

"Federation Corner" column
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Advocate against the terrorists living among us

by Peggy Dennis
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At the February 2013 meeting of the Montgomery County Civic Federation we voted down a resolution that would have urged the County Council to enact legislation to ban the sale, transfer, possession, or use of military style assault weapons within the boundaries of the county. Instead, MCCF delegates voted to support state assault weapons legislation, SB281, introduced at the request of Governor Martin O'Malley.

The resolution the MCCF rejected would have urged the Council "to buy back at full cost any assault weapons that are returned to the Montgomery County Police within 90 days of passage of this law and to confiscate any remaining weapons that are found within the boundaries of the County after this time." I loved this resolution and, had I thought that it had a chance of being enacted, I would have voted for it in a heartbeat. I voted against it because, rather like the "nuclear free Takoma Park," it would have had little positive effect while the county is surrounded by jurisdictions and a nation that still seem unready to give up their guns.

Instead, in February the Federation voted to support the state legislation, which included eight points: to ban assault weapons; limit magazine capacity; require licensing for gun owners; protect second amendment rights; strengthen existing laws prohibiting possession; restrict ammunition possession; registering weapons from other states; and initiating an automated gun application process. I was proud to learn that the Maryland legislature has passed most of these measures, albeit in a somewhat less stringent version than I could have wished for.

Maryland will not be as safe as we would wish because, like Mexico, it still suffers from firearms of all types being brought in illegally from gun-centric states. And yet some of our state and many national legislators resist being tough on guns. Some in Annapolis were even swayed by the testimony of veterans wanting the freedom to use assault weapons as a form of therapy or catharsis. And some were influenced by members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) who flooded the state capital to protest the supposed diminution of their Second Amendment rights. And this occurred despite the fact that no one was proposing banning all firearms, merely the military style automatic and semi-automatic assault weapons.

For the life of me, I cannot understand why any legislators so easily cave to the gun rights lobbyists and advocates. According to the ABC News website, "violent crime rates have been falling in recent years, but the number of people killed by firearms in the United States remains high." And, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, "between 2006 and 2010, 47,856 people were murdered in the U.S. by firearms, more than twice as many as were killed by all other means combined." I calculate that to be an average of 9,571 deaths per year, or over three times the number killed on 9/11.

Let's compare this with the statistics of the 9/11 attacks. As a nation, we lost over 3,000 people: 2,606 in the World Trade Centers; 246 on the 4 airliners; 125 military and civilian deaths at the Pentagon; plus various numbers of fire fighters and emergency responders. Our response was to go to war against Al Qaeda and change the way we behave before boarding any and every airplane flight. Forget the inconvenience of having to remove our shoes and have our bodies and baggage screened before boarding an airplane. We have spent billions in the war against terrorists.

Since 2001 our military has lost at least 2,063 in Afghanistan and some 4,488 in Iraq. Yet the total number of military fatalities is dwarfed by the numbers of people killed each year by firearms. While U.S. public

health experts do not know why, mass shootings appear to be becoming more common. And mass shootings are most often carried out with assault weapons – a personal and highly portable kind of weapon of mass destruction or “WMD” – exactly what we feared from Al Qaeda.

Is it reasonable for anyone not in the military or an elite police sniper unit to have a WMD? I believe that assault weapons, like any other WMD, have no place in the hands of ordinary citizens. As we saw in the Newtown massacre, even a law abiding and loving mother can have her assault weapon turned on her and then on unsuspecting school children and teachers. Strictly limiting automatic and semi-automatic weapons to the military makes excellent sense.

It seems to me there are two reasons Federal legislators are reluctant to reinstate the national assault weapons ban. The first is the NRA.

As long as the NRA holds such great political clout, common sense and sanity are doomed. The NRA has become, over the last few decades, an extremist organization. Their reaction to Newtown is illustrative: put armed police in every school. Next they will advocate armed guards at every movie theatre, then at every shopping mall. Before we know it, we’ll be living in a nation that feels more like a fascist dictatorship than the peaceful society I grew up in the 1950s. With a philosophy like this, we should fear the NRA every bit as much as Al Qaeda.

The second reason is that too many of us are not lobbying our legislators. If you haven’t called, written or emailed to demand that they ban assault weapons, you are a part of the problem. Contact your legislators today, and ask your friends and relatives in gun-centric states to do the same. We and our national leaders should also be talking about a law or constitutional amendment to refine that pesky Second Amendment. The great majority of us would give anything to have a future in which we can enjoy “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” without packing heat or fearing those who possess their own WMDs.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com