

Arming terrorists



You might think that if President Bush and his team were forced to choose between protecting the American people from terrorists and heeding the National Rifle Association, the administration would come down on the public's side.

Well, it *is* nice to believe that. But it's wrong.

In fact, according to a new study by the Government Accountability Office, officials approved 47 of 58 applications from terror suspects to purchase or carry guns during a nine-month period last year.

The gun buyers came up as positive matches on an FBI watch list of thousands of people, many of whom are monitored as part of investigations into Islamic, militia and other groups.

The reason that such an obviously dangerous situation persists is complicated, but the root cause is serious weakness in the federal gun laws.

For starters, the NRA and its supporters in the White House and Congress generally have been successful in curbing use of the FBI's national gun-buying database as an investigative tool. The gun lobby argues that would amount to a national registry of gun owners.

Indeed, John Ashcroft, then the attorney general, moved quickly after the 9/11 attacks to block the FBI from matching gun-buying records against lists of terror suspects. That ruling was not reversed until last year.

Another problem is that last year Congress decided federal officials must destroy records of gun purchases within 24 hours. That could eliminate paper trails of terrorists' weapons.

Finally, federal and state officials OK'd many of the gun buys because applicants did not have records of being felons, illegal immigrants or mentally ill. It is not disqualifying, under current law, to belong to a suspected terrorist organization.



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The remedies are clear: Give law-enforcement counterterrorism agencies broader access to gun and weapons records. Maintain those records for at least 10 years. Reject applications from members of terrorist groups, including domestic right-wing militias, which have a symbiotic relationship with the NRA.

Such changes would require legislation that the President would be loath to endorse. But it would help him fulfill his vow to protect the nation.

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