

Gun Vote Revives Civil Rights Memories

Written by Lee A. Daniels

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At first I wondered why I felt so powerful a sense of *déjà vu* last week when the Senate blocked gun control legislation drafted by a bipartisan group of Senators and supported by the Obama administration.

That sensation even overwhelmed my fury at the craven surrender of the “anti” Senators to the National Rifle Association (NRA), one of the most powerful of the right-wing extremist groups that wag the Republican Party. But then, as I watched President Obama’s April 17th news conference and looked at the faces of those behind him – some whose features were etched with anger, others with a sense of betrayal – I realized my mind was flashing back to the early 1960s. I was thinking of the innumerable news conferences civil rights leaders held in dozens of Southern cities and towns after White mobs had attacked peaceful demonstrators or segregationist officials had stood in another schoolhouse or polling-place door. They, too, most often seemed to have set their facial features in that same stressed emotional range.

It was then I grasped the connection between my memories of those long-ago incidents and the conservatives’ success last week in the Senate. Both harshly illuminated their respective era’s defining characteristic: the bare-knuckle confrontation between those Americans who want to expand democracy and those who want to limit it in order to preserve their own power.

In the early 1960s, that confrontation was almost exclusively centered on the Civil Rights Movement’s efforts to destroy the racism that for nearly a century had marooned Black Americans in a small corner of American life. Today, conservatives have arrayed their resistance to expanding democracy across a broader front of issues and against groups of Americans who are staking their claim to first-class citizenship.

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This is what last week's Senate vote underscored. Recent polls show that more than 90 percent of Americans favor the universal background checks on gun purchases the Senate legislation proposed. That overwhelming majority included 80-plus percent of Republicans and of those who live in homes where one or more people own guns. Yet, a minority of Senators – four Democrats and 41 Republicans – ignored that extraordinary breadth of popular agreement and instead combined to prevent the legislation from getting the 60 votes that would enable it to withstand a certain Republican Party filibuster on the way to passage.

Referring to the “enormous resistance in Congress to passing” strong gun control measures, Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne asked in an essay pointedly titled, “The end of majority rule?” He asked, “What does ‘rule of the people’ mean if a 9-to-1 issue is having so much trouble gaining traction?” Answering his own question later in the piece, he wrote that “a deep structural tilt in our politics to the right ... explains why election outcomes and the public's preferences have so little impact on what is happening in Washington. At the moment, our democracy is not very democratic.”

As a visibly angered President Obama, pledging to continue his campaign for substantive gun-control measures by executive order if necessary, said, the “antis” opposition to the measured bipartisan gun-control proposals was replete with distortions of fact and outright lies. Perhaps the most shameful was the assertion by several conservative politicians, pundits and talk-show jockeys that the families of the victims of the Sandy Hook School massacre, who actively supported the legislation, were dupes and “props” of the president.

If that charge sounds familiar, just remember that for years White and Black conservatives have declared the 90-plus percent of Black Americans who consistently vote Democratic have, against their actual best interests, willfully imprisoned themselves on the Democratic “plantation.” Both charges carry the same, barely implicit insult: If you don't share our views, you're too stupid to know what's good for you.

In a scathing op-ed in the April 17 New York Times, Gabrielle Giffords, the former member of Congress whose serious wounding in 2011 by a deranged gunman helped re-energize the gun-control campaign, castigated the “minority of senators [who] ... looked at the most benign and practical of solutions, offered by moderates from each party, and then they looked over their shoulder at the powerful, shadowy gun lobby – and brought shame on themselves and our government by choosing to do nothing.” Giffords declared she would “not rest until we have righted the wrong these senators have done.”

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The right-wing attack on democracy is also why, for the second time in less than five years, the Voting Rights Act's key provision is being challenged at the Supreme Court – even as Republican state legislators across the country are re-doubling their efforts to restrict the access of Blacks and other Democratic-leaning blocs to the ballot box.

Those Americans who favor more, not less democracy should follow the model of Gabby Giffords, and of the activists who decades ago fueled the Civil Rights Movement's success – and get back to the barricades.

Lee A. Daniels is a longtime journalist based in New York City. His latest book is Last Chance: The Political Threat to Black America.