

Tools of terror: Weapons of destruction at home

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During the most recent political campaign, two snipers were on the loose near the nation's capital, ultimately killing ten and wounding another three persons. You would think that the murder spree would have propelled gun control onto the national agenda. But weapons of mass destruction abroad trumped any talk about weapons of destruction at home.

The gun allegedly used by the snipers was an XM-15, of which 50,000 are sold each year by Bushmaster Firearms Inc. for \$900 each. It is a civilian version of the M-16 and it packs more power than weapons used by the police. It uses a .223 bullet that comes in a "hollow point" version designed intentionally to explode and shatter in its target. What civilian actually needs this kind of firepower? Certainly not game hunters. As a trauma surgeon put it: "If a drug killed as many people as this ammunition . . . there would be immediate demands for its recall. Yet our national response is to focus on these assassins and ignore the tools of their terror."

The *Christian Science Monitor* recently asked a good question: What if President Bush were as eager to control guns as he is to control weapons of mass destruction? While he is asking for full weapons disclosure on the part of Iraq, his administration is loathe to consider any form of gun registration within our own borders, where on any given day an average of 79 gun deaths occur—30 by homicide, 45 by suicide (the rest the result of accidents, police action and unknown causes).

Besides those politicians who oppose any form of gun control, there are those who cower because of the feared gun lobby, assuming that touting even modest gun control measures is tantamount to political death. Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* says that many Democrats are convinced it was guns that lost Al Gore the presidency in key rural areas of West Virginia and Tennessee.

But here's another side to the politics of guns: on the statewide and local levels voters are electing candidates who promote sensible gun laws. Consider Pennsylvania: it has the highest number of NRA members per capita, but this fall it elected Ed Rendell as governor over Mike Fisher, an extremist backed by the NRA. Rendell had repeatedly called for restrictions on gun trafficking and for standards for trigger locks. "The swing voters both parties are competing for—women, independents and minority voters—consistently prioritize gun violence prevention as a pivotal issue," says Michael D. Barnes, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

Perhaps this suggests a strategy for gun control: work locally. Churches can play a role by asking their members to sign a pledge that they won't keep guns in their own homes for self-protection and that any guns kept for legitimate purposes will be locked in a safe place where neither children nor criminals can reach them.

And here's a discussion starter for your church or office gathering: What relationship is there, if any, between the national penchant for use of lethal force in resolving international disputes, the obsession with violence in the media and video games, and the fact that the U.S. firearm homicide rate is nearly 16 times greater than that of 25 other industrialized nations combined?