



Progressive Author Asks Gun Control Advocates to Hold Fire

Luca Gattoni-Celli January 11, 2013

What does Craig R. Whitney, New York Times career man and self-avowed liberal, say to frustrated gun owners, users, and enthusiasts who feel that many in the ongoing debate about their rights are speaking from ignorance? “I sympathize with them,” Whitney told the audience at a Cato Institute book forum Wednesday. “I often see AR-15s described as automatic, which they are not.”

Mr. Whitney, author of the new tome *Living with Guns: A Liberal’s Case for the Second Amendment*, spent much of the event calling on gun control advocates to be less hostile and presumptuous in the heated debate over packing heat.

Cato’s host soberly opened the forum by noting it had been planned months ago and wishing that the book were not so timely. Whitney began working on it when he retired from the Times three years ago, convinced that gun regulation merited a national, coherent conversation. He grimly pointed to Newtown as the latest in a string of “inevitable” mass shootings for which he implicates an unacceptable status quo.

Whether one agrees with him to the letter — and I doubt many people in Cato’s marvelously named Hayek Auditorium did — it is self-evident that the gun regulation debate has become dysfunctional.

Alan Gura, counsel for Dick Heller in the landmark case *D.C. v. Heller*, emphasized the need for gun control advocates to understand why so many of their neighbors own guns and are so passionate about the Second Amendment. He said that to a large swath of Americans, gun ownership has become exotic and unusual, easy to fear and misunderstand, so that any associated risk, however minimal, triggers calls for sweeping restrictions. He argued that civilian gun ownership and gun culture in the United States are not primarily about self-defense; they are about freedom. And with freedom comes responsibility.

Alan Morrison, an associate dean of law at George Washington University, said that virtually everyone agrees in principle with some restrictions (perhaps background checks, bans on felons owning guns) that do not place an undue burden on law-abiding citizens. The rub comes in agreeing on the definition of “undue.”

Whitney, despite the subtitle of his book, appears to be on a crusade primarily for conciliatory policy. On one hand, he said that, "Making AR-15s illegal would not prevent people with no respect for the law from using them illegally to commit crimes." On the other, he said he would entertain restrictions on high-capacity magazines, a buyback program for them, or even a complete ban. (Though as a former Navy lieutenant, he presumably knows an experienced shooter can change magazines faster than you can spell Mississippi.)

Still, at one point, he smiled recalling the fun he had shooting at a range in researching his book. One senses he is a man who sees greater value in learning about what he does not understand than in fearing it.