

# VANITY FAIR

## Virginia Tech Survivor Colin Goddard on New HBO Documentary *Gun Fight*

 SEARCH 

by [John Lopez](#) 3:30 PM, APRIL 13 2011



Colin Goddard. Photograph via HBO.

Four years ago this Saturday, Colin Goddard was in his morning French class at Virginia Tech when Seung-Hui Cho entered the room and opened fire. “It’s the craziest thing you could ever imagine,” Goddard told us recently. “It’s not how it’s portrayed in TV or video games. It’s terrifying.” Despite being shot four times, Goddard survived—but 10 of his classmates did not. In the weeks, headlines, and op-eds that followed, the Virginia Tech shootings became a major national tragedy—but the trauma faded from public consciousness, until Representative Gabrielle Giffords was shot at an Arizona supermarket in early January 2011. Ever since, the debate over America’s unique relationship with gun ownership—and what happens when guns get into the wrong hands—has come back into sharp focus. After graduating from college, Goddard went to work for the Brady Campaign, the D.C.-based nonprofit that lobbies for gun regulation. Today, Goddard’s journey provides a powerful component of two-time Oscar winner Barbara Kopple’s latest documentary, *Gun Fight*, which airs tonight on HBO. In an age when nonfiction’s prestige has been tarnished by reality television, *Gun Fight* recalls the kind of meat-and-potatoes documentary filmmaking that aims for thoughtful examination of a complex issue. Goddard’s is one of several human stories that Kopple assembles to present a snapshot of the current gun-control debate: a former N.R.A. lobbyist, an E.R. doctor turned advocate, and, yes, also rank-and-file N.R.A. members who will defend their Second Amendment rights to the last. Goddard discussed his own history with guns before making the film: “I had shotguns. I went to the range and hunting. I was in Army R.O.T.C. and passed basic rifle marksmanship,” he said. “But I didn’t really know the issues: how you bought a gun, what you had to go through, what you didn’t have to go through. I thought there was licensing and registration—things like that. I thought, You buy a gun, of course, you have to register it! You have to register a car. But there’s nothing like that.”

After joining the Brady campaign, Goddard saw the gun-control debate had two sides speaking two different languages, and has become an advocate of regulation to close the loopholes that allow gun buyers to evade the background checks. “The day the government comes to take everyone’s gun, I will stand with [gun owners] to oppose that,” he says. “However, we’re not talking about that. The N.R.A. has been able to pass legislation in Congress to protect [gun sellers, manufacturers, and distributors] in a way that no other sellers of any other product in our country have been able to.”

As outlined in Kopple’s documentary, Goddard found the debate for sensible gun control log-jammed by an N.R.A. leadership that sees any compromise as an untenable existential threat. In his view, the extremism of the debate results from a built-in existential

incentive; the N.R.A. and the Brady campaign have a symbiotic relationship, in which one's enemy is the best motivation for gathering funds from one's membership. "Both sides need each other to message their membership—'Look, this other group is doing this to ruin the country; send us your money so we can fight these guys.' It's ridiculous," he says. As *Gun Fight* highlights, the result is that the background checks and regulations which *do* exist are easily circumvented, and attempts to reform such inadequacies in the system are thought to harm a politician's electability—something Goddard disputes.

The truly remarkable thing about Kopple's documentary is that it captures the personal elements of Goddard's story without sensationalizing them, and serves as a thoughtful overview of the gun debate in America. It's not hard to see where the film's sympathies lie, but it doesn't feel like muckraking. Instead, it offers an intelligent look at subject matter often deprived of rational discussion. As Goddard puts it: "If more guns made society safer, then the United States would be the safest society in the world. But it's not." The annual number of gun-related deaths will never go to zero, he says—"but they can go from 30,000 to 15,000—and that's huge."

REGISTRATION OR USE OF THIS SITE CONSTITUTES ACCEPTANCE OF OUR [USER AGREEMENT](#) (REVISED AUGUST 1, 2011) AND [PRIVACY POLICY](#) (REVISED AUGUST 1, 2011).  
VANITY FAIR © CONDÉ NAST DIGITAL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THE MATERIAL ON THIS SITE MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED, DISTRIBUTED, TRANSMITTED, CACHED OR OTHERWISE USED, EXCEPT WITH THE PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION OF CONDÉ NAST DIGITAL.  
[AD CHOICES](#)