

Editorial

"An Assault on Everyone's Safety"

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The ludicrously thin membrane that now passes for gun control in this country almost certainly made the Tucson tragedy worse. Members of Congress are legitimately concerned about their own safety now, but they should be no less worried about the effect of their inaction on the safety of all Americans.

As lawmakers in Washington engage this week in moments of silence and tributes to Representative Gabrielle Giffords and the other casualties, they should realize that they have the power to reduce the number of these sorts of horrors, and their lethality.

To do so, they will need to stand up to the National Rifle Association and its allies, whose lobbying power continues to grow despite the visceral evidence that the groups have made the country a far more dangerous place. Having won a Supreme Court ruling establishing a right to keep a firearm in the home, the gun lobby is striving for new heights of lunacy, waging a campaign to legalize the possession of a gun in schools, bars, parks, offices, and churches, even by teenagers.

It reflexively opposes even mild, sensible restrictions — but if there is any reason left in this debate, the latest mass shooting should force a retreat. Is there anyone, even the most die-hard gun lobbyist, who wants to argue that a disturbed man should be able to easily and legally buy a Glock to shoot a congresswoman, a judge, a 9-year-old girl?

One of the first things Congress can do is to take up a bill proposed by Representative Carolyn McCarthy, a Democrat of Long Island, that would ban the extended ammunition clip used by the Arizona shooter, Jared Loughner. A Glock 19 usually holds 15 bullets. Mr. Loughner used an oversize clip allowing him to fire as many as 33 bullets before pausing to reload. It was at that point that he was tackled and restrained.

Between 1994 and 2004, it was illegal to manufacture or import the extended clips as part of the ban on assault weapons. But the ban was never renewed because of the fierce opposition of the N.R.A. At least six states, including California and New York, ban extended clips, which serve absolutely no legitimate purpose outside of military or law enforcement use. At a minimum, that ban should be extended nationwide, and should prohibit possession, not just manufacture.

The gun itself was purchased by Mr. Loughner at a sporting goods store that followed the bare-minimum federal background check, which only flags felons, people found to be a danger to themselves or others, or those under a restraining order.

Mr. Loughner was rejected by the military for failing a drug test, and had five run-ins with the Pima Community College police before being suspended for disruptive activity. Why can't Congress require a background check — without loopholes for gun shows or private sales — that would detect this sort of history? If the military didn't want someone like Mr. Loughner to be given a firearm, neither should the public at large.

At least two members of Congress say they will start to carry weapons to district meetings, the worst possible response. If lawmakers want to enhance their safety, and that of their constituents, they should recognize that the true public menace is the well-dressed gun lobbyist hanging out just outside their chamber door.