

# Slate

## Can We Finally Disarm the NRA?

*Only if voters are willing to square off against a gun lobby that has almost never been challenged.*

By: Emily Bazelon - December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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In his sober, sad speech in Newtown, Conn. Sunday night, President Obama sounded like he meant it when he promised to address gun violence. “Because what choice do we have?” he said. “We can’t accept events like this as routine. Are we really prepared to say that we’re powerless in the face of such carnage? That the politics are too hard?”

In fact, until now, that is exactly what the president, like so many other politicians, has concluded. And their calculus has been perfectly rational. Look at the polls showing waning support for stricter gun-control laws. Take into account the political muscle and campaign spending of the National Rifle Association.

If you are a gun-control advocate, the news regularly brings you what every reform movement wants: a powerful anecdote demonstrating the urgency of your cause, in the form of a mass shooting of innocents. Yet, in contrast to so many other movements for restrictive laws—the push to curtail the rights of sex offenders, or to enlarge the scope of the death penalty, or to crack down on child abusers—the gun-control folks last succeeded at turning the outcry of the moment into legislative change 20 years ago. That’s not their fault. It’s our fault. There is no single-issue vote in favor of gun control to counter the NRA, which “has been delivering voters to the polls since 1970,” as Jill Lepore writes in *The New Yorker*.

The challenge, of course, is to change that now. You can read President Obama’s speech as a plea to be held accountable—and that part is on us. There’s a suggestion that the polls are shifting in the right direction. Rupert Murdoch signaled he’s ready and wants the president to take “bold leadership action.” Unlike all the pro-gun-rights senators who can’t be found on TV, and the gone silent NRA, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin said Monday on *Morning Joe* that he’s altering his position, too.

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OK, so where to start? I like Manchin’s framing: “I’m a proud outdoorsman and huntsman, like many Americans, and I like shooting, but this doesn’t make sense. I don’t know anyone in the sporting and hunting arena who goes out with an assault rifle; I don’t know anyone who needs 30 rounds in the clip to go hunting.” I’m no expert, but a ban on rapid-fire ammunition does seem key. Renewing the assault weapon ban, which expired in 2004, is also a place to start, though as Patrick Radden Keefe explains, it’s a partial fix at best.

One big question is how to address semiautomatic rifles and handguns, like the ones Adam Lanza used Friday morning in Newtown. These weapons have the distinction of being both popular and a common link in recent mass shootings. James Holmes, the accused shooter in Aurora, Colo., used a semiautomatic AR-15 rifle. Jared Loughner, who killed 6 people and shot Rep. Gabby Giffords in Tucson, Ariz., used a Glock 19, a 9mm semi-automatic pistol. Seung-Hui Cho, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter who killed 32 people, used the same semi-automatic handgun. I can understand the frustration of the many gun owners who feel like they're being unfairly blamed for the sins of a few mentally unstable transgressors. I get that almost everyone who owns a semi-automatic uses it legally and reasonably. And I also understand, as my friend and Yale Law professor James Forman Jr. puts it, that guns are the only social problem that are their own solution. We don't fight cocaine and heroin with more cocaine and heroin; we do fight gun violence with gun defense.

But that answer isn't translating into public safety. Maybe we need to shift from fighting over rights to appealing to the communal good. If you are the law-abiding owners of a semi-automatic, Adam Lanza's horrible act isn't your fault, and your desire to protect yourself and your family is probably heartfelt. But if you shared in a collective sacrifice of your preferred type of weapon, you could help make it just a little bit harder for the next young man experiencing a dangerous psychotic breakdown to go on a shooting rampage.

And the thing is, it's hard to see how that could happen without your sacrifice. Lanza got his guns from his mother, who owned five of them and took her sons target shooting. They lived in a town with a strong gun culture—strong enough to torpedo a police-led effort earlier this year to curb the shooting of assault weapons at unlicensed guns ranges. In the *New York Times*, Michael Moss and Ray Rivera report that at two packed meetings last summer, a representative of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a gun industry trade association, led the fight against regulation. "No privileges should be taken away from another generation," he said. There's no straight line between the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and that stance, or the town's decision to shelve an ordinance to curtail the unlicensed shooting. But I do think that we have to shift away from the cultural acceptance of weapons and ammunition of the kind Sen. Manchin is talking about. And the Second Amendment right to bear arms shouldn't block these kinds of reforms. The courts have struck down outright bans on handgun possession and the carrying of concealed weapons, but maybe that's actually part of the political détente—you can have your gun at home and on the street, it just can't rapidly fire bullet after bullet.

There's another parallel route for addressing the problem of mass killings: Limiting mentally ill people's access to weapons. "To reduce the risk of multivictim violence, we would be better advised to focus on early detection and treatment of mental illness," Cato chairman Robert Levy told the *Times*. "An early detection regime might indeed be the basis for selective gun access restrictions that even the N.R.A. would support." I'm all ears, and apparently the Department of Justice has some ideas. Background checks at guns shows and other private sales would help, too. But it's important to remember that the problem isn't that mentally ill people are more violent, it's the link between untreated mental illness and violence. By definition, this is a breed of trouble that often falls between the cracks. To spot it, wouldn't we have to do comprehensive psychological screening for all gun purchasers, as Israel reportedly does?

There's so much to think about here. The main thing, though, is to learn more and to hold Obama and other politicians responsible for turning the best ideas into law for the first time in decades. We can do this. We've done it before, with seemingly intractable problems from lynchings to drunk-driving deaths. We just have to stay the course, for as long as it takes.