

Taking on Guns Will Be the Easy Part

☒ We've already started hearing the arguments about how we need to control guns, at least certain kinds of guns. We hear these same arguments every time something horrific, like the terrible tragedy in Connecticut, shatters our otherwise normal routine.

This time, I suspect, we'll stop talking and actually do something. Twenty dead first graders has a way of focusing a nation's attention.

No reasonable person, and that includes millions of gun owners, wants to repeal the Second Amendment – though I suspect more than a few liberals would like to if they could. But no reasonable person can make the case any longer that civilians need semi-automatic weapons and clips that hold 100 bullets.

Some may worry about the slippery slope. That's understandable. If we ban assault weapons, they say, what will the authorities ban next. Handguns? Rifles? Then who will protect us, not just from common criminals, but also from the government itself? They will tell us that we already have enough gun laws on the books and that we don't need any more. They're wrong.

The First Amendment guarantees all of us freedom of speech. But we can't shout fire in a crowded theater if there is no fire, and we can't libel decent people with made up stories designed to hurt them. No rights are absolute.

Republicans would be smart to actually lead the move to ban assault weapons and not just follow the Democrats. This would help repair the damage done to the GOP brand by the crazies who think President Obama was born somewhere outside of the

United States and the zealots who think that abortion should always be illegal, even in the case of rape or incest.

But on many issues Republicans aren't smart. So when Congress convenes in January, and gun legislation is brought up on Day One, some Republicans will vote *No* on the assault weapon ban. If too many vote that way, it will be another self-inflicted wound for the GOP, more proof that they're out of touch with the American people.

But in many ways dealing with guns will be the easy part. Congress, I think, will pass laws that ban assault weapons. But what laws can Congress pass to protect us from the mentally ill?

Virtually all of the young men who used their guns to kill innocents in Tucson or at Columbine or the movie theater in Aurora or at Virginia Tech were sick.

People who knew them knew something was wrong long before the rest of us turned on the TV and found out just how unstable they were. But that didn't stop the massacres.

Years ago, when I was a correspondent at CBS News, I did a story about young men whose families knew they were mentally ill, and suspected that some day they would do something terrible. But they couldn't get them committed to a mental institution unless they either threatened to hurt themselves or someone else – or until they actually did hurt someone. Eventually they did. One man shot up a church killing many of the congregants. Another killed his parents. Only then were they taken out of society.

It's a safe bet that somebody knew that Adam Lanza was a ticking time bomb. His mother probably knew, but she can't tell us about him anymore. Others may have known too. And we may soon hear from them. What they tell us may be interesting. But it will come too late.

We don't want to live in a country where someone can simply say, "Hey my neighbor's nuts" and then have the police take the poor guy away. And no mother wants to report a threat, if it means her child will go to jail.

But neither can we let people who show signs of serious mental illness walk the streets until they do something terrible. *That's crazy!*

We don't need any more long conversations about guns. By now, we all know the arguments. Now we need to pass laws that deal with assault weapons. Laws that make sure civilians don't get their hands on them, whether the NRA likes it or not.

And we also need to do something about mentally ill people who are well on their way to doing something truly horrible. And we need to do it fast. The nexus between semi-automatic weapons and mental illness is a scary one – and too often a deadly one.

But we all know that. What we don't know is what to do when we only *suspect* the worst, when we think that kid who is a loner and seems odd *may* do something terrible but have no hard evidence to back up our fears. The system doesn't know how to handle hunches.

So let's end the conversation about guns – at least the part about assault guns. And let's start the much more difficult conversation about the young man in the next room, or the one next door, the one who doesn't seem to fit in, who seems strange and sullen, but who hasn't done anything bad. Yet.