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Why Our Gun Debate Is Off Target

America's gun owners have every right to object to sweeping controls, but until they take responsibility for their own role in accidents and violence, they're setting themselves up for more regulation.

By **DAN BAUM**



Most American gun owners don't recognize themselves in the rhetoric of the NRA or the stereotypes of gun-control advocates. Dan Baum, author of "Gun Guys: A Road Trip," offers a very different picture of American gun culture in a discussion with WSJ Weekend Review editor Gary Rosen.

Believe it or not, what's missing from the current shout-fest over guns and gun control is the voice of gun owners.

Yes, the National Rifle Association has been screaming its head off since the tragedy at Sandy Hook, but the NRA doesn't speak for the country's 100 million gun owners. If it did, it wouldn't have just four million members. Some "gun guys" (as I like to call them) probably support the NRA without joining, but if only 4% are signing up, it's safe to say a large majority of them want nothing to do with the NRA's angry extremism.

As for those on the gun-control side, they often go beyond calling for policy changes, about which



David Kasnic for The Wall Street Journal

Marcey Parker of Kentucky competes with submachine guns around the country.

reasonable people can disagree, and issue broad-brush insults that aren't acceptable in other contexts. When sportscaster Bob Costas blames "gun culture" for the murder-suicide of an NFL linebacker, gun owners say, "Wait a minute. I'm gun culture. And my guns haven't hurt anybody."

A lot of assumptions are made about gun owners, by the NRA and gun-control proponents alike. What nobody ever seems to do, though, is listen to them.

I recently drove 15,000 miles around the country doing just that, talking to gun guys in their homes and garages, at gun shows and ranges, at gun stores and in the woods, trying to figure out why they are so deeply attracted to firearms and why guns inspire such passion on all sides. In part, it was a voyage of self-discovery. I'm a weirdo hybrid: a lifelong gun guy who is also a lifelong liberal Democrat. I often feel like the child of a bitter divorce who has allegiance to both parents.

I obtained a concealed-carry permit and wore a gun every place I went. I'd flash it like a Masonic pin, and gun guys poured out their stories. They seemed very glad finally to be asked about their gun lives by someone who was both sympathetic and not trying to manipulate them.



Fabrizio Costantini for The Wall Street Journal

Rick Ector of Rick's Firearm Academy of Detroit. Mr. Ector teaches gun safety.

The fondness for firearms is complex. At their simplest, guns are beautifully made things, richly satisfying to handle. The one with which I hunt was made in 1900, for the Spanish-American War. At a gun store in Minnesota, a big man put his credit card on the counter to buy a Glock, and as he waited for his receipt he turned to me with a sigh of satisfaction. "Tell me another thing I can buy for \$400 that my grandchildren will be using," he said. (This, by the way, is one of the problems with gun bans; unless we're willing to go house to house rounding them up, the country's 300 million privately owned guns are going to last forever.)

Then there's the Zen pleasure of marksmanship. One competitor at a match in Kentucky called it "a martial art," but even less serious shooting is a hoot. At a machine-gun shoot in the Arizona

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desert—yes, machine guns are legal with the right permit—I rented a Thompson submachine gun and fired it into an arroyo strewn with

junked cars and sticks of dynamite. Choose the most antigun peacenik you know, let her shoot a Tommy gun at a stick of dynamite, then ask if it was fun.

During a break in the shooting, I got a lesson in how guns connect us to our past. Men lovingly discussed the industrial-era designs of their 1896 Argentine Maxims and 1916 Vickers. As much as they were gun guys, they were history buffs and patent freaks.

Gun guys also talked of the welcome discipline that living with guns imposed on their lives, of their patriotic pride in the unique trust that America places in its people. They also get a charge from their proximity to the grim reaper. They stand apart from those who fear firearms, saying, essentially, "I am master of this death-dealing device, and you are not. I am prepared for the kind of situation you can't even bring yourself to think about." To live intimately with such lethal devices, to be able to handle them safely, is a powerful self-esteem builder.

Although I did my best to avoid gun politics, the subject came up constantly. What came through loudest of all was that gun guys feel insulted. The caustic and routine dismissal of "gun culture" is only part of it. Gun guys look at the most strident advocates of gun control and say, "You know nothing about what it means to handle guns, but you presume to make judgments about my ability to do so."

From Arizona to Michigan, I found America full of working people who won't listen to Democrats about anything because of the party's identification with gun control. A parks-and-recreation worker in Wisconsin told me he was offended by the Democrats' view "that guns are for the unwashed, the yokels." It's hard to think of a better organizing tool for the right than the left's tribal antipathy to guns.

43%

Americans who report having a gun in the home

Source: Gallup

But
my
fellow
gun
guys
have
plenty
to



Benjamin Rasmussen for The Wall Street Journal

Dan Baum, the author, with his antique German-made Mauser pistol in Boulder, Colo.

answer for, too. We don't live in a vacuum. Our guns affect everybody, and the non-gun-owning public has a right to expect things to improve. More than ever, after the transformative horror of Sandy Hook, the old defensive crouch is inadequate. If gun culture is to survive, gun guys need to get in the game. If we want to hold on to our guns, we need to be part of the solution.

Lacking a national church, Americans have few ways of expressing public morality except by saying, "There oughta be a law." So both sides of our "gun debate" can think no further than what government might do. Gun controllers call for more restrictive laws, gun guys gnash their teeth over same. Meanwhile, the single step that I believe would save the most lives wouldn't involve government at all.

As individuals, the majority of gun guys are achingly responsible with their guns. As a community, though, they are lethal—so focused on criminals and government as the villains that they have failed to examine how they themselves might help to reduce the number of gun fatalities.

The wrongest of wrong hands for guns aren't necessarily those of criminals but of curious children and depressed teenagers. Accidental child death is one of the few gun statistics that has grown worse since 1999. Teenage gun suicide is a lot lower than it was in 1999, but

it's still heartbreakingly high. Almost half the teenagers who kill themselves do it with a gun, and, unlike those who try it with pills, car exhaust, razorblades, or a rope, they almost always succeed.

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Where are those children and teenagers getting the guns? Not from gun stores, thanks to age minimums. Not from gun shows, either, unless they're getting an adult to buy them. And not from some murky "illegal gun market." They're getting them, by and large, from adults who

leave them around, where immature hands can find them.

The same goes for career criminals. In the mid-1980s, the sociologists James Wright and Peter Rossi asked some 2,000 violent felons in prison about their gun lives. Almost half the guns that the felons described were stolen. Add to that the ones they thought were "probably" stolen, and the figure jumped to 70%. Most were stolen from households. An estimated half-million guns a year go missing in the U.S. and end up in criminal hands.

And then there are the tens of thousands of shootings every year by people who aren't criminals until they pick up a gun. Tempers flare, a gun is at hand, and tragedy ensues.

To the legislatures of 27 states and the District of Columbia, the solution to both problems seems obvious: Require guns to be locked up, trigger-locked, stored separately from their ammunition, or some combination of the three. A lot of gun guys hate these laws. They argue that a gun separated from its ammunition, disabled or locked away is useless in an emergency.

Not true. I keep my handgun loaded in the bedroom, in a metal safe the size of a toaster that pops open the second I punch in a three-digit code. I bought it on [eBay](#) for \$25. The gun is secure but instantly available—to me only. Many gun guys use such safes. They just don't want to be told to use them.

Neither do they want to be ordered to report a stolen gun to the police. Lots of gun guys consider it tyranny to have to tell the police anything about their guns, and they have kept most jurisdictions from passing stolen-gun laws. Only seven states and the District of Columbia make reporting a stolen gun mandatory.

But if we gun guys are the paragons of civic virtue that we claim to be, why do we have to be ordered to lock up our guns or report a gun theft? Wouldn't a responsible citizen do that anyway?

We gun guys are operating under a double standard. We want to be left alone to buy, use and carry guns because, we say, we understand firearms better than any bureaucrat. But at the same time, enough of us behave so carelessly that thousands of people are needlessly

killed, injured or victimized every year by guns left lying around.

Is a gun guy who keeps his guns properly secured responsible for some knucklehead who doesn't? If the NRA is consistent in its logic, the answer is yes. Solidarity is a constant theme of the NRA, which exhorts its members to lobby and vote in support of the wider community of gun owners.

But that is where the NRA's vision of service to the community ends. For the NRA to suggest that law-abiding gun owners are responsible in any way for gun violence would shatter the notion that only criminals are to blame. So while the NRA trains people in gun safety and publishes books about gun care, it avoids drawing a connection between the carelessness of law-abiding gun owners and America's still-high rate of needless gun death.

What could the NRA and the community of responsible gun owners do to reduce gun deaths without government intervention? They could make unsafe gun behavior socially unacceptable, just as it has become unthinkable, among most Americans, to smoke inside another person's house or to make lascivious comments about underage girls.

Some are trying. Robert Farago, who writes a popular gun blog called *The Truth About Guns*, runs a regular feature called "Irresponsible Gun Owner of the Day"—often a YouTube video of young men acting stupidly or a news item about a needless tragedy. After Arizona instituted "constitutional carry"—allowing any adult to carry a concealed gun with no training or permit—a group called *TrainMeAZ.com* organized to urge citizens to get trained and to help them find trainers.

But these are lonely voices. The big dog, the NRA, has for decades run a monthly feature in its magazines called "The Armed Citizen," about people successfully defending themselves with firearms. Were it to call its members to a higher standard of responsibility with a complementary column called, say, "The Armed Bonehead," it would reach millions more people than either Mr. Farago or *TrainMeAZ*.

Imagine how gun culture could change if gun guys refused to hang out with those who left guns lying around their houses. "Sorry, dude. I'm not shooting with you until you clean up your act." Or if gun guys refused to shop at stores that sold home-defense guns without insisting that buyers also take safes to keep them in. Little by little, shooters and gun stores would get the message, and the problem of unsecured guns—the main source of gun tragedy—would wither away.

Gun guys are right to object to government officials who propose sweeping gun controls without understanding guns. But until they take responsibility for the gun violence that so frightens their fellow citizens, they're setting themselves up for more regulation. Taking collective responsibility for social problems is not the same thing as knuckling under to a tyrannical government. In fact, it's the opposite.

—Mr. Baum is the author of "Gun Guys: A Road Trip," which will be published by Knopf on March 5.

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