

Gun Control: Can It Happen?

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 17, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

I have voiced the concern previously that the debate over gun control could crowd out other issues, and that I fear the prospect of meaningful gun control is so low, it seems a questionable political calculation to pursue mediocre gun control if that makes real, substantive progress on other issues less likely. "Seek joy where joy may be found" is one of my most closely held beliefs.

Now, we must add a further concern. The President's decision to move forward on the recommendations prepared by Vice President Biden's task force is understandable, transparently so, and what we see is a president moved not so much by his mind as by his heart. The day of the killings in Newtown disclosed a side of Barack Obama that we do not often see, the man who has trouble holding back tears, the man who was clearly responding to the killings as a dad first and a political leader second. Thus, the issue is one more in the long list of conservative complaints against a man they already detest. It would be wrong to say the issue has been politicized — it was always politicized, but only by one side in the debate, the gun lobby. Those in favor of gun control have been marginalized politically for almost twenty years. President Obama has now taken up the cause, but it did not take much in the way of imagination to guess how Fox News, Sen. Rand Paul, and the NRA would respond.

Actually, even I was surprised by the vile response from the NRA. Their ad attacking the President because his children receive Secret Service protection at their school is beneath contempt. Newsflash to the NRA: The children of the president are potential targets in a way most children are not, and they are targets in part because of the poisonous, boorish, despicable, anti-Obama rantings you and your ilk have been mouthing for four years. For four years the NRA has been saying Obama was going to take away our guns, even though, before Newtown, the president had put forward no such plan, even though the plan he put forward yesterday is unlikely to take away anyone's gun. The leaders of the NRA have kept their choir singing in the face of inaction. All hell will break loose in the face of action and their ad was hellish. And you can bet they will be saying "We told you do, he was planning this all along," as if any president would not change course in the face of an abomination like Newtown. I suspect next the NRA will suggest that FDR really planned Pearl Harbor too, and then, for good measure, attack his family.

Here is where the rest of us come in. If the lunacy on guns that has become pedestrian politics for the past two decades is to be confronted, that confrontation must come from more than the White House. Most especially, it must come from the pulpits. The religious leaders of our nation must ask themselves and their congregations if the violence of American culture coheres with the teachings of Him who was called "the Prince of Peace" and about whom it was said, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace." They must challenge not only our nation's gun laws, but our nation's fascination with violence and our blood-drenched "entertainment" industry. They must say that this violence defiles our nation just as much as the money-changers defiled the Temple. They must call our people to conversion, a turning around, because many people, too many people, do not share what the rest of us think of as "common sense?"

proposals.

Our nation's pastors, especially our Catholic pastors, must galvanize the pro-life community for this struggle. There are some on the right who think that focusing on any pro-life concern besides abortion somehow dilutes our focus on abortion. I think it is just the opposite. If I were a lobbyist for my local Catholic conference which I never would be because I would be a horrible lobbyist! but if I were, I can imagine the conversation I could have with Democrats: "Thank you for your support on this pro-life concern of ours about guns. If only we could encourage you to extend that concern to the unborn." And, I can imagine the conversation I could have with Republicans: "You have been so steadfast in opposing the violence of abortion. If only we could encourage you to extend that concern to our cities' streets and the violence that is there."

Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute had an interesting piece [at the Washington Post's "On Faith" blog](#) [1] about the different views on gun controls among Catholics and white evangelicals, the two core constituencies in the pro-life movement. Jones noted, "The idea of gun control as a "pro-life" issue is a more natural one for Catholics, thanks to a history of extending the concept's reach from abortion to a variety of issues, such as the death penalty, euthanasia, economic policies that threaten the livelihood of the poor, and gun violence. As early as 1975, for example, [Catholic bishops favored controlling and even eliminating handguns](#) [2], calling them "a threat to life." In the wake of last month's shooting, the [bishops released a statement](#) [3] declaring that guns are "too easily accessible" and that "it is time for our nation to renew a culture of life in our society."

Those who opposed the "seamless garment" approach to life issues have some explaining to do. Have we made progress in America on reducing the abortion rate? Some, but not much. Have the incidences of other types of violence been reduced? Obviously not. Is our culture closer to the "culture of life" we are called to generate, or closer to the "culture of death"? Conservative prelates challenged the "seamless garment" approach. Has their approach worked better? Perhaps it is time to re-engage the seamless garment approach. It could scarcely work worse and at least we would be more morally consistent.

The founders had the hope that our legislative bodies would serve a deliberative function, draining the passion from issues so that they could be engaged with our minds. Things have not turned out that way, and not only in our national legislature. Especially on the issue of gun control, for years now, one side in the debate, the NRA side, has been driving on passion. Their arguments make no sense, their perspective is paranoid, their proposals Orwellian. It is good to see the President, especially this all too often detached President, engage this issue with passion, and with children at his side and tales of woe to tell. If rationality were enough, we would have never let the assault weapons ban expire in the first place, we would have never permitted the manufacture and sale of high-capacity magazines, indeed we would have recognized that the Second Amendment, in strict, Scalian, "originalist" terms, guarantees the right to bear a musket, not an AK-47. But as is often the case in life, rationality is not enough.

The passion of President Obama is not enough either. If this issue is to actually gain traction, it will be up to the nation's religious leaders to make the case. Next week is the Right-to-Life March. It will be interesting to see how many speakers will use the occasion to denounce all violence, not just the violence of abortion, and to explain and exhort those in attendance to use all the building blocks they can in building a culture of life. One of those building blocks we need, and need now, is to curtail the myths and the power and the vileness of the NRA and its champions.

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- [1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/figuring-faith/post/why-pro-life-catholics-and-evangelicals-part-ways-on-guns/2013/01/16/3a643a4a-5fe9-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fecf_blog.html
- [2] <http://nccbuscc.org/sdwp/national/criminal/handguns.shtml>
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