CONGRESSWOMAN'S CORNER

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One of the greatest myths about taking sensible steps to prevent gun violence is that it amounts to a violation of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and gun owners' rights. Nothing could be further from the truth. This myth is perpetuated by an aggressive and well-funded lobby that benefits primarily gun manufacturers.

I have never feared the National Rifle Association (NRA) because I don't answer to them. I answer to my constituents, those who own firearms and those who do not. Recent polls have shown 92 percent of gun owners approve of background checks for all gun purchases, including those made at gun shows and through private sales. Among gun owners, 52 percent oppose the NRA's prescription to make schools safer by arming teachers.

We have quite simply lost our balance. All citizens have a right to basic safety. Our families should not fear their children being massacred in a classroom. Anyone should be able to go to a shopping center or movie theater and not confront a shooter armed with high capacity ammunition and a "weapon of war."

Many victims of gun violence, whether involved in mass shootings or in isolated incidents in any neighborhood or community, might have been spared if uniform background checks had existed and prevented someone with a serious mental disability from obtaining a weapon.

I have not reached these conclusions lightly or only as a result of recent events. I have consistently and publically stated my position for years - we can and must do more to curb gun violence. I welcome the recent efforts of a White House task force and Vice President Biden to gather information from all stakeholders in the gun regulation debate and issue recommendations. I support legislation to ban assault weapons, high capacity ammunition clips or close loopholes on background checks. None of these measures interferes with the basic right of any hunter, target shooting enthusiast or any other American to own a handgun or rifle, provided that person is of sound mind and does not have a record of criminal violence.

I anticipate the gun lobby will push back hard but I believe we have a window of opportunity to take reasonable action. And we must act soon, before that window closes.

Turning to another topic, the fall of 2012 saw shameful character attacks on Ambassador Susan Rice when her name came up for possible nomination as Secretary of State. Since that time, President Obama has nominated three people to vacancies in his cabinet. All are white males and that demographic "uniformity" has not gone unnoticed. While all of the nominees are well qualified, I urge the president to consider the importance of diversity in high profile appointments.

During his first term, he did appoint two women, including a Hispanic woman to the United States Supreme Court. As chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, I sent a letter to the president recommending for consideration two exceptionally well qualified minority candidates for two pending vacancies; Congressman Mel Watt of North Carolina for the position of Secretary of Commerce and Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California for the position of Secretary of Labor. As I indicated to the president, both have served the American people in the House and their Congressional districts with distinction. Their nomination would serve the president well and send the right message to the nation.