

EDITORIAL

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THANK YOU FOR READING THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

By BERNICE POWELL
JACKSON

Handguns And Justice

Anyone who lives in urban America today knows the stories. Stories of babies being shot in drive-by shootings. Stories of children dying in the crossfire or when another child finds a gun at home and plays with it. Stories of teenagers afraid to go to school because of the death all around them.

Stories of too many city children who, when asked if they know anyone who has been shot, quickly raise their hands. Stories of police officers who are out-gunned by criminals who are sometimes outfitted in bullet-proof vests themselves. Stories of doctors and nurses who work in emergency rooms around the nation and who see case after case of gunshot wounds every week-end. Anyone who lives in urban America today knows the stories.

And, sadly, Americans living in the suburbs and in rural areas are beginning to know those stories as well. Stories of children killing other children in schools in Arkansas and Mississippi and other places around the nation. Stories of accidental shootings in homes or in front yards. Sad, sad stories from which some families never can recover.

But still, in spite of thousands of these stories across this nation, it is still legal to sell handguns and

assault weapons in many places. It is still legal to sell handguns without trigger locks. And so thousands of children and teenagers die every year in this nation, perhaps the only nation at peace in the world where handguns are so easily bought and sold. And maybe the key phrase is "at peace" because some would argue that our cities are not at peace and will not be until handguns are removed from them.

For a decade or more devastated mothers have cried real tears on television news after their children's deaths, and some have even started support groups and groups to fight for better handgun control laws.

After Jim Brady was shot in the assassination attempt on President Reagan, he and his wife became outspoken advocates for such legislation and the Brady bill eventually became a reality, despite fervent opposition from the gun industry and gun advocates.

Still, thousands of inner city youths every year are shot and new research shows that the legitimate gun market is linked to the secondary "black" market which sells illegal guns.

For years, the gun industry had said that crimes were committed with guns which had been stolen and that legal gun sales had nothing to do with guns used in crimes.

Now the Bureau of Alco-

hol, Tobacco and Firearms has found that half of the guns traced to a crime were bought legally in the past three years. In some places that time period is even shorter, for instance, the Los Angeles Police Department found that half of the guns sold legally were used in a crime within two years.

Now the cities are beginning to fight back. Los Angeles is considering restricting handgun purchases to no more than one per month, using the common sense idea that no one with a legal use for a handgun should need more than one per month. New Orleans, Chicago, Miami and Bridgeport, CT are all filing cases against handgun manufacturers, either to force them to put safety trigger locks on all handguns or to try to get back some of the millions of dollars expended in large cities for the care of gunshot victims.

In Bridgeport in 1997 one eight-year old accidentally was shot dead by her ten year-old sister and recently a mother and her eight year-old son were gunned down, allegedly by a man whom the son had witnessed had shot and killed the mother's fiancé earlier and against whom the child was set to testify.

But the most recent development in cases against gun manufacturers was the case won by a Brooklyn mother whose son was killed by a stray bullet from

a semi-automatic handgun. She and seven other families filed a case against the manufacturer of the weapon, arguing that the gun industry floods Southern states where no permits or fingerprint checks or ownership records are required, knowing that some of these guns will overflow into the Northern cities.

The lawyer for that case was able to force some data to be released, including the fact that 90 percent of handguns used in New York crimes are legally purchased elsewhere, mostly in the South. That case also seemed to link the emerging global weapons economy, in which American handgun manufacturers are now sending our guns overseas, most especially to African nations like Liberia and Sierra Leone where civil wars, using teenaged soldiers have been raging.

I know all about the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But I can't imagine that the framers of the Constitution could have envisioned a gun industry with the blood of tens of thousands of children on its hands when it wrote that amendment. I can't imagine why we still allow handguns, whose only purpose is to shoot another human being, to be sold. I can't imagine how many more children will have to die before we do something. I just can't imagine.

The Meaning of Reform

By DR. LENORA FULANI

Being an activist in the Reform Party and an advocate for political reform, I recently looked up the word "reform" in Webster's Dictionary. It turns out there are two different words with two distinct definitions and pronunciations. The first pronunciation is reform (ri-form) and the definition of this usage of reform—according to Webster—is "to make better by removing faults and defects;" and "to make better by putting a stop to abuses or malpractices or by introducing better procedures."

Certainly when you look at the state of our political system, most Americans agree that there is a serious need to make it better by putting a stop to abuses and malpractice by politicians and government officials. Most people agree that it would help considerably to introduce better procedures.

And the American people have indicated at the voting booth and in countless polls some of the procedures they'd like to see introduced to stop the pervasive abuse of power. These include procedural reforms like term limits, campaign finance reform, the easing of ballot access restrictions and open primaries. Ballot access regulations—the laws that govern how a candidate gets on the ballot—are shockingly discriminatory against independents and insurgents.

Here's just one example. An independent candidate for the

U.S. Presidency needs over 1.2 million petition signatures to get on the ballot. A Democrat or Republican needs about 40,000. These laws are enacted by Democratic and Republican controlled state legislatures who design them to protect incumbents—in other words—themselves—and to protect their parties. If we didn't realize it before now, the impeachment spectacle on Capitol Hill is living proof that our politicians' first allegiance is to their party, not to the American people. All of which brings us to the second entry in Webster's dictionary: Reform (RE-form)—meaning, "to form again." When efforts to introduce better procedures to put a stop to systematic abuse and malpractice are frustrated by those in power, it becomes necessary to—not simply "ri-form" that system, but to RE-form it.

What exactly does that mean? That's a difficult question. But the more we look at the extent of political corruption—the more we look at the fact that over 50% of American people don't vote—the more we look at our young people ages 18 to 25 and see that 80% or more of them don't vote—the more evident it becomes that we're going to have to RE-form American politics. We're going to have to re-structure from the bottom-up in order to install the kinds of procedural reforms that are needed at the top. Building a new majority party has the potential to do that.

I have been active in the national Reform Party since its founding. Let me give those of you unfamiliar with its history a little bit of background. The Reform Party was founded by a multi-ideological, multi-racial coalition of independents to introduce a new voice onto the American political scene.

When Ross Perot and Pat Choate polled 8 1/2% of the vote for President and Vice President, the Reform Party was legally established as a minor party. Five percent of the vote in a national election is required to achieve minor status. This entitled the party to recognition by the Federal Election Commission—a dubious distinction to be sure, since the REC is itself a structural monument to the two party system—three Commissioners are Democrats and three are Republicans.

Guess who always gets the short end of the stick when the Commission votes? The independents. By the way, at its founding convention in Kansas City in 1997—one of the first things the Reform Party did was pass a resolution sponsored by Pat Choate and myself calling for the abolition of the FEC.

The first thing the party did on the day after the convention was file a lawsuit against the FEC in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, 9th Circuit challenging its failure to run national elections on a level playing field.

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