

Writers on the Range

Self-described 'gun nut' has a warning

When I was a young man growing up in rural Oregon, there was a term for people like me: "gun nut."

By my 20s I had a sizable collection of firearms. Some people I knew had a "pre-64" Winchester, a rifle renowned for its quality. Or they had a Browning Auto 5, a beautiful shotgun. A friend



BRIAN SEXTON
'GUN NUT'

had 10 of those in various gauges. But gun nuts today are a different breed. They

don't describe graceful lines, tight grain wood or immaculate bluing.

At gun stores today what I hear praised is firepower that comes out of black plastic and steel. These weapons are assault rifles, sometimes called "modern sporting guns." The kind of sport they're good for is not spelled out.

One of the gun stores I visited recently boasted a back wall lined with assault-style rifles, pistols and defensive shotguns, all black except for a choice few in hot pink "for the ladies." The staff mostly wore black as well.

Their T-shirts for sale featured some amalgam of the American flag and warnings such as "Don't tread on me" and "ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ" (Molon labe), an ancient Greek phrase roughly meaning "Come and take them." Everybody — and I mean staff and other customers — was packing holstered pistols. I felt out of place and time.

In my sleepy Oregon town, sentiments like this don't stop at a gun store. A trip to the supermarket is not complete without several sightings of men or women packing a pistol on their hip.

It is as if we are living in a fetishized version of the Wild West.

My town boasts one of the oldest independent newspapers in Oregon, but the readership is a quarter that of the Facebook page for the local police scanner. Every crime is pinged to each follower's cell, providing a steady feed of this world's ills. When we see the world through a lens of fear, it is no wonder we look at our neighbors with suspicion. Maybe that explains the amazing statistic last year from Axios.com that "an estimated 5 million Americans bought their first gun."

Dana Loesch, the former spokesperson for the bankrupt National Rifle Association, talked about this free-floating fear: "The government has proven it cannot keep us safe, yet some people want to disarm all of us."

This new group of men and women who wear guns as political statements apparently no longer experience weapons as tools for hunting or for sport. Even claims of defense are suspect. What type of threat necessitates military firepower?

Guns have become identified as symbolizing freedom, individuality or just plain cantankerousness. It makes me miss the old days when a gun was just a tool — albeit sometimes a beautifully crafted one.

The irony of the modern gun movement is that a take-no-prisoner stance on gun rights might just turn into a groundswell of support for tighter gun regulations. When the patriots start to lose gun nuts like me, they teeter on the brink of irrelevance.

The so-called patriots of today risk the very rights they've pledged to uphold with their lives. I know it's a far less exciting thing to promote, but what makes America great is getting things done by talking and compromising.

I do not own an AR-15, and depending on my mood I can make an argument both for and against further regulations. After all, is my favorite deer rifle any less deadly than the scariest-looking assault weapon?

But on Jan. 6 at the Capitol, as I witnessed some of my countrymen threaten to use their weapons against our government, I found regulations more appealing.

It may be tedious to take part in politics on the level of reading about issues and engaging with people, but so far, that's what makes America the best place to live. If I had to come up with a T-shirt slogan about a weapon, it wouldn't be a threat, a warning or a brag. How about: A gun is just a gun.

Brian Sexton is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit opinion service dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He hunts, fishes and writes in rural Oregon.



Our View

Fee-based government results in haves and have nots

On occasion we are reminded that the budget process used by the Oregon Legislature and state agencies is a bit curious.

According to the Oregon Blue Book, the state's revenue budget for the current biennium is \$85.8 billion. Of that, 26.1% is the general fund, which comes mainly from the state corporate and personal income taxes, the cigarette tax and the estate tax.

About 44% of the state's revenue comes from money state agencies take in as fines and fees in return for services. Some of that money is dedicated under law or constitutional amendment to specific agencies or purposes.

About 1.5% of the revenue comes from the state lottery.

Instead of having all of the state's revenue from taxes, fees and the lottery flow into the general fund, much of it flows into cubby holes within various state agencies instead.

As a result, when legislators write the budget they are debating the highest and best use of their

lunch money. Most of the rest of the state budget is already spoken for.

This results in haves and have-nots among state agencies and a sort of legislative panhandling exercise as agency heads try to make ends meet.

An example: Oregon Water Resources Department Director Tom Byler recently paid a visit to a legislative committee asking permission to raise fees for water transactions and dam inspections by 17% just to keep those divisions functioning. Even with the increase, several people will be laid off.

The implication is the Legislature doesn't have the money for OWRD and some other "have-not" agencies to do their job. The reality is the money is tucked away elsewhere.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is an example of a "have" agency. Under a couple of constitutional amendments, 7.5% of state lottery proceeds are earmarked for the department. In the current biennial budget, that's \$107.3 million

— more than twice the OWRD's entire budget. Much of the rest of the Parks and Recreation budget, \$98.7 million, comes from user fees and stays within the department.

Assuming that transferring water rights and inspecting dams in a timely manner are important, it should be up to legislators to assure the agency is adequately funded. That is not the case, because of the cubby holes.

We cannot tell legislators how to put together a state budget, but we do know the current system leaves some "have-not" agencies dependent on squeezing every penny out of farmers and ranchers and others who need water, inspections or other state-mandated services.

At the same time, the "have" agencies such as Parks and Recreation, have more than enough money to carry out their missions of managing state parks and campgrounds.

The time is long overdue to discuss this shortcoming that leaves some agencies chronically underfunded and others overfunded.

Letter to the Editor

I plan to enjoy the Biden presidency

Responding to John Kaufman (Jan. 28, 2021, edition of The Observer): I marvel at the ability of one person to reach in such a short, concise manner new heights in hypocrisy, new lows in self-awareness and for good measure, some awesome examples of paranoia and conspiracy theory — reeducation and deprogramming hit just the right note.

He bemoans the "torrent of hatred" from "lefties" while his next sentence describes President Biden as an "old corrupt-o-crat," and he continues to spew vitriol and vent his rage at those who might dare to disagree.

Write to us

The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. Letters are limited to 400 words and must be signed and carry the author's address and phone number (for verification purposes only). Email your letters to news@lagrandeobserver.com or mail them to the address below.

Well done sir, well done. I especially enjoyed his closing statement: "This is what you voted for. Enjoy," as if a Biden supporter would already be so disillusioned that the "unity" hasn't come to pass yet, that'd we'd be longing for the good old days when a president entered office speaking of American carnage and went on

to spend four years embroiled in scandal, incompetence, impeachments, and corruption.

I do acknowledge that I am in fact enjoying having as my president a man whose life has been dedicated to service to his country, a man who understands that the presidency is not a never-ending game of golf and watching eight hours of TV a day, a man who on his first day is putting his shoulder into the neglected coronavirus response and trying to fix problems that have plagued us for the past four years.

So thanks for your invitation to enjoy. I think I will.

Mary Chlopek
Lostine

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