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What If We Treated Guns Like Cars? Then We Might Be Able to Enact Truly "Common-Sense" Gun Laws

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Another mass shooting has sparked a gun-control debate in America, and gun-control advocates and gun-rights supporters are talking past each other as usual.

And there's one question that often comes up: What if we treated guns like cars?

Cars, after all, kill around 40,000 people per year—about as many as guns—with 2016 being the deadliest year on American roads since 2007. Yet, in general, we regard auto fatalities as an inevitable consequence of allowing private citizens to own and drive cars. As long as cars are going to be in private hands, then there will be car accidents, including large accidents with multiple fatalities. We expect and accept that the number of auto fatalities increases as more people own cars, and we expect and accept that sometimes cars would be misused with tragic consequences.

We can do this because there is broad agreement about the value of cars and therefore little fear that cars will be banned or regulated to the point that normal people won't have access to commonly used vehicles. And, due to that broad agreement, it is easier to pass regulations to make both cars and drivers safer.

In fact, many gun-rights advocates would be okay with regulating guns like cars. There would be no federal registration or licensing, state-granted licenses would be given to people over 16, 17, or 18 years old after passing a simple test, the license would be good in all 50 states, and using a gun on private property wouldn't require a license. As others have pointed out, in many ways this would be less onerous than current firearm regulations. Purchasing a car requires no background check or waiting period, and cars can be purchased by people who have been convicted of a felony, use illegal drugs, have been dishonorably discharged from the military, or are illegal aliens—all of whom are “prohibited persons” under current federal gun laws.

So why don't we have such purportedly “common-sense” regulations for guns? Quite frankly because many gun-control advocates want to go much further than “common-sense” restrictions. Gun-rights supporters know that gun-controllers won't stop after enacting, say, “universal” background checks. While a significant number of gun-control advocates ultimately prefer total prohibition, the majority likely prefer limiting access to guns in a manner that would be akin to limiting cars to licensed NASCAR drivers on official NASCAR tracks.

Gun-control supporters don't get the comparison between guns and cars. People need cars, but no one needs a gun, they argue. Whereas they see cars as integral to a modern, flourishing civilization, guns are throwbacks to a primitive time when we settled disputes via duels.

Moreover, there's admittedly a significant difference between an intentional and an accidental killing. If you think a gun is only a tool for destruction, then the comparison makes no sense.

But gun-rights supporters understand the analogy. A gun, like a car, is both an effective tool and a deadly instrument. The qualities that make a car or a gun an effective tool are the same qualities that make it a deadly instrument. A good car or a good gun is reliable, easily controllable, and gets the job done. And while there are some cars and guns that are more dangerous due to shoddy construction or because they go particularly fast, no car or gun is good "only for killing." Yes people die from guns or cars, sometimes in horrific ways, but that's no reason to ban either one.

Through the guns/cars comparison, we can see how the gun debate is fundamentally a culture debate. Guns divide us like so many other things. Liberals and conservatives live in different places, go to different restaurants, and watch different shows. Conservatives own guns more often and are more likely to understand that, while a gun is a tool that can be misused, it is also enjoyable to spend an afternoon at the shooting range. For some liberals, an afternoon at the shooting range is akin to watching dog-fighting or bear-baiting.

There is no analogous culture debate about cars. Liberals and conservatives alike enjoy cars, understand their value, and generally understand how they work. We all understand that a car's deadliness is inexorably tied to its usefulness. And there is broad support for "common sense" regulations to make cars and drivers safer because we don't worry that safety regulations or licensing requirements are part of a plan to ultimately ban or severely restrict cars.

But if only half the country owned cars, and that ownership roughly tracked political divisions, then we'd see similar Facebook debates sparked by posts exclaiming "40,000 people died in car accidents last year. When will we stop the madness?!" Jeeps might be described as "military-style" vehicles that are clearly only meant for war, ignoring the fact that Jeeps are just normal cars. Car owners would try to explain that one person's misuse of a car doesn't justify banning whole classes of cars; that the only way to stop auto fatalities entirely is to ban and confiscate cars, an unreasonable goal in a country with hundreds of millions of cars and a deeply entrenched car culture; and that the focus should be on drivers rather than cars because stopping bad drivers is more effective than banning bad drivers' cars. Bad drivers, after all, will just switch to different cars.

If gun-control advocates could better understand the gun/car comparison, then perhaps more productive conversations can happen—or at least less hateful. A more productive conversation about guns—like a more productive conversation about cars—would look to the conditions that help create fatalities rather than just focusing on the object itself. The battle against drunk driving didn't focus on banning drunk drivers' cars; it focused on the conditions that create drunk driving—such as being over-served in bars—and sought to raise awareness through a variety of informational campaigns. Similarly, a productive conversation about guns would also examine the conditions that foment gun violence, especially a failed and immoral drug war, rather than just focusing on guns. Instead, gun-control proposals are often arbitrary, ineffective, based in ignorance about guns, and seemingly part of a long-term effort to ban guns entirely. Gun-control advocates are more prone to lashing out like our hypothetical anti-car advocates, and it drives gun-rights supporters crazy.

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