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**Barack Obama**

*Press Conference on Preventing Gun Violence*

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Good morning, everybody.

It's now been five days since the heartbreaking tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut; three days since we gathered as a nation to pray for the victims. And today, a few more of the 20 small children and six educators who were taken from us will be laid to rest.

We may never know all the reasons why this tragedy happened. We do know that every day since, more Americans have died of gun violence. We know such violence has terrible consequences for our society. And if there is even one thing that we can do to prevent any of these events, we have a deep obligation -- all of us -- to try.

Over these past five days, a discussion has reemerged as to what we might do not only to deter mass shootings in the future, but to reduce the epidemic of gun violence that plagues this country every single day. And it's encouraging that people of all different backgrounds and beliefs and political persuasions have been willing to challenge some old assumptions and change longstanding positions.

That conversation has to continue. But this time, the words need to lead to action.



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We know this is a complex issue that stirs deeply held passions and political divides. And as I said on Sunday night, there's no law or set of laws that can prevent every senseless act of violence in our society. We're going to need to work on making access to mental health care at least as easy as access to a gun. We're going to need to look more closely at a culture that all too often glorifies guns and violence. And any actions we must take must begin inside the home and inside our hearts.

But the fact that this problem is complex can no longer be an excuse for doing nothing. The fact that we can't prevent every act of violence doesn't mean we can't steadily reduce the violence, and prevent the very worst violence.

That's why I've asked the Vice President to lead an effort that includes members of my Cabinet and outside organizations to come up with a set of concrete proposals no later than January -- proposals that I then intend to push without delay. This is not some Washington commission. This is not something where folks are going to be studying the issue for six months and publishing a report that gets read and then pushed aside. This is a team that has a very specific task, to pull together real reforms right now. I asked Joe to lead this effort in part because he wrote the 1994 Crime Bill that helped law enforcement bring down the rate of violent crime in this country. That plan -- That bill also included the assault weapons ban that was publicly supported at the time by former Presidents including Ronald Reagan.

The good news is there's already a growing consensus for us to build from. A majority of Americans support banning the sale of military-style assault weapons. A majority of Americans support banning the sale of high-capacity ammunition clips. A majority of Americans support laws requiring background checks before all gun purchases, so that criminals can't take advantage of legal loopholes to buy a gun from somebody who won't take the responsibility of doing a background check at all.

I urge the new Congress to hold votes on these measures next year in a timely manner. And considering Congress hasn't confirmed a director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in six years -- the agency that works most closely with state and local law enforcement to keep illegal guns out of the hands of criminals -- I'd suggest that they make this a priority early in the year.

Look, like the majority of Americans, I believe that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms. This country has a strong tradition of gun ownership that's been handed down from generation to generation. Obviously across the country there are regional differences. There are differences between how people feel in urban areas and rural areas. And the fact is the vast majority of gun owners in America are responsible -- they buy their guns legally and they use them safely, whether for hunting or sport shooting, collection or protection.



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But you know what, I am also betting that the majority -- the vast majority -- of responsible, law-abiding gun owners would be some of the first to say that we should be able to keep an irresponsible, law-breaking few from buying a weapon of war. I'm willing to bet that they don't think that using a gun and using common sense are incompatible ideas -- that an unbalanced man shouldn't be able to get his hands on a military-style assault rifle so easily; that in this age of technology, we should be able to check someone's criminal records before he or she can check out at a gun show; that if we work harder to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, there would be fewer atrocities like the one in Newtown -- or any of the lesser-known tragedies that visit small towns and big cities all across America every day.

Since Friday morning, a police officer was gunned down in Memphis, leaving four children without their mother. Two officers were killed outside a grocery store in Topeka. A woman was shot and killed inside a Las Vegas casino. Three people were shot inside an Alabama hospital. A four-year-old was caught in a drive-by in Missouri, and taken off life support just yesterday. Each one of these Americans was a victim of the everyday gun violence that takes the lives of more than 10,000 Americans every year -- violence that we cannot accept as routine.

So I will use all the powers of this office to help advance efforts aimed at preventing more tragedies like this. We won't prevent them all -- but that can't be an excuse not to try. It won't be easy -- but that can't be an excuse not to try.

And I'm not going to be able to do it by myself. Ultimately if this effort is to succeed it's going to require the help of the American people -- it's going to require all of you. If we're going to change things, it's going to take a wave of Americans -- mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, pastors, law enforcement, mental health professionals -- and, yes, gun owners -- standing up and saying "enough" on behalf of our kids.

It will take commitment and compromise, and most of all, it will take courage. But if those of us who were sent here to serve the public trust can summon even one tiny iota of the courage those teachers, that principal in Newtown summoned on Friday -- if cooperation and common sense prevail -- then I'm convinced we can make a sensible, intelligent way to make the United States of America a safer, stronger place for our children to learn and to grow.



Thank you. And now I'm going to let the Vice President go and I'm going to take a few questions. And I will start with Ben Feller.

**Question:** Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about the other serious issue consuming this town right now, the fiscal cliff.

**President Obama:** Right.



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**Question:** Haven't you betrayed some of the voters who supported you in the election by changing your positions on who should get a tax increase and by including Social Security benefits now in this mix? And more broadly, there seems to be a deepening sense that negotiations aren't going very well right now. Can you give us a candid update? Are we likely to go over the cliff?

**President Obama:** Well, first of all, there's no reason why we should. Remember what I said during the campaign. I thought that it was important for us to reduce our deficit in a balanced and responsible way. I said it was important for us to make sure that millionaires and billionaires paid their fair share. I said that we were going to have to make some tough cuts, some tough decisions on the spending side, but what I wouldn't do was hurt vulnerable families only to pay for a tax cut for somebody like me. And what I said was that the ultimate package would involve a balance of spending cuts and tax increases.

That's exactly what I've put forward. What I've said is, is that in order to arrive at a compromise, I am prepared to do some very tough things -- some things that some Democrats don't want to see and probably there are a few Republicans who don't want to see either. But the only way that we're going to be able to stabilize the economy, make sure we've got a platform for long-term economic growth, that we get our deficits under control and we make sure that middle-class families are protected is if we come up with something that members of both parties in Congress can support.

And that's the plan that I've put forward. I have gone at least halfway in meeting some of the Republicans' concerns, recognizing that even though we campaigned on these issues, even though the majority of Americans agree with me that we should be raising taxes on the wealthiest few as a means of reducing the deficit, I have also said that I'm willing to identify some spending cuts that make sense.

And, frankly, up until about a couple of days ago, if you looked at it, the Republicans in the House and Speaker Boehner I think were in a position to say, we've gotten a fair deal. The fact that they haven't taken it yet is puzzling and I think a question that you're going to have to address to them.

I remain optimistic, though, because if you look at what the Speaker has proposed, he's conceded that income tax rates should go up -- except right now he only wants to have them go up for millionaires. If you're making \$900,000, somehow he thinks that you can't afford to pay a little more in taxes. But the principle that rates are going to need to go up he's conceded.

I've said I'm willing to make some cuts. What separates us is probably a few hundred billion dollars. The idea that we would put our economy at risk because you can't bridge that gap doesn't make a lot of sense.



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So I'm going to continue to talk to the Speaker and the other leaders up in Congress. But, ultimately, they've got to do their job. Right now their job is to make sure that middle-class taxes do not go up and that we have a balanced, responsible package of deficit reduction.

It is there for all to see. It is a deal that can get done. But it is not going to be -- it cannot be done if every side wants 100 percent. And part of what voters were looking for is some compromise up here. That's what folks want. They understand that they're not going to get 100 percent of what they want. And for some reason, that message has not yet taken up on Capitol Hill.

And when you think about what we've gone through over the last couple of months -- a devastating hurricane, and now one of the worst tragedies in our memory -- the country deserves folks to be willing to compromise on behalf of the greater good, and not tangle themselves up in a whole bunch of ideological positions that don't make much sense.

So I remain not only open to conversations, but I remain eager to get something done. I'd like to get it done before Christmas. There's been a lot of posturing up on Capitol Hill, instead of just going ahead and getting stuff done. And we've been wasting a lot of time. It is the right thing to do. I'm prepared to get it done. But they're going to have to go ahead and make some adjustments.

And I'll just give you one other example. The Speaker now is proposing what he calls plan B. So he says, well, this would raise taxes only on folks making a million dollars or more. What that means is an average of a \$50,000 tax break for every millionaire out there, at the same time as we're not providing unemployment insurance for 2 million people who are still out there looking for work. It actually means a tax increase for millions of working families across the country at the same time as folks like me would be getting a tax break. That violates the core principles that were debated during the course of this election and that the American people determined was the wrong way to go.

And so my hope is, is that the Speaker and his caucus, in conjunction with the other legislative leaders up there, can find a way to make sure that middle-class families don't see their taxes go up on January 1st; that we make sure that those things that middle-class families count on like tax credits for college, or making sure that they're getting some help when it comes to raising their kids through things like the child tax credit, that that gets done; and that we have a balanced package for deficit reduction, which is exactly what I've put forward.

**Question:** Will you give more ground if you need to, or are you done?

**President Obama:** If you look at the package that I put forward, it is a balanced package by any definition. We have put forward real cuts in spending that are hard to do, in every category.



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And by any measure, by any traditional calculation, by the measures that Republicans themselves have used in the past, this would be as large a piece of deficit reduction as we've seen in the last 20 years. And if you combine that with the increased revenue from the wealthy paying a little bit more, then you actually have something that would stabilize our deficit and debt for a decade -- for 10 years.

Now, the notion that we would not do that, but instead the Speaker would run a play that keeps tax cuts for folks making \$500,000 or \$700,000 or \$800,000 or \$900,000 a year, and gives more tax breaks to millionaires and billionaires, and raises taxes on middle-class families, and then has no cuts in it -- which is what he says he wants -- doesn't make much sense.

I mean, let's just think about the logic for a second. They're thinking about voting for raising taxes at least on folks over a million, which they say they don't want to do, but they're going to reject spending cuts that they say they do want to do. That defies logic. There's no explanation for that.

I think that any objective person out there looking would say that we've put forward a very balanced plan and it's time for us to go ahead and get it done. That's what the country needs right now. Because I think folks have been through some wrenching times, we're still recovering from a very tough recession, and what they're hoping for is a sense of stability, focus, compromise, common sense over the next couple of years. And I think we can provide it. But this is a good test for them.

Carol Lee.

**Question:** Thank you, Mr. President. Just to follow on Ben's question, what is your next move? Are we in a position now where you're just waiting for the Speaker to make a move?

**President Obama:** Well, I'm going to reach out to all the leaders involved over the next couple of days and find out what is it that's holding this thing up. What is holding it up? If the argument from Republicans is we haven't done enough spending cuts, that argument is not going to fly because we've got close to a trillion dollars of spending cuts. And when you add interest, then it's more than a trillion dollars in spending cuts.

If the argument is that they can't do -- they can't increase tax rates on folks making \$700,000 or \$800,000 a year, that's not a persuasive argument to me and it's certainly not a persuasive argument to the American people.

It may be that members of their caucus haven't looked at exactly what we've proposed. It may be that if we provide more information or there's greater specificity or we work through some of their concerns, that we can get some movement then.



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But the fact of the matter is, is that what would violate my commitment to voters is if I ended up agreeing to a plan that put more of the burden on middle-class families and less of a burden on the wealthy in an effort to reduce our deficit. That's not something I'm going to do. What would violate my commitment to voters would be to put forward a plan that makes it harder for young people to go to college, that makes it harder for a family with a disabled kid to care for that kid.

And there's a threshold that you reach where the balance tips, even in making compromises that are required to get something done in this town, where you are hurting people in order to give another advantage to folks who don't need help. And we had an extensive debate about this for a year. And not only does the majority of the American people agree with me, about half of Republican voters agree with me on this.

So at some point, there's got to be I think a recognition on the part of my Republican friends that -- take the deal. They will be able to claim that they have worked with me over the last two years to reduce the deficit more than any other deficit reduction package; that we will have stabilized it for 10 years. That is a significant achievement for them. They should be proud of it. But they keep on finding ways to say no, as opposed to finding ways to say yes.

And I don't know how much of that just has to do with -- it is very hard for them to say yes to me. But at some point, they've got to take me out of it and think about their voters, and think about what's best for the country. And if they do that -- if they're not worried about who's winning and who's losing, did they score a point on the President, did they extract that last little concession, did they force him to do something he really doesn't want to do just for the heck of it, and they focus on actually what's good for the country, I actually think we can get this done.

**Question:** You mentioned the \$700,000 and \$800,000. Are you willing to move on income level and are there specific things that you would do --

**President Obama:** I'm not going to get into specific negotiations here. My point is simple, Carol, that if you look at Speaker Boehner's proposal and you look at my proposal, they're actually pretty close. They keep on saying that somehow we haven't put forward real spending cuts. Actually, there was I think a graph in The New York Times today that showed - - they're the same categories, right? There's a little bit of tweaks here and there; there are a few differences, but we're right there.

And on the revenue side, there's a difference in terms of them wanting to preserve tax breaks for folks between \$250,000 and a million that we just can't afford. I mean, keep in mind I'm in that income category; I'd love to not pay as much in taxes. But I also think it's the right thing to do for us to make sure that people who have less -- people who are working, people who are striving, people who are hoping for their kids -- that they have opportunity. That's what we campaigned about. That's what we talked about.



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And this is not a situation where I'm unwilling to compromise. This is not a situation where I'm trying to rub their face in anything. I think anybody who looks at this objectively would say that coming off my election, I have met them at least halfway in order to get something done for the country.

And so I noticed that there were a couple of headlines out there saying, oh, we're now in the land of political posturing, and it's the usual he said-he said atmosphere. But look at the facts. Look at where we started; look at where they started. My proposal is right there in the middle.

We should be able to get this done. Let's get it done. We don't have a lot of time.

Carrie. Where's -- there you are.

**Question:** Thank you, Mr. President.

**President Obama:** Yes.

**Question:** What is your level of confidence that if you are able to reach a comprehensive deal with the Speaker, that he will be able to bring his members onboard and get it passed? Essentially, do you still trust Speaker Boehner in this process?

**President Obama:** There is no doubt that the Speaker has challenges in his caucus, and I recognize that. I'm often reminded when I speak to the Republican leadership that the majority of their caucus's membership come from districts that I lost. And so sometimes they may not see an incentive in cooperating with me, in part because they're more concerned about challenges from a tea party candidate, or challenges from the right, and cooperating with me may make them vulnerable. I recognize that.

But, goodness, if this past week has done anything, it should just give us some perspective. If there's one thing we should have after this week, it should be a sense of perspective about what's important. And I would like to think that members of that caucus would say to themselves: You know what, we disagree with the President on a whole bunch of things. We wish the other guy had won. We're going to fight him on a whole range of issues over the next four years. We think his philosophy is all screwed up. But right now, what the country needs is for us to compromise, get a deficit reduction deal in place; make sure middle class taxes don't go up; make sure that we're laying the foundations for growth; give certainty to businesses large and small; not put ourselves through some sort of self-inflicted crisis every six months; allow ourselves time to focus on things like preventing the tragedy in Newtown from happening again; focus on issues like energy and immigration reform and all the things that will really make a determination as to whether our country grows over the next four years, 10 years, 40 years.





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And if you just pull back from the immediate political battles, if you kind of peel off the partisan war paint, then we should be able to get something done.

And I think the Speaker would like to get that done. I think an environment needs to be created within not just the House Republican caucus, but also among Senate Republicans that say, the campaign is over and let's see if we can do what's right for the country -- at least for the next month. And then we can reengage in all the other battles that they'll want to fight.

**Question:** If you don't get it done, Republicans have said they'll try to use the debt limit as a next pressure point. Would you negotiate with them in that context?

**President Obama:** No. And I've been very clear about this. This is the United States of America, the greatest country on Earth, the world's economic superpower. And the idea that we lurch from crisis to crisis, and every six months, or every nine months, that we threaten not to pay our bills on stuff we've already bought, and default, and ruin the full faith and credit of the United States of America -- that's not how you run a great country.

So I've put forward a very clear principle: I will not negotiate around the debt ceiling. We're not going to play the same game that we saw happen in 2011 -- which was hugely destructive; hurt our economy; provided more uncertainty to the business community than anything else that happened.

And I'm not alone in this. If you go to Wall Street, including talking to a whole bunch of folks who spent a lot of money trying to beat me, they would say it would be disastrous for us to use the debt ceiling as a cudgel to try to win political points on Capitol Hill.

So we're not going to do that -- which is why I think that part of what I hope over the next couple of days we see is a recognition that there is a way to go ahead and get what it is that you've been fighting for. These guys have been fighting for spending cuts. They can get some very meaningful spending cuts. This would amount to \$2 trillion -- \$2 trillion -- in spending cuts over the last couple of years. And in exchange, they're getting a little over a trillion dollars in revenue. And that meets the pledge that I made during the campaign, which was \$2 to \$2.50 of spending cuts for every revenue increase. And that's an approach that I think most Americans think is appropriate.

But I will not negotiate around the debt ceiling. We're not going to do that again.

**Question:** Sir, may I ask a question about Newtown, please?

**President Obama:** Yes, I've got David Jackson.



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**Question:** Thank you, Mr. President. Getting back to the gun issue, you alluded to the fact that Washington commissions don't have the greatest reputation in the world. What makes you think this one is going to be different given the passage of time and the political power of gun rights groups like the National Rifle Association?

**President Obama:** Well, this is not going to be a commission. Joe is going to gather up some key Cabinet members who have an interest in this issue. We're going to reach out to a bunch of stakeholders. We're going to be reaching out to members of Congress who have an interest in this issue. It's not as if we have to start from scratch. There are a whole bunch of proposals that have been thought about, debated, but hopefully also some new ideas in terms of how we deal with this issue.

Their task is going to be to sift through every good idea that's out there, and even take a look at some bad ideas before disposing of them, and come up with a concrete set of recommendations in about a month. And I would hope that our memories aren't so short that what we saw in Newtown isn't lingering with us, that we don't remain passionate about it only a month later. And as soon as we get those recommendations, I will be putting forward very specific proposals. I will be talking about them in my State of The Union and we will be working with interested members of Congress to try to get some of them done.

And the idea that we would say this is terrible, this is a tragedy, never again, and we don't have the sustained attention span to be able to get this done over the next several months doesn't make sense. I have more confidence in the American people than that. I have more confidence in the parents, the mothers and fathers that I've been meeting over the last several days all across the country from all political persuasions, including a lot of gun owners, who say, you know what, this time we've got to do things differently.

**Question:** What about the NRA?

**President Obama:** Well, the NRA is an organization that has members who are mothers and fathers. And I would expect that they've been impacted by this as well. And hopefully they'll do some self-reflection.

And here's what we know -- that any single gun law can't solve all these problems. We're going to have to look at mental health issues. We're going to have to look at schools. There are going to be a whole range of things that Joe's group looks at. We know that issues of gun safety will be an element of it. And what we've seen over the last 20 years, 15 years, is the sense that anything related to guns is somehow an encroachment on the Second Amendment. What we're looking for here is a thoughtful approach that says we can preserve our Second Amendment, we can make sure that responsible gun owners are able to carry out their activities, but that we're going to actually be serious about the safety side of this; that we're going to be serious about making sure that something like Newtown or Aurora doesn't happen again.



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And there is a big chunk of space between what the Second Amendment means and having no rules at all. And that space is what Joe is going to be working on to try to identify where we can find some common ground.

So I've got -- I'm going to take one last question.

Go ahead, Jake.

**Question:** It seems to a lot of observers that you made the political calculation in 2008 in your first term and in 2012 not to talk about gun violence. You had your position on renewing the ban on semiautomatic rifles that then-Senator Biden put into place, but you didn't do much about it. This is not the first issue -- the first incident of horrific gun violence of your four years. Where have you been?

**President Obama:** Well, here's where I've been, Jake. I've been President of the United States dealing with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, an auto industry on the verge of collapse, two wars. I don't think I've been on vacation.

And so I think all of us have to do some reflection on how we prioritize what we do here in Washington. And as I said on Sunday, this should be a wake-up call for all of us to say that if we are not getting right the need to keep our children safe, then nothing else matters. And it's my commitment to make sure that we do everything we can to keep our children safe.

A lot of things go in -- are involved in that, Jake. So making sure they've got decent health care and making sure they've got a good education, making sure that their parents have jobs -- those are all relevant as well. Those aren't just sort of side issues. But there's no doubt that this has to be a central issue. And that's exactly why I'm confident that Joe is going to take this so seriously over the next couple months.

All right. Thank you, everybody.