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Reducing Gun Violence in America

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Foreword

On December 14, 2012, a deranged young man pulled into the parking lot of the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and then shot his way into the building with a high-capacity semi-automatic rifle. The slaughter of 6 adults and 20 children really broke the country's heart, and for many Americans this is the straw that has broken the camel's back.

Since the Sandy Hook massacre, more than 100 mayors from across the country have joined the bipartisan coalition Mayors Against Illegal Guns. The total number of mayors involved is now more than 800. As of January 14, 2013, roughly one million Americans have signed on to the coalition's "I Demand a Plan" campaign against gun violence. Vice President Joe Biden will announce his recommendations for action to President Barack Obama this week. The vice president knows that as horrific as Sandy Hook has been, as have all the other seemingly endless episodes of mass violence, we experience that level of carnage, or worse, every single day across our country, *because every day of the year, an average of 33 Americans are murdered with guns.*

Here's another way to think about what that means. On January 21, 2013, President Obama took the oath of office for his second term. Unless we take

action, during those four years some 48,000 Americans will be killed with guns—nearly twice as many people as were killed in combat during the entire Vietnam War. I have made it clear to the vice president that our bipartisan coalition of mayors is supporting seven measures—three that need legislation and four that require only executive action. We’re hopeful that the vice president and president will support all seven.

First and most urgently, we need the president and Congress together to require background checks for all gun sales, including private sales at gun shows and online. These private sales now account for more than 40 percent of all gun sales nationally, which means that in 2012 alone, there were more than six million gun sales that happened with no background checks. Many of those guns are handguns, which are used in about 90 percent of all firearms murders. Across the United States, more than 80 percent of gun owners, and more than 90 percent of Americans, support requiring background checks for all gun sales. There’s really no debate here. It’s common sense. We have laws on the books that require a background check when dealers sell guns. It’s time for the president and Congress to make that the law of the land for all sales. The forty percent to which the law does not apply means the law is basically a sham.

Second, Congress should make gun trafficking a federal crime. In New York City, 85 percent of the weapons that we recover from crime scenes come from out-of-state sources, but federal laws designed to curb illegal sales across borders are incredibly weak. Criminals who traffic in guns get a slap on the wrist. We’ve made New York the safest big city in the nation, in part by adopting tough gun laws and proactively enforcing them. Every state in the Union has citizens killed by guns coming from other another state, and every state is powerless to stop the mayhem. Until Congress gets tough on trafficking, guns will continue flowing to our streets from states with much looser gun laws.

The third legislative measure that the White House should support is limiting the availability of military-style weapons and of high-capacity magazines with more than 10 rounds. These guns and equipment are not designed for sport or home defense. They are designed to kill large numbers of people quickly. That’s the only purpose they have. They belong on the battlefield, in the hands of our brave professionally trained soldiers, not on the streets of our cities, suburbs, or rural areas, as retired military leaders like Colin Powell and Stanley McChrystal have said.

Many of the weapons in this category were previously banned under the federal assault weapons law that expired in 2004. That law was, incidentally,

first initiated and passed by Vice President Biden. He is the right person to have been appointed by the president to come up with what we should do next. Regulating assault weapons certainly falls within the bounds of the Second Amendment. So does everything else we're urging.

This is not a constitutional question; it's a question of political courage. The U.S. Supreme Court, the entity that defines what the Constitution means, has ruled that reasonable regulations are consistent with the Second Amendment. When the gun lobby raises concerns over protection of the Second Amendment, it is nothing but a red herring. And it's time for Second Amendment defenders in Congress to call them on it.

The three measures that I've discussed—requiring background checks for all gun sales, making gun trafficking a federal crime, and limiting military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines—will require leadership from both the president and members of Congress. But there are other steps President Obama can take without congressional approval—any time he chooses, with the stroke of a pen. Vice President Biden understands this, and we hope his recommendations will include at least these next four steps that we've urged him to take.

In the first of these four steps, the president can order all federal agencies to submit their relevant data to the national gun background check database. Every missing record is a potential murder in the making. If the data aren't in the database, those people that use the database don't get what they need, allowing gun sales to go ahead in cases where we all agree—and federal law says—they shouldn't.

Second, the president can direct the Justice Department to make a priority of prosecuting convicted criminals who provide false personal information during gun purchase background checks. Yes, even criminals buy from dealers, knowing there's going to be a background check, except that they lie when they do so. As a matter of fact, during 2010 there were more than 76,000 cases referred by the FBI to the Justice Department. Do you know how many were prosecuted out of 76,000 in 2010, the last year for which we have data? Forty-four. Not 44,000, but 44 out of 76,000. This is a joke. It's a sad joke, and it's a lethal joke.

These are felony cases involving criminals trying to buy guns, and yet our federal government is prosecuting less than one-tenth of one percent of them. It is shameful, and it has to end, and the president can do that by just picking up the phone and saying to the Justice Department: This is your job, go do it or I'll get somebody that will.

As a third step, the president can make a recess appointment to get someone to head the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The ATF, as it's called, hasn't had a director for six years. Can you imagine how much outrage there'd be if we'd been without a Homeland Security Secretary for six years? You can't have an agency without somebody running it that's going to allow it to do the job for which it was, and that job is to protect everyone in this city, state, and country—including those we love the most, our children, and those we have the greatest responsibility to, the police officers who run into danger when the rest of us are running the other way.

The president, and this is our fourth recommendation, can stop supporting what's called the Tiahrt order. Todd Tiahrt is a congressman from Wichita who got the Congress to pass a law that keeps the public in the dark about who gun traffickers are and how they operate. There can be no excuse for shielding criminals from public view.

At the bidding of the gun lobby, Congress has tied the hands of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosive and has prevented it from releasing critical data to law enforcement authorities and to the public. Unfortunately, the ATF is not alone is being gagged by Congress when it comes to the issue of guns.

The bipartisan coalition of Mayors Against Illegal Guns released a report, "Access Denied" detailing how Congress, bowing to the gun lobby, has systematically denied the American people access to information about guns and gun violence. Most egregiously and outrageously, Congress has severely restricted the scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from studying the epidemic of gun violence, and they've put similar restrictions on the scientists at the National Institutes of Health. Congress has no business dictating what public health issues scientists can and should study.

At Johns Hopkins the motto is, The truth shall make you free. When elected officials try to muzzle scientific research and bury the truth, they make our free society less free and less safe. Today, because of congressional restrictions, CDC funding for firearms injury research totals \$100,000, out of an annual budget of nearly \$6 billion. The National Institutes of Health is estimated to spend less than \$1 million on firearms injury research, out of an annual budget of \$31 billion. To put that in perspective, the NIH spends \$21 million annually researching headaches. But it spends less than \$1 million on all the gun deaths that happen every year. If that doesn't give you a headache, it should.

There are 31,000 gun deaths every year in America, including about 19,000 suicides, many of which are children—every parent’s nightmare. In New York City, our suicide rate is less than half the national average, and one of the differences is that New York has tough gun laws. Nationally, 51 percent of suicides are by gun. In New York City, it is only 16 percent of suicides. The gun lobby callously says that someone who wants to kill him or herself will find a way to do it. In many cases, they are tragically wrong. We can prevent thousands of these senseless deaths with smart gun regulations, and we’re proving it in New York City.

Unfortunately, American scientists are not the only people Congress has attempted to silence. In 2010, again at the gun lobby’s bidding, Congress included language in a funding bill that prevented military officers and doctors, as well as mental health counselors, from even discussing firearms ownership with severely depressed service members. There is a suicide crisis going on right now in our military. It’s tough seeing and doing what we ask our soldiers to do. We have an all-volunteer army, but they come back and many of them really do have a problem. Congress, instead of trying to help, is just doing everything it can to make it worse. Our men and women in uniform deserve better. Thankfully, after mayors and retired military leaders urged Congress to rescind this prohibition, they did—but not until December of 2012, and only after too many men and women in uniform had taken their own lives with guns.

Enough is enough. It’s time for Congress and the White House to put public health above special interest politics. And it’s time for Congress to stop gagging our scientists, military leaders, and law enforcement officers—and stop trying to hide the truth from the American people. That’s why this summit was so important. It is especially fitting that it was hosted at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, where so much outstanding and important work is being done, in areas ranging from malaria research and environmental health to tobacco control and road safety. It’s all designed around the school’s motto, *Protecting Health, Saving Lives—Millions at a Time*. Reducing gun violence will have that kind of an impact, too.

A few years ago, Daniel Webster, director of the School’s Center for Gun Policy and Research, conducted a study of an initiative in New York City that aimed to identify the most problematic out-of-state gun dealers, based on crime data, conducting undercover investigations of their sales practices and

suing those who sold guns to our straw purchasers. Straw purchasers are those who lie about who is the actual purchaser of the gun, standing in for somebody who could not pass a background check. Twenty-four of the most problematic dealers settled or were put under a court monitor. Dr. Webster found that in New York City the likelihood of recovering a gun at a crime scene from one of these dealers dropped almost overnight by 84 percent.

Ninety-nine percent of the gun dealers in our country do obey the law; one percent do not, and those are the ones that we have to go after. And the results are dramatic and almost instantaneous. Our investigation never would have happened without the data that allowed us to identify the problematic dealers. And yet, if it were up to the NRA, we would never have had access to it. More guns would have flowed onto our streets and, in all likelihood, more people would have been murdered.

The undercover investigations we've conducted are just one example of how we've worked to crack down on gun violence. At our urging, the New York state legislature enacted the toughest penalties in the nation for illegal possession of a handgun: a 3½-year mandatory minimum prison sentence. We have also worked with our city council to adopt a law enabling the NYPD to keep tabs on gun offenders in our city, in the same way that they track sex offenders. We enforce those laws and other laws rigorously, which is an important reason New York is the safest big city in the country. In 2012, New York City had the fewest murders in nearly half a century (comparable records started to be kept back in 1963). We've never had a year remotely as safe as this past one.

As hard as we've worked, however, and as much as we've achieved, the reality remains that, in New York during 2012, there were still 418 murders in the City, and a lot of the people that were killed were kids. While shooting incidents are down in New York City, as well as murders, I recently visited three NYPD officers who'd been shot by criminals in two separate incidents on the same night. Thankfully, the officers are all expected to fully recover. But I think the events of that night really do demonstrate a flaw in an argument we've heard lately. That argument is that the solution to "bad guys with guns is good guys with guns." The problem is that sometimes the good guys get shot. Sometimes, in fact, they get killed. And I think the hardest part of my job, the part that I dread the most as mayor, is talking to the family of a police officer at a hospital to tell them that their husband, wife, mother, father, son or daughter won't ever be coming home again.

The tragic fact is that all across America today, fathers and mothers, wives and husbands, friends and neighbors will experience that kind of pain and loss in their lives because of gun violence. The rate of firearms homicides in America is 20 times higher than it is in other economically advanced nations. We have got to change that—and it has to start now, with real leadership from the White House.

If you haven't done so, go to DemandAPlan.org and join the campaign for gun safety reform, or call your senators or your congressmen and say, "We're not going to take this. Even if *you* vote the right way, your associates in Congress aren't voting the right way. And since I don't get a chance to influence them, but you want my vote, you do something about it. It is your responsibility to do it as much as it is the responsibility of the other senators and the other congressmen." Let us hope that Washington gives the issue the attention that it deserves. This is going to make a real difference between what our lives are like today and a safe future for our kids.

Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor of New York City
*Excerpted from opening remarks given at the Summit on
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