

An Opinion: What Are We Going To Do About Gun Violence?

By Scott Laird

As I write this, exactly one week has passed since the tragic shooting deaths of twenty children and six adults took place in Newtown Connecticut. By the time you read this another week will have passed. The debates are raging throughout our country, and all over the internet, about what we can do to try to curb the random gun violence that has become almost epidemic.

Albert Einstein once said "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." That is how I feel every time I hear about another tragedy in our country involving guns. It appears that it is no longer safe to go to the movies, to a place of worship, a political rally, holiday shopping at the mall, onto a college or high school campus or even to send your children to elementary school without fear that your family might be randomly attacked by someone wielding a firearm. The fact, that as Americans, we have continued to sit back and allow nothing to be done in response to these continued tragedies is, to me, insane.

The fact that it took the death of twenty innocent children to wake this country up is heartbreaking.

The rules we currently have in place around this country are not working. The two most recent random, violent and murderous attacks, one of them right here in the Portland area, have once again exposed this tenuous situation and started a real debate about how to try to eliminate random gun violence. Our eyes have finally been opened to the need for some real dialog and discussion about potential solutions to this issue. It's time for all of us to say, "Enough is enough!"

We need to recognize that, through our inaction in the past, we have condoned these types of attacks for far too long. We need to really listen to each other as we debate this issue and work towards real change.

I have been reading about, listening to and participating in many debates since December 13th. I have learned a lot—from both sides of the discussion. Finding solutions to this issue will require us to lower our defenses and put aside partisanship. It will require us to allow others to express their thoughts and opinions freely. It will require us to take in new information. It might re-

quire us to change our minds.

I believe we all want the same thing at the end of the day—no more tragedies like Newtown. But when we all start from a rigid stance about how we get there, we end up with gridlock and nothing changes.

We need to open up to ALL the possibilities that are being discussed; that we may need to arm several staff members in our schools in order to assure that our children are safe. We may need to ban assault style rifles. We may need to expand access to mental health services. We may need to provide more resources for families of people who have exhibited violent tendencies. We may need to regulate firearms more strictly in this country and change the way people acquire guns and ammunition. We may need to adjust our school budgets to pay for armed security guards. We may need to change the laws that make schools a "Gun Free Zone." We may need to demand that the media change the way they report and talk about these violent attacks and those that commit them when they occur. We may need to consider that violent video games might be desensitizing our youth to the impact of violent actions and that these may need more regulations. We may need to stop calling the perpetrators of these attacks "evil" and start recognizing that they are sick. We may need to require that students receive sensitivity training and that parents be required to take parenting classes. We may need to allow prayer back into our schools. We may need to require all schools to hold monthly or even weekly "active shooter drills." We may need to get more involved as a community in order to provide a secure and safe place for all of us to live, work, learn and play. We may have to institute laws that punish irresponsible gun owners. We may need to amend the Constitution. We may need to take the politics out of this debate and work together to find real solutions to this issue for the good of everyone in our country.

What we are talking about is a change in culture. We have created a culture that values gun rights and which therefore tolerates a certain level of violence perpetrated by firearms. Any changes we make will not completely eliminate the possibility of random gun violence and we won't see immediate impacts. But eventually we can see changes and a limit to gun violence.

When I was growing up we had a culture that accepted drinking and driving as the norm. The sudden and violent loss of life finally became intolerable in the 1980's and people finally said, enough is enough. Over the last thirty years we have seen campaigns that have raised awareness and increased safety. We have seen increased law enforcement surrounding this issue. We have seen changes in what is considered irresponsible behavior. We have seen changes in our culture.

Bullying has become a national issue over the last few years and we are seeing changes in how it is dealt with in our schools, how it is viewed by the public, how it is discussed in the media and how it is no longer accepted by students and parents. We are also changing the culture in our country around this issue.

"Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Just like cars don't kill people, people driving cars kill people. But, if you want to drive an automobile in this country we require you to pass an operators test and have a license. You have to be a certain age. We have speed limits and seat belt laws that help create a safe environment and help save lives. We have installed airbags in newer vehicles to provide protection. We have created a culture that does not accept drinking and driving. If you fail to obey the laws that regulate driving you can lose your privilege to operate a motor vehicle.

Many people in this country believe owning a gun is a right. But it is also a privilege. Convicted felons are not allowed to legally own a firearm. The mentally ill can not legally purchase a gun. We can restrict rights and we can regulate privileges. We can create safety measures that allow responsible people to continue to enjoy their rights while providing protections for the rest of society.

Change is never immediate and takes time. The cost of freedom can be high and all of us need to consider that we will probably have to give up something if we are ever going to see any real change to the level of gun violence we are currently experiencing in this country. Change is already starting. But if we wish to see real change enacted it will require us to continue to really listen to each other with an open mind. Each of us needs to consider what we are willing to do to stop this insanity.

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