

GAIL COLLINS

What Passes For Progress In Congress

There was a time when Congress was willing to think about how to control gun violence only after some terrible shooting tragedy.

Now we have moved forward, and terrible shooting tragedies do not have any practical effect whatsoever.

"At least we have Carolyn McCarthy," said Paul Helmke of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. He was referring to Representative Carolyn McCarthy of New York, who is proposing a bill to ban the kind of special bullet clip that allowed the Tucson gunman to shoot 20 people without reloading.

McCarthy's husband was killed and her son permanently injured when a gunman using a pistol with a similar kind of clip opened fire on the Long Island Rail Road in 1993. "That's why I came to Congress," she said on Wednesday. So far, she has collected a modest number of co-sponsors from the same small band of members who have always supported this kind of legislation.

If six people — including a child, a federal judge, several senior citizens, and a Congressional aide — can be killed during an attack on a member of Congress, who was shot in the head, and the only member of the House who attempts to take serious action is the woman whose loved ones were gunned down in a similar attack, something is very wrong.

I am waiting for Speaker John Boehner, who spoke somberly about the tragedy in Tucson in the House on Wednesday, to say that McCarthy has brought up a serious and appropriate idea that is at least worthy of informed debate.

So far, most proposals from members of Congress for practical action to reduce gun violence have been directed at protecting themselves. Representative Peter King of Long Island introduced a bill to ban anyone from carrying a gun in the vicinity of a federal official. Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. of Illinois suggested reversing a recent cut in members' office budgets, and tacking on another 10 percent increase to pay for improved security. Dan Burton of Indiana urged enclosing the House gallery in Plexiglas.

Also, two members vowed to carry their pistols with them when they go about the people's business back in their districts. Other than pointing out that people kill people, the most popular statement about guns seems to be that more guns leads to more safety.

"One can only hope that Saturday's horrible attack in Tucson encourages

more citizens to carry concealed handguns," wrote John Lott Jr., a senior re-

The bill so big
they're afraid
to hold a hearing.

search scientist at the University of Maryland, in The Times's Room for Debate on Wednesday. As a model, he pointed to Joseph Zamudio, who was carrying a concealed pistol while shopping near Representative Gabrielle Giffords's event last weekend and eventually helped subdue the killer.

Lott's theory was that Zamudio was able to lend a hand "because his legally carried 9 mm semiautomatic offered him protection." He neglected to mention that while Zamudio never fired at the gunman, he almost drew on an innocent man by mistake. (As William Saletan pointed out in Slate, Zamudio later admitted he was "very lucky" not to have accidentally contributed to the carnage.)

Meanwhile, one of the earlier tacklers told authorities that the first person to stop the gunman did it by hitting him over the head with a folding chair.

Different parts of the country have very different attitudes about when it is appropriate for citizens to carry guns. There is nothing that would make me feel less safe while shopping than the knowledge that my fellow bargain-hunters were packing heat. But in the name of the short-lived quest for national civility, let's hope that if Representative McCarthy's proposal gets a hearing, everyone will show respect for these variations.

However, it is a very long shot for McCarthy to even get that hearing, which is the most shocking thing of all. Members of Congress are so terrified of the National Rifle Association that they haven't dared to allow a vote on a bill to bar the sale of guns to people on the terrorism watch list.

The Democrats, when they were in power, were too terrified of the N.R.A. to allow for a hearing on McCarthy's bill in the last Congress, even though it would have no effect whatsoever on the right to bear arms. It simply makes it illegal to sell a technology that turns a pistol into the equivalent of a somewhat slow-moving machine gun.

High capacity clips were illegal from 1994 until 2004. Then the law expired, and the very next year a man with a high-capacity clip on his pistol killed seven people in a church in Wisconsin. Same story in 2007, when 32 people were murdered at Virginia Tech. And that did not cause Congress to second-guess its decision to let the law expire. As I said, we've moved forward.