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Opinion: What if Zimmerman had not been armed?

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With every detail of the George Zimmerman trial playing out on the 24/7 news cycle, the expression “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people” comes to mind.

Yes, people kill people. But it is guns that so often turn them into killers.

Guns change everything. Guns embolden bullies, racists, wimps and would-be-vigilantes and turn spectators into actors. People armed with guns believe they have the power – and sometimes even the right – to take the law into their own hands.

Without a gun, Zimmerman – who weighed about 200 pounds at the time he shot Trayvon Martin — was an unlikely killer. Adam Pollock, the owner of the gym where Zimmerman had trained, testified for the defense that Zimmerman was “physically soft,” rating his fight training skills at about a 1 on a scale of 1 to 10. In short, he was no fighter.

Consider the facts of the Trayvon Martin shooting – and then imagine that the neighborhood-watch volunteer had been unarmed. Patrolling the neighborhood in response to a spate of burglaries, he sees Martin and decides that he seems suspicious. Zimmerman calls the police, while continuing to watch Martin closely. Without a gun, would the 5-foot-8-inch, “physically soft” Zimmerman have ever followed the 6-foot tall teen? Would he have approached Martin without police support?

Just walk away

I doubt it. “Stand Your Ground” laws say that no one has to walk away from a perceived threat of attack. Yet, if unarmed, many people would do just that: walk away. Carrying a gun increases the gun owner’s feelings of power – and potentially neutralizes any advantage an opponent may have in size or strength.

The mere presence of a gun can escalate simple interactions into deadly ones.

In the six months alone since the Dec. 14, 2012 shootings in Sandy Hook, an estimated 5,000 people have died nationwide from gun violence. This exceeds the number of American troops killed in the Iraq War.

Each year, tens of thousands of people are killed by guns in the United States. Gun violence is the leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 24. A recently issued report by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council found that “the U.S. rate of firearm-related homicide is higher than that of any other industrialized country: 19.5 percent higher than the rates in other high-income countries.” Clearly, America has a gun problem.

Yet, the Zimmerman case has sparked surprisingly little conversation about guns and gun control. Perhaps people are feeling fatigued, disheartened or defeated. In the wake of the Sandy Hook shootings, gun control advocates somewhat naively assumed that the time was ripe for legislating reasonable limits on gun ownership, for banning assault weapons and for requiring background checks and waiting periods for those wishing to purchase firearms.

The NRA lobbied hard and Congress stood its ground: no new gun laws were enacted. Some states have stepped in to fill the federal void. Connecticut, Colorado, Delaware, Maryland and New York have all passed laws that, at a minimum, have expanded background checks on would-be gun purchasers.

New York’s new laws, which are the toughest in the nation, also strengthen the ban on assault weapons, limit the capacity of ammunition magazines and require background checks on anyone buying guns or ammunition. States such as New Jersey and California are considering new laws that would regulate assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines.

Concealed weapons

Other states, however, continue to block gun control measures. In June, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval vetoed a bill that would have required a background check for anyone seeking to buy a gun in the state. Illinois just became the 50th state to allow people to carry concealed weapons.

In Florida, where Zimmerman shot and killed Martin, there is a continued increase in both gun ownership and gun violence. Gun-related homicides have increased by 38 percent between 2000 and 2011.

Regardless of the verdict in the Zimmerman trial, it is important to remember one thing. It was a gun that transformed the neighborhood watch volunteer into a killer. Had Zimmerman not been armed, Martin might well be here to tell us what happened that night.

Or perhaps – without the gun — there would be no story to tell.

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