

Guns here, guns there, guns everywhere

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

The 1968 assassination of Bobby Kennedy - third in a murder sequence that already had taken the lives of his brother John and Martin Luther King Jr. - loosed a tornado of demands for tougher gun laws. Congressional offices were deluged with mail. My own staff counted 1,400 letters in a single week. Gun control was expected to dominate our legislative schedule for the balance of that summer.

But it did not, because a second wave was already on the way, possibly the most impressive counterdemonstration ever witnessed in politics. In my office, the earlier mass of mail was quickly eclipsed by a total of nearly 1,800 gun-defense letters received in the week immediately following. Such an outpouring of passion, I knew, could have been engineered only in part by the vaunted National Rifle Association. It provided the first evidence I'd seen of what has come to be called "the American gun culture." In extraordinary numbers, we as a people seem to find comfort in the possession of lethal weapons.

A widely held passion for defense of Second Amendment rights goes beyond the NRA's concern for the needs of hunters. More than half of some 200 million firearms privately owned in the United States, alas, are fashioned not for killing game animals, but for shooting fellow human beings.

This unpleasant truth causes an uneasy gap in public debate over access to weaponry - a debate instantly revived by the killings at Virginia Tech. And once again, America is being targeted abroad as the most violent among developed nations. From snide editorials in the European press to the openly expressed contempt voiced by Australia's prime minister, we are faulted for failure to act in the face of repeated mass murders.

Regrettably, however, revival of the gun debate seems limited to radio talk, the cable news shows and letters to newspapers. Legislators, or anyone else who might actually get something done about guns, appear to want no part of the argument. One senses a shift in the thrust of political forces that have previously contested Second Amendment rights. The Democratic Party, for one, shows little eagerness to renew the fight for saner firearms legislation - tilting at windmills, as party leaders see it. Having recently made elective inroads in so-called "red" states where gun laws are thought unpopular, strategists feel they have a winning issue opposing the war in Iraq. So why give Republicans the chance to argue anything else?

For top-tier Republican hopefuls, too, the Virginia Tech tragedy could not have come at a less opportune time. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, once an outspoken gun-control advocate, had recently joined the NRA - and as a "lifetime" member, whatever that means. When he was New York's mayor, Rudy Giuliani chided states that he said make it easier to acquire a gun than a driver's license. But elect him president, Giuliani pledged not long ago, and he'll let the states decide what's best. A third White House aspirant, Sen. John McCain, expresses sympathy for victims of the campus massacre, but cautions against any weakening of the right to bear arms.

And they call this a debate? Interestingly, a shift also has been noted among some long-established defenders of firearms. The old reliable NRA, historical opponent of any and all new laws, has conceded that Seung-Hui Cho's easy pistol buys show a need for strengthening state laws. Cho had acquired his weapons in transactions that were more than the required month apart, but absent any adequate examination of the purchaser's psychological fitness. The NRA has said it will work with Michigan Rep. John Dingell - senior House member and himself an NRA board member - to require greater uniformity in state regulations.

But the NRA's concession exposes a near break in the ranks of firearms advocates. A rival lobby, the 150,000-member Gun Owners of America, would oppose tighter control over the weapons market. This organization's leader, Larry Pratt, proclaims Gun Owners to be "eight lanes to the right of the NRA." Rather than amend present laws, he argues, government must encourage the widest possible possession of firearms.

Pratt's vision of America is of an armed camp in which every person packs a gat. Yes, even school students. "It is irresponsibly dangerous to tell students they may not carry guns," he declares, citing the Virginia Tech incident as proof.

Let it be noted that this same Charles Pratt suffered removal as co-chairman of arch-conservative Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign committee in 1996.

Too radical, Buchanan decided.

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