You Kill Me: Why I Don't Want to Live Around People With Guns

Brandt Goldstein
New York Law School

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By Brandt Goldstein

In recent years, much has been made about how divided our polity is. There are red states and blue states, conservative regions and liberal regions, right- and left-wing cable news networks and websites. Given the current rift, it's a sad irony that we call ourselves the *United* States of America.

The insularity of the left and the right only heightens the differences between us. Cocooned among like-minded friends and colleagues, we incant our catechism and scorn those who don't see things our way. From tax rates to the teaching of evolution, from environmental protection to gay marriage, from voting rights to abortion, there is our position and the wrong position, and precious little in between.

In many parts of the country, we have separated ourselves so completely from those who disagree with us that we only encounter the opposing view from a token dissenter on our favored cable news show or the Facebook post of a high-school acquaintance — at which point we might type an indignant comment about the errors of our "friend."

I confess that I'm among the insulated. Although I have some conservative friends, I am a liberal living among liberals. I reside in a very blue neighborhood in very blue New York City, and before that I lived in a long line of blue communities, from Ann Arbor to New Haven to Washington, D.C.

In recent years, I've come to realize that living among people who almost all share my beliefs and values is a bad idea. Comfortable and reassuring, perhaps, but not healthy for a citizen of our diverse country. It's a lot easier to demonize and dismiss the views of those you don't know, don't work or socialize or volunteer or worship with, don't bump into at the grocery store or the coffee shop. There's no need for civil dialogue with Americans whose views reach you only via Facebook or a talking head.

As deeply troubled as I am by those who believe we should teach creationism in schools or limit access to abortion, I believe both they and I would benefit if we had more to do

with each other in daily life. It would force us to engage with and, one hopes, more deeply understand and respect one another. And it just might lead to a modest consensus, however limited and however contingent, on some of the issues that so sharply divide us.

But in the wake of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I confess that I don't feel that way when it comes to the regulation of firearms. On that issue, the red-blue divide suits me just fine.

I simply don't want to argue anymore with people who genuinely believe that cheap, easy access to guns makes us safer, when for decades the U.S. has suffered from more gun violence than any other western industrialized nation. Staunch gun-rights advocates see the world in a way that seems to me nothing short of insane (and I doubt there are many Americans with a more deranged perspective than N.R.A. head Wayne LaPierre, who will blame *anything* other than easy access to firearms for gun-related violence).

What's more, I cannot recall a single discussion I've had or witnessed on gun control that changed any minds - and yes, that would include mine. One thing that seems to sway a few people is a horrific event like Sandy Hook, which makes the gun safety argument through the bullet-riddled corpses of school kids. The sudden conversions of MSNBC morning anchor Joe Scarborough and Senator Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), who now both support greater firearms restrictions, had little to do with gun control advocates engaging them in reasoned debate. (For further proof of that, watch the newly converted Scarborough try to discuss the issue with pro-gun Congressman Tim Huelskamp (R-Ka.). It degenerates into a shouting match.)

But I also prefer my blue enclave for a reason identified in Nate Silver's recent New York Times piece about the correlation between gun ownership and party affiliation. Like many others, I'd always assumed that Republicans were more likely to own guns than Democrats. But seeing the statistics was bracing: If you're a member of the G.O.P., you're almost twice as likely to own a firearm than if you're a Democrat. Which means that on average, more people are going to be armed in heavily Republican communities than in heavily Democratic ones.

Yes, it's simplistic, but as far as I'm concerned, the fewer guns there are where my friends and family live, the better. That means fewer chances for a homicide, a horrific injury, or an accident (not to mention the question of gun suicides). Is it really that surprising

that [according to the Harvard Injury Control Research Center](#), more guns tends to lead to more homicides? Or that states with stricter gun control laws [have fewer gun-related deaths](#)?

Now, I am well aware that plenty of blue communities are overrun with gun violence, such as Detroit, St. Louis, and Oakland (the cities with the highest rates of violent crime, [according to Forbes](#)). I'll also grant that the majority of gun owners are (as the N.R.A. calls them) peaceful, law-abiding citizens, though "peaceful" isn't a word that immediately comes to my mind. Finally, I recognize that, however controversial the decision, the Supreme Court has ruled that the Second Amendment confers a limited right to own a gun on individuals as opposed to just well regulated militias.

But if conservative Americans and their elected officials cannot agree with the rest of us on reasonable nationwide gun restrictions that would reduce the chance of another Sandy Hook — no semi-automatic weapons, no high-capacity magazines, no gun-show loophole — I confess that I'd prefer to reside in a community where gun ownership isn't an important part of the culture. Just because the Second Amendment grants us some limited right to own a gun doesn't mean we should, especially given that the fundamental reason behind the provision (local resistance against an overweening federal government) remains valid only in the paranoid fantasies of the far right.

But of course, the sad truth is that there's no getting away from the firearms lunacy of the N.R.A. and hardline conservatives. For years, one of the biggest sources of guns here in New York has been Virginia, the gun-running capital of the East Coast. Yes, I'm aware that the state voted for Obama and can be characterized as light blue, but the governor and two-thirds of the legislature's lower house are Republican. And just this year, they made it even easier to buy firearms by repealing a state law that had limited handgun purchases to one per month. Really? Restricting someone to buying *twelve guns each year* is too great an imposition? Even with officials from New York pleading with you to keep this reasonable restriction in place so our citizens don't die from guns bought in your state?

That's our country in December 2012. Even in liberal communities that largely shun firearms, the blood just keeps getting spilled, due at least partly to a gun culture that many of us in blue states frankly abhor. From the view here in New York, it's not called red America for nothing.