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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

The Gun-Free Zone

Sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham felt like an outcast at Pearl High School, and he apparently also had a less-than-perfect relationship with his mother. On Oct. 1, 1997, as his mother was getting ready to go out on her morning jog, Woodham killed her by slitting her throat and then bludgeoning her for good measure.

Taking a deer rifle and with his pockets full of ammunition, Woodham then drove mom's car to the school. There, he shot to death his former girlfriend and another girl, and wounded seven other students. His plan, as police learned later, was to then drive to the junior high school to shoot more children while the police converged on the high school. His signal for this change of venue would be the sound of police sirens.

But that's not the way it worked out.

Vice Principal Joel Myrick heard the shots and saw what Woodham was doing, but Myrick was powerless to stop him. Although Myrick was a gun owner, he was unarmed at this life-or-death moment. The Federal Gun-Free School Zones Act prohibits, with some exceptions, possession of a firearm within 1,000 feet of a school. Myrick had an unloaded Colt.45 caliber pistol in his truck, so he ran to the truck, retrieved and loaded the pistol, and then hot-footed it back to the school.

By the time Myrick arrived back at the school, Woodham had gotten back into his car and was exiting the school parking lot destined for his second killing field - the junior high. Myrick pointed the loaded .45 into the car window and Woodham stopped. With the pistol pointed at Woodham's head, Myrick forced him out of the car and held him until police arrived.

Three obvious conclusions from these events: First, by stopping Woodham at gunpoint, Myrick saved lives that would have been lost at the junior high. Second, Myrick likely could have saved some of the lives or injuries at the high school if he had been armed at the outset - the round-trip to retrieve his pistol having cost precious time. But third, and most important, the federal law deterred Myrick from being armed, but it did not deter Woodham!

The Federal Gun-Free School Zones Act became law in 1990. States and municipalities have jumped on the bandwagon, enacting their own laws which mimic the federal statute. Of course, these state and local laws are useless and redundant, serving only to attest to the goodness of the sponsoring politicians.

Sadly, since the federal law's enactment, the number of school massacres has surged. Here's a possible explanation. Those who would commit such crimes are of course utterly undeterred by the gun-free zones law - just as they are undeterred by laws against murder. On the other hand, law-abiding gun owners are deterred from carrying firearms within the gun-free zones. As a result, potential murderers are free to fire at will without fear of being stopped before the SWAT team enters the scene.

No doubt the legislators who came up with the Federal Gun-Free Zones Act, and President Bush who signed it, were well-intentioned. (Although the same cannot be said for the grandstanding state and local

politicians who enacted duplicative laws just for show.) But clearly it has been useless. Even worse, it has disarmed those Myricks who might, in dire emergency situations, become first-responders.

This is not an advocacy to have all teachers packing in the classroom. Myrick had a military background and the temperament and bravery to take action in a crisis. He was so skillful and courageous, in fact, that he was able to stop and detain the killer without firing his pistol.

There are certainly other Myricks out there. Allowing them to be armed at their schools could save lives. Making sure they are unarmed certainly won't.

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