

Pushing a Right to Bear Arms, the Sharp Kind

PHOENIX — Arizona used to be a knife carrier's nightmare, with a patchwork of local laws that forced those inclined to strap Buck knives or other sharp objects to their belts to tread carefully as they moved from Phoenix (no knives except pocketknives) to Tempe (no knives at all) to Tucson (no knives on library grounds).

But that changed earlier this year when Arizona made its Legislature the sole arbiter of knife regulations. And because of loose restrictions on weapons here, Arizona is now considered a knife carrier's dream, a place where everything from a samurai sword to a switchblade can be carried without a quibble.

Arizona's transformation, and the recent lifting of a ban on switchblades, stiletos, dirks and daggers in New Hampshire, has given new life to the knife rights lobby, the little-known cousin of the more politically potent gun rights movement. Its vision is a knife-friendly America, where blades are viewed not as ominous but as tools — the equivalent of sharp-edged screw drivers or hammers — that serve useful purposes and can save lives as well as take them.

Sure, knife fights and knife attacks are a concern. No knife-lover would ever deny that. In fact, Todd Rathner, the lobbyist for Knife Rights Inc., an advocacy group based in Arizona that is now in its third year, was mugged twice in New York City before moving to Tucson, once — “ironically,” he said — at knifepoint.

But the problem is with the knife wielder, not the knife itself, the knife lobby says, sounding very much like those who advocate for gun rights.

In fact, knife advocates contend that the Second Amendment applies to knives as well as guns. They focus their argument elsewhere, though, emphasizing that knives fill so many beneficial roles, from carving Thanksgiving turkeys to whittling, that they do not deserve the bad name they often get.

“People talk about how knives are dangerous, and then they go in the kitchen and they have 50 of them,” said D’Alton Holder, a veteran knife maker who lives in Wickenburg, Ariz. “It’s ridiculous to talk about the size of the knife as if that makes a difference. If you carry a machete that’s three feet long, it’s no more dangerous than any knife. You can do just as much damage with an inch-long blade, even a box cutter.”

As for the pocketknife he carries with him every day, Mr. Holder said: “I use it for everything — to clean my fingernails, to prune a tree or carve, even to eat dinner with. I never think about the knives that I carry or the knives that I make as weapons.”

Jennifer Coffey, the New Hampshire state representative who led the effort to overturn the state's switchblade ban, is also an emergency medical technician who uses knives to extract people from vehicles after accidents. Even when switchblades were outlawed, there were

exceptions for emergency workers and others who might use them on the job, but Ms. Coffey still considered the law outrageous.

“We had certain knives that were illegal, but I could walk down the street with a kitchen knife that I used to carve a turkey and that would be legal,” Ms. Coffey said. “I’d be more scared of a kitchen knife than a switchblade.”

She said switchblade bans were passed in the 1950s because of the menacing use of the knives in movies like “West Side Story” and “Rebel Without a Cause.” Her legislation drew the support of an array of knife-related entities: Knife Rights, a young upstart in knife advocacy; the American Knife and Tool Institute, a group based in Wyoming that represents knife manufacturers, sellers and owners; and publications like Blade, Cutlery News Journal and Knife World.

The effort to lift the ban on switchblades in New Hampshire even won the support of the New Hampshire Association of Chiefs of Police.

In Arizona, however, police groups were more circumspect about lifting all of the local knife laws. The Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police opposed the move, saying local jurisdictions ought to set their own knife restrictions. The Phoenix Law Enforcement Association remained neutral.

In much of the country, especially in urban areas, knives are still viewed as weapons in need of tight control.

District Attorney [Cyrus R. Vance Jr.](#) of Manhattan announced in June that his office had pressured retail stores that were selling illegal knives to remove them from their shelves, forfeit profits from the knives made over the last four years and help finance a campaign to educate people against illegal knives.

“What makes these knives so dangerous is the ease with which they can be concealed and brandished,” Mr. Vance said of the illegal switchblades and gravity knives, which require a wrist flip to open instead of a switchblade’s spring, that were bought by undercover agents.

Mr. Vance’s offensive drew the ire of the American Knife and Tool Institute, which issued an “action alert” and offered to assist New York retailers and individuals charged with knife violations with their legal defenses.

The knife lobby similarly rose up in 2009 when the federal Customs and Border Protection agency issued a proposal that would have reclassified many pocketknives and pocket tools as switchblades and thus made them illegal for import or sale across state lines under the 1958 federal Switchblade Act. In the end, Congress intervened and blocked the change.

A case now unfolding in Seattle shows how volatile knives continue to be. A police officer there fatally shot a man in August after, the officer said, he ordered the man several times to drop a knife that he was carrying. But the legitimacy of the shooting has been questioned by the Police

Department, partly because the knife, which had a three-inch blade, was found in a closed position near the body of the dead man, who had been using it to carve a piece of wood.

Knife advocates are hoping that, just as [Arizona's immigration law](#) has led to a national debate on that topic, its move to end knife restrictions will lead more states to take up the cause.

“Arizona is now the model when it comes to knives,” said Mr. Rathner, who was a [National Rifle Association](#) lobbyist before he switched to knives. “We’re now going to be moving to other states, probably in the Rocky Mountains and the Southeast. There’s probably half a dozen or more places that are ripe for this.”

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