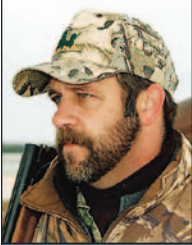


CAPITOL COMMENTS

The Firearm Debate



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Last issue I discussed the need for and expectation of bipartisanship to resolve the major issues confronting our nation. My optimism exceeded the reality in Washington, D.C. Following the pageantry and tradition of the inauguration,

once again both political parties appear to be entrenched. However, a compromise was reached to avert the fiscal cliff and extend the federal debt ceiling. In recognition of the voting power of minorities, both parties have signaled that they will work together for immigration reform. The thorny issue of budget sequestration remains, and time will tell if bipartisanship will address the impending budget cuts that federal agencies face. In spite of these pressing issues, in the months since the last issue of *Fair Chase*, an event occurred that riveted the nation's attention. At the time of my previous column, none of us could have imagined the horrific events of December 14, 2012, that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

This unimaginable tragedy propelled gun violence to the forefront of political debate. The nation has learned about instant background checks, so-called "assault weapons," magazine capacity, gun trafficking, straw-man purchases, and the contributing problems of mental illness and societal change. We have learned the ugly secret that some states have not provided complete information to the national instant background check system—leaving the identities of felons, domestic violence perpetrators, people with restraining orders, and mentally ill persons out of the system that checks on prohibited firearm purchasers. We have also learned that commonly used semi-automatic firearms may be defined as "assault weapons" by making cosmetic changes or adding a handle that alters the appearance but has no effect on the function of the firearm. Images of large capacity magazines, used legitimately by competitive and recreational shooters, have jumped from the big screen movies like

Rambo and *Die Hard* to the living room television screens of our nation. Public opinion has been shaped by the likes of Piers Morgan and Ted Nugent who have been having a heyday with their own interpretations of gun control.

A few of the nation's conservation leaders were asked to engage in the administration's discussion of gun violence. We agreed to participate—not to dictate, decide, or approve gun violence policy, but to inform decision-makers about the legitimate and law-abiding use of firearms for hunting and recreational shooting. In our discussions with the vice president and his staff, we explained the necessity of firearm ownership and the use of firearms for wildlife management and recreation. We described the critical role that federal excise taxes on

firearms and ammunition play in funding wildlife conservation across the country. We made it clear that rural cultures differ decidedly from urban cultures with respect to the responsible use of firearms and the value of treasured heirlooms that are passed from generation to generation. We understand that urban residents, faced with daily television newscasts of shootings, do not appreciate the significance and sentimentality associated with a treasured firearm that has been carried through forests and fields with friends and family. We did our best to explain the traditions, ethics, and responsibility assumed by law-abiding gun owners. However, we realize that urban constituents, who may not share our values, have and will make their voices heard in this political debate.

The ongoing gun violence debate must be conducted in concurrence with an understanding of the Second Amendment rights of our citizens. Hunting, shooting, collecting, and personal defense are legitimate and regulated uses of firearms. It is understandable when law-abiding and responsible gun owners cringe when horrific gun violence occurs. First, we abhor the atrocity and its impact on victims, their families, their friends, and their community. We hate the perception that gun owners are irresponsible, uncaring, and capable of violent acts. We worry that our rights and traditions will be eroded by the actions of heinous criminals who pay no attention to the law or others' rights.

I do not pretend to have the solution to gun violence. This much I do know: responsible firearm owners want to be part of an effective solution that incorporates all elements of gun violence. We want to maintain our rights and avoid division within the ranks of hunters, recreational shooters, and the organizations that represent our interests. We want society to recognize and address the breakdown of our culture, a culture that desensitizes us to violence and leads to criminal acts. We can only hope that because of our efforts to inform the debate and our commitment to preserving the rights and traditions of hunting and shooting, Congress will make intelligent decisions that effectively reduce gun violence and end this firearm debate. ■

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