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Why I still support the right to bear arms

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Being an advocate for individual rights and civil liberties can be difficult. When terrorists attack, when the economy fails, and yes, when evil visits elementary schools, the natural instinct is to demand security above all else.

On learning of the horror in Newtown, Conn., I could thus easily understand the reaction that soon filled my Facebook feed: “We have to do something. There should be laws restricting guns so they don’t get in the hands of these deranged murderers.”

The logical impulse for those of us who defend private gun ownership is to duck such discussions altogether, to let the passions settle. But on the contrary, with the White House task force preparing its recommendations, it’s more important than ever to present our position with clear-eyed resolve.

Even against the backdrop of last month’s tragedy, I still support the fundamental right to armed self-defense. Especially in an imperfect world where madness abounds, I oppose policies that would restrict legal gun ownership by law-abiding citizens.

I say this despite having grown up in Canada and never owned a gun. I’ve shot handguns and rifles about a dozen times at friends’ invitation, but never gone hunting. The last eight years I’ve lived in Washington, where, despite the Supreme Court’s 2008 ruling, it’s still near-impossible to obtain a personal firearm (and illegal to carry one outside your home).

So I hope you can accept that I’m not a “gun nut.”

But you don’t have to be crazy about guns to recognize that no law could make the 300 million firearms in America disappear. Even making it illegal to own a gun wouldn’t prevent a criminal or madman from doing his malevolent deed. Robust policies to prevent legal gun ownership only translate to guns being overwhelmingly possessed by those willing to break the law — i.e., criminals.

Indeed, Connecticut has some of the strictest gun laws in the country, and Sandy Hook Elementary is a “gun-free zone” — as was the movie theater in Aurora, Colo.

None of the measures at the top of gun-control advocates’ agenda — such as banning so-called assault weapons (ordinary rifles with certain cosmetic features like pistol grips or bayonet mounts) and closing gun-show loopholes — would’ve averted these shootings.

The Newtown killer stole the pistols he used from his mother.

We’d be much better off focusing on improvements we can make in identifying and treating mental illness — the common factor in all these incidents — and ensuring that disqualifying records make it into the database used for background checks (which would’ve stopped the Virginia Tech shooter from buying his guns).

That's not to say that we shouldn't have any gun regulations. Cracking down on "straw purchasers" is a good idea and indeed military-grade weapons like fully automatic "machine guns" have no place in civilian life.

On the other hand, it's perfectly reasonable for someone to have a gun to protect herself or her family. That's why the Second Amendment is so important: Americans cherish their life, liberty and pursuit of happiness so much that they instituted a government that protects their right to defend against anyone who would threaten them.

After the 1999 Columbine shootings, Colorado passed a series of laws that should serve as a national model. Some of them consist of what people call "gun control," while others are in the "gun rights" category. The most important one was the Concealed Carry Act, which has already saved countless lives, including at an Aurora church — three months before the theater shooting — where an off-duty cop killed a career criminal who was targeting congregants.

These measures are based on an obvious principle that enjoys broad public support: Guns in the wrong hands are dangerous, while guns in the right hands protect public safety.

The Second Amendment exists to protect the grand American experiment in self-government. Call me a "Constitution nut," but I'm crazy about allowing people to live their lives with the maximum freedom possible.

If I could snap my fingers and end gun violence, I would. I would even take guns away from hunters and sportsmen if it meant better self-defense for the rest of us.

Men aren't angels, however, and, by definition, criminals don't follow the law. Yes, in the wake of Newtown, I still support the right to bear arms.