



Gun Safety vs. Gun Control

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If you're not for gun control, at least you should be for gun *safety*. That's a line you hear a lot these days. Sometimes the distinction serves a tactical purpose of trying to reframe gun control in a politically less threatening way, as when Michael Bloomberg's gun-control group styles itself Everytown for Gun "Safety." But many people do see the two words as meaning different things, with "safety" standing for a seemingly less controversial set of objectives such as preventing accidental misfirings, storing guns in such a way that unauthorized persons can't get at them, making it easier to trace stolen weapons, and so forth.

But one trouble is that it's extremely difficult it is to reliably improve these latter kinds of gun safety except in ways that gun owners might themselves be persuaded to adopt. And if goals are obtainable by persuasion, why should legislation come in?

For example, of the steps announced by President Obama last week, probably the most significant is one that will tighten legal pressure on persons who sell guns in small or incidental quantities but who do not currently register as gun "dealers" with the associated license fees and regulatory requirements. One example given of this in-between class are persons who liquidate estates. While some of these persons will (as intended) register as dealers, others will simply offer to handle the sale of the rest of Uncle Harry's estate but not his small gun collection, which, the family not being sure what to do with it otherwise, may accordingly languish in an attic or the back of a closet. Is anyone actually confident that the risks of theft or misuse from leaving guns in the hands of family members unfamiliar with them is lower than the risk of allowing them to be resold through an intermediary to persons who have consciously chosen to own guns?

Most gun owners already give thought to security, which means there is an active market for gun safes, lockable cases, internal locks and so forth — but these all depend on the user's choice. Requiring that a lock be sold with each firearm is futile, and even perceived as mere harassment, when everyone knows the lock can be left off. Some "safety" devices make it harder to use guns in emergencies, which is exactly when they are most needed. "Gun safety" advocates have repeatedly pressed for mandates of supposed safety features on self-protection handguns that police and military users definitely are **not** interested in having on their similar weapons.

Back in the Clinton years, 30 cities sued gunmakers and distributors demanding they pay the costs of gun-related crime. One of the theories was that it was negligent for sellers not to have installed integral locks and other safety modifications before selling guns. Yet Detroit, New Orleans, Boston and many of the other cities had themselves periodically flooded the market with resold police weaponry, and had almost never modified those guns in the ways they now began to claim were essential for safety. Courts, including New York's, rejected most of these suits and Congress called a halt to the rest in the 2005 Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), a law backed by Bernie Sanders and more than 60 other Democrats.

Theorists play around with ideas of insurance mandates intended to calibrate exactly the right dose of risk incentive in the form of premium surcharges and discounts; it is hypothesized, for example, that insurers will offer discounts to homeowners who adopt best practices in gun storage. Sorry, but as far as government meddling in this market goes, trust has broken down: many gun owners believe insurance mandates would be tinkered with in time so as suppress gun ownership generally, and they can point to writings by some advocates who hope that such mandates will in time accomplish exactly that goal.

Ironically it is the much-demonized gun community that itself accounts for what is probably the single biggest contribution to safety, in the form of the availability of voluntary instruction in safe gun practice. And — you guessed it — many gun control advocates have worked to stigmatize training classes for gun novices, exclude them from public school after-hour settings or the rental of public spaces, and generally push them to respectability's fringe.

Is safety really the issue? You have to wonder at some point.

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