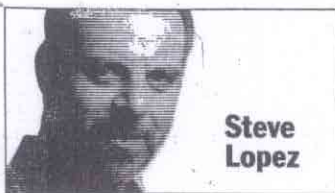


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Steve Lopez

Arlen? Vince? Time for a truce

Like everybody else, I became somewhat reflective as 1993 drew to a close, and scribbled up a list of the many changes I can make to become a better human being in 1994.

God knows the list is long. But first and foremost among my New Year's resolutions, I plan to be nicer to two guys I smacked around all last year.

I am talking, of course, about the Butch and Sundance of Philadelphia. U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and State Sen. Vince Fumo.

When you think about it, there might be some very good reasons Specter is against a ban on military-style assault weapons. Maybe he owns stock in the Uzi company. Maybe he knows national leaders have gone nuts and a well-armed citizenry will be called upon to overthrow the government.

For that matter, maybe Fumo knew something we didn't know when he helped lead an effort to gun down Philadelphia's ban on semiautomatic weapons. He is, after all, a man of superior intelligence, and the owner of a jet ski, which I have always regarded as the ultimate sign of good taste, if not judgment.

Anyway, I called both men Friday. Let's start with Butch. I mean Arlen.

First I called his Philadelphia office, and a receptionist said he wasn't in. So I hung up and dialed his home. Arlen himself answered.

Using my best telephone etiquette, I identified myself.

Cranky in the morning

There was a pause. Arlen might have been in his PJs. I don't know. My guess is that, during the pause, Arlen was trying to decide whether:

(A) This was a crank call. (B) He should hang up. (C) He should say he was Joan, and Arlen wasn't home, or (D) He should reach through the phone and throttle me.

To break the ice, I explained that

I'd like to get together with him and talk about guns.

"What for?" he snapped.

Now I know how Anita Hill felt.

But I remained calm and told him that, in the interest of fairness, I wanted to give him every opportunity to explain his stance on guns.

In a nasty tone, Arlen ordered me to call his office "during working hours" (it was midmorning) and ask for his press secretary.

I told him I already had. And hell, he was on the phone, I was on the phone. This is the problem with government. I had to get off the phone and call for permission to talk to him.

I argued the point, but Arlen repeated the same command, over and over and over and over until, in a breakthrough, I began to understand why someone might want an assault weapon. So we're making progress.

When I called Arlen's office again, a second receptionist said that judging by my voice, I sounded like I was 6-foot-2 or so. I said I am.

The receptionist said the guess would have been much shorter, judging by my picture in the paper.

All right. Actually, I'm 18 inches tall and I live in a magazine rack.

Stalking quail

Right after I hung up, Dan McKenna called. He's Specter's press secretary, and a decent man, I must say. This made for three Specter employees already on the job Friday morning while Arlen was padding around in his PJs, yammering about calling "during working hours."

I told McKenna that, intellectually, I can understand a person opposing gun control. But I find it astounding that anybody other than Rambo would gladly serve as the NRA cheerleader for assault weapons.

Not that Arlen's explanation — a *ban would inconvenience hunters and sportsmen* — isn't compelling.

McKenna promised to see if Arlen would talk to me. Meanwhile, I called Fumo's office. If anybody could understand Arlen's hunting explanation, it would be Vince, who hunts quail with semiautomatics. I believe he stalks them on his jet ski.

A receptionist said Fumo's office was closed and Vince wasn't there.

I asked if he was in Harrisburg.

She said she didn't know.

I asked for the Harrisburg number.

She said she didn't have it.

You're kidding me.

"Wait," she said. I heard some shuffling, and then: "No. I can't find it."

She sounded about 5-foot-2.

I left a message. And while waiting for Butch and Sundance to call back, I thought about how much fun it would be if they picked up their pal Gomez and the three of us went hunting together, maybe in Bolivia.

They haven't called back yet, but I won't pass judgment or anything.

I'm going easy on them this year.