

NATIONAL SICKNESS: NO DEBATE ALLOWED ON CIVILIANS OWNING WEAPONS OF WAR

Three fatal mass shootings within three weeks should be providing an opportunity for a national conversation on civilians having easy access to semiautomatic weapons and high capacity clips that are designed for use in war. Two of the killers in these cases were known by family and/or medical personnel to be dealing with mental issues while the third had generated at least some attention from both government and private groups that monitor groups harboring violent extreme racist views. Despite these clear warning signs in the shooters' backgrounds, all three legally purchased and possessed their weapons that were designed for wartime use.

Instead of the nation assessing what can be done to prevent weapons designed solely for killing large numbers of people getting into the hands of those who are most likely to put them to that use, we have major players in our society fanning some of the issues that contribute to the problem. Last week, Congressman Joe Walsh delivered a speech casting Muslims as dangerous extremists bent on killing:

"One thing I'm sure of is that there are people in this country – there is a radical strain of Islam in this country -- it's not just over there -- trying to kill Americans every week. It is a real threat, and it is a threat that is much more at home now than it was after 9/11," Walsh said.

Walsh went on to claim that radical Islam had found its way into the Chicago suburbs, including some that he represents.

“It’s here. It’s in Elk Grove. It’s in Addison. It’s in Elgin. It’s here,” he said.

Just a few days later, a man was arrested in nearby Morton Grove for firing at a mosque while people were inside praying. Fortunately, this time the shooter only used a pellet gun instead of a weapon of war, which could have led to yet another disaster.

Joe Walsh and other extremists in Congress like Michele Bachmann and Steve King happily spout their venom that fires up racists, but we also learned this week that the man behind the 2009 Department of Homeland Security report on right wing extremist groups capable of violence had his report repudiated and his team dissolved. He subsequently left DHS. Both Democracy Now and Danger Room have chronicled Johnson’s plight. Sadly, Johnson’s work was quite accurate when it came to the shooting at the Sikh temple. From Spencer Ackerman at Danger Room:

Daryl Johnson had a sinking feeling when he started seeing TV reports on Sunday about a shooting in a Wisconsin temple. “I told my wife, ‘This is likely a hate crime perpetrated by a white supremacist who may have had military experience,’” Johnson recalls.

It was anything but a lucky guess on Johnson’s part. He spent 15 years studying domestic terrorist groups – particularly white supremacists and neo-Nazis – as a government counterterrorism analyst, the last six of them at the Department of Homeland Security. There, he even homebrewed his own database on far-right extremist groups on an Oracle platform, allowing his analysts to compile and sift reporting in the media and other law-enforcement agencies on radical and potentially violent groups.

But Johnson’s career took an unexpected

turn in 2009, when an analysis he wrote on the rise of “Right-Wing Extremism” (.pdf) sparked a political controversy. Under pressure from conservatives, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) repudiated Johnson’s paper – an especially bitter pill for him to swallow now that Wade Michael Page, a suspected white supremacist, killed at least six people at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. For Johnson, the shooting was a reminder that the government’s counterterrorism efforts are almost exclusively focused on al-Qaida, even as non-Islamist groups threaten Americans domestically.

“DHS is scoffing at the mission of doing domestic counterterrorism, as is Congress,” Johnson tells Danger Room. “There’ve been no hearings about the rising white supremacist threat, but there’s been a long list of attacks over the last few years. But they still hold hearings about Muslim extremism. It’s out of balance.” But even if that balance was reset, he concedes, that doesn’t necessarily mean the feds could have found Page before Sunday’s rampage.

Despite the clear association of semiautomatic weapons and high capacity clips with the recent mass killings, conventional political wisdom still says that no real action will be taken to control them. The myth that the NRA can defeat any pro-gun control candidate and that the loss of Congress by the Democrats in 1994 was due to the automatic weapon ban means that very few politicians have the courage to advocate new controls.

Another barrier to bringing back controls is that the original ban is described as not being effective. But that lack of effectiveness very likely was due to how incomplete a measure it was:

The expiration Monday of a 10-year federal ban on assault weapons means firearms like AK-47s, Uzis and TEC-9s can now be legally bought – a development that has critics upset and gun owners pleased.

The 1994 ban, signed by then President Clinton, outlawed 19 types of military-style assault weapons. A clause directed that the ban expire unless Congress specifically reauthorized it, which it did not.

Studies done by pro- and anti-gun groups as well as the Justice Department show conflicting results on whether the ban helped reduce crime. Loopholes allowed manufacturers to keep many weapons on the market simply by changing their names or altering some of their features or accessories.

High capacity clips were also included in the 1994 ban. Here is how gun advocates celebrated the end of the ban. From the same article:

Under the 1994 ban, the maximum capacity of a magazine was set at 10 rounds. That sent the price of high-capacity magazines through the roof, Davis said, even though magazines manufactured before the ban were protected by a “grandfather” provision and could still be sold.

Now, some gun manufacturers are planning to give away high-capacity magazines as bonuses for buying their weapons. Sales of formerly banned gun accessories, such as flash suppressors and folding stocks, are also expected to take off.

No, we can't have a national discussion on whether there is a way to take weapons designed for war off of the consumer market, even when we have a disturbing uptick in their designed use

to kill large numbers of people. Instead, we get a new television show that glorifies war and could make even more people want the weapons of war in their households.