

Opinion
OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Pistols at the Pool, Machine Guns on Parade and Nothing We Can Do
By John Hamilton
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Bloomington, Ind. – I'M the mayor of a small Midwestern city and I'm at my wit's end about guns. My first job is to help keep my city safe, but two recent events showed me the limits of what I can do.

Item 1: On a beautiful day this summer, our public swimming pool was full of kids taking lessons and their families enjoying the sun. A man arrived and walked around the pool, with a handgun visible on his hip. He was not a law enforcement officer in uniform. Just a parent, it seemed, unknown to most there, walking around the pool, packing a pistol. No one had any idea if it was loaded or not. You can imagine the stress and worry this led to, with the memories of Orlando (and San Bernardino and Charleston and Newtown and on and on) fresh in people's minds.

Item 2: For our annual Fourth of July parade downtown, the sidewalks and streets were packed with thousands of children, parents, students, retirees – all in their patriotic finest. A float rolled by featuring armed men from a private firearms training center with military-style machine guns held at the ready, ammunition belts attached, atop a pickup truck. The celebration took a nervous-making turn.

This is all happening in Indiana, with a governor, Mike Pence, who has long fought against any reasonable restrictions on guns. His extreme views on this, and other issues, are apparently one reason Donald J. Trump chose him as his running mate. The nation as a whole will now get a better look at the kind of attitude on gun laws that has earned Governor Pence an A rating from the National Rifle Association – and has made it harder for me to do what my constituents want when it comes to making them safe.

The people of Bloomington expect their mayor to protect them against violence. I received dozens of calls, emails and desperate messages after the incidents at the pool and the parade, urging me to act to prevent potential disaster.

My constituents aren't against all guns. They respect Second Amendment rights. They just don't want handguns carried around at their public pools. They don't want machine guns in their parades. Nor does my Police Department. Nor do I.

And in fact, my city used to have reasonable restrictions in place on the possession of firearms in parks, city facilities and at City Council meetings.

But five years ago the State Legislature prohibited cities from enforcing virtually any individual local regulation of firearms, ammunition or their

accessories. The statehouse said we couldn't restrict what kind of guns or ammunition can be carried, displayed, worn, concealed or transported, with a few very limited exceptions like courtrooms and intentional displays at official public meetings.

The state did nothing to fill this vacuum it created. It did create one exception to protect itself – prohibiting anyone but officers, legislators or judges from carrying guns in the statehouse. And in one more technical twist, the state said if any city ever tries to restrict firearms or ammunition, it would be subject to paying triple the lawyers' fees for anyone who sues us.

So despite what a vast majority of Bloomington wants, we can't ban a handgun from a public pool or a machine gun from a parade float.

No one was physically hurt at the pool or the parade. But I worry that tomorrow, or next month, or some day, my city may lose the awful violence lottery that seems to strike with terrible frequency.

Residents of this city, with a population of more than 80,000, worry about their role. How exactly are they supposed to tell a "good guy" with a gun from a "bad guy" with a gun? How about that fellow walking around the pool with a weapon? How are parents, looking up from slathering sunscreen on their kids, to make the necessary judgment? They don't want to be in that position. They're certainly not trained to be in that position.

And more and more people with more and more guns complicate the work of those trained in law enforcement as well. Our police officers risk their lives every day to protect us. Why do we have to make their jobs harder?

I worry that some day it could be my turn to stand in front of television cameras for a few days promising we'll get through, and come together to heal. My duty is to act now, before another terrible act of violence is carried out.

So I'll go to my state legislature and ask them, again, to give us back local authority. I expect the well-funded gun lobby will again oppose local control and reasonable regulations. I'm not likely to prevail without more pressure or a tragedy, but I'll keep at it.

I'm like a lot of mayors around the country, who work every day to fix problems and get results. The people who voted for me want me to do more to protect our community from gun violence. I wish it was one problem we were actually allowed to tackle.

John Hamilton, a Democrat, is the mayor of Bloomington, Ind.