

I was a devoted NRA member – then they lost me

Your Turn

Ross K. Baker
Guest columnist

My academic colleagues would probably be appalled to learn that I was once a member of the National Rifle Association. I have never included the fact on my resume or discussed it in polite university circles. My colleagues would probably be less surprised if I owned up to being a Scientologist or a survivalist, but the NRA and I go back a long way.

My dad signed me up as an NRA member at the age of 12 and I became a faithful reader of the American Rifleman and compared my membership to that of being a Boy Scout or a member of 4-H. My dad looked upon the NRA as entirely wholesome, and so did I.

When my dad presented me with a new .22 caliber Mossberg rifle, it came, as he saw it, with the need to learn marksmanship and gun safety. In a time when I would be facing the draft, it would endear me to my drill instructor in boot camp that I knew one end of a rifle from the other. It was like learning the manly art of boxing.

Not my father's NRA

In college, I drifted away from hunting and target practice and devoted my time to studying and girls; more of the latter than the former. But in 1968, the



Gun rights advocates demonstrate on May 5, 2018, in Dallas, Texas.

JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

NRA became front and center in my mind with the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert Kennedy. That year, I was living in Washington, D.C., and attended a protest rally at the headquarters of the NRA, which was then located downtown.

Looking back on that event and the passions that were present, I have to remind myself that the weapons that killed King and Kennedy were, respectively, a hunting rifle and a handgun. These were “normal” weapons that were adequate for hunting and home safety. Machine guns had long been heavily regulated and effectively banned, and rapid-fire sporting rifles were a rarity.

When Congress enacted the assault weapons ban in 1994, I thought it a curi-

ous move because of the fact that – then at least – these kinds of weapons were functionally not really different from conventional long guns: one trigger-pull, one shot. I could not have imagined that extended magazines manufactured after the 1994 ban expired, recently banned bump stocks and further modifications would turn these guns into instruments of mass murder. Nonetheless, I did not find the NRA’s position unreasonable.

I continued to defend the NRA, even though I believed that the framers of Constitution had militias specifically in mind when they wrote the Second Amendment because of their apprehensions about standing armies and their respect for the gun-savvy citizen – soldiers such as the Minutemen.

The day the NRA lost me forever

What led to my final break with the organization was a chance encounter with an NRA event in Northern Virginia, probably in 2004. I had been attracted to a show of Civil War memorabilia near Dulles Airport and discovered that there was an NRA gun show at an adjacent venue.

As I wandered over to check out the NRA event, I was astonished by how many people were openly brandishing guns even before they entered the hall. While I was taking in all of this, I was lured to an NRA enrollment table with

the offer of a discounted ticket to the gun show. By rejoining the NRA after so many years, I would not only get a discount on the ticket but also an NRA ball cap.

Most of what I saw inside the gun show was a lot of trading and selling of guns and ammunition, but what grabbed my attention and appalled me were the number of vendors selling Nazi memorabilia or knock-offs. The best possible interpretation of these vendors was that they were selling the Nazi items to World War II reenactors, but the more I observed, the more I became convinced that my initial understanding was naive. In some cases at least, these items were being purchased as objects of veneration.

That was the day the NRA lost me forever.

Today’s NRA is a degraded and morally compromised organization that bears no relationship to the one I looked up to as a child.

Its defense of firearms use is indiscriminate. It makes the preposterous argument that the mass murders will cease only when every American is armed to the teeth. The NRA case that everyone should be packin’ caused me to send them packin’.

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AVID aims to help low-income kids finish college

Your Turn

Richard Whitmire

Guest columnist

For the first, time it seems possible that we’re figuring out how to accomplish an agonizingly elusive goal: ensuring that low-income students not just enter college but complete college.

The latest evidence emerged this week when Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a national college readiness nonprofit found in many high-poverty schools, released its college success numbers. AVID, which works with teachers to guide low-income, minority students into college-prep pathways – and give them the tools to succeed – was able to track its 82,807 alumni from three graduating classes.

Bottom line: 42% of its alumni earned four-year degrees, compared with 11% of similar students. That’s

striking, considering the students AVID targets: So-so students who at some point, in some class or on some test, showed a glimmer of college potential.

Those positive results from AVID add to other evidence that we are on the verge of a breakthrough on solving a problem that has plagued both K-12 schools and colleges for years: While we have been moderately successful at luring more low-income students into college, we’ve done an abysmal job at making sure they walk away with a degree.

What AVID achieved is strikingly similar to other efforts aimed at the same goal. The big charter school networks that serve the same type of students are now seeing the fruits of their determined pushes to boost their college success rates. The rates for their alumni range from 25% to 50% higher than expected, depending on the network.

It is probably no coincidence that the college success numbers – boosting rates by a range between two and four times beyond what would predicted – are roughly the same with both the charters and AVID. That’s what happens when students get the right preparation and the right college guidance.

Also optimistic: Many universities, acknowledging past failures in letting so many fragile students drift away, are increasing their efforts to turn that around, admitting more low-income students and tracking them through college to ensure they don’t drop out.

Also encouraging: More universities have agreed to ramp up their acceptances of community college graduates, perhaps the nation’s biggest reservoir of low-income students.

Yet more encouraging data is coming from the fast-growing number of independent college counseling groups dedicated to providing data-driven advice

to students in high-poverty high schools that can’t afford it.

The AVID news is particularly hopeful because the program – now in 7,000 schools serving 2 million students annually – operates in traditional high schools serving some of the nation’s poorest neighborhoods.

Before AVID, not that many students from this district in California’s Inland Empire went to college, especially four-year colleges. That changed. “We’re pushing our students toward four-year colleges,” said Lockman.

Given the dismal history we’ve endured of seeing so many low-income students fail to earn college degrees, it may be hard to believe a breakthrough is at hand. But it’s happening.

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Our View

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the job of being an elected leader. “Elected” means we are the bosses. But good bosses don’t berate – because they know it rarely works.

Likewise, when political arguments online become fact-free volleys of “Orange Clown” and “Killary,” no one is really listening. No one is being convinced. We’re just wallowing in muck that damages the conversation.

When a comedian poses with a prop severed head of the president or when a meme depicts that president as a hangman on the gallows with the caption “I’m ready for Hillary,” we are getting our jollies from incitements to violence. (Side note: If the word “snowflake” or phrase “he was asking for it” just popped into your head, you’re part of the problem.)

The message is simple: If we want a

better political climate, we have to make it.

Have a beef with an elected official? Write a letter to the editor or the lawmaker’s office. Make a sign. Picket. Organize. Tell others about it without ALL CAPS, a photo with words on it, or !!!!!. Hey, maybe even vote or volunteer for a campaign.

To be clear, we adamantly support the American right to disagree with any elected or appointed official, even loudly, even disruptively. But when vitriol is the only tool on the workbench, we can’t build a staircase into the light.

So let’s stop sharing that fact-free meme. Don’t buy that “Rope, Tree, (Enemy) – Some Assembly Required” T-shirt. How about no name-calling? We could even stop casting the “other side” as evil because, well, mostly they’re not.

Let’s think for ourselves, then speak for ourselves in a way that could genuinely advance a point of view. Isn’t that what all the yelling is about?

Erickson

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have had to design for the weather projected for the future; waters and frosts being a big concern.

Locations near lakes, rivers and areas subject to flooding or rising water pose a construction concern. Designs would have to have a certain distance above a projected high-water elevation. Fifty years ago, we designed for a 50- and 100-year water/flood elevation. There are storms that are predicted to occur once every 50 to 100 years.

We have had several 50-year storms locally or in Minnesota in the past five years. In the past five years they have

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estimated at least two storms in the east to be 1,000-year storms.

I believe science is settled on global warming. The U.S. government is one of the few in the world that does not accept the facts of global warming. I believe this is a political choice by many of our elected officials who we elected to serve the people.

This is the opinion of St. Cloud resident Bob V. Erickson.

Pitts

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studied all the time about how she would have to give it up and one day she said, ‘I just decided I’m not going to let old Master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it.’ She got up and give it something out of a bottle and pretty soon it was dead.”

“The brief mentions of the former owners were defamatory,” one tourist complained.

And wouldn’t you pay to see her chastise Mary Armstrong for “defaming” her owners? “You see,” the former Missouri slave once explained, “My mama belong to old William Cleveland and old Polly Cleveland, and they was the meanest two white folks what ever lived, ‘cause they was always beatin’ on their slaves. ... (Polly) whipped my little sister, what was only nine months old, to death. She come and took the diaper off my little sister and whipped till the blood jes’ ran – jes’ ‘cause she cry like all babies do.”

Then there’s one Jamie Hollingsworth who wrote: “Very racist. If you’re white, don’t go.”

No, if you’re white, please do. If only so you never sound as ignorant as Jamie Hollingsworth.

It would be disheartening at any time to be reminded that such pusillanimous thinking still exists. It’s particularly disheartening in August of 2019, as we mark the 400th anniversary of the beginning of slavery. For as much as some of us may wish otherwise, the “peculiar institution” is no artifact of the dead past. It shaped today. It is shaping tomorrow. And we cannot fix that until we face that.

Yet some people still clutch their pearls when the very word is invoked. They need to get over it.

Rhett Butler was fiction. But Fountain Hughes, Lou Smith and Mary Armstrong were assuredly real. And if you’re one of those who is vexed by that reminder?

Well frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.

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Sinclair

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bule area with a transaction window between two sets of double doors. The entrances will be buzzer-operated with camera monitors in place.

Of course, the reality is that school staff will know the vast majority of people coming to our school doors. But if they don’t know the visitor, this approach provides us a safer way to learn about who is visiting and why.

For Sauk Rapids-Rice, this is only the start. We are collaborating with local law enforcement, community leaders and emergency planning experts. We recognize that school security strategies must incorporate an all-encompassing approach, including revised safety protocols, new technology,

building modifications and increased mental health support districtwide.

No doubt, providing safe and secure environments for our kids is complicated as we try to balance the desire to secure our buildings with the need to create productive learning environments. This effort requires an ongoing commitment because there are no easy answers.

At the local level, we need to harness our community resources and ingenuity. We know we must work together to keep our schools safe and secure, because we know that safe schools and safe communities go hand in hand.

This is the opinion of Sauk Rapids-Rice Superintendent Aaron Sinclair. Super Spotlight is published the third Sunday of the month and features the superintendents of the Rocori, St. Cloud, Sartell-St. Stephen and Sauk Rapids-Rice districts.