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5 on 45: Is culture war getting in the way of solving gun violence?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

DIONNE: I'm E.J. Dionne and I'm a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program at Brookings. And like a lot of Americans, I've been involved in the gun debate a long time. As a columnist, I've written a lot of columns in support of gun control, in support of measures such as background checks, an assault weapons ban, bans on gun stocks, and other ways to try to protect Americans from mass shootings and other forms of violence. In the course of making these arguments, I run into a lot of hostility from people in the pro-gun community, and one of the things you hear a great deal of in this argument is that those of us who are in favor of gun control are somehow trying to attack the way of life, a form of culture of people in rural areas. People who support gun control are cast somehow as elitist who have no respect for our fellow Americans. I've never written in that spirit at all. I had a dear godfather and my uncle who was a hunter, who was a gun owner. I have a dear brother-in-law who was also a gun owner when he grew up in Nebraska. I've never been a gun owner myself and I have never wanted to go hunting, but none of the advocacy I've engaged in was intended to go after someone's way of life. But I've heard that argument so often, that those of us seeking saner gun laws, gun laws much more like those in virtually every other democracy in the world, are somehow engaged in a culture war. That's why I was moved to offer an argument this week in my column in The Washington Post taking on the whole culture war argument.

I began with one of my favorite old jokes about the liberal who is so open minded that he can't even take his own side in an argument. But what is said in the column is that those of us who support gun control have been told for years that we should not take our own side in the argument, that if we do we will only hurt our cause. Those of us who support restrictions on firearms are told that our advocacy turns off Americans in small towns and we are supposed to do everything we can to show that we really, honestly, truly, cross-our-hearts, positively love gun owners, and wouldn't for an instant think anything ill of them. I am all for people showing respect and reaching out across cultural lines. But what I wrote in the column is that I find it very odd that those with extreme pro-gun views, those who are pushing for new laws to allow people to carry just about anywhere, anytime, are never called upon to model a similar empathy toward people on

the other side, toward children killed, toward the mourning parents left behind, toward people in urban neighborhoods suffering from violence, and by the way, toward the majority of Americans who don't own guns. Yes, a majority of us don't own guns. There is a dispute in the surveys about the exact number, but no dispute about that majority, somewhere between 58 and 68 percent of Americans live in households without guns.

But no one who belongs to the NRA is ever asked to prove they respect our way of life, and rarely is it pointed out that the logic of the gun lobby's position is to create a world in which everyone will need a gun whether we want one or not. What else are we supposed to think when people in the gun lobby talk about arming the teachers or arming the students. I reported on Lebanon's civil war in the 1980s and I can assure you that a heavily armed country is not an ideal or safe place to live. The other thing that really troubled me with the attacks on these brave students and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida who have had the guts to speak up, who didn't get the memo that you're not supposed to speak out in favor of gun control. Their witness has been very powerful and it does seem to be moving the country. No wonder that there are conservatives out there people like Bill O'Reilly or Jack Kingston who've actually gone after these students. Bill O'Reilly said that the media were promoting opinions by teenagers who are in an emotional state and facing extreme peer pressure in some cases. That was Bill O'Reilly, you're talking about condescension, these kids are strong, they're smart, and they're telling us things that we need to hear.

As I said in the beginning of this podcast, I truly respect people who disagree with me on all kinds of issues, and I respect people who disagree with me on this issue. I honestly find it harder and harder to understand their position when we have one mass shooting after another. And when the United States stands out from the rest of the world in the number of mass shootings we have. We cannot go on like this. We cannot be a country that refuses to act in the face of this violence. I want to reach across all lines we can. I love discussions among people who disagree. But if we wait to act until our cross cultural understanding is complete, many more people who might have lived, will die. I don't think that should be acceptable to us as Americans. We have to act and we have to stop all the talk about culture wars.

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