

RICHARD: The recent mass shootings in Sacramento, California and at a subway station in Brooklyn, New York prompted renewed calls for action on gun control. In this episode, a unique perspective on the raging debate with a former gun industry executive who says he loves guns, has more of them than he has counted, but the NRA and its supporters, he says, have gone too far. This is Let's Find Common Ground, a podcast about different ways of looking at the world. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Our guest, Ryan Busse, grew up around guns, hunting and shooting with his father. He is still a proud gun owner, hunter, and outdoorsman, and he lives in Montana. For years, he was a successful executive in the gun industry, but then he quit.

RICHARD: Ryan says, in recent years, the gun industry radicalized large numbers of Americans and that it must change before gun violence can be reduced and our nation can heal.

ASHLEY: Ryan wrote a book called Gunfight, which tells the inside story of a little-known industry.

RICHARD: First question from Ashley.

ASHLEY: So, Ryan, you're a gun owner. You grew up around guns, and you enjoy using them, right?

RYAN: I do, yes. Not only did I grow up around guns, I helped build one of the most iconic firearms companies in the United States and the world. And, yes, I still very much enjoy using guns. In fact, many of the best days of my life in my youth were spent in and around guns, shooting and hunting with my father, and now I'm shooting and hunting with my own two boys.

ASHLEY: Well, talk a little bit about how you grew up and where.

RYAN: I grew up in what is now pejoratively called flyover country in a very rural ranch and farm in far northwestern Kansas, right along the Colorado and Nebraska border. You know, agriculture... it was 60 miles to the nearest fast food restaurant or movie theater. It was very rural. We worked very hard, like many kids or families do in agriculture. So many of the best parts of our life, when we did finally have time to spend doing things fun often involved guns whether it was hunting with my dad or my brother or target shooting or something like that. Also, guns were tools for my dad on the ranch whether it was dispensing with rattlesnakes or things of that sort. Guns were never really absent from our lives. They represented something culturally that I now understand is very important. They were ubiquitous, they were tools, but they were also representative of a culture that can be a very healthy part of an American existence.

RICHARD: You mentioned that terms flyover country. That's so patronizing and awful, isn't it, that idea that some people live in a part of the country that's just not worth visiting?

RYAN: Well, I think the idea that coastal elites don't understand flyover country, we seem to have separated ourselves into all of these different pejorative terms. We have coastal elites. We have flyover kids. We're all now something. Instead of just being Americans, we're something negative to somebody else. But I think this idea that we don't understand each other's cultures anymore... once those cultural labels, negativity, threats, once that starts to permeate our existence, then we have the sort of separation that we're now taking to the extreme. We can have a separation, and I think it's fair to say we've got a few separations in our political culture now.

RICHARD: To be clear, you are not anti-gun. You are not opposed to the Second Amendment, are you?

RYAN: Not at all. In fact, I think it's an important part of being an American, and it's an important part of my life. At the same time, I have come to refuse the idea that reasonable restrictions, cultural norms, responsibilities, that adhering to those sorts of things makes one anti-gun. In other words, just because I think background checks are a good idea or because I believe in the right of states to permit concealed carry or I think that armed intimidation is wrong or I think that open carry should be outlawed in a democracy, there are those on the far right who believe that that makes me anti-gun. But I refuse to live under that label. I'm not anti-gun. I don't even know how many guns I own, more than three dozen. I have a ton of them. I've sold millions of guns. I don't know how I can be labeled as anti-gun, but I think the idea that me, an award-winning firearms executive who shoots with his boys every chance he gets and doesn't know how many guns he owns, can be labeled as anti-gun, I think there you have a very illustrative example about how divisive our country has become.

ASHLEY: What is the difference between responsible gun ownership, in your mind, and reckless use of guns?

RYAN: I think any healthy democracy is debating those sorts of questions every day. I don't think there is a clear answer to that. I think a healthy democracy lives its life in the gray area. I believe that guns is an extremely illustrative and important fault line in our society, but I think there are things that are clearly not responsible. I don't know where the line is exactly, but I can give you some examples of things that I think are not responsible. The idea that firearms should be used to intimidate protestors, lawmakers, average citizens, which we've seen many, many times in the last two to three years, this idea of authoritarian intimidation with guns in the open... people who do that want to try to cover up what they're actually doing. They say that they're just exercising their rights. No, they're not. You take a gun out in the open in front of a bunch of kids who are protesting, you're trying to intimidate them. That's not reasonable. It's not responsible.

Really, it has no place in a functioning democracy. So I guess, to me, that's a very clear example of something that's far over the responsible line.

RICHARD: How do you contrast that with your behavior as a gun owner?

RYAN: Most people who grew up like I did and are still being raised in a responsible gun-owning America understand there are certain things that you never do, and this applies to me. It goes to the way I was raised. It's the way that hundreds of people who have reached out to me since the release of my book and the various podcasts I've been on... they all adhere to these same sorts of things. You never take a gun to a fight. The idea of responsible gun ownership is you want to do everything possible to never have to use a gun in any sort of societal... against human interaction. So you never go to a fight. You always try to leave. You never brandish a gun to intimidate. It's not part of your identity. It's not part of some sort of weird faux-patriotic machismo that we've seen. All of these things are things that responsible gun owners would never do. For me, it's very important that we adhere to those sorts of rules.

RICHARD: I think what you're saying, the sense that there is nuance in an intelligent conversation about guns, is something we so rarely hear in our media and in our very often angry debates about the role of guns. You are very comfortable around guns. Guns are very much a part of your lifestyle, but there's an aspect, and some of it's a recent aspect of owning guns, which really troubles you. Can you explore that more?

RYAN: Sure. John Adams is famous for essentially saying that our democracy or our Constitution can only be applied to a moral people, and by moral, I think he meant responsible. And I think that anything with this society, we have always tried to enumerate our freedoms very carefully in all of our founding documents and in our reams and reams of laws on which our country is supposed to function, but responsibilities have always been this ethereal thing that we just sort of understand. They're sort of a part of our cultural norm. I think what's happened is we have this runaway focus on freedoms which we all agree are important. Owning guns is one of them. But with each freedom, there's a commensurate need for responsibility, and, with guns, because of the exceedingly powerful reality of owning guns and what they represent, what they can do, what they're designed to do, we have a commensurate exceedingly important need for responsibility. It's that responsibility that I think has been largely dispensed with, certainly through the Trump years. The reason that is is because political intimidation and authoritarianism has become a tool of the Right or a desired outcome of the Right, and nothing jumpstarts authoritarianism like guns do because they upend our civility. If you're sitting around with a group of friends at dinner waiting for one to show up, and you have a nice, civil dinner, and then that last person shows up brandishing a gun, your entire civil existence is upended, and that's very similar to what I think radicals have intended to do to our political situation in our country with guns.

ASHLEY: Demand for guns reached, by all accounts, a record high during the first year of the pandemic. Precise statistics vary, but according to official statistics, more than twice as many guns are being sold now compared to 20 years ago. Is gun industry marketing mostly the reason for this, do you think?

RYAN: It's certainly part of it. The through-line of my book and my existence, my life, is that I came to understand the NRA and very powerful political forces meant to divide our country realize that the sort of things that could drive terrible political outcomes for our country but good political outcomes for a narrow band of our society, meaning radical NRA sort of political radicals, the hatred, fear, divisiveness, racism, the things that increase angst in a society, those drive fearful people to vote in irrational ways. So we've seen some of what feels like irrational political outcomes. But those are precisely the same things that drive firearms purchases because fearful people purchase guns. So it's not an accident that the worst sort of tumultuous time that any of us can remember probably, this period between let's say March of 2020 and January 6th, 2021, that angsty, tumultuous time corresponds perfectly with the highest ever firearms sales in the United States. Actually, it's not double. When I entered the firearms industry in 1995, there were about 3.5 million guns sold a year. In 2020, 2021, in any 12-month period, you're going to find evidence of about 22 to 25 million guns sold. So we're talking about a 600% increase. The sort of hatred and tumult that exists in our society corresponds perfectly with a 600% increase in gun sales. So now we have 30-round magazines being sold, literally, by the truckload, and I mean literally truckloads of people who are putting those sorts of 30-round magazines into AR-15s that they are buying. There are QAnon-branded AR-15s. There are AR-15s called the Urban Super Sniper. It's hard now to distinguish firearms marketing, political division, and angst in our society because they're all driving towards the same place on the right.

ASHLEY: For people who don't know much about guns, what is an AR-15? What is it designed to be used for?

RYAN: It was designed... I can't remember the exact year, in the '50s, and AR does not mean automatic rifle. It means Armalite rifle. It was designed by a company called Armalite. Eventually, the design was sold to Colt. That gun became the preferred rifle of the U.S. military and of military forces across the world. There are about 500 companies that build that gun in the United States, and the United States, by all accounts, is the vast majority of the civilian gun market. It is a gun that has become both a thing and a symbol because the January 6th insurrection, you'll note there were two types of flags. There were political Trump flags, and then there were Come and Take It or AR-15 flags. There were tens of thousands of guns that could've been on there: handguns, shotguns, but there weren't. There were AR-15s on there, and that's because they have become both a thing and a powerful political symbol for the radical right of the United States in our political atmosphere.

RICHARD: Describe how an AR-15 or weapons similar to that is different from the guns that you have and the guns that you hunt with with your boys, your sons.

RYAN: AR-15s are a gun that has been specifically honed and designed for the most efficient offensive killing of people, really. That's what they're for because they're the preferred rifle of military forces and police forces across the country. They are a gun just like any other semi-automatic gun, which semi-auto means every time you pull the trigger, the thing goes bang. You don't have to manually cock it. The force of the explosion cycles the gun for the next round. An AR-15 can be converted, not legally, but can be converted to a fully auto gun, which means you pull the trigger once, and it just keeps shooting until you let off the trigger. But lots of guns in our society are semi-auto, lots of hunting guns, lots of shotguns, lots of handguns. So, in that way, it's similar to all of those semi-auto guns.

RICHARD: Ryan Busse; our conversation continues in a minute, but first a word about a special online event on April 24th. That's pretty soon, right?

ASHLEY: Yes, it is. Sign up for "Media, Politics, and Polarization" with cable TV news anchor Chris Wallace, former CBS news journalist and author Jacqueline Adams, and ABC News Chief White House Correspondent Jonathan Karl.

RICHARD: This promises to be a fascinating conversation on the news media's role in our divided country and what can be done to find common ground.

ASHLEY: Register now for this online event at our website, commongroundcommittee.org. Now more from our interview with former gun industry executive Ryan Busse.

RICHARD: Let's consider a comparison between guns and cars. People who drive cars, even very fast cars, accept the need for speed limits and driver's licenses. They don't want to share the road with crazy or unqualified drivers. Should we feel the same way about guns?

RYAN: I think so. I think back to the idea that if we want to live in a functioning democracy, we have to understand that our freedoms must be regulated by commensurate responsibilities. The driving example is a good one, the idea that we don't think it's okay to speed through school zones because it's responsible. Now, people on the right who have become what I call Second Amendment absolutists, in other words who believe that literally nothing can restrict your firearms ownership... they quite literally believe that you should be able to own an A-10 Warthog jet, anti-tank missiles, everything. So, in that way, they would believe that no speed limit should exist on firearms. I don't think a democracy can function that way. I think we can and should be allowed to exercise our right to own guns but not without social norms, responsibilities, and reasonable restrictions.

ASHLEY: You've been speaking extensively about your life and experience in the gun industry since your book came out. Have you found common ground with anyone on guns who you didn't necessarily expect to?

RYAN: Again, this is very similar to our political world, where on the right, we have... I don't know how large, but it's not everybody in the Republican Party. It's not everybody on the right. We have a class of very loud folks who have stolen the microphone and therefore represent an entire political movement. In guns, it's very similar. From far away, it appears that everybody who owns guns... again, I'll use the pejorative. Coastal elite people who don't understand firearms culture... everybody looks like these crazies who invade the Michigan Capitol or who own lots of AR-15s or who think it's okay to intimidate kids. What I've found is those are the loud radicals that have the mic in the gun world. The ones who have reached out to me 95/5 percentages are responsible gun owners who are very put off, who are very worried by this radicalization of the gun world. In other words, they're not very dissimilar from the sort of respect that I have described in the culture growing up, and they understand or they're coming to understand the need for social norms and responsibility and reasonable regulations because they're worried that guns and this runaway freedom and the radicalization it represents may be the thing that undoes democracy. They're very concerned with that. I've got hundreds, if not thousands, of those sorts of messages. The number of those and the percentage of those that have reached out to me versus the angry radicals, yes, has surprised me in a very pleasant way. I have been shocked by it, actually.

ASHLEY: How about people more on the left, people who would perhaps never have owned a gun, would've been the type of person to say, "We don't even need guns"? Have you spoken to some of them, as well?

RYAN: I have. On the left, there has been this sort of panacea that perhaps we can be a country one day in the not-too-distant future where no firearms need to be owned by anyone. That tends to be fostered and empowered when you see people march into the Michigan Capitol or the Kentucky Capitol or wherever with guns, and gun owners don't stand up and decry it. Well, that leaves people, like we were just talking about, to think, "Well, they must all be crazy. Why don't we take all their guns?" Well, all gun owners aren't crazy like that. So I think, when somebody like me stands up and says, "Look. There are people who are responsible gun owners, and we know this isn't okay," then folks on the left are like, honestly, sort of a sigh of relief like, "Whew, okay. Well, I guess guns are okay as long as it's somebody like this who owns them and understands that responsibility is important." That's why I think this whole thing is so central to repairing the democracy because it's so incumbent on reasonable people in the middle or in the gray area to stand up and decry the fringe so that common ground can be found. Otherwise, this chasm's just going to keep getting worse.

ASHLEY: Our podcast is called Let's Find Common Ground, and we've spoken about this a little bit, but there are plenty of people in this country, especially perhaps who live

in the big cities and their suburbs, who don't have any experience with guns, and they make people feel really uncomfortable in many cases. Do you think there's a way to improve understanding between those people and people who were raised like you were with guns?

RYAN: Yeah, I absolutely think there is, and it starts with aggressively castigating the divisive forces who have tried to divide the country over guns and who have, frankly, tried to frighten the people that you just described into saying, "Well, you're going to have to deal with this no matter what. There's never going to be any restrictions." I've not yet met somebody from the group that you just described, actually, who isn't very open to a conversation with people who seem reasonable and responsible. I just haven't met them. So I think all it takes is for people like me to stand up and say, "Let's have a conversation."

RICHARD: There's a nice story in your book, Ryan, where you write about how you were raised. Your mom didn't grow up immersed in guns, you say, but she accepted them as an ordinary part of our lives. She wanted her kids to be well-rounded and well-behaved. Tell us more about what sort of rules you had involving guns when you grew up.

RYAN: Well, the rules I had were just understood. First off, we had guns and used guns. They were part of our culture and our times together, but they didn't define us. We didn't wave them around. We didn't have stickers of them on the back of our trucks. They weren't part of our political identity. Safety was always at the forefront of every experience we had with guns, and that was not quite literally but figuratively beat into us from the day we... before we even started shooting. You don't put your finger on the trigger. You treat every gun as if it's loaded. All of these basic safety things that have now been dispensed with in our society were just intertwined in the way we used guns. So we understood that, yes, they could be fun. They could represent a sort of an American freedom. They could defend us. But never could that happen absent responsibility that was to be a part of our experience with them. I think that dispensing with the responsibility in and around guns is at the very core of our political division and is emblematic of the degree to which our society has dispensed with responsibility in general. I lived in the industry that crushed that responsibility for political and monetary gain and then spread it into the rest of our political ethos. I think it's that regaining of social norms and responsibilities that we must insist upon and find again or the finding common ground issue is going to become ever more difficult. None of this society exists without these norms and responsibilities and rules and laws. We only need look at Russia now to understand how tenuous this can be.

RICHARD: Ryan Busse, thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

RYAN: Thank you, guys.

ASHLEY: Ryan Busse, our latest guest on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: The name of his recent book is Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry that Radicalized America.

ASHLEY: Hear more of our interviews at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. This is our 55th episode.

RICHARD: Yeah, and we have a fascinating range of guests, and virtually every episode of our podcast is under 30 minutes, perfect for that commute or session at the gym.

ASHLEY: Thanks for listening. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Before we go, a quick word about another interesting podcast.

SIMONE LEEPER: If you're like me, you're probably a bit frustrated with the state of our political system today. There's no getting around it. There's a lot to be frustrated about. So why does American democracy look the way it does, and how can we make it more responsive to the people it was formed to serve? I'm Simone Leeper, host of Democracy Decoded, a podcast where we examine our government and discuss innovative ideas that could lead to a stronger, more transparent, accountable, and inclusive democracy. In Season One, we'll take you on a journey where we delve into the nuts and bolts of our campaign finance system. We'll look at the effects of secret spending at both the federal and state level, explore where and how foreign governments are spending to attempt to influence American elections, and investigate the fight against the outsized influence wealthy special interests have on local elections. Democracy Decoded is a production of Campaign Legal Center. Find us at democracydecoded.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

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