

Nothing Will Change After the Las Vegas Shooting

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WASHINGTON — In the wake of one of the deadliest mass shootings in our nation's history, perhaps the most asked question by Americans is, "Will anything change?" The simple answer is no. The more vital question is, "Why not?"

Congress is already doing what it sees as its part. Flags have been lowered, thoughts and prayers tweeted, and sometime this week it will perform the latest episode in the longest-running drama on C-Span: the moment of silence. It's how they responded to other mass shootings in Columbine, Herkimer, Tucson, Santa Monica, Hialeah, Terrell, Alturas, Killeen, Isla Vista, Marysville, Chapel Hill, Tyrone, Waco, Charleston, Chattanooga, Lafayette, Roanoke, Roseburg, Colorado Springs, San Bernardino, Birmingham, Fort Hood and Aurora, at Virginia Tech, the Washington Navy Yard, and the congressional baseball game practice, to name too many.

In my 16 years in Congress, Mother Jones magazine counted 52 mass killings. Fewer lessons about Congress were starker than the ones I learned about why, after each one, nothing happened. The first lesson was in January 2001, shortly after I was sworn in. I wanted to introduce legislation to require safety locks on certain guns and sought the support of a fellow freshman, a Democrat from Arkansas.

"I can't do that," he said. "In my district, we close schools on the first day of hunting season." I kidded him that in my suburban district, we close school when there was a big sale at the mall. That's when I learned that all politics is local, and on the issue of guns, it's hard to build a political bridge from Huntington, N.Y., to Huntington, Ark.

There were moments when I thought, "Finally, we will do something." I remember sitting at my desk in my district office on Long Island watching the grisly images of the murder of 26 children and adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, and President Barack Obama with tears streaming down his cheeks. I was confident that at the very least we'd expand background checks or make it harder for people with mental illness to obtain guns.

My confidence ebbed when I heard my colleagues turn this into a debate over the rights of gun owners instead of the right to life of children. In the confines of the members-only elevators, where my colleagues could speak honestly, I heard colleagues confide that any vote for gun safety would lower their N.R.A. scores, making them casualties in the next election.

"Finally, we will do something," I thought after the June 2016 mass shooting in an Orlando, Fla., nightclub. I was in a leadership meeting with Nancy Pelosi when we heard that several colleagues had taken to the floor and started a sit-in to force the House to address gun violence. I was stunned to see dozens of my colleagues sitting and chanting, just before we were about to take a long recess, "No bill, no break."

We held the floor for 24 hours. Thousands converged spontaneously on Capitol Hill in support. This was a moment I thought we could no longer be ignored. I was right. Congress did act. It declared that fines would be slapped on House members who broadcast audio or video from the House floor. Thank God the decorum of the House was safe, at least.

Then there were the annual rituals in the House Appropriations Committee. Democrats would offer amendments to prevent people on the terrorist watch list from purchasing firearms. A no-brainer, I thought. If you're too dangerous to board a plane, you're too dangerous to buy an assault weapon, a common-sense position shared by over 80 percent of Americans.

I remember the Republican chairman of the committee rising in opposition to the amendment, arguing that in America, everyone is innocent until proven guilty. I'm not sure he ever extended that argument to other populations, but it didn't matter. The amendment failed.

So did our attempts to rescind the infamous Dickey Amendment, which prevents the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from even researching the relationship between gun violence and public health. The Dickey Amendment was so absurd that it was ultimately opposed by its own sponsor, Jay Dickey, an Arkansas Republican. Still, we failed. The result? The government can't study gun violence but is spending \$400,000 analyzing the effects of Swedish massages on rabbits. So at least the rabbits feel safe.

And finally, there are those moments when members ourselves became victims. Gabby Giffords in Tucson; Steve Scalise at the congressional baseball game. Even the proximity of bullets resulted in shock and inaction.

Why? Three reasons.

First, just like everything else in Washington, the gun lobby has become more polarized. The National Rifle Association, once a supporter of sensible gun-safety measures, is now forced to oppose them because of competing organizations. More moderation means less market share. The gun lobby is in a race to see who can become more brazen, more extreme.

Second, congressional redistricting has pulled Republicans so far to the right that anything less than total subservience to the gun lobby is viewed as supporting gun confiscation. The gun lobby score is a litmus test with zero margin for error.

Third, the problem is you, the reader. You've become inoculated. You'll read this essay and others like it, and turn the page or click another link. You'll watch or listen to the news and shake your head, then flip to another channel or another app. This horrific event will recede into our collective memory.

That's what the gun lobbyists are counting on. They want you to forget. To accept the deaths of at least 58 children, parents, brothers, sisters, friends as the new normal. To turn this page with one hand, and use the other hand to vote for members of Congress who will rise in another moment of silence this week. And next week. And the foreseeable future.