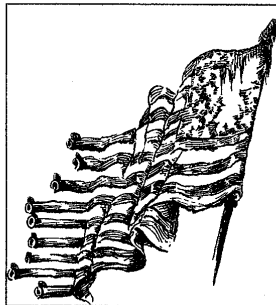


Maine needs restrictions on guns

Letting the federal assault weapon ban expire instead of renewing and improving it is a mistake.

When 60-year-old Julius Petrovic stopped at the State of Maine Tourist Center in Yarmouth on May 17, he may have been expecting many things. A pleasant afternoon drive in New England's spring landscape. A laughter-filled telephone talk with his friend, area restaurateur Roger Bintliff. A good dinner that night. And a satisfying job for the summer as a cordial, experienced Maine maitre d'.

What Petrovic did not expect was to die violently that fresh May day. Yet - bam! - die he did, his life ended by a single shot to the chest from a .40-caliber Glock handgun. It was fired into him as he sat in his car in a clean, open parking area, allegedly by two local brothers he had never met.



Art by Geoffrey Moss

Today, Petrovic will be remembered at a Vigil for Maine Gun Violence Victims at the tourist center, off Exit 17 of Interstate 295, where he died. The candle-light ceremony, from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m., will not be his alone. It will honor the memory of all people who have been victims of gun violence in Maine. And they are many.

Julius Petrovic never met 21-year-old Kelley Newcomb of Portland, killed, on June 1, 1995, by a bullet from a .25-caliber handgun fired by her boyfriend, Douglas Blowers, who subsequently killed himself. Cumberland County Sheriff Mark Dion, then deputy police chief in Portland, saw that all-too-familiar murder-suicide as a twisted triangle.

"Unfortunately, in terms of this domestic violence tragedy," Dion said at the time, "the third party was a firearm."

And nothing much changes. As most of us celebrated the Fourth of July two weeks ago, Rosemarie Dyer, 52, died at Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, fatally wounded in what police describe as a domestic shooting at her home in Lee - one more name to add to a long list.



NANCY GRAPE

A sampling of gun violence in Maine last year, compiled by Maine Citizens Against Handgun Violence, lists 153 incidents that vividly demonstrate guns are indeed an equal opportunity destroyer. Among the targets were cats, dogs, sheep, llamas, horses and, far more seriously, human beings from kindergarteners and little brothers to teenagers and adults.

In Farmington last year, a man allegedly shot his mother in a fight over a farm. In Brunswick, a man fired off a gun in a bar. Shots were fired on an ATV trail, at a card game, in the midst of a New Year's party, on a highway in an incident of road rage, through the walls of a house, outside an Old Port bar, on an island and on a golf course. And, time after time, in the supposed safety of kitchens and bedrooms.

Armed standoffs noted in the sampling raised the ante for police who responded in communities from Augusta, Presque Isle, Bath and Winthrop to Porter, Ellsworth, Newport and York. Home invasions with guns at the ready also grabbed their share of headlines. And always, like background music you can never quite shake out of your head, gun violence punctuated Maine's corrosive history of domestic violence.

CHIEFS FOR THE CAUSE

No wonder police chiefs in 27 Maine communities and three counties - with more to come - have signed on with Maine Citizens Against Handgun Violence to urge Congress to strengthen and renew the federal assault weapons ban scheduled to expire on Sept. 13. A national "Halt The Assault" tour, supporting that cause, will visit Maine for three days, starting today.

Anyone who has been in Maine long enough to drink a Geary's or order a lobster roll knows guns are valued here. Anyone who doubts it has only to consult the Maine Constitution's hallowed Declaration of Rights - "Every citizen has a right to keep and bear arms and this right shall never be questioned."

That's no Mickey-Mouse protection. It's a declaration that reaches deep into Maine's history of individualism and self-reliance, of piney woods, of deer dressed to keep homesteading families alive through harsh winters, of sportsmen seeking to

renew themselves in nature's vastness and sporting industries that make it possible. Any effort to address gun violence needs to recognize this history and honor it.

At the same time, those who place their faith in unfettered gun ownership need to take a long, thoughtful look at another side of Maine history. Domestic violence - right here, right now - is Maine's leading cause of murder. And guns in the home - an arm's reach away when alcohol boils rage into violence - contribute to the mayhem.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

"There isn't any question that firearm violence - that is, the irresponsible use of firearms - contributes substantially to the fatalities that we record annually," says Dr. Robert E. McAfee of Portland, former president of the American Medical Association and a leading national foe of domestic violence. "The presence of a gun when two people are angry with each other escalates the serious degree of injury immensely."

"Similarly," McAfee continues, "the presence of a firearm in a home can serve as a significant intimidator. I remember vividly a woman who said that within the first year of marriage her husband was upset with her for something, put a gun to her head and said, 'If you ever do that again, I'll kill you.' And for the rest of their marriage he slept with that gun under his pillow."

Much as the rest of us might like to think that ugly scenario is one couple, isolated and off-kilter, the facts say otherwise. Maine recorded 3,449 domestic violence arrests last year.

Yet an effort by the citizens' group to introduce a bill last session to continue the federal assault weapons ban as a state law, should the federal law expire in September, never made it to the floor of the Legislature, says the group's executive director, Cathie Whittenburg.

"This is not something that hunters need to be concerned about," Whittenburg says of the federal ban. "This is not hunting rifles. This is not something to defend your home with."

Too bad Julius Petrovic isn't here to listen, and to witness the vigil in Yarmouth this afternoon. And too bad Petrovic isn't here to hear McAfee ask this question:

"What do we do to prevent the other Juliuses out there? The other Julianes? And the little Juliuses? That's my question. Why can't Maine do better?"

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