

KEEP YOUR GUNS AT HOME

September 5, 2009

You've probably heard or seen of the guns, rifles, or knives that have been brought by protestors who appear at the town hall meetings that President Obama and members of Congress are holding on the debate over health care reform. Heated discussion is one thing, but guns at public meetings or events may cross the line, in my opinion. To paraphrase *Hardball* host Chris Matthews, to bring guns to a public meeting is a statement that it is your view that government is the enemy.

Why do we need to do something about health care? One in 14 women and girls have no health insurance at all and another 1 in 21 had to buy insurance on their own through individual plans. Three-fourths of people pushed into bankruptcy by medical problems had insurance but their policies denied paying for services needed – just the opposite of what you'd expect when you pay those premiums. Statistically, you probably know someone in either category. That's just the start. The denial of care patients need is linked to unsettling reports that the average salary of CEOs of major health care companies is \$14 million a year.

Statistics like these are just some of what lawmakers both locally and at the national level have heard from many people who needed help when their insurance coverage was cancelled or required treatment was denied. While Hawaii in 1974 resolved the issue with the Prepaid Health Care Act, Congress is now addressing the enormous problem of shrinking access to medical care and spiking insurance premiums. The \$2 trillion a year health care industry represents 16% of our GDP, and comes out to over \$7000 per citizen.

Political observers note that in the battle over access and affordability, the amount of outright misrepresentation and distortion is reaching unprecedented proportions. The consequences of riling up public emotion can be dire. Given our history of political assassinations, the presence of weapons at town hall meetings presents not only a risk of death to the elected official holding the meeting, but also to the innocent community members who attend the meeting.

Those bearing the rifles and guns claim it is their Second Amendment right to do so, though the historical context is long outdated. The clause was written in days when colonialists needed to defend themselves against commonly occurring attacks from bandits, Indians, and even troops from other states, as well as fighting the war for independence from Britain. These state militias long ago evolved into the National Guard, and because of organized government law enforcement agencies, regular citizens are no longer expected to defend the state or nation.

Protestors who bring their rifles and guns to congressional public meetings pose a risk to the public, not just by stray bullets but by panic-driven reactions. The safety of others, in my view, takes priority over an individual's right to carry a gun. Even the First Amendment has been restricted in several types of situations for the sake of maintaining the safety of the public: no falsely shouting "fire" in a crowded theatre, for example. Surely, the Second Amendment is also subject to restrictions in the name of public order and safety.

Safety precautions are not unprecedented. The United States has no-fly zones over the White House, the U.S. Naval Observatory where the Vice President lives, the National Mall around the White House, the area around Camp David, and other areas of national significance. Streets are routinely blocked off and extensive police motorcades used when a president visits, not just for the event itself but for the practice runs in the preceding days. Surely, with concern for the life of the President at stake, a no-weapons policy should be in effect, detaining and isolating these individuals until the President is safely away.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screens for anything that could be used as a weapon to ensure the safety of everyone on an airplane. Airlines use plastic cutlery to prevent metal meal utensils from being used to hurt anyone. Schools likewise, are gun-free zones, for the sake of the safety of students and education staff. Courthouses have metal detectors to prevent weapons from being brought in, as do prisons and jails. Federal buildings likewise have security screenings, cemented buffer zones, and no-public parking restrictions (to prevent a recurrence of the Oklahoma City bombing).

America's history with killing our leaders is tragic. President Abraham Lincoln was shot while attending a theatre performance. James Garfield, a former pastor who had been president for only three months, was gunned down as he was going to deliver a speech at a university. (Ironically, President Lincoln's son Robert, who was Garfield's Secretary of War, accompanied Garfield and witnessed the murder.) William McKinley was fired at point blank range by a man who waited in line to shake hands with the president at a public reception during the Pan-American Exposition. John F. Kennedy was killed by a sniper while riding in a motorcade welcoming him to Dallas.

Ninety other assassination attempts have been made on our presidents. President Ford was shot at twice within three weeks at public appearances in California. President Reagan and three others were shot in a notorious episode captured on television. President Teddy Roosevelt was saved when the bullet was slowed by hitting his metal glasses case and a 50 page speech folded twice. These are just a few examples.

With this history, it is entirely appropriate to have a regulation prohibiting carrying firearms and other weapons at certain categories of events. Political protests are usually carried out in designated "free speech" zones where an official is carrying on, or is trying to, a meaningful exchange with constituents. With the rise in militias, the decrease in Secret Service protections during the Bush/Cheney Administration, and the increase in hate talk and death threats against President Obama and members of Congress, the public and our officials deserve protection. This right of to be safe must take precedence over an individual's right to bear arms. Where there are scheduled public events, our police should be able to create and enforce weapon-free zones on exactly the same basis that schools, courthouses, federal buildings, and airplanes are.