NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

2013: Gun Control

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 10, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

I hate to be the person to put a damper on a good cause, but I fear the politics of gun control will have unintended consequences and that those who rightly perceive the need for effective gun control may end up sowing the seeds of their own frustration.

To be clear, our nation?s current attitude towards guns is insane. No other Western industrialized country has the easy access to guns, the sheer number of guns, and the great variety of guns it is legal to purchase as does the United States. It should not be surprising, then, that we also have levels of gun violence that would be unthinkable in other nations. Japan has virtually no gun violence. (And they watch the same violent movies we do, I might add. Blaming Hollywood for the gratuitous violence it peddles is a noble cause because that violence is bad art. But it does not cause gun violence.) Nor do most European countries experience the kind of violence that stalks America?s streets. In the days since the killing of twenty children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary school, gun advocates have pointed to the mass killing in Norway in 2011, but what is most striking about that massacre, about from its horror, was its rarity. Besides, more people have been killed in gun violence since the attacks in Newtown, Connecticut than have been killed in Norway in years.

The distinction between a mass shooting and the slow, daily, killings by guns that mar our cities is critical. Gun advocates will make the case in the coming weeks that the changes in the laws being proposed would not have affected the circumstances in Newtown. That may be right. I suspect that there is little to do when a determined, mentally ill person, who happens to live with someone who owns a lot of guns, decides to use them. But, to begin taking more guns off the streets, to control who can and cannot buy them, to make it more difficult to purchase the kinds of weapons that can cause great harm in a short amount of time because they are semi-automatic, this could gradually bring down the rate of gun violence nationally, gradually end the slow, unnoticed string of murders that, in a week, outstrips the death tolls of the more shocking mass murders.

If you watched Pierce Morgan the other night, you witnessed the fanaticism of some gun advocates. I have happily forgotten the name of the person Morgan was interviewing but his rant was stunning, concluding in a threat of revolutionary action should the government ?take our guns.? The man noted a long list of tyrants who had also confiscated guns, from Hitler to Castro, failing to mention the benign parliament of Japan which had also confiscated guns. It does not make sense, but it is deeply rooted in the minds of many Americans that the Second Amendment is the most important guarantor of liberty in the world. I suspect that no law being considered, even my the most forceful advocate of gun control, would disturb the gun-owning rights of the man being interviewed, although from his rant, there is some doubt he would pass a mental illness test and qualify for a license.

In the wake of the tragedy, there have been calls for urgent action, before the country can turn its attention to other issues. But, I fear this strategy is wrong, especially for President Obama. I think the President needs to persistently, and over time, confront the craziness that surrounds this subject and restore some semblance of sanity to the discussion. Without that kind of sustained public campaign, I fear that any proposals will simply

stoke the crazy narratives and that the vast, powerful and well-funded interests that support unlimited gun ownership, will carry the day.

There is another danger. It is that the President and the Congress will agree to measures that are not strong enough to be effective but are sufficient to stoke the fires of the gun lobby. This is my greatest fear. A ban on assault rifles might prevent the kind of killing spree that happened in Newtown, and that is an achievement. But, an assault weapons ban will not stop the daily carnage in the southside of Chicago, the streets of Camden, or Southeast Washington.

Here, the President is at a unique disadvantage because of his condescending remark during the 2008 campaign about people in economic hardship turning to ?guns and God? for solace. The remark showed how little Mr. Obama understood what motivates believers, to be sure. But, it also showed the degree to which he misunderstood the cultural significance of gun ownership to millions of Americans. It is critical to reach the average gun owner, the man or woman who may have learned to hunt with their family growing up, to reach them with cogent reasons why they should support common sense gun control measures, not to dismiss them as acting irrationally because they face economic hardship.

Political capital is required to pass the kind of gun control laws that would be effective. But, there are many demands on the President?s political capital these days. He will need most of it in the budget negotiations that must occur by March 1 to avoid sequestration and a national default should Congress fail to raise the debt ceiling. He will need some of his political capital to confirm former Senator Hagel as Secretary of Defense and Jack Lew as Secretary of the Treasury. He will need a lot of political capital to pass comprehensive immigration reform. This is the question ? the hard question ? that progressives need to ask themselves: Does it make sense to spend political capital on gun control measures that are not effective when there are so many other pressing national needs? Or, does it make better sense to wage a long-term campaign that might eventually yield the kind of gun control laws that would really make a difference? And, are these mutually exclusive? These are political questions, not policy questions, but they must be asked.

There is one ray of hope, sort of, in this debate. Today, Wal-Mart will send a representative to the White House meeting with Vice President Biden?s task force on the issue. Wal-Mart and other gun retailers would love to see the gun show loophole closed. That loophole allows people to purchase guns at a show without a background check. Closing the loophole neatly addresses both sides of the mass shooting, the availability of guns generally and the availability of guns to those who might be mentally ill specifically. Closing that loophole, with the admittedly strange allies among those who sell guns in stores, would be a significant achievement.

I am averse to one issue politics. If progressives go all-in on a policy that alienates many voters who might otherwise support them, they lose seats, and then we not only lose on efforts to enact gun control, we lose on efforts to protect the environment, efforts to enforce civil rights, efforts to fund social welfare programs that assist the poor. There is work to be done and it is my hope that organizations like the one being set up by former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords to advance the cause of gun control and protect politicians from the NRA, will undertake that work. It is cultural and educational work first and foremost, not political work, convincing gun owners that they have nothing to fear from the kind of restrictions being proposed. Unless we change the culture, we will not change the laws.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/10/2013 - 05:37*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/2013-gun-control