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## Lawyers, Guns and Money

Posted April 22, 2007 | 08:56 PM (EST)

When we're confronted with human tragedy, it's a very human impulse to try to figure things out; to explain the inexplicable.

Sometimes, it works. The shuttle came apart on re-entry because a piece of foam damaged protective tiles. New Orleans flooded and people died because the levees were shoddy and a key government agency was inept. The tragedy isn't any less terrible, but there is some comfort - a reclaimed sense of balance and reason for optimism - in the assumption that there is protection in the painful lessons learned.

The search for lessons is underway in the tragedy at Virginia Tech. Should the health care professionals have seen that a poison roiling the synapses of a troubled loner was driving him toward a horrible act? Should the campus police have sounded a campus-wide alarm? Would 33 people be alive today if there were registration and a waiting period -- or more than a cursory background check -- before you can buy a gun in Virginia?

I'm afraid we'll never know. We can probe the hatreds squirming in the dark corners of this boy's psyche we can parse the responses down to why-nots and what-ifs. We can debate whether it's guns or people who kill people. We will ultimately come to conclusion as final as it is painful. Sometimes, unspeakable things happen, and there is nothing you can do about them.

I have another question. And this one, we can do something about. And it's not -- why are guns available? It's why are *these* guns available?

Some will argue they are available because the NRA wants them to be. That's too easy. There will always be an NRA, just as there will be energy lobbyists to argue that Greenland isn't really melting. Every form of government has a weakness - and for democracy, it's the susceptibility to well-heeled influence.

The NRA is perhaps the fiercest, most unforgiving political organization ever conceived. They have four million members who do what they're told. They have bank accounts flush with the kind of spending cash that wins friends. Lots of them. They can also get

incumbents fired.

My question is addressed to the conspiracy of cowardice that has allowed the NRA to be so powerful for so long.

Before 2004, Seung-Hui Cho would not have been able to hop on eBay to buy the high-capacity magazines that allowed him to shoot and reload so fast students were cut down before they could even reach the windows. The 1994 Clinton-sponsored ban on assault weapons made them illegal.

Two thirds of the American people and every police department in the country did not want the ban to expire in 2004. But the Republican-dominated legislature (Republicans, studies show, enjoy about 85 percent of the NRA's largess) prevented the renewal from even coming to a vote. The president said he would sign an assault weapons ban, but did absolutely nothing to support it. No surprise; he has been joined at the holster with the NRA since the early days in politics.

A lot of those same Republicans have been blown out of office by corruption and incompetence, and the president is politically neutered by his epic failures of judgment and leadership. But the new Democrats haven't forgotten what happened when previous Democrats tangled with the NRA.

But maybe this time it's different.

Maybe it's time to take on an organization so arrogant that it staged a meeting in Denver barely weeks after Littleton had buried its children.

Maybe it's time for leaders to stand up to an organization that, even as it expressed sympathy to the families of Virginia Tech, was trying desperately to block postponement of Georgia legislation that would allow concealed weapons to be kept anywhere in cars - and brought to work.

The NRA is what it is. Let's go after the enablers.

Find out if your representatives believe there should be automatic weapons on the street. Find out if he or she believes that it makes sense to be able to buy guns at gun shows without a waiting period or background check. Ask how they feel about a few facts: 30,000 gun deaths a year - most by handguns that are useful only for shooting people; the estimated \$100 billion a year in costs related to gun violence; the fact that find out what they make of the fact that guns bought for protection end up being 22 times more likely to kill a family member than an intruder; or that over 30 years, more Americans will die from gun deaths than in all the wars ever fought.

Find out how much your representatives received out of the \$5.1 million the NRA spent last year to support or attack candidates.

Ask if they have ever explained their position on gun control to the family of someone gunned down in their district.

And when they clamber up on the bunting-covered platform of the Second Amendment - which actually called for the right to bear arms in forming "well regulated militias" - ask if they really think the British still have designs on retaking the colonies.

Here is one more idea, this one for the media. When you finally decamp from the Virginia Tech campus, instead of filtering back to your respective bureaus, why not swing by the Capitol set up *there* for a few days. Catch up with pro-gun legislators and ask *them* for interviews. And if you do, ask a question on the minds of a majority of Americans - how many more dead is it going to take?