



InSight

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My Life with Guns

In the 1960s, our family bought a cattle ranch in a remote area of Oregon. The ranch manager and other locals had guns, so pretty soon my father started buying guns, and then he introduced my 10-year-old brother to them.

The function of guns on our ranch was dubious. We had rattlesnakes, but a gun is not the most effective way to deal with a rattler. Occasionally a coyote would corner one of our cows while calving and try to grab it, but the ranch manager could take care of that. Cougars haunted our bluffs, but they never came close enough to humans to be a danger. Guns were mainly used for target practice, some deer hunting and shooting at the “sage rats,” little rodents that dug burrows in our fields that could trip up the horses and cattle.

I could have carried a gun while I rode range in the summers, but I never did and the need for a gun never arose on my rides after stray cattle or to find breaks in the fence. I found shooting at cans and bottles, or “plinking,” to be exceedingly boring. I was not interested in killing small furry animals.

As a backdrop to my views on our current national debate over gun control, I will describe a few of the gun incidents that have happened in my own family and among close friends. One could refer to these as “stupid tricks with guns,” if some of them were not so tragic. My dad’s business partner went out deer hunting with his brother. His wife decided to sneak out to where they were and “surprise” them. You can guess what comes next. They mistook her for a deer and shot her through the thigh. She recovered.

My brother, still a kid and seemingly unaware that real bullets could kill, shot at some motorcyclists crossing our ranch. The sheriff had a stern talk with him. Another time, my mom went out to call my brother in to dinner from target shooting. He handed her his 22 pistol in its holster, the gun slipped out butt first, the safety was off, it hit the ground, fired and lodged a hollow-point bullet behind my brother’s kneecap. He recovered, following surgery.

My father suffered from major depression, and when he first came into psychiatric care, all of his firearms were taken away from him, and he was prohibited from owning guns. He was able to purchase more guns through sources that did not require background checks or registration. He eventually turned one of these guns on

himself. He did not recover.

I could continue with other personal stories, and if you generalize them to the broader U.S. population, you have many of the reasons behind the epidemic of school shootings and other gun violence both accidental and intentional that we are now experiencing. Where does this lead me, on the major issues in our current national debate on gun control? I do not mind a registered gun in the hands of a trained hunter or sport marksman. I don’t mind shopkeepers or homeowners having firearms to protect themselves, if the owner’s background has been properly checked, if the gun is registered and secured, and if the owner is trained in its use. Alarm systems and other precautions are much more effective for security than guns.

But the national gun situation has gotten way out of control. Three hundred million firearms are in private hands among Americans, quite a few of whom are mentally unstable, some of whom are careless, and some of whom are malevolent. Some states allow the open carry of firearms – which is absurd in the year 2013. The ATF is a toothless agency. Gun lobby pressure for years prohibited the Centers for Disease

Control from doing research on gun violence as a public health problem.

The pressure brought by the NRA to prevent regulation of guns and bring about the absurd public policies just mentioned represents to a large degree the economic interests of the gun and ammunition manufacturers, a multi-billion dollar annual business in the United States. The NRA’s suggestions that the problem of school violence be addressed by bringing armed guards to school campuses or arming teachers is a further attempt to drum up business for the gun companies.

What do we need to do? Automatic weapons must be banned. Guns must be registered. Ammunition sales must be limited. There must be background checks, so mentally ill people have a harder time obtaining guns. The “gun show loophole” for unlicensed sales of firearms must be closed. This is a source of a vast number of unregistered firearms being sold by unlicensed dealers who keep no records (and generally pay no taxes on the sales).

The details of how we do these things are up to our political leaders, or if they are not effective, to activists working through the insurance or investment industries. But it is absolutely clear that they need to be done. 🍷

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