

Middle ground elusive on gun-control issue: Lawmakers reluctant to alienate National Rifle Association

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In the wake of another spate of gun mayhem—this time in Red Lake, Minnesota, just nine days after a church shooting in Brookfield, Wisconsin—the question resurfaces: Why can't a gun-control compromise be found to prevent such incidents? The answer is complex, both politically and morally, say advocates on both sides.

Gun-control measures are being debated in state legislatures from California to Florida, but the topic has largely vanished from the national political agenda. Relatively few lawmakers are willing to risk alienating the influential National Rifle Association and its supporters.

With Republicans controlling the White House and Congress, Democrats remain at a disadvantage in advancing gun-control legislation. Two of the Democratic Party's leading figures—Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean—have made a point of supporting certain gun rights.

Peter Hamm, spokesman for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence/Million Mom March in Washington, said the political climate deeply frustrates activists, particularly whenever a mass shooting occurs.

"We always feel like we're stuck in the position of saying 'We told you so' time and time again when these happen," Hamm said. "You have politicians in Washington doing everything they can to ignore what's going on, because it doesn't fit with the political equation to maximize votes to one party or another. The end result is a remarkable series of incidents these last few months. Everything's going in the wrong direction."

Some activists said they need to better convey their belief that gun violence is morally wrong. "It's important that we look at this from a moral-values framework," said Joshua Horwitz, executive director of the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, a Washington lobbying group.

"The time for righteous action for gun control is now!" said R. Randy Day, general secretary of the United Methodists' General Board of Global Ministries, in reiterating his denomination's call for greater gun control after ten people were killed in a shooting March 21 in Red Lake that concluded when the 16-year-old assailant finally turned the gun on himself.

Day's statement March 22 urged President Bush to lead "a massive American campaign" to control guns and end gun violence. "Let him resist the powerful gun lobby in favor of programs of tightened sales restrictions and of 'gun amnesty,' or surrender, in return for tax credits."

However, University of Central Florida sociology professor James Wright, author of several books on guns and society, commented that "if you start casting this in moral terms, people will say, 'What about the moral obligation to protect my family from a criminal attack?'"

UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh, a frequent commentator on Second Amendment issues, agreed that moral arguments are unlikely to carry much weight. "If [gun-control advocates] are to prevail, they would have to make a pragmatic argument: 'Even though we're going to take away some of your self-defense rights, we're going to give you something back with more value, more safety,'" Volokh said. "However, given that people quite rightly estimate that people will always be able to get guns, it seems many of their initiatives are unilateral disarmament."

Instead of focusing so much on guns, Volokh said, society might prevent mass shootings by adding more security guards in schools, or perhaps by toning down sensationalized media coverage in an attempt to discourage "copycat offenders."

But given the current state of affairs, Wright said he doesn't see much room for a middle ground. "I've always felt that the terms of the debate around gun control are so white-hot that it's almost impossible for any central position to emerge or be argued for," he said. "I've never figured out what the pro-gun-control people want us to do. Practically everything kids do to acquire firearms is already against the law." - *Religion News Service*