

Crusader Curran

Handgun Ban Is Latest Controversial Campaign for Attorney General

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For such a quiet fellow, Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. (D) sure is causing a ruckus.

With his call two weeks ago for an eventual ban on handguns in Maryland, Curran has positioned himself among the most aggressive anti-gun activists. Since then, he has been attacked by gun-rights advocates, has been only warily embraced by some gun-control activists and has attracted media attention around the globe.

Amid the swirl of attention, the 68-year-old lawyer and veteran pol has, with his typical demeanor of an old-time family doctor, been hard at work pressing his case. One day last week, he made the rounds with an interview at WRC-TV, an hour-long appearance on WAMU-FM radio's "The Diane Rehm Show" and an interview at BBC News's Washington bureau, followed by a rally in Takoma Park, where some city officials want to ban handguns.

"I hope what you're doing here goes on to the rest of Montgomery County and Maryland," Curran told the crowd.

He is not one for soaring oratory or political sluffests. Even when he speaks from a podium, his voice seems to barely reach above a whisper. His staff is constantly coaching him on how to sharpen his message. But his mild manner should not be mistaken for a lack of resolve, say those who know him.

"He would always look at things in terms of his political beliefs and stand his ground on his moral beliefs," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Prince George's), who served on the Senate's Judicial Proceedings Committee in the late 1970s when Curran was its chairman. But Miller added, "What he wouldn't do is push his feelings on someone else."

That raises the question of how effective Curran will be in his latest crusade. Few question that he truly believes in what he is doing, but can he effectively use the bully pulpit of one of only four jobs elected statewide in Maryland to make changes to gun laws?

"It looks like the last hurrah of a tired, old, liberal Democrat," said John H. Josselyn, legislative vice president of the Associated Gun Clubs of Baltimore, who has been strongly critical of Curran.

But Curran's supporters say he has a history of being among the first to sign on to controversial, liberal causes and stick with them. Elected to the General Assembly in 1958 and serving in public office since, including a four-year stint as lieutenant governor, Curran has been derided before.

He was among the first state officials to condemn the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. He opposes the death penalty. His support for fair housing laws in the 1960s prompted demonstrators to march outside his Baltimore home.

Despite being the scion of a prominent Irish Catholic family, he was an early supporter of abortion rights and was denounced from the pulpit at his parish when he voted to support Medicaid funding for abortions in 1978.

"But I won that precinct," Curran said.

Indeed, he has never lost an election, which Curran said is a sign that his views can't be too far out of step.

Though he has been in public office for more than 40 years and was elected to a fourth term as attorney general last year with 64 percent of the vote, Curran isn't well known outside Baltimore. Polling shows that nearly 45 percent of the state's voters outside the city don't know him well enough to offer an opinion of him, said Keith Haller, of Bethesda-based Potomac Research.

"There are a lot of local state's attorneys who get more publicity than Curran does as state attorney general," he said.

Curran's style is in marked contrast to that of his predecessor, Stephen H. Sachs, who emphasized criminal investigations and courted the media as he prepared for what was ultimately an unsuccessful gubernatorial bid. Curran has focused on consumer protection and joined the fight against the tobacco industry, which led to last summer's national settlement with cigarette makers.

"Joe's not motivated by any ambition except the desire to do the right thing," said Timothy Maloney, a former lawmaker from Prince George's County who is friendly with Curran.

"He has no other ambitions other than to wake up tomorrow and carry out what he sees the mission of the office to be."

Curran might have a low profile statewide, but in Baltimore his family is among the political elite. His father served on the City Council; a younger brother later held the same seat, and now his youngest brother, Robert W. Curran, holds it. Curran's daughter, Katie, is married to Councilman Martin O'Malley, who is favored to win the city's mayoral election tomorrow.

Curran encountered gun violence in a personal way in 1976 when his father was shot at by a gunman who charged into Baltimore City Hall, killing one council member and wounding another. The elder Curran wasn't hit, but he suffered a heart attack and died 10 months later.

"Gun violence touches a lot of people," Curran said.

Partly in response to the attack, Curran took up the cause of gun control. He unsuccessfully pushed several gun control measures while in the Senate, but his greatest success came during his first term as attorney general, when Maryland became one of the first states to outlaw Saturday night specials, a ban he had long advocated.

Many states followed. Now Curran hopes the same thing might happen with all handguns.

His office spent six months preparing his recent report, which concluded that it was time for the United States to join Great Britain and Australia, which recently enacted gun bans after bloody shootings.

The response from gun-rights advocates was quick and harsh. "He has armed guards. I don't," said Sanford Abrams, vice president of the Maryland Licensed Firearms Dealers Association. "He doesn't have to protect himself. All he does is sit on the mount and tell people what to do."

Even such leading anti-gun groups as Handgun Control Inc. have not called for a ban on handguns. Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D), who has launched a drive to mandate the selling of "smart guns" in Maryland, says Curran's proposal makes his appear moderate.

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Curran, who noted that he does not accept state bodyguards and frequently travels by himself, said the spate of recent shootings with multiple victims, including one in Atlanta and another at a Los Angeles child care center, has made Americans more willing to accept harsher gun control. He said that some day, even if it's a decade or two from now, handguns will be banned.

"I think the country is moving this way because of the escalating tragedies," he said over a quiet lunch one day last week. "It's going to come. Maybe not for a while. But just as sure as people's attitudes changed on the Vietnam War, on social issues, on smoking, people's attitudes will change on this."