

NATIONAL VIEW | NEWSDAY

Gun control bill should become law

Whenever someone wantonly opens fire and kills a group of innocent people, the natural question is, what can be done so it doesn't happen again? There's no easy answer — no silver bullet, so to speak — but Congress has recently taken one small step that should help.

It passed a bill, born of painful Long Island experience and the tragedy at Virginia Tech., that will help keep guns out of the hands of dangerous, mentally ill people. Wonder of wonders, it reflects common ground between passionate champions of gun control, such as bill sponsor Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., and the National Rifle Association. It needs only President George W. Bush's signature to become law.

The legislation would provide \$250 million to help states update their records on people who cannot legally own guns, and to send that

data to the National Instant Criminal Background Check system. That federal system for screening would-be gun buyers is only as good as the information contained in its computerized database. Right now that's not very good. Too many states have spotty data or, for technical reasons, fail to share what they have with Washington.

One result is that people such as the man who opened fire at Our Lady of Peace Church in Lynbrook, N.Y., in 2002, killing a priest and an elderly parishioner, have been able to buy guns despite disqualifying psychiatric histories.

The bill places no new burdens on gun owners or sellers. It simply enforces current law. It's stunning that it took Congress so long to pass this reform to ensure that fewer potential gun buyers slip through the cracks of potentially lifesaving background checks. Better late than never.

NATIONAL VIEW | PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Lawsuit contorts truth

President Bush's refusal to sign a defense spending bill, in part because it might bolster a lawsuit filed by U.S. soldiers tortured in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, reeks of hypocrisy.

It's just the president's latest sleight-of-hand trick when it comes to Iraq.

Bush rushed to the current war based, at best, on flawed intelligence. At worst, the public was misled about Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons.

Soon after the March 2003 invasion, Bush made his infamous fighter-jet landing on a carrier and made his "Mission Accomplished" speech. Almost five years later, the war drags on, having cost almost 4,000 soldiers' lives and \$10 billion a month in tax dollars.

Progress of late is partly credited to Bush's "surge." But this is the same guy who four years ago insisted that troop levels were adequate when then Army chief of staff Gen. Eric Shinseki was arguing that many more soldiers were needed to succeed.

Now Bush's veto of a defense authorization measure has served to block efforts by 17 former U.S. soldiers seeking justice from Iraq for past torture.

Didn't Bush argue that one reason Saddam Hussein needed to be toppled was that he tortured his own people? But now, Bush fears that a provision added to the defense bill would trigger a wave of lawsuits that could "imperil billions of dollars of Iraqi assets."

So, he has no problem pouring billions of U.S. tax dollars into Iraq for the war, but opposes efforts to force the Iraq government to pay

for past misdeeds that occurred there.

Sure wouldn't want to waste Iraqi dinars.

In fact, Bush administration lawyers intervened after the soldiers who filed suit were awarded a \$959 million judgment, arguing that the verdict should be thrown out. A U.S. appeals court sided with the administration.

U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., then attached an amendment to the defense bill that would allow victims to sue "state sponsors of terrorism" accused of torture. It would set aside the so-called "sovereign immunity" rule of law that has traditionally applied even to dictatorships.

Lautenberg's amendment would reopen the door for the soldiers' lawsuit, and could lead to more suits. In opposing it, Bush claimed he's worried about what it could do to the finances of the new Iraq.

But governments have paid for the crimes of their predecessors. So it was when the Clinton administration paid reparations to the families of Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. And Iraq's oil means it won't always be destitute.

Bush knows that if Iraq can get sued for torture, so can the United States. Even now, the CIA is trying to keep secret all of the ways it pulled information from captives.

That's the slippery slope the Bush administration has tumbled down by using waterboarding and other torturous methods to fight terrorism. Bush's latest contortion shows how hard it is to take the moral high ground when you've been swimming in the gutter.

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ARTIST'S VIEW



POLITICS | U.S. REP. JOHN R. KUHL JR.

We need to work together

In January of 2007, House Democrats took the gavel for the first time in 12 years. They came in with promises of transparency and change. But unfortunately, the only thing the American public received from their new leadership was inaction and political games.

The Democratic majority had 12 months to address the nation's problems and establish a federal budget. Instead, this majority chose to rename federal buildings for more than 11 months and wait until the last two weeks to pass any substantial legislation. Of the 155 bills signed into law this Congress, 64 renamed post offices and courthouses. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid summarized the Democratic progress this year on "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer," by saying "well, we've been able to accomplish quite a bit, but not very much, cer-

tainty not as much as I wanted to."

In actuality, there were only six new laws that achieved any of the original objectives of the Democratic leadership. Six new laws in 365 days is equivalent to one bill passed every 60 days.

And those six bills were greatly influenced by Republicans, who worked to eliminate tax hikes and decrease spending. The six new bills include an energy bill that raises automobile fuel efficiency standards, mandates additional production of ethanol, reduces home energy consumption, but did not include a \$21.5 billion dollar tax increase that the Democrats proposed. The State Children's Health Insurance was reauthorized through March 31, 2009 and this reauthorization does the one thing that the other previously defeated State Children's Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP) bills didn't — it puts

low-income children first.

The reviews are in for the Democratic majority. USA Today says the Democrats are "Lost in Time" — (12/17/2007) while the Washington Post points out that "Democrats (are) Blaming Each Other for Failures" — (12/13/2007).

While millions of Americans are making New Years resolutions, my greatest hope is that the Democratic leadership will resolve to work with the minority in 2008. Much must be accomplished this year, and we cannot afford another 11 months of bickering and posturing to hinder the progress this country needs. Americans deserve a government that will work to meet the people's needs. It is my resolution for 2008 to continue to serve the people I represent and do everything I can to encourage and motivate the government to resolve the important issues and fix our nation's problems.



COMMENTARY | LEONARD PITTS JR.

It can happen here

The authorities would just come into your home, grab your mother, your brother, your dad, and take them away. No warning, no warrant, no appeal.

Thirty thousand people were disappeared that way, she told me. This was in an interview three years ago, and Ruth Cox was describing her childhood in Argentina under military dictatorship. Cox, a teacher in Charleston, S.C., said families never learned what happened to their loved ones. Or why. People were taken and that was it. The government was not accountable.

My first response was a vague pride that those kinds of things can't happen here.

My second response was to realize that my first response was naive. These last years have provided a jolting education in the sorts of things that can, indeed, happen here. Mass surveillance, detention without access to courts, no right to confront, or even know, the evidence against you, torture. And a government that is not accountable.

So last week's news that the Justice Department has launched a criminal investigation into the CIA's destruction of videotapes said to depict the harsh interrogation of terrorism suspects is welcome, but also belated, the very embodiment of the old saw about locking the garage after the car's been stolen. Though we have lost a lot more than a car. And here, a line from a

Bruce Springsteen song seems apropos. "The flag flying over the courthouse means certain things are set in stone. Who we are, and what we'll do and what we won't." Sadly, the list of what we won't do has narrowed dramatically since 2001.

It's telling that a number of politicians have lately cited as their model on terrorism issues Jack Bauer, the counterterrorism agent on the TV hit "24," who routinely tortures the truth out of bad guys as the clock ticks toward catastrophe. It's not hard to understand the appeal. There's a certain atavistic attraction to the Jack Bauer method, an attraction that bypasses the head en route to the gut.

Too bad, because had the head been asked, it might have pointed out that Jack Bauer is a fictional character on a TV show not noted for its realism. Using him as a guide to terrorism makes about as much sense as using Barney Fife as a guide to law enforcement.

And the very fact that Jack Bauer is invoked in the most crucial policy debate of our time tells you something about the state of the union going on seven years after the Sept. 11 attacks. In a word: scared.

There is nothing new about being scared. Nor about abridging civil liberties in response. It happened in the civil rights movement, in the Red scare, happened when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, when the nation plunged into

World War I, when John Adams was offended by the French.

But it's worth noting that, for all the illegal wiretapping, arrests, detention, blacklisting, censorship and loss of life this country has seen in the name of fear, only one major abridgement of civil liberties in time of national emergency — Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War — stands justified by hindsight.

The rest, we regard with a shamed fascination. We wonder what we were thinking, how we wandered so far afield from the principles that should make us great.

We'll wonder this time, too.

And me, I also wonder this: are we doomed to keep learning the same lesson every generation? Or will we finally decide someday to stand for what we stand for even — "especially" — when we are scared? That kind of courage might not stop terrorists, but it could cripple "terrorism."

Because violence that intends to instill fear is not the only threat we face. We are also threatened by the fear itself. Fear is the enemy of reason. Fear can leave you fundamentally changed.

It can't happen here, I said. But of course, it already has.

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COMMENTARY | SUSAN BENJAMIN

Fatally ill, or foolishly misguided

A few weeks ago, my 11-year old son got a bite on his cheek — a spider bite from all appearances. The bite didn't heal; in fact, it seemed to become slightly more infected. So, I decided a trip to the doctor was in order. When I picked my son up at school, I mentioned the sore to one of the mothers. "You know," she said: "it could be MRSA."

MARSA? Never heard of it. MRSA, she told me, is a highly contagious, potentially fatal form of staph infection. Worse, it's immune to treatment. Several other mothers chimed in. And in. And in. Suddenly, my otherwise healthy son (with no fever or bodily aches or pains) was on the brink of death. When we got home, his teachers called with anxious inquiries.

The hysteria around MRSA is one of many that have circulated around our West Virginia community lately — and thousands of other communities around the nation. There was the spinach disaster, where even a cooked leaf in a soufflé would lead to certain death. There was the hamburger debacle where so much as a slice of meatloaf had high fatality potential.

The reality of these ailments is another matter. According to the Center for Disease Control (and my son's doctors), MRSA is usually treatable through medication or by draining the wound. Fatalities from the bacteria are rare. As for spinach — the numbers vary but apparently one or two people died of the spinach-induced E.coli virus and 200 others got sick. As for the hamburger: according to the CDC Web site dated Oct. 26, "Among 33 ill persons for whom hospitalization status is known, 21 (64 percent) were hospitalized. Two patients developed a type of kidney failure called hemolytic-uremic syndrome (HUS). No deaths have been reported." The outbreak, which occurred between July and September 2007, affected frozen hamburger only.

Ironically, to combat these ills — and countless others — we engage in warfare that makes the Cold War look tame. We wash our children's hands with anti-bacterial wipes and spray every surface with toxins that could purge a small nation of small pox. Never mind that these overpriced cleansers do nothing more than regular soaps except, quite possibly, contribute to the growth of antibiotic resistant bacteria. The stronger the weapon, the better.

So, why the hysteria? Perhaps the reason can be attributed to our relationship to the world we live in. We are no longer part of it but aliens living on the fringes. Take food, for example. In Ann Valeris, in her book "Kitchen Literacy" (Island Press, 2007), in colonial days we knew exactly where our food came from. The meat, from the farmer down the road. The eggs from our next-door neighbor. And the vegetables from our garden.

These days, the typical American eats about 260 pounds of imported foods each year (the FDA only inspects 1.3 percent of them). As for the great outdoors? According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, "... children 8 to 18 spend 6.5 hours a day on television, electronic games, computers, music and other media. ... For many, the virtual world has become a more familiar setting than the natural one."

In the end, we'd be doing kids, and ourselves, a big favor by paying closer attention to the food we eat, the earth where it's grown, and its life in side us for better, as well as worse.

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