

Testimony of Ryan Busse
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I grew up on a ranch where guns were an integral part of our lives. When we had time for fun, it often involved guns; hunting and shooting with my father or brother or friends. Guns were also tools for work and protection. For me, firearms came to represent important parts of my culture, something quintessentially American.

But I was also taught that responsibility and safety are required to maintain this freedom. My dad insisted on this every time we touched a gun. Today I teach my own boys the same things.

I got a job in the firearms industry after I graduated from college. I helped build up a gun company and I was nominated for the most prestigious industry awards. For the first part of my career, the industry insisted on the same responsibility that my dad taught me. In fact, prior to the mid-2000s, the industry would not allow any tactical gear to be displayed in the main portions of industry trade shows. AR-15s and inexpensive pistols were outliers and represented only a small fraction of sales.

But by 2007 that self-imposed responsibility was mostly gone and everyone adhered to the same messaging: praising anything that sold more guns and attacked *anything or anyone* that might slow sales.

Even after mass shootings we were to cheer the “hell no” everyone knew would be the response to any proposal no matter how modest. Everyone knew the debate around those proposals would create profitable sales booms, and nothing else mattered.

The industry transformation was dramatic. Before 2007, gun sales never exceeded 8 million units in one year with almost no sales of assault rifles. By 2016, the industry was selling more than 16 million guns, and between January 1, 2020 and January 7, 2021, the industry sold more than 22 million guns. Most of those were handguns, and about 4 million were AR-15s. This represents a tripling of annual sales in less than 15 years; this expansion has produced huge increases in profits, with Smith and Wesson recently reporting an annual profit of more than \$243 million.

When people talk about our national challenges and what has changed in America, no rational person can look past this monumental transformation in the gun market.

This growth made fortunes for some, and it also brought modernization to the gun industry. Inexpensive polymer-framed handguns became the primary focus for most companies. Business pressures sped the investments that increased efficiencies, leading to much lower

prices for what we called “commodity handguns.” These are the same guns that are now flooding into urban areas of our nation.

These guns are cheap to make—many with hard costs of less than \$100 each but an average retail price of more than \$400. As profits increased, companies found more freedom to maneuver on price. When dips in the market happened, prices could be lowered to spur sales. Sometimes manufacturers even gave guns away to keep volumes up. It was not uncommon to see “buy 3 get one free” offers and that drove prices even lower. I saw this happen dozens if not hundreds of times in my career. I never heard anyone question what the proliferation of low-cost guns might mean for the country.

Growth pressures of the industry also meant that dealers and sales practices that should have received far more scrutiny were excused in order to maintain volume. No one was supposed to slow down or ask questions because doing so would slow sales. This is why there has been such vehement opposition from the industry to confirming an ATF Director. A good regulator will ask questions.

I wrote a book about my time in the industry, and about my battles to confront all of this. About how our country has changed. The experiences that informed the book and my experiences since the book came out have taught me much that is important for this hearing today.

First, balancing gun ownership with responsibility is absolutely central to the wellbeing of our democracy. I hear it from people all across the country every day.

Second, and very importantly for this committee, the feedback to my book proves to me that there are millions of gun owners who want to maintain their rights, but also want to be a part of the solution. They welcome reasonable policies that address the changed realities of guns and gun violence in America. They are tired of the loud extremists hogging the mic.

Third, we need to move forward on policies like universal background checks and raising the minimum age to purchase long guns to 21; the vast majority of gun owners agree.

I am one of those gun owners, and I am here today to represent the people who understand we cannot exist in a country where rights are not balanced with responsibilities and regulations. We cannot continue to allow profits to outweigh the rights of all citizens in places like Uvalde and Buffalo and Highland Park.

I am here to say that I know much has changed over the past 15 years, and it's high time we do some rebalancing to address those changes.