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By Congressman Mike Quigley (IL-05)

The horror of Tucson may be fading from the headlines, but gun violence in Chicago is as prevalent as ever. On any given weekend, a half-dozen Chicagoans lose their lives to guns.

But Chicago is not alone. Americans across the country from Fort Hood to campuses in DeKalb and Blacksburg to the Pentagon and Columbine continue to wonder how dangerous individuals have access to such deadly weapons.

The answer is that Congress has refused to embrace a common-sense, life-saving middle ground on gun control that protects citizens while respecting the Second Amendment.

When the Supreme Court recently recognized a constitutional right to own a gun in the home, it eliminated the National Rifle Association's tired fund-raising argument that any gun control regulation is a precursor to revoking all gun-owning rights. But it also made the critical distinction that the Second Amendment is not an unlimited right. In the interest of public welfare, communities can keep guns away from schools and out of the hands of terrorists, felons and the mentally ill.

With the highest court in the land settling the law and marginalizing the extremes, Congress was invited to seize the sensible middle. It hasn't.

In fact, Congress has strenuously avoided any discussion of commonsense gun laws, with the House refusing to hold a single hearing on the topic during the last Congress.

And when Congress has passed sound laws, such as mandatory background checks, it sabotages its good intentions by allowing glaring loopholes in the legislation.

For instance, a bipartisan bill to close an egregious lapse in gun law that allows anyone — regardless of criminal history, mental condition or terrorist affiliation — to purchase weapons without a background check went nowhere. Instead, the gun-show loophole allowed the Pentagon shooter to gain a weapon without passing the National Instant Check System.

Nearly a decade after 9/11, the federal government can prevent suspects on terror watch lists from boarding an airplane but not from buying firearms. The Bush and Obama administrations both endorsed a bill that would close the gap, but Congress hasn't acted.

After the Virginia Tech shootings, a law to improve NICS was passed to keep guns out of the hands of those declared mentally ill. But just five percent of the funding was allocated, rendering the bill ineffective.

Unfortunately, in the absence of sensible laws, Congress has passed a series of illogical bills that seemingly kowtow to the whims of the gun lobby. In the last Congress, we passed laws allowing guns in national parks and on Amtrak trains and another exempting guns from creditors in bankruptcy cases.

In the Senate, President Obama's nomination to fill the vacancy for head of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the federal agency with primary responsibility for enforcing gun laws, was never considered. The position has now been open for four years.

The silver lining is that mainstream America feels differently. A bipartisan poll taken this month shows the incredible disconnect: 81 percent of gun owners support requiring a background check on all firearm purchases, and 90 percent of all Americans favor strengthening databases to prevent the mentally ill from buying guns.

Preventing mass shootings — or stopping at least a few of the 34 gun murders that occur each day in our country — requires closing gaps in our gun background-check system and tougher enforcement of existing laws. But we cannot complete that mission if Congress does not recognize extremism and separate it from commonsense policy.

It's time Congress demonstrates much-needed leadership. For children in Chicago, students across the country and the safety of all Americans, we must do better.