

Sinner-saints with guns

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In the wake of the shootings in Las Vegas—in which bystander Joseph Robert Wilcox tried to take a shooter out and instead was himself shot and killed—Adam Weinstein offers [a very thoughtful take](#) on the notion of being a "good guy with a gun." A veteran and a gun owner, Weinstein describes himself as "one of those wannabe heroes"—but also details his growing doubts:

With the license, and the gun, came a host of new grownup worries. First: Who do you shoot, and when?

Over the years, even as I lived in a series of bad neighborhoods and sent the cops after a felon who threatened my family, my doubts about the usefulness of a firearm have compounded. What to carry? How to keep it concealed, but accessible? Keep it cocked and locked? Where would I leave it when going to a school campus, or a post office, or a courthouse?

And then there were the supposedly clear-cut scenarios, the ones every gun-lover thinks himself into: An armed perpetrator threatening your life. Do you shoot to stop, or shoot to kill? As I was taught, it was always the latter. Which meant my aim should be true. I was a typical gun person, in that I believed myself better trained than my peers, as good as a cop or a combat handgunner. But what proof did I have? And what risk was I willing to take?

There are too many scenarios. Say someone tries to mug me, and I'm armed, but they're already drawn down on me and I don't feel I have a safe shot. I'd be inclined to let them take what they want. But if they see my gun, I become the mortal threat, and perhaps they kill me preemptively. Should I preempt their preemption?

Say I shoot someone, and I'm fully within my rights to do it. How do I even present myself and my weapon to the cops in a way that doesn't alarm them and endanger me? How do I know the difference between an active shooter and a plainclothes police officer?

All good questions. But it's where Weinstein ends up—storing his guns outside his home now that he has a son—that interests me most:

I'd love to believe that he'll have no mischievous accidents, no suicidal depressions or homicidal rages, no moments of weakness or fits of pique or questions that can be answered by the pull of a trigger. As with all the other scenarios in which I'm the good guy with the gun, I can never be sure.

He leaves it there, right on the edge of what I see as the most important point to make: it's not just that it's not always easy to *discern* who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. ([Ruben Bolling offers some help](#) on that front.) As Weinstein's title puts it, "it's really hard to be a good guy with a gun"—and this is true in a more literal sense than he necessarily means it. **It is hard for any of us to be consistently good.** And access to guns makes it far easier for someone's failure to be good to result in serious harm to others.

In other words, I'm against guns because I believe in sin. In Las Vegas, the crimes were premeditated by people with some pretty disturbing ideas. This isn't always how gun crimes go down. Often they're committed by ordinary sinner-saints making a really bad decision on the fly. Obviously, the fact that gun owners are sinners doesn't mean they're *likely* to use their guns to commit violent crimes. Few do. But it's not easy to predict *which few*, and the notion of "good guys with guns" obscures this problem.

As Weinstein details, it takes a lot of optimism about your own discernment and coolness under pressure to imagine yourself as the good-guy hero in a bad-guy scenario. But it takes even more optimism about *human nature* to imagine that we good guys can be absolutely certain our goodness will never waver.