

When a Reasonable Idea Goes Bad

I have found myself watching out the car window as my wife and I have driven across rural lands. When doing so, I often wonder about the homes and villages in the distance and about the people who live there. And at times my thoughts have turned to their relationship with guns.

For these people, living as they do far from community safety resources, owning a gun, knowing how to use it, and being willing to shoot at a threatening animal or human makes a lot of sense to me. Threats beyond our urban-living-based imagination pose dramatic and immediate threats to rural landowners and their families. Self-sufficiency in defending their lives and their property seems logical and, frankly, essential.

But as I watch out the same car window when driving through cities, the opposite logic seems to apply. Living in an environment with trained community safety professionals who can respond quickly to a 911 call dramatically changes the paradigm. And, in that city life means living in close proximity to many others, bringing with this the higher potential for stress-based reactions and a different type of violent threat, allowing unfettered access to lethal weapons seems to be a dangerous proposition.

It would appear that a reasonable solution to the issue of guns would be to have different laws for different situations. And in a governing federation of different entities including local, county, and state jurisdiction, it would seem that this could be easily accomplished.

Except for the problem of politics.

The NRA spoke in support of elements of the Gun Control Act when it finally passed in 1968, following on the assassinations of MLK Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and also in response to the Black Panther movement. This Act created serial numbers for guns, set minimum age requirements for gun ownership, and banned mentally ill and drug addicted people from purchase. Such support stood well in resonance with the NRA's mission. Established in 1871 to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis," the NRA was dismayed by the lack of expertise in marksmanship displayed in the Civil War and was interested in improving shooting skill in the United States.

Addressing the same legislation, the NRA strongly opposed the creation of a national registry and mandatory licensure and these were dropped from the final bill.

In 1975, the NRA established a new lobbying aspect to their business, the Institute of Legislative Action. Under the direction of longtime NRA Board member Harlon B. Carter, this arm of the NRA was interested in promoting unregulated gun rights and liberties. The NRA Board voted to eliminate this wing of their organization a year later, but Mr. Carter was elected Executive Vice President of the NRA Board in 1977 and he quickly reestablished the political viewpoint of unregulated gun ownership.

It is interesting to note that the Moral Majority saw its roots in the work of Jerry Falwell beginning in 1976 and becoming fully established as a political force by 1979. Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum was established in 1975. The political right was learning how to use cultural wedge issues to win elections.

Beginning in the 1970s, then, the second amendment became a national political flashpoint. And, because it was effective and remains effective to this day, the issue is now a litmus test for politicians on both sides of the aisle. As today's political atmosphere is one of extreme polarization, this litmus test is equally applied to both conservative and liberal candidates, although in diametrically opposed ways.

Bob Barr's essay published by the Heritage Foundation in February of 2021 is, essentially, a primer for activists interested in promoting a laissez faire approach to gun ownership. Meanwhile, the articles provided stating a contrary point of view appeal to an emotional response to violent acts perpetrated by gun-wielding terrorists. Notably, the Gebelhoff column is entitled "6 Solutions to Gun Violence that Could Work." Could work. This column is strongly biased toward an urban point of view, and the argument fails when addressing those living rural areas that I mentioned above.

And finally, I wonder if it isn't time to do some actual research on gun violence and its surrounding culture. We hear a lot of sound bites on all sides of this issue, but research is woefully lacking. This short article might be worth a quick read: [How could mass shootings be prevented? Research shows certain policies may help : Shots - Health News : NPR](#)

As always, I look forward to an interesting discussion.

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