

Outcome uncertain in battle over gun control

by Chris Mondics and Jackie Koszczuk
Knight-Ridder Tribune
April 13, 2000

WASHINGTON — Lee Davis gets decked out in cowboy duds and blasts away at metal targets with a .45-caliber Colt revolver. He has heard the arguments for gun control, and says they're bunk.

Linda McCarthy-Raffier, a suburban mother with a five-month-old son, has never fired a gun in her life and calls them "distasteful." She's planning to join the Million Mom March in Washington next month, hoping to pressure Congress into enacting tougher gun controls.

Although they've never met, Davis and McCarthy-Raffier are part of the reason Washington remains gridlocked over gun control, even after the killings last April 20 at Colorado's Columbine High School and a string of other high-profile slayings, and why both political parties are trying harder than ever to exploit the issue.

The debate over guns is much more than a contest between competing legislative and political agendas. It also is a cultural tug-of-war between Davis and McCarthy-Raffier, between rural America and the cities and suburbs, between the South and West and the Northeast and Pacific Coast, between those who view guns as tools or toys and those who view them as murder weapons.

Gun owners groups are strongest in rural areas, particularly the South and West, where gun ownership is commonplace and hunting and target-shooting are popular. The strongest efforts to restrict the sales of arms come from suburban areas — particularly from suburban women — where gun ownership is less common and increasingly stigmatized.

"There is an urban-rural split to some extent," said Christopher Foreman, an analyst at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "People who live in rural America are generally much more comfortable with firearms than are people in cities. There is a cultural tension between someone who lives in rural Wyoming and someone who [lives in a place that] overlooks Central Park."

The same fundamental splits that have paralyzed attempts to pass tougher gun laws have made gun control an issue both major political parties can use to rally members and demonize opponents. And for the first time in a generation, the issue may play a pivotal role in the presidential election and could have a huge impact on some House and Senate races.

"This issue has a higher profile now than it has ever had in the 20 years I've been [in Washington]," said Jim Baker, the National Rifle Association's chief lobbyist.

"It is a result of Columbine," added pollster Andrew Kohut of the Pew

Research Center. "There were so many deaths; it really had the power to shock."

With polls suggesting that voters are paying much closer attention to guns than they have in past elections, both candidates for the White House, as well as both parties in Congress, have staked out starkly different positions on how to control gun crime.

As governor of Texas, Republican George W. Bush signed legislation giving Texas residents the right to carry handguns provided they had no felony arrests and met other minimum qualifications.

Vice President Gore has proposed photo licensing and testing for new handgun owners, measures that go well beyond the mandatory trigger locks and gun-show background checks that Democrats tried to push

financial assistance to states that enact mandatory sentences for gun crimes.

While voters who favor gun control may outnumber the solid core of support for gun rights, so far they haven't matched gun owners in their passion for the issue — or in translating that passion into political muscle and campaign cash. Typically, membership in the NRA surges with every new call for gun restrictions — it has grown by a half million people in the last six months.

The NRA has spent more money — \$21 million — on political campaigns than any other single political action committee in the last decade. Baker, the NRA lobbyist, said he expects the association to raise and spend more than the \$4.1 million it collected during the 1996 presidential cycle. Be-

intensity."

But a single, well-publicized shooting can dramatically alter the politics of the gun control debate. Last spring, the Senate reversed itself and voted in favor of background checks at gun shows just hours after a 15-year-old high school student in Georgia opened fire May 20, wounding six students.

Among those who changed sides was Sen. Max Cleland, D-Ga., whose home is near Heritage High School outside Atlanta, where the shootings took place. "You talk about pressure," Cleland said, recalling the day of the vote.

"I had been wondering whether the [gun show] amendment wouldn't in fact do more harm than good. But the Heritage shooting, in my own back yard, pushed me over the edge," he said. "Whatever I can do to keep guns out of the hands of kids, I'll do."

The measure failed in the House, where there is strong support for the gun owners' agenda among Republicans and a small bloc of Democrats.

Membership in groups that support gun control also has been rising. There are signs that the Columbine killings have swayed more voters in favor of tighter gun restrictions, and groups that favor gun control are planning to capitalize on that.

Handgun Control Inc., the major gun-control lobbying group, projects that it will raise at least \$2 million for direct contributions to federal candidates, nearly six times what it raised in the last election cycle.

The group's political director, Joe Sudbay, said the defeat of a referendum in Missouri last year on whether residents should have the right to carry handguns for self-protection "proved to us that the NRA can be beat."

While Congress remains largely gridlocked, Sudbay notes that state governments such as those in Maryland and Massachusetts have tightened controls on gun ownership, which he says is a sign that some regions are more receptive to stricter controls.

Sudbay and other gun control advocates also are buoyed by polls showing small but steady increases in support for tougher gun laws. A monthly survey by the Pew Research Center found that support for tighter controls grew from 57 percent of respondents in December 1993 to 65 percent in May 1999. The most dramatic shift came among Republican women, who went from 48 percent supporting tighter gun laws to 72 percent during that time period.

McCarthy-Raffier, of Annapolis, Md., said she never had much interest in politics, but was moved by the Columbine killings to join the call for new gun restrictions. She says she would like to see all guns banned.

"I am the sort of person," she said, "who believes that nobody should have them."

"I don't believe that I gained five votes in Kansas because I voted for the assault weapons ban. But I lost thousands of votes because I voted for it. The 25 percent who oppose gun control oppose it with a vengeance, and with great emotional intensity."

-Jim Slattery,
former 12-year House veteran
and 1994 Kansas governor candidate

through Congress last year after the Columbine killings.

Despite all the focus on Columbine and the deep national dismay that followed, the outcome of the fight is very much in question.

Most polls show that although a majority of Americans favor new restrictions on handgun ownership, voters also are receptive to arguments that government could do a better job of enforcing the gun laws already on the books. Some polling also suggests deep opposition to the Clinton administration's strategy of using litigation to force gun companies to change their manufacturing and marketing practices.

Both parties, sensing public opinion is at a crucial juncture, have stepped up efforts to persuade voters that they offer the best solutions to gun violence. On Wednesday, April 12, President Clinton took the unusual step of attending a signing ceremony in Maryland for a state bill that requires manufacturers to equip handguns with built-in locks. The next day, the President traveled to Colorado to mark the first anniversary of the Columbine slayings and call on Congress to pass his proposals for mandatory background checks at gun shows and other restrictions on gun ownership. House Republicans, for their part, passed legislation granting

fore the end of the year, he says, membership could hit 4 million, a record.

Davis, a Chambersburg, Pa., dermatologist and NRA member who likes to attend Old West-style shooting matches with his wife, says gun violence among the nation's youth has more to do with cultural problems and social pathologies than it does with the availability of firearms.

"The fix always seems to be to have a new gun law. What have the laws done that we already have on the books?" he asks.

The NRA is a sophisticated political organization skilled at getting out the anti-gun control vote. One favorite strategy is to compare pickup truck registrations with voter registration rolls. The NRA contacts truck owners who are not voters and urges them to register, reasoning that if they own trucks, they are probably pro-gun.

Jim Slattery, a Democrat and former 12-year veteran of the House, lost his bid for Kansas governor in 1994 in part because of his votes in favor of a ban on assault weapons and for waiting periods to buy handguns.

"I don't believe that I gained five votes in Kansas because I voted for the assault weapons ban," he said. "But I lost thousands of votes because I voted for it. The 25 percent who oppose gun control oppose it with a vengeance, and with great emotional

ism. It was designed for a Cold War world with two superpowers, both of which have been shrinking their arsenals anyway for financial and practical reasons.

"The strategic situation has changed significantly because Russia and the United States have both cut their nuclear arsenals," said Andrei V. Kortunov, president of the Russian Science Foundation think tank. "They just couldn't afford to maintain them."

The treaty, however, is important symbolically. Its ratification is a sign that Putin, unlike his predecessor, has the support of the Parliament in pursuing more substantive cooperation with the United States after years of deteriorating relations — exacerbated last year by the Yugoslav conflict and NATO's eastward expansion.

"The important thing is not just the ratification itself, but the fact that it demonstrates a real, definitive consolidation of power," said Sergei Ivanov, head of Putin's powerful Security Council.

As a goodwill gesture, the ratification was not unequivocal. The Duma added a protocol saying that Russia intends to withdraw from the treaty if the United States proceeds with plans to build a strategic missile defense in violation of the 1972 Antiballistic Missile treaty — the first and most successful arms control agreement signed with the Soviet Union.

"If... the United States destroys the ABM treaty... [we] will withdraw not only from the START II treaty but also

from the entire system of treaty relations on the limitation and control of strategic and conventional armaments," Putin said. By tying the ratification to the ABM treaty, Russia puts the United States in a difficult spot.

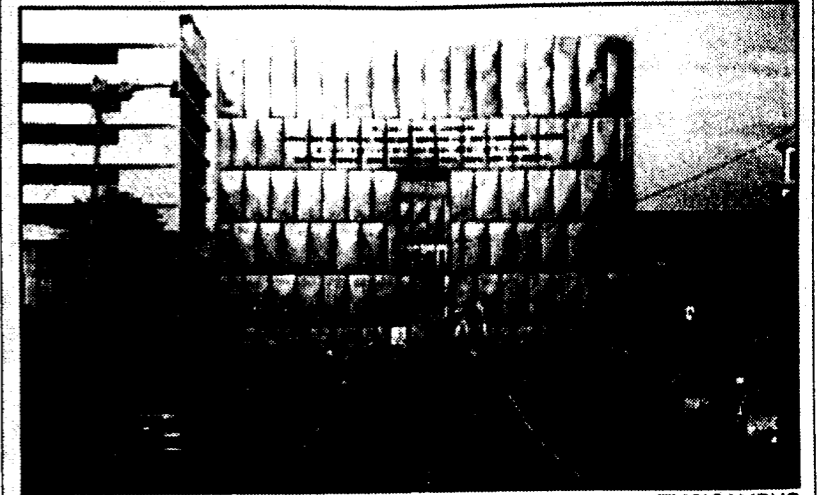
During the Cold War, the foundation of nuclear security was "mutually assured destruction," the idea that because neither side could defend itself from annihilation, neither side would launch an attack.

But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has grown to believe that so-called "rogue" states such as Iraq or North Korea could pose more of a threat, and it would like to build a missile defense system — something Russia strongly opposes, because it does not have the resources to design and build its own missile defense.

Despite Putin's strong words on the ABM treaty, there have been signs that Russia might be open to some compromise. For instance, Russian diplomats have floated the idea that Russia would agree to amend the ABM treaty if the United States agrees to share its missile defense technology and accept even deeper cuts in strategic missiles.

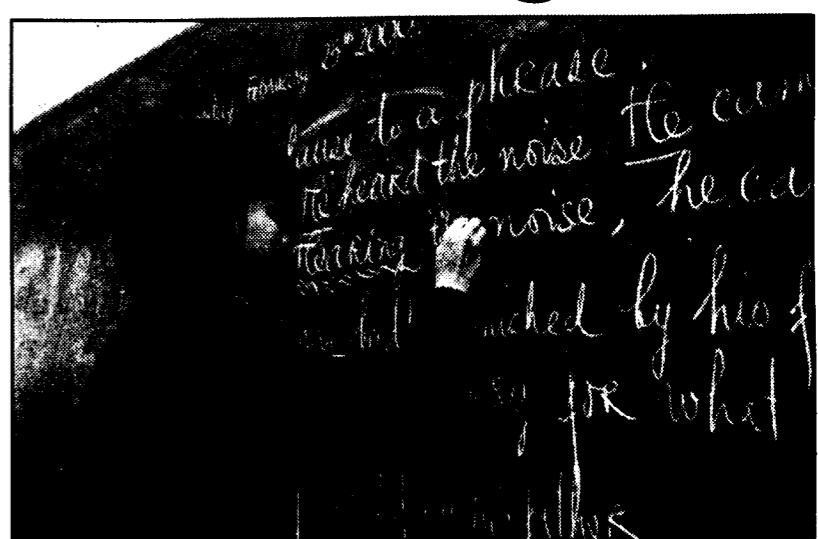
Washington's chief arms negotiator, John Holm, leaves this weekend for Geneva, where he plans to begin talks with Russian experts on a START III pact that would reduce total warheads on both sides to 2,500 or fewer, 1,000 fewer than allowed under the just-ratified pact and 15,000 below Cold War peaks. Russia has indicated that it

Oklahoma City Bombing Remembered



TMS CAMPUS
Wednesday, April 19, five years to the day after a truck bomb changed the face of downtown Oklahoma City, thousands — including President Clinton — gathered at what remains of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building to dedicate a national memorial that will serve as a reminder of the evils of terrorism and the triumph of the human spirit. A towering bronze gate and a reflecting pool are located at each end.

U.S. gains foothold in Vietnam as country embraces English



LA TIMES PHOTO
Sao Mai Do, 15, studies English at her school in Hanoi. Vietnam is turning to the United States for help with its language programs.

by David Lamb
Los Angeles Times
April 14, 2000

HANOI, Vietnam — In another of its ongoing breaks from the past, Vietnam has chosen English over French and Russian as the favored foreign language for students to learn and has turned to its former ideological enemies in the West to help redesign the educational curriculum.

Vietnam is already phasing out English-language textbooks written by Russian advisers in the mid-1980s. They trumpet Sputnik and the World Festival of Youth in Moscow, and are full of such "misspeak" as "I am having a temperature" and "My car runs away" — explaining in part why many of the 35,000 teachers of English in Vietnam can't really speak much English themselves.

The new books, to be used in grades six through 12 throughout the country, were developed by U.S. and Vietnamese educators in partnership with Vietnam's Education Ministry and U.S. corporate sponsors. Some of the 24 sponsors, such as Coca-Cola Co., are the same companies whose billboards Communist officials painted over in 1996 in an attempt to diminish Vietnam's growing fascination with everything Western.

"This is a very courageous decision on the government's part and one, I think, that shows a lot of trust," said Adrie Van Gelderen, Hanoi representative of Business Alliance for Vietnamese Education, or BAVE, the nonprofit U.S. organization overseeing a project that eventually may cost \$50 million. "Can you imagine the reaction in the United States if a bunch of foreigners came in and said, 'We're going to modernize your education system for you?'"

To be sure, the Education Ministry has not surrendered control. It has approved every comma and kept the texts nonpolitical. It ordered an early batch of books recalled so a reference to the South China Sea could be changed to the East Sea, reflecting a territorial dispute between China and Vietnam about the Spratly Islands, and it insisted — over some early U.S. objections — that a mention of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, a legendary national hero who fought the French and the Americans, not be deleted.

Even before the government's February decision to use the BAVE books exclusively and its 1998 edict that all bureaucrats under age 50 would be expected to learn English, young Vietnamese by the tens of thousands had started studying the language, many of them on their own time and at their own expense. Russian, once widely spoken, fell from vogue when Moscow's aid ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and France has had only moderate success trying to reestablish its tongue as the second language of Vietnam, even though

it pays instructors to teach French.

Perhaps most significant, the broad reform of Vietnam's education system — supported by the World Bank, Australia, and Britain in addition to BAVE — includes retraining teachers. Under the new curriculum, Vietnam will move away from its traditional methodology, in which students have been expected, in the words of one educator, to "sit down, shut up, and listen." Instead, the new approach encourages student participation, independent thinking, the challenging of academic authority.

"The government is willing to admit the problem is with methodology, not just with English-language teaching," said Psyche Kennett, director of Britain's English Language Teacher Training Project. "Without retraining the teachers, the endeavor won't go back because teachers will subvert the new textbooks and return to traditional methods in which students play a passive role."

Educators point out that the curriculum overhaul could result in significant long-term changes, because its goals — learning to think on one's feet, questioning authority, searching for independent, creative solutions — are anathema to Hanoi's Communist government. It relies on decision by consensus, on like-minded thinking, and on obedience to the wisdom of the Communist Party. Indeed, officials at the Education Ministry will not discuss BAVE or the new curriculum with foreign correspondents.

Such reticence is not surprising in a bureaucracy where civil servants devote great energy to ensuring that they don't make a mistake or say anything to offend superiors. But Western educators say that the ministry is genuinely excited about the pending changes and that no one questions Vietnam's commitment — as a people or as a government — to education.

Even the poorest families are obsessed with educating their children, though school is compulsory only through the fifth grade. It is common for college-age youths to finish their day jobs and head straight for night classes, then study at home until 1 or 2 in the morning. The government has raised the literacy rate from 88 percent in 1989 to 94 percent in 1999 and is aiming for zero illiteracy with the introduction of the new curriculum.

Western educators consider all this no small accomplishment in a country that can afford to spend only \$41 a year per high school student and can pay teachers (most of whom are women) only \$24 to \$39 a month. By comparison, affluent towns in western Connecticut spend \$7,300 annually per student and pay teachers as much as \$60,000 a year. With a million new students a year entering Vietnam's school system, the financial crisis is not likely to abate any time soon.

Russia ratifies START II Treaty for arms control

by Maura Reynolds and Norman Kempster
Los Angeles Times
April 14, 2000

MOSCOW — After more than seven years of discord and delay, Russia's lower house of Parliament signaled a new era in U.S.-Russian relations Friday by ratifying the landmark START II arms-control treaty.

The treaty, which was ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1996, is the most ambitious and extensive arms-control agreement ever between the two nuclear states, requiring each to roughly halve their arsenals by 2007.

The treaty's ratification — one of the Clinton administration's central foreign policy goals — was approved by an easy margin by Russia's lower house, the Duma. The margin of victory was higher than expected, apparently enhanced by a last-minute personal appeal from President-elect Vladimir V. Putin.

"We don't need an arms race," Putin told lawmakers. "We faced one before, and if we allow it again it will be worse than last time."

In Washington, President Clinton praised the Duma action, saying, "START II will make our people safer and our partnership with a democratic Russia stronger."