

Shootings Alter Nation's Gun Debate

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The shooting deaths at a Colorado high school Tuesday have swiftly altered the gun debate raging across the country, stalling several key pieces of legislation and prompting the National Rifle Association to cancel much of its annual convention next week.

As horrifying details of the massacre at Columbine High School continued to emerge yesterday, Republican legislators in Colorado shocked their colleagues by killing two pro-gun measures headed for passage within days. Those bills, which would have overridden local gun control laws and made it easier to carry concealed weapons, had positioned Colorado as a critical state in the national gun control debate.

In Florida, a pro-gun bill scheduled to go to the House floor yesterday was indefinitely postponed as a result of the shootings. In Illinois, Gov. George Ryan (R) cited the Colorado incident when he asked legislators to speed action on a measure that would punish parents who allow young children access to guns.

And the prime political force behind the gun debate – the NRA – announced that it would abandon the most popular aspects of its massive annual gathering and hold only the legally required portions of its convention, which is set to begin April 30 in Denver, just miles from the site of the school shootings.

The killings come at an important juncture in the national soul-searching over the role of guns in society. A New York jury recently found gun manufacturers negligent for allowing weapons to fall into the hands of criminals, opening up a new line of attack for victims and others who want to reduce the number of firearms flowing into communities. More than two dozen similar suits have been filed by individuals and six major cities.

But it is also clear that America is enormously ambivalent on the subject: At the same time some state legislatures are poised to make guns safer and keep them out of the hands of children, other legislative bodies are trying to protect gun manufacturers and liberalize concealed weapon laws.

Against that background, this week's school shooting has suddenly emerged not only as a vivid display of adolescent violence, but also a reminder that guns – even in the nation's affluent suburbs – are ubiquitous.

The two high school students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were armed with two sawed-off shotguns, a semiautomatic rifle and a pistol, according to a senior law enforcement source citing a preliminary assessment.

Even before police could learn where the boys acquired the guns, Colorado Gov. Bill Owens (R) and several Republican leaders in the state retreated from their earlier support of two major gun bills.

"Our total focus should be with those families," said state Sen. Ken Chlouber (R), sponsor of the concealed weapons bill. "Anything this General Assembly could discuss is insignificant compared to that loss."

The withdrawal of those bills was a stunning victory for gun control forces, who had viewed Colorado as an important test after Missouri voters recently rejected a measure that would have allowed more concealed weapons.

"This is of enormous proportions," said Brian Malte, associate western director for Handgun Control, an advocacy group. "This goes way beyond what happened in any school last year and breaks down any myth that this is a regional problem. This is a nationwide problem."

The second Colorado bill was the subject of bitter contention within the state. It would have eliminated local gun laws, including Denver's ban on assault weapons, which prevented the NRA from displaying such firearms in its convention exhibit hall.

Among pro-gun forces, this was considered a golden year in Colorado. After a dozen years of veto threats during the governorship of Roy Romer (D), Owens had signaled his support for the concealed weapons bill and other gun legislation.

Pro-gun advocates also recognized the public relations power of the shootings outside Denver, but questioned whether the tragedy would have a long-term impact.

"Of course there are a number of those . . . who will immediately make a political issue out of any tragedy of this sort," said Rep. Robert L. Barr Jr. (R-Ga.), an NRA board member. "It really pulls us away from addressing the more fundamental issue that caused this. It's not a gun control problem. It's a culture control problem."

In Florida, the House speaker ordered a bill designed to insulate gun makers from lawsuits withdrawn from consideration, making it unlikely that the measure would be resurrected before the legislative session adjourns next week.

And in a letter signed by NRA president Charlton Heston and executive vice president Wayne La- Pierre, the organization said the Littleton incident "calls upon us to take steps . . . to show our profound sympathy and respect for the families and communities in the Denver area in their time of great loss."

The letter also urges members to attend the scaled-down convention: "We must stand in somber but unshakable unity, even in this time of anguish."

Staff researcher Alice Crites contributed to this report.