

## **Why Americans have guns**

**Let's be honest: A lot of people own them because they are fun**

**NATHAN GORENSTEIN**

There is a reason why America has about as many guns as people, and it's not because millions are terrified of a home invasion or fear drug gangs crossing the Rio Grande. It is a reason "anti-gunners" seldom acknowledge, but it helps explain the rejection of seemingly reasonable firearm safety laws.

It's that guns are fun.

Take it from me, a blue-state guy who belongs to what President Donald Trump's spiritual predecessor, former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, derided as "an effete corps of impudent snobs." I was raised in Massachusetts, worked as a newspaper reporter and editor, and now I write books. I vote Democratic, mostly. I'm Jewish. Noting I'm bald is only redundant.

I didn't grow up with guns, and no one I knew in the Boston suburb of Medford did. That guns were bad and gun control good was a given in my professional and social circles. I was never quite such an absolutist, but I didn't own a gun until December 2015, when I began researching a book about Wyoming's infamous 1892 range war. To supplement my archival research, I decided to learn two skills: how to ride a horse and how to shoot a gun.

As it was too cold for riding, I drove to a local gun store and purchased an Italian-made replica of the famous Colt Single Action Army revolver. It's the gun you see the good guys and bad guys shooting in almost every Western TV show and movie.

I found an instructor to teach me the fundamentals of my six-shooter and the rules of gun safety. We met in a gravel pit. A half-dozen rectangular steel plates were mounted 4 feet off the ground. I stood 3 yards away, cocked the hammer and fired.

The recoil was wicked. The gun almost jumped out of my hands as the barrel swung a foot into the air. The bullet hit the plate, but at 3 yards I really couldn't miss. After five rounds I clicked open the loading gate, extracted the spent shells and, just like in the movies, snapped five .45-

caliber cartridges into the cylinder, closed the gate and resumed firing.

The instructor repeatedly corrected one novice mistake — I rested my finger on the trigger. Amicably but firmly, he ordered my finger to remain outside the trigger guard until I had the gun pointed at a target, saw what was behind the target, aimed the gun and was ready to fire.

Even though I was carrying a famous Western six-shooter, I loaded only five cartridges, so the hammer rested on an empty chamber. It was insurance in case the hammer received an inadvertent blow, as the Colt lacks a modern safety.

That was a problem in the old West. Even the expert killers and veteran cowboys in 1892 Wyoming managed to shoot their guns, or themselves, at inopportune moments. One incident spoiled an ambush and likely saved dozens of “regulators” from being killed or captured by angry homesteaders.

At the gravel pit I ran through two boxes of cartridges — 100 rounds — in short order as we moved back to 5 yards and then 10. Then the instructor suggested I try shooting single-handed. I did, and hit each of the steel plates.

This was interesting. Fun, even. I didn’t feel empowered, or any more masculine, and it wasn’t even exciting, exactly. It was simply interesting. I was learning some new things. How to control a weapon and hit a target, and how to use this famous handheld machine.

Since then I’ve moved up to a series of modern American and Czech target pistols, including the .45-caliber 1911 semi-automatic pistol, the handgun you see GIs carrying in World War II movies. I’ve taught myself enough gunsmithing to optimize the actions and install sights for “bull’s-eye” shooting, a difficult, single-handed endeavor that involves firing 90 or more rounds at a target 25 yards away. It’s considered one of shooting’s most difficult disciplines. I discovered it demands a strong right hand, a steady grip, a muscled forearm and smooth coordination of index finger, eyes, breath and shoulder. The entire body, in fact.

For a novice like myself, the goal is to create a whole-body muscle memory so that the front sight “merges” with the center of the target and I “think”

the bullet into the 10 ring — not much larger than a half-dollar.

It requires skills similar to golf, basketball and baseball, sports that of course demand far more physical exertion but depend on the athlete's command and exact control over arms, legs, feet and breath.

But here's the thing. The worst a basketball will do is break a finger. A nimble victim can dodge a falling golf club or swinging baseball bat. My carefully crafted .45-caliber 1911, on the other hand, was originally designed to kill, and in the wrong hands fast feet won't save a life.

Guns can be scary. And they are dangerous. Handling and shooting them demand close attention. But like any sport or hobby — think woodworking — the tactile pleasure of loading, aiming, shooting and working on guns can be satisfying, and not just to Americans who still make their living handling tools. For most people, daily work lacks contact with the physical world.

Guns are here to stay. Perhaps commonsense gun-safety measures — mandatory lessons for new gun owners (ignorance may be why some leave a loaded gun within reach of a child) or banning sales to anyone on Homeland Security's no-fly list — would be possible if gun owners could be convinced that ever-tougher regulations would not inevitably follow. Don't forget, in the 1990s there was a movement to ban all handguns, a gun-control strategy that empowered the National Rifle Association's descent into scare tactics.

That said, I'm not optimistic there will be a gun-safety "grand bargain." The nation is divided and guns often mark the border line, even if some of us manage to straddle both sides.

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