

In D.C., another cycle of inaction on guns

Can anything end Congress's gridlock?

By Brian Bennett

AS PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN SAT WITH NEW ZEALAND Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in the Oval Office on May 31, the juxtaposition was hard to miss: the leader of a country who had robustly tackled gun control after one horrible mass shooting, beside another who remained incapable of such action after hundreds.

It was a little over three years ago that a white-supremacist gunman armed with AR-15-style semiautomatic rifles and shotguns murdered 51 people and injured 40 at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, livestreaming the killings on Facebook. Within a month of the massacre, Ardern led an overhaul of New Zealand's gun laws that included banning most semiautomatic and military-style weapons and starting a buy-back program that brought in some 50,000 weapons. Only one New Zealand lawmaker voted against the legislation.

Such a national response remains the stuff of political fantasy in the U.S., even after the massacre of schoolchildren in Uvalde, Texas, which came about just 10 days after racist killings in a supermarket in Buffalo, N.Y., two of hundreds of mass shootings in the U.S. over the past year. Turning in his yellow armchair, the U.S. President asked his guest about the politics of that accomplishment. "I want to talk to you about what those conversations were like, if you're willing," he said.

The President then gave voice to a growing anxiety that the sheer number of mass shootings in the U.S., and the cycle of inaction, has made too many in power numb to the devastation. As he often does, Biden paraphrased an Irish poet; this time it was William Butler Yeats. "Too long a suffering makes a stone of the heart," Biden said. "Well, there's an awful lot of suffering," he continued, adding, "Much of it is preventable."

After reporters filed out of Biden's office, the two leaders talked for nearly an hour and a half, on the rise of China's influence in the Pacific Rim and on trade initiatives. At one point, Biden indeed pressed Ardern on how she rallied her fellow New Zealanders to take forceful action to rein in assault weapons after the Christchurch

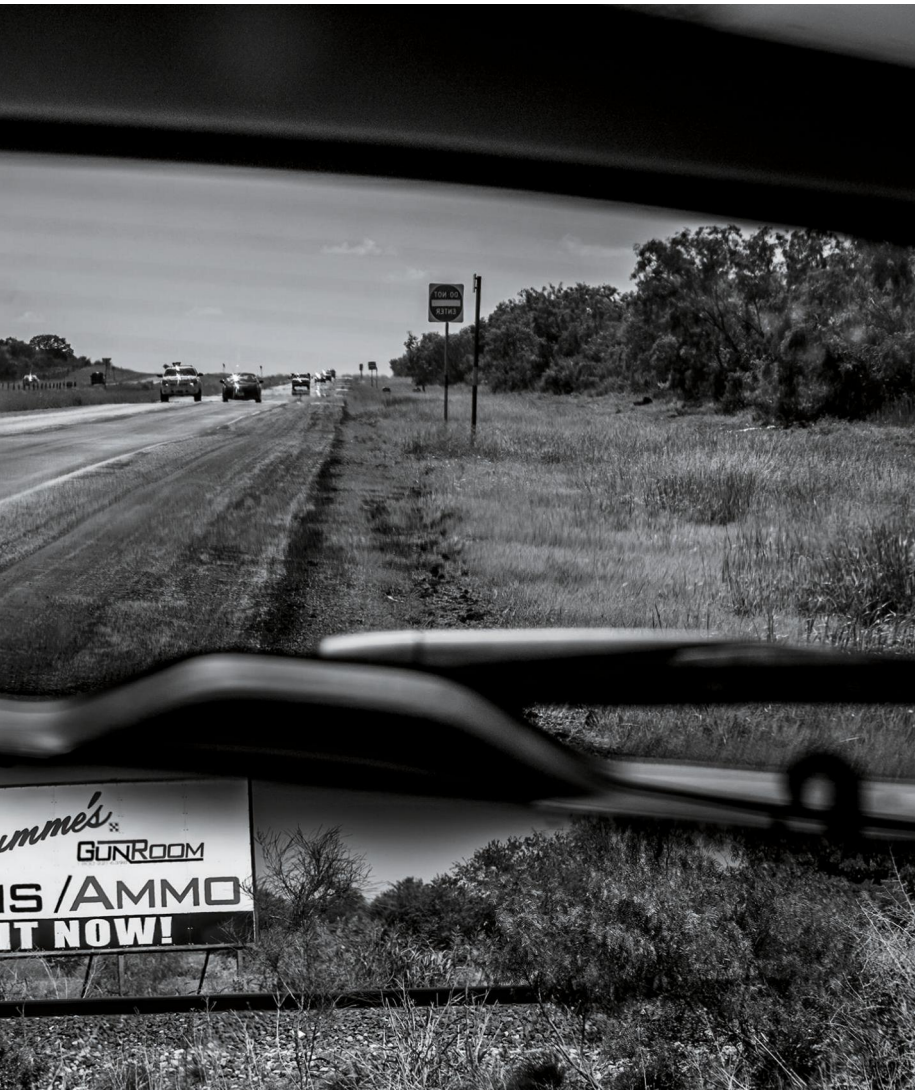


▲
If Congress won't ban the sale of military-style assault weapons, as it did for a decade starting in 1994, the President hopes to at least raise the age limit for buying semiautomatic rifles

shooting. She told reporters outside the West Wing that she "reflected on our experience with gun reform, but it is just that, it is our experience."

The American experience is proving to be quite different.

For one, there's no sense of urgency. The House and Senate did not cancel the late-May and early-June recesses after the shootings. A group of five Republican and five Democratic Senators started up phone calls and video meetings about whether any new gun restrictions could draw the support in the Senate of at least 10 Republicans and all 50 members of the Democratic caucus, the most plausible path to reaching the



votes needed to overcome a filibuster.

Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell tasked Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas and the minority whip, with bringing together some Republicans for the talks. Cornyn told reporters in San Antonio on May 30 that he was discussing with Democrats a “basic framework about how we go forward.” The next day, Cornyn wrote on Twitter that making gun laws more restrictive was “Not gonna happen.”

THERE IS SOME bipartisan interest in a few efforts to address the mass shooting epidemic, including helping states pass and fund red-flag laws that would allow courts to impose restrictions on

the purchase of firearms by people believed to be a danger to themselves or others, Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut who is helping organize the talks, said June 5 on CNN’s *State of the Union*. There has also been discussion about improving background checks, increasing mental-health resources, and putting more funds toward school safety, he said. “Republicans realize how scared parents and kids are across this country,” Murphy said. “The answer this time cannot be nothing.”

But anything that passes will be more modest than steps Biden called for during an impassioned prime-time address on June 2, like broad bans on

assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. “Right now, people in this country want us to make progress,” Murphy said. “They just don’t want the status quo to continue for another 30 years.”

In the meantime, Democrats who control the House are moving forward with a raft of gun-control measures, including the Protecting Our Kids Act, a bill that could include provisions to raise the age limit for buying semiautomatic rifles from 18 to 21, and ban the sale of high-capacity ammunition magazines.

Those proposals are likely to face stiff resistance in the Senate, prompting lawmakers to refrain from seriously broaching more restrictive measures such as banning assault weapons like the AR-15, the main weapon used by the gunmen in both the Buffalo and Uvalde shootings. The last time Congress approved such a ban was 1994, when Biden was a crucial Senator in the discussions. Lawmakers allowed those provisions to expire in 2004. American politics has become even more “dysfunctional” since then, says Timothy Naftali, a historian at New York University.

“There is no reason to be hopeful at the national level now about the possibility of any gun control,” Naftali says. “The pandemic showed that issues of life and death are politicized now in a way that would have been hard to imagine 10 years ago.”

The current political environment, Naftali says, undermines the American political tradition of lawmakers being problem solvers. “Right now our political class is incapable of solving major domestic challenges at the national level,” he says, leaving any possible efforts to curb access to guns to state and local leaders. But that response will be inherently uneven and less effective than sweeping, national measures.

As the press was ushered out of Biden’s meeting with Arden, one reporter shouted a question to Biden about whether he would meet with McConnell about guns. “I will meet with the Congress on guns, I promise you,” Biden said. He didn’t say when. — *With reporting by MARIAH ESPADA* □

© TIME USA, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this material may be duplicated or disseminated without permission.