

Stephen Gutowski (00:03.051)

All right, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another episode of the Weekly Reload podcast. I'm your host, Stephen Gutowski. I'm also a CNN contributor and the founder of thereload.com where you can head over today and sign up for our free weekly newsletter. If you want to keep up to date with what's going on with guns in America. This week, we are talking about the gun rights movement and its current standing in American politics. And to do that, we, I think we have one of the best gun writers, maybe one of the best writers, especially in the conservative sphere out there with us and that's Kevin Williamson from The Dispatch. Welcome to the show Kevin. Thanks for joining us Yeah, can you just tell people a little bit more about your background before we get going here?

Kevin (00:39.15)

My pleasure.

Kevin (00:44.43)

Yeah, I spent the first half of my career mainly as a newspaper editor in India and Texas and Philadelphia and rural Colorado and various places. Yeah, you got your veteran stadium shirt on there. And, uh, and I was, um, I've been an opinion magazine guy since, uh, since, uh, around 2008. I was at National Review for about 15 years. And, uh, some of you may know, I worked at the Atlantic for three days. I think it was before they fired me.

Stephen Gutowski (00:54.347)

Yes, I got my veteran stadium shirt from Philadelphia.

Kevin (01:11.534)

And then I've been at the dispatch for a couple of years now. And I write about all sorts of stuff, but including gun policy and gun stuff.

Stephen Gutowski (01:15.755)

Yes, and yep.

Stephen Gutowski (01:21.515)

Yes, and you're a gun owner yourself. I mean, for those watching on YouTube, they can see in the background there you have some firearms in your collection.

Kevin (01:30.702)

I've got more 375 Hollins and Hollins than a man needs to have probably, but I really like shooting them.

Stephen Gutowski (01:34.443)

Well, that's what they say about guns generally, right? Once you get into it, you, yeah, more than you need and fewer than you want. That's, that's how it tends to go. Um, and, and, you know, we actually just talked not that long ago, cause I was on the dispatch live, which I would encourage people who, uh, listen to the show. If you haven't followed the dispatch live, you should head over. They put it out as a podcast as well. Once it's done.

Kevin (01:39.822)

More than I need you or than I want. Yeah.

Kevin (01:54.368)

Mm -hmm.

Stephen Gutowski (02:04.459)

So give that a listen. We're going to talk, I think, expand on what we were talking about over on the dispatch and maybe cover bigger picture stuff with especially the gun rights movement. Right. So I wrote a piece for the dispatch that looked at the risk for gun rights advocates with Donald Trump that he may decide to, you know, essentially pull a similar move that he did with pro -life advocates and moderate on the issue.

very publicly come out and say that the, I think the ultimate goals of a lot of pro-life activists at least are not tenable and not politically viable to Donald Trump at this point. And so he's decided to at least rhetorically during the campaign, it seems, change his position on, you know, what his policy should be in regards to abortion.

And, you know, it's now not that Donald Trump has ever necessarily, like a stalwart pro-lifer, he's taken different positions on the issue throughout his life. And even while he's been, you know, officially in politics as a politician, but, you know, if you look at his history with guns, you see a very similar pattern, right? And so let's start with him. And then I think maybe broaden from there. Cause

because Donald Trump is the leader of the one party, and we'll get more into this in a little bit, that actually seeks out gun voters and wants their support and values their votes at the polls. So let's start with him. Where do you see the same sort of risk that I'm talking about here with him maybe trying to attack to the center during the campaign on guns, or do you think he's?

Kevin (03:27.598)

Sure.

Stephen Gutowski (03:56.363)

a bit more committed in that area.

Kevin (03:58.542)

No, Trump doesn't believe in anything, of course, with the exception of he cares a great deal about trade policy. If you read his public statements and his various pronouncements about political issues and public issues going back to the 1980s, you'll find a pretty consistently hostile view of international trade. In the 80s, it was Japan. Now it's China.

India will get their turn one of these days, I'm sure. Maybe Singapore, if they start doing a little more manufacturing. But other than that, and he's also at this point really dug in on the issue of immigration. It would be difficult, I think, for him to change his tune on that issue very much without looking like he has done something unusually craven, even by his very low standards of craveness.

He doesn't care about the abortion issue. He doesn't really care about the gun issue. He has said things on both sides, both those issues over the years. Sometimes during the same conversation, he will contradict himself. The worry on that, of course, is...

that someone will get in his ear and convince him that if he takes up a more restrictionist view of firearms, that it'll win him some votes in the suburbs and that'll get him over the line in November, or that they'll write nice things about him in the New York Times. And since he's on his way out, he's a lame duck, his first day in office, he may want to be thought of as a kind of respected elder statesman once he leaves, which of course is preposterous and delusional, but that doesn't mean that's not what he's thinking. And, um,

There's also the issue that he apparently feels that he has been betrayed by the conservative legal movement, that he made all these commitments about judges and followed through when it came to the Supreme Court and appointed exactly the sort of people the Federalist Society wanted him to. And these people haven't done him any favors. Of course, what they've done is act consistently with their judicial philosophy and their understanding of the law. And they've mostly

Kevin (06:08.494)

apparently tried to do the right thing, but that's not how he views this stuff. Next time around, if there is a next time around, he probably will be less likely to be courting those sorts of lawyers, both for judicial appointments, but also for positions in the justice department and other positions in the federal government. He's going to want people who are more, you know, more activist, more loyal, more sort of a...

mafia type lawyers. His ideal lawyer, he always says, is Roy Cohn. And he's looking for people like that. And those folks, of course, can go either way on these issues. If the Trump administration, a second Trump administration, if one

should come to pass, if it continues to appoint originalist, textualist judges and to follow a kind of federalist society,

legal strategy that's going to be really good for the gun rights movement in the longterm because all the gun rights movement really needs to succeed in the legal, in the judicial realm anyway, is for the courts to do their jobs. The law is pretty clearly on their side in most places. I mean, not to say there aren't statutory changes that need to be made. There are. The constitution is pretty clearly on their side and federal jurisprudence for some years now has been pretty clearly on their side. So without some radical change,

the gun rights movement probably has pretty good reason to be competent, at least at the level of the Supreme Court and the very senior federal courts. But in terms of day -to -day policy, whether the administration's going to support a so -called assault weapons ban or an AR -15 ban or the things they've talked about, that's really going to be whichever way the wind blows. And Trump can be pretty specious about that stuff and pretty meretricious about that stuff and pretty unpredictable.

And the other thing is that, um, something Trump has in common with Joe Biden, I think is that weirdly enough for two guys who've both been elected president of the United States, neither one of them has particularly good political judgment. Um, you know, Biden right now allowing himself to be kind of bullied by these campus activists and, uh, and treat our allies in Israel the way he has, I mean, nevermind the right and wrong with the question, nevermind the national interest of the question. It's just dumb politics. Um,

Kevin (08:22.478)

Trump might be someone who could be convinced that this would be a political winner for him, even though it probably wouldn't. And well calculated, well understood political self -interest is not going to save him from making bad decisions because he doesn't have well calculated and well understood political self -interest, I don't think.

Stephen Gutowski (08:41.227)

Interesting. Yes, because it does seem like you could make a similar case that he should moderate on some gun policies, at least maybe not just like with the pro life stuff. It's not like he's gone to the complete other end of the spectrum. He's trying he's he's trying to stake out some position he thinks is a bit more appealing to the American public through by judging off of polling or how some of these bad initiatives have gone.

since Roe v. Wade was overturned. And you can look at polling that indicates universal background checks are a very popular idea in the sort of generic sense of when you just ask, would people support them, they get very high numbers supporting that. I do think that there's less evidence that gun rights or the gun rights movement is in a weaker position based off ballot initiatives, of course, than.

Kevin (09:11.278)

Mm.

Stephen Gutowski (09:38.411)

than the pro -life movement at the moment because you have not seen the same sort of gun restrictions sweeping at the ballot box as you have with pro -choice ballot initiatives sweeping even in deep red states. So there does seem to be a bit of a, if you're just looking at it from a cold calculated, like a fence sitting sort of position where you're just trying to gauge what, there's a little bit of a difference.

Kevin (10:00.974)

Well, I think the political calculation issue there is, is, is fairly straightforward in the sense that. You know, abortion and guns are really not issues that are about what they're, they pretend to be about. These are really, you know, hot buttons, symbolic culture war issues. Nobody who votes because they care most about abortion rights is ever going to vote for a Republican. And they're sure they're not going to vote for Donald Trump. No one who's going.

whose vote is going to be determined because their top issue is gun control and they're in favor of it, is ever going to vote for a Republican. Even if Donald Trump comes out and says, hey, I'm 30 % on your side or 40 % on your side or 50 % on your side, they're not going to jump over for that, which is not going to happen. So there are places in the world

you can pander. You can pander on entitlements, taxes.

Stephen Gutowski (10:47.819)

That's interesting.

Kevin (10:55.15)

industrial protection, trade, immigration, all sorts of stuff you can pander on. But those two issues you just really can't pander on. There's just people are too fixed on them. And the people who care most about those things are among the least flexible voters when it comes to partisanship. They're just not going to cross party lines.

Stephen Gutowski (11:13.483)

Hmm. That's interesting. And I do like, I just to wrap up the Trump stuff real quick, because I do want to get to the broader question. I think that maybe we can start where you're at. You know, it doesn't seem like he's not, he telecraft his move to away from the pro -life, um, you know, maximalist position, uh, whatever you want to call it. Uh, you know, his, his, his tacked away from the most ardent pro -life advocates. He, he, he was.

you know, saying he was going to do that for a while. He hasn't done the same thing with, with pro gun positions. And in fact, he has one of the things I put in my dispatch article was the next sign to look for is whether or not he's going to show up to the NRA's annual meeting. He's been to all of them since he started running for president while he was president, he went to all of them. And, you know, it's, it's in Dallas, Texas, which is not exactly a swing state, not a key spot for him to go campaign.

So if he shows up there, it's probably a good sign that he's gonna remain basically where he is right now on guns. And even though he has, you know, he's expressed openness while president to passing red flag laws, you know, the infamous statement of take the guns first and have due process second, which is, you know, obviously not how due process is supposed to work, but, you know,

he didn't end up following through on any of those, those flirtations with stricter gun policy, other than obviously the bomb stock ban, which is a significant thing that happened, although it only, there's only a couple hundred thousand of those out there compared to the millions and millions of guns, hundreds of millions of guns, obviously that Americans own.

Kevin (12:44.046)

Yeah.

Kevin (13:02.528)

Yeah, he's not a real due process kind of guy. I don't think that would stop him. One thing that I think maybe enters into that too is there are people on the opposite side of the issue from us who have this kind of a psychological account of gun enthusiasm, that it's about some sort of masculine insecurity and it's a kind of totemic expression of masculine strength. That sort of thing is wildly and grossly and...

terribly overstated in a very, very juvenile way. But it's not as though there's nothing at all to it, at least for some people. And Donald Trump is someone who is very, with a lot of value on sort of traditionalist symbols of masculine oriented strength, especially where it relates to violence. And Trump is a, I think what you might call a police brutality enthusiast. He's a guy who...

who he's kind of a, you know, sort of, you're a Philadelphia guy, sort of a Frank Rizzo kind of politician in some ways. And I think that turning, making a very broad turn on guns would run into that aspect of his character and psychology in a way that would make it.

Stephen Gutowski (14:05.707)

Yep, yep.

Kevin (14:20.366)

embarrassing for him or emotionally difficult for him to do. Because he loves all these kind of, you know, hunters and like, you know, cowboy type saying, Hey, you know, don't be a sissy. And, um, that's going to matter to him.

Stephen Gutowski (14:24.299)

Yeah, and...

Stephen Gutowski (14:33.611)

Yeah, there's also sort of a personal connection there. His sons seem to be genuinely interested in gun rights with even Trump Jr. being floated as a potential replacement for Wayne LaPierre at the NRA. You know, there's I think there's a number of reasons to think he's not going to change course at this moment. I do think that he absolutely could if he believed it was the politically advantageous thing for him to do. I just don't see signs that he's.

Leaning that direction right now. If he's president again and another parkland happens, I think all bets are off. And in fact, especially if he's president again and Republicans control Congress, cause you know, if there's anyone who could pass significant gun control, it'd probably be a figure like Donald Trump in a party like the Republican party because he has.

Kevin (15:04.622)

Yeah.

Kevin (15:22.254)

Sure.

Stephen Gutowski (15:26.443)

If he were to become president again, he would have so much sway over what the party does. I mean, he already does right now, obviously. And I don't think he's like, he's obviously considered doing this in the past. Honestly, the main reason that the red flag proposal never got through at the time was because the first impeachment happened just after he was considering supporting that. So that was the bigger impediment to it than any sort of, I think,

lobbying from the NRA. There was lobbying, you know, and it is better for the NRA to have, or the gun rights movement, whatever organization is going to be representing it moving forward. And still, I think the NRA look by large, especially for Trump right now. But, you know, it's better for them to be in the room than to be yelling from the outside. And that has a lot of influence. But ultimately, I think it was more of a, I'm not going to work with Democrats to pass something while they're trying to impeach me.

Kevin (16:25.038)

Yeah, well, I think being in the room is, um, is, is important. And I think that is really where the NRA has, has failed the gun rights movement in a lot of ways. Um, I think that we had a healthier gun rights movement when we had a genuinely bipartisan, uh, national rifle association.

Stephen Gutowski (16:46.507)

Mm.

Kevin (16:46.702)

The NRA caught the populism bug long before the Republican party at large did. And before the Trump movement really even took off. And the NRA's conversion from being a single issue gun rights lobby organization into being a kind of Fox News adjacent, and they tried to launch their own little version of Fox News. You know, all purpose right wing culture war organization has been really, I think, destructive for the gun rights movement.

Now, the Democratic Party has undergone its own radicalization on the issue during the same time, so it's not as though there were a lot of likely partners on the other side. Yeah, it is, but both the Democratic Party, I think, was healthier when you had people like Harry Reid around who.

Stephen Gutowski (17:21.483)

Yeah, it's a push -pull thing, I think.

Kevin (17:31.438)

You know, we're up and down the line, partisan Democrats on every issue, but we're also gun rights supporters and an NRA who could interact with Democrats like that in good faith, where they could have, you know, productive, mutually respectful, beneficial relations. Um, right now, even if there were a Democrat out there who took a relatively enlightened view of gun rights.

Could he really go to the National Rifle Association and say, let's talk about this? Could the NRA really?

Stephen Gutowski (18:03.659)

Maybe go high and close doors, but yeah, probably not at the annual meeting or something like that.

Kevin (18:07.982)

Yeah, I mean, because the NRA has really made the Democratic party, among other things, you know, a sort of totemic cultural enemy. And, um, I don't think that's a super helpful place for them to be.

Stephen Gutowski (18:18.763)

Yeah, and I want to get into that a little bit deeper because I think it speaks to the broader point here beyond just Donald Trump or Joe Biden or the NRA and where gun owners and the gun rights movement, you know, you have gun owners, then you have gun voters, then you have the gun rights movement, it gets smaller and smaller. And, you know, as you zoom out more, obviously, ideas become less.

Kevin (18:36.75)

Mm -hmm.

Stephen Gutowski (18:45.291)

salient among the groups and you're gonna have there's so many people who own guns in the United States that a lot of them aren't going to agree with each other right we have uh just I think what the NBC said 52 percent of voters have a gun in the home Associated Press put the number of American adults with a gun in the home at 46 percent. Yeah these are that's 100 million plus people so there's obviously not going to be commonality completely on all among all of them but

Kevin (19:11.406)

Charlie Cook and I did a podcast together for years and years and we're both gun rights guys, but we actually disagree about some of the issues and, um, like, yeah.

Stephen Gutowski (19:19.787)

Sure, and that's bound to happen. But I'm wondering, you know, this situation that you mentioned earlier, this kind of station of guns as a more of a cultural signal in American politics and the extremely polarized one.

to the point where the Republican Party and the Democratic Party on the exact opposite ends on this issue, one, that doesn't necessarily seem like a good place to be, right? Because, I mean, even just look at the Republican primary, right? Whatever happens with Donald Trump, he seems more on the side of the NRA and the gun rights movement than not at this point. But whatever happens with him, you know, the...

If you look at the Republican primary, nobody competed on this issue in that primary. Even the pro -life movement, which we're just talking about its weaknesses and Trump turning on it to some degree, you had candidates trying to appeal to pro -lifers in the Republican primary. You didn't have any of that with the pro -gun side.

Kevin (20:22.926)

Yeah. Haley.

Kevin (20:28.75)

Yeah, I think it's an issue that's slightly dormant right now on the pro -gun side in that you've got a lot of people who feel like they're basically winning. You've got a lot of people who are basically OK with the status quo. I think a lot of the hoops you have to jump through to buy a gun are silly. And...

Stephen Gutowski (20:49.515)

Mmm.

Kevin (20:56.75)

particularly like, you know, I've been, I've been in this, you know, epic dumb thing of trying to get federal permission to put a stock on a firearm our own, which makes it a short barrel rifle, which is a, in a special tax stamp and all that stuff. And it's hilariously idiotic what you have to do to do this. I mean, as though 45 AC people it's fired from a gun with a stock on it were more dangerous than once, you know, fired from a pistol grip. But, but even that being the case, I think a lot of us are

basically satisfied with it.

Stephen Gutowski (21:28.939)

Yeah, I think that you hit that gun voter segment. There's the gun rights movement where you can find a lot of criticisms, including criticisms of Donald Trump for things like the bump stock ban. It's sort of what I was trying to get a little bit go because like the bump stock ban, well,

Kevin (21:32.91)

Yeah.

Kevin (21:41.678)

Yeah, I think the people who, um, the people who have a positive agenda for change, um, you know, who want statutory change, who want administrative changes are, are, are not finding a lot of allies, even among relatively sympathetic people. Um, so I think you have a lot of people. What's that?

Stephen Gutowski (21:46.795)

Yeah.

That'd be movement people, advocates, activists.

Stephen Gutowski (21:57.867)

Yeah. Then you go broader. Then you go broader to the gun voters. And I think you're right. Like, honestly, this is probably why Donald Trump doesn't see a lot, but that this may be a big reason why he didn't have a lot of competition on the issue from even Ron DeSantis or, or Nikki Haley or whoever else. Because I think gun voters don't look at Trump's record and think it was that bad. I mean, obviously he's got the Supreme court.

Kevin (22:03.886)

Yeah.

Stephen Gutowski (22:27.531)

nominations that led to the Bruin. That's obviously as big, just like with pro lifers, that's his big accomplishment. Not much else beyond that, that was super significant, but I think they just don't want more restrictions. I think they view as with, you know, not getting sweeping new gun restrictions as a win in and of itself.

Kevin (22:41.678)

Yeah.

Kevin (22:50.862)

Yeah, I also think some of the gun rights conversation has temporarily been swallowed up by the crime conversation and that you've got a lot of people like me, for instance, who have spent a lot of time writing and talking about the need

to take a more aggressive policing and prosecutorial stance toward crimes involving firearms. And that my view is that we really should be prosecuting more straw buyers.

Stephen Gutowski (22:56.779)

Mm.

Kevin (23:19.534)

uh, we should dedicate more resources to trafficking. Um, we shouldn't have a 60 % dismissal rate for, uh, gun possession crimes in Philadelphia, which we do, which is up from 30 % just a few years ago. So that's a policy choice. You know, that doesn't happen by accident. And, um, so I think that a lot of us who care about gun rights are also talking about, um, the flip side of that issue, which is that there are times when, you know, firearms need to be policed and.

parties that need to be kept from having them. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to say a felon can't buy a firearm. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to say a 16 year old can't buy a rifle or a handgun. These things don't strike me as being particularly controversial outside of a very small number of very committed ideologues.

And the more we're talking, I think, about crime, I think that just saps some of the energy out of the conversation about, well, how do we get a broader, more liberal, more constitutional understanding of gun rights in general?

Stephen Gutowski (24:18.539)

interesting. You know, and one thing I wonder too, like,

We've had all these new gun owners come in during the pandemic. There are millions of new gun owners, a lot of them from demographics that haven't traditionally owned firearms at the same rate as the national average, right? So you had a lot of minorities, a lot of women, and that trend was already ongoing in the gun -owning community, but it really accelerated during the pandemic. And I think there's a lot of expectation that that was going to...

change these dynamics that we're talking about, especially this idea of guns as a cultural signaler for a very specific kind of person. You know, a guy like me, right, is a suburban white guy or rural white guy who likes to buy a lot of guns or whatever, who's conservative and traditionally votes Republican or whatever. And...

And we haven't seen a lot of that effect yet, right? I mean, what do you make of that?

Kevin (25:27.118)

And we won't.

Well, one thing is people don't vote on issues. People vote on affiliation. So if you take black voters who are pro -life, do not really vote Republican in much larger numbers than black voters who are pro -choice. Because they look at the Republican party and they see an organization they think is full of people who don't like them and don't want them there and don't have their best interests at heart. So if they agree with them on an issue, whether it's...

You know, the median black voter was to the right of the median white voter on gay marriage until fairly recently, certainly before the Supreme Court stepped inside of that issue. It just doesn't work that way. So if you take, I mean, race is a good proxy for this stuff just because it's so strongly polarized. If you look at, you know, historically, which income groups will tend to vote Republican, it doesn't hold true for African Americans.

So for, I mean, the Democrats now do better among higher income voters than they used to, but for a long time, basically the higher your income was, the more likely you were to vote Republican. I work the opposite way for African -Americans for years, the higher income you were, if you were black, the more likely you were to identify with the democratic party. So, uh, we've got these, you know, social signifiers, race is one sex is one marital status is one, whether you live in a city or rural areas, another one, these things are very, very powerful. And, um,

And they exercise an enormous amount of influence on people's party affiliations. And it takes a lot of issue

disagreement to move people on that. And there's another, I don't want to make this whole conversation about Donald Trump, obviously, who I've spent way more time than I want to talking about in recent years. But one of his political gifts was understanding that...

Kevin (27:18.894)

The issues don't really matter that much. That isn't what moves people. What moves people is they think, well, this person cares about me. This person has something in common with me. This person has a view of the world in which I have a place that has some security and some prestige and some honor and some respectability. And those things are enormously powerful partisan motivators in a way that, well, is the top income tax rate going to be 41 % or 38 and a half percent?

Don't. I care about the tax rates a lot. I care about trade and trade liberalization and how we regulate the steel industry and how we regulate the oil and gas industry and all that stuff. Those things don't move very many voters with the exception of people who have a paycheck that depends on one of those things. You know, if you're someone who works,

Stephen Gutowski (28:08.075)

sure.

Kevin (28:09.774)

Um, on a gas rig and you've got a politician who says we're going to shut down oil and gas and it's all going to be, uh, flowers and solar power and happy thoughts. Yeah. That person may change his, um, voting behavior based on that. But most people vote according just to these longstanding social, social affiliations, um, which, which tend to be inherited. Um, you know, we, we think of ourselves as being, um, these independent autonomous, um,

free -minded people and the boomers in particular, you know thought of themselves as being rebels against their parents generation But one of the best indicators of someone's party identification was their parents party identification we tend to inherit our politics from our families and our communities and our social groups and Saying I have this view of the Second Amendment rather than that view of the Second Amendment probably isn't going to change that for very many people that was a long -winded answer I'm sorry, but um That's where it was.

Stephen Gutowski (29:05.483)

No, I think it makes sense to explain why you haven't seen like, you know, a black woman from the city who bought her first gun in 2020 become a Republican party line voter, right? What I would expect to see more of is some change within the Democratic Party on this particular issue. Okay, that's where I think you would start to see more of those.

the signs that this incredible gain of new gun owners, I mean, that NBC poll, I think that was up 10 points over a decade, which is a really unprecedented rise, at least in the last several decades that we've seen in gun ownership. And I don't know if that's materialized yet. Do you think it's coming or do you think it takes more time than what the...

couple of years we've gone through or for this stuff to kind of actually work its way into local politics and then filter up from there or is it overblown, the effect?

Kevin (30:15.79)

Yeah, I just don't think it's going to change. I think that...

Some people, I'm sorry about that dinging there. I was just trying to turn on my do not disturb, but I guess I didn't actually get it done. The number of people who were going to shift their party allegiance based on any particular given issue is pretty small.

Stephen Gutowski (30:25.547)

It's okay.

Kevin (30:41.454)

And the number of people who are going to shift it on the fact that they bought a gun is going to be even smaller. And

there's also maybe not a strong correlation between gun ownership and views on gun issues as people expect there to be. There are a lot of people I know who own guns who have very restricted views of gun rights. And some of these people, you know, particularly if you're a, if you're a single woman living in an urban area or an interring suburb and you've bought a firearm in the last couple of years because.

COVID freaked you out or the riots freaked you out or Donald Trump freaked you out or something else. That gun is not going to make a Republican voter out of you. And it's probably not going to make a gun rights voter out of you. And if you particularly bought it because you're concerned about crime, it may make you even more hostile to gun rights. There are people who think, well, I need one, but I don't want other people to have it. Or I want to make it more difficult for other people to have it. I think that's a misreading of..

Stephen Gutowski (31:36.107)

interesting. And so I guess where do you see the things going for me? And that seems like a pretty bleak picture for the the gun rights movement that the best you can hope for is what we already have, I guess, which is like, guns are this this cultural signal or that the Republican Party cares a lot about, or at least cares, only one party really cares about.

Kevin (31:55.31)

Well, I think we're.

Yeah. Well, I think the gun rights movement has good reason to be pretty satisfied with federal jurisprudence. The courts have done right, I think, and show many signs continuing to do so. What happened to you, as you know, I care a lot about the abortion issue. I've written a lot about it. And it took 50 years to get Roe v. Wade overturned. And once Roe was overturned, you had the whole...

pro -life movement, not knowing what to do next. And because they had focused so much on the Supreme Court and getting this done, and they've really dropped the ball politically since then. They screwed up in all these referenda. They've made some really bad decisions in the state legislatures. They just weren't ready politically for doing what they needed to do, which is the very hard, old fashioned democratic work of persuasion and argument and coalition building and compromise and all the rest of it.

And I think that there's an element of that in the gun rights movement where we tend to think, well, we've got the second amendment. Bill of rights is on our side. That's all we need. And it's great to have the bill of rights on your side. That's enormously important, but we've got a lot of work to do of explaining to people why these things are important, why we care about them, why it's good for society. Um, why these Nostrom's being pushed by the anti -gun people will do little or nothing to.

decrease the sort of things we'd like to see decreased, whether it's ordinary crime or these kind of histrionic manifesto mass shootings. And we need to do a better job of helping people understand that we care about those issues and that we have what I think are some pretty good policy ideas for them.

Kevin (33:42.734)

that we're not just taking a sort of callous view of this stuff and that, you know, the gun rights position isn't, well, I've got my AR -15 and I'm at home and I've got it sitting in my lap, so I don't have to worry about crime or anything else because I'm good to go. That's not how we think about stuff. And that's a cartoon and it's silly cartoon, but just the fact that it's silly cartoon doesn't mean it's not politically effective or important. It is.

So we've got a lot of work to do. You know, the, the whole thing of just bringing people out to the range and teaching them a little bit about stuff and having them do a morning or an afternoon where they handle some firearms and do some shooting is enormously effective in my experience. There's, there's, there's good anecdotal reason to think that that's a useful kind of proselytizing tool to demystify and sort of de -scarify this stuff.

We need to get the kind of Hollywood version of what firearms are like and what they're for and how they work out of people's heads. I've been writing about this issue for a long time and it's just the amount of invincible ignorance that you run up against is just astounding. There are people who are responsible people who are leaders in business and

sometimes in politics and in cultural organizations who really believe you can walk into a Walmart and buy a machine gun. And with...

I mean, nevermind without a driver's license. Um, there are people who really believe that, you know, uh, an AR 15 can shoot through, uh, you know, 10 inches of steel and six brick walls and, uh, you know, kill someone on the other side. Um, they really believe these weapons have these kinds of quasi magical, uh, powers. And, um, it sounds like I'm setting up a segue for my last column there, but I'm not getting to, which is kind of in my head though. So, uh,

Stephen Gutowski (35:23.083)

Yeah, actually, that's what I was going to say. It's a, that is a pretty good segue into the little, just a little bit of, uh, of what I was hoping to talk about next. Um, which, which is, you know, we republished one of your pieces from the dispatch that you wrote, uh, about the Washington post and their, um, there, they won the Pulitzer for this piece that they did where they essentially published.

graphic photos from mass shootings at schools that involved AR -15s and I just wanted to get into that a little bit with you before we end the show here and you know because we talked about this a lot on the Dispatch Live so we won't go as deeply into it here but I think there's still a couple things that we could hit for instance you know like you like you just set up but I think that one of the problems that I had with this P with the

Kevin (36:00.846)

Mm -hmm.

Stephen Gutowski (36:21.067)

what the post did is that it relies on this concept that you see a lot in major media, which is that if people just, that opposition to restrictive gun policies that a lot of editors or broadcasters would like to see implemented is mostly based off of ignorance or perhaps callousness.

that people just don't know how bad it is when somebody murders a bunch of children. And if we just showed them pictures, graphic photos of this, then they would understand and agree with us. Or either that, or they're just kind of monsters, so hol - solace people. I mean, that's the implication I get from this. They don't say that directly, necessarily. Yeah. And so, I don't know. Where does the Washington Post piece come down on that spectrum for you?

Kevin (36:57.326)

Mm -hmm.

Kevin (37:01.678)

in shock as a substitute for argument.

Kevin (37:11.342)

Well, so something you and I, I think maybe the slightest agreement about is that I'm not really particularly against the use of graphic imagery in journalism. I think it's often very useful. I think that in general, American newspapers and news outlets are too squeamish about things rather than not squeamish enough. I've been reporting for a long time and seen some genuinely awful things, some of which I think...

probably should have been photographed and put in more newspapers than they were. Now, of course, the idea that people killed with bullets fired from AR -15s are a special set of people and that people who are gunned down with nine millimeter handguns or 12 gauge shotguns or anything else are not in that special category of people is something that...

people like the Post's report or pieces like the Post's report are trying to create these artificial fake categories of things. And the Post's series was, I think, highly, highly propagandistic in that way. Yet it's propagandistic because it is made to carry out a political strategy rather than to be an act of journalism. And the political strategy is this. People who are in favor of gun control,

cannot for political reasons be very direct about what it is they want, which is essentially the prohibition of most, or all

firearms in the United States in private hands. So the thing that makes the AR -15 and rifles like that useful for lots of things, including doing horrible things, is the fact that it's semi -automatic and that it has a detachable box magazine, which makes it quick to reload. That also describes...

almost every handgun currently sold in the United States. And there's still a few revolver fans out there like me, but not very many of us. And, but it also describes the great majority of rifles sold in the United States now. You know, there are a few people who shoot bolt action rifles and lever action rifles and things like that. But well more than half of the rifles sold in the United States in a year are AR pattern rifles. And if you take all semi -automatic rifles with detachable magazines, you get different numbers if you ask different people, but it's probably,

Kevin (39:33.966)

something north of 80 % of the, of the rifle sold every year. Um, a great number of the shotguns sold now are semi -automatic as well, although not as many with, uh, detachable magazines. So if what you want to do is target the qualities of the AR -15 and similar rifles that, um, make them distinctive in that way, you're basically talking about a blanket ban on, on firearms, at least on firearms designs that are more recent than 19th century.

Although it's probably worth pointing out that, um, Americans have been buying semi -automatic rifles since 1903. When I guess it was, uh, was it Winchester that introduced the first semi -automatic, the 22 hunting rifle. It was 1903. It's either Winchester or Remington. I can't remember which one.

Stephen Gutowski (40:17.803)

Good question. I mean, definitely turn to the turn of the 19th century is when semi -automatic semi -automatics became a reliable common type of firearm.

Kevin (40:26.51)

Yeah. Uh, they've been around for a long time. You know, of course, I mean, this audience doesn't need to be told this, but AR -15 type rifles have been sold to American civilians since the early 1960s and, uh, without too much trouble for, for many of those years. Um, so what's, so what they're doing instead of presenting a case that's based on something that's very difficult to defend politically.

It's invent this iconic totemic thing about the AR -15 treated as some special dangerous weapon of war item. And because it's easier to run a campaign against a tiny minority than it is to run a campaign against a majority. It's easier to identify and limit one small particular thing for invective than a whole class of things. This is a very old fashioned kind of political calculation.

So we get these myths about the AR -15 and the Washington Post story was of course full of them. I don't want to go into the whole physics lecture here, but the idea that just velocity is something that makes something especially dangerous ignores the fact that there are a lot of bullets out there that move a lot faster than the 5 .56. There are a lot of AR type rifles that are chambered for different rounds. And every day you get hit by things going 96 % of the speed of light. You never notice it because they're very, very small. You know, mass matters too.

Stephen Gutowski (41:29.259)

People should read the full piece to get that.

Stephen Gutowski (41:39.563)

Certainly.

Kevin (41:51.566)

Uh, as I always point out to people, you know, people like Joe Biden always say, well, we don't want to take away your hunting rifles that you're going to use for legitimate purposes, which are multiple times more powerful than your typical five, five, six AR. Um, again, I want to be ghoulish about this and it's easy to talk about this in a way that makes you sound like, you know, I'm up to a man and you're, uh, you know, posturing, but there are a lot of people who get shot with five, five, six rifles who survive. Um,

you're not going to survive getting shot with a big game rifle. You're just not. It's made to kill bull elk and Cape buffalo and things like that. You're not going to you're not going to get through that. So whatever our criterion is, you know, it's impossible to draw up a criterion that really just covers scary looking black military derived rifles that does anything meaningful. So if you really want to, you know, confiscate.

Stephen Gutowski (42:29.003)

Yeah, certainly.

Kevin (42:46.574)

firearms, the United States, that's a conversation you can have. You can have the conversation about repealing the second amendment and all that stuff. But the people who are making these arguments don't really have the courage of their convictions. They refuse to be forthright about, you know, what their actual agenda is. And so they end up engaged in this kind of weird culture war, symbolic politics around this very small subset of firearms that aren't really particularly special.

Stephen Gutowski (43:14.443)

Yeah, and that's one of the things that I want to get at too is like, you know, one, obviously you're not saying that the AR -15 is not perfectly capable of killing people. It clearly is. And frankly, in my view, with, we're talking about weapons here, there's a lot of focus on the AR -15 and these sorts of mass shootings. And you can understand that they have been involved in a lot of the...

the most sensational ones, the worst mass shootings that have happened. So there's, you know, there's some, it also happens to be the most popular rifle in the country. I think there's some level of social proofing among these kind of shooters where there's a bit of copycatting going on, where the Sandy Hook shooter used the AR -15, so I'm gonna use the AR -15.

Kevin (43:42.094)

Mm -hmm.

Kevin (43:55.214)

Yes.

Kevin (44:01.838)

It's psychologically powerful on both sides, right? So there are people on the gun control side who see it as a special evil villainous thing. And there's a sort of, you know, kind of riotous violent ideology that takes the AR -15 as a symbol of freedom or nationalism or whatever their nihilistic particular agenda is. And so yeah, it's a culture war symbol on both sides, definitely.

Stephen Gutowski (44:06.187)

Yeah.

Stephen Gutowski (44:20.939)

Mm -hmm.

Stephen Gutowski (44:24.459)

And to me, I don't think that the weapon, mass murder has been carried out by all sorts of different weapons over the years, including lots of different kinds of firearms from bolt action rifles in the University of Texas shooting the shotgun, it's pump action shotgun. And there's Texas high school shooting that where 12 people were killed by the pump action.

Kevin (44:45.678)

dynamite and the worst school massacre in American history.

Stephen Gutowski (44:48.715)

Yeah, and I don't think that these kinds of events that they're documenting with these pictures are ones where you need any sort of specialized weaponry to, I mean, you're talking about killing innocent people at short ranges. It's not something that requires any sort of special super weapon to do, unfortunately. And that's the other half of it is that the pictures from these other events are also going to be equally as horrific, I can guarantee you, as the ones that The Washington Post published.

And, you know, it's not to me the publishing of graphic images that I object to. It's the logic that they're using because, you know, you can look at a similar time frame. Other even I believe Pulitzer winning stories that use graphic photos, including, you know, that the massacre of Ukrainians in Bukha by the Russian forces, which absolutely produced shocking graphic image images or even obviously all the coverage of

the October 7th massacre of Israelis by Hamas. But generally, my understanding of it in our industry has been that you publish these sorts of images as evidence for the lengths that this organized group is willing to go to to carry out their goals. Because you're trying to learn something about the psychology of the Russian military.

leadership or Hamas and the terrorist organizations and what how they think and what they're willing to how they operate and what they're willing to do whereas like I don't know what we're learning from seeing these images of individual killers who don't have any sort of ideological backing to what they're trying to like it just doesn't I don't think it actually informs anybody of anything and instead it's it's more of honestly it's more to

make their audience feel morally superior for agreeing that these guns should be banned because they can produce horrible images like this. And again, it's misleading. Yeah.

Kevin (46:52.302)

Yeah, it's, um, it's emotional manipulation, you know, and, and again, there's, there's a time for graphic images. I mean, one of my college colleagues, um, Jean -Marc Bourgeau was an AP photographer who won the Pulitzer prize for his photographs of the genocide in Rwanda. And, uh, these are nightmare inducing pictures and it's important that they, they got out there. Uh, I also think there's a case for, you know, running graphic images from people who've been killed by drunk drivers and other sorts of social issues that are important.

Stephen Gutowski (47:07.051)

Yeah, I totally agree.

Stephen Gutowski (47:11.787)

Yes.

Kevin (47:19.438)

Again, as an editor, I was a little more promiscuous with these kinds of images than maybe the averages.

Stephen Gutowski (47:23.786)

I just think that the posts justification was literally just that they're shocking images. I didn't see anything beyond that.

Kevin (47:29.102)

Right. And the post would, yeah. And they certainly do not, you know, have a similar standard when it comes to people who are victims of Islamic terrorism or people who are victims of ordinary crime in Washington. You know, they're, they're definitely making a propagandistic effort with this, with this piece. And the Pulitzer committee, of course, blessed it because that's what they do these days.

Stephen Gutowski (47:51.915)

Yeah. And I also don't have an issue with victims' families. If they feel these pictures should be out there, that's their decision and they're right. If we're talking about standards of journalism, I just didn't see a convincing case, especially one that would just limit outside of, like you're saying, propaganda. That would just limit the images to ones with shootings that involved an AR -15.

Again, you're gonna get equally horrific pictures from shootings with other sorts of guns or other kinds of mass killings. Getting run over by a car is not going to leave a pretty picture at the end of it either. The Waukesha parade killings. So I think it failed on that level, that basic level.

Kevin (48:32.366)
Yeah.

Kevin (48:40.558)
We've very much had the stamp of it, of a piece that came out of a committee meeting at which some people sat down and said, how do we want to appeal to surprise? And so what's the issue we can dig up? How do we take, how do we take an approach to it that will be propagandistic in the sort of way that's going to get us what we want, which is to reinforce our readers, preexisting prejudices and values, and to be awarded prizes by people who agree with us politically.

That's what this did. It's the opposite of journalism. It's public relations and And it's full of errors, you know, since my pieces point out it's full of mistakes from basic physics to you know Kind of how guns were to all sorts of stuff and what's particularly annoying about that is they just you know There are people out there if the Washington Post calls you or me will answer the phone You know and take a look at it

Stephen Gutowski (49:17.771)
That's another issue too, yes.

Stephen Gutowski (49:24.363)
All kinds of common area.

Stephen Gutowski (49:32.747)
And I've had post reporters in the past do that. Look, you know, I'm not trying to tarnish everyone who works at the Washington Post or even, and I'd be very happy to have editors involved with this piece or the Pulitzer committee, anyone from there who wants to discuss this decision and why they went this path or, you know, I'm happy to have them on to have a very civil discussion about it, as I'm sure you would be on over at the dispatch as well. But I just think they fell short here.

Kevin (49:54.446)
Me too.

Kevin (50:01.71)
Yeah, it was bad journalism and bad journalism done for bad reasons. You know, there are a lot of reporters who make mistakes and that's fine. You know, particularly reporters who do a lot of work about complicated things, you're gonna make mistakes. But this was something else. This was something that was put together in this way for a particular political reason. And yeah, it's a public relations campaign masquerading as journalism. And...

And then they'll sit around for the next six months and worry why people don't take newspapers seriously anymore and why demagogues get so much juice out of talking about fake news and things like that and why no one trusts them.

Stephen Gutowski (50:40.651)
Well, if people want to maybe sign up for reporting from an outlet that purchase things a little bit differently, I feel like you might have a solution.

Kevin (50:52.494)
Please do come over to thedispatch.com and become a subscriber. Most of our stuff is still delivered via our newsletters, although we also have things on the web. Most of it's paywalled. We don't do advertising really over the dispatch. I mean, maybe we will someday, but our model right now is to produce journalism that's worth time and money and then sell it to people in the form of subscriptions. And that seems to be working out reasonably well. So please do subscribe and buy gift subscriptions for all your friends.

Stephen Gutowski (51:19.243)

Yes, I'm a subscriber to Dispatch, so I recommend it to others as well. But yeah, so we appreciate you taking some time to come on and give us discussion. Hopefully we can have you on again in the future, one of my favorite conservative gun writers. So I definitely always appreciate your perspective. And of course, we have your piece republished at the reload with permission, so people can also find it there.

Kevin (51:21.326)

Thank you.

Kevin (51:43.566)

Thanks so much. I enjoyed the conversation.

Stephen Gutowski (51:45.579)

Absolutely. Well, that's all we've got for this week. If you want to sign up for the reload, you can also do that as well. We have memberships that give you exclusive access to hundreds of pieces of analysis and reporting that you won't find anywhere else. Head over to the reload .com and do that. If you want to just help us grow without, you don't have the resources to pay for a membership at the moment. You can of course, review this podcast, give us a nice rating and share it with people, leave a comment, all that kind of stuff helps. But.

That's all we've got for you this week. We will see you again real soon.