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Caesar's Wife

In Roman society, the wife of the emperor was supposed to be the guardian of Roman honor. She was supposed to be above reproach; if her morals were called in question, it was a serious problem to her husband's image. (Try not to laugh; several of the early emperors were actually somewhat moral guys for their time.) This wasn't fair, but that was how things were.

In 1981, I had made the decision to buy a handgun, my first gun. I didn't grow up around guns; my parents didn't have one; no one I knew was part of the gun culture. After making a few calls, and asking for recommendations, I went to Martin B. Rettig, Inc., in Culver City, in the Los Angeles area.

There were several visits required. First I had to make sure that I knew what I wanted. Then I went back to purchase the gun. Finally, there was a 15 day wait while the State of California did a background check.

During those visits, I noticed something very interesting about Rettig's customers. Culver City was at that time on the edge of the black section of Los Angeles. Martin B. Rettig, Inc., unsurprisingly, had quite a number of black customers. That wasn't particularly interesting to me. What was interesting was how the customers dressed.

The white customers were usually dressed casually: slacks and a dress shirt or T-shirt. The black customers, almost without exception, were wearing suits, or at least ties with a nice jacket. The contrast was very obvious. Why?

I don't know for sure, but I suspect that because of the long history of racism associated with gun control, and because there were—and still are—some assumptions commonly held about blacks and crime, the black customers believed that they needed to

dress in a certain way to be taken seriously as legitimate customers. A black guy in a suit and tie doesn't make you think "gang member" or "robber."

Was this fair? Not in the least. I can remember looking at the situation, and feeling some real sorrow that Rettig's black customers believed that they needed to wear their Sunday best to go buy a gun. We have somewhat the same situation today in many cities, where a black man or an Hispanic driving a nice car is more likely to be pulled over by the police than if a white guy is driving that same car. I know that this problem is real, and it isn't just the usual whiners looking for a cause. When I lived in San Jose, a neighbor with an Hispanic appearance was repeatedly pulled over by the police. She was never written a ticket; they just kept checking her license for outstanding warrants.

Racial profiling, while unfair, is unlikely to go away in the near future. September 11th guaranteed that. It should be obvious to anyone but the most hopelessly stupid that men of Middle Eastern appearance named Mohammed boarding an airliner are deserving of rather greater scrutiny than say, an American of any color.

The gap between what is fair, and where we are today, is often painfully large, and one of the places where this is most apparent is at gun shows. Gun owners have a terrible image to overcome. The mass media have tried very hard to create a perception that gun owners, and especially gun enthusiasts, are rednecks, neo-Nazis, skinheads, KKK members, hillbillies that marry their sisters, and so on. It is a vicious and inaccurate stereotype. You and I know that it isn't correct—so let's not do anything that plays to that stereotype, okay?

Gun shows bring out collectors of military memorabilia. Some collectors collect anything, from Bronze Age daggers to 19th century Turkish flintlocks. Others are more

specialized, often focusing on a particular nation or a particular war. There's nothing wrong with collecting these odds and ends. While I don't collect these things, I do find it fascinating to see and actually hold a weapon that participated in a moment in history. Let's just be a little careful about *how* we display them!

There was one collector in California who seemed to specialize in World War II German memorabilia. It always troubled me that his most prominently displayed item was a swastika flag. There is nothing wrong with having an item like that; I only cringed at how important a part it played on his table. I shudder to think what would have happened if a reporter had wandered in, and decided to let a picture of his swastika-adorned table be the artwork around which he built his story.

Think very carefully about what you say, and how you say it, may appear to a person on the outside. It is very true that hostile journalists are not above editing or even altering quotes to make us look good; we don't have to make it easy for them, however. If you don't feel that you are sufficiently articulate to defend the rights of gun owners, encourage the reporter in the direction of someone who is.

How you dress matters. Some years ago, progun forces held a large demonstration in California's state capital. I'm told that almost everyone that showed up was dressed either casually, or in their Sunday best. There were a couple of people who showed up in camouflage, carrying signs with offensive language. They claimed to be on our side, and perhaps they really were on our side, and just lacked good sense. When the local stations carried coverage of the demonstration that evening, which demonstrators did they show, and which signs received the attention? Journalists want sensation, not accuracy. Please make sure that *you* aren't the sensation.

How journalists see us isn't the only issue. If most people in your area wear flannel and blue jeans on Saturday afternoon, it probably won't cause any problems if you dress that way to go to the gun show, or a progun demonstration. Think about the consequences, however, if you live in a suburban area, and you go to an event dressed like a slob, or like you are expecting to take a 12-pointer. There may be antigun demonstrators present; there may just be ordinary people going about their business who see you dressed that way. What will they think of gun enthusiasts, if you and several dozen other people look either like Rambo, or something that the cat dragged in?

I feel like such an old fuddy-duddy when I say this, but we need to be careful about the language that comes out of our mouths. Do we use language or expressions that are likely to build on those negative stereotypes, or break them? Avoid vulgar words, swearing, and other language that, once upon a time, wasn't used around women or children. Yes, television is a lot more foul-mouthed than it used to be, but we don't have to conform to television's standards, do we? The antigunner who comes to demonstrate against our right to keep and bear arms may have a pretty foul mouth himself, but if you say something off-color or vulgar, *that* is what he is going to remember. Because so much of the antigun movement is based on a self-righteous attitude, the more excuses we take away from them for looking down on us, the better.

I can honestly say that I have not heard any racist language at gun shows. Indeed, I think I have heard more racist epithets among upper middle class professionals than I hear from gun enthusiasts. Let's keep that up, and make sure that our enemies have to go to BATF social events to hear this sort of language.

By now, some of you are chafing at the bit. “What does this guy want me to do? Not be myself?” Be yourself at home. Be yourself at work. When you go to a gun show, or a progun demonstration, you are an ambassador for the right to keep and bear arms. It is important that we be like Caesar's wife—as decent as we can be. We want to win this fight, and that means using every trick in the book—including sneaky tactics such as clean language and clean clothes.

There is an old maxim that says, “Never offend with style when you can offend with substance.” Ideally, we don't want to offend anyone at all. But if you must irritate someone, which would you rather be the source of irritation? A well thought out argument about why gun control doesn't reduce murder rates? Or the fact that you were wearing a T-shirt that shows crosshairs on a person with the slogan, “.308 Holes Make Invisible Souls”?

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