

Newtown won't change Idaho's gun fixation

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

This time it's different.

This time, the massacre of 20 first-graders, six of their teachers and the shooter's mother at Newtown, Conn., will break the national impasse on guns.

Perhaps.

But not here.

Not in Idaho.

What was the Gem State's reaction to the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, which killed 32 and wounded 17? A legislative debate about whether to arm students at its public campuses.

Four years later when Jared Lee Loughner shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and 18 more outside a Tucson, Ariz., area supermarket, killing six including a 9-year-old girl, Idaho quickly moved on.

And last summer's mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., killing 12 and injuring 58 others, faded into background noise.

Did the killing of two and wounding of another at the Clackamas Town Center near Portland, Ore., get more than its 15 minutes of attention?

Sure, this is about insanity and the consequences of inadequate mental health care or outright neglect.

It's also about a culture enthralled with the spectacle of violence - the higher the body count, the bigger the box office.

And no, you can not blame all guns. There are more than 300 million in the United States. You can't confiscate them, nor would you want to.

But why can't you do something about assault rifles capable of firing a round per second?

Or ammunition magazines carrying 30 rounds or more?

Or at least the gun-show loophole where 40 percent of guns are bought and sold in the United States without a federal background check?

You know why? You've heard these ritualistic responses from people who:

- Distort - What about the 32,000 automobile deaths every year? Why not lower the speed limit to 15 mph?
- Delay - The tragedy is still fresh. This is no time to bring up gun control laws. Wait a decent interval - until, of course, the political pressure is off.
- Divert - That damned media is sensationalizing the story and promoting an anti-gun agenda.
- Distract - If only the victims had been carrying concealed weapons, they could have done more than crouch and pray.
- Demonize - President Barack Obama is capitalizing on the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting spree to justify the gun control agenda he always wanted.

Sure, Idaho has its sensible middle, people who recognize that guns already are regulated in the U.S. You can't own an automatic weapon. You can't fire a gun across a highway or in public. Why is reauthorizing the Brady law considered such a radical step?

But is this swath of reasonable Idahoans a continent or an island? All you hear are the loud and angry voices who consider every conversation about gun laws an assault upon the sacred American way of life.

Even if this sensible middle were to carry the day, it would be pointless. Idaho's political culture is wedded to the National Rifle Association. Few politicians outside the Democratic enclaves of Boise's North End or Blaine County dare stand up to the NRA.

For an Idaho Republican to do so invites a primary challenge from the right.

Some will lead on this issue. Some will follow. But here's an educated guess: Idaho's political leaders will resist, frustrate and impede any effort, in fact any dialog, on toughening gun laws. For doing so, they'll draw applause, votes and accolades at home.

So Idaho extends her prayers to the grieving families of Newtown.

And not much else. - M.T.