To get to Joe Manchin’s private office in the Hart Senate Office Building, you first pass through a lobby where you encounter a small bronze statue of an Old West lawman holding a firearm — an award given to Manchin several years ago by a chapter of the National Rifle Association for his unswerving defense of gun rights. Then you turn down a hallway, past several framed photographs of children who were victims of the massacre a year ago at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. The combination of the bronze rifleman in the lobby and the young faces on the wall suggests a particular viewpoint — I stand with gun lovers; I stand with victims of gun violence — that qualifies, in Washington anyway, as being nuanced, which is to say politically ill advised if not suicidal.

Even sitting behind his stately wooden desk in a suit and tie, Manchin, who is 66, possesses the craggy appearance of a small-town sheriff. As he proclaimed to me one morning in September,
“I enjoy my guns, and my family enjoys their guns.” And indeed, Manchin, a conservative Democrat from West Virginia, won election to the U.S. Senate in 2010 partly on the strength of a memorable TV ad depicting him firing a bullet through President Obama’s cap-and-trade bill that had been anathema to coal miners in his state. But Manchin’s outlook changed the day he came back from a hunting trip last December, having learned of the 20 children and six adults slaughtered at Sandy Hook. That unique horror motivated him in a way that other recent mass shootings in Tucson and Aurora, Colo., had not.

“To sit here and do nothing, I could’ve done that all day long,” Manchin said. “Let this be the happy retirement home.” Instead, for the first time in his 30-year political career, he acted against the N.R.A.’s wishes. He introduced legislation that would require universal background checks for commercial sales. Background checks have been federally mandated for firearm purchases from licensed dealers since 1994. The bill would have extended them to gun shows and all Internet sales. Manchin was aware that universal background checks would not have prevented the Newtown killings, because the shooter, Adam Lanza, used firearms that were legally purchased by his mother. Nonetheless, a confluence of factors at the time favored his efforts: a newly re-elected Democratic president personally stung by the gun tragedies that took place on his watch; a fractious and self-doubting Republican Party; the seemingly bottomless financial resources of the New York mayor and ardent gun-control advocate Michael Bloomberg, whose alliance of more than a thousand mayors throughout the United States, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, would sponsor an aggressive wave of TV ads; and the forceful but sympathetic lobbying presence of Gabrielle Giffords, the former congresswoman who had been shot in the head in Tucson, along with the voices of the Newtown parents whose children were killed. Given this climate and the overwhelming public support for universal background checks, even the N.R.A. was braced for the passage of some version of Manchin’s gun-control bill.
Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia came to support a gun-control bill. But no version did pass. Four months after the Newtown shooting, on April 17, the bill failed to win the necessary votes to make it through the Senate. The most fearsome lobbying organization in America prevailed once again. Other victories would soon follow. On the day before I visited Manchin’s office in September, two state senators who spearheaded a recent passage of tough gun-control legislation in Colorado were recalled — another triumph for the N.R.A., despite having been outspent by Bloomberg’s group. (A third Colorado state senator who supported the bill announced her retirement last month in the face of a recall.) Not long after that, a mentally unhinged gunman at the Washington Navy Yard, less than two miles from the Senate office buildings, killed 12 employees. In his eulogy for the victims, the president noted somberly: “Once more our hearts are broken. Once more we ask why.” But few were asking why Joe Manchin or some other senator wasn’t out trying to round up more votes for his bill. If the murder of 20 schoolchildren had proved insufficient motivation to address gun violence in America, this killing was not enough to persuade anyone to take on the N.R.A. again.

“As far as putting on a full-court press, I don’t see that happening,” Manchin told me in his office. “And I don’t hear much conversation about it.” The defeat of the bill has added to the legend of the gun lobby’s brawn. Though the N.R.A.’s opponents still question whether the group is really as indomitable as it is perceived, at a certain point, political mythology engineers its own reality. One recently retired congressman from a conservative district told me, “That was the one group where I said, ‘As long as I’m in office, I’m not bucking the N.R.A.’”

Still, a year after the Newtown killings, the question of why nothing new has been done to address America’s gun violence is a vexing one. To begin to answer it requires a close look at why Joe Manchin failed in his effort to pass a fairly minimal change — closing loopholes in the existing gun laws. The defeat of the bill not only provides a case study in how the N.R.A. operates but also reveals its potential frailties. Whether the N.R.A.’s new and well-financed adversaries can exploit them is another matter. Doing so will most likely involve more than just standing up for the vulnerable young faces on Manchin’s wall. It will also require taking stock of, and appreciating, the resonance of the armed figure in his lobby.

President Obama was at his desk on the afternoon of the Newtown shootings, when two speechwriters, Jon Favreau and Cody Keenan, entered the Oval Office to receive his edits of the statement they wrote about the horrendous episode. “I can’t read that,” Obama said quietly, crossing out a couple of lines. “I won’t be able to get through them.”

That evening, Obama convened a group of top aides in the Oval Office and informed them that passing gun legislation would now take priority in his already-cluttered second-term agenda. Five days later, at a news conference, Obama announced that Vice President Joe Biden would be leading a monthlong search for “proposals that I then intend to push without delay.” When a reporter asked, “What about the N.R.A.?” the president replied: “Well, the N.R.A. is an organization that has members who are mothers and fathers. And I would expect that they’ve
been impacted by this as well. And hopefully they’ll do some self-reflection.”

Wayne LaPierre of the N.R.A. took a hard line after the Newtown shootings. The N.R.A. was doing precisely that. In the week that followed the shooting, the organization’s two top officials — its chief executive, Wayne LaPierre, and Chris Cox, the executive director of the N.R.A.’s Institute for Legislative Action — spoke by phone numerous times. LaPierre, who is 64, was paid a salary of $831,709 in 2011, according to federal tax returns. He spends the majority of his time on the road, raising money and interacting with N.R.A. members, who routinely address him by his first name. Despite his accessibility with gun owners and the homespun manner in which N.R.A. phone solicitors tell members that “Wayne” would like to offer them discounts on N.R.A. products, LaPierre is notably guarded with the media. After Newtown, he traveled with security guards who, because of death threats, cased TV studios in advance of his rare interviews. (The N.R.A. refused my repeated requests to speak with him.)

By contrast, Cox, who is 43, is the group’s inside man whose office is a short walk from the Capitol in a small space above Bullfeathers, a popular watering hole for Hill staff members.

In their conversations, Cox told LaPierre that he did not yet have a clear sense of how their congressional allies were reacting to the Newtown shootings. Cox’s instinct was that the N.R.A. should stay quiet for the time being, as it had done following past shootings. Instead LaPierre decided to respond forcefully, without consulting the N.R.A.’s lobbyists or its full 76-member executive board. One week after the shootings, he stood behind a lectern at the Willard InterContinental hotel a few blocks from the White House and broke into a blistering attack on the news media, the movie industry and video-game manufacturers while defiantly declaring, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” Several N.R.A.-friendly legislators found LaPierre’s speech to be tone deaf and recommended to his colleagues that someone else serve as the group’s spokesman.
LaPierre’s combativeness was nonetheless in keeping with the N.R.A.’s recent history as an organization that views its cause as an embattled one. It hasn’t always been that way. Founded in 1871 to teach marksmanship to city-dwelling Union soldiers, the group was originally a nonpolitical and noncontroversial league of sportsmen and remained so for nearly a century. Everything changed, however, during the urban tumult of the 1960s, culminating in the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The 1968 Gun Control Act imposed a licensing system for purchases, mandated serial numbers on weapons, banned certain gun imports and barred felons and illicit drug users from obtaining firearms. Gun-loving legislators like Representative John Dingell of Michigan worried that even harsher restrictions were imminent and clamored for the N.R.A. to wake up and enter the political arena. The lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action, was formed in 1975. Two years later at a now-famous annual convention in Cincinnati, Dingell and other N.R.A. allies ousted the group’s reigning executives, who saw the organization largely as a haven for gentlemen hunters, and replaced them with fire-breathing Second Amendment absolutists. The new lobbying director, Harlon Carter, then led an energetic campaign to boost membership. “Harlon came up with the idea that they’d need four million members, and everybody thought this was impossible, but by golly, he did it,” Dingell told me. (Today the N.R.A. claims that it has more than five million dues-paying members, though there is reason to believe that this figure is at least somewhat inflated. Millions more do not pay dues but — perhaps because they’ve taken the group’s firearm-safety course — say in surveys that they are members.)

The N.R.A. scored its first major victory when Dingell and other friends on the Hill succeeded in passing the Firearm Owners’ Protection Act of 1986, which restored many of the gun rights that were outlawed by the 1968 law. Once the Democrats regained the White House in 1993, the N.R.A. was again put on the defensive, when President Bill Clinton and Congress passed a ban on assault weapons. The gun group then targeted the bill’s proponents during the midterm elections. Many of them lost and Republicans became the majority. “The N.R.A. is the reason Republicans control the House,” Clinton ruefully observed, thereby cementing the group’s reputation as a political force to be feared.

Following the Columbine shootings in 1999, in which some of the weapons used were bought at gun shows, Clinton pushed for universal background checks. Initially, the N.R.A. went on record supporting an amendment by Dingell that watered down a bill extending background checks to gun shows. But ultimately the scandal-ridden and lame-duck president was no match for the N.R.A., whose congressional allies killed the bill entirely. By the time the Virginia Tech murders occurred in 2007, it was a fact of life in Washington: Any major legislation that the N.R.A. opposed stood little to no chance of passage.

But the uniquely awful nature of the Newtown tragedy, coupled with Obama’s recent victory, augured a battle far more difficult than any the N.R.A. recently faced. Aware that the struggle would be fierce and expensive, the group made it “as easy as we could for people to join,” says David Keene, who recently retired as N.R.A. president. It offered discounts on annual and lifetime memberships. In the six months after Newtown, as gun-control advocates pushed for
legislation, the N.R.A. was able to recruit more than a million new members, Andrew Arulanandam, an N.R.A. spokesman, said. This meant millions more for the group’s coffers.

Still, the gun lobby had no clear sense initially of how its efforts would be waged, and to what end. On Jan. 10, 2013, Biden hosted a meeting in his Executive Office Building suite with several Second Amendment supporters, including the veteran N.R.A. lobbyist Jim Baker. When Biden asked if the N.R.A. would consider supporting a ban on assault weapons or high-capacity magazine clips, Baker’s answer was a crisp “no.” But when asked the same thing about universal background checks, Baker equivocated, saying, “I’d have to see what you’re talking about.”

Baker knew this was thorny territory for the N.R.A. Extending background checks to firearms purchases at gun shows and over the Internet, with the aim of making it harder for felons and the mentally ill to acquire weapons, remains popular and not just among liberals. According to a CBS News/New York Times poll taken in the days after the Biden meeting, 92 percent of Americans favored universal background checks. A poll conducted by the Republican pollster Frank Luntz indicated that there was 74 percent approval among self-identified N.R.A. members — in keeping with the 77 percent approval in a survey of hunters commissioned by the Bull Moose Sportsmen’s Alliance. (The N.R.A. dismisses these high numbers but has offered none of its own. Three days after the Biden meeting, the Republican polling firm OnMessage conducted a survey for the N.R.A. of its members on a variety of legislative topics — but was not instructed to ask about universal background checks.) After Newtown, the N.R.A. lobbyists suspected that if the Democrats were to reintroduce Dingell’s 1999 background-checks bill, there would be no political will to oppose it.

In January, Biden’s task force announced its legislative recommendations. These included universal background checks, a ban on assault weapons and limits on magazine capacity. Each initiative would successfully pass through the Senate Judiciary Committee, whose chairman was Patrick Leahy — himself an owner of more than a dozen firearms who has spent time during Vermont winters shooting at large chunks of ice. Though it was clear from the outset that there would never be enough votes in the Senate to pass either an assault-weapons ban or a limit on magazine capacity, progressives were convinced that their moment had arrived on universal background checks. During one meeting between several Democratic senators and some of the Newtown parents in early February, Al Franken of Minnesota openly conveyed the optimism many on his side of the issue were feeling. “There’s not an argument — there aren’t two sides to this,” he said, according to someone who was present. “This is common sense. And that’s the end of it.”

Not every Democrat felt so sanguine. Any bill that made it out of the Senate would face stiff opposition from the Republican-controlled House. Other pressing issues (like immigration) loomed on the legislative calendar, and the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, had no desire to see the agenda overtaken by gun control. Like Leahy, Reid was a gun owner who was keenly aware of the place firearms hold in American life — and who recognized that not everyone in his
party understood this. At roughly the same time that Franken and other Democratic senators were plotting their legislative strategy, their Democratic counterparts in the House met for an annual retreat in Leesburg, Va. Among the gathering’s main events was a seminar on how to talk to voters about firearms and gun legislation. But not one of the four panelists — a Yale law professor, a political reporter, a former Orlando police chief who ran for Congress on the Democratic ticket and the veteran Beltway strategist Anita Dunn — could claim a true appreciation of American gun culture. According to two attendees, when Dunn was describing the desirability of background checks, she used the word “registration” — thereby conjuring up the specter of a national registry of all licensed guns, a notion that is abhorrent to many gun owners, who fear that registering firearms with a federal agency would make it easier for the government to one day confiscate them. “She kept using the R-word,” one attendee recalls. “And what I took away was that nobody in the Democratic Party knows how to talk about this.”

Joe Manchin shared the concern that the Democrats who were leading the charge on gun legislation didn’t understand how deeply people care about guns and needed to if they were ever to get anything passed. By January the universal background-checks legislation was being spearheaded in the Senate by Charles Schumer, a liberal from New York City. “Joe, I didn’t know anybody who owned a gun when I grew up,” Schumer said to Manchin, who replied, “Chuck, I didn’t know anybody who didn’t own a gun.” Schumer’s bill contained no provisions that might attract the support of gun owners, a fatal omission in Manchin’s view. “The bill Chuck Schumer dropped was one that I didn’t think anyone from a gun state would or should support,” Manchin told me. “So I reached out to the N.R.A. and said, ‘Let’s have an alternative.’ ”

In early March, Chris Cox and Jim Baker came to Manchin’s office to hear him out — the first of several face-to-face meetings they would have that month. Manchin knew that the lobbyists were never going to embrace universal background checks. His hope was simply that they would not fight him. To win their neutrality, Manchin had all sorts of ideas for an N.R.A.-friendly bill. In his version, firearms dealers would, for the first time since 1968, be allowed to sell handguns across state lines, including at out-of-state gun shows. Members of the military and their spouses could purchase guns in their native state and in the state where they were stationed. Such provisions had been championed by the gun group for years. “I told the N.R.A., ‘When will you ever have a time when liberals who hate us even having a gun actually vote for something that protects and enhances our rights — and all we ask for in return is to tighten up loopholes in legislation that’s already there?’ ” he said. “Absolutely, I said that to them. Many, many times.”

Among the N.R.A.’s most-activist members, however, there is a powerful suspicion that one restriction will open the door to more, each new limit leading inexorably to a time when there will no longer be a right to bear arms. Throughout March, the N.R.A. employed the familiar mechanics of lobbying the dozen or so senators — including Democrats facing tough re-election battles in 2014 like Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and blue-state Republicans like Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire — who had not yet decided whether they would support the bill. They pressed for face time with the senators, cozied up to their aides and urged N.R.A. members in their
states to harangue the Washington offices. Cox and Baker were aware that the senators were also feeling pressure from the White House and gun-safety groups — and, of course, from Joe Manchin, a fellow N.R.A. member and sportsman who actively sought to allay the fears of red-state legislators that his bill would be impossible to sell back home. Recognizing, for example, that a chief talking point of the gun lobby was that universal background checks might enable a government agency to compile a national registry, he added a section that would make the attempt to do so punishable by a 15-year prison sentence. By early April, Manchin found a willing Republican co-sponsor: Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania, the former president of the fiscally hawkish Club for Growth who, like Manchin, had received an A rating from the N.R.A. (Toomey hailed from a blue state and, says someone closely involved in the legislative strategy, “he needed something to show to more moderate voters in Pennsylvania that he’s not an ideologue.”)

For the time being, then, Cox and Baker’s only recourse was to make Manchin’s bill as attractive to gun owners as possible, in the event that it became law. Through email and phone calls, N.R.A. lobbyists inundated Manchin’s office with suggested bill changes. Among these were small but meaningful technicalities like refining the legal definition of “gun show” and exempting certain firearm purchases from background checks. When the Manchin-Toomey bill was officially made public on April 10, the language included numerous provisions that were explicitly, according to someone involved in the negotiations, “N.R.A. ask-fors.”

The N.R.A. prefers quashing a bill it doesn’t like or pushing a favored bill through Congress with traditional arm twisting. But if it can’t do that, the organization strives to be in the room while legislation is being hashed out; and once there, it will cut deals with any ally it can find, including Democrats. This is the way of all lobbying organizations, of course. As David Keene, the former N.R.A. president, put it: “Our effectiveness is totally dependent on the fact that we reward our friends, and we stand with them. Our goal isn’t to elect Republicans. It’s to support people who support the Second Amendment.” The N.R.A. declared war on those who helped pass the 1994 assault-weapons ban, most of whom were Democrats, but while the bill was being crafted, the N.R.A. worked with two of its House Democratic allies, John Dingell and Jack Brooks of Texas, to weaken it so that if it did pass, it would apply to only a limited number of firearms and would expire a decade later. (It did not pass again.) Following the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, the N.R.A. skillfully aligned itself with both the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and Carolyn McCarthy, a New York congresswoman and ardent gun-control advocate, to pass legislation that would improve the flow of state mental-health and criminal records to the F.B.I. database.
But a handful of smaller, more strident gun groups — most notably the Gun Owners of America and the National Association for Gun Rights — have continually attacked the N.R.A. for giving any ground, for negotiating with the enemy and, worst of all, for helping to elect lukewarm allies. By way of defending the organization’s strategy, Keene says: “The difference between the N.R.A. and a lot of these other gun organizations is that it’s easy enough to stand and say, ‘You shouldn’t compromise on anything.’ Our job is to actually get things done.”

Still, getting things done requires compromise, which is frowned upon by the group’s hard-core base. This dilemma has plagued the N.R.A. since it achieved passage of the 1986 Firearm Owners’ Protection Act, an N.R.A. triumph that came at a cost: to garner enough votes among Democrats, Wayne LaPierre, who then led the N.R.A.’s federal lobbying effort, agreed to a provision in the bill that banned the future sale of machine guns. Richard Feldman, an N.R.A. lobbyist back then and now its critic, said: “At the time, there was a huge controversy among the activist groups about the N.R.A. being a sellout. ‘They gave away your rights on machine guns!’ This was long before an Internet. Now it would be all over the place, and people would question what the N.R.A. did.”

That kind of instant, frenetic backlash is precisely what occurred during the spring of 2013, when word began to leak out that the N.R.A.’s top lobbyists were once again in the back room discussing gun legislation. On March 25, Dudley Brown, executive vice president of the National Association for Gun Rights, sent a mass email to thousands of gun enthusiasts that began: “It’s happening. . . . According to Politico, Sen. Joe Manchin is in secret negotiations with unnamed N.R.A. officials to sell out our gun rights. I’ve warned you from the beginning that our gravest danger was an inside-Washington driven deal.” In the email, Brown dammingly referred to the deal as “the Manchin-N.R.A. compromise bill.”
A week later, on April 1, about 250,000 gun-rights sympathizers received an email from the Gun Owners of America, which promotes itself as “the only no-compromise gun lobby in Washington.” The email warned, “The media has been reporting that the N.R.A. is working” with Manchin. It concluded, “If you are an N.R.A. member, contact them,” and helpfully supplied the N.R.A. phone number, directing recipients to address their grievances to Wayne LaPierre.

The Gun Owners of America and the National Association for Gun Rights each has less than a tenth of the N.R.A.’s reported five million members and each has only one full-time lobbyist (the N.R.A. has more than a half-dozen federal lobbyists alone). Yet, as two people connected to the N.R.A. acknowledged to me, extreme gun groups can influence the N.R.A. simply by casting it as the establishment organization, much as Tea Party candidates have pushed mainstream Republican incumbents farther to the right. That would seem to be what occurred in the case of the Manchin-Toomey bill. For it was immediately following pressure from the hard-liners that the N.R.A. lobbyists suddenly and without notice backed away from the background-checks bill.

A few days after the Gun Owners of America’s mass email, Cox and Baker stopped communicating with Manchin’s office. (The N.R.A. denies that its withdrawal from the process was a result of pressure from other gun groups.) On the afternoon of Monday, April 15, Manchin was surprised to learn about an email that the N.R.A. had sent to his Senate colleagues. The email (a similar version of which went out to N.R.A. members) ended any pretense of neutrality by announcing that the organization would vehemently oppose the Manchin-Toomey bill. In addition, the organization said it would “score” the vote — meaning, it would factor into its election-year grading system how each senator voted on the bill. (In some conservative states, an N.R.A. grade can be determinative; as one former legislator told me, “When you come from a state like mine, you’d better be with them 100 percent.”)

Aghast, Manchin got Jim Baker on the phone. “Jim, why’d you change?” he recalls asking.

Rather than answer the question, Baker simply replied: “We’re totally opposed to it. We’re going to be fighting it with all we have.”

The phones soon began to ring throughout Senate office buildings, jamming up the lines in front offices and rolling over into those on many staff members’ desks. In Pat Toomey’s office, the calls ran nine to one against the bill. In Manchin’s office, the ratio was 200 to one in opposition, with many citing the fear that the bill would lead to a national registry despite the provision that explicitly made it a felony to do so. The N.R.A. enlisted the aid of a paid phone-calling organization to mobilize its members by forwarding willing participants directly to their senators’ phones. Regardless of what prompted the calls, what Senate staff members heard was the distinct and fevered outcry of a single-issue constituency with every intention of echoing its wrath at the ballot box. This was the N.R.A.’s base in action.

Manchin stepped up his personal lobbying. He and his other allies, like Gabby Giffords and her husband, Mark Kelly, quickly recognized that the gun bill wasn’t being viewed in isolation.
Sometimes that worked in their favor. While visiting their Arizona friend John McCain, Giffords and Kelly were two minutes into their pitch on the background-checks bill when McCain interrupted them: “Oh, yeah, yeah, of course. I’m with you. Now, immigration? I’m going to need your help.”

But for several other undecided senators, the gun bill constituted one political burden too many. This was evident during a meeting between Rob Portman, who is a Republican senator from Ohio, and several parents of the slain Newtown children. Portman told them, “You know, I have an A rating from the N.R.A., so I’m probably not going to support this.” At some point, 13-year-old James Barden, a brother of one of the victims, spoke up. “Senator, there’s over a thousand deaths from gun violence in Ohio every year,” he said. “I’m here on behalf of my little brother, Daniel. Do you think that this bill would save some of those lives?”

Portman sat quietly for a moment. Then he said: “It could. It could.” But what the Republican senator did not say was that he had already disappointed conservatives by coming out in favor of same-sex marriage because of his openly gay son. By the spring of 2013 it had become axiomatic in the Senate that among the three incendiary social issues of the moment — gun restrictions, same-sex marriage and comprehensive immigration reform — a moderate Democrat could afford to vote for two of them, and a conservative Republican only one. Portman had already selected his hot-button issue.

Harry Reid scheduled the vote on the Manchin-Toomey bill for Wednesday, April 17. The previous weekend, Manchin, Toomey and Schumer divvied up the list of undecideds whom they needed to call. Democrats had been hopeful that Toomey could bring as many as 10 Republicans on board. Thus far, none would commit. Manchin was having problems of his own with the undecided Democrats. Max Baucus crossed the N.R.A. back in 1994 by voting for the assault-weapons ban and, a former Baucus staff member told me, he “felt he had paid dearly for that” in the form of attack ads and wrathful constituents. Baucus was viewed as a near-certain no. Mark Pryor of Arkansas faces a tough re-election in 2014; he was also aware that his father, Senator David Pryor, like Baucus, voted for the 1994 assault-weapons ban and incurred the animus of the N.R.A. Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota had just begun her first term after defeating a Republican who received the N.R.A.’s endorsement. The flood of calls from Heitkamp’s new constituents registered roughly seven to one against the background-checks bill.

By late Sunday, Manchin, Toomey and Schumer glumly compared notes. The weekend calls failed to produce a single new vote in favor of the bill. Then, on the afternoon of Monday, April 15, explosive devices went off at the Boston Marathon. That evening, while mayhem dominated the news coverage, one of the key swing senators in the gun debate, Jeff Flake of Arizona, posted on his Facebook page that he intended to vote no.
The following afternoon, Flake was in a Capitol Visitor Center restroom before heading to a conference room that was about to be dedicated to Gabe Zimmerman, the former staff member of Gabby Giffords who was killed by the Tucson gunman. Inside, the senator encountered a fellow Arizonan who was also heading to the dedication: Giffords’s husband Mark Kelly.

Kelly pulled a copy of the Manchin-Toomey bill out of his pocket. He wanted to know specifically what Flake’s objections were. The two began to debate the wording of individual sentences. As Kelly would later tell me, he thought that Flake’s tortured reasoning — combined with the fact that the N.R.A. spent more than $345,000 on his Senate race last year — seemed like evidence “that he was trying to get to ‘no.’ ”

Flake stepped out of the men’s room. Shortly afterward, Gabby Giffords met them by the door. The former congresswoman — whose speaking skills remain badly impaired since being shot in the head — fixed Flake with a glare of anger and disappointment.

But Flake’s decision to vote no began the cascade. On Wednesday, Joe Manchin stood on the floor of the Senate as the votes stacked up against his bill. In the end, the final tally was 54 to 46 in favor of the bill. But that was not enough to reach the 60-vote threshold the bill required and the legislation was defeated. Afterward, several senators came up to shake Manchin’s hand and express kind words for his political courage and determination. Half-listening, Manchin scanned the gallery, where he knew some of the Newtown parents were sitting. In a few minutes he broke away and gathered the families in an anteroom. He managed to stare into their eyes and assure them that he was far from done. Their children’s faces were on his wall, and he would not forget them.

“Harry Reid told me that as soon as I’ve got 60 votes, he’ll bring it to the floor for a vote,” Manchin said in his office recently. But his tone suggested that this was not something anyone should expect anytime soon. As to what legislative compromises would be needed to swing the necessary votes his way while not alienating the ones he already had — and then, to find Republican supporters in the House — Manchin could only say he was open to whatever ideas his colleagues might have.

Yet even as the votes in the chambers still favor the N.R.A., gun-control advocates have some cause for optimism. Time does not seem to be on the N.R.A.’s side. According to data compiled by the nonpartisan National Opinion Research Center, between 1977 and 2012 the percentage of American households possessing one or more guns declined by 36 percent. That decline should not be surprising. Tom W. Smith, director of the research center, says: “There are two main reasons, if you ask people, why they have firearms: hunting and personal protection. Now, from external sources like the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, we know the proportion of adults who hunt has declined over the decades. And since the ‘90s, the crime rate has fallen. So the two main reasons people might want to have a gun have both decreased.”
The N.R.A. is all too aware of the headwinds it faces and has ramped up its efforts. In recent years, it has targeted young military veterans by offering them a free introductory “Life of Duty” membership. It also works extensively with the Boy Scouts, David Keene told me, “to try to get kids in the city to hunt and fish.” The N.R.A.’s signature method of recruitment, however, is to play on the fears of gun enthusiasts with over-the-top claims that President Obama and his administration will not rest “until they’ve banned, confiscated and destroyed our guns, just like they did in England and Australia.” Over time, this tactic could prove to be a losing one. Just as Tea Party rhetoric has hurt the Republican Party among young people and Hispanics, the N.R.A.’s seeming capitulation to the smaller, no-compromise gun groups risks turning off whole swaths of mainstream gun owners who may be more concerned with the job market and the cost of college tuition than with the prospect of a national gun registry.

For now, the matter of universal background checks joins immigration reform and same-sex marriage as issues in which Washington Republicans lag behind nationwide public opinion. And so the more competitive gun-legislation battles have begun to take place at the state level. Following the shootings in Newtown, tighter gun restrictions have passed in 20 states, including Connecticut, New York, Delaware, Illinois and Colorado, while a ballot-initiative effort is under way in Washington State to pass a background-checks bill that was defeated in the Legislature earlier this year. Meanwhile, 27 states have loosened, in some manner, gun laws that were already on the books. Some states did both.

“The N.R.A. has had this issue to itself for a generation,” Mark Glaze, the executive director of the Bloomberg-backed Mayors Against Illegal Guns, said, referring to the N.R.A.’s dominance of an overmatched gun-control lobby. On the subject of the Manchin-Toomey defeat, he said: “Would we have done anything differently? We might have started advertising sooner and more broadly. We might have paid millions rather than thousands of dollars to ship telephone calls into offices. But it’s entirely possible that none of that would’ve made a difference, because you’re at the early stage of a process that has several stages.”
If part of this early stage is figuring out how to exploit the N.R.A.’s vulnerabilities, Glaze and others must also face up to why it is that the N.R.A. has continued to beat them soundly and far more consistently than the Republicans have defeated Democrats — namely, by motivating its supporters to make themselves heard in a way that gun-control adherents haven’t. One gun-control group that seeks to close the intensity gap is Moms Demand Action, which was started by Shannon Watts, a 42-year-old Indiana-based public-relations veteran and mother of five, the day after the Newtown shootings. “I think what’s been missing are the voices of mothers,” Watts told me. Most gun-control organizations “have been run by men,” she said. “Women are the caretakers of the family, and the ones who make most of the spending decisions. Most of us don’t realize — I certainly didn’t — that it’s easier to buy ammunition than Sudafed. But the massacre of innocent children in the sanctity of their schools woke us up.”

Though underfinanced, Watts’s group (which, she says, consists of 125,000 volunteers nationwide) has staged attention-getting Stroller Jams — rallies of women with strollers at state capitols and congressional offices — and pressured Starbucks to request that customers not bring firearms into its stores. More often than not, Watts told me, men with semiautomatic weapons slung over their shoulders show up to her group’s events, and she routinely receives vile phone messages and threats against her and her children.

While Moms Demand Action employs confrontational tactics, Gabby Giffords and Mark Kelly have opted for a more soothing approach. Following the defeat of the background-checks bill, Giffords and Kelly, co-founders of Americans for Responsible Solutions, have spent much of their time touring rural regions and meeting with gun owners. “We’re trying to make it a habit to engage with folks who don’t think we’re on the same side of the issue,” Kelly told me the day after he and Giffords visited a gun show in upstate New York. “More than anything, they just
want to be listened to — and to hear that we know something about where they’re coming from. Hell, I’m as much of a supporter of the Second Amendment as Wayne LaPierre. I’d far rather spend my day at a gun show than at an antique show.”

But the point behind this blue-collar diplomacy, Kelly told me, is to build consensus on addressing a painful conundrum: “It’s been almost a year since 20 schoolchildren were massacred, and so far our national response has been to do nothing.”

“Washington, D.C., is a difficult place to get things done,” Nicole Hockley said with arch understatement when I visited her in Newtown one morning recently. The first time I met her, two weeks after the defeat of the background-checks bill and less than five months after the death of her son Dylan, Hockley seemed freighted with a bottomless fatigue. Though grief was hardly behind her, she now appeared more buoyant and intent on rising above the legislative mire. Recently, Hockley said, she spent several days attending focus groups of gun owners in Memphis, Phoenix and Chicago. Sitting in a dark room and peering through one-way glass, she listened as people who looked and sounded very much like her spoke of their love for their children and their affection for their firearms. It struck her, she told me, that “only one out of more than 60 didn’t support background checks.”

Hockley also recently met with a firearms instructor to learn more about the Bushmaster semiautomatic rifle that Adam Lanza used to kill her son. She said she has a “perverse need” to come to terms with the weapon used to shoot Dylan, as part of a larger attempt to understand gun culture. Her effort represents a way of doing individually what those in the gun-control movement might need to do collectively — break down the barriers of fear and mistrust from which the N.R.A. derives much of its power.

As the instructor spoke, she stared at the weapon and listened intently. He asked her whether she would like to shoot it or at least hold it. Hockley shook her head. “This is as far as I can go today,” she told the instructor with tears in her eyes. And that was the way these things would have to progress, in unsteady little increments.

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