

Trigger for debate:
Writer Alex
Hannaforf gets
a taste of Second
Amendment freedom
in Austin, Texas

**‘When I walk into
a bank I become
all too aware that
I have a killing
machine strapped
to my belt’**

Keys. Wallet. Mobile. Gun?

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre, Barack Obama is trying to enact a ban on assault weapons. But there is another America, one which says the answer to firearms is more firearms. GQ's correspondent straps on his own pistol and meets the people who demand to pack heat wherever they go – even when entering a government building...

Story by **Alex Hannaforf** Photographs by **Matt Rainwaters**

It's the eleventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and while President Obama is pausing in remembrance at the Pentagon, I am near the back of a sports shop a few miles north of my house in Austin, Texas, buying a handgun.

Beyond the kayaks, tennis racquets and fishing rods, the young assistant at Academy Sports + Outdoors hands me a 9mm semi-automatic Sig Sauer P250 pistol, a handgun that federal air marshals use. It's made of black steel and polymer and won the National Rifle Association's Golden Bullseye Award for handgun of the year in 2009. *Gun World* called it

"reliable and rugged" and said, "In the unfortunate event that someone gets into a gunfight, that's exactly the kind of pistol they'll need." I point it at the wall behind the clerk and look down the sights. The gun costs \$400.

I am only in the shop for 40 minutes and the criminal-record check, via computer, lasts five of those. On a form headed "Firearms Transaction Record", I tick the boxes that say I am not "addicted to marijuana, or any depressant, stimulant or narcotic", and that I haven't been "adjudicated mentally defective". The information I've given isn't verified. Ten minutes later, I walk out of Academy with a new 9mm semi-automatic gun, plus cleaning kit and holster. I have only ever shot a real firearm once before – at a shooting range, years ago, with someone who knew what they were doing. Sitting back in my car and staring at the gun in a black plastic bag, I realise I have no idea how to even load it.

When I walked into Academy last summer, I was in the first throes of writing a story for *GQ* about how easy it is to buy a gun in America as an expat, but the plan was to point out how ludicrous some of the gun laws are and the ironies of some of the pro-gun arguments. I have lots of American friends who own guns; some who have several, including assault rifles, in their houses. I wanted to understand why they felt the need to "bear arms" at all in America in 2013. I wanted to take a few harmless jabs at them – and at myself for how ridiculous it must feel asking a checkout girl at Walmart for two doughnuts, a crate of beer and 100 hollow-point bullets.

Then, two weeks before Christmas, 20-year-old Adam Lanza woke up, shot his mother in the head four times while she lay in bed, and then drove five miles to Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where he executed 20 young children and six

staff members before shooting himself. All the children killed were between six and seven years old. Each victim was found to have more than one gunshot wound; one boy, Noah Pozner, was shot eleven times at close range. Among the weapons found with Lanza's body was a 9mm Sig Sauer handgun, the same firearm I'd purchased only weeks before.

In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting in America (and there have been many – at least 62 in the last 30 years), the National Rifle Association, the controversial Second Amendment rights organisation, usually chooses not to enter into a debate about gun control. Instead it issues a statement expressing its condolences (like it did after Virginia Tech in 2007) or that "at this time anything other than prayers... would be inappropriate" (as it did after Jared Loughner killed six people and wounding Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in 2011).

Just a week after the Newtown shootings, however, the NRA stunned even some of its own members when it called a press conference to announce it wanted to see armed police officers at every school in the country and, as the *New York Times* reported, "pointed the finger at violent video games, the news media and lax law enforcement – not guns – as culprits in the recent rash of mass shootings".

A week, then, was enough time for America's fierce debate about gun control to rage once more. Facebook timelines lit up, newspaper editorials advocated, on one side, a ban on assault rifles and, on the other, gun owners' defence of "their God-given right". Piers Morgan called Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, an "idiot" live on air, adding that he was dangerous and stupid. In the weeks that followed, Morgan's aggressive stance on gun control led to 100,000 Americans signing an online petition asking that he be deported.

More shocking still for me, Texas governor Rick Perry didn't even wait a week to voice his opinion. Three days after the massacre, he told a Tea Party audience that Texans with gun licences should be able to carry firearms in any public place. "One of the things we don't want to see from the federal Government is a knee-jerk reaction," he said. And according to the *Austin American-Statesman* newspaper, he elicited applause when he talked about a Texas school system that already allows members of staff to carry guns.

I naturalised as an American citizen in 2011, after moving to Austin, Texas, from London. I don't agree with gun ownership, other than for hunting or target shooting, but prior to the Sandy Hook shooting I applied for a Concealed Handgun License – something that would enable me to carry my pistol almost everywhere I choose to take it.

There are around 300 million guns in America – enough to arm every man, woman and child – and every state allows you to keep a firearm at home for protection. Texas has a Stand-Your-Ground law, which means we can use deadly force to defend against an intruder

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in our home (or car) if we think our life is being threatened.

Around eight million gun owners are also licensed to carry "concealed" weapons in America. One of the catalysts for the Texas legislature passing its concealed-carry bill in 1995 was some testimony it heard from a woman named Suzanna Gratia Hupp. Four years earlier, Hupp was having lunch with her parents at a branch of the Luby's Cafeteria chain in Killeen, Texas, when a man drove his truck through the wall and opened fire with a handgun. By the end of the massacre, ➔



Arms and the man (clockwise from top left): The writer's neighbour, Luke Miller, with his AR-15 rifle at a shooting range; cleaning the Sig Sauer pistol; the writer after a day of target practice; Austin's Capitol building, where concealed weapons are welcomed

➤ George Hennard, an unemployed merchant seaman, had killed 23 people – including Hupp’s parents – before committing suicide. Hupp, who later became a Republican member of the Texas House of Representatives, spear-headed a campaign to sanction concealed carry in Texas. She said that if she had been allowed to carry her gun into Luby’s that day, she might have prevented the slaughter. A similar response came from the pro-gun lobby in the wake of the cinema shooting in Aurora, Colorado, last July, in which 12 people died: if only a Concealed Handgun License holder had been in the movie theatre that night... I’d hear the same argument following the school shooting at Sandy Hook. In arguing for more people to carry concealed weapons in the wake of the massacre, one friend of mine wrote on Facebook: “Think of it like having a bunch of off-duty policemen walking around.”

Red’s Indoor Range sits on the edge of Highway 290, eight miles southwest of downtown Austin. It’s a ramshackle, single-storey place, built in the shadow of a gnarled oak tree, and when I call in, the sound of cars and trucks barely drowns out the persistent “pop pop pop” of gunfire. Inside, students and old men crowd the Perspex windows, waiting to occupy one of ten shooting lanes beyond. Fourteen dollars gets you an hour, one target, and the loan of ear defenders and shooting glasses. Red’s is open 9am till 9pm, seven days a week; there’s no day of rest when it comes to exercising your Constitutional right, even in the Bible Belt. It’s well known now that the Sandy Hook killer, Adam Lanza, was taken by his mother (a survivalist who stocked weapons, food and other supplies in anticipation of the end of the world) to shoot guns at their local firing range several times, even when Adam was still a teenager. Going to a firing range is as everyday to many Texans as going on a Starbucks run. A popular country song by the artist Josh Thompson expresses it like this: “Our houses are protected by the good Lord and a gun/And you might meet ‘em both if you show up here not welcome, son.” The air-conditioning system splutters and whirs as it fights the Texas heat. Wood panels in the roof are all shot up, and red lines painted widthways across the concrete floor denote the three-, seven- and 15-yard lines. I attach a paper target and send it shooting down to yard 15 on an electric pulley. A friend shows me how to load the Sig’s magazine with bullets and slam it shut. At 15 yards, I hit the target with six bullets; at seven yards, the bull’s-eye.

In 30 minutes, I fire off 100 rounds. According to police reports, Lanza managed the same number in under ten minutes. My temples are sweating from the heat, the fumes make my throat itch and there is a smudge of black gun-powder residue on my trigger finger. Each time a gun goes off in one of the neighbouring lanes, the sound thuds in my chest like a deep cough. By breaking down a gun, you can clearly see what an efficient, brilliant piece of engineering it is. That afternoon, home from the range, I sit at the wooden picnic table in my back garden, flatten out a piece of green baize and take the gun apart: you pull the magazine out;

The most dangerous thing I’ll do today is try to sync my iPhone to my laptop without losing all my contacts. What do I need a gun for?

twist the take-down lever and remove the slide; pull out the recoil spring followed by the barrel. Using a cotton-cleaning patch soaked in Hoppe’s No.9 Solvent, you then push the swab through the barrel using a cleaning rod and it comes out black with gunpowder residue. Soon, you’ll have a dirty pile of swabs on the table. You then drop a bead of gun oil into the grooves on the slide, and run an oil-soaked swab through the barrel. As I do this, I remember what Anthony Swofford, author of *Jarhead*, wrote about this very process: it was “calming”, and “meditative”. But he was

a soldier at war, bored and terrified. I’m a civilian. I have no army to fight. No oppressor to rise up against. The most dangerous thing I’ll be doing all day is try to sync my iPhone with my laptop without losing all my contacts. What do I need a gun for?

To hold a Concealed Handgun License (CHL) in Texas, you must have a state ID, be at least 21, and not have committed any felonies or be addicted to drugs. The ten-hour class covers gun safety, the use of force and dispute resolution. There’s also a shooting test at the range; to pass, you must fire off 50 rounds and score 170 points out of a possible 250. But first I need some instruction. Mark Northrup, one of the two instructors on the CHL course, agrees to take me to the Austin Rifle Club, where he’s a member, to give me some tips ahead of the test. A gentle sixty-something, with short grey hair and glasses, Northrup may look an unlikely gun nut, but he’s a life member of the NRA (where he’s also a range safety officer), a certified Glock armourer and a member of the International Defensive Pistol Association. He tells me to stand shoulder-width apart and look at the far sight on my gun. I hold the grip in my right palm and cup my right hand with my left. “Now, put 2lb of pressure on your left thumb and 1lb pressure on your right,” he says. “Take a breath, get your sight alignment, then gently squeeze the trigger. It should be a surprise when it goes off.” That afternoon, I shoot a Glock 9mm, a .22 Ruger, a .357 Smith & Wesson (“an old police gun”), a .38 six-shooter, a Glock .45 sub-compact, a Kimber .45, a Walther PPK, and my own Sig. I’m ready to take my CHL.

There are 15 people in the function room at the Holiday Inn, all men, mostly in their forties and fifties, sipping weak coffee from Styrofoam cups. When I ask, the majority tell me they want their CHLs to exercise their Constitutional right. “If you don’t use ‘em, you lose ‘em,” says one. Wyatt Bellis, the other instructor, was born in Texas but grew up in England and still has a British accent. Northrup shows us a video of a police officer talking to high-school kids about gun safety, whose Glock accidentally discharges. “Accidents don’t happen; it’s negligence,” he explains. “Never point a gun at anything you don’t want to destroy. They’re not just designed to punch holes in paper.” The day is full of sound bites like this: “Always keep one in the chamber in the car. A gun’s no use if it ain’t loaded.” “Every bullet has an attorney’s name on it.” “Gymnastics

Photograph Rex

and high-school football are much more dangerous than guns.” I wonder if I’ll find the research to back up that last point, but from the noises in the Holiday Inn function room, it seems like most of the other attendees are in agreement. Next we learn where we can and can’t take our concealed weapons: if a business posts a 30.06 notice – referring to the Texas penal code – it’s illegal to enter with a firearm. Usually hospitals and churches have one somewhere near the entrance. You can’t take guns into schools or post offices, as these are federal institutions. What about banks? No problem. “It sometimes helps withdrawals go a little quicker,” Bellis quips. If you want to take your handgun with you on the plane, Texas has a reciprocal agreement with 29 other states, but it must be checked in the hold. You can’t take it within 1,000 feet of a prison on the day it’s carrying out an execution, but you’re welcome to conceal your gun in Texas’ seat of government – the Capitol building in downtown Austin. There’s a separate entrance just for CHL holders. If that isn’t terrifying enough, in 2013, the Texas legislature is poised to consider bills that, if passed, will reduce the number of classroom hours required to get your CHL and expand the places we’re allowed to carry guns to include school-board meetings. One representative even wants to allow us to carry our guns openly rather than concealed. In Texas, for many, more guns equal more safety and more freedom. Northrup goes on to say it is important for us to practise drawing our weapons from their holsters at home in front of a mirror. If there was no other option but to use deadly force, he adds, we need to ask ourselves: could we take a human life? “Using deadly force is unnatural,” Bellis says. “After the Civil War, they found muskets that were still loaded: not everyone wanted to pull the trigger.” If we did, we are to call 911. “Always ask for an ambulance,” he says. “Even if you’ve killed your assailant.” This, apparently, is for legal reasons: you’re trying to “stop” an attacker, not kill them. If we are to use deadly force, we’re told, we’d probably be arrested; there’s a possibility that criminal charges would be filed, followed by a trial and possible punishment. Then there’s the psychological aftermath. We may view the incident in slow motion, get flashbacks, nightmares, and we’d likely develop depression. “Better to be judged by 12 than carried by six,”

Bellis says with a chuckle, when I ask why anyone would choose to carry a weapon. I get the feeling he’s used the line many times before. Up the road at Eagle Peak Shooting Range, owner Jim Day likes to say your \$10 membership card “expires when you do”. I score 244 out of 250 – I’ve passed my CHL test. CHL holders are generally well behaved, and the statistics kept by the Texas Department of Public Safety back that up: of the 63,679 convictions in Texas in 2011, just 120 were committed by CHL holders. But even though we’re a law-abiding group, I’m still not convinced by what Bellis told us about tension “dissolving”



Emergency measures: Counter-terrorism advisor John O Brennan briefs President Obama in the White House on the details of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, 14 December 2012

if the police were to pull us over for speeding. I just can’t see how, after running my number plate and discovering that I’m probably carrying a loaded weapon, it would instil a sense of calm. I begin asking police officers on the beat in Austin whether this is true, and the responses I get are, variously, “no”, “not at all” and laughter. One says he’d want to see both my hands on my car window and that he’d keep my gun in his vehicle for the duration of the traffic stop. “It’s a safety thing. If anything, I’m more tense because I know you’ve got a gun.”

Another police officer adds: if he were called to a shooting incident, and a CHL holder who was on the scene had removed his gun from his holster to engage the attacker, how would the officer distinguish between the gunman and the CHL holder? It is a frightening scenario. It echoes something I read in *On Killing*, a book about the psychological cost of learning to kill that is essential reading for Second Amendment advocates. In it, author Lt Col Dave Grossman identifies a group of people he terms “sheepdogs”; “faithful, vigilant creatures who are capable of aggression but environmentally and biologically predisposed to be the

In order to carry my gun concealed, in order to carry a weapon to protect myself and others, I need to load the magazine with hollow-point bullets. Full metal jackets (lead bullets covered with a harder metal), you see, are good for target shooting, but not for stopping people – their velocity means they’ll go straight through flesh. Hollow-points, however, are designed for one thing only. ➤

➤ Once a hollow point enters a human body, it expands, tearing tissue and causing maximum damage. Aim one at the right spot and your attacker will find it hard to get up.

It’s time to take my new gun for a walk around town. Although my Sig is compact, it still feels bulky between the skin of my hip and my jeans. I park in a multistorey near the Capitol and self-consciously stroll across the lawn, feeling around the back of my jacket and pushing down on the grip of the gun to make sure it is firmly in its holster. After walking straight through the CHL line into the domed atrium of the building, surrounded by portraits

Rick Perry, they can meet him wearing their handgun. It suddenly strikes me at that moment, sitting in the Capitol building, that 90 per cent of the people in the canteen could be armed. This doesn’t make me feel safer.

Afterwards, I walk down Congress Avenue, in Austin’s main business district, past suited office workers, a group of homeless people and several police officers. It doesn’t take long to get used to carrying the gun – to the point where I almost forget I have it – and it is only when I decide to walk into a bank that I become all too aware that I have a 9mm semi-automatic killing machine strapped to my belt. It’s

out that white, middle-class men are most likely to get their licences, and that they are motivated largely by “a desire to protect their wives and children, to defend against people and places they perceive as dangerous, especially ethnic-minority men, and to compensate for lost strength as they age”.

The truth is, most crime is intra-racial – black on black, white on white – according to Stroud, but from her numerous interviews with CHL holders, she found they don’t have much interaction with the people they see as a threat, yet believe they could at any moment. In my CHL class, I was taught that I had a right to pull my gun out if I felt a real and present threat to my life. But Stroud said that if you’re carrying a gun, you’re more likely to think that someone else is, so you’re more likely to reach for your weapon.

According to Stroud, the perception among gun owners is that more CHL holders in one geographical area equals less crime, but finding evidence of this is very difficult. In a 1997 paper, economists John Lott and David Mustard argued that state laws enabling citizens to carry concealed handguns have reduced crime. The paper proved polarising, spawning scores of reports and causing academics to pin their colours to either side of the debate. But in 2004, the National Academy of Sciences conducted a review of the research data and found “no credible evidence that right-to-carry laws decrease or increase violent crime”.

Art Acevedo is Austin’s police chief, and the following week he lets me join him on patrol in his SUV. He is incredulous that police in England aren’t routinely armed. “You don’t bring a billy club to a gun fight,” he says. “You have a lot of Eastern European organised-criminal syndicates coming into your homeland and they play for keeps. You don’t get a second chance at life.” It’s

worth mentioning here that in America you are about 41 times more likely to be killed with a gun than you are in the UK.

Like most police chiefs in America, though, Acevedo would like to see access to guns controlled. He doesn’t think the mentally ill, people with substance-abuse problems or those “who show a propensity to be engaged in criminal activity” should have them, adding that some “pro-Second Amendment forces take gun rights to extremes”, and “some folks think everyone should be able to own a gun, and that there shouldn’t be any rules or registration”.

Licensing seems like a sensible suggestion to me. With 300-million-odd guns in circulation in America, it’s vacuous to suggest that disarming the States is a viable answer – besides which, there will never be the political will on either side to implement it.

Sean Johnson, a 29-year-old photographer friend in Austin, grew up in a Texas family of trucks, country music, pearl snaps and flannel shirts. There were shotguns and rifles in the Johnson household, too, and a .357 Magnum in his mum’s night stand. When Johnson turned five, his uncle bought him a pump-action pellet gun. Then, at eight, he got a .22 Winchester bolt action rifle. In his early twenties, Johnson bought a 9mm Smith & Wesson handgun. That’s the gun he loads with hollow points and keeps under his bed. You know, just in case.

Perhaps surprisingly, Johnson has also always voted Democrat. “Obama wants a ban on assault rifles, rightly,” he tells me. “Good. They’re dangerous and they should be difficult to get hold of.” Johnson believes we should have the right to own a gun for protection. He then tells me about an incident outside a friend’s house in a “particularly bad area of east Austin”. A guy walked up and started urinating on his friend’s washer/dryer that he was storing outside, and Johnson’s friend confronted him. “I was hanging back and I saw the guy reach towards his hip. I shouted ‘gun’.” The guy pulled out his gun and the pair just stared at each other. In the end, nothing happened, but Johnson says it was enough to persuade him to keep a gun in his car and another by his bed.

The more people I talk to in Austin for this piece, the more I’m stunned to discover how many of my friends – Democrat, Republican and Libertarian alike – own guns they keep at home. I submit an Open Records Request to the Austin Police Department, asking for statistics related to home invasions in the city for the past five years. Austin has a population of around 820,000 people, and the department tells me we see an average of 82 home invasions per year. In other words, I have a miniscule chance of seeing an armed burglar break into my home in the middle of the night. In the

past five years, only one homeowner has been killed. However, during that time, Austin has seen three accidental shooting deaths and 69 accidental shooting injuries. I am more likely to be injured by my own weapon than to use it against someone wanting to kill me. In fact, a 1998 study published in the *Journal Of Trauma And Acute Care Surgery* reveals that guns kept in homes in America are 22 times more likely to be used in unintentional shootings, murder, assault or suicide attempts than in an act of self defence.

Then something strange happens. I have to go to New York for work. The night before I leave, my wife and I are about to fall asleep, when I ask her: “Are you going to be OK on your own next week while I’m gone?”

“Yes,” she says. “Why?”
“Well, if you want me to grab my gun [I keep it in my neighbour’s gun safe], I will.”
Silence.

Then my wife, unsurprisingly, flips out. I don’t know why I said it. Maybe because now I own a gun and – despite all I’d read – this weapon, which can, in theory, be used to protect my family, is mine and only a short walk away. And maybe that’s the problem: guns are so easy to get hold of in America, and when you own one it’s far easier to imagine a situation – however far-fetched – in which you might need it. I lie awake all night fretting, regretting ever starting this whole experience.

Three months after I bought my gun, three months after President Obama stood at the Pentagon on the anniversary of 9/11, he’s on the podium once again, this time in Newtown, Connecticut. “We can’t tolerate this any more,” he says, the tears stinging his eyes. “These tragedies must end.” At the same time, people are interviewed on TV and use social media to call for more guns, not fewer. Texas Republican congressman Louie Gohmert tells Fox News he “wishes to God” that Sandy Hook principal Dawn Hochspring “had had an M4 in her office”, referring to the assault rifle assigned to the US miliary.

In the weeks following, it is looking hopeful that laws will be reintroduced to ban AR-15-

type assault rifles, guns like the Bushmaster used by Lanza in Sandy Hook that grey morning. Similar semi-automatic assault rifles were wielded by James E Holmes, who shot dead 12 people in a cinema in July last year; and by Jacob Roberts, who shot and killed two people and then took his own life in a shopping mall three days before Sandy Hook. AR-15s are also increasingly being used to kill of police officers in America. There’s no doubt there is momentum for change in the law. Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire mayor of New York, has recruited more than 800 mayors around the country to his own lobbying group, Mayors Against Illegal Guns. Even David Bowie’s new LP will feature a track addressing the gun issue in America; a song called *Valentine’s Day*, about a boy named Johnny who walks into his own school with a firearm. Bowie (through Tony Visconti, his long-time producer) insists it’s a song about mental health, rather than gun crime.

But handguns like the one I bought and now own? Even the hardline gun-control advocates concede that it will be a long, arduous, no doubt futile fight to ban such weapons. The Nation Rifle Association’s stance had become somewhat firmer: “We will not allow law-abiding gun owners to be blamed for the acts of criminals and madmen.” And this was after talks with Vice President Joe Biden at the White House that were described by the NRA as an “attack on the Second Amendment”. It seems like the NRA is hoping that the shock of Sandy Hook, of another massacre in homeland America, will soon fade.

President Obama announced 23 executive actions he would take unilaterally to deal with gun violence. He said he would ask Congress to require background checks on all gun sales; ban assault rifles and magazines of ten rounds or more; and issue tougher penalties on those who sold guns to people who can’t have them.

I think of the images on TV of the students of Sandy Hook school returning to their lessons: hand in hand, quietly, and with astonishing courage. Then I think of my own gun. And I have absolutely no idea what I’m going to do with it. ☹



Darkest day (clockwise from top left): Sandy Hook Elementary School remembers the shooting victims on 25 December 2012; pupils wait outside the school after the 14 December massacre; a poster campaign by the National Rifle Association; 20 children and six teachers were killed at the school by lone gunman Adam Lanza

of former governors, my first real concern is how to sit down with the gun strapped to my hip, and after taking the lift to the Capitol Grill, it’s all I can do to perch precariously at a table, among the legislators, lawyers and lobbyists, drinking tea and eating a sandwich. My mouth is so dry I find it hard to chew or swallow.

In 2010, when licensed gun owners were first allowed to bring their weapons to the Capitol, a former legislative aide told me even some anti-gun senators took CHLs just for the speedy access into the building. If a CHL holder has an appointment with current governor

a surreal feeling. I feel guilty, even though I’m not breaking the law. Then I realise that, in fact, I am – this particular branch has posted a 30.06. No guns – even licensed ones. I have to leave. As I walk through the door and past the air-con, I suddenly notice how much I’m sweating.

Angela Stroud, a sociology professor at Northland College in Wisconsin, is an expert in gun culture, and currently writing a book on how race, class and gender shape people’s desire to obtain their concealed carry permits. As I talk to her, it doesn’t surprise me to find

Piers Morgan’s view



Photographs Rex, Reuters/Michelle McLoughlin

The Sandy Hook massacre brought back horribly vivid memories for me of Dunblane, the worst mass shooting in Britain in my lifetime. But my anger turned to blind rage when I saw the reaction in America. Sales of the weapon used, an AR-15 assault rifle, rocketed at gun stores in the days following the shooting. After the worst gun crime in American history, at a cinema in Aurora, Colorado, in July – where 70 people were hit, 12 of whom

died – sales of guns in the state rose by 41 per cent in a month. Can you imagine if 200 people pulled out guns and blazed away in a dark theatre? Yet the gun lobby argues the only way to defend against gun criminals is for everyone else to have a gun, too. Teachers, clergymen, nurses, usherettes – all must be armed. This is a warped logic that bears no statistical analysis and makes no sense. Do you fight obesity with more cake?

In the days after Sandy Hook I interviewed a number of gun-rights representatives, and erupted at one of them, the unfortunately named Larry Pratt (near left), who runs the lobbying group Gun Owners of America. A petition was created on an official White House website demanding my deportation for “attacking the Second Amendment of the Constitution” – which alludes to the “right to bear arms”.

But I have a problem when the Second Amendment’s wording is twisted to mean that anyone in America can have any firearm they want, in whatever quantity they want. I will not stop in my efforts to keep the gun-control debate in people’s minds, however much abuse I’m given. The “more guns, less crime” argument is nonsense. Less guns equals less gun murder. This is not a “pinko liberal” hypothesis. It’s a simple fact. **PM**