

Agreeing to disagree

By: Peter Dorfman – May 21, 2013

To the editor:

This is absolutely my last installment in the Dorfman-Loss dialog. After this, I will, as Robert Loss suggests in his recent letter to the editor, be content to agree to disagree on gun control and assault rifles.

First of all, I know what an assault rifle is, and that it is not an automatic weapon. Automatic weapons, I'm happy to say, are banned to civilian buyers in the U.S. I imagine Second Amendment fundamentalists see this as unconstitutional, but they don't seem to be making a fuss about it.

I appreciate Loss's clarifying the sources for his contentions about the Clinton assault weapons ban, but I'm still a little confused. He cites "the U.S. Department of Justice as well as the FBI Uniform Crime reports," meanwhile dismissing the 1994 University of Pennsylvania study I reference as the work of a "notorious left-wing university professor."

The problem with this is that the Justice Department commissioned the UPenn study, led by Christopher S. Koper, and its findings are the Justice Department's official word on the assault weapons ban. If Loss is referring to some other Justice Department publication on the ban, I have no idea what it would be.

Koper, an eminent criminologist now at George Mason University, is hardly a notorious leftist. In fact, in January, when the Senate held hearings on gun violence, both Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, and David Kopel, a researcher at the libertarian Cato Institute, cited Koper and his study — erroneously — to suggest that it evaluated the assault weapons ban as a failure. Actually, I can't find any critical references to Christopher Koper, painting him as a left-winger or anything else.

As for the FBI Uniform Crime Statistics, these are part of the public record on crime. Conservative and pro-gun pundits quote them all the time to crow that gun-related crime rates are lower in the U.S. and in other countries — per capita — to suggest that this news undercuts the argument for gun control. This is a complicated subject. It actually cuts both ways — if violent crime is declining, this also leaves one wondering why Americans feel they need arsenals of semi-automatic weapons to defend themselves from home invasions and the like. Loss could find hundreds of articles by Second Amendment purists tying the Uniform Crime Stats to arguments against gun control. But he misses a trend that these articles gloss over: Mass shootings, the crimes mostly likely to involve assault weapons, have not declined. The worst year on record, for victims and fatalities from mass shootings, was 2012. Last year, in 2009 and in 2007, mass shooting rates

were higher than in any year when assault weapons were banned— except 2009, the year of Columbine.

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