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Betty Bainbridge, Moderator

Bloomberg Super PAC Gun-Control Push Off to Strong Start

By Jill Lawrence | National Journal – Mon, Dec 17, 2012

It is never too soon to talk about politics -- specifically gun-control politics -- when 26 people, including 20 young children, have been murdered in a school shooting rampage. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been trying to launch that debate, and he's off to a good start.

While Bloomberg's Mayors Against Illegal Guns initiative focuses on state and federal gun laws, his new Independence USA super PAC is all about electing or defeating those who make the laws. He injected less than \$9 million in super PAC money into the political bloodstream, a pittance in the post-Citizens United world. But his record -- three wins, three losses, and a bonus win for an independent Senate candidate he supported through another super PAC -- is impressive.

The context here must be Karl Rove's Crossroads empire, created in 2010, which spent \$300 million this year to little effect. Contrast that with Bloomberg. He started spending barely a month before the election and he didn't sink money into the presidential race. Instead he homed in on down-ballot candidates who agreed with him about the need for "sensible" gun control.

Mayors Against Illegal Guns offers examples of what that means. The mayors want to fix holes in the national system of background checks for gun buyers, such as requiring the checks at gun shows. They also want to ban gun sales to people on the terrorist watch list, ban sales of high capacity ammunition magazines, and repeal a law that makes it harder for authorities to track guns and criminals.

Bloomberg and his PAC sought out like-minded candidates and pursued their goals in the most practical way possible. "Going in late certainly didn't hurt us," New York deputy mayor Howard Wolfson said. "We were able to identify races that had not otherwise attracted a lot of attention from other outside groups, and that proved to be helpful."

The PAC devoted special attention to independents (Bloomberg funneled \$500,000 to Maine independent and Sen.-elect Angus King through the super PAC Americans Elect) and two members of that increasingly rare species, moderate Republicans. He invested \$1 million in GOP Rep. Bob Dold of Illinois and \$1.1 million in Andrew Roraback's bid for an open seat in Connecticut. They both lost.

For Bloomberg, a Democrat-turned-Republican-turned-independent, the defeats were setbacks in his quest to elect candidates from both parties who care about gun control and his other priorities. Yet the mayor didn't really lose from a policy standpoint. As Wolfson acknowledged, "the Democrats in those races also had good records on a lot of the issues he cares about," topped by guns, gay marriage, and school reform.

The race that has drawn the most attention is the upset of southern California Rep. Joe Baca by fellow Democrat Gloria Negrete McLeod. Independence USA poured \$3.3 million into that contest, its highest concentration of resources, hoping to defeat Baca – a National Rifle Association favorite mildly described by Wolfson as “an opponent of sensible gun measures.” Negrete McLeod, a state senator, has won favorable NRA ratings for a Democrat. But Wolfson said her record has been evolving and “most of her recent votes were good” from the standpoint of gun control.

One of the most interesting aspects of that race was the single TV ad Independence USA ran in the expensive district. It portrayed Baca as siding with water polluters and Negrete McLeod as “taking on polluters to protect drinking water.” Guns were not mentioned. Wolfson said the super PAC sent out a mailing about guns. As for the TV ad, “You have twin goals. One is to focus on and elevate the gun issue. The other is to win the race.” He added: “Clean water is a very big issue in this district. You want to focus on top of mind issues.”

Wolfson said both candidates were in the low 30s when Independence USA first polled the district. Then came the super PAC’s massive cash infusion. Negrete McLeod ended up winning easily, 56 percent to 44 percent. The PAC also appeared to make a difference in GOP Rep. Ann Marie Buerkle’s upstate New York district. She lost a rematch with former congressman Dan Maffei, a Democrat supported by Bloomberg. Bloomberg notched another win in Pennsylvania with the easy election of Democrat Kathleen Kane as attorney general.

The most notable loss on Bloomberg’s list this year was Democrat Val Demings’ failure to oust conservative Rep. Daniel Webster in central Florida. The PAC invested \$2.4 million in the race and Bloomberg personally contributed \$2,500 to Demings, a former police chief who carries a concealed weapon. Demings’ support for background checks for all gun purchases is among the positions that earned her an F rating from the NRA.

Wolfson describes Bloomberg as pleased and encouraged by his test drive and still passionately committed to gun control and his other priorities. Those signs, his need for a niche when he leaves office next year, and his reaction to the horror in Connecticut, all point to an expanded role for Bloomberg and his super PAC in coming elections. "My determination to stop this madness is stronger than ever," he said in a statement after the latest shootings.

There’s one potential opportunity already in sight: the 2013 gubernatorial race in Virginia. In his former role as Democratic Party chairman, likely Democratic nominee Terry McAuliffe viewed gun control as a third rail and urged candidates to avoid it. It remains to be seen if he will follow that advice himself. Likely Republican nominee Ken Cuccinelli, meanwhile, is an aggressive champion of gun rights and has an A+ rating from the NRA.

So far, bolstered by his wealth and prominence, Bloomberg has been trying to take on the gun issue – and the NRA – nearly singlehandedly. President Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney gave non-committal answers even when asked about it directly in the Oct. 16 presidential debate.

But Friday’s horrific shooting prompted a tearful Obama to say that the country is going to have to take meaningful action to prevent future tragedies, “regardless of the politics.” Bloomberg could find himself with more company the next time he tries to shape national gun policy at the ballot box.

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Why do Americans love guns? They're part of our culture.

By Henry Allen, The Washington Post, December 25, 2012

Henry Allen, who won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2000, was a Post editor and reporter for 39 years.

Let me dust off my favorite Sufi parable.

A man loses a ring inside his house. A friend sees him crawling around outside and asks, "If you lost your ring in the house, why are you looking for it here?" "You fool," says the man, "the light is much better out here."

And so it goes with people looking for solutions to gun killings in America.

We're talking about the very best people, the people with statistics and proposals for regulation, crawling around in the sunlight of their social-scientific rationality.

They never find a solution because all their legislation, academic studies, mathematical proofs, and proposals for waiting periods, background checks and buying limits aren't going to do much more than they ever have.

Nor are the pleas of the progressives asking why anyone would ever want to own a gun — thereby demonstrating their arrogance toward the people who own the hundreds of millions of guns in the United States.

Both the problem and the solution lie elsewhere, in what historian Richard Hofstadter called "America as a Gun Culture."

It started with New England Indians trying to drive out settlers in King Philip's War, 1675-76. Some 5 percent to 10 percent of settler men of fighting age were killed. Laws soon required settlers to keep firearms in their homes.

The 1700s brought the "Kentucky rifle," the long-range symbol of frontier independence. George Washington encouraged "the use of Hunting Shirts, with long Breeches made of the same Cloth . . . it is a dress justly supposed to carry no small terror to the enemy, who think every such person a complete marksman."

In the 19th century, Samuel Colt brought the gleaming modernity of mass production to gunmaking. The slogan had it that God created man and Samuel Colt made them equal. Cowboys carried Colts the way noblemen carried swords, as blazons of their status. Dime-novel writers invented the quick-draw duels that almost never happened.

The 20th century brought the dark romance of the gangster armed with Thompson submachine guns and private eyes with their snub-nosed .38s. World War II veterans brought home enemy guns as trophies of their victory. Then came the AK-47, weapon of choice against Western imperialists.

Hollywood employs armorers tuned to the tiniest details of gun fetishism. I've read that on "Miami Vice," Don Johnson's character was equipped with not an ordinary cop's sidearm but a 10mm Dornaus & Dickson Bren Ten with hard-chrome slide on a stainless-steel frame. How alluring.

Guns get handed down through generations, symbols of patriarchy.

They're symbols of protection of the home, the romance of industry, equality, cool daring, mean-street savvy, fighting for liberation and family tradition.

There are complications of class, too. Campaigns against "Saturday night specials" were campaigns against the arming of the lower classes. In 1941, a Florida Supreme Court justice wrote an opinion that a gun-control law had been "passed for the purpose of disarming the Negro laborers and. . . was never intended to be applied to the white population."

Last week an analyst talked to an NPR talk-show host about "insurrectionist" gun owners — a rising of the masses against, presumably, some of the people who listen to NPR.

When elites talk about "armed rednecks" and "gun-toting trailer trash," they may think their bigotry stays secret. It doesn't. Those maligned Americans are aware that governing classes throughout history have sought a monopoly on violence, in the manner of the British redcoats trying to seize American guns at Concord, Mass.

Purveyors of guns rejoice whenever America is seized by gun-control crusades — they do little but drive up gun purchases by those who fear total confiscation.

The gun problem, however it's defined, can't be solved by statistical correlation between gun ownership and gun deaths, or by sneering at gun owners, or by lawmakers calling for more laws (which is, after all, what they do).

Instead, we need to look at America as a gun culture.

We might start with public pressure on the media and mass entertainment. We might stop catering to gun fetishism. We might increase the number of high school rifle teams, the dwindling of which, following calls for bans starting in the 1960s, has helped leave gun training to movies and video games. We might point out that the great names of American gunsmithing — Winchester, Colt, Smith and Wesson, and Remington — are now just brands bought and sold by corporations. U.S. pistols are so shoddy that our armed forces chose a pistol from Italy, the Beretta. Our police carry pistols from Austria and Germany.

We might think about the cultural effects of turning endless war — Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan — into a norm. And we should know that gun culture is founded on a small amount of facts and a large amount of romance.

Changing a culture is a lot harder than changing the law. But look at our cultural shifts on race and gender, on drunk driving and the cooling of the American love affair with the automobile. It takes a long time, and there are no guarantees, yet we might actually find the solution we've been looking for in all the wrong places.

Read more on this issue: Philip Caputo: Blame the killing machines: guns Ann Hood: A parent's grief never goes away Fareed Zakaria: The blindingly obvious solution to gun violence Debbie Dingell: Gun-control fights won't solve the problem Sen. Charles Schumer: The Second Amendment, with real limits.

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The solution to gun violence is clear

By Fareed Zakaria, December 19, 2012, The Washington Post

Announcing Wednesday that he would send proposals on reducing gun violence in America to Congress, President Obama mentioned a number of sensible gun-control measures. But he also paid homage to the Washington conventional wisdom about the many and varied causes of this calamity — from mental health issues to school safety. His spokesman, Jay Carney, had said earlier that this is “a complex problem that will require a complex solution.” Gun control, Carney added, is far from the only answer.

In fact, the problem is not complex, and the solution is blindingly obvious.

People point to three sets of causes when talking about events such as the Newtown, Conn., shootings. First, the psychology of the killer; second, the environment of violence in our popular culture; and, third, easy access to guns. Any one of these might explain a single shooting. What we should be trying to understand is not one single event but why we have so many of them. The number of deaths by firearms in the United States was 32,000 last year. Around 11,000 were gun homicides.

To understand how staggeringly high this number is, compare it to the rate in other rich countries. England and Wales have about 50 gun homicides a year — 3 percent of our rate per 100,000 people. Many people believe that America is simply a more violent, individualistic society. But again, the data clarify. For most crimes — theft, burglary, robbery, assault — the United States is within the range of other advanced countries. The category in which the U.S. rate is magnitudes higher is gun homicides.

The U.S. gun homicide rate is *30 times* that of France or Australia, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, and 12 times higher than the average for other developed countries.

So what explains this difference? If psychology is the main cause, we should have 12 times as many psychologically disturbed people. But we don't. The United States could do better, but we take mental disorders seriously and invest more in this area than do many peer countries.

Is America's popular culture the cause? This is highly unlikely, as largely the same culture exists in other rich countries. Youth in England and Wales, for example, are exposed to virtually identical cultural influences as in the United States. Yet the rate of gun homicide there is a tiny fraction of ours. The Japanese are at the cutting edge of the world of video games. Yet their gun homicide rate is close to zero! Why? Britain has tough gun laws. Japan has perhaps the tightest regulation of guns in the industrialized world.

The data in social science are rarely this clear. They strongly suggest that we have so much more gun violence than other countries because we have far more permissive laws than others regarding the sale and possession of guns. With 5 percent of the world's population, the United States has 50 percent of the guns.

There is clear evidence that tightening laws — even in highly individualistic countries with long traditions of gun ownership — can reduce gun violence. In Australia, after a 1996 ban on all automatic and semiautomatic weapons — a real ban, not like the one we enacted in 1994 with 600-plus exceptions — gun-related homicides dropped 59 percent over the next decade. The rate of suicide by firearm plummeted 65 percent. (Almost 20,000 Americans die each year using guns to commit suicide — a method that is much more successful than other forms of suicide.)

There will always be evil or disturbed people. And they might be influenced by popular culture. But how is government going to identify the darkest thoughts in people's minds before they have taken any action? Certainly those who urge that government be modest in its reach would not want government to monitor thoughts, curb free expression, and ban the sale of information and entertainment.

Instead, why not have government do something much simpler and that has proven successful: limit access to guns. And not another toothless ban, riddled with exceptions, which the gun lobby would use to "prove" that such bans don't reduce violence.

A few hours before the Newtown murders last week, a man entered a school in China's Henan province. Obviously mentally disturbed, he tried to kill children. But the only weapon he was able to get was a knife. Although 23 children were injured, not one child died.

The problems that produced the Newtown massacre are not complex, nor are the solutions. We do not lack for answers.

What we lack in America today is courage.

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