

Other Viewpoints

Guns get overkill in new Kansas laws

Mass shootings have led to serious conversations, even action, on gun control in some states, including places where deadly outbursts occurred.

Yet in Kansas, the reaction was to make the state more gun-friendly.

A December shooting incident that left 20 first-graders and six staff members dead in Newtown, Conn. – and other recent, high-profile mass killings – understandably sparked pleas from citizens eager for reasonable restrictions on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, as well as stepped-up background checks for gun purchases and efforts to help the mentally ill.

But those pleas have been drowned out in Kansas by those who fear such pursuits would strip them of their Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms, even though there's no intent to do so.

Kansas lawmakers recently passed ill-conceived legislation that would let people carry concealed firearms into more public buildings, and prevent federal agents from confiscating weapons made in the state.

Neither would improve public safety. Encouraging people to bring guns into courthouses, city halls or other public places where emotions may run high is a disturbing proposition. Lawmakers interested in such misguided ideas should ask themselves why law enforcement agencies charged with keeping us safe resist these changes.

The Legislature also approved a plan to tell the federal government it has no power to regulate guns, ammunition and accessories that are made, sold and kept exclusively in Kansas. Unfortunately, that's just an invitation to costly litigation.

Overlooked as lawmakers pursued their gun-rights legislation were efforts to improve access to mental health services and a stronger system of background checks on gun sales, two areas where Kansas falls short.

In defending the legislation, supporters of making Kansas more gun-friendly said the bills were in the works before the elementary school massacre.

If true, the most recent shooting spree should have been enough to turn lawmakers' attention to realistic ways to prevent such tragedies.

And even if Kansas lawmakers had no interest in tighter gun control, they could have left existing policies in place.

Instead, they chose overkill by going too far in the wrong direction when it comes to guns.

– The Garden City Telegram, via the Associated Press

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RISE AND RISE AGAIN

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Don't forget suffering in North Korea

North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un continues to direct increasingly hostile rhetoric at the United States and South Korea, and it seems certain that the conflict between these three countries will dominate the cable news networks and occupy the front pages of major newspapers across the country for some time.

This is how it should be. When a foreign leader, especially one who leads a regime as detestable as the one in North Korea, threatens nuclear war, no matter how empty those threats may be, the press has an obligation to cover the story from every angle. After all, the U.S. media's first mission is to cover issues that affect Americans in some fashion.

It makes sense that most of the coverage of the North Korea-U.S. conflict will focus on how large a threat this abominable regime actually poses to America. But, as this situation continues to evolve, the press – and Americans in general – shouldn't forget the plight of the hundreds of thousands of people who fill North Korea's brutal concentration camps.

There are no words strong enough to accurately describe how unconscionable the North Korean regime really is, now and since its inception. While some regimes may have been worse – the Soviet Union during the Joseph Stalin years, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia – the list is pretty short.



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

To understand just how depraved this regime is, one has to look no further than the tragic events that took place between 1995 and 1997. Outside observers and nongovernment organizations estimate that 3.5 million North Koreans starved to death, even though there was enough humanitarian aid to feed the nation's population. According to Robert Park, a human rights activist and missionary who was detained in North Korea from December 2009 to February 2010, the North Korean regime diverted the aid to enhance its military might while the people the aid was intended for starved.

But numbers, while important, don't do an adequate job of illuminating the horrors that undergird life in North Korea. They don't force us to imagine what it must have been like for the mothers who had to watch helplessly as their young daughters slowly starved and died. Numbers don't demand that we close our eyes and envision what it must have been like to be

that child when he realized that he only had a couple more minutes left on this earth. How scared and alone they must have felt. To feel these emotions, we must make an earnest effort to put ourselves in these people's shoes.

One of the vilest aspects of the North Korean dictatorship is what appears to be a policy of infanticide being carried out inside the nation's concentration camps. In an article in the *New York Times*, Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, a private group based in Brussels, said that of 35 escapees he talked with, 31 said they had witnessed babies being killed by abandonment or being smothered by plastic sheets. That is beyond repugnant.

It's essential we don't forget that the people who inhabit these camps are no different from us. They just happen to be victims of circumstance. And as people become more interested in the dealings inside North Korea, the least we can do is keep their stories in the national spotlight.

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Congress falls short on national security

Our system is based on the premise that better policy emerges if the president and Congress work together. It depends on Congress holding executive policies up to the light and weighing in with its own concerns.

Wherever you stood on Sen. Rand Paul's 13-hour filibuster to delay John Brennan's confirmation as CIA director, or on the Senate's confirmation hearings for Brennan and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, they all serve as a reminder of just how feeble Congress has proven to be when it comes to foreign policy.

This wasn't immediately obvious, of course. Paul's speech questioned whether there are limits on the president's power to use drones to kill Americans who've been declared "enemy combatants." But the CIA and military have been using drones overseas for years and this was the first time Congress really pondered the issue.

That's a measure of its dereliction, not of stepping up to the plate. Why has it taken so long to see significant congressional review of the president's power to use drones?

Meanwhile, if you followed the confirmation hearings, you'd have to conclude that Congress thinks U.S. foreign policy centers on Israel, Cuba and the destroyed consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

On the long list of significant foreign policy issues confronting the White House – the rise of China, a war looming with Iran, increased tensions on the Korean peninsula, the fragmentation of Syria, Libya, the spread of Al Qaeda to northern Africa – there's mostly been silence from the Congress.

Our strategic framework agreement with Iraq? The agreement we're negotiating with Afghanistan? The key issue of when, where and how we commit American forces abroad? Congress has been missing in action.

This is not how it's supposed to be. Our

Other Opinions

• Lee Hamilton Center on Congress

Constitution gives Congress strong levers for dealing with foreign policy. It has oversight of the executive branch and can hold hearings and demand information. It has the power of the purse and with it the ability to explore key issues of behavior and policy before approving the budget. It has the power to declare war and to raise and maintain an army and navy. The Senate has the confirmation process, which allows senators to probe and evaluate policies and nominees for top jobs.

Yet for the most part, Congress defers to executive power. Most of its members, who know that their re-election rests on domestic issues, don't bother to gain the expertise or develop the political will to become potent and valuable foreign policy contributors, as the Constitution intended.

Congress likes leaving decisions to the president and then blaming him if they turn out to be wrong – or it tries to have it both ways, as with Benghazi, cutting funds for State Department security and then criticizing the department for not having enough security.

The executive branch is hardly blameless. The White House, whether under Republican or Democratic control, typically sees Congress as a nuisance and an obstacle to be overcome, not a partner.

Yet that's a reason for Congress to try harder, not to fold. Our system is based on the premise that better policy emerges if the president and

Congress work together. It depends on Congress to hold executive policies up to the light and to weigh in with its own concerns.

To do this, members need to be fully informed both about the complexities of foreign issues and about what the administration is doing. They need to make robust oversight commonplace, asking executive-branch policymakers to spell out and justify policies and their implementation. They need to use the power of the purse to grant or deny funds if their views are not taken into account. They need to develop the expertise – both among themselves and on staff – that would allow them to be both critic and partner in the development of foreign policy.

And above all, those members who do understand the ins and outs of foreign matters need to press Congress to set aside its reluctance to affect foreign policy. That is where the real failings lie – not with individual members, but with how Congress acts as an institution in the formulation of our foreign policy.

Developing American foreign policy is complicated, confusing and sometimes frustrating. But our country is at its strongest when it is unified and speaks with the voice not just of the president, but of the American people's representatives in Congress. It's time for Congress to shoulder its responsibilities.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

