

Gun points: Who cares about protecting life?

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In 1996, after an assailant massacred 35 people at a resort area in Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australians responded to the horror by banning the possession of automatic rifles and shotguns. Gunowners proceeded to turn in 650,000 guns to the government (which reimbursed them for the cost). Since that year, gun deaths in Australia have been cut in half. The country's per capita gun crime rate is a tenth that of the United States.

Why no similar societal response here? Surely some decisive measure is needed. Every year the U.S. suffers 15 firearm deaths for every 100,000 citizens—vastly more than in other industrialized countries that have stricter gun laws, like Norway (4 per 100,000) or England or Japan (less than 1 gun death per 100,000). Other countries have crazy assailants and occasional mass shootings—but none as many or as often as the U.S.

Cho Seung-Hui's shooting rampage at Virginia Tech that left 33 people dead hasn't even prompted a serious political debate on gun laws and it isn't likely to. Many of those who favor gun laws lack the stomach for taking on the National Rifle Association and its allies, who regard all efforts to restrict gun ownership as assaults on individual liberty. It's become an article of faith among Democrats that Al Gore lost key states (including his home state of Tennessee) in the 2000 presidential race because of his support for tougher gun laws.

One of the guns that Cho used was a 9mm semiautomatic pistol with a 15-round magazine that allowed him to get off 15 shots without stopping to reload. That's the kind of killing machine that has nothing to do with the sport of hunting. There is no reason a civilian should own such a gun. In most countries of the world such a weapon is available only to police. In this country it is sold to virtually anybody.

Cho's pistol was among the guns outlawed by the 1994 ban on assault weapons. Congress, with President Bush's tacit approval, allowed that ban to expire in 2004.

You might think there would now be a strong move to reinstate and even strengthen that ban. But you would be wrong.

Why do Americans retreat when they hear the NRA's myths about guns and liberty rather than rally to calls by police unions and city mayors for stricter gun laws? Why, when it comes to gun violence (but not abortion), do evangelical Christians say that the answer lies not in laws but in a change of heart? Why did the Institute on Religion and Democracy complain that the church leaders who raised the issue of gun control after the Virginia Tech killings had "exploited" the horror by injecting their political views (which is like saying that those who work to restrict tobacco use are exploiting the horror of lung cancer)? Not, we conclude, because they care about protecting life.