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HAPPINESS IS A WORN GUN

My concealed weapon and me
By Dan Baum

In the 1943 noir thriller *The Fallen Sparrow*, John Garfield asks the police inspector whether his permit to carry a gun is still valid.

“Good for a year,” the cop says wearily. “Why did you want to carry a gun?”

“To shoot people with, sweetheart!” Garfield snarls, as the cop’s face falls comically.

I think about the ambivalence of that line every time I strap on my .38—mixing the brutality of shooting people with that wise-guy *sweetheart*. It’s so endearingly American.

Garfield’s were the days when people who wanted a concealed-weapon permit had to convince the police to issue one. Merchants in rough neighborhoods, bodyguards to the rich, and the well connected could usually manage it. The rest went unarmed, or carried illegally. That’s how it was for generations: if you wanted permission to carry a gun, you had to have a good reason.

Nowadays, most states let just about anybody who wants a concealed-handgun permit have one; in seventeen states, you don’t even have to be a resident. Nobody knows exactly how many

Americans carry guns, because not all states release their numbers, and even if they did, not all permit holders carry all the time. But it’s safe to assume that as many as 6 million Americans are walking around with firearms under their clothes.

Good thing or bad? Most people can answer that question instinctively, depending on how they think about a whole matrix of bigger questions, from the role of gov-

ernment to the moral obligations we have to one another. Politically, the issue breaks along the expected lines, with the NPR end of the dial going one way and the talk-radio end the other.

The gun-carrying revolution started in Florida, which in 1987 had a murder rate 40 percent higher than the national average. Another state



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might have reacted to such carnage by restricting access to guns, but Florida's legislature went the other way. Believing that law-abiding citizens should have the means to defend themselves, it ordered police chiefs to issue any adult a carry permit unless there was good reason to deny it. In the history of gun politics, this was a big moment. The gun-rights movement had won just about every battle it had fought since coalescing in the late 1960s, but these had been defensive battles against new gun-control laws. Reversing the burden of proof on carry permits expanded gun rights. For the first time, the movement was on offense, and the public loved it. The change in Florida's law was called "shall-issue"—as in, the police shall issue the permit and not apply their own discretion.

IT WAS HARD TO DISCERN THE LINE
BETWEEN PREPARING FOR SOMETHING
AWFUL TO HAPPEN AND PRAYING FOR
SOMETHING AWFUL TO HAPPEN

Six states already had such laws, but Florida's became the model for the twenty-nine others that followed. Most of these states recognize the permits of other shall-issue states. Nine remain "may issue" states, leaving the decision up to local law enforcement. Alaska and Arizona have laws allowing any resident who can legally own a gun to carry it concealed with no special permit. And one—can you guess which?—is silent on the whole issue, meaning anybody over sixteen from any state can walk around secretly armed inside its borders. (Most people guess Texas, but it's Vermont.) Only two states, Wisconsin and Illinois, flatly forbid civilians to carry concealed guns.*

I got hooked on guns forty-nine years ago as a fat kid at summer camp—the one thing I could do was lie on my belly and shoot a .22 rifle—and I've collected, shot, and hunted with guns my entire adult life. But I also grew up into a fairly typical liberal Democrat, with a circle of friends politely appalled at my fixation on firearms. For as long as I've been voting, I've reflexively supported waiting periods, background checks, the assault-rifle ban, and other gun-control measures. None interfered with my enjoyment of firearms, and none seemed to me the first step toward tyranny. As the concealed-carry laws changed across the land, I naturally sided with those who argued that arming the populace would turn fender benders into gunfights. The prospect of millions more gun-carrying Americans left me reliably horrified.

At the same time, though, I was a little jealous of those getting permits. Taking my guns from the safe was a rare treat; the sensual pleasure of han-

* *The implications of the Supreme Court's recent McDonald decision—which established that the Second Amendment confers the right to bear arms on the local level, and not just the federal—remain unclear.*

dling guns is a big part of the habit. Elegantly designed and exquisitely manufactured, they are deeply satisfying to manipulate, even without shooting. I normally got to play with mine only a few times a year, during hunting season and on one or two trips to the range. The people with carry permits, though, were handling their guns all the time. They were developing an enviable competence and familiarity with them. They were *living the gun life*. Finally, last year, under the guise of "wanting to learn what this is all about," but really wanting to live the gun life myself, I began the process of getting a carry permit. All that was required was a background check, fingerprints, and certification that I'd passed an approved handgun class.

I live in Boulder, Colorado, a town so pains-takingly liberal that the city council once debated whether people are "owners" or "guardians" of their pets. "Guardians" won. Bill O'Reilly regularly singles out Boulder for his trademark contempt as a place even more California than California. I expected to have to drive some distance to find a class, but it turned out that half a dozen shooting schools operate in the Boulder area, with classes so overbooked I had to wait a month for a vacancy. The number of carry permits issued annually in Boulder—Boulder!—has risen eighteenfold since 2001; almost 3,000 of us, about 1 percent, carry guns, and 900 more apply every year. I began examining more closely the aging hippies milling about Whole Foods.

I ended up taking two gun-carry courses. The first sent me an enrollment-confirmation email on November 5, the day that Major Nidal Hasan killed thirteen people and wounded thirty others at Fort Hood in Texas. The next day, Jason Rodriguez of Orlando, Florida, used a handgun to kill one person and wound five others at the office of his former employer. He told reporters, "I'm angry."

The classes I took taught me almost nothing about how to defend myself with a gun. One, taught by a man who said he refuses to get a carry permit because "I don't think I have to get the government's permission to exercise my right to bear arms," packed about twenty minutes of useful instruction into four long evenings of platitudes, Obama jokes, and belligerent posturing. "The way crime is simply out of control, you can't afford not to wear a gun all the time," he told us on several occasions. We shot fifty rounds apiece at man-shaped targets fifteen feet away. The legal-implications segment was taught by a cop who, after warming us up with fart jokes, encouraged us to lie to policemen if stopped while wearing our guns and suggested that nobody in his right mind would let a burglar run off with a big-screen TV. It's illegal to shoot a fleeing criminal, he said, "but

if your aim is good enough, you have time to get your story straight before I [the police] get there.” Thank you for coming; here’s your certificate of instruction. The other class, a three-hour quickie at the Tanner Gun Show in Denver, was built around a fifteen-minute recruiting pitch for the NRA and a long-winded, paranoid fantasy about “home invasion.” “They’re watching what time you come home, what time do you get up to go to the bathroom, when you’re there, when you’re not,” said the instructor, Rob Shewmake, of the Florida company Equip 2 Conceal. “They know who lives in the house. They know where your bedroom is, and they’re there to kill you.” (Eighty-seven Americans were murdered during burglaries in 2008; statistically, you had a better chance of being killed by bees.)

Both classes were less about self-defense than about recruiting us into a culture animated by fear of violent crime. In the Boulder class, we watched lurid films of men in ski masks breaking into homes occupied by terrified women. We studied color police photos of a man slashed open with a knife. Teachers in both classes directed us to websites dedicated to concealed carry, among them usacarry.org, an online gathering place where the gun-carrying community warns, over and over, that crime is “out of control.”

In fact, violent crime has fallen by a third since 1989—one piece of unambiguous good news out of the past two decades. Murder, rape, robbery, assault: all of them are much less common now than they were then. At class, it was hard to discern the line between preparing for something awful to happen and praying for something awful to happen. A desire to carry a gun seemed to precede the fear of crime, the fear serving to justify the carrying. I asked one of the instructors whether carrying a gun didn’t bespeak a needlessly dark view of mankind. “I’m an optimist,” he said, “but we live in a world of assholes.”

At the conclusion of both classes, we students were welcomed into the gun-carrying fraternity as though dripping from the baptismal font. “Thank you for being a part of this, man. You’re doing the right thing,” one of the Boulder teachers said, taking my hand in both of his and looking into my eyes. “You should all be proud of yourselves just for being here,” said the police officer who helped with the class. “All of us thank you.” As we stood shaking hands, with our guns in our gym bags and holding our certificates, we felt proud, included, even loved. We had been admitted to a league of especially useful gentlemen and ladies.

Partly, gun carriers are looking for political safety in numbers. Alongside a belief in rising crime lies a certainty that gun confiscation is nigh. I had a hard time finding cartridges for my hunting rifle the past two seasons because shooters began hoarding when Barack Obama was elected presi-

dent. Since then, the gun industry has had its best sales on record. At the Tanner show, posters of Obama’s stern face over the words FIREARMS SALESMAN OF THE YEAR were as common as those of him in Joker makeup over the word SOCIALISM. Looking for a holster for the .38 I planned to carry, I stopped at the table of a big man wearing a cargo vest and a SIGARMS cap and idly picked up one of his Yugoslav AK-47s. “Buy it now!” he barked. “Tomorrow they may not let you!” I must have looked skeptical; he reached across the table, snatched the rifle from my hands, and slammed it down. “You don’t think he’s waiting for his second term to come and get them?” he said. “You’re dreaming.”

Shooters see their guns as emblems of a whole spectrum of virtuous lifestyle choices—rural over urban, self-reliance over dependence on the collective, vigorous outdoorsiness over pallid intellectualism, patriotism over internationalism, action over inaction—and they hear attacks on guns as attacks on them, personally. The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence sound like groups even the NRA could support: who wouldn’t want to prevent violence? But the former was called, until 1989, the National Coalition to Ban Handguns, and the latter wants



to prohibit the “military-style semi-automatic assault weapons” popular among shooters. From the point of view of gun enthusiasts, it’s not gun violence these groups want to end, but gun ownership. Another gun-show vendor—wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND FIREARMS SHOULD BE A CONVENIENCE STORE, NOT A FEDERAL AGENCY—was yelling to potential customers that they’d better buy guns now because the “liberals want to take away

your gun and your McDonald's both." As I headed for a table heaped with old holsters, I picked up a free copy of the NRA's *America's 1st Freedom* magazine. Its editorial captured perfectly the class-based resentment that permeates modern gun culture, characterizing the opposition as "those who sip tea and nibble biscuits while musing about how to restrict the rest of us."

Beyond mere politics, gun carriers are evangelizing a social philosophy. Belief in rising crime, when statistics show the opposite, amounts to faith in a natural order of predators and prey. The turtle doesn't apologize for his shell nor the tiger for his claws; humans



shouldn't be bashful about equipping to defend themselves. Men and women who carry guns fill a noble niche between sheep and wolf. "Sheepdogs" is the way they often describe themselves—alert, vigilant, not aggressive but prepared to do battle.

In both classes, and in every book about concealed carry that I read, much was made of "conditions of readiness," which are color-coded from white to red. Condition White is total oblivion to one's surroundings—sleeping, being drunk or stoned, losing oneself in conversation while walking on city streets, texting while listening to an iPod. Condition Yellow is being aware of, and taking an interest in, one's surroundings—essentially, the mental state we are encouraged to achieve when we are driving: keeping our eyes moving,

checking the mirrors, being careful not to let the radio drown out the sounds around us. Condition Orange is being aware of a possible threat. Condition Red is responding to danger.

Contempt for Condition White unifies the gun-carrying community almost as much as does fealty to the Second Amendment. "When you're in Condition White you're a sheep," one of my Boulder instructors told us. "You're a victim." The American Tactical Shooting Association says the only time to be in Condition White is "when in your own home, with the doors locked, the alarm system on, and your dog at your feet. . . . The instant you leave your home, you escalate one level, to Condition Yellow." A citizen in Condition White is as useless as an unarmed citizen, not only a political cipher but a moral dud. "I feel I have a responsibility, and I believe that in my afterlife I will be judged," one of the Boulder gun instructors said. "Part of the judgment will be: Did this guy look after himself? It's a minimum responsibility."

Just as the Red Cross would like everybody to be qualified in CPR, gun carriers want everybody prepared to confront violence—not only by being armed but by maintaining Condition Yellow. Hang around with people committed to carrying guns and it's easy to feel guilty about lapsing into Condition White, to begin seeing yourself as deadweight on society, a parasite, a mediocre citizen. "You should constantly practice being in Condition Yellow all the time," writes Tony Walker in his book *How to Win a Gunfight*. Of course, it's not for everyone; the armed life in Condition Yellow requires being mentally prepared to kill. As John Wayne puts it in his last movie, *The Shootist*, "It's not always being fast or even accurate that counts. It's being willing."

Whoa: wrong example. The policeman helping with the Boulder class was adamant. "Hollywood," he intoned, "will get you killed." Real gunfights are nothing like the ones on-screen. They happen instantaneously and at arm's length, with no time for clever repartee, diving for cover, or even aiming. "There is nothing sexy about a gunfight."

Alas, the very word "gunfight" is sexy. The first American narrative movie, *The Great Train Robbery*, made in 1903, is all gunfight and ends with a villain shooting straight at the camera. All we know about carrying and using a gun—at least at first—is what we learn from the movies and television. How else did I pick up that insouciant way of swinging open my revolver's cylinder to check its loads, that casual manner of jamming it up into my shoulder holster or down the small of my back? The gun I chose to wear concealed, a second-generation Colt Detective Special .38, is one I grew up watching just about every fictional dick and gungel use,

from Edward G. Robinson in *Key Largo* to Detective McGarrett on *Hawaii Five-O*. (I'm old; younger guys prefer their own generation's TV guns: the Glocks of *CSI* or the SIG Sauer P228 Jack Bauer carries on *24*.) I know it's foolish to conflate Hollywood with reality, and when I'm armed I try to discipline my mind back to my training. But anyone who tells you he has no fantasy life constructed around his gun either has been packing it for as long as he's been watching television or is flat-out lying.

Having carried a gun full-time for several months now, I can attest that there's no way to lapse into Condition White when armed. Moving through a cocktail party with a gun holstered snug against my ribs makes me feel like James Bond—I *know something you don't know!*—but it's socially and physically unpleasant. I have to remember to keep adjusting the drape of my jacket so as not to expose myself, and make sure to get the arms-inside position when hugging a friend so that the hard lump on my hip or under my arm doesn't give itself away. In some settings my gun feels as big as a toaster oven, and I find myself tense with the expectation of being discovered. What's more, if there's a truly comfortable way to carry a gun, I haven't found it. The revolver's weight and pressure keep me constantly aware of how quickly and utterly my world could change. Gun carriers tell me that's exactly the point: at any moment, violence could change anybody's world. Those who carry guns are the ones prepared to make the change come out in their favor.

Living in Condition Yellow can have beneficial side effects. A woman I met in Phoenix told me carrying a gun had made her more organized. "I used to lose my stuff all the time," she said. "I was always leaving my purse in restaurants, my wallet in the car, my sunglasses at friends' houses. Once I started carrying a gun—accepted that grave responsibility—that all stopped. I'm *on it* now."

Like her, I'm more alert and acute when I'm wearing my gun. If I'm in a restaurant or store, I find myself in my own little movie, glancing at the door when a person walks in and, in a micro-second, evaluating whether a threat has appeared and what my options for response would be—roll left and take cover behind that pillar? On the street, I look people over: Where are his hands? What does his face tell me? I run sequences in my head. If a guy jumps me with a knife, should I throw money to the ground and run? Take two steps back and draw? How about if he has a gun? How will I distract him so I can get the drop? It can be fun. But it can also be exhausting. Some nights I dream gunfight scenarios over and over and wake up bushed. In Flagstaff I was planning

to meet a friend for a beer, and although carrying in a bar is legal in Arizona, drinking in a bar while armed is not. I locked my gun in the car. Walking the few blocks to the bar, I realized how different I felt: lighter, dreamier, conscious of how the afternoon light slanted against Flagstaff's old buildings. I found myself, as I walked, composing lines of prose. I was lapsing into Condition White, and loving it.

Condition White may make us sheep, but it's also where art happens. It's where we daydream, reminisce, and hear music in our heads. Hardcore gun carriers want no part of that, and the zeal for getting everybody to carry a gun may be as much an anti-Condition White movement as anything else—resentment toward the airy-fairy elites who can enjoy the luxury of musing, sipping tea, and nibbling biscuits while the good people of the world have to work for a living and keep their guard up. Gun guys never stop building and strengthening this like-minded community. When I mention that I'm carrying, their faces light up. "Good for you!" "Right on!" "God bless you!" The owner of a gun factory in Mesa, Arizona, spotted the gun under my jacket and said, with great solemnity, "You honor me by wearing your gun to my place of business."

I was crossing the corner of Dauphine and Kerlerec Streets in New Orleans late one evening with my gun under my jacket. (Louisiana is one of the states that recognizes a Colorado permit.) I wasn't smelling the sweet olive, replaying in my head the clackety music of Washboard Chaz, or savoring the residuum of dinner-time's oysters Pernod. I was in Condition Yellow and fully aware of two scruffy guys lounging in a doorway up ahead. "Can you help us out?" one asked. I made my usual demurral and walked on. When I got about fifteen feet away, one of them yelled, "Faggot!"

I've never been one to throw down because someone called me a name. But it's possible that in the old days I'd have yelled something back. At the very least, I'd have felt my blood pressure spike.

This time, I didn't become angry or even annoyed. A Zen-like calm overtook me. I felt no need to restrain myself; my body didn't even gesture in the direction of anger. *Pace Claudio*, my hand meant nothing to my sword. Rage wasn't an option, because I had no way of knowing where it would end, and somehow my brain and body sensed that. I began to understand why we don't

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hear a lot of stories about legal gun carriers killing one another in road-rage incidents. Carrying a gun gives you a sense of guardianship, even a kind of moral superiority. You are the vigilant one, the sheepdog watching the flock, the coiled wrath of God. To snatch out your gun and wave it around would not only invite catastrophe but also sacrifice that righteous high ground and embarrass you in the worst possible way. I don't know how many gun carriers have read Robert Heinlein, but all of them can quote him: "An armed society is a polite society."

But is it a safer society? In 1998, John Lott, later a researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, published a book with the provocative title *More Guns, Less Crime*. Violent crime had been dropping in states with shall-issue laws, he argued, because the concealed-carry revolution left criminals unable to know who is and who is not armed. The gun rights lobby lofted Lott on a pedestal,

academics attacked him, and a heated round of my-data-set-can-beat-up-your-data-set ensued. Lott turned weird, first by claiming to have conducted a large national survey that he

couldn't prove to have done, and then by inventing an online alter ego named Mary Rosh to blog his praises. Still, he is widely quoted.

Shall-issue may or may not have contributed to the stunning drop in violent crime since the early Nineties. The problem with the catchy *More Guns, Less Crime* construction, though, is that many other things may have helped: changing demographics, smarter policing, the burnout of the crack-cocaine wave, three-strikes laws, even—as suggested by *Freakonomics* authors Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner—legalized abortion. And crime dropped more in some states that didn't adopt shall-issue laws than in some that did.

But shall-issue didn't lead to *more* crime, as predicted by its critics. The portion of all killing done with a handgun—the weapon people carry concealed—hasn't changed in decades; it's still about half. Whereas the Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C., can produce a list of 175 killings committed by carry-permit holders since 2007, the NRA can brandish a longer list of crimes prevented by armed citizens. I prefer to rely on the FBI's data, which show that not only are bad-guy murders—those committed in the course of rape, robbery, and other felonies—way down but so are spur-of-the-moment murders involving alcohol, drugs, romantic entanglements, money disputes, and other arguments: the very types

of murders that critics worried widespread concealed-carry would increase.

One number that jumps out from the FBI's 2008 data is how many alleged criminals were shot dead by civilians: 245, not many fewer than were shot by cops. I found that statistic amazing until I reflected on how seldom police are present when a crime is occurring.

I CARRY A GUN BECAUSE A COP IS TOO HEAVY, goes the bumper sticker.

Law enforcement tends to oppose shall-issue laws, at least institutionally. A group of Iowa sheriffs agitated against a shall-issue law their governor signed in April, and Ohio's Fraternal Order of Police is objecting to a bill designed to open bars, stadiums, and other venues to concealed guns. Every street cop I've met lately, though, sees it the other way. "Absolutely I want more people armed," one told me in Las Vegas. "If I'm shooting it out with a bad guy, and an armed citizen can step in and throw fire downrange, I'm all for it." At traffic stops, a person's concealed-carry permit pops up on the computer. "That tells me they've been checked out," he said, "that they're probably someone I don't have to worry about."

The inclination nationwide is still to make concealed-carry permits easier, not harder, to get, and the recession may be helping the cause. In Ohio, a judge recently suggested that, in the face of law-enforcement budget cuts, people should "arm themselves." An Ohio concealed-carry activist told the *Toledo Blade* that he thinks hard economic times are "causing all these law-enforcement officers, whether they're police officers or sheriff's deputies, to get laid off, and people realize they're in a situation where they may have to be responsible for their own safety."

Whatever the reason, the handgun industry is pleased with the legal drift, given that the Obama-panic bubble is fading and the long-term industry trend is bleak. Young adults buy markedly fewer guns than older people. They want to be urban and digital, and guns are the opposite of that. A big push by the industry to feminize the shooting sports has fallen flat; only in hunting has women's participation increased, and even there just by a little. The bright spot in the industry remains small handguns and all of their accoutrements—holsters, belts, purses, and an entire line of clothing, 5.11 Tactical, designed to conceal weapons. Back in the mid-Nineties, when handgun sales were falling fast, *Shooting Industry* magazine wrote, "Two bright rays of sunshine gleam through the dark clouds of the slump in the firearms market. One is the landslide of 'shall-issue' concealed-carry reform legislation around the country. The other is the emergence of a new generation of compact

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handguns.” Shall-issue saved the handgun business; sales were half again higher in 2007 than in 2000, and much of that growth was in concealable weapons. At the gun-industry trade show in Las Vegas in January, the people crowding Ruger’s enormous booth were a lot more focused on the new high-tech pocket guns than on what one salesman derisively called the “Dirty Harry” guns—flamboyantly gigantic weapons—that were the hot item a decade ago. “Anymore it’s the small personal defense gun where the action is,” said Robert Robbins, a Smith & Wesson salesman, as he let me dry-fire a brand-new line of lightweight, scandium-framed pocket revolvers. “People are perceiving it’s a more dangerous world, and they’re thinking, ‘I should get one now before it gets harder.’” His face clouded and his voice dropped. “It’s mostly older people, to be frank. The younger people tend to be more liberal. They’ve been led to believe the police are going to be there for them, that guns are bad and made for killing. They’re fed that crap, and they believe it.”

Now that they’ve largely won the concealed-carry fight, gun-rights activists have begun a new offensive: “open-carry.” Advocates for wearing guns in plain view hold armed picnics and urge people to wear their guns visibly wherever it’s legal. Forty-three states let citizens carry openly, including some that remain reticent on concealed-carry and one—Wisconsin—that doesn’t allow concealed-carry at all. Open-carry became a national issue last year, when people displaying guns showed up at New Hampshire and Arizona rallies attended by President Obama. Reporters seemed surprised that police made no arrests, but open-carry is legal in both states and none of the gun carriers made threats. The open carriers are pushing it; in at least six states, citizens have sued police after being stopped for wearing a gun. In January, a group of California activists began wearing unloaded guns openly to Starbucks, but if they were expecting to get arrested or thrown out they were disappointed. They drank their lattes and left. Starbucks, a company official told reporters over and over, respects California state law, which as of this writing allows open carry as long as the guns are unloaded.

When I called Mike Stollenwerk, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who is a cofounder of opencarry.org, he told me right away he thinks displaying a gun outside a presidential event is for “the Tea Party nutties.” He wants more people carrying handguns openly because “we want everybody to have that right.” Wearing guns openly so you can wear guns openly sounds to me like the old Firesign Theatre joke about the mural depicting the historic struggle

of the people to finish the mural. Open-carry is already legal almost everywhere. But Stollenwerk said the movement is about changing culture rather than law. “We’re trying to normalize gun ownership by openly carrying properly holstered handguns in daily life,” he said.

I’ve tried carrying openly a few times, wearing a loaded, long-barreled .45-caliber revolver in a hip holster to Safeway, Home Depot, Target, Whole Foods, and my local Apple Store. The only person who objected was my wife (“For Christ’s sake!”). Nobody else said a word. The kids at the Apple Store, in their rectangular-framed glasses and blue T-shirts, stood right



beside me as I played with an iPad for half an hour. It isn’t possible that they didn’t see the big handgun. More likely, it didn’t interest them: a World War I revolver is pretty dull competition for a touch-screen device running a 1 GHz A4 chip and 802.11a/b/g/n Wi-Fi. At Target, I made a point of standing for a long time directly in front of a security guard. Nothing. What he saw was a balding, middle-aged man in pleated pants and glasses with a tired old gun on his hip—not a particularly threatening sight. He may have figured I was a useless cop or a ranger from the city’s vast parks system. Either that, or the sight was so incongruous that he and everybody else in Target failed to register it. Then I stopped at a gritty little Mexican grocery I like, for some tortillas and *crema*, and everybody noticed, their eyes flicking over my belt and going wide. “Señor, is it real?” a chubby little boy asked as I locked up my bicycle. In Mexico, almost nobody gets a

license to own a handgun, let alone wear one. “¿Por qué la pistola?” a man at the meat counter asked. “¿Por qué no?” I answered. He shrugged and walked away, shaking his head—not like I was dangerous, more like I was simply a *gabacho* fool. Overall, I felt less safe with the gun openly displayed than with it concealed. I worried that someone would knock me on the back of the head and steal it, or that some genuinely aggressive nutcase would challenge me to draw. Mostly, though, I felt obnoxious. In all likelihood, I was making somebody silently anxious. It remains to be seen how Stollenwerk’s open-carry strategy will work. I suspect it will backfire, that instead of acclimating people it will frighten them, and that they’ll eventually ask their legislators to put a stop to it.

Even in shall-issue states, guns—whether visible or concealed—are often barred from places where they seem especially inappropriate: college campuses, schools, bars, parks, churches. The list can vary from town to town. When I take a long road trip, I keep a sheaf of gun-law printouts on the front seat so I don’t inadvertently walk into the wrong place with my concealed revolver. In Boulder, it’s a nuisance to keep taking my gun off and finding a place to stow it when I’m going to visit the university library, toss a Frisbee in a schoolyard, or see a movie on campus. I’ve been checked out, fingerprinted, and trusted by the state with a carry permit; having to ditch my gun feels vaguely demeaning. To those already feeling slighted, gun-free zones are a continual insult.

Someone bent on killing people isn’t going to be dissuaded by a NO FIREARMS sign on the door. Gun carriers tend to think that such rules serve only to alert the malevolent to good places for mass shootings. And they’re right that no matter how stringent our background checks, we’ll never do a perfect job of keeping guns out of the wrong hands. Guns are well-made things; the rifle I hunt with was made in 1900, the revolver I carry was made in 1956, and both are as lethal today as the day they were built. So even if the United States were to ban the import, manufacture, and sale of new ones—unlikely—there would still be some 250 million privately owned guns in the United States. Unless we’re willing to send the police door-to-door to round them all up, the country is going to be awash in firearms for years to come. Thugs will push guns into the faces of convenience-store clerks, lunatics will shoot up restaurants, aggrieved workers will spray their offices with bullets, and alienated students will open fire at school. The question that interests gun activists is how we’re prepared to respond. A Republican legislator in Wisconsin wanted to arm teachers so they could cut down Columbine copycats, and college students in Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Michigan,

Texas, and Virginia are agitating for the right to carry concealed weapons on campus so they can defend themselves against the next Virginia Tech-style shooter. An armed civilian might be even more useful during a massacre than a police officer; cops hit the people they’re aiming at less than half the time—in some departments much less. That might be because criminals identify police by their uniforms and so get the first shot off. A civilian might have the element of surprise.

My friends who are appalled at the thought of widespread concealed weapons aren’t impressed by this argument, or by the research demonstrating no ill effects of the shall-issue revolution. “I don’t care,” said one. “I don’t feel safe knowing people are walking around with guns. What about my right to feel safe? Doesn’t that count for anything?”

Robert Bork tried out that argument in 1971, in defense of prosecuting such victimless crimes as drug abuse, writing in the *Indiana Law Journal* that “knowledge that an activity is taking place is a harm to those who find it profoundly immoral.” It’s as bad an argument now as it was then. We may not like it that other people are doing things we revile—smoking pot, enjoying pornography, making gay love, or carrying a gun—but if we aren’t adversely affected by it, the Constitution and common decency argue for leaving it alone. My friend may *feel* less safe because people are wearing concealed guns, but the data suggest she isn’t less safe.

To the unfamiliar, guns are noisy and intimidating. They represent the supremacy of force over reason, of ferocity over refinement, and probably a whole set of principles that rub some people the wrong way. But a free society doesn’t make people give a reason for doing the things they want to do; the burden of proof falls on those who would forbid. I started out thinking widespread concealed-carry was a bad idea. But in the absence of evidence that allowing law-abiding citizens to carry guns is harmful, I come down on the side of letting people do what they want.

Why shouldn’t being prepared to defend oneself be on the list of skills we expect of modern citizens? I’ve encountered five reasons not to wear a gun: you think it so unlikely you’ll be attacked it’s not worth the trouble or the sacrifice of Condition White; you expect the police to come to your aid in the event of trouble; wearing a gun makes you feel less safe instead of more; you’ve decided you couldn’t take a life under any circumstance; or you don’t want to contribute to a coarsening of society by preparing to kill at a moment’s notice.

It’s true that crime is down, but it’s certainly not nonexistent; hideous things happen to good

people every day. We carry fire insurance even though fire is uncommon; carrying a gun may be no more paranoid. Expecting police protection is delusional; they'll usually do no more than show up later to investigate. Carrying a gun is unsafe for those who haven't been properly trained, but a good class and regular practice can fix that. Only the last two reasons strike me as logically complete arguments not to go armed. Being willing to die rather than kill is an admirable and time-honored philosophical position. I'm not certain, though, how many of us would hold to it when the fatal moment was upon us. I, for one, count myself out. I'm *willing*.

At least I think so. Those who write about and teach defensive gun use say an incident, if it happens, will go down something like this:

I will draw my gun from its holster if I reasonably believe myself or another person to be in imminent danger of death or grievous bodily injury. I will fire two bullets into the center of the attacker's chest. My 125-grain hollowpoints will not only carve permanent cavities through his body, they'll also send out pressure waves that might rupture his solid organs—his liver, spleen, and kidneys. If he's going to die, he'll likely die on the spot or within a day. I will be sure to have my hands empty and raised by the time the police show up, because they'll be scared and liable to shoot anyone holding a gun. The only way to win a gunfight, goes the saying, is not to be there when it happens. I can expect the police to arrest, handcuff, and jail me. If I'm not charged, or I'm acquitted, the attacker or his family will probably sue me. I use hollowpoints, I will say on the stand, because they deliver more energy to the target and are therefore more likely to stop the attack—and the shooting—quickly. Also, being more likely to stay in the attacker's body or embed themselves in walls without passing through, hollowpoints are less dangerous to bystanders, which is why police use them. I didn't cock the revolver, yell "Freeze," or shoot to wound, because if I'd had time to think about doing any of that I'd have had time to run away. But the poor guy only had a knife, the plaintiff's lawyer might say, to which I'll respond that a man with a knife can close twenty-one feet in a second and a half—less time than it takes to draw and fire. Then it will be up to the jury to decide my fate. The gun carrier's ethic holds that it's better to be tried by twelve than carried by six.

That said, I will probably stop carrying my gun. It's uncomfortable, distracting, and freaks out my friends; it's not worth it. I miss Condition White. If I lived in a dangerous place, I might feel different, and I may continue wearing a gun when I travel to such places (at least

to the ones that allow it). That some people think going unarmed makes me a traitor to the Second Amendment doesn't bother me at all. And if I'm a burden to society because I cannot jump in and stop a crime, well, I'm not qualified in CPR, advanced first aid, maritime lifesaving, or firefighting either. Social parasite that I am, I'm content to leave emergency response to the pros.

We may all benefit from having a lot of licensed people carrying guns, if only because of the heightened state of awareness in which they live. It's a scandal, though, that people can get a license to carry on the basis of a three-hour "course" given at a gun show. State requirements vary, but some don't even ask students to fire a weapon before getting a carry permit. We should enforce high standards for instruction, including extensive live firing, role playing, and serious examination of the legal issues. Since people can carry guns state to state, standards should be uniform. States should require a refresher course, the way Texas does, before renewing a carry permit. To their credit, most gun carriers I've talked to agree that training should improve, even if some of them get twitchy at the idea of mandates. The Second Amendment confers a right to keep and bear arms. It does not confer a right to instant gratification.

Going armed has connected me with an entire range of values I didn't use to think much about—self-reliance, vigilance, muscular citizenship—and some impulses I'd rather avoid, like social pessimism and irrational fear. It has militarized my life; all that locking and loading and watching over my shoulder makes me feel like a bit player in the perpetual global war in which we find ourselves. There's no denying that carrying a gun has made my days a lot more dramatic. Suddenly, I'm dangerous. I'm an action figure. I bear a lethal secret into every social encounter. I have to remind myself occasionally that my gun is not a prop, a political statement, or a rhetorical device, but an instrument designed to blow a ragged channel through a human being. From a public-safety standpoint it may matter little that lots of people are carrying guns now, but if accessorizing with firearms becomes truly *au courant*, the United States will feel like a different place. We'll be less dreamy and more secretive. We'll spend more energy watching one another and less on self-obsession. We'll be a little more on-task, more cognizant of violence and prepared to participate therein. We'll also be, in our own minds, a little sexier as we make ourselves more dangerous. We'll be carrying guns for exactly the reason John Garfield did: to shoot people with, sweetheart. ■