

Brady Campaign



To Prevent Gun Violence

SENSIBLE GUN LAWS SAVE LIVES

November 12, 2009

The Honorable Richard Burr
SR-217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Burr:

This letter is in response to comments that were attributed to you on a Fox News website late Friday in which you attacked me and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence for the statement we issued that day concerning the Fort Hood tragedy.

In part of that statement, we referenced our opposition to your bill, S.669, to automatically permit gun possession by over 100,000 veterans found by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Justice Department to be ineligible to possess firearms under current federal law. Your bill would allow veterans determined to be “mentally incapacitated, deemed mentally incompetent, or experiencing an extended loss of consciousness” to possess firearms by removing their names from the Brady Law’s National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

Contrary to your reported assertion that our opposition to your bill is a matter of my “personal agenda,” or to secure some “personal triumph,” the issue is the safety of our veterans, their families, and the nation they have so valiantly served. In the wake of a mass shooting committed by a serviceman on a heavily-fortified Army base, it is hardly “exploitive” to have an honest debate about your proposal to allow guns in the hands of thousands of individuals already determined to present sufficient risk that they should be denied firearms. Just a few days ago, on October 29, you urged your Senate colleagues to bring S.669 up for an immediate vote. It is disturbing that you would cite the Fort Hood shooting as a reason to deflect criticism of your legislation, when this tragedy makes even more clear the need to make it harder for dangerous people to acquire dangerous weapons.

In your recent statement on the Senate floor in support of S.669, you argued that some veterans have been barred from gun possession simply because they “can’t balance their checkbook on time.” If veterans truly are being prohibited from buying guns for such reasons, we would be pleased to work with your office to design legislation to remedy that problem. But surely the solution is not to automatically allow all veterans

who have been determined “mentally incapacitated, deemed mentally incompetent, or experiencing an extended loss of consciousness” to have guns, as your proposal would do. The serious risks created by S.669 are further underscored by the fact that veterans are far more likely to die of suicide than non-veterans in the general population, with firearms the most common method of suicide among veterans.

You also complained to your Senate colleagues that the process by which veterans are found ineligible for gun possession is “neither rigorous nor fair.” Yet even the National Rifle Association, in the current issue of its magazine *First Freedom*, states that “VA records are only reported to NICS if a patient has been ‘adjudicated as a mental defective,’ a lengthy process that includes opportunities for hearings, appeals, etc.” I would note that the Brady Campaign joined the NRA in supporting the NICS Improvement Amendments Act of 2007, signed into law by President Bush in January 2008, that gave veterans and others additional rights to contest their status as “prohibited purchasers” in situations like you have described.

Particularly in light of the Fort Hood shootings, I call on you to withdraw S.669. Not only does your bill do nothing to address the serious unmet needs of our veterans, but it puts them, their families, and the general public at increased risk of gun violence. We will not be silent in ensuring that the American people fully understand the life-and-death issues posed by your legislation.

Every day, over 80 Americans are killed, and over 190 are injured, by gunfire. Every day, we at the Brady Campaign work to prevent those needless tragedies. We invite you to work with us to develop and enact constructive proposals to protect all citizens from gun violence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Helmke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P".

Paul Helmke
President
Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence