Nov-2013

Viewpoint: The Making of a Gun Owner – Massachusetts Style

Jack Murphy

Bridgewater State University

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
VIEWPOINT
The Making of a Gun Owner – Massachusetts Style

Jack Murphy

In early 2006, at the invitation of my brother, and with a general interest in familiarizing myself with personal and home protection options, I began an introduction to the world of firearms. I was completely unaware of the strong feelings I would encounter from extremists on both sides of the argument. Should I own a gun? Should I explore and educate myself on this issue? My family and closest relations are dramatically split on the matter, left and right,

Democrats and Republicans. What's more, my wife, 10 siblings, two children, 23 nieces and nephews and numerous friends and acquaintances all seemed to have stronger beliefs—both pro and con—than I do. At the risk of alienating at least half of my family and friends, I marched ahead into discussions about the Second Amendment and the virtue of gun ownership in America.

As it turned out, neither side had a monopoly on reason, and too few of them worried about letting facts get in the way of their feelings. I met as many louts and know-nothings on each side, both willing to pigeonhole and excori-ate when their seriously held beliefs were challenged. What follows is my attempt to come to grips with this divisive quintessentially American issue and the one question that tests our ability to live and let live.

The FNG

My brother Jim's invitation to “come by my club and I'll give you an introduction to some of the basics” was both typical and generous. My surprise was that he was able to bring with him everything I might be interested in: handguns (both semiautomatics and revolvers), shotguns, rifles, ammunition, safety equipment and more. He did this without any special permission or proof that I was not an “undesirable,” say, emotionally unstable, or a convicted felon. I was unaware of how deeply involved my brother was in his sport. Regardless, he was able to escort me about the grounds, unchallenged, while he educated me in the use of guns. The welcoming atmosphere and nonchalance of other well-armed members and visitors surprised me, as did the character of several members. I was somewhat relieved by Jim's contention that “an armed society is a polite society,” one of many aphorisms that I came to find equally amusing and frightening as my education proceeded. More than once, when my new colleagues in the gun community became heated in discussions over the question of the right to bear arms, someone would trot out the line: “I'd rather be judged by twelve than buried by six.”

The Hook Takes

After my introduction, I found it hard to get my mind off just how much fun it had been. Breaking clays with a shotgun, punching paper targets with various pistols and clanging hundred yard iron targets with a rifle. It all hung around the edge of my daydreaming time while I trudged through my workdays in a slowly dying business (book selling) to unenthusiastic customers (college students). It was fun to be pursuing a hobby with people who were enthusiastic, if not especially cautious.

At this point, I really was still holding myself at arm's length, hesitant to fully embrace much of what the clubs had to offer. I did, however, apply for a license to carry with my local police department and take a full safety course with a certified instructor. My original plan to simply have a weapon in my home for self-defense was quickly becoming a jumping-off point.

When applying, my new friends had convinced me to request a full license-to-carry/large-capacity (LTC) with no restrictions. Because I did not know then what other aspects of gun ownership might come to interest me, I agreed. Nearly six months went by before I was notified of approval by my local police department and directed to come to the station to collect my LTC.

First Purchases

To get started with my home protection project, I took others' advice and made my first purchase a .22 pistol. With it, I learned the basics of physically running
a gun: sight acquisition, trigger control, and so much more. Being academic by nature, much of this was just pure enjoyment for me. The ballistics, physics, history and development all appealed to me without reservation. Six months of firing this gun regularly in the woods near my home helped make me ready to buy something with more appropriate stopping power in the event of a home break-in or a situation that called for self-defense. During this time, I was visiting a local gun club for Saturday- and Sunday-morning trap shooting. The group couldn’t have been more welcoming. They were well represented across the age spectrum (including among them the young, the middle aged, and the elderly) but there were only a few women and even fewer minorities. They were uniformly helpful in offering to lend me weapons, ammo and advice. No one ever once asked me for any documentation to be handling anything or anything concerning identification. And when, once in a while, someone offered too much advice on technique, stance or grip, there was always someone else to laughingly offer a correction: “just shoot the fucking thing!”

As much fun as this was, I was easily convinced that I “owed myself” a shotgun, which was accomplished very easily with the help of a little more advice from my friends and some introductions to local gun shops. There was no heavy sales pitch from any of the dealers and each was willing to act as an intermediary when I found the best deals available through websites out-of-state. Massachusetts dealers were, without exception, diligent in following license requirements, selling only approved weapons only and always checking my license.

Joining a Club – The Golden Handshake

To the uninitiated, the clutter of rules, regulations, laws and licensing (both state and federal) is very intimidating. They all seem to be designed to prevent you from purchasing or owning a firearm. The rules concerning storage, carry and even what you may own are cumbersome and mysterious. Once among a group of enthusiasts, however, you soon learn the ropes. You discover that, given a clean background check, the main obstacles to gun ownership seem to be only patience and money. Even in a state as restrictive as Massachusetts, I have had no problem finding places to practice and tips on where to find nearly any firearm that interests me. Various web groups and local clubs with affable members provided me with enthusiastic and generous guidance. Not one among them encouraged or supported anything illegal.

In every club, at every gun show and Saturday morning meet and in many casual sit-down chats that I have experienced since I became a gun owner, the views of strident defenders of Second Amendment rights ring loudly. It is the view of a small yet very vocal minority, one that scares us all. Many of my new friends will find my words here a sell-out, perhaps, but I agree with the many voices calling for mandatory background checks as well as the restriction of some weapons. Still, I also think that we, as individuals, all need to be more aware of and responsible for our own personal safety. Our introverted iPod/smartphone culture has made us all less situationally aware. Perhaps we rely too much on the idea that the local police or the federal policing authorities are on the job and that, because of that, we’re totally safe. Their mantras—“see something, say something”, “advise local authorities” or the newest command to seek “shelter in place”—are unconvincing to me.

My experience of becoming a gun owner has shed new light for me in several unexpected ways. First, it exposed me to more anger and strong opinions than I expected. It’s a very divisive issue and I’ve become cautious about discussing it. Secondly, I have been very surprised by the lax attitude from law enforcement in enforcing compliance on gun-control issues. Neither criminals nor law-abiding citizens seem to have any problems gaining access to a remarkable array of weapons. Finally, it seems clear that a solution to the question of who can get guns and how must be pursued. We can’t do that if we can’t discuss it.

To the uninitiated, the clutter of rules, regulations, laws and licensing (both state and federal) is very intimidating.