



## Opinion: Obama, Trump and guns

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Had the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton occurred before last week's Democratic presidential debates, the discussion about gun violence might have gotten more news coverage. As it was, the candidates dutifully repeated the party's positions on establishing universal background checks, banning assault weapons and preventing people with a history of domestic violence or mental illness from purchasing firearms.

And the subject got less scrutiny than the criticisms aimed at former President Barack Obama.

That's how debates should work, though. Disagreements define the candidates more than the viewpoints they share. What makes this story different is after the debate, some party members argued that Obama's popularity among registered Democrats makes it unwise to challenge his legacy.

One reason why they're wrong is it contradicts the complaint Democrats have leveled against Republicans who refuse to criticize President Donald Trump. Whether he's trusting the word of dictators over the nation's intelligence experts or sending insulting and racist tweets, too few in his party have the courage to speak out against him. Many of them fear voter backlash because Trump's approval rating among registered Republicans is about the same as Obama's among Democrats.

Obama might not enjoy the criticism. But I think he knows his legacy will always be a subject of debate. And that progress beyond his accomplishments isn't possible any other way.

That's true for every problem, including gun violence.

In 1994, Democrats passed a ten-year ban on the purchase of assault weapons and large capacity magazines. But as Jesse Ferguson recently wrote in the USA Today, the National Rifle Association (NRA) "exacted its punishment on opponents in Congress." Among those ousted from office was Tom Foley, the first Speaker of the House to lose a re-election bid in a hundred years. After that, she says, Democrats "shied away from gun safety."

There were several unsuccessful attempts to renew the ban. But having lost control of Congress, those never got out of committee. And after Obama won the presidency and Democrats took back both chambers, the issue took a back seat to rebuilding the economy and reforming the health care insurance market.

We'll never know if any kind of weapons ban could have prevented the shootings last weekend. Or the one in Gilroy, California a week earlier. Or the 40 plus cases after the ban ended in which a gunman chose a semi-automatic firearm as his murder weapon.

Debating the past won't bring back the hundreds of lives lost. But judging by where we are now, running scared from the NRA hasn't helped at all.

Refraining from intra-party criticism of Obama also reinforces what Gene Healy of the Cato Institute called "The Cult of the Presidency." His book by that title, published in the waning days of George W. Bush's presidency, warned how the expansion of executive power that threatens American liberty is partly the result of voters looking "to the president for salvation from all problems great and small."

Which is exactly the power Trump imagines he brought to the presidency. "I alone can fix it" he said in his 2016 Republican convention speech after ruminating about government incompetence and corruption. And just last week, he tweeted "only the United States, with me as President" can fix the North Korean problem.

Trump hasn't made the world safer from North Korea's nuclear ambitions. He's made it more dangerous with regard to Iran. And the mass shootings in Nevada, California, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Tennessee and Ohio read like a 31-month record of law and order impotence.

One person can't do it all. For a president to think otherwise is disturbing. For voters to expect it leans toward accepting life under authoritarian rule when the president shares our views. And calling for a revolution if he or she doesn't.

Instead, we must distinguish between the idea and the person. Understanding that, Obama knows the criticism last week wasn't about him. And the 2020 election isn't either.

In regard to his legacy, there's one area Obama would agree he failed. Gun violence was rampant during his presidency. But we can't solve the problems we avoid. And since 1994, congressional Democrats thought the only time it was wise to challenge the NRA's chokehold on Republicans was after a mass shooting tragedy.