hoped to cool is as superheated as ever. "You're an unbelievably stupid man, aren't you?" Piers Morgan asked one of his pro-gun guests in December. On the other side, *Guns and Ammo* magazine recently ended the decades-long career of one of its most popular columnists, Dick Metcalf, for opining that 16 hours of training to get a concealed-carry permit wasn't an infringement of Second Amendment rights. Speaking to *The New York Times*, former *Guns and Ammo* editor Richard Venola essentially wrote the epitaph for my effort. "The time for ceding some rational points," he said, "is gone." □

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Photo by Mark Gocke



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—Tom Bell, founder
High Country News

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