

OTHER VOICES

The Deafening Gun Control Debate: It's About More Than Guns

By David R. Altman
Progress Contributor

As a father, grandfather, gun-owner, outdoorsman and fixed-income American, I am worried about where our country is going. I am aware of knee-jerk reactions on both sides of the gun control debate. There is, as with most matters of public policy, room for disagreement. Unfortunately, you can't hear the disagreement with both sides screaming so loudly.

We have 300 million people in America and 270 million guns. For many people, that would sound like plenty. But we have a Constitutional right to purchase those weapons and a moral responsibility to use them safely.

I support the freedom to buy guns for hunting or sport or self-defense or, as a free American, protecting myself against all enemies, foreign and domestic (yes, as a former Army Reservist, I also took The Oath).

Right now, according to Gallup, Americans are split on this issue. About 58 percent surveyed in mid-January said they favored tougher laws. But that number was 78 percent in 1990 and just 43 percent 18 months ago. Public opinion has swayed dramatically, just like it was split over re-electing our president. I am not sure if that split makes us more diverse or more dangerous.

President Obama is, predictably and on-cue, reacting to these recent tragedies (incidentally, his use of children as a backdrop for the signing of his executive orders was both shameful and unbecoming).

While his executive orders do not appear an immediate threat to our Second Amendment rights, they have further ignited the debate.

Ironically, the only practical (and least intrusive) point in the Obama response is whether mental health professionals, like psychiatrists and counselors, should be required to report to law enforcement any patients whom they believe are a threat to society. But that also comes with a cost, and the civil libertarian in me worries about patient privacy.

It's a tradeoff—but one we must consider. If the psychiatrist who treated the Aurora Colorado movie theater killer knew that this mentally unstable man had mass murder on his mind about a month before the shooting then why did she reject local law enforcement's offer to put him on "psychiatric hold"? This calculating murderer's right to privacy led to 70 people being shot and 12 of them dying—and now, according to the *Denver Post*, his psychiatrist is being sued by one of the victim's spouses, charging that the doctor knew he was dangerous and "breached her duty to exercise reasonable care."

It is true that if there is a "solution" it is a complex one. And most of it has nothing to do with gun control. It involves significant improvements in mental health screening, more thorough background checks and greater involvement by parents. Side note to parents: let's get these kids outdoors and further away from their video games. Let's focus more on sports and scouting and camping and hunting and fishing and hiking.

As one experienced law enforcement professional told me, when a kid gets "killed" in a

video game he just hits "reset". There were no resets in Columbine, Blacksburg, Ft. Hood, Tucson, Aurora or Newtown.

Yet another Pickens law enforcement officer confided that banning assault weapons would be more symbolic than substantive. It will not stop the violence. It will give solace to those who have suffered from the gun violence and it may give hope to those who believe greater regulation will mean greater safety. It will not make our nation a better place.

But this issue is far deeper than guns. The gun debate speaks to the great division in our country that is exemplified by divisive and polarizing leadership in Washington.

The gun debate is symptomatic of the larger issue, which has more to do with whether we can survive as a nation than it does whether we can survive mass murderers.

The questions about gun control are almost unanswerable. You can't live in America and be middle-of-the-road about gun legislation. I have a close conservative friend who told me once that the only thing in the middle-of-the-road is a yellow stripe. He is right—but yellow stripes on the highway save lives every day. I am not convinced that further gun control will save any.

Like you, my heart hurts for families who have lost loved

ones—especially children—in these horrible massacres. There is no explaining why these shootings occur. Innocent people were shot by crazy people. And, despite our need to do something, there is nothing that will prevent these sorts of crimes from happening again. That is simply the truth.

Talk to law enforcement professionals (I have) and they will tell you that you cannot legislate safety. You cannot legislate sanity. As long as we are a free and open society, we will have senseless crimes committed by senseless people.

And beginning the process of disarming law-abiding Americans is a step toward disarming our right to be free.

My final appeal is to those of you who are in the middle, riding that yellow stripe, who are conflicted by these choices. Ask yourselves these two questions. Can we afford to do nothing? More importantly, can we afford to do the wrong thing?

We should think not just about the future of gun control but about the future of America. As our Republic struggles to remain free, we have more to lose than just our guns.

David R. Altman is a resident of the Sassafras Mountain area and is a regular contributor to the Progress.

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