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Breaking News...
BREAKING NEWS

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Debating guns is never smooth sailing

No need to go overboard in either direction, but many do

"Neil Steinberg"
There, I've made public my part of the list of 1.3 million Illinoisans who hold Firearm Owner's Identification cards. If Attorney General Lisa Madigan wants to reveal the rest, that's her business — and theirs, of course. I'm willing to out myself because that's my job, but can also see how others might be reluctant.

Like so much in databases, the list is deceptive. I possess an FOID card — Maxon's gun shop required it to rent guns when I took my boys target shooting — but do not actually own firearms.

Why not? I've already got the card. Guns have a certain glamor, a cold murderous beauty. And a gun can be handy under certain situations — if you see bad guys in black and white striped shirts, black masks and caps, holding sacks for their loot, creeping across your lawn at midnight. And target shooting is fun.

But I don't own firearms because — and I know I risk drawing the wrath of the National Rifle Association by saying this — guns are dangerous.

Not just dangerous in the wrong hands or dangerous unless handled properly, guns have a constant inherent danger, because of what they are: machines designed for efficient killing. And their danger is directly proportionate to their availability for use — one gun, stored in a locked box in the basement, is only a little dangerous, but also only a little useful. Many guns, loaded and sitting out around your home, are very available and also very dangerous. The more ready a gun is for the rare moments when it may be needed, the more dangerous it is every other moment.

That many adults would disagree with this obvious truth illustrates an aspect of the debate that doesn't get discussed — emotion. Mayor Daley is pushing for handgun control, and while I agree, I take issue with his flustered, sweaty, raving approach.

There is too much passion to the gun debate already.

On one side, you've got the NRA, and they're in a constant lather — our precious constitutional rights are endangered! The 2nd Amendment (but not the "well-regulated" part) is threatened! The gun owners I hear from are in a fear frenzy and immune to uncertainty — they know the world is out to get them, that their guns keep them safe, and anyone suggesting the most rational restrictions — make 30-shot-clips illegal — is striking at the core of their security.

On the other side, the gun opponents have a similar, if more rational and restrained,

passion: guns killed someone I love. They're a menace and we need them off our streets NOW. They radiate a grim, mournful outrage.

On this issue, I turn, not to the mayor, not to either impassioned side, but to the most dispassionate people I know of — maritime actuaries. Insurance providers for ships. We've been seeing a rise in piracy off the African coast, and the question always is: Why not arm the ships? A few assault rifles will drive off that skiff of Somalia riff-raff. If ever someplace needs guns, merchant ships would seem to be it.

Wrong. Because insurers won't generally insure an armed ship.

"Underwriters perceive ship crews having guns as an unacceptable hazard for a number of reasons," said Jim Craig, president of the American Institute of Marine Underwriters in New York. "One is injuries to themselves, because they're not properly trained. Giving them weapons causes more problems than it's worth."

Then there is the issue of putting into port. America is the land of guns, but other nations, with sanity-based gun policies, don't appreciate Americans docking with their arsenals.

"I have a number of friends who were sailing with private vessels around the world and the problem they run into is there are countries that absolutely ban firearms and you have firearms on your ship and they throw you in jail," said Glenn McCarthy, of the David Agency in Elmhurst.

"It's not a good idea," said Harry Yerkes, president of the American Hull Insurance Syndicate in New York. "Arming crews, because they're not professionally trained, would be just like giving guns to the kids in the backyard. I've heard the joke a million times: If you put a shotgun on a ship for self-defense, any crew will pay anything to shoot the cook."

Guns are not even good on ships likely to meet pirates because guns "invite escalation," said Yerkes. "In general, if you shoot at someone, they're going to shoot back. Firing an RPG at an oil tanker is not that great."

To me, if it's a bad idea to arm a container vessel going through the Gulf of Aden, it's a worse idea to arm your bungalow on Golf Road. But that's just me. If having a MAC-10 makes you feel better, by all means and God Bless America. But does it really upset your world if the magazine in that weapon holds 10 bullets instead of 30? Really? That I can't understand. Maybe if you explain it in an angry tirade, with lots of personal insults and capital letters, it will begin to make sense. Or maybe not.

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