

For attorney general, battle over gun control nothing new

Curran's call for ban on ownership of handguns criticized

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SUN STAFF

In the fall of 1988, Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. ventured into gun country in St. Mary's County with an unpopular message.

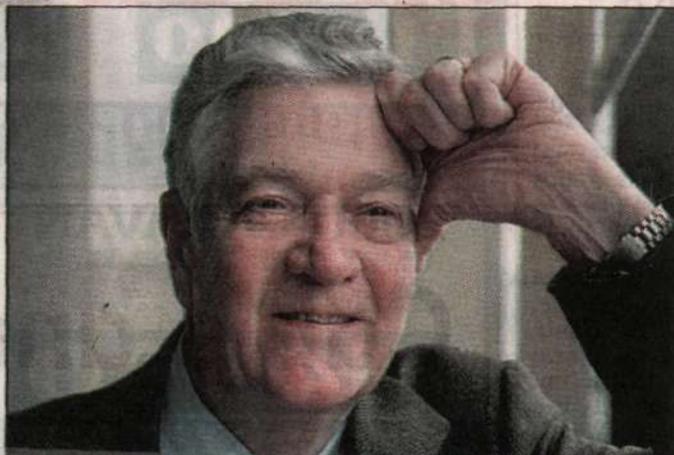
Delivering a speech he would make countless times that fall, Curran tried to sell a mostly hostile audience on the state's ban on Saturday night special weapons, passed that year by the General Assembly but still needing ratification by the voters.

"They were hooting at Joe. He got a lot of catcalls and all the rest," recalled Vincent DeMarco, a former assistant attorney general who was with Curran that night.

"But he stood his ground," DeMarco said, "and made a good case and convinced some people. Not everyone — but there will always be some unconvincibles."

For Curran, 68, battling the "unconvincibles" over gun control has been a passion for more than 30 years.

Yesterday, he took the debate to a new extreme with



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"For those who oppose this, I challenge them to have a better idea to save 35,000 lives."

J. Joseph Curran Jr., Maryland attorney general, on his proposal to ban private ownership of handguns

his call for stricter gun-control laws, including an eventual ban on the private ownership of handguns.

Curran became one of a tiny number of elected officials around the country favoring such a ban — prompting sharp criticism from pro-gun advocates and polite disagreements with his usual allies on gun control who suggest Curran has gone too far.

"I think at this time, it's a nonstarter," Gov. Parris N. Glendening said bluntly. "We've got to be realistic."

Somewhat obscured by the uproar over the handgun ban proposal was Curran's 58-page report — called "A Farewell to Arms" — that lays out a sweeping state and federal agenda for ending America's "culture of guns."

In the report, Curran proposed changes that would give Maryland the toughest gun laws in the nation — such as providing police powers to investigate illegal gun purchases and putting significant restrictions on a person

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seeking a gun permit.

"Imagine an inner city where mothers no longer keep children from playing outside for fear of drive-by shootings," Curran wrote in his report. "As a grandfather, I am ready to say enough children have died."

That kind of idealistic sentiment built around proposals such as a handgun ban might be politically untenable in the Maryland of 1999, but it is vintage Curran, his admirers say.

"Joe Curran deeply believes that government must do all it can to protect society, and particularly children, from the scourges of guns and tobacco," said DeMarco, who has lobbied with Curran in Annapolis on both issues. "There's no other way to explain it."

But gun-rights advocates do have another way.

"He's an elitist, plain and simple," said John Josselyn, lobbyist for the Associated Gun Clubs of Baltimore.

"He is now advocating the destruction of the Constitution," Josselyn added. "Therefore he is no longer fit to hold office."

Curran was no stranger to guns when he was first elected to the legislature in 1958, having handled a .45-caliber handgun and an M-1 rifle in the Air Force.

But as a legislator, he said it was clear to him that gun-control advocates had better arguments than their opponents. In the 1960s and 1970s, he said, he became dismayed by the steady increase of violent crime in Baltimore.

"I just became more and more convinced that less is better when it comes to guns," said Curran, who is in his 13th year as attorney general and his 41st in public service.

During that time, Curran had a hand in passing all of the state's gun-control laws, beginning in 1966 with a landmark measure that licensed gun dealers and made a seven-day waiting period before the purchase of a weapon mandatory.

In 1972, Curran was head of the Senate committee that handled a bill putting tough restrictions on people seeking permits to carry

handguns in public.

His feelings about guns were only buttressed four years later, when his father, Councilman J. Joseph Curran Sr., suffered a heart attack brought on by a man who fired at him with a handgun in Baltimore City Hall during a spree that killed a city councilman and wounded four other people.

"Here was an unstable man who had a gun," Curran said. "How could that happen?"

Curran said his father, a city councilman for 20 years, never really recovered from the heart attack. He died 11 months after the shooting.

"If he didn't have a gun, I might still have a father," Curran said.

In the mid-1980s, Curran, then lieutenant governor, led the opposition to undo a court decision that allowed lawsuits against gun manufacturers.

He left perhaps his biggest mark in 1988, when, as attorney general, he was the impetus behind the ban on Saturday night specials.

Curran lobbied heavily on the measure and dispatched DeMarco from his office to the legislative trenches every day.

Despite being outspent 10-to-1 during the ensuing referendum campaign, Curran and other state leaders secured an overwhelming victory for the ban on Election Day, making Maryland the first state to enact such a law.

He notes with wistfulness that at least one of the proposals he presented yesterday — requiring a much more rigorous procedure for gun licensing — is one he first made in 1972.

"You just keep trying," Curran said.

Curran took a modest step backward yesterday, saying that while he favors a ban on private ownership of handguns, he is not calling for Americans to turn in their guns.

"The reality is there are 75 million guns in America today," he said during a news conference at Maryland Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore. "There is no way you can disgorge them."

Standing next to more than a dozen handguns seized by police

and displayed on two hospital gurneys, Curran acknowledged his critics.

"For those who oppose this, I challenge them to have a better idea to save 35,000 lives," Curran said, referring to the nation's annual toll from guns.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, who served on a legislative committee headed by Curran 25 years ago, called the mild-mannered attorney general a "man of the people."

Curran, he said, has an idealistic streak that would have served him equally well in a different calling.

"My take on Joe is that he has the makings of a Catholic priest," Miller said. "He's a very thoughtful person, very true to his beliefs — and always a bit preachy."