



WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT GUNS?

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The next time you hear a politician call for “common sense gun control” listen for the details. You are likely to be treated to a torrent of platitudes about assault weapons, gun show sales and other half measures.

These sorts of proposals are rooted in a theory of gun control that has been around since the 1960s. The basic idea is that fewer guns equal less gun crime. But for this theory to have even a chance of working drastic reductions in the supply of guns will be necessary. Everything else amounts to security theatre.

The late Senator Howard Metzenbaum, a strong gun control advocate, explained it this way: “If you don’t ban all guns you might as well ban none of them.”

But few, if any, politicians who call for “common sense gun control” have the courage to propose this. Even putting aside the issue of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which affirms the right to keep and bear arms, a gun ban has no broad popular support. Nevermind the conservative states, handgun ban referendums failed by large margins in two of our most liberal states - Massachusetts in 1976 and California in 1982. No serious attempts have been made since then.

Recently Australia’s gun control efforts have gained new prominence as a possible model for the United States to follow.

Let’s take a closer look at Australia.

In 1996, after a lunatic used a semiautomatic rifle to murder 34 people in Tasmania, the Australian government banned all semi-automatic rifles and repeating shotguns. Owners of roughly 700,000 registered firearms – about a quarter of the country’s three million total guns – were required to turn them in for destruction. The government called this a “buyback,” but in fact no one had a choice.

As my research shows, this model will not work in the United States for the simple reason that the US has roughly 325 million guns. This is orders of magnitude more than any other country. Even if the Australian plan were tried in the US and worked to perfection, we’d still be left with over 200 million guns, including handguns, which account for nearly 80 percent of gun crime. But gun confiscation has never worked to perfection, and sometimes threatens to make things worse.

The 2007 International Small Arms Survey studied 72 countries that attempted to enforce

gun confiscation or registration on their citizens. They found massive defiance of these laws with only about a third of gun owners complying.

If Americans defy gun bans at just the average rate that has occurred internationally, then we should expect tens of millions of guns to flood into the black market. Not surprisingly politicians advocating for gun control prefer to avoid the thorny issues that confiscation raises. Instead, they seek to have it both ways. They pursue the votes of gun owners by paying lip service to the Second Amendment and offering assurances that they only want to ban “the bad guns” like rifles with pistol grips. And at the same time, they pander to their core constituents with broad gun ban rhetoric, and supply control proposals that will have a marginal effect at best. And when these meager efforts fail to pass or to work? Blame the gun lobby.

So, to the glib critics of America’s gun culture, we should make this demand: If supply controls are the answer, describe precisely the full program of supply side policies you propose to stop the gun crimes that we all abhor. And then tell us how those policies will also allow lawful gun owners to keep and protect themselves with firearms.

If you cannot square these two things, then you must convince Americans that they are better off under policies that would disarm good people, in a fruitless attempt to keep bad men from getting guns.

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