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CAUCUS ROOM

The Nation Wept. Congress did Nothing.

By Carl Golden | August 12, 2019, 11:47 am | in **Caucus Room**
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In December, 2012, 20 six and seven-year-olds boarded a bus for school in Newtown, Conn. They left their classrooms in body bags.

The nation wept. Congress did nothing.

In October, 2017, thousands of people attended an outdoor concert in Las Vegas, Nev. Within an hour, 58 of them were dead, their bodies shredded by a high-powered rifle.

The nation wept. Congress did nothing.

There are others as well: El Paso, Tex.; Dayton, Ohio; Charlotte, N.C. ; Pittsburgh, Parkland, Fla.; Sutherland Springs, Tex.; Orlando, Fla.

In the aftermath of each — and others — the nation wept.

Congress did nothing.

Now, with 31 people killed in a single weekend in Dayton and El Paso, the debate over mass shootings dominates yet again. And early indications are the Congress will not act.

President Trump has expressed his support for universal background checks for weapons purchasers and authorization of law enforcement to confiscate guns from individuals deemed a threat to themselves or others.

Reinstating the Federal ban on the manufacture of assault rifles, enacted in 1994 and allowed to expire in 2004, was quickly dismissed — “no space” for it, in the words of one Senator.

Whether the expanded background checks, the so-called “red flag” idea or any other proposal will win congressional approval appears unlikely. Trump has raised the possibility of controlling access to firearms before but has never elevated it to priority status. Congress has simply waited it out, believing the public outrage and the pain and grief of those impacted will fall off the front pages and fade from view.

The National Rifle Association voice has always been louder and more powerful than the sight of falling tears and gut-wrenching grief. And, given the responses of some members of Congress, it will continue to be.

If the heartbreaking sight of kindergartners and first-graders mowed down in their classrooms was insufficient to move Congress, what will?

Immediately after the president’s expression of support, news accounts surfaced that he’d received a telephone call from an executive of the NRA, warning that expanded background checks or restrictions on purchases and ownership would not sit well with the president’s political base.

The Association will ratchet up its considerable lobbying clout in Congress and, if history is any indication, will again succeed in blocking meaningful action.

Extending background checks to private sales or transactions involving an unlicensed dealer enjoys the support of an overwhelming majority of the American people, as does a carefully monitored system to remove guns from the hands of individuals judged to be a danger to others.

Yet, the NRA leadership has been unyielding in opposition to both, a position rooted in the belief that any government regulation is a foot in the door, a precursor to confiscation carried out by agents of an out of control government intent on disarming the citizenry.

There is no history in the United States to support such a belief, but it has gained currency nonetheless.

Background checks have become an accepted part of daily life, required on everything from employment applications to volunteering as a room parent at the local elementary school. They are neither onerous, punitive, costly or time-consuming. Requiring it for helping in a classroom but not for certain gun purchases is absurd on its face.

Removing weapons from the hands of persons whose behavior is evidence of delusions or other mental stability issues serious enough to pose a risk to others seems a prudent and wise step to take.

In true “never let a good crisis go to waste” fashion, Democratic presidential candidates eagerly pounced on the Texas and Ohio tragedies, blaming Trump, calling him a white supremacist who has willfully created a climate that led inevitably to the shootings.

It was a callous and tasteless display of political advantage-seeking by candidates desperate to break out of their one to two per cent polling numbers and by the leading candidates equally desperate to increase their margins. Using the tragedy to solicit campaign contributions was an appalling move by individuals without a conscience.

For too long, the debate over gun control has been dominated by absolutists on both sides — those who demand unrestricted access to guns for everybody and those who demand guns for nobody. For them, there is no common ground, no consensus — it’s my way or no way.

Firearms advocates rightfully argue that the Second Amendment grants the right to gun ownership — a position upheld repeatedly by the courts.

At the same time, however, courts have just as firmly held that ownership is subject to regulations by the Federal or state governments, that firearms are subject to restrictions and even denial if government so chooses without violating anyone’s constitutional rights.

The ban on the manufacture of assault weapons is perhaps the most prominent example of government’s regulatory authority. There are varying degrees of restrictive language involving minimum age for gun purchases, magazine capacity, concealed weapon permits, permissible number of firearms purchases, among others.

The most recent executive order action involved banning so-called bump stocks, a device which allows rifles to mimic automatic weapons.

There is, at this point, no reason to assume that the gun rights absolutists will not prevail in the Congress once more, that no action will be taken or, if it is, it will be purely cosmetic in nature without impact.

It is, perhaps, the saddest of commentaries on our times that back to school advertisements feature — in addition to sneakers and jeans — bullet proof student backpacks.

What other civilized nation in the world acknowledges the madness involved in promoting and profiting from protecting children in school with a backpack lined in metal?

In homes all over America, presumably mothers and fathers will start their day by placing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bag of chips and a juice box in a backpack which does double duty as a Kevlar vest.

How, in heaven's name, did our society fall to this level?

There are those who continue to cling to the hope that common sense and civility will carry the day and gun violence will receive the attention it deserves.

It seems, though, that their hopes will be futile unless medical science develops a spine transplant procedure and applies it to members of Congress.

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