

WNDC



Political Dispatch

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From the Committee on Public Policy and Political Action

Gun Safety Legislation: Prospects for Action in the US Congress

According to a recent article in *Roll Call*, it sounds like Senate Majority Leader McConnell is hard pressed to find floor time to consider any of the various measures introduced since the horrific massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Poor man, it must be tough having to prioritize between legislation to protect the public from gun violence run amok or say, rename a health care facility or loosen banking rules (both passed very recently since Parkland). Here is a short list of proposals and action in Congress so far meant to respond to this latest mass shooting:

- Fix NICS Act. Sens. Murphy (D-CT) and Cornyn (R-TX) have introduced a bill that basically enforces current law around the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). A similar bill passed the House in December, but includes a dangerous provision to allow guns across state lines. Known as the “National Concealed Gun Carry Reciprocity Act,” this legislation would allow those states with the most stringent requirements to be subverted by those with the most lenient regulations. A January 2015 report by Everytown for Gun Safety said that reciprocity not only interferes with states’ rights, but also more dangerously, “some states do thorough criminal background checks on applicants, while other states have such ineffective permitting systems that they inadvertently issue permits to felons.”
- Manchin-Toomey. This legislation, which failed to pass after Sandy Hook, expands background checks to include internet and gun show sales. Senators, how many times must we remind you that 97% of all Americans support universal background checks!
- Assault weapons ban. This legislation, not surprisingly, is backed solely by Senate Democrats and, according to *The Hill*, most of the House Democratic Caucus;
- School safety grants. On March 14, 2018, the House passed by near unanimity a measure called “Students, Teachers, Officers Prevention (STOP) School Violence Act.” Basically, it provides grants to schools to provide training. Catchy name, but hardly a panacea to the real threats the public faces from gun violence.

Other measures include various renditions to address school safety, minimum age, and so-called “red flags” sometimes referred to as “ERPO” (extreme risk protective order).

I’m feeling a surge of optimism from the Parkland students’ #NeverAgain movement, and their persistence informs me that they will not accept band aid fixes to our gun sickness. And maybe, just maybe, after politicians witness the throbbing pulse of the angry crowds rallying on March 24, we will hear more quotes similar to these by Republican Senator Lindsey Graham: “I don’t know what Mitch’s game plan is for dealing with this. I’m not going to go into my election saying I didn’t do something. To the politicians who believe they are going to be rewarded by punting on this, I think you’re making a huge mistake.” (Graham speaking to reporters after introduction of measure with Democratic Sen. Blumenthal addressing high-risk persons and gun purchases.)

To learn more, attend the legislative briefing hosted by WNDC PPC Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention on Wednesday, April 18, 12:30-1:30 pm.

-- Shelly Livingston, Acting Chair, Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention

WNDC Holds a Forum on Sexual Harassment with Democratic Representative Jackie Speier

Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA) and Emily Martin of the National Woman's Law Center (NWLC) are on the front lines of the battle for survivor justice. The WNDC's March 15 event inspired our activist members with a talk on the history, context, and specifics of the current transformational change.

Rep. Speier has led the fight to restructure the process for those sexually harassed in Congress. Emily Martin serves as the Vice President for Education and Workplace Justice at the NWLC, which administers the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund. Audience members included Dr. Bernice "Bunny" Sandler, known as the godmother of Title IX, which prohibits sex discrimination in education, and the former president of both the Sewall-Belmont House and the DC Rape Crisis Center, Marty Langelan.

Rep. Speier has taken the lead on protecting women on college campuses and in the military, working alongside Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand. She led the passage of a resolution for mandatory Congressional sexual harassment training, and the House vote to approve the transformational Congressional Accountability Act. It now needs to pass the Senate.

Rep. Speier reminded her audience that progress has been a long time and many people in the making. Birthday celebrant (March 15) Ruth Bader Ginsburg fought for equal pay and against workplace discrimination for decades, before becoming a Supreme Court Justice. Now we have what Rep. Speier calls the "Year of the Amazon Women" with Oprah Winfrey declaring "a new day is on the horizon" at the Golden Globes, and Janelle Monáe announcing at the Grammy's, "We come in peace but we mean business ... and to those who would dare try and silence us, we offer you two words: 'Time's up.'"

Rep. Speier also challenged us to the work ahead. We are facing, she said, a roll back of Title IX guidance issued under President Obama to ensure responsive university action to sexual harassment and assault. But new guidance released under Education Secretary Betsy DeVos last year allows them to use a lower standard of evidence employed primarily for criminal cases, in which a finding of guilt results in criminal penalties, e.g., prison time. It permits giving the accused, but not the victim, appeal rights. It allows requiring mandatory mediation. Even worse, it allows permitting the accused to cross examine the victim, even in cases of violent assault. This would have a "chilling effect" on victims which would make schools more unsafe. States, schools, and students must act to keep protections, Speier and Martin urged.

--Veena Trehan, Chair, Task Force on Global Women

Democratic Positions on Gun Violence Prevention and School Safety

"Whenever you bump into someone there is the fear that they are the next shooter" - Daniela Palacios, 16

Democrats support actions that will be effective in protecting our students from shooters that have killed an appalling number of innocent young children and teenagers in mass murders. We believe in the bravery and eloquence of the students that have survived and look to them for guidance. Their messages are clear that arming teachers will only make their schools less safe. **We need fewer guns not more.**

Decisions on making our schools safer should be made by citizens not by corporations and lobbying groups pursuing their own financial interests. The National Rifle Association should not dominate our national debate on the best road to follow to protect our youth.

Initiatives to identify disturbed young men is desirable but totally ineffective in stopping massacres. Even the biggest budget and most intrusive practices can't guarantee the next shooter will be spotted before he acts. The Parkland shooter was identified as a troubled young man, multiple times. Mentally ill shooters will not be deterred by more security guards and armed teachers. They aren't making practical calculations on whether to storm into a classroom precisely because they are mentally ill. If they are using a rapid fire assault rifle, they know they will kill many before anyone can kill them.

The issue is not just reducing murders. There are issues of **freedom of speech and moral beliefs**. More guns mean less freedom of speech. Individuals are going to be extremely cautious about what they say to someone once they have noticed that that person is armed. Individuals hold beliefs against taking a life that should be respected. One husband of a teacher was quoted as saying his wife didn't want to be armed because she didn't want to kill.

Therefore:

Democrats back the students calling for a ban on assault weapons, banning bump stocks, raising age levels for purchasing guns, requiring a waiting period for purchase, and universal background checks.

"He was a boy that got shot because of your laws saying an 18 year old boy can carry a military grade weapon to kill" - Tyra Hemans, 19

Democratic Positions on Education

A public education has been one of the cornerstones of American democracy since the beginning of this Republic. Historically, the role of public education has been to teach students knowledge, skills, and values. Although educational reform is argued by both Democrats and Republicans, there are significant differences in the philosophies, goals, and objectives of each party.

- We advocate for public education and oppose the privatization and de-stabilization of public schools.
- We support funding for programs that aid in children succeeding in school from preschool through college. Programs that nurture social-emotional development, interpersonal skills, and other "learning mindsets" encourage overall achievement.
- We support access to high quality early learning programs, such as Head Start programs.
- We encourage state leaders and policy makers in their efforts to promote students to consider teaching as a profession. We support increasing the diversity among the pool of teachers.
- We support efforts to reinstate Title IX guidelines on how colleges respond to allegations of sexual assault.
- We advocate maintaining the Education Department's civil rights investigations at its current level by not reducing staffing levels and not scaling back the scope of future inquiries.
- We support guidelines that protect students from for-profit schools, such as debt forgiveness programs, and we support regulations that call for more accountability with these institutions.

New Shocks

While we were overdosing on the McCabe firing story or the Stormy Daniels law suit story, we were missing other shocking stories that don't get press coverage. "The State Department to drop 'Democracy' from its Mission Statement" should have been a big story, at least if you think American values count, indeed empower, our leadership in the world.

After a little google research, WNDC is bringing you the tale of two mission statements. In 2016, the State Department's Mission Statement defined its purpose as shaping and sustaining "a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster[ing] conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere." Now the Mission Statement reads that the "U.S. Department of State advances the interests of the American people, their safety and economic prosperity, by leading America's foreign policy through diplomacy, advocacy, and assistance."

What makes Trump tick: Checking off a List

It seems the media love having an ever flowering story on what makes the Trump voter tick. It can be complex. What makes Trump tick on the other hand might be even simpler than we think. He is just checking off campaign promises. It's a check list. Since he said these things so often, even he can remember them.

Check off Trump's campaign statement that torture was ok by him, specifically waterboarding. His nominee to replace Mike Pompeo at CIA is Gina Haspel. Among other involvements with torture, she ran a secret prison in Thailand — part of the CIA's network of "black sites" — "where two detainees were subjected to waterboarding and other harsh techniques." The Senate Intelligence Committee's report on torture also detailed the central role she played in the particularly gruesome torture of detainee Abu Zubaydah. With Haspel Trump can check "Bring back Waterboarding" off his campaign promises list. Firing McCabe checks off a number of bullets on his campaign list, including nailing "Crooked Hillary." With someone other than McCabe Trump might have gotten the action he wanted against Hillary on emails. Although not a campaign promise, that would open the way to check off Trump winning the popular vote in the 2016 election, a big box on his list! He is not going to give up on that.

-- Elizabeth Clark, Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action, and Chair, Foreign Policy Task Force

Antagonizing the Rest of the World Is NOT in Our Best Interest

Trump's misguided policy of denigrating and antagonizing the rest of the world in the name of "America first" is not in our country's best interest. In fact, it is downright dangerous and irresponsible.

This policy--if you can even call Trump's compulsive and contradictory actions a policy--arrogantly and patronizingly assumes that our engagement with the rest of the world benefits others at the expense of our own interests. In reality, constructive collaboration with other members of the international community is the most effective way to ensure that American interests are protected and advanced.

Take the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. The United States under President Obama wanted to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and worked with China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the EU to negotiate a deal with Iran. The deal imposes strict curbs on Iran's nuclear development in return for sanctions relief. It is by no means perfect, but it significantly reduces the threat of Iran developing nuclear weapons capabilities and makes the US and our allies more safe.

But Trump calls the Obama Administration's signature foreign policy achievement "the worst deal ever," claiming it does not go far enough, and even mentioned disagreements over Iran policy as a reason for firing Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Foreign policy observers now fear that, with Tillerson gone, the path is clear for Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA. This would be a tragic mistake.

Reneging on the Iran deal would amount to throwing out the baby with the bath water; both American and Israeli security experts maintain that an imperfect deal is vastly better than no deal at all. Withdrawing from the deal would immediately increase the chances of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and would put Americans and our allies at significantly greater risk. It would also send the message that the United States cannot be trusted to honor its agreements. Is this the message that we want to send right before going into negotiations with North Korea? Finally, we should be engaging with the people of Iran to the extent that we can, rather than pushing them away with the reimposition of sanctions that would come from backing out of the deal. The Iranian people want freedom and democracy and are benefiting from having the world opened up to them just a little bit more with this nuclear deal. If we withdraw now, we will only help to breed more oppression and resentment.

-- Foreign Policy Task Force



Grassroots Coordinating Committee

The WNDC Grassroots Coordinating Committee, a corps of activist groups that coalesced around WNDC after the 2017 Women's March, had a fantastic first week of March. After going through a wide-ranging and creative drafting process, they presented six resolutions to the Democratic National Committee -- all of which passed unanimously. GCC members fanned out to attend as many council meetings as possible, introduce themselves to DNC members, and host a happy hour all in the name of acquainting the DNC with their powerful grassroots activism. As WNDC VP for Programs Naomi Naierman said, the GCC is "changing the DNC culture and the way they do business."

Not resting on their laurels, GCC members rallied just two days after the DNC meeting for a phonebank to urge voters to turn out for Conor Lamb in PA-18's special election. You can join them for all of these activities and more. The GCC is in the midst of finding new facilitators and creating its plan for 2018. Discussion of these issues will be the focus of its upcoming meetings; the next one is Monday, April 16, at 6:30pm.

GOTV Task Force

The GOTV Task Force convened its first meeting in early March and created a plan mixing new ideas with tried and true GOTV. Having worked with the GCC to support Conor Lamb, the task force next will phonebank all WNDC members to urge their electoral activity in 2018 and follow up with an information packet to help them get involved. It will identify key races and the ways best to support those races -- including distribution of the Public Policy Committee's "campaign messages" to the campaign as well as their volunteers. It will also collaborate with the GCC and other organizations to train volunteers in electioneering issues and best practices.

Commentary

Threats to our Democracy: Religious Authoritarianism

You will see a website reference below to an earlier essay of mine on Religious Authoritarianism and the Trump Administration.* In that essay I laid out the extreme religious affiliations of a number of administration officials (including former members), especially Betsy DeVos, Steve Bannon, Mike Pence, Jeff Sessions, Tom Price, Ben Carson, and Mike Pompeo. It hasn't gotten any better. The list of administration figures who explicitly do not believe in the separation of church and state has increased.

Scott Pruitt, Director, Environmental Protection Agency

New information has surfaced about those on our original list of religious extremists. One of those is Pruitt, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator. In 2003, Pruitt supported an unsuccessful bill that would have required textbooks in Oklahoma to use language that evolution is only a theory. Other Pruitt views have just been revealed in a 2005 interview he gave in an article in *Politico*, views he has not rejected. In that 2005 interview he said that states might need to call a constitutional convention to propose amendments that would allow expression of religion in government, declare abortion illegal, and bar same-sex marriage. In the 2005 recordings, Pruitt also backed a broad interpretation of the Second Amendment's right to bear arms, saying it derives from a divine mandate and thus cannot be limited. Pruitt belittles the rule of law and Constitutionally guaranteed rights. He has said we have "a judicial monarch."

Sarah Huckabee Sanders

We now have as the White House Press Secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who shares her religious beliefs with those of her father, Mike Huckabee. He expressed his views on the relation of church and state in his 2008 Presidential campaign: "I have opponents in this race who do not want to change the Constitution. But I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God. And that's what we need to do is amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than trying to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view of how we treat each other and how we treat the family." Huckabee's daughter Sarah deflects all questions on President Trump's moral standards by saying that, in effect, as humans we are all weak and should look for our "model" not to humans but to God, who has decree what happens – such as the election of Trump – is for his purposes. Huckabee Sanders, by making all humans generic in this "God space," is making human institutions, and humans in this world, unimportant. Everything is bad about Trump, or everything is good. It is all the same.

Religious Beliefs and Job Qualifications

A person's religious beliefs aren't off the reservation for discussion and judgment on that individual's interactions with fellow members of his or her community, including the nation. They are legitimately part of a review of their qualifications for certain jobs – including all public sector jobs. They are not determinative, but they are relevant. Part of one's qualification for public service in America means serving the community and treating its members as equally valuable in terms of the human spirit. If you don't believe that and believe, for example, that God decreed that some who are poor deserve to be poor, then you aren't qualified to be a public servant.

–Elizabeth Clark, Vice President for Public Policy and Political Action, and Chair, Foreign Policy Task Force

*<https://cstreetdemocrats.com/2017/06/an-issue-still-important-religious-authoritarianism-and-the-trump-administration/>

Trumpeting Tariffs

President Trump's sudden decision on March 8 to impose major steel and aluminum tariffs caught nearly everyone—including his own staff—by surprise. Trump touted the tariffs as a way to "protect jobs" against "very unfair" foreign competition, but in reality, tariffs end up hurting national income and cost jobs. Trump needed his action to be sudden because of the strong opposition to protective tariffs in the Republican Party, in Wall Street, and in his own White House. House and Senate leadership said they opposed the move and his chief economic policy advisor, a former president of Goldman Sachs, resigned. Trump's disregard for his own advisors and party leaders demonstrates how little credence he gives to informed opinions around him when making far reaching policy decisions.

Nevertheless, at his rally in Western Pennsylvania supporters cheered. Trump's simple approach to a complex issue such as immigration – build a wall – is similar to his response to losses of blue collar jobs – impose a tariff. There are many possible policy responses to the stagnation of wages and loss of blue collar jobs that do not impose the costs and potential damage to the economy of high tariffs. Trade by definition benefits both parties in a willing transaction. Foreign trade is about 14% of US national income. If we put up tariffs and others reciprocate by imposing tariffs, then the income of both countries goes down. We know the failures of tariffs from our own history: the high US tariff in 1930 that was supposed to protect US jobs ended up hurting our national income and lowering the income in other countries.

We learned from our failure. Since 1945 the US has been the leader in establishing international agreements such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) designed to stimulate trade and avoid unfair trading practices such as "dumping" – that is, exporting goods at less than cost. The Trump administration has not complained to the WTO about steel exported to the US, no doubt because it thinks it does not have a case it thinks it can win. When the US has a good case against unfair trade practices, it has won most of the complaints it has brought to the WTO.

The way to more and better paying blue-collar jobs is not to reduce trade but to encourage competitiveness, productivity, labor mobility, and training. To remain profitable steel has increased productivity and reduced the amount of labor needed for the same output. Forty years ago, it took around ten person hours to produce a ton of steel; with today's technology it takes less than two. Reductions in low-skilled jobs have been accompanied by openings of well-paying and safer jobs. Yet many positions remain unfilled due to lack of workers with the necessary skills. Government policies should focus on stimulating investment, including investment in education and training to create more and better paying jobs, while maintaining competitiveness, not by cutting back on trade.

– Warren Clark and Mariellen Jewers, WNDC Task Force on Economic Policy

