A Modest Proposal on Gun Control:

Ask the NRA to Take the Responsibility for Licensing Gun Owners

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The only even slightly good thing to emerge from the horrific slaughter in Newtown is that it has renewed the national debate about what could be done to reduce gun violence through changes in gun policy: the size and character of the national gun inventory, the rules that determine who has legal access to them, and how they can be legally used. Moved by civic spirit, the NRA has recently offered to help the nation deal with the specific threat of gun violence in schools by urging that an armed “good person” be assigned to each school in the nation to keep them safe from “bad persons” with guns. Initially, the idea was to hire trained security guards to perform this function. More recently, they have offered to organize a volunteer effort to supply this service – substituting private volunteerism for government dollars. This offer can be seen in the same light as the voluntary contribution now being made by religious and community-based organizations to distraught individuals throughout the country deal with their pain and their fears.

Contributions from civic organizations to public problems are always welcome. It occurred to me, however, that there is something even more important that the NRA could do as a large, strong civic organization committed to responsible gun ownership and use: namely, we could ask the NRA to assume the national responsibility for licensing individuals to own guns. This may seem bizarre to many, but let me explain the logic.

Our current system for managing gun ownership essentially presumes a broad right to own a gun: one can own a gun unless one gives clear evidence of civic irresponsibility. Currently, federal law prohibits convicted felons, the mentally ill, and those illegally within the country from buying guns from federally licensed dealers. Unfortunately, we have struggled to find the effective means for executing the background checks that would make this system effective. Further, we have lived with the possibility that *many individuals who will end up committing crimes with guns do not fall into the proscribed categories*. There are some who commit crimes with guns, or who kill themselves, or who accidentally kill or injure others who are legally entitled to own weapons. They just happened to use them badly.

Note three key features of this existing system. First, restrictions on gun ownership and use (however limited) show that the right to own guns is not absolute. The society has, apparently, seen the wisdom of restricting access to weapons to at least some of its members – ideally, the irresponsible users. Second, the current restrictions are, perhaps, at once too narrow and too broad: too *narrow* in the sense that they do not take effect until someone has already committed a crime leaving many eligible to own guns who might commit a crime in the future; too *broad* in the sense that there may be many mentally ill, or illegal aliens who could be utterly relied upon to own and use a gun. (The fact that one is tempted to gasp at such a claim makes it clear that we really do not want very many people to have the right to own guns, since we recognize they are very dangerous things, even in the “right” hands!)

A significant step forward in dealing with these problems could be made if we forged a private/public partnership between the NRA and government. The aim would be to reconstitute this system from one that *allows everyone* to own a gun unless they have shown some kind of irresponsibility (a *permissive* licensing system), to one that limited the right to own a gun to those who could affirmatively show good character, competence and commitment in the responsible ownership and use of guns, and some need to have and exercise the right to gun ownership (a *restrictive* licensing system).

One might quickly object that the proposed restrictive system would violate the right to own guns. But there are very few rights that are wholly unregulated. Even the right to vote in a democracy is conditioned by demonstrations of good character and competence. So is the right to drive a car. And, as noted above, the principle that some individuals should be excluded from having the right to own a gun has long been undermined by both the law and common sense which have sought to keep guns out of the hands of irresponsible individuals.

The second objection might be that it is too hard to reliably distinguish responsible gun owners (the good people with guns who can help keep us safe), from irresponsible gun owners (the bad people with guns from whom we need to be protected). It is certainly true that making this distinction is very hard to do. Yet, for many, many years the NRA has insisted on the existence of a clear difference between the responsible gun owners of America (presumably their members), and the irresponsible gun owners of America (those who end up killing, robbing, assaulting, accidentally shooting, or impulsively committing suicide). Furthermore, they have often seemed to suggest that their screening, their training, and the broad cultural values that they seek to preserve in the ownership and use of guns could be taught to individuals who wanted to own guns, thereby turning many who would otherwise turn out to be irresponsible gun owners into responsible gun owners.

If this is true -- if the NRA is right that there is a clear distinction between good gun owners and bad; if they can tell the difference between the two; and if they know how to create and sustain the commitment to responsible gun ownership among those who become members -- then it seems clear that the NRA is in an excellent position to help the country as a whole get past a terrible stumbling block in our path towards responsible gun ownership. The NRA, acting consistently with the social aims that characterize our most important civic institutions, could accept and discharge the responsibility for leading the responsible gun owners of the country, and help ensure that no one citizens other than those responsible members had access to guns. Just as the American Red Cross seeks to train individuals to help prevent and manage health and other kinds of emergencies when they occur, so the NRA could assume civic responsibility for help the nation deal with the crimes, the accidents, and the suicides that generated by the irresponsible use of guns, and the porous systems that allow irresponsible individuals to gain access to the weapons.

With millions of guns already in private hands, and no practical method for getting them back, perhaps now is the time to focus attention not on what kinds of guns we will continue to produce and sell, but the more difficult and more important question of who will have legal access to them. The NRA can, by their own testimony, give us an answer to that question, and help us draw the line between responsible and irresponsible gun owners. The only interesting question is whether they will step up and do their civic duty, and if not, why not.