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gun handy, he pulled it out and aimed it in the direction of the goose. Seeing this, the goose-owner (who had come to fetch his bird) saw the need to protect his property and pulled out his own gun. They faced off — over a goose!

Our neighbors were both good, admirable, law-abiding people, but their guns had led to a dangerous confrontation. The N.R.A. might say that guns don't kill people, geese kill people, but in the absence of firearms they wouldn't have menaced each other with axes or hammers.

The sheep-owner's wife eventually persuaded the men to stand down. Good sense prevailed, the goose survived, and so did the neighbors.

But I think of that episode because it underscores the role that guns too often play in our society: an instrument not of protection but of escalation.

Lovers throw plates at each other and then one indignantly reaches for a gun — maybe just to scare the other. And then, too often, something goes wrong.

One study, reported in Southern Medical Journal in 2010, found that a gun is 12 times more likely to result in the death of a household member or guest than in the death of an intruder. Another study in 1993 found that gun ownership creates nearly a threefold risk of a homicide in the owner's household.

Far too many Americans are like Nancy Lanza, who may have thought that her guns would make her safer, and then was killed with them. Something similar happened in Yamhill, where a troubled teenager took a gun that his grandmother owned and shot her dead. The N.R.A. is right that most guns are used safely, but it's also true that guns are more likely to cause tragedies than to avert them.

President Obama said that there have been 900 violent gun deaths since Sandy Hook, but that was a rare error. He perhaps was speaking of gun homicides only, but he should also include gun suicides — which are even more common and certainly qualify as violent firearms deaths.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calculates that each year there are more than 11,000 gun homicides and nearly 19,000 gun suicides. That's 30,000 firearms deaths a year in the United States. At that rate, there have already been some 2,500 violent gun deaths since Sandy Hook.

David Hemenway, a public health specialist at Harvard, says that having a gun at home increases the risk of suicide in that household by two to four times.

To reduce auto deaths, we've taken a public health approach that you might call "car control" — driver's licenses, air bags, seat belts, auto registration. The result is a steady decline in vehicle fatalities so that some time soon gun deaths are likely to exceed traffic fatalities, for the first time in modern American history.

There are no magic solutions to the gun carnage in America. But in the same spirit as what we've accomplished to make driving safer, President Obama has crafted careful, modest measures that won't solve America's epidemic of gun violence but should reduce it.

If we could reduce gun deaths by one-quarter, that would be 7,500 lives saved a year. Unless life in America really is cheap, that's worth it.

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