

Guest Column: Responsible gun owners need to be heard

December 19, 2021



I own a closet full of guns.

But nowhere in that closet is ammunition. That is locked up elsewhere, reflecting a rule I was taught in childhood. Guns are powerful, even deadly, tools. If you own one, it's on you to keep it safe. That is what the parents of a Michigan teenager failed to do, and their son murdered four of his fellow high school students.

Not long ago, safety seemed gospel for gun owners and the gun industry alike. But something has changed. Responsibility has been discarded in a twisted form of gun idolatry.

That change is detailed in a new book, *Gunfight* by Ryan Busse. He's a gun industry boss who walked away from the industry he championed and the company he helped build. His book documents a shift in America's culture about guns and politics. Disclosure: Busse is a friend of mine. I bought one of my favorite rifles from him. We both live in the same town in Montana where the gun industry is a significant economic player.

Entering our town of Kalispell, there's a billboard from one of our local gun manufacturers that claims "We build the things they want to ban." As an "open carry" community, you can sometimes see moms and dads packing semi-auto pistols as they push a swing on the playground.

At a recent high school band concert, one parent wore a T-shirt featuring an AR-15 like a crucifix. The shirt read: "Guns are my religion. I am the priest." I don't know what's more weird, the T-shirt itself or the fact it barely raised an eyebrow.

Back in 2019, some local high school kids here organized a rally in response to the police murder of George Floyd. About 100 vigilantes came to my town's square, carrying high-capacity semiautomatic rifles. They said they were there to "keep the peace." I carried a cardboard sign that borrowed a quote from the federal Supreme Court building: "Equal Justice Under the Law." I looked around for a parked car to duck behind in case gunshots rang out. Busse was there, too, and we felt the change. As hunters, we understand the reality of even a single bullet traveling 2,000 feet per second.

Clearly, our local vigilantes were no kind of "well-ordered militia" or even a sanctioned sheriff's posse.

Busse's company sold tried-and-true rifles, shotguns and handguns, made-in-America to a high standard of craftsmanship for legitimate, legal uses. That was the brand he tried to build, a standard he tried to live by. But Busse describes in *Gunfight* how guns have become political props and ideological symbols.

Under this new narrative, any attempt or even discussion of limiting firepower in the hands of random people is denounced as tyranny. Industry spokespeople who dared question this narrative saw their careers ruined. The end result is the sale of rocket-propelled grenade launchers in the public square.

There are cultures on earth where you can find such an arms market, but they are in failed states, not democracies. Democracies draw a line between responsibility and unfettered liberty. Anarchy denies any line exists.

You don't have to look far for this toxic mix of anarchy and firepower. In Oregon in 2016, an armed band of disgruntled white men took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, taunting federal authorities until one man, LaVoy Finicum, was shot and killed by Oregon State Police.

In Michigan in 2020, a group of armed men took over the State Legislature.

Also in 2020, in Wisconsin, teenager Kyle Rittenhouse ran into a crowd of protesters with his rifle. As a result, he killed two men and left one badly injured. That same year, in Missouri, a lawyer and his wife pointed their AR-15 rifle and handgun at protestors and photographers, becoming Internet sensations.

Not that long ago, these gun owners would have felt a backlash from fellow gun owners. The idea is that irresponsible gun ownership anywhere is a threat to legitimate gun ownership everywhere. Yet some want to make Rittenhouse, who was acquitted of legal liability but still faces potential civil suits, a folk hero. The Missouri attorney is running for the Senate. The mastermind of the Oregon refuge takeover is running for governor of Idaho.

I believe it is on responsible gun owners to keep our guns safe in our homes. It's also on us to speak out for responsibility in our communities if we are to maintain our freedoms and our democracy.

Ben Long is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He lives in Kalispell, Montana.