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GUNS AND GUN LAWS

Gun laws and mass murder

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Because of their high-profile nature, mass murders are often exploited to advance some political agenda, and this is especially true when it comes to the role of firearms. Mass shootings have served as ammunition in the debate over gun control, but used, ironically enough, by advocates on both sides of the issue.

In the wake of particularly deadly and widely publicized shootings, gun control proponents have argued that the carnage would not be so great were it not for the easy availability of high-powered firearms, especially assault weapons with high capacity magazines. In contrast, these same tragedies have helped the campaign to expand the right to carry concealed weapons as a deterrent and a means of protecting self and others from an armed assault.

Despite the strength of conviction, it is questionable whether either side's approach -- more or less gun control -- has any potential to impact on the kind of events that unfolded last Saturday outside a Tucson, Arizona supermarket in which six people were killed and many more were wounded by a crazed and embittered assailant using a legally-purchased Glock with an extended magazine.

There are lessons to be learned by looking back over the past 20 years. The past two decades have included many troubling and tragic mass shootings in a variety of public places, with ebbs and flows in the political climate surrounding gun control.

The 1989 mass shooting at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, in which Patrick Purdy executed 5 children and wounded 30 others, resonated around the country. Even President George H. W. Bush, a staunch pro-gun Texan with strong political ties to the National Rifle Association, softened his stand just a bit by signing a temporary ban on the importation of foreign-made assault weapons, which did little but advance the interests of domestic firearms manufacturers.

The early 1990s witnessed a scary flurry of high-profile mass murders, including Gang Lu's 1991 shooting spree at the University of Iowa, the 1991 massacre of 23 lunchtime diners at Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, and the slaughter of eight people inside a San Francisco law firm at the hands of a disgruntled former client. The anxiety and publicity over these and other shooting rampages prompted Congress to pass and President Bill Clinton to sign the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act of 1994, better known as the Assault Weapons Ban. This federal law included, however, a 10-year sunset

provision stipulating that the ban would expire if not extended by Congress. By 2004, the mood in the country and on Capitol Hill had shifted to the right, and efforts by a minority of elected officials to reaffirm the prohibition failed to avert expiration.

Unfortunately, many of today's and yesterday's gun control measures, while arguably effective in preventing certain crimes, do not easily deter mass murderers. Most massacres do not have criminal records and, despite certain bizarre behaviors, have never been committed to a psychiatric facility. Most would patiently postpone their planned assaults if waiting periods were still mandated. Of course, restrictions on extended ammunition clips may, in some cases, reduce the body count.

Mass shootings have been exploited just as effectively by pro-gun groups to promote legislation allowing ordinary citizens to carry concealed weapons in public places -- so-called right to carry (RTC) laws. The same Luby's Cafeteria shooting that prompted calls for the assault weapons ban inspired one Texas woman who survived the massacre to launch her own campaign to liberalize laws concerning carrying loaded weapons in public places.

On Oct. 16, 1991, Suzanna Gratia Hupp helplessly watched her mother and father die as George Hennard Jr. methodically blasted away at a crowd of stunned customers at the Killeen Luby's. At one point during the slaughter, she had a clear shot at the assailant and reached for her purse to get her gun. But Hupp soon realized she didn't have it with her, as state law prohibited citizens to carry guns concealed inside pocketbooks or clothing. As a survivor, she became a forceful advocate for concealed-weapons laws, becoming the darling of the NRA and eventually being elected to the state legislature as a one-issue candidate.

In the two decades since the Killeen massacre -- during which time the nation was horrified by mass shootings in schools, churches and even a military base -- the campaign for expanding "right to carry" laws gained traction around the country. Not surprisingly, Arizona has one of the most liberal provisions, allowing citizens to carry concealed firearms in a variety of public places, even without a special permit. Saturday's tragic shooting became a real life-and-death test of the supposed benefits of concealed carry, with disappointing results for the more-guns-less-crime believers.

The prospect of facing armed opposition hardly dissuades mass murderers, like the Arizona gunman, who are determined to pursue their vengeful plan. In fact, many mass killers fully expect to die in battle; some even taking their own life. It is also debatable whether citizens who are packing heat will in fact intervene in a way that Hupp believe would have been possible from her vantage point during the Killeen shooting spree.

The crowd that witnessed Saturday's rampage would have included citizens armed for protection, yet none apparently tried to fire at the assailant. Some may have been too stunned to react, or perhaps they acted instinctively by running and hiding. Some who were prepared to shoot may have feared hitting innocent people in the chaos. Even when a few bystanders heroically tackled the assailant as he paused to reload, it wasn't clear which one was the perpetrator among those struggling for control.

Beyond this one episode, the effectiveness of concealed-carry laws in deterring mass murder is an empirical question, one that has been examined thoroughly by criminologists Grant Duwe, Tomislav Kovandzic, and Carlisle Moody. Using fairly sophisticated analytic techniques, they assessed the extent to which enactment of various RTC laws in 25 states across the country were associated with any change in the incidence of public mass shootings in the years from 1977 through 1999. Based on their estimates, the effects of RTC laws are negligible, neither encouraging nor discouraging mass murder.

Regardless of the factual data, public opinion on concealed carry laws will likely continue to be driven by political agendas as well as fear. According to reports, gun sales and registrations for concealed weapons classes have increased sharply in Arizona (and elsewhere) in the wake of Saturday's shooting. Apparently, few of these alarmed (and now armed) citizens fully considered how people react under such unanticipated and suddenly chaotic situations. The notion that they will whip out their loaded weapon, gun down the assailant, and save scores of innocent lives in the process is far more fantasy than realistic expectation. At the same time, we can only pray that the spike in gun sales will not place us all in greater peril.