

Why Million Mom March can rally nation against guns

On Saturday, Cheryl Reynolds, Republican, mother of three and stepmom of two, will travel to the national Million Mom March from Boise on a ticket she bought with money saved from four months of bringing peanut butter sandwiches to the office. Reynolds, shaken by Columbine and other school shootings, is marking not only her first trip to Washington, D.C., but also her first-ever political act.

"I'm not trying to take away anyone's right to own a gun," Reynolds says. But unless her preferred politicians make gun registration, licensing and locks a must, she says she won't vote for them come November.

Joan Gold, 50, of Queens, N.Y., also will spend Mother's Day in Washington. Angered by the Los Angeles day-care shooting last August and having heard about the march on the *Today* show, the stay-at-home mother has organized 12 busloads of moms to join her for the ride.

Debbie Gelmini of Fort Worth has been interested in gun control ever since her teenage son, following a suicide threat, told her that many of his friends had access to firearms. After seeing march organizers on TV, she signed up to help.

Spurred by talk show hosts and pastors, the Internet and personal experience, an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 mothers from across the USA will give up their traditional day of pampering to march on Washington this Sunday, calling for tougher gun laws. Hundreds of thousands more will attend about 60 rallies from Atlanta to Los Angeles.

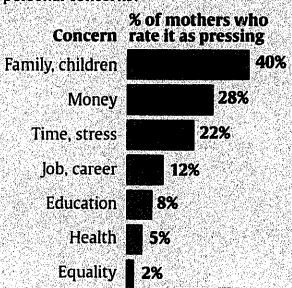
This sort of grassroots mobilization of women doesn't happen every day, or even every decade. And history shows politicians would be fools to ignore it.

Several times in the past 200 years, American mothers have shifted their focus from family life to push for political change. As Dartmouth historian Annelise Orleck notes, children have been women's principal source of political motivation. And every time national masses of women have put their mind to a goal involving children, they've triggered government changes.

In 1897, 2,000 mothers rallied in Washington for more parental involvement in children's education. That rally of the National Congress of Mothers later became the PTA, which succeeded in improving child-welfare

Kids spur women to act

When women become politically active, it's often because of their children. Here's what mothers consider their most pressing personal concerns:



Source: The Gallup Organization, March 2000

By Elizabeth Wing, USA TODAY

and education laws nationally.

In 1918, American mothers' century-long push against men's drunkenness in public and in the home culminated in a constitutional amendment on prohibition. Prohibition had its bad effects and didn't last, but the mothers succeeded in turning the abuse of alcohol into a social taboo.

During the Depression, immigrant mothers in Detroit and other cities protested high food prices for their families, triggering the first-ever government assistance programs.

And in 1980, spurred by the hit-and-run killing of a teenage girl by a drunken driver, California women formed Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which prompted driving-law changes and a 40% decrease in alcohol-related deaths in the subsequent 20 years.

The gun issue is a natural successor. Random gun violence is on the rise, generating a sense of fear in the previously sheltered suburbs. Polls show Americans have rated the deadly shootings of children as the top news story for the past several years. After last April's massacre of 12 students and a teacher at Colorado's Columbine High School, 60% of women polled by the Pew Research Center said they wouldn't vote for a member of Congress who opposed gun control. Eighty percent of women favor the licensing and training of handgun owners, compared to 57% of men, according to a 1998 survey by the National Opinion Research Center.

Whether the Million Mom March can actually change laws is an open question. But the marchers could attract some election-year concessions, with the Columbine tragedy already sensitizing voters, particularly women, to the issue. March organizers plan this weekend to announce how they'll break down into local chapters and focus on the November vote. And the moms' moderate message — support for gun restrictions, not a ban — could help it gain popularity that crosses partisan lines.

The movement's strongest card is the personal commitment of individual mothers. Not all are like Monica Shepherd, a 37-year-old organizer in Columbus, Ohio, who had a 3-inch Million Mom March logo tattooed on her calf last Sunday.

But like a sleeping giant stirred into activity, the mothers vow they're in the movement for the long haul. American history shows that's not a promise to be trifled with.

USA TODAY reports that Karl Sandstrom, who heads the Federal Election Commission, has proposed a new rule intended to counteract the proliferation of groups that use a legal loophole to let well-heeled donors bankroll candidates secretly ("Secret political funding targeted," News, May 5).

Meanwhile, as usual, bureaucrats and politicians will continue to debate the merits of a rule that misses the forest for the trees.

In terms of basic principles, the fuss about campaign finance is a clear case of worrying about symptoms while neglecting causes.

The underlying assumption in campaign-finance-reform proposals is that the "scandal" can be cleaned up by interfering with the giving of money — free

political expression.

Beyond the obvious violation of the right of free association and speech, such restrictions severely handicap challengers in elections, given the built-in advantage incumbents enjoy.

In economic terms then, proposals for campaign finance pay attention to the demand side and neglect supply. In other words, big donors are trying to buy something, but they can do so only if someone else has something to sell.

What might big campaign donors be buying? Influence over the people who write laws and run programs that bring about transfers of wealth from one group to another — namely, the transfer of wealth from taxpayers to recipients of taxpayer-financed programs.

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U.K., Irish leaders are the real heroes

USA TODAY's editorial presents a realistic view of the remaining challenges required to close the door on violence in Northern Ireland. It was a sober and well-reasoned piece ("IRA makes a move," Monday).

However, the editorial didn't mention the significant movements of the British and Irish governments in reassuring Sinn Fein and the "warriors-in-truce" of the Irish Republican Army that the critical promises of the Good Friday agreement would be vigorously pursued and not subject to "cherry-picking" in the future.

Specifically, the common endorsement of timetables for demilitarization by British forces, strict adherence to the "neutrality" of the north's new police service in spirit and symbols, and formalization of human rights initiatives were committed to unequivocally.

This bonding in principle and action between London and Dublin was certainly the most important stimulus to the IRA commitment. Their principals, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, are the true giants in this breakthrough.

As USA TODAY correctly cautioned, such bonding and commitment now must be reciprocated by the unequivocal commitment of the Unionists and their paramilitary supporters.

Charles J. McCarty
Folly Beach, S.C.

Cubans have choices

In response to DeWayne Wickham's column ("Time for Cuban exiles to let go," The Forum, May 2), USA TODAY reader Pura Font says there aren't elections in Cuba and that she should know because she lived there ("Learn about the real Cuba," Letters, May 5).

I would like to suggest that her information is obsolete. I am sure that her information was correct a number of years ago. However, my wife and I recently returned from a trip to Cuba, and there is a municipal-election mechanism now in place.

Font is correct when she said that there is only the ruling Communist Party. But, to use U.S. political terms, there is a primary election. And one does not have to be a communist to run in that primary.

In other words, Cuban voters do have a multiperson choice — at least at the municipal level.

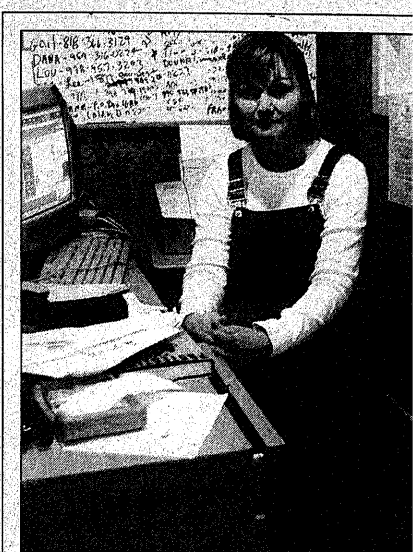
Peter Kohnke
Bethel Park, Pa.

Close our borders

When are the politicians of this country finally going to wake up to the immigration problem and stop catering to the legal and illegal immigrants to gain political ground?

How can you blame the ranchers in Arizona and other border states for protecting, by whatever means necessary, their land and families when our borders are so poorly guarded ("Armed rancher acts as one-man border patrol," News, April 28)?

Now the Mexican government, which barely has lifted a finger in the drug war and done nothing about the thousands of illegals who come across our border, wants to sue Arizona ranchers for violating these



Head mom: Donna Dees-Thomases, at her home, the founder of the Million Mom March. The event: sure Congress to enact tougher gun-control laws.

Mom March triggers

Although I am a gun owner and a strong advocate of gun rights, I agree with parts of the Million Mom March's agenda. For example:

► I agree that existing gun laws should be strongly enforced. In almost all of the recent shooting incidents publicized in the media — including the Columbine High School massacre and the murder of the 6-year-old girl in Michigan by a classmate, numerous existing gun laws were violated. Aggressive prosecution of violations is the only way that laws of any type will have any effect on anyone except law-abiding citizens.

► I agree that all gun purchases — including private and gun-show sales — should be subject to the National Instant Check System (NICS) that is already in place.

► I can even agree with a short cooling period on gun purchases — no more than seven days. We should keep in mind, though, that this could cost someone's life.

However, I take issue with some of the other positions that the moms are advocating:

► Safety locks for all handguns
► Licensing handgun owners and registering all handguns. This is a violation of the right to keep and bear arms under the Second Amendment.

► Limiting handgun purchases to one a month. It's another step down the slippery slope of surrendering our Second Amendment rights.

► Enlisting help from corporate America: First, gun buyback programs don't work. A violent criminal is not going to turn in one of the tools of his trade — an illegally possessed firearm — in exchange for a Sony Walkman or a pair of Nike sneakers. The guns that show up in buybacks are of such poor quality and in such poor condition that not even criminals want them.

John J. Szucs

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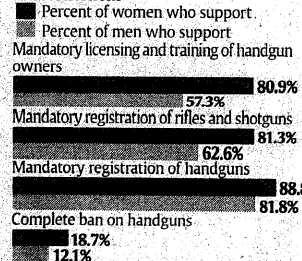
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Women take a harder stand

Thirty-three percent of women have a gun in the household, compared with 43% of men. Women are more inclined toward gun control than are men.

Gun restrictions



Source: National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago in collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, 1998

By Julie Stacey, USA TODAY

Peacekeepers under fire

Amid echoes of Somalia, a weak, lightly armed United Nations peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone now faces a combat situation, confronting an onslaught from more

Bosnia.

And even though 20,000 U.S. peacekeepers were sent to Haiti in 1994 to restore order and democracy, the country has fallen