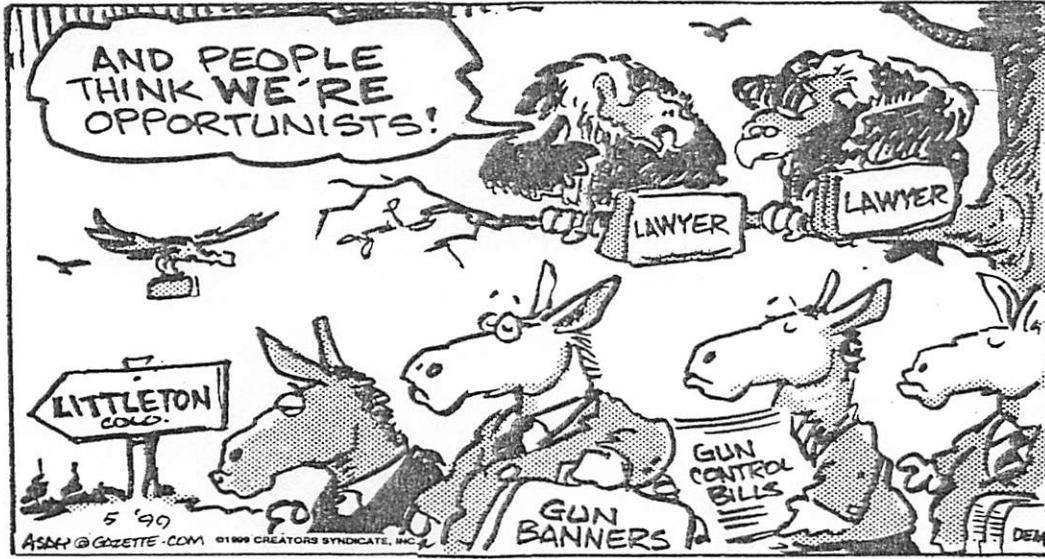


Gunning for new regulations



The Clinton administration wants tough new anti-gun laws. The Senate seems willing to go along at least part of the way. But at least one leading Republican has come out against concealed-weapons permits despite their success at reducing violent crime. The aftermath of the Colorado high school killings has driven Washington nuts. Again.

Within hours of the tragedy, President Clinton leapt to the microphones to denounce the "gun lobby." Within days, a legislative package was announced. Then three weeks to the day of the most recent high school killings, America's First and Second Families hosted a "White House Strategy Session on Children, Violence and Responsibility." It was a farce.

The attendees included intellectual giants such as "Melrose Place" star Andrew Shue, poet Maya Angelou and Latin singing sensation Gloria Estefan. Not one chief of police of a major metropolitan jurisdiction attended. No purveyor of big-screen graphic violence participated. No manufacturer of violent interactive video games was there. And the much-maligned National Rifle Association — the alleged villain in this drama — wasn't even invited.

Who loses the most when a national discussion on juvenile violence becomes nothing more than a celebrity-laden photo-op? America's children. Consider the facts:

Each year, Americans under the age of 18 are responsible for nearly 2 million violent crimes. And while violent crime overall is decreasing in the United States, teen-age violence is increasing dramatically. Since 1965, the number of 12-year-olds arrested for violent crime has increased by 211 percent, by 301 percent among 13- and 14-year-olds, and by 297 percent among 15-year-olds.

And while young people are increasingly responsible for crime

in our society, statistics show that they are not being treated like criminals. About 50 percent of juveniles arrested for violent crimes receive only probation, fines or some form of community service. Worse still, charges against almost 40 percent of these violent juveniles are dismissed, meaning that minors who commit assault, armed robbery, rape and worse are often put right back out on the streets — and eligible to legally buy a firearm when they reach majority. Now that's crazy.

But craziness hasn't stopped Washington from trying to come up

Federal "gun-free school zone" acts bar firearms from school campuses.

with a few more federal gun laws to add to the 20,000 or so already on the books. Consider just a few of the current laws that are not being enforced:

Federal "gun-free school zone" acts bar firearms from school campuses. Over the past two years, more than 6,000 students have been caught with firearms in schools. There were only 13 prosecutions. Why?

Every time he talks about the "problem with guns," Mr. Clinton brags that the "Brady Law" has prevented more than 250,000 prohibited buyers from purchasing firearms. It is a federal crime for a felon to even try to buy a gun. Yet, there have been no prosecutions for this offense in the past three years. Why?

"Straw purchasing," the term used when a gun is legally purchased then illegally transferred to a prohibited owner, is a violation of federal law. In the past two years,

there have been only 11 prosecutions for illegally transferring handguns to juveniles. Why?

Federal law prohibits juveniles from possessing handguns. In the last two years, only 11 juveniles — known affectionately to law enforcement as "gangbangers" — have been subject to federal prosecution. Why?

And running guns across state lines without a license is prohibited by federal law. Yet in the past two years, there have been only 37 federal prosecutions nationwide for providing firearms to felons. Why?

Before we decide that the prescription is more gun laws, we need to answer these questions in order to properly diagnose the problem. And if at least part of the problem of youth violence has to do with guns, let's start with a policy of zero-tolerance for criminals. The NRA-endorsed "Project Exile" has been tested and proven to dramatically and immediately reduce violent crime and save lives, cutting homicides and gun crimes by as much as 50 percent. "Project Exile" sends violent felons caught with firearms to jail for five years. There isn't any secret to "Project Exile," there just aren't any loopholes.

If we fail to prosecute felons with guns, it doesn't matter if you have five new gun laws or 5 million. The people most likely to commit a violent crime, the people most likely to give guns to children, the people most likely to provide the means for tragedies like what we witnessed in Littleton are convicted felons with guns. Our children will never be safe from gun violence until we enforce the laws on the books.

But whatever we do, we should not abridge the constitutional rights of law-abiding citizens in order to protect law-abiding citizens from those who break the law. That would be nuts.

Oliver North is a nationally syndicated columnist.

COMMENTARY