

Making a Difference



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My New Year's Resolution: Change the Parameters

Words matter. How we use them and allow others to define them matters more. For years I have enjoyed twisting my opponent's words and phrases to work against them. I considered myself quite an expert. Still, I have been tripped up, and realizing what had happened, I understand how essential it is to remain always vigilant.

For several weeks I have been struggling to answer online comments posted in response to an article in the *Bangor Daily News*. For the record I usually disagree with the majority of posters to BDN, and I have no responsibility to reply. Still, I agonized over my response to the posts, because I need to be able to answer the allegations, regardless of whether or not I do.

Today, the solution hit me. I had fallen prey to trying to answer the wrong question. I had allowed my opponent to define the parameters and frame the discussion from an

illegitimate position.

Here is the situation. In 2008 two men broke into a home in Maine. They attacked the father and then 10-year-old daughter with a machete. According to newspaper reports, the girl "...lost part of her skull due to blows to her head..." and the father "...lost part of his skull and brain, part of his vision and a finger." The mother and one brother escaped from the house, and a second brother was not home at the time of the attack.

It was a gruesome crime. The victims were left to bleed to death as the perpetrators searched the house for other family members and valuables. Amazingly, both survived, although with permanent damage.

Both attackers were convicted and received lengthy prison sentences. One appealed his case to the Maine Superior Court in mid-October. Like all spectacular crimes, as this one makes its way through the criminal justice system, it generates a lot of interest, news stories, and public opinion. (In writing this last sentence I was struck by the phrase "criminal justice system." Perhaps things would be different if we had, and lawyers studied, a "victim justice system.")

The question became: Who

should be allowed to own a machete; with the implied answer "no one." The comments fell into the usual categories. (1) Who needs a machete? (2) There should be regulations, registration for machetes. (3) Anyone who wants to get a machete is suspect. (4) Machetes should be banned because there is no legitimate reason to have one. (5) What kind of person would want a machete?

We've heard the arguments before. Only the nouns have changed. There is no question that this is a Second Amendment issue, which is why I feel the necessity to deal with the comments. Every country that has succeeded in eliminating or severely limiting individual gun ownership has consequently instituted a campaign to control the ownership of knives. There is legislation at a variety of levels of government to control knives in the United States.

Defending the ownership of machetes except in the subtropical regions of the country seems difficult. I admit that I have a visceral repugnance when I consider them. Through news items, literature, and movies they have a strong association with horrendous violence.

Actually, I have good, personal memories of machetes. As a child

I lived in Hawaii, and they were a common tool. I have pleasant memories of pineapples and coconuts quickly opened with the huge blades. I remember smiling, gentle, men performing the tasks. I know they used those tools to clear the jungle of underbrush.

But I had to dredge up those pleasant memories. What comes immediately to mind is what I know from history and the present wholesale, brutal slaughter.

Still, for days I argued with myself. How can I defend this? Theoretically, I knew that the answer is very simple. Every year at the Gun Rights Policy Conference we re-ratify the Farmer Resolution. In 2010 recognizing the danger to knife ownership, we modified it to conclude: An assault on any type of arm is an assault on all arms. It is an important mantra. To give up one type of arm is to give up all arms.

Just governments have nothing to fear from an armed citizenry. Just the opposite. An armed citizenry can defend both themselves and their country. Many governments are not just, however, and they understand they will not survive with an armed people. For many years I studied karate. The Okinawans who developed the "Open Hand" or "Empty Hand" were an oppressed people. They were ruled for centuries by their stronger neighbors. All were harsh rulers. The native islanders were allowed absolutely no weapons. They learned to use both their bodies and simple tools as weapons.

The inherent despair of a people really came home to me when I made my jo. It is a short, thick piece of wood. I made mine in

the traditional way, wrapping a cut-down broom handle in tape. I feel anguish whenever I pick it up. Imagine being reduced to using broken farm implements as one's only means of defense. Imagine being forbidden to have a knife, a sword, a blade of any kind. Don't bother imagining a gun.

"Who needs a machete?" is easy. Alan Gottlieb summed it up a few years ago. He said, "It is the Bill of Rights; not the Bill of Needs." However, as soon as I answered the question "Who should be allowed to have a machete?" with my glib, "Anyone," I was struck with the vision of the carnage in the Pittston home.

Finally, I came to an understanding. I was trying to answer the wrong questions. All of them centered on the machete. Our problem is not with a particular item. It is not the thing with which we should concern ourselves. It is the people.

It was the people that tripped me up each time I tried to answer the comments. These two horrible people who should live whatever time they have to live behind bars.

The machete is to knives what machine guns were to firearms. They are extremely powerful types of their genre. But, there is nothing inherently vicious in either. They are superior tools under certain circumstances. They are neither good nor evil. The people who use them are.

So, through an agonizing two weeks I am back where I was years ago. The journey was necessary, apparently, to clarify my understanding. To an outsider it could seem ridiculous. I never wavered in my answers, only in their application. And the

importance of the exercise was to clarify the battle.

We get caught up in these skirmishes over specific items and can lose sight of the essence of the war. It is not a matter of size or quantity or ability to be used to do harm. It is a matter of free people making decisions of what to do with their lives.

I believe that the majority of people are decent and honest. I believe that the majority of people are capable of making good choices. Decent, honest, sensible people should not be treated as criminals.

This year I resolve to change the parameters when others define situations inappropriately. This year I resolve to control the conversation. (Something my husband and friends might think I do without a formal resolution.)

W&G

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