

The News Journal

January 17, 2013

Knowledge is Key for healthy gun debate

Understandably, it has been difficult to watch a news program, visit a news website or even eat in a restaurant during the past month without encountering reports, opinions and suggestions about guns in America. Because many of us watched the horrific aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre unfold in real time, it is difficult to separate our emotions from reasonable thought.

Tears easily cloud our vision, but as an advanced, rational society we – gun supporters, gun opponents and our elected officials – must not allow them to cloud our judgment. Rather than making hasty, irrational decisions, we owe it to our fellow citizens, our forefathers and ourselves to use all available information when examining legal gun ownership and use.

One of the biggest issues that sometimes hampers rational discussion about gun ownership and gun use is the vast disparity in gun knowledge between many gun proponents and opponents. Let's face it: Few people possess gun expertise (or even casual gun familiarity) without having owned and shot guns. This unfamiliarity frequently leads nongun-owners and nongun-users to ask questions about the number of guns someone wants or needs, the number of shots a gun can or should be allowed to fire before reloading, the number of guns someone can or should be allowed to purchase in a specific time frame and why someone wants or needs to own a specific type of gun (including guns frequently referred to as "assault weapons").

I understand why people who are unfamiliar with guns ask these questions, and I am delighted when the questions are asked by someone who is truly interested in the answers. However, I fear that some gun opponents and legislators aren't as interested in the answers, and – what's worse – many aren't even asking the questions.

Before our elected officials bog themselves down with long-lasting discussions about legal gun ownership and gun use, I suspect a great number of United States citizens expect their elected officials to perform some research. Now



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is the time

for our lawmakers to educate themselves about guns and to form their opinions and make their decisions based on facts and personal

experience. I ask that they visit gun stores, visit shooting ranges and observe hunts. I ask them to talk to gun collectors, recreational shooters, competitive shooters (from beginners to Olympians) and hunters. They should meet with security guards, bodyguards, police officers and members of the armed forces. I want them to speak with dads, moms and children who own and use guns for personal protection, sport, historical preservation or investment.

I really want them to ask their questions about gun ownership and use. By asking their questions, many may be surprised to learn different types of guns and ammunition are needed for hunting different types of game, for shooting different distances and for shooting in different conditions.

They would learn that there is no way to predict how many rounds are needed for self-defense, and that, while hunting, it may take several shotgun shots to hit one flying target. Perhaps they would realize that it makes perfect sense to buy a handgun, a deer rifle and a waterfowl shotgun during one trip to a gun store that is three hours away from one's home.

Questioning is a great way to learn, but I suggest lawmakers unfamiliar with guns go one step further and actually handle and shoot guns.

Actually shooting handguns and long guns of varying actions, sizes and configurations is the only way to truly examine gun use and to experience why someone may want one type of gun over another. Direct observation and experience could help those unfamiliar with guns realize that skilled shooters – via loading of new magazines – can fire bullets on target in rapid succession regardless of how many rounds a magazine holds.

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Likewise, observation of and experience with shooting various types of guns can help those unfamiliar with guns understand that any gun in the hands of a criminal or deranged individual can be lethal.

Before lawmakers attempt to pass laws that penalize law-abiding gun owners for heinous acts committed by criminals, they should carefully consider if they are thinking rationally, rather than emotionally. They should also ask themselves if they've asked enough questions and performed enough hands-on research before adamantly endorsing their views and disregarding the views of responsible gun owners and users.

Along the same lines, gun owners and gun users should carefully consider their responses to any proposed legislation regarding guns. Not all proposals are categorically bad, but I fear that emotion occasionally moves some gun owners and gun users to reflexively reject any new ideas.

Encouraging Americans from all walks of life and from all sides of the gun debate to engage in rational discussions about the issues for which guns unnecessarily take the blame is crucial. Without focusing on criminal prosecution, sentencing guidelines, mental health issues and a drug culture where murder and bullet wounds are worn like badges of honor, we all are just shooting in the dark.

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