

Remarks on Gun Violence

January 16, 2013

Vice President Joe Biden. Before I begin today, let me say to the families of the innocents who were murdered 33 days ago, our heart goes out to you. And you show incredible courage—incredible courage—being here. And the President and I are going to do everything in our power to honor the memory of your children and your wives with the work we take up here today.

It's been 33 days since the Nation's heart was broken by the horrific, senseless violence that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School: twenty—20—beautiful first-graders gunned down in a place that's supposed to be their second sanctuary; six—six—members of the staff killed trying to save those children. It's literally been hard for the Nation to comprehend, hard for the Nation to fathom.

And I know for the families who are here that time is not measured in days, but it's measured in minutes, in seconds, since you received that news. Another minute without your daughter. Another minute without your son. Another minute without your wife. Another minute without your mom.

I want to personally thank Chris and Lynn McDonnell, who lost their beautiful daughter Grace, and the other parents who I had a chance to speak to, for their suggestions and for—again, just for the courage of all of you to be here today. I admire the grace and the resolve that you all are showing. And I must say I've been deeply affected by your faith as well. And the President and I are going to do everything to try to match the resolve you've demonstrated.

No one can know for certain if this senseless act could have been prevented, but we all know we have a moral obligation—a moral obligation—to do everything in our power to diminish the prospect that something like this could happen again.

As the President knows, I've worked in this field a long time, in the United States Senate, having chaired a Committee that had jurisdiction over these issues of guns and crime and having drafted the first gun violence legislation—the last gun violence legislation, I should say. And I have no illusions about what we're up against or how hard the task is in front of us. But I also have never seen the Nation's conscience so shaken by what happened at Sandy Hook. The world has changed, and it's demanding action.

It's in this context that the President asked me to put together, along with Cabinet members, a set of recommendations about how we should proceed to meet that moral obligation we have. And toward that end, the Cabinet members and I sat down with 229 groups—not just individuals, representing groups—229 groups, from law enforcement agencies to public health officials, to gun officials, to gun advocacy groups, to sportsmen and hunters and religious leaders. And I've spoken with Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, had extensive conversation with mayors and Governors and county officials.

And the recommendations we provided to the President on Monday call for executive actions he could sign, legislation he could call for, and long-term research that should be undertaken. They're based on the emerging consensus we heard from all the groups with whom we spoke, including some of you who are victims of this god-awful occurrence, ways to

keep guns out of the wrong hands, as well as ways to take comprehensive action to prevent violence in the first place.

We should do as much as we can, as quickly as we can. And we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. So some of what you will hear from the President will happen immediately; some will take some time. But we have begun. And we are starting here today, and we're resolved to continue this fight.

During the meetings that we held, we met with a young man who's here today; I think Colin Goddard is here. Where are you, Colin? Colin was one of the survivors of the Virginia Tech massacre. He was in the classroom. He calls himself one of the lucky seven. And he'll tell you he was shot four times on that day, and he has three bullets that are still inside him.

And when I asked Colin about what he thought we should be doing, he said that, he said: "I'm not here because of what happened to me. I'm here because of what happened to me keeps happening to other people and we have to do something about it."

Colin, we will. Colin, I promise you, we will. This is our intention. We must do what we can now. And there's no person who is more committed to acting on this moral obligation we have than the President of the United States of America.

Ladies and gentlemen, President Barack Obama.

The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Good afternoon, everybody.

Let me begin by thanking our Vice President, Joe Biden, for your dedication, Joe, to this issue, for bringing so many different voices to the table. Because while reducing gun violence is a complicated challenge, protecting our children from harm shouldn't be a divisive one.

Over the month since the tragedy in Newtown, we've heard from so many, and obviously, none have affected us more than the families of those gorgeous children and their teachers and guardians who were lost. And so we're grateful to all of you for taking the time to be here and recognizing that we honor their memories in part by doing everything we can to prevent this from happening again.

But we also heard from some unexpected people. In particular, I started getting a lot of letters from kids. Four of them are here today: Grant Fritz, Julia Stokes, Hinna Zeejah, and Taejah Goode. They're pretty representative of some of the messages that I got. These are some pretty smart letters from some pretty smart young people.

Hinna, a third-grader—you can go ahead and wave, Hinna. Yes, you. [*Laughter*] Hinna wrote: "I feel terrible for the parents who lost their children. I love my country, and I want everybody to be happy and safe."

And then, Grant—go ahead and wave, Grant. [*Laughter*] Grant said: "I think there should be some changes. We should learn from what happened at Sandy Hook. I feel really bad."

And then, Julia said—Julia, where are you? There you go. "I'm not scared for my safety, I'm scared for others. I have four brothers and sisters, and I know I would not be able to bear the thought of losing any of them."

These are our kids. This is what they're thinking about. And so what we should be thinking about is our responsibility to care for them and shield them from harm and give them the tools they need to grow up and do everything that they're capable of doing, not just to pursue their

own dreams, but to help build this country. This is our first task as a society: keeping our children safe. This is how we will be judged. And their voices should compel us to change.

And that's why, last month, I asked Joe to lead an effort, along with members of my Cabinet, to come up with some concrete steps we can take right now to keep our children safe, to help prevent mass shootings, to reduce the broader epidemic of gun violence in this country.

And we can't put this off any longer. Just last Thursday, as TV networks were covering one of Joe's meetings on this topic, news broke of another school shooting, this one in California. In the month since 20 precious children and 6 brave adults were violently taken from us at Sandy Hook Elementary, more than 900 of our fellow Americans have reportedly died at the end of a gun—900 in the past month. And every day we wait, that number will keep growing.

So I'm putting forward a specific set of proposals based on the work of Joe's task force. And in the days ahead, I intend to use whatever weight this office holds to make them a reality. Because while there is no law or set of laws that can prevent every senseless act of violence completely, no piece of legislation that will prevent every tragedy, every act of evil, if there is even one thing we can do to reduce this violence, if there is even one life that can be saved, then we've got an obligation to try.

And I'm going to do my part. As soon as I'm finished speaking here, I will sit at that desk, and I will sign a directive giving law enforcement, schools, mental health professionals, and the public health community some of the tools they need to help reduce gun violence.

We will make it easier to keep guns out of the hands of criminals by strengthening the background check system. We will help schools hire more resource officers, if they want them, and develop emergency preparedness plans. We will make sure mental health professionals know their options for reporting threats of violence, even as we acknowledge that someone with a mental illness is far more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the perpetrator.

And while year after year, those who oppose even modest gun safety measures have threatened to defund scientific or medical research into the causes of gun violence, I will direct the Centers for Disease Control to go ahead and study the best ways to reduce it. And Congress should fund research into the effects that violent video games have on young minds. We don't benefit from ignorance. We don't benefit from not knowing the science of this epidemic of violence.

Now, these are a few of the 23 executive actions that I'm announcing today. But as important as these steps are, they are in no way a substitute for action from Members of Congress. To make a real and lasting difference, Congress, too, must act, and Congress must act soon. And I'm calling on Congress to pass some very specific proposals right away.

First, it's time for Congress to require a universal background check for anyone trying to buy a gun. The law already requires licensed gun dealers to run background checks, and over the last 14 years, that's kept 1.5 million of the wrong people from getting their hands on a gun. But it's hard to enforce that law when as many as 40 percent of all gun purchases are conducted without a background check. That's not safe. That's not smart. It's not fair to responsible gun buyers or sellers.

If you want to buy a gun—whether it's from a licensed dealer or a private seller—you should at least have to show you are not a felon or somebody legally prohibited from buying one. This is common sense. And an overwhelming majority of Americans agree with us on the

need for universal background checks, including more than 70 percent of the National Rifle Association's members, according to one survey. So there's no reason we can't do this.

Second, Congress should restore a ban on military-style assault weapons and a 10-round limit for magazines. The type of assault rifle used in Aurora, for example, when paired with high-capacity magazines, has one purpose: to pump out as many bullets as possible, as quickly as possible; to do as much damage, using bullets often designed to inflict maximum damage.

And that's what allowed the gunman in Aurora to shoot 70 people—70 people—killing 12 in a matter of minutes. Weapons designed for the theater of war have no place in a movie theater. A majority of Americans agree with us on this.

And by the way, so did Ronald Reagan, one of the staunchest defenders of the Second Amendment, who wrote to Congress in 1994, urging them—this is Ronald Reagan speaking—urging them to listen to the American public and to the law enforcement community and support a ban on the further manufacture of military-style assault weapons.

And finally, Congress needs to help, rather than hinder, law enforcement as it does its job. We should get tougher on people who buy guns with the express purpose of turning around and selling them to criminals. And we should severely punish anybody who helps them do this. Since Congress hasn't confirmed a Director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in 6 years, they should confirm Todd Jones, who will be—who has been Acting, and I will be nominating for the post.

And at a time when budget cuts are forcing many communities to reduce their police force, we should put more cops back on the job and back on our streets.

Now, let me be absolutely clear. Like most Americans, I believe the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms. I respect our strong tradition of gun ownership and the rights of hunters and sportsmen. There are millions of responsible, law-abiding gun owners in America who cherish their right to bear arms for hunting or sport or protection or collection.

I also believe most gun owners agree that we can respect the Second Amendment while keeping an irresponsible, law-breaking few from inflicting harm on a massive scale. I believe most of them agree that if America worked harder to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, there would be fewer atrocities like the one that occurred in Newtown. That's what these reforms are designed to do. They're commonsense measures. They have the support of the majority of the American people.

And yet that doesn't mean any of this is going to be easy to enact or implement. If it were, we'd already have universal background checks. The ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines never would have been allowed to expire. More of our fellow Americans might still be alive, celebrating birthdays and anniversaries and graduations.

This will be difficult. There will be pundits and politicians and special interest lobbyists publicly warning of a tyrannical, all-out assault on liberty, not because that's true, but because they want to gin up fear or higher ratings or revenue for themselves. And behind the scenes, they'll do everything they can to block any commonsense reform and make sure nothing changes whatsoever.

The only way we will be able to change is if their audience, their constituents, their membership says this time must be different, that this time, we must do something to protect our communities and our kids.

I will put everything I've got into this, and so will Joe. But I tell you, the only way we can change is if the American people demand it. And by the way, that doesn't just mean from certain parts of the country. We're going to need voices in those areas, in those congressional districts, where the tradition of gun ownership is strong to speak up and to say this is important. It can't just be the usual suspects. We have to examine ourselves and our hearts and ask ourselves what is important.

This will not happen unless the American people demand it. If parents and teachers, police officers and pastors, if hunters and sportsmen, if responsible gun owners, if Americans of every background stand up and say: "Enough. We've suffered too much pain and care too much about our children to allow this to continue." Then change will come. That's what it's going to take.

In the letter that Julia wrote me, she said, "I know that laws have to be passed by Congress, but I beg you to try very hard." [*Laughter*] Julia, I will try very hard. But she's right: The most important changes we can make depend on congressional action. They need to bring these proposals up for a vote, and the American people need to make sure that they do.

Get them on record. Ask your Member of Congress if they support universal background checks to keep guns out of the wrong hands. Ask them if they support renewing a ban on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. And if they say no, ask them why not. Ask them what's more important: doing whatever it takes to get a A grade from the gun lobby that funds their campaigns or giving parents some peace of mind when they drop their child off for first grade?

This is the land of the free, and it always will be. As Americans, we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights that no man or government can take away from us. But we've also long recognized, as our Founders recognized, that with rights come responsibilities. Along with our freedom to live our lives as we will comes an obligation to allow others to do the same. We don't live in isolation. We live in a society, a government of and by and for the people. We are responsible for each other.

The right to worship freely and safely, that right was denied to Sikhs in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The right to assemble peacefully, that right was denied shoppers in Clackamas, Oregon, and moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado. That most fundamental set of rights to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, fundamental rights that were denied to college students at Virginia Tech and high school students at Columbine and elementary school students in Newtown and kids on street corners in Chicago on too frequent a basis to tolerate and all the families who've never imagined that they'd lose a loved one to a bullet, those rights are at stake. We're responsible.

When I visited Newtown last month, I spent some private time with many of the families who lost their children that day. And one was the family of Grace McDonnell. Grace's parents are here. Grace was 7 years old when she was struck down, just a gorgeous, caring, joyful little girl. I'm told she loved pink. She loved the beach. She dreamed of becoming a painter.

And so just before I left, Chris, her father, gave me one of her paintings, and I hung it in my private study just off the Oval Office. And every time I look at that painting, I think about Grace. And I think about the life that she lived and the life that lay ahead of her, and most of all, I think about how, when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable among us, we must act now. For Grace. For the 25 other innocent children and devoted educators who had so much left to give. For the men and women in big cities and small towns who fall victim to senseless

violence each and every day. For all the Americans who are counting on us to keep them safe from harm. Let's do the right thing. Let's do the right thing for them and for this country that we love so much.

Thank you. Let's sign these orders.

[At this point, the President signed memorandums to increase research by Federal agencies into the causes and prevention of gun violence, improve the availability of records to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, and strengthen firearms tracing efforts by Federal law enforcement agencies.]

All right, there we go.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:52 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr.; Secretary of Homeland Security Janet A. Napolitano; Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius; and James E. Holmes, accused gunman in the July 20 shootings at the Century 16 multiplex in Aurora, CO. Vice President Biden referred to Colin Goddard, assistant director for legislative affairs, Brady Campaign To Prevent Gun Violence. He also referred to the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Gun violence.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Duncan, Arne; Fritz, Grant; Goode, Teja; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Holmes, James E.; Jones, B. Todd; McDonnell, Christopher; McDonnell, Lynn; Napolitano, Janet A.; Sebelius, Kathleen; Stokes, Julia; Zeejah, Hinna.

Subjects: California : Shootings in Taft; Civil rights : Firearm rights; Colorado : Shootings in Aurora; Connecticut : Shootings in Newtown; Education, Department of : Secretary; Health and Human Services, Department of : Secretary; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Justice, Department of : Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; Law enforcement and crime : Federal Assault Weapons Ban; Law enforcement and crime : Gun control; Law enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; Oregon : Shootings in Happy Valley; White House Office : Vice President; Wisconsin : Shootings in Oak Creek.

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