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**Barack Obama**

*Remarks at a CNN 'Guns in America' Town Hall*

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**Anderson Cooper:** Good evening from George Mason University here in Fairfax, Virginia. We are here tonight to talk about one of the most divisive issues in America today -- guns. Their protection is enshrined in the Constitution, in the Second Amendment, and gun ownership is an integral part of American history and culture.

There are some 30,000 gun deaths in America each year. Two-thirds of them are suicides; one-third of them are homicides. So the question we want to confront tonight is how you find a balance between protecting the rights of American citizens who want to own guns, but preventing guns from getting into the hands of people who shouldn't have them.

We brought together people here tonight who represent really all sides of the issue -- gun owners, gun sellers, people who have survived shootings or lost loved ones. Some here believe that having more guns makes us all safer, and believe the right to bear arms defines us, preserves us from tyranny and cannot be compromised in any way. Others here tonight believe just as passionately that more needs to be done to limit the sale of firearms. And we respect all of their views, and we want to hear from as many as we can tonight in the hour ahead.



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One voice you will not hear from tonight is the National Rifle Association. They're the nation's largest, most influential and powerful gun rights group. We invited them to be here -- I think their office is just a couple miles away. They declined to take part. Some of their members are here tonight, though. We're very thankful for that. And so are representatives from the National Firearms Retailers Association.

This town hall is not something the White House dreamed up or that the White House organized. CNN approached the White House shortly after the San Bernardino terror attack with this idea. And we're pleased that they agreed to participate and pleased to welcome tonight the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

**President Obama:** Thank you, everybody. Thank you.

**Anderson Cooper:** Hello, Mr. President. Welcome.

**President Obama:** Great to see you.

**Anderson Cooper:** Good to see you. Let me start. Have you ever owned a gun?

**President Obama:** I have never owned a gun. Now, up at Camp David, we've got some skeet shooting, so on a fairly regular basis, we get a 12-gauge and -- I'm not making any claims about my marksmanship.

**Anderson Cooper:** Before you were President, did you ever feel a desire to get a gun, feel the need to get a gun?

**President Obama:** I grew up mostly in Hawaii, and other than hunting for wild pig -- which they do once in a while -- there's not the popularity of hunting and sportsmanship with guns as much as there are in other parts of the country.

**Anderson Cooper:** I mean, I ask the question because there's a lot of people out there who don't trust you, obviously, on the issue of guns. You keep saying you don't want to take away everybody's guns. But there's a lot of people out there tonight watching who don't believe you. There are a lot of people in this room who, frankly, don't believe you. And it's not just that you don't really have personal experience having owned a gun, but that things you've said: Support for Australia's tough anti-gun policies. They banned semi-automatic assault rifles. They banned even shotguns in Australia. You've praised their policies over and over.

Back in 2008, you said -- you talked about "bitter Americans clinging to their guns." Even now, these executive actions have caused a lot of concern among a lot of people. What can you say to somebody tonight to convince them that you don't want to take away everybody's guns and you're not coming for their guns?



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**President Obama:** Well, first of all, Anderson, I think it's useful to keep in mind I've been now President for over seven years and gun sales don't seem to have suffered during that time.

**Anderson Cooper:** If anything, actually --

**President Obama:** They've gone up. I've been very good for gun manufacturers. More importantly -- I'll tell you a story that I think indicates how I see the issue. Back in 2007-2008, when I was campaigning, I'd leave Chicago, a city which is wonderful, I couldn't be prouder of my city, but where every week there's a story about a young person getting shot. Some are gang members and it's turf battles. Sometimes it's innocent victims.

**Anderson Cooper:** Fifty-five people have been shot in Chicago in the last seven days.

**President Obama:** Sometimes it's happened just a few blocks from my house, and I live in a reasonably good neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. So that's one image -- talking to families who've gone through the pain of losing somebody because of violence in Chicago -- gun violence.

Michelle and I are then campaigning out in Iowa, and we're going to farms and we're going to counties. And at one point, Michelle turned to me and she said, you know, if I was living in a farmhouse, where the sheriff's department is pretty far away, and somebody can just turn off the highway and come up to the farm, I'd want to have a shotgun or a rifle to make sure that I was protected and my family was protected. And she was absolutely right.

And so part of the reason I think that this ends up being such a difficult issue is because people occupy different realities. There are a whole bunch of law-abiding citizens who have grown up hunting with their dad, or going to the shooting range, and are responsible gun owners. And then there's the reality that there are neighborhoods around the country where it is easier for a 12 or 13-year-old to purchase a gun -- and cheaper -- than it is for them to get a book.

**Anderson Cooper:** But what you're proposing, what you proposed this week, the executive actions, the other things, are they really going to be effective? And I ask this because the vast majority of felons out there -- I mean, we can all agree criminals should not get guns; we want to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. The vast majority of criminals get their guns from -- either illegally or from family or friends. So background checks is not something that's going to affect them, is it?

**President Obama:** Well, but that's not exactly accurate. Look, first of all, it's important for everybody to understand what I've proposed and what I haven't proposed. What I've said consistently throughout my presidency is I respect the Second Amendment; I respect the right to bear arms; I respect people who want a gun for self-protection, for hunting, for



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sportsmanship. But all of us can agree that it makes sense to do everything we can to keep guns out of the hands of people who would try to do others harm, or to do themselves harm.

Because every year we're losing 30,000 people to gun violence. Two-thirds of those are actually suicides. Hundreds of kids under the age of 18 are being shot or shooting themselves, often by accident -- many of them under the age of five. And so if we can combine gun safety with sensible background checks and some other steps, we're not going to eliminate gun violence, but we will lessen it. And if we take that number from 30,000 down to, let's say, 28,000, that's 2,000 families who don't have to go through what the families at Newtown or San Bernardino or Charleston went through.

And so what we've proposed is that if you have a background check system that has a bunch of big loopholes, which is why a lot of criminals and people who shouldn't have guns are able to get guns --

**Question:** But they're not buying them at gun shows -- only 1 percent of criminals are buying them at gun shows.

**President Obama:** No, but this is what happens. Let's go back to the city of Chicago that has strong gun control laws. And oftentimes the NRA will point to that as an example and say, see, these things don't work. Well, the problem is, is that about 30, 40 percent of those guns are coming from Indiana, across the border, where there are much laxer laws. And so folks will go to a gun show and purchase a whole bunch of firearms, put them in a van, drive up into Mike Pflieger's neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, where his parish is, open up the trunk, and those things are for sale.

Now, technically, you could say those folks bought them illegally, but it was facilitated by the fact that what used to be a small exception that said collectors and hobbyists don't need to go through a background check has become this massive industry where people who are doing business are, in fact, saying that they're not in the business of selling guns, but are.

And all we're saying here is, is that we want to put everybody on notice that the definition of doing business -- which means you have to register, and it means you have to run a background check -- is if you are making a profit and repeatedly selling guns, then you should have to follow the same rules as every other gun dealer. And what that means --

**Anderson Cooper:** There are a lot of people who believe that's not specific enough because there's a lot of fathers and sons who sell guns every now and then and at gun shows. Are they going to have to now start doing background checks? Are they going to start to have to register?



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**President Obama:** Look, what the Justice Department has done is provided a whole range of very specific examples. And what we ultimately need I believe is for Congress to set up a system that is efficient, that doesn't inconvenience the lawful gun seller or purchaser, but that makes sure that we're doing the best background check possible.

And the fact, Anderson, that the system may not catch every single person, or there may be a circumstance where somebody doesn't think that they have to register and do, and that may cause some red tape and bureaucracy for them, which -- or inconvenience -- has to be weighed against the fact that we may be able to save a whole bunch of families from the grief that some of the people in this audience have had to go through.

And keep in mind, for the gun owners who are in attendance here, my suspicion is, is that you all had to go through a background check and it didn't prevent you from getting a weapon. And the notion that you should have to do that but there are a whole bunch of folks who are less responsible than you who don't have to do it doesn't make much sense.

So why we should resist this -- keep in mind that, historically, the NRA was in favor of background checks. Historically, many in the Republican Party were in favor of background checks. And what's changed is not that my proposals are particularly radical. What's changed is we've suddenly created an atmosphere in which I put out a proposal like background checks or, after Sandy Hook, was calling on Congress, along with people like Gabby Giffords, who herself was a victim of gun violence -- we put out a proposal that is common sense, modest, does not claim to solve every problem, is respectful of the Second Amendment, and the way it is described is that we're trying to take away everybody's guns.

And part of the reason I welcomed this opportunity by CNN to have a good discussion and debate about it is because our position is consistently mischaracterized. And, by the way, there's a reason why the NRA is not here. They're just down the street, and since this is the main reason they exist, you'd think that they'd be prepared to have a debate with the President.

**Anderson Cooper:** They haven't been to the White House for years.

**President Obama:** Oh, no, no -- we've invited them. We've invited them.

**Anderson Cooper:** So, right now, tonight, you're saying you would be --

**President Obama:** We have invited them repeatedly. But if you listen to the rhetoric, it is so over the top and so over-heated, and, most importantly, is not acknowledging the fact that there's no other consumer item that we purchase --

**Question:** So is that an open invitation that --



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**President Obama:** Hold on a second. Let me finish this point, Cooper. There's nothing else in our lives that we purchase where we don't try to make it a little safer if we can. Traffic fatalities have gone down drastically during my lifetime. And part of it is technology, and part of it is the National Highway Safety Administration does research and they figure out, you know what, seatbelts really work. And then we passed some laws to make sure seatbelts are fastened. Airbags make a lot of sense; let's try those out. Toys -- we say, you know what, we find out that kids are swallowing toys all the time, let's make sure that the toys aren't so small that they swallow them if they're for toddlers or infants. Medicine -- kids can't open aspirin caps.

Now, the notion that we would not apply the same basic principles to gun ownership as we do to everything else that we own just to try to make them safer, or the notion that anything we do to try to make them safer is somehow a plot to take away guns, that contradicts what we do to try to create a better life for Americans in every other area of our lives.

**Anderson Cooper:** And just so I'm clear, tonight you're saying you would welcome to meet with the NRA?

**President Obama:** Anderson, I've said this repeatedly -- I'm happy to meet with them. I'm happy to talk to them. But the conversation has to be based on facts and truth and what we're actually proposing, not some imaginary fiction in which Obama is trying to take away your guns. The reason, by the way, that gun sales spike not just before I propose something -- every time there is a mass shooting, gun sales spike. And part of the reason is, is that the NRA has convinced many of its members that somebody is going come grab your guns -- which is, by the way, really profitable for the gun manufacturers. It's a great advertising mechanism, but it's not necessary. There's enough of a market out there for people who want protection, who are sportsmen, who wants to go hunting with their kids. And we can make it safer.

**Anderson Cooper:** I want to open this up to people in our audience.

**President Obama:** Absolutely.

**Anderson Cooper:** People have traveled far. I want you to meet Taya Kyle. She's the widow of Chris Kyle, former Navy SEAL, author of "American Sniper." Taya wrote a book, "American Life: A Memoir of Love, War, Faith, and Renewal." Taya, we're happy you're here. What do you want to ask the President?

**Question:** I appreciate you taking the time to come here. And I think that your message of hope is something I agree with, and I think it's great. And I think that by creating new laws you do give people hope. The thing is that the laws that we create don't stop these horrific things from happening, right? And that's a very tough pill to swallow.

**President Obama:** Right.



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**Question:** We want to think that we can make a law and people will follow it. But by the very nature of their crime, they're not following it. By the very nature of looking at the people who hurt our loved ones here, I don't know that any of them would have been stopped by the background check. And yet -- I crave that desire for hope, too. And so I think, part of it, we have to recognize that we cannot outlaw murder, because the people who are murdering are - they're breaking the law, but they also don't have a moral code that we have. And so they could do the same amount of damage with a pipe bomb. The problem is that they want to murder.

And I'm wondering why it wouldn't be a better use of our time to give people hope in a different way, to say, you know what, we -- well, first of all, actually, let me back up to that. Because with the laws, I know that at least the last I heard, the federal prosecution of gun crimes was like 40 percent. And what I mean by that is that there are people lying on these forms already, and we're not prosecuting them. So there's an issue there, right? But instead, if we can give people hope and say that also during this time, while you've been President, we are at the lowest murder rate in our country -- all-time low of murders. We're at an all-time high of gun ownership, right? I'm not necessarily saying that the two are correlated, but what I'm saying is that we're at an all-time low for a murder rate. That's a big deal.

And yet, I think most of us in this country feel like it could happen at any moment. It could happen to any of us at any time, at a moment's notice. When you talk about the NRA, and after a mass shooting that gun sales go up, I would argue that it's not necessarily that I think somebody is going to come take my gun from me, but I want the hope, and the hope that I have the right to protect myself, that I don't end up to be one of these families; that I have the freedom to carry whatever weapon I feel I need, just like your wife said on that farm. The sheriff is not going to get to my house, either. And I understand that background checks aren't necessarily going to stop me from getting a gun, but I also know that they wouldn't have stopped any of the people here in this room from killing. And so it seems like almost a false sense of hope. So why not celebrate where we are? I guess that's my real question -- is celebrate that we're good people, and 99.9 percent of us are never going to kill anyone.

**President Obama:** Well, let me make a couple of points. First of all, thanks to your husband for his service, and thank you for your service, because of extraordinary heroism that he and your family have shown in protecting all of us. And I'm very grateful for that.

Number two, what you said about murder rates and violent crime generally is something that we don't celebrate enough. The fact of the matter is, is that violent crime has been steadily declining across America for a pretty long time. And you wouldn't always know it by watching television, but overall, most cities are much safer than they were 10 years ago or 20 years ago.



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Now, I'd challenge the notion that the reason for that is because there's more gun ownership, because if you look at where are the areas with the highest gun ownership, those are the places, in some cases, where the crime rate hasn't dropped down that much. And the places where there's pretty stiff restrictions on gun ownership, in some of those places the crime has dropped really quickly. So I'm not sure that there's a one-to-one correlation there.

But I think the most important point I want to make is that you will be able to purchase a firearm. Some criminals will get their hands on firearms even if there's a background check. Somebody may lie on a form. Somebody will intend to commit a crime but they don't have a record that shows up on the background check system.

But in the same way that we don't eliminate all traffic accidents, but over the course of 20 years, traffic accidents get lower -- there's still tragedies, there's still drunk drivers, there's still people who don't wear their seatbelts -- but over time, that violence was reduced, and so families are spared. That's the same thing that we can do with gun ownership.

There is a way for us to set up a system where you, a responsible gun owner, who I'm assuming, given your husband and your family, is a much better marksman than I am, can have a firearm to protect yourself, but where it is much harder for somebody to fill up a car with guns and sell them to 13-year-old kids on the streets. And that is I think what we're trying to do.

What we're also trying to do is make the database more effective -- so that's part of the proposal -- which, by the way, will convenience you when you go to the store, because if we can set up a 24/7 background check system, then that means that it's less likely that things slip through the cracks or it's more difficult for you to get your background check completed.

And we're also trying to close a loophole that has been developing over the last decade where now people are using cut-out trusts and shell corporations to purchase the most dangerous weapons -- sawed-off shotguns, automatic weapons, silencers -- and don't have to go through background checks at all. And we don't know whether -- are these sales going to drug traffickers? We don't know who's purchasing them right now. And so what we're saying is, you know what, that is something that we've got to do something about.

The same thing is true with Internet sales, where one study has shown that one out of 30 persons who are purchasing weapons over the Internet turn out to have a felony record. And that's not something you want to see.

**Anderson Cooper:** I think one question a lot of people have about you is do you believe the fundamental notion that a good guy with a gun or a good woman with a gun is an important bulwark against a bad person with a gun? And before you answer, I want you to meet Kimberly Corban. Kimberly was a college student in Colorado in 2006 -- Kimberly is right over there.



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She was raped by a man who broke into her apartment. She testified for three hours in the trial against him. Her attacker was sentenced to 24-years-to-life in prison. And I know that attack, Kimberly, changed your view of handguns. What's your question for the President?

**Question:** Absolutely. As a survivor of rape and now a mother to two small children, it seems like being able to purchase a firearm of my choosing, and being able to carry that wherever me and my family are, it seems like my basic responsibility as a parent at this point. I have been unspeakably victimized once already, and I refuse to let that happen again to myself or my kids. So why can't your Administration see that these restrictions that you're putting to make it harder for me to own a gun, or harder for me to take that where I need to be is actually just making my kids and I less safe?

**President Obama:** Well, Kimberly, first of all, obviously, your story is horrific. The strength you've shown in telling your story and being here tonight is remarkable. And so I'm really proud of you for that.

I just want to repeat that there's nothing that we've proposed that would make it harder for you to purchase a firearm. And now, you may be referring to issues like concealed carry, but those tend to be state-by-state decisions, and we're not making any proposals with respect to what states are doing. They can make their own decisions there. So there really is no -- nothing that we're proposing that prevents you or makes it harder for you to purchase a firearm if you need one.

There are always questions as to whether or not having a firearm in the home protects you from that kind of violence. And I'm not sure we can resolve that. People argue it both sides. What is true is, is that you have to be pretty well trained in order to fire a weapon against somebody who is assaulting you and catches you by surprise. And what is also true is there's always the possibility that that firearm in a home leads to a tragic accident. We can debate that, round or flat.

But for now, what I just want to focus on is that you certainly would like to make it a little harder for that assailant to have also had a gun. You certainly would want to make sure that if he gets released, that he now can't do what he did to you to somebody else. And it's going to be easier for us to prevent him from getting a gun if there's a strong background system in place -- background check system in place.

And so if you look at the statistics, there's no doubt that there are times where somebody who has a weapon has been able to protect themselves and scare off an intruder or an assailant. But what is more often the case is that they may not have been able to protect themselves but they end up the victim of the weapon that they purchased themselves. And that's something that can be debated. In the meantime, all I'm focused on is making sure that a terrible crime like yours that was committed is not made easier because somebody can go on the Internet and just buy whatever weapon they want without us finding out whether they're a criminal or not.



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**Anderson Cooper:** Kimberly, thank you for being here. I appreciate it.

You talked about Chicago, and there's a lot of folks from Chicago here tonight. I want you to meet -- or I want everybody to meet, because I know you've met her before, Cleo Pendleton. She's sitting over there. And I should point out -- I think I said it earlier -- 55 shootings in Chicago in just the past seven days. Cleo Pendleton, her daughter, Hadiya, performed at your second inauguration. She was shot to death a little more than a week later. She was 15 years old. She was an honor student, a majorette. And you being here tonight honors her, so thank you very much for being here. What's your question to the President?

**Question:** Well, I want to say thank you, first of all, for making it more difficult for guns to get in the hands of those that shouldn't have them. Thank you for the action you took on Tuesday. But I want to ask a question -- how can we stop the trafficking of guns from states with looser gun laws into states with tougher gun laws? Because I believe that's the case often in Chicago, and possibly the source of the gun that shot and murdered my daughter.

**President Obama:** Well, first of all, it's great to see you again. And part of the reason that we do this is because when you meet parents of wonderful young people and they tell their stories, at least for me, I think of Malia and I think of Sasha and I think of my nieces and I think of my nephews. And the pain that any of us go through with a loss like that is extraordinary. And I couldn't be prouder of the families who are here representing both sides but who've been affected in those ways.

If we are able to set up a strong background check system -- and my proposal, by the way, includes hiring -- having the FBI hire a couple hundred more people to help process background checks, because they're big numbers, you're talking about 20 million checks that are getting done every year -- hiring 200,000 -- or 200 more ATF agents to be able to go after unscrupulous gun dealers, then that will apply across the country.

And so, some states may have laws that allow for conceal-and -carry; some states may not. There's still going to be differences. But what will at least be consistent across the country is that it's a little bit harder to get a gun. Now, we can't guarantee that criminals are not going to have ways of getting guns. But, for example, it may be a little more difficult and a little more expensive, and the laws of supply and demand mean that if something is harder to get and it's a little more expensive to get, then fewer people get them. And that, in and of itself, could make a difference.

So if somebody is a straw purchaser -- and what that means is they don't intend the guns for themselves, they intend to resell them to somebody else -- they go to a gun show in Indiana, where right now they don't have to do a background check, load up a van, and open up that van and sell them to kids in gangs in Chicago -- if now that person has to go through a background check, they've got to register, ATF has the capacity then to find out if and when a gun is used in a crime in Chicago where that gun had come from. And now you know here's somebody who seems to be willing to sell a gun to a 15-year-old who had a known record.



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**Anderson Cooper:** But you're only going to be asking people to get a license and do background checks if they give out business cards, if they're selling weapons that are in the original packaging. Somebody just walking around a gun show selling a weapon is not necessarily going to have to register.

**President Obama:** No -- look, there's going to be a case-by-case evaluation: Are they on an ongoing basis making a profit and are they repeatedly selling firearms.

**Anderson Cooper:** I want you to meet Sheriff Paul Babeu of Pinal County, Arizona. He's a Republican running for Congress. After the recent terror attacks, Sheriff, I know you've been telling citizens to arm themselves to protect their families. What's your question to the President?

**Question:** Well, first, deputies' slow response time has been mentioned a couple times. I want to be clear that my deputies have a very fast emergency response --

**President Obama:** I'm sure that's true.

**Question:** Yes. Mr. President, you've said you've been thwarted by -- frustrated by Congress. As a sheriff, I oftentimes get frustrated. But I don't make the laws and I've sworn an oath to enforce the law, to uphold the Constitution, the same oath you've taken. And the talk and why we're here is all these mass shootings, and yet you've said in your executive action it wouldn't have solved even one of these or the terrorist attack --

**President Obama:** No, I didn't say that. I didn't say that it wouldn't solve one.

**Question:** Well, looking at the information, what would it have solved? Now, knowing --

**Anderson Cooper:** None of the recent mass shootings, I should point out, none of the guns were purchased from an unlicensed dealer.

**Question:** Correct. And that's what I'm speaking to -- the executive action that you mentioned earlier. Aspirin, toys, or cars, they're not written about in the Constitution. I want to know -- and I think all of us really want to get to the solution, and you said don't talk past each other -- what would you have done to prevent these mass shootings and the terrorist attack? And how do we get those with mental illness and criminals -- that's the real problem here -- how are we going to get them to follow the laws?

**President Obama:** Well, first of all, appreciate your service. Good luck on your race. You sure you want to go to Congress?

**Question:** I don't want to [inaudible] --



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**President Obama:** I'm sure that's true. That will hurt you. And I'm sure it's a Republican district. Look, crime is always going to be with us. So I think it's really important for us not to suggest that if we can't solve every crime, we shouldn't try to solve any crimes.

And the problem when we talk about that guns don't kill people; people kill people, or it's primarily a mental health problem, or it's a criminal and evil problem and that's what we have to get at -- all of us are interested in fighting crime. I'm very proud of the fact that violent crime rates have continued to go down during the course of my presidency. I've got an Attorney General, an FBI that works very closely with local law enforcement in busting up crime rings all the time. That's a huge priority to us. And we're probably providing grants to your department to help go after criminals.

The challenge we have is that in many instances, you don't know ahead of time who's going to be the criminal. It's not as if criminals walk around with a label saying, "I'm a criminal." And, by the way, the young man who killed those kids in Newtown, he didn't have a criminal record, and so we didn't know ahead of time, necessarily, that he was going to do something like that. But he was able to have access to an arsenal that allowed him in very short order to kill an entire classroom of small children. And so the question then becomes, are there ways for us -- since we can't identify that person all the time, are there ways for us to make it less lethal when something like that happens?

And I mentioned this during my speech at the White House a couple of days ago. Right around the time of Newtown, in China, a guy who was obviously similarly deranged had a knife and started attacking a bunch of schoolchildren. About the same number were cut or stabbed by this guy. But most of them survived. And the reason was because he wasn't yielding a semi-automatic.

So the main point I think that I want to make here is that everybody here is in favor of going after criminals, locking them up, making sure that we're creating an environment where kids don't turn into criminals and providing the support that they need. Those are all important things. Nobody is saying we need to be going soft on criminals.

What we do have to make sure of is that we don't make it so easy for them to have access to deadly weapons. In neighborhoods like Chicago -- I keep on using Chicago -- this is all across the country. You go into any neighborhood, it used to be that parents would see some kids messing around on the corner and they'd say, "Yo" -- even if they weren't the parent of those children -- "go back inside, stop doing that." And over time, it was a lot harder to discipline somebody else's kid and have the community maintain order, or talk to police officers if somebody is doing something wrong, because now somebody is worried about getting shot.

And if we can create an environment that's just a little bit safer in those communities, that will help. And if it doesn't infringe on your Second Amendment rights, and it doesn't infringe on your Second Amendment rights, and you're still able to get a firearm for your protection, why wouldn't we want to do that?



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**Anderson Cooper:** We've got to take a break. We're going to take a quick break. Our live town hall conversation, "Guns in America," with President Barack Obama continues right after this.

[commercial break]

**Anderson Cooper:** And welcome back. We're live at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, continuing our live town hall conversation with President Barack Obama, "Guns In America," talking to voices from all sides of the issue, including the President.

You made your announcement just the other day in a very obviously emotional ceremony at the White House. And I want to play just a moment from it for those who haven't seen it.

[Video is shown.]

I think a lot of people were surprised by that moment.

**President Obama:** I was, too, actually. I visited Newtown two days after what happened, so it was still very raw. It's the only time I've ever seen Secret Service cry on duty. And it wasn't just the parents. You had siblings -- 10-year-olds, 8-year-olds, 3-year-olds, who, in some cases, didn't even understand that their brother or sister weren't going to be coming home. And I've said this before -- it continues to haunt me. It was one of the worst days of my presidency.

But, look, I want to emphasize that there are a lot of tragedies that happen out there as a consequence of the victims of crime. There are police officers who are out there laying down their lives to protect us every single day. And tears are appropriate for them, as well, and I visit with those families, as well -- victims of terrorism, soldiers coming home.

There's a lot of heartache out there. And I don't suggest that this is the only kind of heartache we should be working on. I spent a lot of time and a lot of hours -- in fact, a lot more hours than I spend on this -- trying to prevent terrorist attacks. I spend a lot of time and a lot of hours trying to make sure that we're continuing to reduce our crime rate.

There are a whole bunch of other answers that are just as important when it comes to making sure that the streets of places like Chicago and Baltimore are safer. Making sure kids get a good early childhood education. Making sure that we're teaching conflict resolution that doesn't involve violence. Making sure that faith communities are able to reach out to young people and intervene in timely ways.

So this is not a recipe for solving every problem. Again, I just want to emphasize that the goal here is just to make progress. And it's interesting, as I enter into my last year as President, I could not be prouder of the work that we've done.



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But it also makes you really humble, because you realize that change takes a long time and a lot of the work you do is just to incrementally make things better so that, 10 years from now, 20 years from now, the crime rate has gone down.

That's not just because of my Administration. That's the groundwork that was laid by a bunch of good work by law enforcement and others for years, across Administrations, on a bipartisan basis. The same is true with traffic safety. The same is true with advances in medicine. The same can be true with this if we stop exaggerating or mischaracterizing the positions of either side and we just come up with some sensible areas that people agree with. Background checks are an example: The majority of gun owners agree with this.

**Anderson Cooper:** You talk about faith communities. Father Michael Pfleger is here. I know you know him well. He's a Roman Catholic priest in Chicago. For those who don't know, his church is St. Sabina on the South Side of Chicago. I was there about a month ago. It was a great honor to be there. Father, you've given a lot of eulogies for a lot of kids in your community. Far too many over the 40 years that you have been there. What your question for the President?

**Question:** Mr. President, first of all, thank you for your courage and your passion, and keep pushing. I happen to be from one of those cities where violence is not going down. Not only, as Anderson mentioned, the 55 shot, there's been 11 killed in seven days in Chicago. And one of the main reasons for that is the easy access to guns. It's easier to get a gun in my neighborhood than it is a computer. And the reality is, is because many of those guns have been bought legally. And I understand why people are pushing against you, because I understand it's a business and it's about a business, and so if we cut back the easy access to guns, less money for gun manufacturers, less money for the gun lobby. I understand the business of it. But that business is causing blood and the kids that are dying in Chicago. And for many years, nobody even cared about Chicago because the violence is primarily black and brown.

The reality is that I don't understand why we can't title guns just like cars. If I have a car and I give it to you, Mr. President, and I don't transfer a title and you're in an accident, it's on me. We don't take cars away by putting titles on them. Why can't we do that with guns and every gun in America? So if somebody who's buying 200 guns, selling them on the streets, if they can't transfer those titles, then they're going to be held responsible for the guns that they sell.

**President Obama:** Well, Father Mike, first of all, for those of you who don't know him, has been working since before I moved to Chicago, and I was a 23-year-old when I first met him. And somehow I aged and he didn't.

**Anderson Cooper:** Your gray hair is not going back, I can tell you from experience.



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**President Obama:** He was always the best-looking priest in Chicago. But Father Pfleger has done heroic work at St. Sabina Parish.

Issues like licensing, registration, that's an area where there's just not enough national consensus at this stage to even consider it. And part of it is, is people's concern that that becomes a prelude to taking people's guns away. I mean, part of the challenge in this is that the gun debate gets wrapped up in broader debates about whether the federal government is oppressive. And there are conspiracy theories floating around the Internet these days all the time. We did a military exercise in Texas, and a whole bunch of folks were sure that this was the start of martial law, and were suggesting maybe don't cooperate with the United States Army in an effort to prepare so that if they get deployed overseas, they can handle it. But that's how difficult sometimes these debates are.

But I want to pick up on some things where I think there should be consensus. One of those areas that I talked about at the speech, part of the proposal is developing smart gun technology. Now, this is an interesting example. I don't exactly understand this, and maybe there will be somebody in the audience who explains it to me. Back in 1997, the CEO of Colt said we can design, or are starting to develop guns where you can only use it if you've got a chip, where you wear a band or a bracelet, and that then protects your 2-year-old or 3-year-old from picking up the gun and using it. And a boycott was called against him, and they had to back off of developing that technology. The same with Smith & Wesson. They were in the process of developing similar technology, and they were attacked by the NRA as "surrendering."

Now, to me, this does not make sense. If you are a gun owner, I would think that you would at least want a choice so that if you wanted to purchase a firearm that could only be used by you -- in part to avoid accidents in your home, in part to make sure that if it's stolen, it's not used by a criminal, in part, if there's an intruder, you pull the gun but somehow it gets wrested away from you, that gun can't be turned on you and used on you -- I would think there might be a market for that. You could sell that gun.

Now, I'm not saying that necessarily would be the only gun that's available, but it seems to me that that would be something that in any other area, in any other product, any other commercial venture, there would be some research and development on that because that's a promising technology.

It has not been developed primarily because it's been blocked by either the NRA, which is funded by gun manufacturers, or other reasons. In part, what we proposed was, you know what, we're going to do some of the research. We'll work with the private sector. We'll figure out whether or not this technology can be developed -- and then give everybody a choice in terms of the kind of firearm that they want to purchase -- because I think that there will, in fact, be a market for that. And over time, that's an example of how we could reduce some of the preventable gun deaths that are out there.



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**Anderson Cooper:** I want to bring in somebody who actually knows a lot about selling guns. I want you to meet Kris Jacob. He's vice president of the American Firearms Retailers Association. He's the owner of the Bullseye Indoor Shooting Range and gun store in San Rafael, California. Kris, it's great to have you here. First of all, how is business under President Obama? Because everything I read says gun sales have been going up. Every time he talks about guns, gun sales go up.

**Question:** It's been busy. And certainly I think that shows, as Taya said earlier, that there's a very serious concern in this country about personal security. And the sheriff is right -- they do everything they possibly can to make sure they get there as quickly as they possibly can. And my question is actually focused around law enforcement, as well. There's 53,000 licensed gun dealers in the United States who stand behind the counter and say no to people all day.

**President Obama:** Yes.

**Question:** We feel it's our responsibility to make sure that people who have a criminal past, people who are mentally ill or are having a bad day don't get possession of firearms. So we assist law enforcement all the time in the process of making sure that those things don't change hands inside our commercial market if they shouldn't. It's a very serious responsibility for us, and as a group, we take it very seriously.

My question is around the executive order related to the investigators, the inspectors, the adding of 200 inspectors who are more on the auditing and record-keeping side. Why not add 200 ATF agents on the law enforcement side to keep the criminals and the bad guys out of the stores in the first place? I mean, the problem seems to me to be -- you mentioned dealers who are less responsible than others, and certainly it's possible that those folks are out there, but if we can enforce the laws that already exist, the tens of thousands of gun laws that are on the books right now, it might create a very significant deterrent in just getting those people in the stores.

**Anderson Cooper:** Let me also point out the number of ATF agents during your Administration has actually declined. So even if you hired 200 more --

**President Obama:** Yes, but not because of my budget.

**Anderson Cooper:** But even if you hired 200 more, it will get it to what it was right before you took office.

**President Obama:** Absolutely. Well, look, first of all, there are a whole bunch of responsible gun dealers out there. And my hope would be that those gun dealers would support making sure that everybody is following the same rules that they are. That's number one.



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Number two is we're not writing a new law. Only Congress can do that. This is about enforcing existing laws, and closing what has grown into a massive loophole where a huge percentage of guns -- many of whom end up being traced to crime -- are not going through the responsible gun dealers, but are going through irresponsible folks who are not registered as doing business. And the whole goal here is to clarify and to put on notice that if you're a business, even if you don't have bricks and mortar, then you're supposed to register, you're supposed to conduct background checks. So the issue is not where you do it, it's what you're doing. And that should not be something that threatens responsible gun dealers across the country.

In terms of the ATF, it is absolutely true that the ATF budget has been shrank because -- has been shrunk -- it's a little late -- you knew what I meant -- and part of it is because the politicizing of this issue. So many in the Republican Congress feel as if the ATF is not their friend, but their enemy. Part of the story I was telling --

**Anderson Cooper:** You said this issue should be politicized, though.

**President Obama:** Well, but what I mean by that, Anderson, is, is that they have been portrayed as trying to take people's guns away as opposed to trying to make sure that the laws are enforced. And one of the most frustrating things that I hear is when people say -- who are opposed to any further laws -- why don't you just enforce the laws that are on the books, and those very same members of Congress then cut ATF budgets to make it impossible to enforce the law.

And by the way, the ATF is a law enforcement agency working under the FBI that is doing enormous work in going after criminals and drug cartels, and have a pretty dangerous job. So it's not as if doing background checks or auditing gun sales is all that they're doing.

Part of my proposal is also developing better technologies so that we can do tracing of shells when a crime is committed in order to figure out who exactly are the perpetrators of the crime and where did they obtain the weapon. So there's a whole bunch of other elements to this that are going to be important. But my hope is, is that responsible gun dealers like yourself and your organization are going to be supportive of this proposal, because it should actually help push away unscrupulous dealers and that means more customers for you guys.

**Anderson Cooper:** I want to bring in Mark Kelly. As you know, a former astronaut, husband of former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who we're proud to say is here tonight. Five years ago this week in Tucson, Arizona, Congresswoman Giffords was shot. Six others were killed. Captain, your question?

**Question:** Well, thank you for being here, Mr. President. As you know, Gabby and I are both gun owners. We take gun ownership very seriously and really think about the voices of responsible gun owners in this debate. But I want to follow up to something Father Pfleger said and your answer to his question, and it's about expanded background checks.



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Often, what you hear in the debate of expanding background checks to more gun sales -- and, as you know, Gabby and I are 100 percent behind the concept of somebody getting a background check before buying a gun -- but when we testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, we heard not only from the gun lobby but from United States senators that expanding background checks will -- not may -- will lead to a registry, which will lead to confiscation, which will lead to a tyrannical government.

So I would like you to explain, with 350 million guns in 65 million places, households, from Key West to Alaska -- 350 million objects in 65 million places -- if the federal government wanted to confiscate those objects, how would they do that?

**President Obama:** Well, look, first of all, every time I see Gabby, I'm just so thrilled because I visited her in the hospital, and, as I mentioned I think in the speech in the White House, as we left the hospital then to go to a memorial service, we got word that Gabby had opened her eyes for the first time. And we did not think that she was going to be here, and she is. And Mark has just been extraordinary. And, by the way, Mark's twin brother is up in space right now and is breaking the record for the longest continuous orbiting of the planet, which is pretty impressive stuff.

What I think Mark is alluding to is what I said earlier -- this notion of a conspiracy out there, and it gets wrapped up in concerns about the federal government. Now, there's a long history of that. That's in our DNA. The United States was born suspicious of some distant authority.

**Anderson Cooper:** But let me just jump in -- is it fair to call it a conspiracy? I mean, there's a lot of people who really believe this deeply -- that they just don't trust you.

**President Obama:** I'm sorry, Cooper, yes it is fair to call it a conspiracy. What are you saying? Are you suggesting that the notion that we are creating a plot to take everybody's guns away so that we can impose martial law --

**Anderson Cooper:** Not everybody, but there is certainly a lot of people --

**President Obama:** -- is a conspiracy? Yes, that is a conspiracy. I would hope that you would agree with that. Is that controversial except on some websites around the country?

**Anderson Cooper:** There are certainly a lot of people who just have a fundamental distrust that you do not want to get -- go further and further and further down this road.

**President Obama:** Look, I mean, I'm only going to be here for another year. I don't know - - when would I have started on this enterprise, right?



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I come from the state of Illinois, which -- we've been talking about Chicago, but downstate Illinois is closer to Kentucky than it is to Chicago. And everybody hunts down there and a lot of folks own guns. And so this is not, like, alien territory to me. I've got a lot of friends like Mark who are hunters. I just came back from Alaska, where I ate a moose that had just been shot -- and it was pretty good.

So, yes, it is a false notion that I believe is circulated for either political reasons or commercial reasons in order to prevent a coming together among people of goodwill to develop common-sense rules that will make us safer while preserving the Second Amendment.

And the notion that we can't agree on some things while not agreeing on others and the reason for that is because, well, the President secretly wants to X would mean that we'd be paralyzed about doing everything. I mean, maybe when I proposed to make sure that unsafe drugs are taken off the market that, secretly, I'm trying to control the entire drug industry, or take people's drugs away. But probably not. What's more likely is I just want to make sure that people are not dying by taking bad drugs.

**Anderson Cooper:** You wrote an op-ed that just got published. A lot of people probably have not read it yet. One of the things you say in it is that you are not going to campaign for, vote for any candidate, regardless of what party they're in, if they do not support common-sense gun reform.

**President Obama:** Yes. I meant what I said. And the reason I said that is this. The majority of people in this country are a lot more sensible than what you see in Washington, and the reason that Washington doesn't work well in part is because the loudest, shrillest voices, the least compromising, the most powerful or those with the most money have the most influence.

And the way Washington changes is when people vote. And the way we break the deadlock on this issue is when Congress does not have just a stranglehold on this debate -- or, excuse me -- the NRA does not have a stranglehold on Congress in this debate -- but it is balanced by a whole bunch of folks -- gun owners, law enforcement, the majority of the American people -- when their voices are heard, then things get done.

The proposals that we've put forward are a version -- a lawful, more narrow version -- of what was proposed by Joe Manchin and Senator Toomey of Pennsylvania, a Republican and a Democrat, both of whom get straight-A scores from the NRA. And somehow, after Newtown, that did not pass the Senate. The majority of senators wanted it, but 90 percent of Republicans voted against it. And I'll be honest with you, 90 percent of those senators didn't disagree with the proposal, but they were fearful that it was going to affect them during the election.



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So all I'm saying is, is that this debate will not change and get balanced out so that lawful gun owners and their Second Amendment rights are protected, but we're also creating a pathway towards a safer set of communities -- it's not going to change until those who are concerned about violence are not as focused and disciplined during election time as those who are. And I'm going to throw my shoulders behind folks who want to actually solve problems instead of just getting a high score from an interest group.

**Anderson Cooper:** We have time for one more question. And we talked about Chicago a little bit. We haven't really heard from young people tonight -- no offense to those who have spoken. I'm in the same category as you all. Sorry, Father.

**President Obama:** You're a kid.

**Anderson Cooper:** There's a lot of kids, as you know, growing up in Chicago, fearful of walking to school, fearful of coming home from school. A lot of kids have been killed on buses. There's a lot of moms of kids who have been killed in the streets of Chicago. And I want you to meet Trey Bosley. He's 18 years old. He's a high school student. And his brother Terrell was shot and killed nearly 10 years ago while he was helping a friend in a church parking lot. Terrell would have turned 28 years old on this Tuesday. What's your question, Trey?

**Question:** As you said, I lost my brother a few years ago -- well, 10 years ago. And I've also lost a countless amount of family members and friends to gun violence, as well. And just growing up as a young black teen in Chicago, where you're surrounded by not only just gun violence but police brutality, as well, most of aren't thinking of our life on a long-term scale. Most of us are either thinking day to day, hour to hour -- for some, even minute to minute. I want to thank you for your stand against gun violence for not only the victims of gun violence, but those on the verge of being victims of gun violence. And my question to you is, what is your advice to those youth growing up surrounded by poverty and gun violence?

**President Obama:** Well, first of all, Trey, I couldn't be prouder of you. And I know -- is that your momma next to you? I know she's proud of you right now. So good job, Mom. When I see you, Terrell, I think I about my own --

**Anderson Cooper:** Trey.

**President Obama:** Excuse me -- Trey. When I see you, I think about my own youth, because I wasn't that different from you. Probably not as articulate and maybe more of a goof-off. But the main difference was I lived in a more forgiving environment. If I screwed up, I wasn't at risk of getting shot. I'd get a second chance. There were a bunch of folks who were looking out for me, and there weren't a lot of guns on the streets. And that's how all kids should be growing up, wherever they live.



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My advice to you is to continue to be an outstanding role model for the young ones who are coming up behind you. Keep listening to your mom. Work hard and get an education. Understand that high school and whatever peer pressure or restrictions you're under right now won't matter by the time you're a full adult, and what matters is your future. But what I also want to say to you is, is that you're really important to the future of this country.

And I think it is critical in this debate to understand that it's not just inner-city kids who are at risk in these situations. Out of the 30,000 deaths due to gun violence, about two-thirds of them are actually suicides. That's part of the reason why we are investing more heavily also in mental health under my proposal.

But while the majority of victims of gun homicide are black or Hispanic, the overwhelming majority of suicides by young people are white. And those, too, are tragedies. Those, too, are preventable. I'm the father of two outstanding young women, but being a teenager is tough. And we all remember the times where you get confused, you're angry, and then the next thing you know, if you have access to a firearm what kind of bad decisions you might make. So those are deaths we also want to prevent.

Accidental shootings are also deaths we want to prevent. And we're not going to prevent all of them. But we can do better. We're not going to, through this initiative alone, solve all the problems of inner-city crime. Some of that, as I said, has to do with investing in these communities and making sure there's good education and jobs and opportunity -- and great parents, and moral responsibility, and ethical behavior, and instilling that in our kids -- that's going to be important.

So this is not a proposal to solve every problem. It's a modest way of us getting started on improving the prospects of young men and young women like you, the same way we try to improve every other aspect of our lives. That's all it is.

And if we get started -- as I said before, it used to be people didn't wear seatbelts, didn't have airbags. It takes 20, 30 years, but you look and then you realize all these amazing lives of young people like this who are contributing to our society because we came together in a practical way, looking at evidence, looking at data, and figured out how can we make that work better.

Right now, Congress prohibits us even studying through the Center for Disease Control ways in which we could reduce gun violence. That's how crazy this thing has become. Let's at least figure out what works. And some of the proposals that I'm making may turn out are not as effective as others. But at least let's figure it out, let's try some things. Let's not just assume that -- every few weeks there's a mass shooting that gets publicity, every few months there's one that gets national publicity, every day there are a whole bunch of folks shot on streets around the country that we don't even hear about. That is not something that we can be satisfied with.



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And part of my faith and hope in America is just that -- not that we achieve a perfect union, but that we get better. And we can do better than we're doing right now if we come together.

Thank you.

**Anderson Cooper:** Mr. President, thank you very much for your time.

**President Obama:** Appreciate it very much.