GUEST ESSAY

Firearms Classes Taught Me, and America, a Very Dangerous Lesson

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By Harel Shapira

I did not grow up around guns, but 10 years ago, I started attending firearms training classes. I wasn't there to learn how to protect myself or my family. I was there to learn what was taught in the classes themselves, which a broad coalition of groups — including many police officers, Republican and Democratic legislators and gun violence prevention organizations — have hailed as a path out of the nation's epidemic of violence.

I found something very different. The classes I attended trained students to believe that their lives are in constant danger. They prepared us to shoot without hesitation and avoid legal consequences. They instilled the kind of fear that has a corrosive effect on all interactions — and beyond that, on the fabric of our democracy.

I took 42 classes and conducted interviews with 52 instructors and 118 students, in traditionally red states like Texas as well as blue states like Massachusetts, in urban areas like Newark as well as rural Southern Illinois. (The instructors knew I was there to conduct research; in keeping with my university's academic protocols, I had permission to take notes in class and to record interviews but not to publish anyone's names.) Most of all, I immersed myself in firearms schools in Texas, where I live, that cater to people who wish to learn how to use guns for self-defense. Some instructors in these schools told me they have been involved in drafting public safety protocols or running active shooter drills for public school teachers. Some of these instructors' students have gone on to open training programs of their own.

While American gun culture has diversified in recent years, the overwhelming majority of firearms instructors — in Texas it's 75 percent — are white men. Many have a background in the military or law enforcement. Nationwide, more than 125,000 of them have taken a certification course offered by the National Rifle Association. Many states require instructors to complete additional training.

First, the good news: Every firearms instructor I encountered was extremely serious about preventing accidents. When a student inadvertently pointed his gun at me for a moment, our instructor immediately chastised him. And when the student objected, saying he didn't have his finger on the trigger, the instructor became livid and threatened to kick him out of class.

But teaching people how to avoid shooting someone by accident is a small part of what these classes are about. The primary lessons are about if and when to shoot someone on purpose. And this is where the trouble begins.

Instructors repeatedly told me that a big part of their job was to make people feel vulnerable, to make them aware of dangers they were not conscious of before to understand that bad things can happen at any time. One instructor told me he encourages students to carry their gun at all times. If students say they plan to leave it in the car, he responds, “So what you’re telling me is the only time you are ever going to get attacked is if you are in your car?”

The instructors describe a world teeming with violent and deranged individuals. And not just any individuals. The scenarios cluster around the public spaces of racially diverse cities. “More often than not,” an instructor who had been a high-ranking police officer said, the place you’re likely to be attacked is “in an urban part of society.” Another instructor, also a former police officer, tells students to keep their gas tanks filled at least halfway to avoid situations in which “it’s the middle of the night and you need to get gas in downtown Houston.”

Outside a restaurant in Austin, an instructor saw a disheveled man sitting on the curb and nudged me in the other direction, directing me to pick up the pace. He said he had detected “potential predatory behavior” and wasn’t sure if this man was a panhandler or someone about to stick a gun in our faces.

Instructors repeatedly told me that statistics about crime are meaningless when it comes to the need to carry a gun. It’s not the odds, I heard on numerous occasions; it’s the consequences. I have been taught strategies for avoiding interactions with strangers. I have participated in scenario training sessions in which students carrying guns loaded with plastic ammunition enact mock burglaries, home invasions, mass shootings and attacks by Islamic terrorists. Repeatedly the lesson was that I ought to shoot even when my instincts might tell me otherwise.

For example, in one scenario, an instructor pretended to punch someone I know and care about in the head. The instructor’s back was toward me, so I held my fire. Later, I told him that I hadn’t had enough information to act. Wrong answer. Being punched in the head can be fatal, the instructor told me, so there was no time to wait. I had never heard someone advocate shooting an unarmed person in the back. The instructor did it with a sense of moral, legal and tactical clarity and conviction.

Officially, the message is caution. A line I heard from multiple instructors was: If you are not about to die in the next three seconds, don’t pull the trigger. If you are not 100 percent sure, then don’t shoot. But relentlessly harping on the dangers that surround us changes the way students assess those risks.

I experienced it myself.

On a recent night I saw a driver who didn’t appear to realize that he was going the wrong way on a one-way street. As the other car approached, I began to slow down, roll down my window and stick my hand out in a friendly gesture. Suddenly I worried the other driver might have a gun. How might he respond to someone slowing down a car and waving at him in the middle of the night? Would he shoot? Probably not. But it’s not the odds, I remember telling myself; it’s the consequences.

That’s the great irony of firearms training: In learning how to use a gun for self-defense, something that seems like it might give you confidence and a sense of safety, people end up feeling more afraid than before. “I knew the world was dangerous,” a student told me after class one day, “but this was a real wake-up call.” “He scared

the daylights out of me," I heard from another student, who went straight from class to a gun store. Others who already owned a gun told me the classes made them feel the gun should be bigger, with a larger caliber and more capacity.

Firearms instructors are not the only ones who make an appearance at self-defense classes. Lawyers do, too. Lawyers who specialize in defending gun owners. They go to classes and tell students how to talk (or not) to 911 operators and police officers in the event they shoot someone. In one seminar, a lawyer emphasized the importance of explaining, "I had no choice."

With more than 200 mass shootings in our country this year alone, advocates of gun regulation often cite the tragic number of lives lost or the fact that gun-related injuries have surpassed car accidents as the nation's leading cause of injury-related death among people under 24. But another, less recognized casualty is the kind of public interactions that make democracy viable. The N.R.A. says that "an armed society is a polite society." But learning to carry a gun isn't teaching Americans to have good manners. It's training them to be suspicious and atomized, learning to protect themselves, no matter how great the risk to others. It's training them to not be citizens.

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