

# Vox

## **I own guns. Here's why I'm keeping them.**

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I grew up in a house with guns. My father was a police officer in my hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana, for 25 years, and he had not only a service weapon but several guns on top of it. I was given my first BB gun when I was 7 or so. I practiced with it a lot. I grew up believing that gun ownership was perfectly normal and, in certain circumstances, a personal responsibility.

I'm still a gun owner.

Like many Americans, my family history is closely tied to firearms. I was raised with a sense of duty to protect my loved ones. Danger wasn't something that was abstract or imaginary in my family history or my upbringing, and so we had to learn to deal with it.

I'm not a Second Amendment absolutist, and I am open to changes to our gun laws. But gun ownership is important to me, and responsible individuals must be allowed to make the choice for themselves and their families if they want to own firearms.

### **Guns helped protect my family from the Ku Klux Klan**

When my father died, the police found a loaded pistol in his bedroom. He'd suffered a heart attack after trying to shovel snow in a blizzard. He was a stubborn 83-year-old man who'd survived several heart attacks and two quadruple bypasses already.

The gun belonged to my grandfather.

My grandparents were born in Mississippi in the late 19th century and were part of the Great Migration that came north during Jim Crow. But although Fort Wayne was well north of the Mason-Dixon Line, segregation was a fact of life, if not a fact in law, in many Northern cities. Black people were only permitted to live in a small area in Fort Wayne, and that's where my family went.

During the early part of the 20th century, the KKK were a social and political force in Indiana. They would march in town and through the black neighborhood where my father's family lived. Growing up, I was told about my grandfather standing at the door of the house with his gun drawn, calling the kids home while the Klan marched up the street.

As far as I know, my grandfather never had to fire his gun in defense of his family, but like many blacks in the years following emancipation, he believed firearms were a necessary part of protecting them. Particularly in the South — but in fact throughout the United States — blacks could not rely on the government to protect them from crime or terrorism. Many free blacks took up arms to defend themselves, and some of them died fighting. When given the choice, many blacks preferred self-defense to submitting to crime and terrorism. Indeed the right of blacks to own guns factored heavily into the congressional debates surrounding the drafting and ratification of the 14th Amendment.

I didn't know my grandfather. He died 40 years before I was born. I didn't know my grandmother well, either. She was the victim of a violent home invasion when I was very young, and she had trouble communicating after that.

My father was a police officer, and he was proud of it. Like many officers, Dad valued his police-issued pistol and was commended for his marksmanship while he was on the force.

He used his gun in nonprofessional capacities too. He was off duty one night when an 18-year-old kid tried to rob him. Dad happened to be carrying his pistol under his jacket, thwarted his own mugging, and arrested the guy. (I still have the newspaper clipping.)

When I was growing up, it was not unusual to see gun violence and other crime on the local news. Parts of Fort Wayne were violent places, including my childhood neighborhood, though most of the violence didn't involve guns.

When I was still very young, a drunk man threatened me outside a roller rink. His friends beat up the man who was going to give my friends and me a ride home, and when a few of us ran to a payphone to call for help, he broke a beer bottle and told us to hang up. I was too young to process the mortal threat he was making, but I remember being scared.

At school, fights were a normal part of life. I remember two instances where teachers were the targets of physical assault by students — the first time I was in fourth grade, and the second time I was in middle school. In high school, teachers and administrators were sometimes injured trying to break up fights.

I got in my first fight in the summer after third grade. I didn't get out of a kid's way, and we brushed shoulders near the baseball diamond. He took offense and wanted to throw down. My mother always told me to walk away from fights, so I tried to do just that. The kid kicked me in the back and beat me up.

I learned my lesson — don't turn your back on a threat — and afterward asked my father what I should do.

Dad told me that I should learn to defend myself but never to start fights. He explained, then and in other lessons over the course of my life, that while I should call authorities when possible, they wouldn't always be there to help me out when trouble was imminent. Personal safety was ultimately up to each individual, and a responsible person makes adjustments when other people break the rules. To paraphrase something he said to me: "There are plenty of people who were in the right who are in the cemetery now."

The threat of violence is a part of life. In time, I became resigned to the fact that I could get beaten up for looking at someone the wrong way, or jumped because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I didn't grow up in the most violent place in America; far from it. But the threat of crime and violence was real, and we had to learn to cope with it. Dad didn't keep his father's gun loaded because he was going to the range. He was protecting himself and his home.

### **You are safer with a gun sometimes**

Both my father and grandfather's guns are mine now. And I will fight in order to keep them.

Fortunately, I've mostly been able to avoid confrontations where a firearm would be necessary. But there have been times that I was glad to have my father's gun at the ready.

Several years ago, I lived in Bloomington, Indiana, with my then-girlfriend. She had a colleague I'll call Diane. Diane waited tables at the bar my girlfriend worked at to support her oft-out-of-work husband, a man I'll call Bobby. Bobby was an exuberant working-class tough guy who loved to show off.

Bobby was also abusive. One night, my girlfriend called me to ask if Diane could stay with us because Bobby had beaten her up (again). Diane said she was finally fed up with the abuse and was going to leave. She was scared for her life and needed a place to stay.

I didn't hesitate to say yes, but I understood that this positioned my girlfriend and me for a potential conflict with a terribly violent man. (Not to mention a man more than capable of hurting us: The first time I met Bobby, he picked me up and fireman-carried me up a full flight of stairs on a lark. Then, as now, I was 6 feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds. I hadn't been picked up so easily by anyone since I was a child.)

Bobby knew where we lived and, because controlling abusers often limit the number of people allowed in their victims' personal lives, almost certainly knew where Diane sought shelter. I couldn't take him in a fight if I wanted to, and any non-firearm weapon I could use would require close contact and increase my risk of being overpowered, endangering everyone.

We kept the door locked, but it opened directly from the outside. A man as strong as he was could conceivably break down the door before any police responded to a 911 call. Beyond that, being in a ground-floor apartment, there were several windows he could break into.

I loaded my gun and kept it out all night. All I could think about was the weight of the responsibility I had to protect Diane and my girlfriend, the possibility that I would need to kill another human being. I couldn't stand Bobby as a person, but the thought of taking his life was not something I relished or wanted to do. Still, I was prepared to do it.

Thankfully, I didn't have to use the gun that night — Bobby never showed up. But that gun was my best — and, frankly, only — weapon against someone who had already proven himself willing and able to hurt me and those I care about.

If I hadn't had my gun, I might not have been able to take in my friend. I would have felt less confident about my ability to protect my girlfriend and myself — let alone the person we were taking in for her protection.

I've never brandished my gun in self-defense. Thankfully, I've never had to. Nobody should point a firearm at another person unless he is truly willing to kill that person, and I've been fortunate enough to never be in quite that much danger. But that doesn't mean that keeping my gun has never been justified. Guns offer a sense of protection. It isn't foolproof protection, but precious little in life is. The night Bobby didn't come, my gun wasn't useless. It was security. Do you lock your doors? Keep an alarm system in your home? Security isn't only valuable when the worst-case scenario actually happens.

**I'm not against all gun laws. But I want them to be smart and realistic.**

I recognize that many of the pro-gun blowhards who fight against any new gun laws say a lot of ridiculous things. In the wake of the Charleston, South Carolina, shooting, for example, some suggested said that the people in the church should have been armed. That's absurd. While I believe in the right to self-defense, and indeed that all rights are effectively meaningless if you don't have control over your own life, body, and personal safety, we still live in a society where we should be able to move freely — and go to church, of all places — without a rational fear of being murdered.

And I am sensitive to the very real problem of gun deaths in this country. I know the shocking, numbing sadness of losing someone to gun violence or suicide. I know the helpless terror of watching the news when an old friend is involved in a hostage situation. I even know what heartbreak it is to read about childhood friends who were imprisoned for murders they committed when they were adults. I just thought, "My god! What happened to them?"

But none of those deaths, tragic as they are, negate my fundamental right and duty to protect myself and my loved ones. We can debate new laws that may have an effect on the margins, but most gun deaths reflect broader problems in American society. Policymakers should address the underlying drivers of gun deaths — particularly suicide, drug prohibition, and domestic violence — on their own terms without abridging law-abiding Americans' fundamental right to self-defense.

I never thought I'd write about my gun ownership. Part of that is the lesson my dad taught me: Never give out information that makes a break-in more likely. But the conversation in the media has been dominated by extremists and people who have no idea what they're talking about. I'm a man who fully understands that self-defense isn't an abstract concept, and that more can be done to reduce gun deaths. But the answer is neither gun bans nor simply giving more people guns. Years of personal and family experience have taught me that.

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