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Barack Obama

On Reducing Gun Violence and Making Our Communities Safer

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Mark, I want to thank you for your introduction. I still remember the first time we met, the time we spent together, and the conversation we had about Daniel. And that changed me that day. And my hope, earnestly, has been that it would change the country.

Five years ago this week, a sitting member of Congress and 18 others were shot at, at a supermarket in Tucson, Arizona. It wasn't the first time I had to talk to the nation in response to a mass shooting, nor would it be the last. Fort Hood. Binghamton. Aurora. Oak Creek. Newtown. The Navy Yard. Santa Barbara. Charleston. San Bernardino. Too many.

Audience Member: Too many.

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President Obama: Thanks to a great medical team and the love of her husband, Mark, my dear friend and colleague, Gabby Giffords, survived. She's here with us today, with her wonderful mom. Thanks to a great medical team, her wonderful husband, Mark -- who, by the way, the last time I met with Mark -- this is just a small aside -- you may know Mark's twin brother is in outer space.

He came to the office, and I said, how often are you talking to him? And he says, well, I usually talk to him every day, but the call was coming in right before the meeting so I think I may have not answered his call -- which made me feel kind of bad. That's a long-distance call. So I told him if his brother, Scott, is calling today, that he should take it. Turn the ringer on.

I was there with Gabby when she was still in the hospital, and we didn't think necessarily at that point that she was going to survive. And that visit right before a memorial -- about an hour later Gabby first opened her eyes. And I remember talking to mom about that. But I know the pain that she and her family have endured these past five years, and the rehabilitation and the work and the effort to recover from shattering injuries.

And then I think of all the Americans who aren't as fortunate. Every single year, more than 30,000 Americans have their lives cut short by guns -- 30,000. Suicides. Domestic violence. Gang shootouts. Accidents. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost brothers and sisters, or buried their own children. Many have had to learn to live with a disability, or learned to live without the love of their life.

A number of those people are here today. They can tell you some stories. In this room right here, there are a lot of stories. There's a lot of heartache. There's a lot of resilience, there's a lot of strength, but there's also a lot of pain. And this is just a small sample.

The United States of America is not the only country on Earth with violent or dangerous people. We are not inherently more prone to violence. But we are the only advanced country on Earth that sees this kind of mass violence erupt with this kind of frequency. It doesn't happen in other advanced countries. It's not even close. And as I've said before, somehow we've become numb to it and we start thinking that this is normal.

And instead of thinking about how to solve the problem, this has become one of our most polarized, partisan debates -- despite the fact that there's a general consensus in America about what needs to be done. That's part of the reason why, on Thursday, I'm going to hold a town hall meeting in Virginia on gun violence. Because my goal here is to bring good people on both sides of this issue together for an open discussion.

\I'm not on the ballot again. I'm not looking to score some points. I think we can disagree without impugning other people's motives or without being disagreeable. We don't need to be talking past one another.



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But we do have to feel a sense of urgency about it. In Dr. King's words, we need to feel the "fierce urgency of now." Because people are dying. And the constant excuses for inaction no longer do, no longer suffice.

That's why we're here today. Not to debate the last mass shooting, but to do something to try to prevent the next one. To prove that the vast majority of Americans, even if our voices aren't always the loudest or most extreme, care enough about a little boy like Daniel to come together and take common-sense steps to save lives and protect more of our children.

Now, I want to be absolutely clear at the start -- and I've said this over and over again, this also becomes routine, there is a ritual about this whole thing that I have to do -- I believe in the Second Amendment. It's there written on the paper. It guarantees a right to bear arms. No matter how many times people try to twist my words around -- I taught constitutional law, I know a little about this -- I get it. But I also believe that we can find ways to reduce gun violence consistent with the Second Amendment.

I mean, think about it. We all believe in the First Amendment, the guarantee of free speech, but we accept that you can't yell "fire" in a theater. We understand there are some constraints on our freedom in order to protect innocent people. We cherish our right to privacy, but we accept that you have to go through metal detectors before being allowed to board a plane. It's not because people like doing that, but we understand that that's part of the price of living in a civilized society.

And what's often ignored in this debate is that a majority of gun owners actually agree. A majority of gun owners agree that we can respect the Second Amendment while keeping an irresponsible, law-breaking feud from inflicting harm on a massive scale.

Today, background checks are required at gun stores. If a father wants to teach his daughter how to hunt, he can walk into a gun store, get a background check, purchase his weapon safely and responsibly. This is not seen as an infringement on the Second Amendment. Contrary to the claims of what some gun rights proponents have suggested, this hasn't been the first step in some slippery slope to mass confiscation. Contrary to claims of some presidential candidates, apparently, before this meeting, this is not a plot to take away everybody's guns. You pass a background check; you purchase a firearm.

The problem is some gun sellers have been operating under a different set of rules. A violent felon can buy the exact same weapon over the Internet with no background check, no questions asked. A recent study found that about one in 30 people looking to buy guns on one website had criminal records -- one out of 30 had a criminal record. We're talking about individuals convicted of serious crimes -- aggravated assault, domestic violence, robbery, illegal gun possession. People with lengthy criminal histories buying deadly weapons all too easily. And this was just one website within the span of a few months.



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So we've created a system in which dangerous people are allowed to play by a different set of rules than a responsible gun owner who buys his or her gun the right way and subjects themselves to a background check. That doesn't make sense. Everybody should have to abide by the same rules. Most Americans and gun owners agree. And that's what we tried to change three years ago, after 26 Americans -- including 20 children -- were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary.

Two United States Senators -- Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, and Pat Toomey, a Republican from Pennsylvania, both gun owners, both strong defenders of our Second Amendment rights, both with "A" grades from the NRA -- that's hard to get -- worked together in good faith, consulting with folks like our Vice President, who has been a champion on this for a long time, to write a common-sense compromise bill that would have required virtually everyone who buys a gun to get a background check. That was it. Pretty common-sense stuff. Ninety percent of Americans supported that idea. Ninety percent of Democrats in the Senate voted for that idea. But it failed because 90 percent of Republicans in the Senate voted against that idea.

How did this become such a partisan issue? Republican President George W. Bush once said, "I believe in background checks at gun shows or anywhere to make sure that guns don't get into the hands of people that shouldn't have them." Senator John McCain introduced a bipartisan measure to address the gun show loophole, saying, "We need this amendment because criminals and terrorists have exploited and are exploiting this very obvious loophole in our gun safety laws." Even the NRA used to support expanded background checks. And by the way, most of its members still do. Most Republican voters still do.

How did we get here? How did we get to the place where people think requiring a comprehensive background check means taking away people's guns?

Each time this comes up, we are fed the excuse that common-sense reforms like background checks might not have stopped the last massacre, or the one before that, or the one before that, so why bother trying. I reject that thinking. We know we can't stop every act of violence, every act of evil in the world. But maybe we could try to stop one act of evil, one act of violence.

Some of you may recall, at the same time that Sandy Hook happened, a disturbed person in China took a knife and tried to kill -- with a knife -- a bunch of children in China. But most of them survived because he didn't have access to a powerful weapon. We maybe can't save everybody, but we could save some. Just as we don't prevent all traffic accidents but we take steps to try to reduce traffic accidents.

As Ronald Reagan once said, if mandatory background checks could save more lives, "it would be well worth making it the law of the land." The bill before Congress three years ago met that test. Unfortunately, too many senators failed theirs.



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In fact, we know that background checks make a difference. After Connecticut passed a law requiring background checks and gun safety courses, gun deaths decreased by 40 percent -- 40 percent. Meanwhile, since Missouri repealed a law requiring comprehensive background checks and purchase permits, gun deaths have increased to almost 50 percent higher than the national average. One study found, unsurprisingly, that criminals in Missouri now have easier access to guns.

And the evidence tells us that in states that require background checks, law-abiding Americans don't find it any harder to purchase guns whatsoever. Their guns have not been confiscated. Their rights have not been infringed.

And that's just the information we have access to. With more research, we could further improve gun safety. Just as with more research, we've reduced traffic fatalities enormously over the last 30 years. We do research when cars, food, medicine, even toys harm people so that we make them safer. And you know what -- research, science -- those are good things. They work. They do.

But think about this. When it comes to an inherently deadly weapon -- nobody argues that guns are potentially deadly -- weapons that kill tens of thousands of Americans every year, Congress actually voted to make it harder for public health experts to conduct research into gun violence; made it harder to collect data and facts and develop strategies to reduce gun violence. Even after San Bernardino, they've refused to make it harder for terror suspects who can't get on a plane to buy semi-automatic weapons. That's not right. That can't be right.

So the gun lobby may be holding Congress hostage right now, but they cannot hold America hostage. We do not have to accept this carnage as the price of freedom.

Now, I want to be clear. Congress still needs to act. The folks in this room will not rest until Congress does. Because once Congress gets on board with common-sense gun safety measures we can reduce gun violence a whole lot more. But we also can't wait. Until we have a Congress that's in line with the majority of Americans, there are actions within my legal authority that we can take to help reduce gun violence and save more lives -- actions that protect our rights and our kids.

After Sandy Hook, Joe and I worked together with our teams and we put forward a whole series of executive actions to try to tighten up the existing rules and systems that we had in place. But today, we want to take it a step further. So let me outline what we're going to be doing.

Number one, anybody in the business of selling firearms must get a license and conduct background checks, or be subject to criminal prosecutions. It doesn't matter whether you're doing it over the Internet or at a gun show. It's not where you do it, but what you do.



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We're also expanding background checks to cover violent criminals who try to buy some of the most dangerous firearms by hiding behind trusts and corporations and various cutouts.

We're also taking steps to make the background check system more efficient. Under the guidance of Jim Comey and the FBI, our Deputy Director Tom Brandon at ATF, we're going to hire more folks to process applications faster, and we're going to bring an outdated background check system into the 21st century.

And these steps will actually lead to a smoother process for law-abiding gun owners, a smoother process for responsible gun dealers, a stronger process for protecting the people from -- the public from dangerous people. So that's number one.

Number two, we're going to do everything we can to ensure the smart and effective enforcement of gun safety laws that are already on the books, which means we're going to add 200 more ATF agents and investigators. We're going to require firearms dealers to report more lost or stolen guns on a timely basis. We're working with advocates to protect victims of domestic abuse from gun violence, where too often -- where too often, people are not getting the protection that they need.

Number three, we're going to do more to help those suffering from mental illness get the help that they need. High-profile mass shootings tend to shine a light on those few mentally unstable people who inflict harm on others. But the truth is, is that nearly two in three gun deaths are from suicides. So a lot of our work is to prevent people from hurting themselves.

That's why we made sure that the Affordable Care Act -- also known as Obamacare -- that law made sure that treatment for mental health was covered the same as treatment for any other illness. And that's why we're going to invest \$500 million to expand access to treatment across the country.

It's also why we're going to ensure that federal mental health records are submitted to the background check system, and remove barriers that prevent states from reporting relevant information. If we can continue to de-stigmatize mental health issues, get folks proper care, and fill gaps in the background check system, then we can spare more families the pain of losing a loved one to suicide.

And for those in Congress who so often rush to blame mental illness for mass shootings as a way of avoiding action on guns, here's your chance to support these efforts. Put your money where your mouth is.

Number four, we're going to boost gun safety technology. Today, many gun injuries and deaths are the result of legal guns that were stolen or misused or discharged accidentally. In 2013 alone, more than 500 people lost their lives to gun accidents -- and that includes 30 children younger than five years old. In the greatest, most technologically advanced nation on Earth, there is no reason for this. We need to develop new technologies that make guns safer.



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If we can set it up so you can't unlock your phone unless you've got the right fingerprint, why can't we do the same thing for our guns? If there's an app that can help us find a missing tablet -- which happens to me often the older I get -- if we can do it for your iPad, there's no reason we can't do it with a stolen gun. If a child can't open a bottle of aspirin, we should make sure that they can't pull a trigger on a gun. Right?

So we're going to advance research. We're going to work with the private sector to update firearms technology.

And some gun retailers are already stepping up by refusing to finalize a purchase without a complete background check, or by refraining from selling semi-automatic weapons or high-capacity magazines. And I hope that more retailers and more manufacturers join them -- because they should care as much as anybody about a product that now kills almost as many Americans as car accidents.

I make this point because none of us can do this alone. I think Mark made that point earlier. All of us should be able to work together to find a balance that declares the rest of our rights are also important -- Second Amendment rights are important, but there are other rights that we care about as well. And we have to be able to balance them. Because our right to worship freely and safely -- that right was denied to Christians in Charleston, South Carolina. And that was denied Jews in Kansas City. And that was denied Muslims in Chapel Hill, and Sikhs in Oak Creek. They had rights, too.

Our right to peaceful assembly -- that right was robbed from moviegoers in Aurora and Lafayette. Our unalienable right to life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness -- those rights were stripped from college students in Blacksburg and Santa Barbara, and from high schoolers at Columbine, and from first-graders in Newtown. First-graders. And from every family who never imagined that their loved one would be taken from our lives by a bullet from a gun.

Every time I think about those kids it gets me mad. And by the way, it happens on the streets of Chicago every day.

So all of us need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby's lies. All of us need to stand up and protect its citizens. All of us need to demand governors and legislatures and businesses do their part to make our communities safer. We need the wide majority of responsible gun owners who grieve with us every time this happens and feel like your views are not being properly represented to join with us to demand something better.

And we need voters who want safer gun laws, and who are disappointed in leaders who stand in their way, to remember come election time.



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I mean, some of this is just simple math. Yes, the gun lobby is loud and it is organized in defense of making it effortless for guns to be available for anybody, any time. Well, you know what, the rest of us, we all have to be just as passionate. We have to be just as organized in defense of our kids. This is not that complicated. The reason Congress blocks laws is because they want to win elections. And if you make it hard for them to win an election if they block those laws, they'll change course, I promise you.

And, yes, it will be hard, and it won't happen overnight. It won't happen during this Congress. It won't happen during my presidency.

But a lot of things don't happen overnight. A woman's right to vote didn't happen overnight. The liberation of African Americans didn't happen overnight. LGBT rights -- that was decades' worth of work. So just because it's hard, that's no excuse not to try.

And if you have any doubt as to why you should feel that "fierce urgency of now," think about what happened three weeks ago. Zaevion Dobson was a sophomore at Fulton High School in Knoxville, Tennessee. He played football; beloved by his classmates and his teachers. His own mayor called him one of their city's success stories. The week before Christmas, he headed to a friend's house to play video games. He wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. He hadn't made a bad decision. He was exactly where any other kid would be. Your kid. My kids. And then gunmen started firing. And Zaevion -- who was in high school, hadn't even gotten started in life -- dove on top of three girls to shield them from the bullets. And he was shot in the head. And the girls were spared. He gave his life to save theirs -- an act of heroism a lot bigger than anything we should ever expect from a 15-year-old. "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

We are not asked to do what Zaevion Dobson did. We're not asked to have shoulders that big; a heart that strong; reactions that quick. I'm not asking people to have that same level of courage, or sacrifice, or love. But if we love our kids and care about their prospects, and if we love this country and care about its future, then we can find the courage to vote. We can find the courage to get mobilized and organized. We can find the courage to cut through all the noise and do what a sensible country would do.

That's what we're doing today. And tomorrow, we should do more. And we should do more the day after that. And if we do, we'll leave behind a nation that's stronger than the one we inherited and worthy of the sacrifice of a young man like Zaevion.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. Thank you. God bless America.