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## **THE LOBBY AGAINST COMMON SENSE:**

*THE RIGHT'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE REFORM  
AND HOW WE CAN DEFEAT IT*

# THE LOBBY AGAINST COMMON SENSE:

## THE RIGHT'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE REFORM AND HOW WE CAN DEFEAT IT

While the *White House*, governors, Congress and other public officials grapple with policy responses to last month's mass shooting at a Connecticut elementary school, many Americans wonder whether the massacre of young children will provide momentum for more effective laws that previous killing sprees - even one that gravely wounded a member of Congress - have not.

Some assume, wrongly, that nothing can be done. Politicians' fear of the \$200+ million National Rifle Association (NRA) is generally cited as the reason for weak gun laws that undermine law enforcement and put citizens at higher risk from gun crimes. The power of the NRA to determine the outcome of elections may well be more myth than reality, but even the perception of such power can give the group tremendous political muscle, along with its aggressive lobbying and strong-arm political tactics.



LIBERTY  COUNSEL

The NRA is not alone in attempting to prevent effective regulation of guns and promoting reckless policies that leave Americans vulnerable to crime. Its efforts are supported by the same kind of coalition that undermines the nation's ability to solve a wide range of problems. Corporations, right-wing ideologues, and Religious Right leaders work together to misinform Americans, generate unfounded fears, and prevent passage of broadly supported solutions.

Understanding the extremism and dishonesty at the heart of right-wing obstructionism is crucial to overcoming it.

### WHO'S EXTREME?

Opponents of stronger gun laws portray any effort to regulate the sale of even military-style weapons as radical assaults on American freedom. For instance, Matt Barber of the Liberty Counsel, a Religious Right legal group, called President Obama a "slime ball," claiming falsely that Obama used his remarks at a memorial service for the Connecticut shooting victims to push "radical" gun control and saying of Obama, "His extremism knows no lows."

But it is Barber and NRA officials who are staking out an extreme position. They emphatically do not speak for the American people. More strikingly, the NRA leadership and its allies do not speak for the group's own members. Huge *majorities* of NRA members support sensible policies that the group opposes. For example, 82 percent of the public, and 74 percent of NRA members, support

**"RADICALS IN POWER HAVE ALREADY DEVoured OUR FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE THROUGH OBAMACARE AND HAVE REPEATEDLY CHOMPED ON OUR FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN THE ONGOING "HOMOSEXUAL RIGHTS" CAMPAIGN. NOW THESE INSATIABLE SOCIALISTS ARE DROOLING ALL OVER OUR SECOND AMENDMENT RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS!"**

—MATHEW STAVER, LIBERTY COUNSEL, JANUARY 2013

requiring a criminal background check of anyone purchasing a gun. NRA leaders strongly oppose requiring background checks for gun sales. And a recent *poll* taken after the Newtown shooting found that a majority of people who live in gun-owning households support a ban on high-capacity ammunition magazines.

At the urging of NRA officials, Congress has even passed laws that *undermine* law enforcement officials' ability to fight gun crimes, forcing the Justice Department to destroy within 24 hours records about the buyer in approved purchases and making it harder for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to track

sales of certain guns used in crimes. How do anti-gun-regulation activists prevent action in the face of broad public support? They deploy a range of strategies and tactics that right-wing activists use on a variety of issues:

## DENYING AND MASKING REALITY

On issues from gay rights to climate change, right-wing activists stick stubbornly to their ideology even when it is clearly controverted by scientific consensus and other reality. On gun violence, NRA officials and their allies

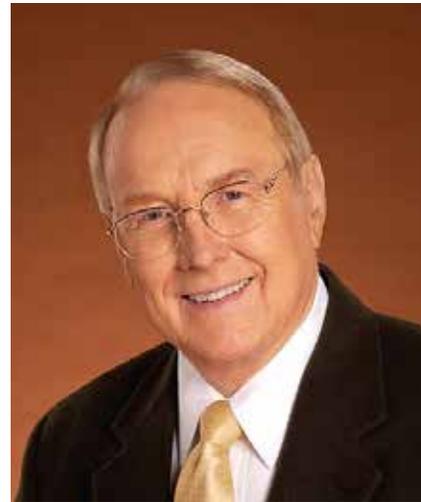
### JAMES DOBSON SAID THE (NEWTOWN) SHOOTING WAS GOD'S JUDGMENT FOR THE COUNTRY TURNING ITS BACK ON SCRIPTURE AND ON GOD.

refuse to acknowledge that the availability of assault weapons and high-volume ammunition clips, or the lack of background checks for private sales of guns, are problems that make it easier for a shooter to kill more innocent people quickly. They ignore evidence that stronger gun laws can and do reduce gun crimes. According to an October 2012 [report](#) from the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, "When states expand firearm prohibitions to high-risk groups, and adopt comprehensive measures to prevent diversion of guns to prohibited persons, fewer guns are diverted to criminals, and there is less violence."

One way to mask reality is through rhetoric that distorts or hides the truth. Tea Party leaders and their allies rallied opposition to federal health care reform by portraying "ObamaCare" in lurid end-of-freedom, America-destroying rhetoric. They were successful in building public opposition to the generic "ObamaCare" - even though there was strong majority support for most of the substantive elements of the plan. By portraying advocates for stronger gun regulation as government thugs who want to take guns from hunters' hands, NRA leaders and their allies have been able to generate some poll numbers indicating opposition to "gun control," but the more relevant fact for policymakers is that huge majorities of Americans, and of NRA members themselves, back many of the most commonly discussed approaches to reducing gun violence. Stronger efforts to keep dangerous guns out of the hands of dangerous people are simply not attacks on the right recognized by the Supreme Court under the Second Amendment of law-abiding citizens to have guns for hunting or self-defense.

## SHIFTING BLAME

The [speech](#) by the NRA's Wayne LaPierre a week after the Connecticut shootings was a memorable display of blame shifting. He attempted to cast blame for the killings on everyone but his own group's resistance to



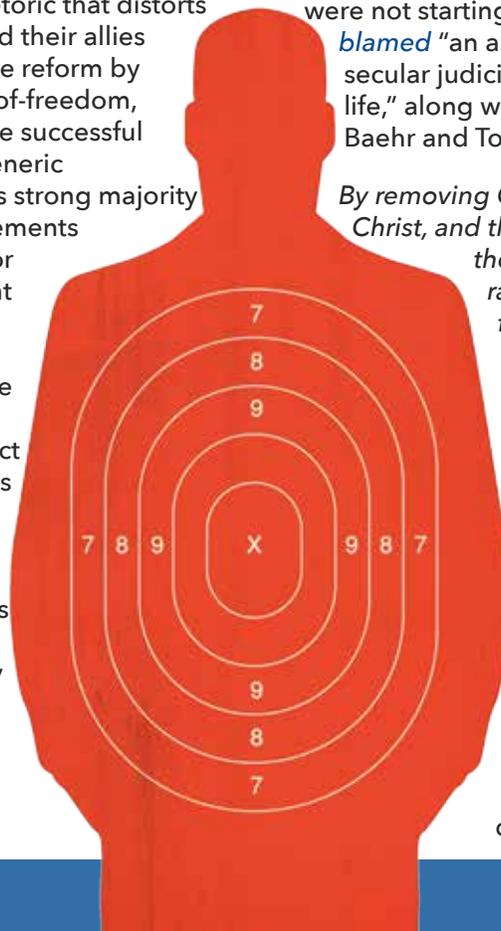
stronger controls on assault weapons and the firearms or ammunition themselves.

Religious Right leaders and right-wing pundits played their usual parts in the spin. Religious broadcaster James Dobson [said](#) the shooting was God's judgment

for the country turning its back on scripture and on God. Franklin Graham [said](#) much the same: "This is what happens when a society turns its back on God." Radio host Steve Deece [blamed](#) public schools for promoting a "culture of death" and teaching students "there is no God and thus no real purpose to their lives." American Family Association spokesperson Bryan Fischer [said](#) God wasn't there to protect students because schools were not starting the day with prayer. Newt Gingrich [blamed](#) "an anti-religious secular bureaucracy and secular judiciary seeking to drive God out of public life," along with video games. Culture warriors Ted Baehr and Tom Snyder wrote in *Movieguide*:

*By removing God, the Bible, God's Law, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit from society, including the mass media and the schools, we are raising generations of people with no faith in God or Jesus and, hence, no moral conscience, and no self-control. If so many people have no faith, no moral conscience and no self-control, then it's no wonder our society is suffering from all these mass murders by evil lone gunmen.*

Tea Party Nation [blamed](#) teachers' unions, liberals, and an "over-bureaucratized society." The Oathkeepers, a Tea Party offshoot for military and law enforcement officials, argued that the federal government was "complicit in the deaths of these children, and in fact



an accessory to their mass murder, by forcibly disarming (with the very real threat of prison) all the teachers, all the staff, and any parent who may have been on school property.”

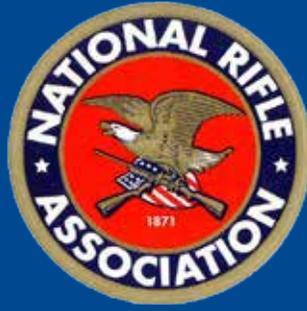
The consequence of such blame-spreading is that it creates distractions from addressing the real problems. One Religious Right leader appearing on American Family Radio *called* the shooting a “gracious” act of divine punishment designed to “bring us to our senses and bring us back to Him.”

So what does that mean for policy? Such arguments suggest that the appropriate response is not dealing with weak laws that allow military-style guns to get into the hands of dangerous people, but to get the government and public schools into the business of promoting religion.

## HOSTILITY TO COMPROMISE

The absolute refusal to compromise - indeed, the vilification of the very idea of compromise - is at the heart of the right-wing movement and much of the modern Republican Party. That has been the story of GOP obstructionism on tax policy, judicial nominations, and more. Just as the Tea Party and its corporate backers have gone out of their way to punish Republicans they see as insufficiently “conservative” - even when it meant nominating extremists who could not win a general election - leaders of the NRA and other groups like the Gun Owners of America react with fierce hostility to talk of compromise. Their political power comes largely from the fear they have created among elected leaders that the group will spend lavishly to punish even the tiniest dissent from its ideological dogma. The NRA’s leaders loudly pulled out of current conversations convened by the White House, denouncing the effort to find policy solutions to gun violence as “demonizing” the Second Amendment, and they launched a “Stand and Fight” campaign even before the details of the White House proposals had been announced. Rep. Steve Stockman from Texas even *threatened* to file articles of impeachment.

One way Religious Right leaders justify their opposition to compromise is claiming a biblical mandate for their favored policies, something Religious Right leaders do on issues like taxes as well as issues involving privacy and sexuality. Discredited Religious Right “historian” David Barton *calls* the Second Amendment “the biblical right



**HUGE MAJORITIES OF AMERICANS, AND OF NRA MEMBERS THEMSELVES, BACK MANY OF THE MOST COMMONLY DISCUSSED APPROACHES TO REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE**

of self-defense” and says it requires that individual Americans have access to any weapon the federal government has.

## SMEARING OPPONENTS

Just as Religious Right groups smear political opponents as hostile to religious liberty, anti-gun-regulation groups smear as enemies of liberty anyone who advocates for stronger oversight on the purchase of weapons capable of mass violence. Even though polls show that NRA members believe support for the Second Amendment goes hand in hand with preventing gun crimes, the group’s leaders falsely equate any effort to strengthen gun laws to advance public safety with a desire to confiscate Americans’ handguns and hunting rifles.

Religious Right leaders are prone to make claims that only fellow believers are capable of moral action and decision making. Snyder and Baehr, in their post-shooting column, wrote, “Without

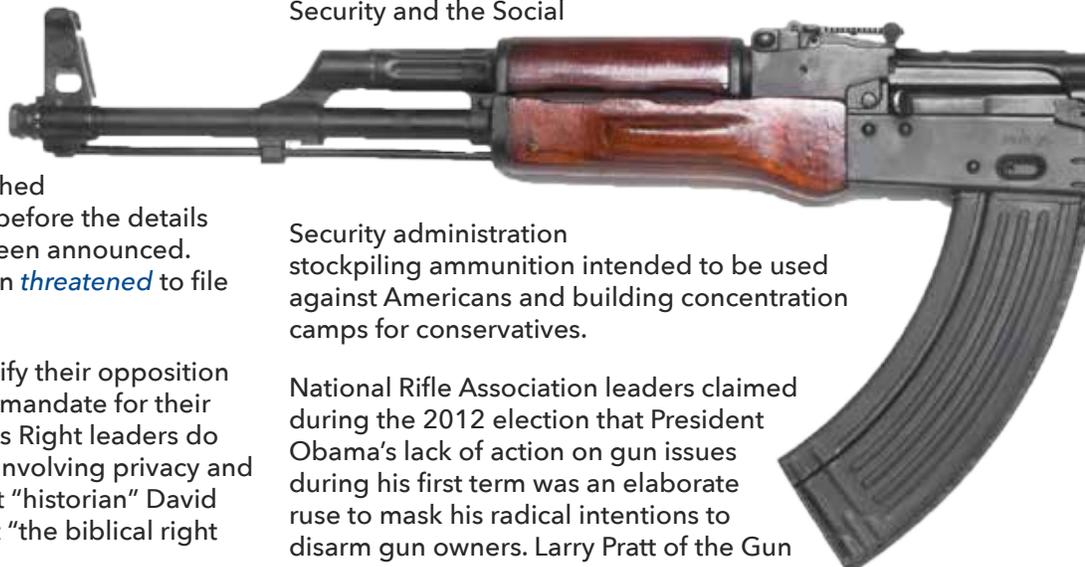
God, without faith and values, we are just soulless meat machines who can kill without mercy.”

## PROMOTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The right-wing base of the Republican Party is fed a steady diet of conspiracy theories about liberals and other perceived enemies. That’s why so many Republicans believe President Obama is a secret Muslim bent on the destruction of the US, or that he was not born in the United States. During the Obama administration, right-wing websites have circulated conspiracy theories about the Department of Homeland Security and the Social

Security administration stockpiling ammunition intended to be used against Americans and building concentration camps for conservatives.

National Rifle Association leaders claimed during the 2012 election that President Obama’s lack of action on gun issues during his first term was an elaborate ruse to mask his radical intentions to disarm gun owners. Larry Pratt of the Gun



Owners of America insisted that the federal health care reform law was meant to “take away your guns.”

Some went even further: Christian radio host Bradlee Dean, a close ally of Rep. Michele Bachmann, *suggested* that the killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, like earlier murders at a theater in Aurora, Colorado, were actually orchestrated by the government to create a pretext to ban guns.

## MANY HUNTERS AND GUN OWNERS SEE NO CONTRADICTION BETWEEN SAFEGUARDING THE SECOND AMENDMENT AND ENACTING POLICIES THAT CAN HELP LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS KEEP AMERICANS SAFE BY KEEPING DANGEROUS GUNS OUT OF THE HANDS OF DANGEROUS PEOPLE.

Right-wing columnist Erik Rush *says* he suspects that “the Obama administration or one of its surrogates “is responsible for the recent murder of a Keith Ratcliffe, a gun enthusiast with a huge online following. Conspiracy theories have been circulating since news broke of Ratcliffe’s death, which Rush called “the first of many such executions that will take place in order to silence individuals whom the government deems a threat to their oligarchical collectivist agenda.” According to a local news *report* on January 18, law enforcement officials were interviewing several “persons of interest” who were affiliated with Ratcliffe, but no one had been arrested.

## FICKLE LOYALTY TO STATES’ RIGHTS

Hostility to the heavy hand of the federal government, and support for the sovereignty of states, is an article of faith among the conservative movement, except when it isn’t. For example, anti-gay groups laud the power of states to restrict marriage, but they push a federal constitutional amendment to override the laws of states where legislators and citizens have voted to recognize the legal equality of same-sex couples. The NRA and its allies at the *American Legislative Exchange Council* have pushed federal bills that would force states to allow people with concealed carry permits from other states to carry guns even if they wouldn’t have qualified under the

other state’s laws. A bill *pushed* by Sen. John Thune would even allow people from states that don’t require permits to carry hidden guns anywhere in the U.S.

## EXTREMIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONSTITUTION

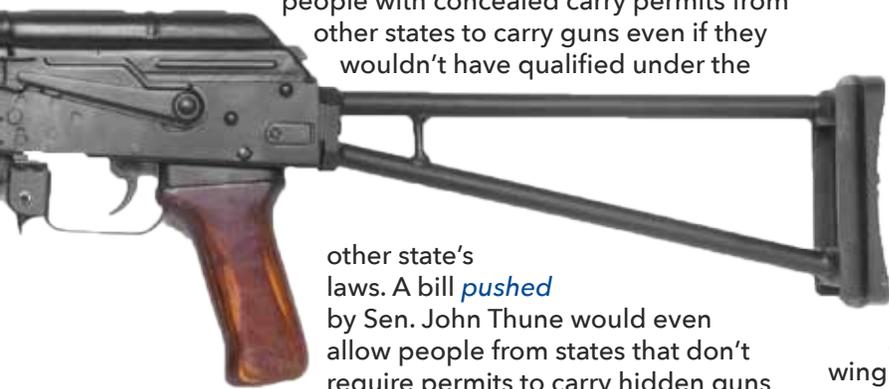
A Wyoming legislator has *introduced* legislation that would make it a felony to enforce a federal ban on assault weapons or high-capacity ammunition. The idea that a state could imprison federal agents for enforcing a federal law may excite right-wing activists, but it doesn’t reflect a reality-based view of our constitutional system

of government. And that’s a widespread problem. David Barton insists that the founding fathers’ view of the constitutional right to bear arms means that any weapon the government possesses must also be available to the population at large: “...whatever the government’s got, we’ve gotta have the same thing, because if they’ve got an AK-47 and come through and we’ve only got a BB gun on the inside, this is not a deterrent. So the whole purpose of the Second Amendment is to make sure you have equal power with whatever comes against you illegally.” If Barton is really saying that citizens have a Second Amendment right to anything that is in the U.S. military arsenal - chemical weapons, fully automated machine guns, bombs, and more - that is emphatically not a view endorsed by the Supreme Court.

Ted Cruz, a new U.S. senator from Texas elected with major support from Tea Party activists *said* recently that efforts to restrict the sales of assault weapons and ammunition are unconstitutional. In fact, even the conservative Supreme Court has said clearly that regulating the sale of dangerous guns is not prohibited by the Second Amendment. According to Justice Antonin Scalia, “the Second Amendment does not protect those weapons not typically possessed by law-abiding citizens for lawful purposes, such as short-barreled shotguns.”

## HARNESSING CORPORATE MONEY

Right-wing causes, including the Tea Party, anti-unionism, and anti-environmentalism, have benefitted from a flood of corporate money in the wake of Supreme Court decisions gutting the nation’s campaign finance laws. In addition, the American Legislative Exchange Council, a right-wing group that acts as matchmaker between corporate interests and lawmakers eager to do their bidding, has produced literally hundreds of model bills that right-wing legislators have enacted into law - attacking unions and public education and otherwise supporting the *predatory*



*privatization* of public assets and government services. Among the model bills ALEC has previously *promoted* is the so-called “stand your ground” law originally adopted in Florida. ALEC deemed it a national “model” law, and it was enacted in more than two dozen states. The Florida law was cited initially to prevent the prosecution of the man who killed Trayvon Martin.

Some analysts believe the NRA has morphed from a grassroots group teaching marksmanship to a trade association for gun manufacturers - a “lobbying, merchandising and marketing machine.” Business Week *reported* in January 2012 that more than 50 firearms-related companies had given at least \$14.8 million to the group. The NRA has boosted gun makers several ways: its rhetoric about gun confiscation has spurred binge buying by gun enthusiasts; it has pushed a federal law that limits liability against gunmakers as well as state laws that bar cities from suing gun manufacturers (in conjunction with ALEC); and the NRA’s legislative arm has also “helped ensure the end of the federal assault weapons ban” in 2004 (which the NRA and ALEC opposed in 1994). Business Week quotes the former NRA President Sandy Froman claiming that it “saved the American gun industry from bankruptcy.”

## ANYTHING GOES

A hallmark of right-wing activism over the past four years has been a willingness to say and do anything to try to undermine the effectiveness of the Obama presidency and to try to prevent the president’s re-election (as well as his initial election). Rhetorically, that has meant equating health care reform and other initiatives with tyranny. In response to recent reports that some aspects of gun regulation could be strengthened by executive order, the right-wing Drudge Report posted *photos* of Hitler and Stalin.

Before the 2012 election, NRA leaders portrayed President Obama as conspiring to abolish Americans’ Second Amendment rights. But NRA efforts to bring down the Obama administration went well beyond political rhetoric and campaign spending. The NRA leadership played a significant role in the failed effort by congressional Republicans to turn the ATF’s botched “Fast and Furious” operation into an administration-destroying scandal. NRA officials even announced that the group would “score” a House vote on whether to hold Attorney General Eric Holder in contempt, getting votes from Republicans and some Democrats eager to preserve a 100-percent NRA rating.

## MONEY, POWER, AND PERCEPTION

Back in August, Daniel Webster, co-director of the Center for Gun Policy and Research at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore *said*, “Democrats have decided, I think wrongly politically and morally, that it’s only an issue they can lose on.” Indeed, even though the group’s *recent political spending* is



NRA CEO & Executive Vice President Wayne Lapiere  
Photo Gage Skidmore

heavily weighted toward Republicans, the lack of desire to cross the NRA’s lobbyists and activists is bipartisan. In 2009, a Democratic Congress *complied* with demands for federal laws allowing people to bring guns onto Amtrak trains and into national parks; in 2010 the group demanded, and got, a special exemption from identifying its donors in the DISCLOSE Act under consideration.

But all that could be changing. Although the group can still generate a flood of calls to elected officials from its loyal members, the response by the NRA leadership to the Sandy Hook shootings has generated widespread ridicule and contempt. And this year’s elections - as well as some serious research into past elections - have begun to dismantle the myth of the all-powerful NRA, a myth that has given the group much of its ability to stand between Americans and policies that will protect them from violent crime. *Says* Robert Spitzer, author of *The Politics of Gun Control* and other books, “The NRA’s actual track record of defeating people who would otherwise win isn’t very good.”

Indeed, the NRA did poorly in 2012, and not only with the *millions* it spent to defeat President Obama. An analysis by the *Sunlight Foundation* found that less than one percent of the NRA’s political spending in 2012 supported candidates who actually won. Early in 2012, Paul Waldman released a *study* of prior year elections and found that the NRA’s endorsement and spending had little impact on most races. He challenges the

notion - an article of faith among many Democrats - that Democratic support for the assault weapons ban gave control of Congress in 1994. Waldman called the NRA a "paper tiger."

## A CHALLENGE

It has become devastatingly clear that the lack of effective policies to prevent gun crimes can lead to disastrous consequences for individuals, families, and entire communities. And it is equally clear that the leadership of the NRA's opposition to policies that are overwhelmingly supported by their own members has distorted public debate by masking the fact that many hunters and gun owners see no contradiction between safeguarding the Second Amendment and enacting policies that can help law enforcement officials keep Americans safe by keeping dangerous guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

It is also true that the failure to challenge extremist and dishonest rhetoric can lead to damaging consequences for our common public life. The promotion of false conspiracy theories, the claims by public figures that their political opponents are out to destroy freedom and America itself, and the false equation of sensible, broadly supported laws with the elimination of the rights of hunters and other gun owners, can foster a dangerous extremism, including threats of violence.

In 2009, at Phyllis Schlafly's "How to Take Back America" conference, several people *suggested* that armed resistance to a tyrannical Obama administration may be needed. A speaker who drew parallels between America today and her experiences growing up under Nazis and Communists urged activists to buy more guns and ammunition. Someone even suggested that "the Second Amendment" would be the answer to threats by state governments to impose forced vaccination and quarantines during a flu pandemic.

More recently, an owner of a firearms training business who believes the federal government is preparing to confiscate Americans' guns threatened in an online video to "*start killing people.*" (He has since *apologized.*) Glenn Beck recently said President Obama was trying to push conservatives into launching a new *civil war*. Similar calls for violent *resistance* to, or *revolution* against, the federal government can be heard with alarming frequency from right-wing activists and public officials.

Religious and civic leaders are *calling* on public officials to stand up to the extremism, dishonesty and bullying of the NRA leadership and their allies on the far right, and to seek sensible solutions that protect individual liberties as well as the lives and well-being of Americans.



# WHAT CAN I DO?

- ✓ **Share your personal story**  
Let us know how the Right's refusal to consider reasonable gun regulations has impacted you: your life, your community and our shared values.
- ✓ **Send a letter to the editor**  
A carefully crafted letter to the editor of your local newspaper can be a great way to counter the extreme pro-gun agenda of the Right. The more voices we have speaking out against the outrageous stance coming from the Right Wing, the more power we have to make real change on the issues that impact our safety, security and prosperity.
- ✓ **Call in to talk radio shows**  
Talk radio shows can be an important venue for progressive voices to counter the pro-gun rhetoric of the Right. By calling in, you have a platform to discuss your concerns and the American values you hold dear.
- ✓ **Write and Call Congress**  
It is always important for our congressional leaders to know that their constituents don't support the radical agenda of groups like the NRA. We need Congress to take meaningful actions to prevent further tragedies by restricting access to weapons of war. The main number to the U.S. Congress is (202) 224-3121.
- ✓ **Write and Call your State Legislature**  
State legislators need to understand that their constituents support common sense regulation of guns. State legislators don't often get as many calls or emails as members of Congress, so each contact can be even more important.
- ✓ **Encourage friends to speak up**  
It is important to engage and educate our friends and neighbors about the issues that impact our collective safety and security. This is an opportunity for you to help turn up the volume of voices speaking out against the radical agenda coming from right-wing politicians and public figures on the state and national level.
- ✓ **Join Us**  
If you're not already a member of People For the American Way, join us! You can sign up at [www.PFAW.org](http://www.PFAW.org).

People For the American Way is dedicated to making the promise of America real for every American: Equality. Freedom of speech. Freedom of religion. The right to seek justice in a court of law. The right to cast a vote that counts. The American Way.

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