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## **The curious strength of the NRA** ***The Economist* – Mar 26th 2013**

### **America's gun lobby is beating back a post-Newtown push for gun controls**

After a spate of shootings, notably last December's murder of 20 children and six staff at a school in Newtown, Connecticut, the spokesmen of the US gun lobby sound shrilly out of step with majority opinion, and even with each other.

Newtown left America winded by grief, with its tales of six- and seven-year-olds shot by a disturbed young man using his mother's guns, among them a semi-automatic assault rifle. In January Barack Obama asked Congress for ambitious gun controls, including the renewal of a ban on assault weapons that expired in 2004 and universal background checks on gun buyers, closing a wide loophole that allows private sales without verifying the criminal or mental-health histories of buyers.

Much of that agenda looks doomed. Nobody expects assault weapons to be outlawed again. A ban on high-capacity magazines is possible, though of questionable use with so many already in circulation. A law on gun trafficking is thought likely to pass. Background checks may be extended to cover private sales, and improved by prodding states to feed more criminal and mental-health records into a federal database.

Much of the gun industry favours universal background checks, which the National Rifle Association (NRA) opposes. Even some pro-gun Republicans express private disdain for the give-not-an-inch tactics of the NRA, whose executive vice-president, Wayne LaPierre, says the correct response to Newtown is armed guards in every school, and doing more to track the "monsters" and "lunatics" whom he blames for the mass shootings. The NRA's logic on mental illness is hard to follow. It says it wants background checks improved with better mental-health reporting, but opposes using the database more often, saying universal background checks are a ruse for creating the national register needed to confiscate arms.

Though America is saturated with guns, many are stockpiled in a shrinking number of homes. Recent surveys found guns in "only" between a half and a third of households, with steep declines among the young and Democrats.

In that divided America, when exceptional horrors such as mass shootings prompt a search for exceptional causes, a growing number may turn their gaze to guns. That is why the NRA and allies offer an alternative narrative about America as an exceptionally violent dystopia, whose streets are prowled by mad or bad "monsters"—so that good citizens need semi-automatics for what Mr LaPierre calls the moment when "glass breaks in the middle of the night".

(402 words)