

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 27
Ryan Busse

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana's. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. My guest today is Ryan Busse, former senior executive in the firearms industry.

Ryan Busse What I'm witnessing, at least I feel a tipping point in that responsible gun owners have just had enough of this, and it's time for us to put responsibility back in the conversation.

Justin Angle Ryan's new book, Gunfight is an intimate and revealing account of his experience in that industry, his growing disillusionment with it and his ultimate exit. Ryan, thanks for coming on the show today.

Ryan Busse Thanks so much for having me. My kids and my family have listened to him many times in our household, so it's an honor to be on your show. Thank you.

Justin Angle Well, that means a lot. I appreciate it. So you know how we start? Where did you grow up and where did your parents do?

Ryan Busse I grew up like a lot of rural Montana kids. I grew up on a wheat and cattle ranch in far western Kansas, just across the Colorado border. Multi-generational ranch and farm and a lot of ways. I grew up with a shotgun in one hand and a rifle and the other guns were very important parts of my life, as they are with many rural kids.

Justin Angle Yeah, we'll circle back to that upbringing in just a moment, and I think it's important for me to set up this conversation with some personal disclosure. I mean, I'm not somebody who grew up with that background. I'm a rural kid. You know, there is hunters and fishers in my family. I was not active in that space. I was actually shot at by a hunter when I was on my mountain bike as a child. I've only fired a gun twice, and both times it really scared me. So I just don't have that fluency and familiarity. So maybe talk about that, that cultural piece.

Ryan Busse Sorry to hear that and know that must have been frightening as a kid. I try to deal with that a lot in my book. I think there are a lot of people, certainly not that have your experience, thankfully, but that there's a lot of people who don't understand the connection that so many people, so many Americans have to guns. And so, so many of the best times of the early part of my life. I you know, there was a lot of work to be done on a ranch and farm, and there wasn't a lot of time for fun. And most often when there was time for fun, it often involved guns. We were pheasant hunting or target shooting or deer hunting.

And so over the years, the cultural identity of me and my family became wrapped up with guns because the best parts of our lives involve guns. And so they became a symbol for what we wanted to be true and what we wish to be true. And when you have those kind of cultural symbols that are wrapped up in your identity and your family's identity, it can be a very healthy thing. But it becomes also so incredibly ingrained in your psyche that it can be used by nefarious forces. If you're convinced that it's under threat to do things where I think you sacrifice your own self-interest and some of your morals. So there's a lot of a lot of explanation about how guns are intertwined into so many of our lives.

Justin Angle So now we know a little bit more of your upbringing and kind of your family situation. You decided to make the gun industry and guns your career. Talk about that thought process of making this your life's work.

Ryan Busse When I, you know, I decided to get in the firearms industry, in the sporting goods industry, you know, and I tell people, it's a little bit like a kid who played baseball, which I did making the major leagues. It was a dream thing. I, you know, again, back to the cultural thing. This was something I love to do. I love to hunt and fish. I love to be around those guns. And so when I got in the industry where I where I got paid, I joke where I would often say things like, Well, I just want to get paid to hunt and fish, and this is as close as I could get. Sure there was a lot of truth in that. This was my this was my way of achieving a dream. And so for a while, it was a dream job because it was infused with the same sort of responsibility and decency that my dad had taught me. And I didn't feel that it had gone off the rails, and that was in the mid-90s. Obviously, things have changed, and eventually I feared that it was going off the rails and it was changing our country, but early on it really was a dream.

Justin Angle Yeah, and it brings you to Montana and Kalispell area, and there's a particularly telling passage in the book where you and your your dog are in the Badger-Two Medicine area. And that seems like it was a I want to give too much away for readers, but a formative moment in you thinking like aligning your priorities about this industry and this this type of product.

Ryan Busse When I got into the industry, I was also sort of this thoughtless conservative flyover country kid who had spent a lot of time on tractors and trucks and driving tractors around in squares and fields, which I know a lot of Montana kids have done. Mm-Hmm. And, you know, talk radio poured into those spaces, and I was just sort of this thoughtless conservative kid who sort of bought the lines of various political figures. And I believed I believed in those talking points and that the Republican Party was, you know, in favor of wild places and hunters and wild animals and things like that. And I believe the firearms industry was too, because that was part of the rhetoric. And when I found the Badger-Two Medicine and other wild places in Montana, frankly, it really Montana changed me in in just immeasurable ways.

I eventually fought for those places. I was recruited to do a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., in 2004. You know, the hook was that I was this relatively conservative person or perceived to be on my politics were already breaking down. And I was criticizing the Bush administration, which was a Republican administration, and I was from the gun industry, so you can see what the hook was going to be. Mm-Hmm. And that blew up into a dozen national newspapers. And I was then attacked vociferously by the firearms industry, the NSSF and the NRA. I was attacked because I attacked the wrong political party. And that's when the scales kind of fell from my eyes and I realized, OK, I've bought a line here. It was breaking down already through various other things, but that really put the nail in the coffin. And from then on, I decided, Nope, I'm standing up for my self-interest from then on and I became an opponent of the politics and the policies of the industry, even though I was inside of it.

Justin Angle Yeah. So these politics are unfolding within your own company with your colleagues, but also within the NRA. And then they're sort of the role the NRA has played in the polarization of our politics is particularly telling in the book. Talk about that a little bit.

Ryan Busse You're right. There's sort of two storylines. My memoir, *The Narrow Lens* Nature of my memoir and my family's experience, and then the larger kind of 30,000 foot view of what's going on in our country. And and as it turned out, I was a member of an organization of an industry that was changing a nation that was fueling the NRA and ended up changing the nation's politics and the through line. The largest throughline of the book is that the the politics of division and hate and conspiracy and not being able to trust your neighbors and hating members of your own family. That kind of ugly politics really started with the NRA, and I witnessed the emergence of that, the fueling of that, the embrace of that by the NRA. And it really began to frighten me after that 2004 event, and I and I began to push back in every way I could.

Justin Angle And there's some terminology at play here, you know, the rise of kind of military style weapons in the general populace, also corresponding with these endless wars in the Middle East. So that's happening. But then the industry starting to see profit margin in these in these categories, right?

Ryan Busse As with a lot of movement and big changes in a country the size of the United States, it's not just one thing. It's several things that kind of were conflagration.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Ryan Busse And as the NRA was figuring out sort of stumbling on to the fact that hate and conspiracy and division could be used to drive a political movement could be, frankly, it could be used to create fear and drive people to the polls. Then you had a long, you know, decades of ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and you had returning veterans who had served their country and you had, you know, decades of CNN and Fox News news coverage of these wars. People had seen these guns of war, AR 15s and what, you know, pejoratively was called the sandbox and desert tan colored guns. And this sort of patriotism mixed with fear of the NRA and distrust of the other. And then this machismo that was built around the weapons of war that also became profitable. Not only did it drive politics, it became profitable and then the gun industry really started to change. When I got into the gun industry, there were very specific uses for all the guns that were sold target guns, hunting, gun self-defense, guns. But then millions of these guns started to be sold, and never nobody could quite understand exactly what they were all for. There were reasons created for them, but a lot of those were created. And the gun industry went from selling three to five million units a year to in the last 12 months, I think the totals are going to top 23 or 24 million units a year. So a four or 500 percent increase, largely based on this new sort of brand of a shooter and owner.

Justin Angle So when you say nobody really knew what these guns were for. I mean, it seems pretty clear they're they're designed to kill people. They're designed based off of military designs, right?

Ryan Busse Right on air. 15 was designed and accepted and adopted by the U.S. military as an offensive weapon of war. It's a it's a war. It's a weapon meant to kill people, and they're there. Obviously, now are very various versions of the gun that are target guns and there are some hunting guns. But that AR 15s, but still the vast majority of those guns that are sold are modified to be weapons of war, and a lot of people own them. And I started to worry about this sort of cult that was built around these guns and when eventually when they ended up in places like the Michigan Capitol with armed men with 30 round magazines screaming at lawmakers, or I open the book, you know, with a lot of these guys at a rally that my family and I were at in Kalispell, where they were intimidating people with a AR 15s, you know, 100 of these guys with AR 15s. I really worried about the impact and the sort of a new kind of cultural connection to guns. Yeah.

Justin Angle And what do you think it is about this particular category of guns that is so powerful from an identity and branding standpoint? I mean, the Black Rifle movement, as you refer to it in the book, it just seems like there was a timing piece, but also that the product and the culture itself coalesced to be a really powerful identity force.

Ryan Busse You know, I don't think it's accidental why the people who marched on the Capitol in January on January six had two basic types of flags, right? They had American Trump sort of political flags, and then they had come and take AR 15 flags. I think guns, and the AR 15 in particular, are now at the very center of our political division. And I think there are various reasons for that. But one is that that rifle, when loaded and and cocked and ready to go, is it is an unbelievable symbol of power. I mean, you, you walk into a room, just three or four of us walk into a room with no guns. It doesn't seem very odd. Somebody walks in with an 15 loaded on their chest. Obviously, they instantly have the power in the room and in a larger

sense, that what's going on in our politics when you have these armed men that invade a Capitol in Michigan or Kentucky, or a protest in Kalispell or across the United States in the last 12 to 18 months. It's a way to convey this sort of unhealthy power, and that's not that's not the way democracy functions. I'm worried that that's it destroys the civility and the decency and the responsibility that is required for a democracy to function because civility does not exist when one party is standing over the other with a loaded gun.

Justin Angle You know, as you said, the rise of the black rifle and the AR 15 and the power and like that, that just sort of threat that that imposes and that carries over to our how our politics exist right now. And you sort of start to go down this path further and eventually you get to the breaking point. Maybe talk about that.

Ryan Busse I look back now. I wonder where my breaking point actually was, but I think. For me, one of the most illustrative things was Donald Trump was elected, obviously in November of 2016. His inauguration actually fell on the last day of the industry. Trade show that next year in 2017, that was in February of 2017 or January 2017. I can't remember the exact day, but I know it was on the on the Inauguration Day, and the whole industry was assumed to be so single-minded that I had never seen this before. But the whole, you know, the shot show is a is a huge show in Las Vegas, one of the largest trade shows in the nation and a place that usually moves with this frenetic place just slowed to a stall, and almost every booth in the entire Las Vegas Convention Center had a big, flat screen TV. The inauguration was played and the inauguration was piped. The audio was piped in through the loudspeakers of the entire convention, as if every single, every single person entity, there were a lot of foreign gun companies there. I guess they were, they were supposed to celebrate this as well.

And I thought this this incredible toxic groupthink where nobody can do anything but praise this particular event. I remember as many people in Montana know when you fly home from places, often times you get home at midnight, which I did. And I remember I crawled into bed

that night, Sarah whispered. How did it go? And I said, I can't do this anymore. And I did do it some more. But I think the dye was cast for me.

Justin Angle Then we'll be back to my conversation with Ryan Busse after this short break.

Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Ryan Bussey, longtime executive in the firearms industry and author of Gunfight.

You know, a lot of the recent reporting about the NRA's just painting a picture of an organization in disarray. The lawsuits within, the bankruptcy, the filing, the court filings in New York state. I mean, for an organization that is so seemingly in disarray. I guess the question is one, is it in disarray or is that just what you read in the New York Times? And if it is like, how does it still exert so much political power?

Ryan Busse It is in disarray. I don't think it's ever really not been in disarray. It's always been an organization of graft and of disarray and of using people in a have really lying to its constituency because for so long, it hasn't been about guns. It's been a culture war organization. You know, there's been a lot of tapes come out here lately of actual NRA officials saying things that validate so much of what my book indicates I lived through, which is they made the decision that this was not about guns. This was about amping up the culture war and dividing people so that the country could be kept at this constant pressure cooker just just once, you know, just one degree below an explosion. And that's why anytime something was dumped into society, whether it was a political candidate, whether it was Barack Obama, you know who all of these vitriolic things were said about Barack Obama and his administration, or Joe Biden or 911 that was turned into sort of this, you know, incredible racist, toxic soup, all of these things, instead of making the country better. They were used to keep that temperature, the national toxic temperature, just one step below, you know, explosion.

You ask about what the future of the NRA there is. There's a lot of disarray there, but I don't think NRA-ism is going away. Much like Trump, ism is not going away or that the fire has been let across the country. It's dry and it's windy and it's burning out of control. Or if you want to use another analogy, that pressure cooker has exploded and it's just, you know, it just spilled all over the place. So even if the organization is weakened, its politics and its vitriol have not weakened. People think that they can control this. But when you start a radicalized movement, you lose control of the radicalization. I use the analogy of people think they can start this little fire and stay warm by this little campfire. But when you wake up and again and it's windy and it's dry and it's got away from you, you don't get to control it anymore. And that's where we are now.

Justin Angle And so what distinguishes this radicalized movement is just the concentration of lethal weaponry within it. You know, the gun sales figures, they've been strong, the particularly strong during democratic presidencies that you talk about in the book, but it's also growing more concentrated. Smaller number of people are earning more and more and more dangerous guns.

Ryan Busse Yeah, there's definitely more, you know, more people own more guns. But I think it's quite illustrative. During the pandemic, during the initial stages of the pandemic and then after the George Floyd murder and the Black Lives Matter rallies across the country, those are the most tumultuous times. I hope that you and I lived through, like politically and as a nation, it felt, you know, it felt like we were coming apart at the seams was a frightening time. Well, that also happens to be the time when gun sales and gun ownership exploded. And the point is that the NRA was right. If you create a society with enough fear, anybody will go buy guns.

Now, I'm not opposed to buying guns. I sold millions of guns. I own lots of guns. My kids and I shoot every chance we get. We hunt every chance we get. But owning guns strictly because you're fearful and then creating an atmosphere where the entire country is fearful of the other half of the country. And then we're all armed for a violent civil war, and half of the people want

it. I don't know about you, but that's not the country I want to live in, because if that happens, none of the rights, none of the amendments second or otherwise, none of them will matter. And so we have to we have to get back to a place where responsibility is valued, not just fear to make us go out and buy guns

Justin Angle does seem like that is possible on the gun issue. It does seem that it's an issue where reasonable people could figure something out. I mean, I think about other divisive issues in our society, like abortion for one, right? There are people that believe that, you know, it's a it's a personal right to choose. And there's other people that, you know, it's personal health care choice and there's other people that think it's murder, you know? So it's hard to see where there's a path to common ground with something like guns. There does seem to be a path or, you know, a logical path. I don't know if that that logic appeals to any policymaker or politician, but like, what do you think is our way of turning down the heat and figuring out a way to live with these things? Well, the

Ryan Busse Montanans that I know, the Montanans that I hunt with and fish with. Not all of them agree with me politically, but none of them are OK with this irresponsibility having to do with guns. None of them think it's OK to march through towns and frighten, you know, young high school kids with guns. None of them think it's OK to threaten to use a loaded AR 15s to threaten to kidnap and kill governors, right? And so Montanans are an independent lot. I'm an independent person. But responsibility, you know, has is woven through the Montana's psyche. And I think that that's where we will come to agreement because so many of the things that we're witnessing now in gun culture. I mean, responsibility has left the building. And I think that really offends responsible gun owners. And I think the point is that responsible citizens and responsible gun owners have to be a part of the solution. We cannot be the problem, right? We can't be the thing that takes the country apart. We have to be one of the things that holds it together

Justin Angle and that gives you hope. You think there's a pathway?

Ryan Busse I really do. I think as with a lot of things in your life, they have to get, you know, they have to get kind of bad before they get better. And I think we have seen some pretty ugly things in our country over the past many months. You know, we've seen a 17 year old kid kill people in Kenosha, Wisconsin. We've seen three white men run down a black man in Georgia and claim a citizen's arrest and kill him with a gun. We've seen, you know, the capital of the most powerful democracy the world has ever seen. Attacked and guns are at the center of that. And those are ugly things. What I'm witnessing, at least I feel a tipping point in that responsible gun owners have just had enough of this, and it's time for us to put responsibility back in the conversation.

Justin Angle And I guess in our closing minutes here, Ryan, I'd love to flip around the perspective for a moment. And kind of go back to, you know, my perspective coming into this. I think it's easy for the quote unquote prestige media and coastal elites to to not really. Very few of those writers and talking heads have any experience with guns at all, right, so what is the left getting wrong and what can the left do better to engage this debate in good faith and try to work toward solutions?

Ryan Busse The first thing that needs to happen is for the left to stop buying the NRA's baloney. And by that, I mean, the NRA has succeeded because it has forced all gun owners to operate or to be represented under one umbrella as if, you know, once the once the AR-15 and tactical culture started to take over the industry, we were often told that we must all be the same, that all guns are the same, all gun owners are the same, that even, you know, that's why if you notice, nobody from the firearms industry criticizes Kyle Rittenhouse, nobody from the firearms industry criticizes these men that stormed capitals. Why? Because there's a culture where everybody must be the same, very much like right wing politics, right? No matter what happens, no matter how ugly it is. I mean, members of Congress threatening to kill other members of Congress, we cannot criticize them, we all have to be the same.

Well, that will lead to a civil war. When you cannot criticize your own tribe, it will lead to a civil war. And I think to your question about what coastal folks and media folks need to understand is not all gun owners are like that. Not all gun owners are OK with that. In fact, many, many are not only not OK with it. They detest it. And so I would say to coastal folks, to people in Democratic Party who might not understand this. Reach out. You have you have friends here. These are response. These are good, responsible people. Just because they own and use guns does not mean they're not good, responsible people. I'm one of these people and there's far more of us than you may think. And I believe there's, you know, I think it's way over 50 percent of gun owners are this way. Media folks and coastal folks need to stop shoving them in the corner. And we need to, you know, we need to be willing to accept people that aren't those those radical.

Justin Angle So we've talked about tactical culture and sort of the glorification of weapons of war in that culture. Yet we're also living through this period where we are, I think as a society starting to come to grips with the costs of those endless wars on the people involved. I mean, our veterans are coming back with deep problems that our society has doesn't really have the systems in, and the government is certainly not dedicating the resources to helping them. So these guys are living in the aftermath of using these weapons to do what they were designed to do. Yet we have this other side of our culture that glorifies that, that type of weaponry. How do you feel about that sort of juxtaposition?

Ryan Busse I think you're right. And when you have those sorts of societal turmoils, 20 years of war, people who have sacrificed for their country and who frankly, there's a lot of PTSD, there's a lot of ugliness that happens in war. I've got a lot of friends that are veterans. If if these people aren't taken care of and embraced and appreciated by the country, it creates a potential place for radicalization. And I mean, there was an an alarming number of veterans that were in those in that January six crowd. And I'm distressed by that, and I think it's incumbent upon us as citizens and as a country to not wait until people are so troubled, they become radical. It's it's not just veterans. We there's there's been economic turmoil in our country and we have sort

of abandoned people and they became radicalized. There has been racial turmoil and we have sort of abandoned people and they become radicalized. And there's this military turmoil and we've abandoned these people and they become radicalized. I sense a theme here. We should not abandon people like we have. And so but that requires a very healthy and vibrant democracy in society and that is not going to exist if we tear it apart with a violent insurrection or violent civil war.

Justin Angle Yeah. And you're your riff about how the NRA demands everybody's the same. Like, if we assume and demand everybody is the same, we will continue to abandon groups that aren't the same. Yeah, yeah. And that's a big risk.

Ryan Busse Yeah, I'm very I'm very worried about that. I'm exceedingly worried. But I'm also very hopeful because I believe I believe in the goodness of American people, and I believe that in our hearts, we don't want to do these violent, these violent things, these violent armed things that so many of these political power entities want us to do. But we have to stand up for our own self-interest.

Justin Angle I think you're right. It's a small number of people doing these things, but it's very few of our leaders having the courage to stand up to those forces.

Ryan Busse One of the themes is, as with our modern politics, a very small number of people grabbed the mic and then they set the tone for an entire organization or an entire country. And it's time that the reasonable people I know, it's difficult. People don't like to fight back. They don't like the they don't like to confront their relative, who's a huge nonbeliever who says crazy things at Thanksgiving dinner. But we can't keep letting these things pass. We have to stand up for himself and dress. We have to put sanity back in the room. And frankly, we got to take the mic back. So that's that's what I hope happens.

Justin Angle So one other thing, Ryan, I know that public lands are very important to you. You've been active in Montana conservation voters, backcountry hunters and anglers. Anything you want to talk about with that particular issue and why it's so important to you.

Ryan Busse I'm a student of history. I'm a student of our government. I believe all the words in the Constitution. I love the Declaration of Independence, but honestly, those are all ethereal ideas. They're beautiful. They helped form what I believe is the most beautiful democratic experiment ever on the planet. But public lands are something we can touch. It's it's an experiment that no other country has played around with. And it really, to me, is the epitome of trusting citizens with something we can touch and feel. People who attack them, call them federal lands or call them. This are none of these things. There are. To me, that is the manifestation of a government trusting its people with something as big and beautiful as 600 700 million acres of public lands and, you know, some of the most beautiful, fulfilling times in my life. Most of them, in fact, have been in and around public land, so it's something that's just incredibly important to me.

Justin Angle Paul Ryan, as we close here, we should mention gunfight. It's such a powerful book. If folks want to learn more about your work or any of the other organizations that you're involved in, where would you point them online?

Ryan Busse So just go to my website. I've got an author website. It's Ryan Bassey, author, icon and just all one word, and you can see updates there by the book articles podcast. Whatever so would love to have you visit there?

Justin Angle Awesome. Well, thanks for joining us today, Ryan, and thanks for the work.

Ryan Busse Yeah, thanks for your show, Justin.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.