

The Washington Post

Why gun control is such a losing proposition

By Christine Emba

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Early Sunday morning in Orlando, a gunman armed with an AR-15-type assault weapon opened fire inside a crowded gay nightclub, leaving 49 dead and 53 injured. The massacre at Pulse nightclub is the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, perpetrated by an Islamic State sympathizer who had already twice come under investigation by the FBI for potential ties to terrorist groups but who was nonetheless able to legally purchase two guns, including the one he used to commit the act, only days before the event.

The shooting has sparked a new wave of debate about gun control, especially around the availability of assault-style weapons.

On Twitter, activists called out politicians who tweeted condolences but had previously blocked gun-control legislation or taken money from gun groups:

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.@SenRonJohnson accepted \$1.3 million+ from gun rights groups, so all you'll get are his #ThoughtsAndPrayers <https://twitter.com/SenRonJohnson/status/742003855379025920> ...

10:47 AM - 12 Jun 2016

Others questioned whether stricter gun-control laws could actually prevent other tragedies:

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Serious question — who/what did the people obsessing about guns blame Paris attacks on? (Since they have strict gun control.) I forget.

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The political response, however, has been predictably mixed. Many Republican legislators have offered thoughts and prayers to victims and others affected by the shooting while avoiding mention of gun violence. After Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) held a moment of silence in the House of Representatives Monday night, House Democrats staged a protest criticizing Congress's inability to pass or even consider gun-control legislation, whether in the form of assault rifle bans, extended background checks or denying guns to those on a terrorist watch list.

Six months ago, after the mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., that left 14 dead and 21 injured, *In Theory* published a series of pieces attempting to answer the question of why gun control in the U.S. appeared to be such a losing proposition, and what, if anything, could be done to make gun ownership less dangerous to the average citizen.

Jay Wachtel, a former agent at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, described how our regulation of assault-style weapons like the one used in the Orlando shooting was pretense, at best:

In 1994, the federal assault weapons ban outlawed a host of firearms by make and model, including the popular Colt AR-15 and several "AK" style rifles. . . . How did the gun industry respond? With cosmetic fixes. Colt renamed the AR-15 the "Sporter," stripped off its flash suppressor and bayonet lug and modified the magazine. Other manufacturers and importers took similar measures, renaming guns and making minor tweaks.

Everyone was pleased. For liberals, the law's passage was a victory. What got lost in the orgy of self-congratulation, though, was the purpose of the ban.

Michael Waldman, president of the Brennan Center for Justice, pointed out that the Second Amendment has not always been interpreted the way it is today:

It was only a few years ago, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment recognizes an individual right to gun ownership. Previously it had ruled otherwise. . . . As we debate what to do about the scourge of gun violence, we'll hear a lot of spurious arguments that even modest measures trample on Second Amendment rights. Don't believe them. We can have safety and freedom. Whatever complex choices we must make, let's at least know that the Constitution doesn't prevent us from making them.

Philip Alpers, founder of GunPolicy.org, looked at the uniquely American problem of gun violence from an international vantage point.

Most developed countries have already moved to reduce gun-fueled mayhem. Great Britain, Argentina and Brazil all mounted massive national gun buybacks to reduce the availability of firearms. The world's largest occurred in Australia, where a million of its guns — one-third of the nation's private arsenal — were destroyed after a spate of gun massacres that claimed 100 lives. [...] Successive U.S. surgeons general have rightly described America's scourge of 30,000 gun deaths each year as an "epidemic" and a "preventable health problem." Yet the number of U.S. researchers dedicated to this field across all academic disciplines is as few as a dozen. Each year, Congress chokes federal funding to ensure that this remains the case.

All this from a great nation that has led the world in public health interventions to save millions of lives.

And Tom Zoellner, journalist and author, suggested that wresting control of the National Rifle Association away from its anti-legislation minority could make gun-control legislation possible.

The NRA loves to use the phrase "responsible gun owners" to distinguish their membership from criminals, and indeed, polls from the Pew Research Center show that 74 percent of the membership supports universal background checks. . . . What's needed now is for this level-headed majority lurking within the NRA to take over the 76-member board by political force. . . . Even if a coup fails, a vigorous discussion might force some concessions and give hope to those who see the NRA as unbreakable.

Other contributors were more skeptical of calls for further gun control. From Jonathan Blanks, research associate at the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice:

One of the recent refrains from the White House and other political circles after a gun tragedy is, "We need common-sense gun reforms." It's a convenient piece of jargon that conveys level-headedness, non-partisanship and empathy. But it doesn't mean anything substantive, because not all gun deaths are the same: Treating them as if they are is neither common sense nor good public policy. Many of these "common-sense reforms" — assault weapon bans and vague allusions to "gun availability" — do little to reduce the major drivers of gun-related deaths.

Charles C.W. Cooke of National Review defended the Second Amendment from first principles:

The gun is a great equalizer, and the state a capricious beast. [...] The Second Amendment is not "old"; it is timeless. It is not "unclear"; it is obvious. It is not "embarrassing"; it is fundamental. And, as much as anything else, it is a vital indicator of the correct relationship between the citizen and the state and a reminder of the unbreakable sovereignty of the individual.

Margot Hirsch of the Smart Tech Challenges Foundation pointed out that if legislation wasn't going to change, the guns themselves might.

Our country's legislative track record shows that even nationally publicized acts of gun violence do not lead to the enactment of new firearms legislation. If the tragedy at Connecticut's Sandy Hook Elementary School, in which 26 innocent lives were taken, was not sufficient to spur legislation effective at preventing gun violence, it's unlikely that San Bernardino will have any greater impact. Solutions on gun violence won't come from Washington anytime soon.

That's why we need to go a completely different route when it comes to beginning to solve the U.S. gun violence problem: empowering gun owners to make safer choices about the weapons they buy and own.

Despite early outpourings of grief, mass shootings don't tend to substantially affect public opinion on gun control or lead to new legislation. But there's always the potential for change — at least one GOP lawmaker has broken with the party to call for a vote on gun control, and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has made a push for gun control part of her policy platform.

Will it be enough to prevent the next shooting? We'll have to wait and see.