

Denying guns to the mentally ill

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Despite recollections of Columbine and Virginia Tech, the orgy of violence in just two months warns us that 2008 may see the highest toll ever in school shootings. As recently as a dozen years ago, an American schoolroom surely was among the safest refuges we'd be likely to find.

Things have changed. And there are two organizations that, though claiming to speak for the rights of countless members, offer no reasonable proposals for dealing with school shootings. These are the incredibly Washington-wise and politically powerful National Rifle Association and its smaller, but often louder echo on firearms issues, Gun Owners of America. Incorporated in 1976 (as Gun Owners of California), the latter group faults the NRA for serving the interests of firearms manufacturers more faithfully than it does an upright citizenry, which feels it must possess guns for sporting purposes.

And, oh yes - for self-protection. On these grounds, Gun Owners objected recently to a proposal even the outlaw John Dillinger might have thought reasonable. The provision would add mental health records to an FBI data base that's checked for information on people buying guns. Apparently with a straight face, Gun Owners of America argues that the new requirement "could block millions of additional, honest gun owners from buying firearms."

How's that? Is the organization's goal "Lugers for loonies?"

I'd have supposed that the records required on prospective gun purchasers already include most of what's needed in deciding whether they are fit to own a death-dealing weapon. But this, apparently, is not so. We're indebted to the Chicago Sun-Times for nailing essential facts concerning the disturbed 27-year-old who shot up a classroom at Northern Illinois University. Steve Kazmierczak, the newspaper learned, had acquired eight firearms without violation (by himself or anyone else) of laws that presumably protect society from guns in the hands of people who shouldn't have them.

Although treated intermittently since his teen years for mental instability, Kazmierczak was able to buy three handguns from a licensed DeKalb, Ill., dealer in February 2007. He subsequently made three separate purchases at a shop in Champaign, seat of the University of Illinois. These included two 9 mm handguns, a .380-caliber pistol and a pump-action 12-gauge shotgun.

Quite an arsenal, this, for a young man who'd been diagnosed with mental problems. Only family members or close companions (whom the brooding Kazmierczak reportedly shunned) might have known he had stopped taking anti-anxiety and depression medications shortly before his Valentine's Day rampage.

Anyone questioning why gun control is a topic as yet unmentioned in the 2008 presidential campaign need only look to the past. It's not a winning political issue. This is so despite repeated outrages over the years that brand America the most violent among all developed nations - Christian, Jewish, Muslim or none of the above. Candidates showing courage to speak up on what could be the most urgent of all domestic issues have too often found themselves in cross-hairs of the firearms lobby.

Can the entire U.S. Senate be gutless? If in doubt, then consider the saga of Michael J. Sullivan. He's acting director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Sullivan hasn't yet won Senate confirmation, more than a year after President Bush named him to the job, because three senators stand in his way - Idaho's Michael D. Crapo and Larry Craig, along with David Vitter of Louisiana.

Of Crapo, I know nothing beyond the company he keeps. Vitter we remember as the self-proclaimed family man whose name graces the patron list of a notorious "D.C. madam." Craig, there seems reason to believe, gets his kicks in airport restrooms.

But the present fuss isn't about sexual indiscretions. Nor is it one of those partisan confrontations we've wearied of - Republicans and Democrats on opposite sides, neither giving an inch. No, this unpleasantness is about reducing gun violence, and it's an exclusively one-party rumble. A Republican president, Bush, picks a Republican prosecutor, Sullivan, to head a vitally important regulatory agency - and a trio of Republican senators puts a "hold" on the man's confirmation.

A "hold?" It's one of those Senate courtesies enabling individual members to block someone's confirmation without giving a reason. But every senator knows what this one is about. It's because Sullivan, a tough enforcement guy, thinks we need to know if a prospective gun buyer is sane - and we're denied the only means of finding out.

Is no one in authority raising hell about this? Not yet, it seems.

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