

Special series from 9A

When the demonstrator stated that nobody needs “semi-automatic machine guns,” they conflated two types of guns, semi-automatic and machine.

A machine gun is a firearm that only fires in full-automatic mode, meaning it continuously fires with a single pull of the trigger, and stops only when the trigger is released.

A semi-automatic gun is one which fires a single shot with every pull, but the bullets are automatically reloaded between shots. This is different from single-shot guns, which requires the user to either cock the gun between shots, such as revolvers, or hand-feed ammunition between shots, like bolt-action rifles.

The distinction is important for a number of reasons.

Since the passage of the Firearm Owners Protection Act in 1986, the manufacturing and selling of machine guns became illegal, though ownership or selling these guns made before the ban are still allowed. Most of the machine guns still in existence are cost prohibitive though, with price tags in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Pre-1986 machine guns are still transferable between individuals. Dealers are able to buy newly manufactured machine guns, but are not allowed to sell them to the general public.

When a gun reformer states they want machine guns banned, they are talking about policy that was decided decades earlier.

More regularly, gun reformers refer to semi-automatic guns when they speak of gun control. However, most of the guns sold in America, from handguns to rifles, are semi-automatic.

In 2013, more than four million pistols (semi-automatic) were sold in America, while less than one million revolvers (single shot) were sold, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Creating a blanket ban on all semi-automatic weapons would essentially ban 3/4 of all handguns and rifles in America.

To differentiate, gun reformers often lean on the term “assault

weapon” to describe weapons to control, but even that term is fraught with problems.

The term “assault weapon” has been used in various capacities throughout the decades. A January 2013 New York Times article laid out the problems surrounding the term.

“Assault weapon” was first used to describe a military weapon, the Sturmgewher, produced by the Germans in World War II. That weapon was capable of both semiautomatic and fully automatic fire.

By 1984, as manufacturers began to sell firearms modeled after new military rifles, advertisers like Guns & Ammo promoted a book called “Assault Firearms,” which it said was “full of the hottest hardware available today.”

But since then, the term has become mostly a political phrase.

Generally, gun reform advocates refer to “assault weapons” as firearms like those used in recent mass shooting like the Pulse Nightclub in Florida and the Las Vegas shooting earlier this year. The focus is on semi-automatic rifles with detachable magazines and “military” features like pistol grips, flash suppressors and collapsible or folding stocks, as the NY Times article stated.

But gun rights advocates argue that the term should only apply to weapons that have fully automatic capabilities, as defined in the WWII era. Because fully automatic weapons were essentially banned in 1986, the discussion on further banning assault weapons is moot.

They also contend that there is very little difference between any sporting firearm and assault weapons, which is true.

The general consensus for those who use the term is that an “assault weapon” is a semiautomatic weapon that has detachable magazines, allowing them to fire 10 to 100 rounds with a single magazine. But this definition covers a wide variety of guns, including handguns.

After that, it becomes a question of “cosmetics.” Does a gun have a col-

lapsible or folding stock, which allows the weapon to be shortened and perhaps concealed? Does the gun have a muzzle brake, which helps decrease recoil?

These types of arguments are considered crucial to those in the gun debate, particularly for guns rights advocates. Because of the nebulous

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— Author Meredith Dake-O’Connor in an article for The Federalist

nature of the term, different states have come up with different laws based upon their own interpretation of the phrase. For example, California bans magazines that hold more than 10 bullets.

Many gun rights advocates contend that by simply saying “assault weapons” should be banned; gun reformers are ignoring the complexity of the issue.

The March for Our Lives demonstrator suggested that long guns like AR-15s are not made to shoot accurately, inferring that the only reason to own a long gun would be to indiscriminately shoot at multiple targets. The statement is false, as most models have a Minute of Angle (MOA) of one or two.

MOA refers to the capability a firearm has to consistently deliver a grouping of shots at a particular distance. A one-MOA gun can be accurate within 1 inch when shooting from 100 yards away. At 200 yards, it’s 2 inches, 300 yards, 3 inches, etc. Many long guns like the AR-15 have MOA ratings that make the accuracy even better.

The targeting accuracy of a long gun like the AR-15 is important to understand how they are typically used in the general population.

A 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center studied why people own guns. Asking what the “major” reason was for gun ownership, 67 percent said for protection, 38 percent for hunting, 30 percent for sport shooting, 13 percent for collecting and eight percent for work.

If people had to choose one specific reason for gun ownership, protection drops to 48 percent and hunting down to 32 percent, per a 2013 Pew report.

But the guns people use for protection differs.

A 2014 Baylor Religion Survey found that handguns were the preferred weapon at 37.5 percent. Long guns, like the AR-15, drop to 27 percent, with 58 percent reporting long gun use as recreational only, and 9 percent as collector’s items.

In this light, AR-15s are typically used for hunting and target practice, something that most of the March for Our Lives demonstrators listed as suitable reasons to own a gun.

It should also be noted that the “AR” in AR-15 does not stand for “assault rifle,” which is an oft-stated claim. Instead, it stands for ArmaLite Rifle 15. It was originally manufactured for military use as an automatic weapon, but in 1959 the trademark was sold to Colt’s Manufacturing Company. In 1964, Colt began selling the rifle in a semi-automatic form. Then in 1977, the patent ran out and the gun proliferated the market, fast becoming one of the most popular guns in America.

It is important to point out that the gun has been sold publicly for 54 years, but is only now being used in mass shootings, which have occurred in America since before the Constitution was signed. To single the AR-15 out as the main reason for deadly mass shootings would be a misnomer, as it has existed for decades as an uncontroversial gun for hunting and target shooting.

Handguns make up the vast majority of gun violence in the United States. In 2016, 7,105 handguns were tied to homicides, compared to 374 with rifles and 262 with shotguns.

When the March for Our Lives demonstrators were asked if they believed handguns should be banned, most stated no.

“They’re okay,” one demonstrator said. “They’re okay in the hands of people that know how to use them or keep them secure.”

When a gun reformer infers that guns like the AR-15 are only used to kill mass amounts of people, it can have the effect of completely disregarding the culture of those who own guns, painting gun owners as uncaring. This in turn makes it difficult for both sides of the issue to debate guns in good faith.

In an October 2017 article in The Federalist written by Meredith Dake-O’Connor, a gun rights advocate spoke about the pain of the misconceptions regarding how they are viewed in the debate:

“The most destructive, divisive response when dealing with Second Amendment advocates is the notion that we aren’t on your side of the issue because we ‘don’t care’ about the tragedy and loss of life. Two years ago, at Christmas I had a family member, exasperated that I wasn’t agreeing about gun control, snarl, ‘It appears that if your [step] daughter was killed because of gun violence you wouldn’t even care!’ ... The obvious implication is that we are unmoved by the loss of life.”

Dake-O’Connor wrote that the debate often “dehumanizes” Second Amendment advocates, even those who empathize with the pain over the loss of life.

“As hard as it may be to imagine, a person can watch this, ache, hurt and be profoundly affected by these events and not change his or her position on the Second Amendment,” she wrote.

If both sides view each other as monsters, will a constructive discussion on the issue ever be had? And if the discussion cannot be had, will meaningful and lasting solutions to issues of mass shootings ever be accomplished?

In different times, it’s possible that this debate could be better served without the specter of mass shootings. As it stands, however, mass shootings are where the debate currently is.

The question is whether there are misconceptions about mass shootings as well.

In part two of this series, the Siuslaw News will examine another component of the ongoing debate on guns: mental health.

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