



# Episode 172-- How the Gun Industry Radicalized America

 Tue, 2/22 9:32AM  30:46

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

industry, gun, people, firearms industry, nra, book, gun owners, firearms, responsible gun owners, point, political, stories, gun violence prevention, gun lobby, left, country, politics, enemy, bad, important

## SPEAKERS

Ryan Busse, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson

---



JJ Janflone 00:08

This is the legal disclaimer where I tell you that the views, thoughts, and opinions shared in this podcast belong solely to our guests and hosts and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please note, this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's okay, we find it disturbing too.



JJ Janflone 00:37

Everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue, and Brady.



Kelly Sampson 00:40

I'm Kelly, one of your hosts.



JJ Janflone 00:41

And I'm your other host, JJ.



Kelly Sampson 00:44

And one thing we talk a lot about on this podcast is the role that firearms manufacturers and dealers can play in either perpetuating, or we hope preventing gun violence.



JJ Janflone 00:53

And what we have seen positive changes with, corporations and folks across the US deciding to put safety first. Nevertheless, many, including members of the gun lobby, do continue to push the narrative that common sense gun laws are bad news.

K

Kelly Sampson 01:06

Yeah. And today we're joined by a man who knows all about that. Ryan Busse



JJ Janflone 01:10

Ryan is an environmental advocate, hunter, and an author who also happens to be a former firearms executive who helped to build one of the world's most iconic gun companies, Kimber.

K

Kelly Sampson 01:21

and today Ryan joins us to discuss his book "Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry that Radicalized America." And he tells us about how he saw from the inside, the gun industry switched from prioritizing safety and ethics to promoting fear for the sake of profit.

R

Ryan Busse 01:39

My name is Ryan Busse, I, uh where to start. I grew up in flyover country, I grew up on a rural cattle ranch and wheat farm in far-northwestern Kansas. And firearms were a central part of my life and my upbringing is, as is the case with many ranch kids. My joke that, I was born with a shotgun in one hand and a rifle on the other. And they they played a very sort of healthy Americana kind of role in the lives of kids like me. When I graduated, so I lived on that ranch and worked on that ranch too, used and owned many guns. When I graduated from college, I ended up getting a job in the sporting goods industry, eventually the firearms industry and for me that was it was kind of a dream. It was much like a kid who played baseball, his whole life, ending up kind of in the major leagues, right, like in and around the thing he loved so much as recreation.

R

Ryan Busse 02:37

And I spent the next 28 years in the firearms industry, helped build one of the largest gun companies in existence, very influential gun company. Along the way, as the firearms industry changed in ways that troubled me very, very deeply. I also had an political epiphany. And I ended up spending nearly 20 of those years kind of living a knife's edge existence and fighting against the industry, as I was trying to uphold those sort of classic Americana, healthy parts of gun ownership. And I felt like the industry was sliding in the other direction. And so my book "Gunfight" is, is my memoir, my family's memoir. And also, it's sort of a 30,000 foot history of how guns have changed our country and radicalized our country and the gun industry doing that. So it's an alternation, it's, it alternates between tight limbs on me and my family and my memoir and wider limbs of what's going on in the country.



JJ Janflone 03:34

I highly do recommend that people pick up your book just because you're detailing so much within it. But before we go too far in, I wonder if you can break down for our listeners, you know, why you left an industry that, you know, as you said, you were so excited to join.



Ryan Busse 03:50

Yeah, well, things, you know, things changed. I note that in 1995, when I got in the industry, families still talked politics over dinner, and Republicans and Democrats still had drinks with each other after legislative sessions, and we had not yet had a horrible school shooting. And importantly, Americans bought about 350,000 guns a month in 1995. That sounds like a lot of guns. But that was the, and almost all of those had a very specific purpose; target guns, hunting guns, some self-defense guns, like they were, you know, they were very specific market segments. When I left in 2020, families were split over politics. Republicans and Democrats hated each other. One side of the political aisle is dreaming of a bloody civil war with the other side. We can't keep track of the school shootings. Parents, like my wife and I, Sarah, break down in tears when we drop our kids off at school, and the country consumes 2.5 million guns per month. I don't think that it's that those things are coincidences. And so what prompted me to leave, I guess, was a long realization that that was the truth and that the industry had played a leading role in tearing up the strongest democracy on the history of the planet and had had and had propagated all these other spillover effects. And frankly, the final straw, and it wasn't like a particular straw. But the final straw was my realization that I couldn't do anything about it from inside anymore. I thought I could. I tried. The book is about me trying to figure out ways to do that. But it just got too big for me to do it.



Kelly Sampson 05:29

And I mean, I just want to put a pin in something you said there, which is how the gun industry played a role, not only in things that you mentioned, like mass shootings, but also in sort of degrading democracy. And one of the things you talked about in your book is that you received a lot of pushback from folks after you left. But even after getting that pushback, you've written a book about your story. So did you have any concerns about writing this book and sharing your story publicly? I mean, given that you experienced pushback simply for leaving?



Ryan Busse 06:00

Oh, yeah. And I want to hit on the political radicalization first, because I think people can explain away as I saw, for many years, people in the industry can explain away singular bad actors. They can think that it's not going to be their kids school that gets shot up. They can say that a guy in Las Vegas, that they're not going to be in Las Vegas on that day. And all of those things may be true, you may escape those things, you may escape the personal impacts of the spillover of this sort of gun radicalization that we had. But we're all citizens of the country. And if half of this country gets what they want, which is the politics of the NRA take over. And we have gun radicalization that runs the course that so many seem to want it to. And, and I think we should remember, on January 6, there were two types of flags. There were American and

Trump flags, kind of political flags. And then they were "Come and take our AR-15" flags. That's not by accident. Gun radicalization is at the very, very heart of our national political radicalization. So it gets what I'm saying is if you think you can escape being involved in gun politics, because you might escape it on a personal level, okay, maybe, but you're not going to escape it on a societal level, you're not escaping it now. So it's in everybody's, it's in everybody's best interest to do that.



JJ Janflone 07:16

And this might be a little impertinent to me. So I'm sorry. But you know, do you regret it at all, writing the book?



Ryan Busse 07:22

This is actually a hopeful story. Did I fear? Yes. Did we go through changing security protocols and social media, and worry about sniper sitting on a ridge above our house? Yes, all of those things. We were exceedingly worried. And the response to my book has been almost exactly the opposite. What I thought it was going to be, and that's the hopeful thing. So many gun owners. I mean, I before I got on podcast with you guys, I've been answering emails this morning, from people who you don't, would not think would be writing these emails. Longtime gun owners, multi-generational NRA members like and they're all the stories are all the same. "I've had it. Thanks for writing this book. I own guns, but I'm a gun owner, but I'm not one of those gun owners". Like these are long voluminous letters, dozens, hundreds of them, I'm getting almost never do I get a trolling, you know, sort of vitriolic message. And to me, that's a hopeful sign, much more hopeful than I anticipated.



JJ Janflone 08:17

Well, and I think that speaks to the industry, you know, leaving people behind, like hunters, who had long been supporters of responsible gun ownership. And I'm wondering if you could explain maybe how that switch happened, you know, from traditional owners, to folks that as you detail in the book, you know, that people in the industry, really pejoratively called things like you know, quote, unquote, "couch commandos."



Ryan Busse 08:43

Some of the best, some of the best, most pejorative, derogatory terms for these people were developed by the shooting industry. So there you go. There's a couple others on there, you can use those as well.



JJ Janflone 08:53

Right. Yeah. Which I think also then points to the industry, not there's it doesn't seem like there's respect really or love for the folks who are buying into this rhetoric. It's it's using them as a as a cash flow.

R

Ryan Busse 09:04

Yeah. So when did it happen? Let's start with that and as many things in our country, there's not an easy answer to this. But I think I point certainly to the first Obama term, as as the the NRA was shifting even as far back as 1977. But the NRA didn't fully click into this mode, until we had a Black community organizer from Chicago with a degree from Harvard as our president. I just don't think it's possible to escape all of the societal and racial truths. Because the NRA stumbled onto or fully realized that all of those components can be used to gin up hate and fear and conspiracy to drive election outcomes. And that's when reason common sense people like me were totally left behind. I felt left behind far before that, because I felt this rumbling long before we got in to the first Obama term. But it really, really clicked into place then. And that's when I started to, you know, I would be at trade shows. And I note in the book, some of the, you know, the the T-shirts, I saw the hats I saw. People giving people who are wearing these incendiary, racist things high, high fives as if they're some kind of hero. Why? Because it drove, it drove election outcomes. And if that sounds a lot like Trumpism, January 6 politics, it's because it is January 6, Trumpist politics. That's where it started.

K

Kelly Sampson 10:37

And I think one of the points you make in the book is that it's not just people who buy into the rhetoric, you know, sort of having these misogynistic or xenophobic or racist views. But that's actually something that operatives within the industry were trading on themselves. And you kind of expose a lot of those things coming out in industry for people who are working for companies or lobbying groups. And so I'm wondering if you could share what that looks like, and how that became institutionalized within the industry itself?

R

Ryan Busse 11:06

Well, it's really, I think a lot of people want it to be sort of this grant, they want to look at the NRA, which I think did orchestrate most of what you just described, they want to look at the NRA as this big, institutional, nefarious, well planned, intelligent sort of operation. I didn't see it that way at all. In some of the other reporting that's been done on the NRA, Tim Mak's book speaks to this as well. It was sloppy, it was accidental, but it was really basal and effective. And again, if that sounds like Trumpism, is because it is Trumpism. Right? Like, I don't think Trump had any big grand genius plan. I mean, he's not a very stable genius. But what he stumbled on to in the core of the human psyche, is incredibly important. And I think, so to your question, the reason it became institutionalized, the reason race, looking the other way, if not full, outright embrace of racism, using racism, or looking the other way, or racism, much like Trump did. Those sorts of things. Conspiracy Theory, definitely pioneered by the NRA in the firearms business. Looking the other way. Yeah, racial turmoil, or fomenting racial turmoil. Definitely started with the industry in the NRA.

R

Ryan Busse 12:22

And I can keep going on down the line here. The reason they're institutional is because those things increase fear in a society. And when you increase fear in a society, you can make people

vote against their own self-interest in really odd and scary ways. And accidentally, they're the exact same things that sell guns. So if you think about all of our lives in the last, however old we are the most tumultuous, scary, frightening time any of us have ever experienced has been the last 24 months. COVID, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Antifa, Election lies, insurrection, people storming the Michigan Capitol, like I mean, come on, I don't even know where...and when is the highest gun sales ever in the United States by a huge sum? The same exact time. Those things are not coincidences. So if you build an incentive system, which NRA did, that needs more hate, fear, conspiracy, to win more elections to sell more guns? Well, then you're going to do everything you can to keep fueling that fire. You need more hate, more fear, look the other way. And that's, again, if it sounds like our modern politics, it's because it is

K

Kelly Sampson 13:28

it kind of turning from a little bit from this to talking about another mythology, I think that get developed and talk about the gun industry is this idea of a group or an entity that really cares a lot about firearm safety and the technical aspects and sportsmanship and things like that. But one of the things that you talk about in the book, are these really scary stories about shootings or gun mishandling that happened within your own offices? And I'm wondering, why do you think there's this disconnect between the industry and actual gun safety practices and why those uncheck?

R

Ryan Busse 14:05

Well, yeah, those are some pretty crazy entertaining stories in the book, I guess. I guess my point with all those and they're all true, and I have a lot more of, I edited tons of them out because I couldn't have four chapters that just went on with crazy stories with mainly guys with guns, although, you know, maybe it would have been funny. But my point there is is that despite, you know, generally speaking, firearms companies, they don't really follow their own political example. They try to institute the most stringent firearm safety policies on the planet in their own facilities. I tell the story of me, you know, shooting in our range at the at the company at which I worked and I had to go through exceedingly strict safety procedures to shoot. Bulletproof vest, goggles, muzzle stays downrange. No, no pointing the gun anywhere. I had to sign essentially background checks to letting me even into our own facility. Everybody stands behind me, I mean, exceedingly type safety procedures. That guns don't leave the controlled range all of these things.

R

Ryan Busse 15:10

And yet, all gun companies are fighting for political legislative realities, where there's essentially none of that. Zero. Not only that, it any of those sorts of policies mandate that the firarms companies mandate in their own facilities are met with tons of disdain. And my point in the book is, even with all of these procedures, at gun companies, we still had crazy-ass gun accidents. We still had people, we, I still had workplace shootings. And and I don't, the disconnect for me was just too ironic not to write about, I don't know how it's possible that you mandate that your employees act safe and responsible all the time, and then fight for politics

that tell me an entire populace of 320 million people that they don't have to act safe and responsible all the time. I don't I don't understand that. But there's stories in the book that try to explain it.



JJ Janflone 16:02

But I think it also shows too, that the gun industry is not what I think you break down here is that it is as you've pointed out the NRA, like it's not, or at least in didn't start out as this monolithic, super technically advanced, you know, high level, everybody in a suit in a New York City boardroom? Yeah, like it was very individualistic, and a lot of almost like very a lot of startup energy



Ryan Busse 16:27

And it still is that way, even though it's now become much more corporatized to much larger industry. Still, and there's a I mean, for a kid like me who grew up in a rural setting, that sort of that sort of sort of cowboy startup mentality that you describe. And then I write about in the book, there's a certain allure to that, right. It's it's like a Netflix series happening. It's kind of this edgy, Americana Breaking Bad kind of feel to it. It had that sort of in sometimes in good ways. But I think that people, people who think that the firearms industry is like this button down, Big Pharma or defense industry, it's not like that. It's not like, still isn't like that at all. It's it's populated by a bunch of people who are enthusiasts.



JJ Janflone 17:11

And I think that comes across when you talk about, you know, the industry pivoting from a focus on gun owner owners more broadly, to one point you detail like a conversation happening, "Well, we don't want to sell guns to these people. We don't sell we don't sell guns to Democrats or very like public Democrats." And so to certain political affiliations, and I'm wondering if you can can maybe break down for our listeners, you know, why that sort of strategic choice seem to be being made.



Ryan Busse 17:39

Firearms, it's a weird thing that happened in the gun business at first, for the first part of my career, the firearms industry, kind of that Cowboy Western mentality, wanted to make everybody a gun owner, right. And then all the sudden, it shifted to a place where we had to make some gun owners into villains, because it became important to hate some people too while you're doing it, right. And so, enemies are always really, really important in big social and political movements. I don't I don't think any of them ever really progress without a defined enemy. And Democrats, liberals, progressives, of which I am all of those things, became the defined enemy. And, and so it was a strange thing to go from a startup, startup industry that wanted to convert everybody into customers, to one that I think was more interested in converting people into culture warriors. So like, I tell the story about not wanting to, the company not wanting to sell to a particular Democrat, I really think what the what the industry

wanted to do is to convert those people into cultural warriors, and then it would be okay to sell to them. In other words, that culture, that culture and culture warriorship became more important than the actual gun thing.

K

Kelly Sampson 18:56

I think that makes a lot of sense to when you were in, you've been outlining too some of the parallels between some of the commonalities that are driving the current industry, and then some of the same factors that are driving politics or like Trump politics, and how they're kind of all connected. And I'm wondering at this point in time, you know, we're sitting here, President is a Democrat, etc. What do you feel the role of the gun industry and the gun lobby and manufacturers is now when maybe you don't have something like a President Obama to act against, or to characterize?

R

Ryan Busse 19:36

I think you're asking an exceedingly frightening question. When there isn't an obvious enemy, I fear that the industry and the political machinery it has created, will figure out a way to create new enemies. And I think you saw that during the administration. During the first part of the administration of Trump. Trump was an ally, we no longer had an enemy of the firearms industry in the White House. So the NRA had to figure out how to make new enemies in this, you know, some of the ads I detail that the NRA TV launched. It, it had to divide society had to make you hate your neighbor. And so do I think it's an accident we that we now live in a country where you know, families can't have Thanksgiving dinner anymore because half the family hates the other half the family or workplaces you can't have water cooler talk because there's gonna be a fight breaks out because, you know, the political toxicity is so bad that, you know, bloodshed is going to happen. No, I don't think that's an accident. That's, that's a byproduct of a political system that needs enemies to survive. And when they're not obvious, when we don't have Barack Obama to hate, we'll figure out a way to hate all of our neighbors. And, you know, he put all that on a graph. I'm worried about where that's headed. How does it get any better if the industry if the industry and the system needs hatred of others to feed on? I don't know. It's scary.

K

Kelly Sampson 20:59

I think it's interesting too that detail that the firearms themselves change, right? Like, how they went from handguns to, as you detail in "Gunfight," the AR-15. And, you know, the fact that someone was trying to take an AR-15s to go prairie dog hunting at one point in your book was surprising to me. I mean, like, That's wild. And so I wonder if you can speak a little bit to why there was this industry shift to weapon that just had such a higher capacity for doing catastrophic harm.

R

Ryan Busse 21:34

Yeah. So one point there is that the industry once, you just touched on it, but the industry once policed itself. This responsibility that I want our society to find, again, was once mandated by the firearms industry itself. It wouldn't tell stories which what you're hitting on, it wouldn't



by the firearms industry itself. It wouldn't sell stones, which what you're hitting on, it wouldn't allow certain sorts of guns to be used at its own events, it wouldn't. The firearms industry itself NSSF, the trade group that runs the largest trade show would not allow anything tactical to be displayed on the tradeshow floors, no AR-15, no tactical vests, no gloves, nothing. All that crap that you see the guys who stormed the Michigan capitol, or the Proud Boys and Oathkeepers or the insurrections, all that tactical stuff that they're wearing, none of that could be displayed on the floor. Per the regulation, not a law, per the regulation of the industry itself. It was a self imposed sort of decency, it did it because it knew that potential spillover effects were so bad that they could be deleterious to the business into the society.

R

Ryan Busse 22:37

And that's a lot like our politics, certain things just weren't done 20 years ago. Members of Congress didn't tweet death threats to other members of Congress. Now they do. Now Marjorie Taylor Greene shoots socialists with a AR or with a 50-caliber sniper rifle on her campaign commercials. The reason the AR-15s became so embraced is because they could be both gun and symbol intimidation, all at the same time. You know, personally, I don't care if some person owns an AR-15 and never does anything bad with it. But just on its face, that doesn't sound threatening at all, to me. When it's used as a political symbol to overthrow a country, when people marched into schools and kill little kids with AR-15s when they're used in some of our worst mass shootings, when they're wrapped up as some sort of weird faux patriots, Patriot machismo thing that I don't even know how to describe this movement that half of these people seem to think is okay, now I got a frickin problem. And I think somehow, the NRA and the industry sense that they could be both business and political symbol at the same time. That's certainly what they have become

K

Kelly Sampson 23:54

Sort of outlining that I think that's one of the to continue the plug. That's one of the interesting things is to hear from someone who is sort of very familiar with firearms, but then also can kind of take an outside view as well. And you end "Gunfight" by saying that we have to commit to changing the country for the better. And going to ask you the million dollar question, just totally a simple one, which is, how do we commit to changing the country for the better? What are some things that in your opinion that we could think about doing?

R

Ryan Busse 24:28

I think that we have a great, big, overarching problem. Not a small little problem. I do suggest a couple legislative fixes in the book. But they're going to go to this larger problem. I think that our I think our country has forgotten how to weave responsibility through all these freedoms that we seem to enjoy so much. And I use the analogy of driving and school zones. We want to drive, we have to get to work, sometimes we're late. Sometimes we'd like to Be we might even want to go 70 or 80 miles an hour through a school zone because we got to get to the other side of town. Right. But we don't do it. Why? Because we value live kids more than we value dead kids. We don't. It's just not responsible to blast through a school zone. Do we call that commie socialist? Do we have rallies? Do we overthrow governments over, that impose responsibility that we've all agreed on is important? No, it's just responsible behavior in a society. And we have to get there with guns as well. There are some things that we shouldn't

be doing. Armed intimidation, guys marching around scaring kids with AR-15s. That's got to go. We either need to stop it on our own, or we need to outlaw it period. That's just not how responsible societies and democratic societies are going to exist. And I think that once we start addressing some of this lack of cultural responsibility, then some of the more detailed, the legislative fixes will become a lot easier and a lot more obvious, because we'll agree that responsibility is important. You can't have a society that only values runaway freedom, because it will run away. It will have spillover effects, we'll have way too many guns in inner-city Chicago, we'll have way too much gun crime, we'll have way too many school shootings, we'll have back to this, we'll have way too many people driving 90 miles an hour through a school zone. Right. And so I guess what I, it's a big thing. But it's a simple thing. And I think we have to figure out a way to talk about responsibility, not all these other detailed legislative things.



JJ Janflone 26:42

Well, and then specifically for folks who work in gun violence prevention, do you have any thoughts for them on how if you want to help prevent gun violence, what can we be doing? Maybe better?



Ryan Busse 26:53

I think it's really important right now, for Gun Safety activists, and people generally on the left to understand that not all gun owners are the same, that there's a lot of potential allies. And that's why I put so much time in the first part of my book, to try to describe, I think a lot of people. I don't mean pejorative, like you guys, but you may or may just not understand how it is that people could be some become so connected to guns. Isn't that bad, right? Like it? Well, it's not all bad. It hasn't always been bad. It wasn't bad for me. It's not bad for millions of people. And if and if you want to know why some of this seems like unsolvable. It's because when people feel like their cultures are attacked, and they don't feel like those cultures are bad, then intransigence helps. And I guess I just would really encourage people on the left, of which I'm one of them. But on this issue, I think it's really important to understand that these healthy cultural connections with guns don't necessarily mean bad things or mean these people can be allies. And so watch your language, reach out to them, don't lead with things that shut down the conversation. These people don't want to hear that things will be banned, when they've been important parts of their life for so long, healthy parts, and they've never done anything. So I really think we're at a time when a new kind of coalition can be built because I sense it in responsible gun owners that are reaching out to me for this book. And I guess I just really asked everybody who might be listening to this to be open minded to that.



Kelly Sampson 28:22

you know, thank you so much for this. And we really do encourage everyone who's interested in building a coalition like that to reach out to us because we need everyone.



JJ Janflone 28:34

That was great. Kelly, and I remain so impressed with Ryan and his work. And folks go buy the book because we didn't even get to talk about his environmentalism efforts

book because we didn't even get to talk about his environmentalism efforts.

K

Kelly Sampson 28:42

Absolutely, JJ. And I think one of the things that I take away from this conversation is the idea that the gun lobby has been perpetuating that gun violence prevention isn't a universal desire. Instead, they've pushed this false dichotomy that you can't be fond of guns, and in favor of gun violence prevention. And there's this narrative of us versus them that the gun lobbyists helped create, and they're continuing to push because they profit from it.



JJ Janflone 29:12

What I keep coming back to is, you know, that this industry, you know, that says that it supports responsible gun owners, them purposely turning their back on people like safety instructors and hunters, folks who are responsible gun owners in order just to make money, which is there's no there's no other word for it. It's just gross and awful.

K

Kelly Sampson 29:32

Yeah, it's really manipulative. Because the end of the day, shouldn't you care more about keeping people safe?



JJ Janflone 29:37

Exactly.



JJ Janflone 29:41

Hey! Want to share the podcast? Listeners can now get in touch with us here at Red, Blue, and Brady via phone or text message, simply call or text us at 480-744-3452 with your thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, whatever! Kelly and I are standing by.

K

Kelly Sampson 29:56

Thanks for listening, as always, Brady's life saving work in Congress, courts, and communities across the country is made possible thanks to you. For more information on Brady or how to get involved in the fight against gun violence. Please like and subscribe to the podcast. Get in touch with us at [Bradyunited.org](https://bradyunited.org) or on social @brady buzz. Be brave and remember, take action, not sides