Aftermath of a Massacre

By Mel Lavine

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After the school massacre in Connecticut, the president said that the enormity of the problem of gun control cannot be “an excuse for inaction.” As the New York Times notes, he’s said this before after two earlier massacres, and did nothing. But there are signs that people are willing to reconsider their attitudes.

The newspaper cited two Democratic senators with top ratings from the National Rifle Association – Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Mark Warner of Virginia – as saying the time has come to consider restrictions on selling and buying guns. California’s senator Dianne Feinstein is planning to introduce legislation that would toughen an assault weapons ban that she authored, but which expired eight years ago.

For its part, the National Rifle Association has put Washington on notice that it will fight any move by Congress to strengthen the rules on guns. Wayne LaPierre, the vice president of the N.R.A., heaped scorn on a task force called for by the president and led by vice president Joe Biden to consider plans to reduce gun violence.

In an appearance Sunday on “Meet the Press,” Pierre said, “If it’s a panel that’s just going to be made up of a bunch of people that, for the last 20 years, have been trying to destroy the Second Amendment, I’m not interested in sitting on that panel.” His organization, he said, “is not going to let people lose the Second Amendment in this country, which is supported by the overwhelming majority of the American people.”

(The Second Amendment, the focus of much heated debate over the years, is tantalizingly brief. Ratified on Dec. 17, 1791, it says, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”)

The N.R.A.’s defiance of moves to legislate limits on guns sends a message to the White House that it will have a fight on its hands. With three million members, the N.R.A. is among the most influential lobbies in Washington, with support from many Congressional Republicans and Democrats.

Pierre says the N.R.A.'s solution to deal with protecting children was to put police and armed guards in all the schools, adding, "If it's crazy to call for putting police and armed security in our schools to protect our children, then call me crazy." But, he insisted, it was the one thing that would keep people safe.

Senator Charles Schumer of New York, who also appeared on "Meet the Press," thought Pierre's remarks would win new converts for gun control. Said Schumer: "He blames everything but guns – movies, the media, President Obama, gun-free school zones, you name it. Now, trying to prevent shootings in schools without talking about guns is like trying to prevent lung cancer without talking about cigarettes."

In these circumstances, if I had Obama's ear, I would urge our re-elected 44th president to heed the words of a predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, our 28th: "The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience to be as big a man as he can," Wilson said. "His capacity will set the limit."

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