Better Laws Might Have Helped in Tucson

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In an ideal world, stable, cautious law-abiding citizens would have access to guns and others would not. We would like wise regulation and prudent personal decisions about carrying and using guns. Deciding on the elements of wise laws and consumer decisions requires extensive data analysis beyond any single episode, like the horrific killings in Tucson. But this tragedy highlights some relevant issues.

Laws are better than armed citizens in keeping killers from firing 31 times in succession. For one thing, the killer would have found it harder to purchase the high-capacity magazine that he used had George W. Bush adhered to his campaign promise in 2000 to support the assault weapons ban that lapsed after 10 years in 2004.

Unfortunately, the gun area is a prime example of where good politics and good policy often diverge sharply. One cannot ignore the economic interests of gun sellers who profit directly when criminals can buy guns and then indirectly when the gun lobby uses the resulting mayhem to urge others to seek protection. These interests cannot be expected to tell the truth about wise regulation or seek to promote anything other than a more-guns, more-profits strategy.

Second, young men with severe mental illness can buy guns far too easily. A first-rate assessment of the costs and likely benefits of a program that screens every gun transfer to ensure that the purchaser is not mentally ill (or an alcoholic, drug user or convicted felon) should be undertaken. One must also think about stopping the incomprehensibly large number of lost and stolen guns -- some one million per year -- that travel from law-abiding citizens to U.S. criminals. Arming the good guys unfortunately means arming the bad guys if the good guys don't have their guns secured.

Third, while early studies by John Lott and others suggested that state policies providing greater freedom to carry guns would reduce crime, empirical evidence refutes this view.

The complexity of the issues of gun carrying is evident in the Tucson shooting: Joe Zamudio, the first lawful gun carrier on the scene, came around a corner and saw a man with a gun. Mr. Zamudio "grabbed his arm and shoved him into a wall." Thankfully, Mr. Zamudio didn't shoot because this was not the shooter, but the person who disarmed the shooter. Mr. Zamudio, age 24, displayed further caution in that he didn't pull out his own 9 mm handgun because "he didn't want to be confused as a second gunman."
Those who carry guns have to make quick decisions, often in crowded and confused circumstances where the chance of doing more damage must be weighed against the benefit of stopping an assault. We should all agree, though, that we should keep bad guys from being able to fire 31 times without reloading.

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