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Bill Cirone op ed column

To: All newspapers
July 18, 2016 —Col. 16/17-02

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We must help make the killings stop

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

The shootings continue. The deaths continue. We hear that Americans are angry, divided, fed up. But we are all horrified by the outcome in blood. And almost everyone shares the same reaction: make the violence stop.

First we must acknowledge that no other modern, civilized country on earth has the gun deaths we do here in the U.S. It's not even close. Only two countries on the planet enshrine the right to bear arms in their constitution: the U.S. and Yemen.

Capitol Journal columnist George Skelton laid out the problem recently by referring to the National Rifle Association's mantra after every mass shooting since Sandy Hook Elementary School: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." Skelton says that nonsense was given the lie in Dallas.

"Twelve good guys — law enforcement men and women trained to shoot — were stopped by one bad guy. ...How many good guys with guns were there trying to subdue this bad guy? Maybe 100? More?" he asked.

Then he added: "The bad guy himself, like so many killers, apparently also was a good guy, until he wasn't anymore — until he decided to shoot white cops... (He) had no known criminal record ...He was formerly a U.S. Army reservist stationed in Afghanistan. Clearly not all terrorism is wrought by radical Muslims, let alone immigrants."

Skelton's conclusion? "The better way to have stopped this ambushing assassin would have been to deny him his guns in the first place, especially any assault rifle." According to the most recent polls, the vast majority of Americans — including the rank and file members of the NRA — agree. Background checks. Bans on assault weapons. Keeping guns out of the hands of terrorists. These should not be controversial measures.

The alternative, of course, is to do nothing and to accept continued mass shootings as a fact of life. But most people agree we have been through this too many times as a nation. We have to change. We have to protect our children.

When terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center towers on 9/11, we changed our procedures for travelers on airplanes. We created screenings and restricted carry-ons. Columnist [Nicholas Kristof](#) asked some years ago, why can't we regulate guns as seriously as we do cars?

“The fundamental reason [people] are dying in massacres ... is not that we have lunatics or criminals — all countries have them — but that we suffer from a political failure to regulate guns,” he wrote. “What do we make of the contrast between heroic teachers who stand up to a gunman and ... politicians who won't stand up to the NRA?” he asked.

Kristof wrote that as a lifelong gun owner, he knows that guns are fun. But so are cars, and we accept that we have to wear seat belts, use headlights at night, and fill out registration forms. Our driving backgrounds are checked when we seek a license, and we mandate air bags, child seats, and crash safety standards. We have limited licenses for young drivers and curbed the use of cell phones while driving. In doing so, we have reduced traffic fatality rates by nearly 90 percent since the 1950s.

Some argue that restrictions won't make a difference because criminals or disturbed people will always be able to get a gun. And they will. We won't ever be able to eliminate gun deaths altogether, just like we will never eliminate car accidents. But reducing gun deaths even by one-third would mean 10,000 lives saved each year.

Here's another sobering statistic Kristof cites: “More Americans die in gun homicides and suicides in six months than have died in the last 25 years in every terrorist attack and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.” Read that one again.

Kristof said that many of us are alive today because of sensible auto safety laws.

“If we don't treat guns in the same serious way, some of you and some of your children will die because of our failure,” he wrote.

Some argue that ownership of cars is not enshrined in the Constitution. But neither are assault weapons. When the Second Amendment was written, the “arms” one had the right to bear were muskets that had to be reloaded after each shot.

When guns become prevalent, we become numb to their use. When did police start using deadly force so often? Is it because the populace is so much better armed as well?

Now is the time to take a stand for the safety of our children and our families. We need to initiate serious policy changes. Clearly we need to deal with mental health, with racism and bigotry, with power and financial inequalities, and all the issues that factor into our current challenges. Gun safety measures must be part of that mix. There have already been too many deaths. If we do nothing, we are to blame for the next ones. As another famous quote dictates: “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

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