

Mothers and Guns

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, May 14, 2003

The roots of this past Mother's Day run deep. The carnage of the Civil War led activist Julia Ward Howe to propose an annual Mother's Day for Peace. Likewise, the carnage in our streets, our schools, and our homes due to lax gun laws galvanized over 750,000 demonstrators to gather in Washington DC for the Million Mom March for sensible gun laws in 2000. That year, 3,042 children and teenagers were killed by firearms in the US-one every three hours. That's a school bus full each week.

Mary Leigh Blek, Director of the March, says, "the measure of a successful society is how well we protect our children. In the US, we're not doing that well." The Million Mom March is building a powerful grassroots movement to educate the public about the severity of the problem. Many of its organizers have experienced the impact of guns. Blek says she "was the personification of apathy, sealed off in a gated community" in Orange County, California until her son was killed with a Saturday Night Special while spending the summer in New York City. She and her husband founded a local gun violence prevention group and successfully lobbied to ban the sale of Saturday Night Specials in California. But a national movement was needed to effect change at the federal level, so the Million Mom March was born.

In three years since the group's formation, Million Mom activists have made important gains. In New Jersey, they led the successful fight last year to pass the first Childproof Handgun Law in the country. In Michigan, they convinced the Detroit Free Press to stop advertising handguns. In Minnesota, Missouri and Ohio, they protested new concealed handgun legislation; all three bills were defeated.

Stronger gun laws reduce violence. Since the passage almost ten years ago of the Brady Bill, which requires gun stores to perform criminal background checks on gun buyers, gun deaths have dropped from 120 daily to 80 daily. According to a 60 Minutes interview with former National Rifle Association lawyer Robert Ricker, gun manufacturers know distributors are supplying criminals, but they take no action.

The story gets worse. In a November 2001 speech to the United Nations, President Bush declared, "we have a responsibility to deny weapons to terrorists." However, Attorney General John Ashcroft refused

an FBI request to use the Brady Law to determine if any of the 1,200 foreign nationals detained after the September 11 attacks had bought guns in the US. Not an unlikely assumption, since terrorists can exploit weak guns laws to amass firearms. Amazingly, this critical component of our homeland security was waived by Ashcroft, who had received an "A" grade on the NRA 2000 election report card, as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of support for his senatorial campaign that year.

A November 2001 Chicago Tribune article described a manual entitled "How Can I Train Myself for Jihad," found at a training facility in Afghanistan for an Islamic terrorist organization. The manual singles out the US for its easy availability of firearms. A review by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms revealed that between July 1996 and December 1998, gun shows were "a major trafficking channel" and were associated with the diversion of approximately 26,000 firearms into the illegal market.

To put a personal face on this problem, September 10, 2001, Ali Boumelhem was convicted for conspiracy to ship weapons to the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah, associated with numerous anti-US attacks, including the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut that killed 241. Boumelhem had purchased an arsenal of shotguns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, flash suppressers, and assault weapon parts from Michigan gun shows. He was prohibited from buying guns at stores because he was a convicted felon; however he could-and did-buy from gun shows because neither federal nor state law requires background checks in that setting.

International terrorists have penetrated our homes-but not with explosives. Instead, in our fear, we're buying guns and killing each other. Following September 11, handgun purchases skyrocketed. But guns kept at home for protection are 22 times more likely to kill a family member or friend than to kill an intruder. The Journal of the American Medical Association reports that more teenagers die as a result of gunshot wounds than from all natural causes combined. The next Million Mom March is scheduled to take place on Mother's Day 2004. Mark it on your calendar.