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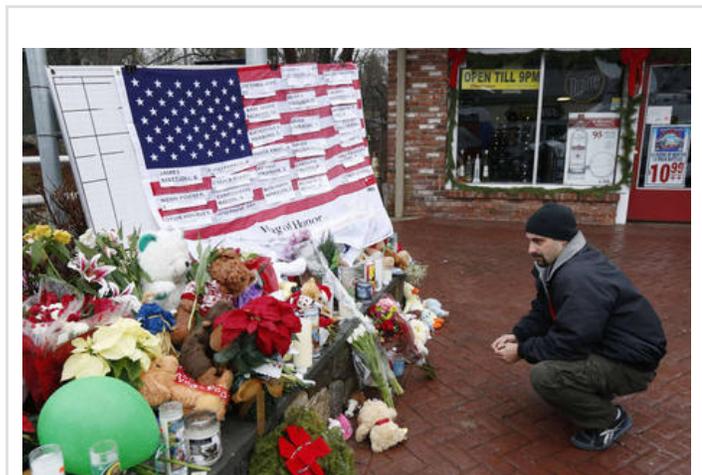
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Deseret News

Nathan B. Oman: Good guys, bad guys and gun control

By Nathan B. Oman , For the Deseret News

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I honestly don't know if such laws would have prevented the killings in Connecticut. A sick mind determined to do great evil will often prevail despite our best efforts. (Julio Cortez, AP)

I first saw news of the Connecticut shootings while at a conference in London. For the cosmopolitan participants in such events, blaming tragedies like the mass murder at Sandy Hook on the exotic and faraway American gun culture seems natural. The passionate reverence of many Americans for hunting, self-defense and the Second Amendment is the gun-loving soil from which the murderers of kindergartners grow. It's a view shared by the less cosmopolitan critics of the gun culture in cities and suburbs around the United States.

This view is wrong.

I am not a gun owner or a hunter, but I have friends who are members of the American gun culture in good standing. These are people who gleefully take a buck home every season, raise their children to use firearms, own handguns for self-defense and pledge symbolic allegiance to the Second Amendment and an armed citizenry ready to violently resist tyranny. They have been raised in a world of guns, and they live in a world of guns.

These also are not the kind of people who start shooting innocent children, nor does their culture encourage such things. They imagine the gun owner as a defender of the weak and a provider for the family. They do not exalt the nihilistic tough guy mowing down innocents with automatic weapons. The soil from which that cultural image springs lies elsewhere.

For those who never encounter firearms, the American gun culture seems a frightening place, filled with violent and trigger-happy people. It's easy to pin responsibility for horrific crimes like the Connecticut shootings on these unfamiliar and dangerous people. Such stereotypes about gun owners, however, are unfair. Whatever its faults, the American gun culture does not exalt senseless violence or the slaughter of innocents. It just doesn't.

The problem is that the most vocal and paranoid segment of the American gun culture, led by the National Rifle Association, has lobbied relentlessly against what are ultimately moderate and sensible gun laws. I am not talking here about laws banning the private possession of handguns. I am talking about laws that would make it harder for the bad guys to buy large-magazine, semi-automatic assault weapons at gun shows.

I honestly don't know if such laws would have prevented the killings in Connecticut. A sick mind determined to do great evil will often prevail despite our best efforts. Still, we ought to make it more

difficult for such monsters to get access to the tools that allow them to slaughter children.

Let me offer two suggestions in the debate over guns in this country. Those who do not own or use guns need to stop demonizing those that do. Urban and suburban proponents of gun control need to stop talking as though the largely rural culture of gun ownership is responsible for producing the killers of children. This isn't true, and such talk understandably offends and alienates law-abiding gun owners.

For the gun owners of America, please chill out about gun control. Laws making it more difficult for deranged criminals to buy automatic weapons are fully consistent with a robust right to bear arms. This isn't the beginning of a prohibition on gun ownership, the end of the Second Amendment or the first step toward totalitarian dictatorship. That's crazy talk.

Ultimately, the fundamental logic of gun ownership is for the good guys to have the means to protect the innocent from the bad guys. Let's make it more difficult for the bad guys to get guns.

Nathan B. Oman is a professor of law at the College of William & Mary in Virginia.

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