

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks at the National Safer Communities Summit in West Hartford, Connecticut  
June 16, 2023**

*The President.* Hello, hello, hello.

*Audience members.* Hello!

*The President.* I think maybe your patience exceeds your good judgment. [*Laughter*] Please, have a seat, if you have one.

Thank you for your commitment. I really mean it.

You know, as a kid, I came out of a different movement, the civil rights movement. Senator Blumenthal and I have talked about it before. I come from a State that has the eighth largest Black population in the country and was segregated when I was a kid. That's what got me engaged. And it made me believe that we could do anything. Made me believe we could do anything.

So I want to thank Chris for the introduction.

But before I say anything else, I want to acknowledge the amazing young people we just heard from. You know—[*applause*—I really mean it.

It takes extraordinary courage for them to stand up here and retell the story. Because many of you out there—either parents, relatives, and/or victims yourself—it's not just your story, it's the first graders, the educators of Sandy Hook. It's the kids and teachers at Uvalde who I sat with afterwards. It's the Emanuel—Mother Emanuel, 8 years ago tomorrow. It's the Tree of Life Synagogue. It's the families all across Hartford.

Not just the shootings that make the headlines, but every single day—every damn day in America—in the—in areas that are poor, mostly minority, there's a mass shooting. And it never reaches the crescendo that it reaches other places. Every single day.

And, folks—[*applause*]. Folks, there's a—there's a lot—a lot we have to do. And it takes courage to tell the story that you've been through, because, you know, I spent a lot of time as President, and I spent 30-some times—visits—many more days in Afghanistan and Iraq. And I watch. You know, we have posttraumatic stress, they call it, for soldiers. What's the difference between the posttraumatic stress that a soldier meets in the hills of Afghanistan and a 4-year—a fourth-grade kid meets in a classroom when they have to duck and cover? No, I'm serious.

And you're here, many of you, and it brings it all back. Brings it all back for your families, your parents, your siblings. And it brings it back for the entire country. It ripples through the Nation.

I don't know how many times I met with people at events in the country who shake my hand and say: "I'm worried. There's been another shooting not far from where I live. I'm scared to send my kid to school." It's had a profound impact.

And some people in this room have turned your pain into purpose—I suspect all of you have—your loss into determination; and your anger—justifiable anger—into a deep-seated commitment. You're the reason why I'm so optimistic about the future of this country. And that's not hyperbole, that's a fact. You're the best educated, most involved, least selfish, and most consequential generation in American history.

I'm also optimistic because of leaders like Senator Murphy. Chris, thanks for inviting me today to organize—and for organizing this summit. You know, Chris and I have known each other a long time and grew closer after that December day in 2012. You just elected to the Senate, and Barack and I had just been reelected to the White House, when the soul of Newtown, the soul of Connecticut, the soul of the Nation was pierced forever.

You've never forgotten that feeling, and you've never given up on something that can never—we can never lose—ever lose: hope. Hope.

The same goes for Senator Dick Blumenthal, a great friend. He was attorney general when my deceased son was attorney general of Delaware. Another leader in the fight against gun violence.

And Governor Lamont and Connecticut delegation, which is incredible—I think on this issue and many others, you're the best delegation in the United States of America. *[Applause]* No, I—that's the truth.

I also want to acknowledge the gentlelady from Georgia, Lucy McBath. Lucy carries her son Jordan in her heart. She proves you can run for office on ending gun violence in the South and you can win. Only by about 20 points or something like that. I've never come close. *[Laughter]* Lucy, I know this isn't easy for you. You've—you're a real pro. But I know it's not easy for you. I remember.

And one of Jill's favorite people in the whole world, and mine—I always introduce her as—she is—Mark Kelly is her husband. *[Laughter]* Ladies and gentlemen, Gabby Giffords. She's a—*[applause]*—Gabby has more courage than most people I have ever known.

I had the honor to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Gabby, not only for her courage, but her intellect that helped carry this movement. She's not stopping now. She's not stopping now. Gabby, I love you. You're wonderful.

And, Congressman Larson, thanks for the passport into your district. You've never given up. You've never given up either.

And to the State and local leaders, the mayor, others—the dedication to this vital issue is critical. It really is.

Look, you know, to the survivors and families, Jill and I—and Jill—my wife, Jill, is not here today with me. She is in Delaware right now. She had to go back up.

Jill and I have gotten to know many of you over the years. Some of us have become friends for a long time. We've kept in touch. Mark, it's good to see you again and your family.

And losses may be different circumstances, but we've shared before something that's helped our family. When my wife and daughter were killed when a tractor trailer struck them and—just after I got elected—my two boys weren't expected to live.

And then later, when my son Beau, who was the attorney general and spent a year—volunteered to spend a year in Iraq, died of stage 4 glioblastoma, my daughter Ashley tapped—taped a mirror—excuse me—a message to the mirror. The way we get to—everything gets to me through my wife and daughter now is a—they know I have to shave in the morning—*[laughter]*—so they'll tape on the mirror—for real—so I can see it when I'm shaving.

And one day, she left me a quote from Immanuel Kant, who wrote that finding happiness and peace of mind when it seems impossible can be done. He said, "You need something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for."

"Something to do" was to fulfill the promise I made to my son Beau and to my family—and your families, and you've made too—that I would not retreat from public life in the sadness that I felt afterwards, that I'd stay engaged to solve problems. "Someone to love"—my family, my kids, my grandkids. And "something to hope for"—all of you, survivors and advocates, who have built real movement with something to hope for. Something to hope for.

That your collective trauma and injuries are not going to be in vain. That your friend, your family member, your loved one did not die in vain. That by acting in their memory, you can prevent the next tragedy, you can save life, you can save families. In the process, you can continue to save the country. And I mean that.

Look, folks, a year ago, the conventional wisdom was, we would never get any Republicans to support gun legislation, period. That was the conventional wisdom. And all the usual obstacles would block us once again. But it didn't happen.

Instead, I signed into law the Bipartisan Safer Community Act, which you've referenced several times today, which many have described was the most significant gun safety law in 30 years. And it is.

But for me, and for most of you, here's what it really is: It's an important first step. I know it feels like it isn't enough when you turn on the news and see another tragedy at a school, a grocery store, a parade, or a place in America—honestly, I feel like that as well.

The facts give us reason to hope though. So far this year, murder is down in many major cities across the country. There's far too much gun violence, but that's why this summit is so important and why Chris asked me to be here today with the following message.

One year ago, we did come together. We did hear the call for too many families. Every one of those families I've met at all the places I've mentioned, I was there for—met with every single family. And you know what they'd say? Almost the same phrase, Dick. They'd say, "Do something." "Do something." And the response usually was, "My prayers are with you."

Well, prayers are fine. They're important that it doesn't happen again. But it's not going to stop it. We have to take action. We have to move, have to do something.

And so what happened? We began to continue to fight again, because for a while there, there were only about two dozen of us—in the Congress or as Vice President or when I was—as President—who thought anything could be done.

We did pass the most meaningful gun safety law in 30 years. We did overcome an unrelenting opposition of the gun lobby to gun manufacturers and so many politicians who hide behind the belief that they'll never have to pay a price for their inaction when they oppose commonsense gun legislation. And we beat them. We beat them.

And we did it through a bipartisan effort that included a majority of responsible gun owners. Because whether you're Democrats or Republicans, we all want families to be safe. We all want to drop them off at the house of worship, a mall, a movie, the school door without worrying that's the last time we're ever going to see them.

We all want our kids to have the freedom to learn to read and to write instead of learning how to duck and cover in a classroom. And above all, we all agree: We are not finished. We are not finished. We are not finished.

Look, I know you've had a full day of summit, getting into details of the law. But, folks listening at home, here's a quick summary of what's—what the law is doing. It's already allowing the Justice Department, through the FBI, to run enhanced background checks on young people under 21 trying to buy a firearm.

This legislation has already provided more than \$230 million for States to expand the use of tools like the "red flag" laws—as my son was the first to enforce when he was attorney general—which says that a court has a right to temporarily move—temporarily remove a firearm where there's danger to themselves or others.

More people die from gun violence as a consequence of suicide than anything else that happens in the Nation. Suicide. This legislation has already delivered more than \$1.5 billion to States and communities to make schools safer, improve access to mental health services, and help young people deal with the grief and trauma resulting from gun violence, posttraumatic stress syndrome.

It includes an additional 14,000 mental health professionals hired and trained to work at our schools.

The law helps prevent domestic abusers from purchasing guns. I'm the guy that wrote the Violence Against Women Act. I proposed a long time ago—[applause]—I didn't mean to—I didn't say it for that reason. But I care deeply about it, because the ultimate abuse: the abuse of power. My dad used to say, "The single worst abuse of all was the abuse of power."

We fought like hell to close the so-called "boyfriend loophole." If in fact you had a stay-away order issued against a man or a woman because of your boyfriend or girlfriend and they weren't your spouse, then guess what? They decided—the last administration decided not to impose this limitation on being able to own a weapon.

So we finally can say that those convicted of domestic violence abuse against their girlfriend or boyfriend cannot buy a firearm, period. And by the way, it's already saving lives. There are fewer deaths occurring in that area.

For the first time ever, we explicitly made gun trafficking a Federal crime. They say: "What the hell? It wasn't already?" [Laughter] No, I'm serious. Think about it.

You go home and tell your mother, father, brother, sister, aunt, and uncle that, "Whoa, gun trafficking is now a crime." They're going to look at you like: "What are you talking about? It's always been a crime." It wasn't a crime.

We did the same thing for straw purchases. That's when a middleman, who can pass the background check, buys a gun usually for someone who can't pass the background check. It's now a Federal crime if you do that.

And finally—we finally clarified who needs to register as a Federal licensed gun dealer, because a federally licensed gun dealer is required by law to run background checks on those he's selling the weapon to. And in most cities—down in Philadelphia and New York, areas I know well—like up here—you'd see a truck pull up, pull to the curb, and selling weapons—selling guns, selling AR-15. Selling weapons. Well, guess what? You do that now, you go to jail.

There's so much more, but the bottom line: If this law had been in place a year ago, lives would have been saved. And it's in place now, and it is saving lives today. We got it done because of you. Not a joke.

You all think we're being nice to you. It's—[laughter]. You're tough. [Laughter] Thank God. But I—but I really mean it. It's because of you. Moms Demand Action. Big deal. All the—all the—[applause]. No, I really mean it.

Because what did you do when young people are coming out, people who you grew up with who didn't think this was real; the suburbanite Republican man or woman—or Democrat, not just Republican—in the—who thinks, well, you know, everything is fine, and then all of a sudden they see someone of your caliber, someone of your commitment, walking down the street saying,

"We've got to do something." It matters. It matters, it matters, it matters. And you can feel it; you can taste it, what you're doing.

And here's the deal: You're changing the culture, proving we can do more than just thoughts and prayers. You're changing our politics. You're registering voters, you're recruiting candidates, you're getting them elected. You've proven that you're powerful and you're relentless. And it matters. It matters. They know you're not going away.

As I just said when I signed the law: a call to action to do more. Because I don't see that this was enough; neither do you. Really important. Really, if nothing else happened, we have changed things for the better.

So I set out to take as much executive action—that's a fancy word of saying: What can I do as President on my own? *[Laughter]* Executive action that made it illegal to manufacture so-called "ghost guns." I just signed that, and I said that.

It's being challenged in court, but so far, it matters. That allow anyone to assemble a gun at home, bought from several different places, in as little as 30 minutes. Come on. These weapons don't have serial numbers. That's why they like to buy them, so criminals can use them to commit crimes and not leave behind a registration of who owned the weapon.

It made it harder for people to buy stabilized braces. Put a pistol on a brace, and it makes—turns into a gun. Makes them where you can have a higher caliber weapon—a higher caliber bullet coming out of that gun. It's essentially turning it into a short-barreled rifle, which has been a weapon of choice by a number of mass shooters.

We're making it easier to buy gun locks and other safe storage at gun stores.

If any one of you drove over the parking lot here today, got out of your car, and left a key in your car, and a kid comes along who's 13, 14 years old, gets in your car, takes it on a joyride and kills someone, guess what: You're liable.

Why should that not be the case if you don't lock up your weapon? Why should that not be the case? Why is that not required? And most gun owners agree with me.

We also established a zero-tolerance policy for rogue gun dealers who willfully violate the law. Now, instead of a slap on the wrist, their licenses are revoked.

You have a lot of gun dealers who are engaged in shady actions. Well, guess what? Used to be, they get—they'd get a fine. Now they lose their license to sell. We established a strike force to crack down on gun trafficking across State lines, including guns brought up from Georgia, South Carolina, Washington, Philadelphia, New York, right here to Hartford.

All told, we've taken more executive action to reduce gun violence than any of my predecessors—probably than all my predecessors. They're being challenged in court, but so far, so good. *[Laughter]*

And the budget I submitted to Congress would help reduce crime by increasing funding to go after gun traffickers. And for the—by the way—you know what I get when I—we're talking about the fentanyl at the border and all that? I speak with the President of Mexico. "Will you stop sending guns to us?" We are sending dangerous weapons, particularly assault weapons, to Mexico. To Mexico. They're asking us: "Please stop it. Cut it off at the border."

What in God's name are we becoming if we don't do this?

Look, ladies and gentlemen, for those who say they're concerned about crime, you can't deal with crime without dealing with gun violence. It's a simple proposition.

Remember, for a long time in America, car accidents were the leading killer of children. This was mentioned earlier. Then, in 2020, guns became the number-one killer of children in America. Guns. More than car accidents, more than cancer. Let me say that again: We can't let that just become another statistic. Guns, the number-one killer of children in the United States of America?

Folks, it's time once again that we banned AR-15 rifle-style weapons, high-capacity magazines; they're not only a weapon of war, they're the single biggest driver of profits for the gun industry. That's why they're selling them. Profit, profit, profit. The single biggest.

As I said, we did it once before, in '94, and 10 years after that, the ban was—mass shootings went down significantly—the number of mass shootings. That's—when the ban expired, mass shootings tripled. But let the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines come back into vogue.

Look, I find it outrageous that of all the industries in America—and by the way, I've been doing this a long time. *[Laughter]* I know I don't look that old. I know. *[Laughter]* I'm a little under 103. *[Laughter]*

But all kidding aside, I thought—I mean, I'm going to say something outrageous. I was a pretty powerful Senator. I—pretty—managed some of the biggest committees: judiciary, foreign policy, et cetera. But I didn't know 10 years ago—I didn't know that there are—gun manufacturers are immune from liability. I didn't know that. Gun manufacturers.

Just imagine how many more people would be dead if the tobacco industry—if the tobacco industry was immune from liability, you couldn't sue the tobacco industry. I'm being deadly earnest. Think about the number of people who would be dead today that are alive because we could sue them and they paid billions of dollars for their—for the damage they were doing.

Well, ladies, we need to end immunity for the gun manufacturers. We've got to hold them accountable. And it's time we establish universal background checks and require safe storage of firearms.

And just remember, the United States of America has the finest fighting force in the history of the world. We provide our—these same servicemembers with the most lethal weapons on Earth. But we also require them to receive significant training before they are allowed to use them.

We require extensive background checks and mental health assessment on them before they can allow to use them. We require them to lock them up and store the weapons responsibly or they're court-martialed and put in jug.

These are commonsense requirements all gun owners should follow. Every gun owner should be required to have the same requirements held to him or her. We know what to do.

Congress needs to act. And let me be clear about something: If this Congress refuses to act, we need a new Congress.

And we need States to act as well. Not every—not every State has a Governor as competent as Governor Lamont, and I mean that. But they can do a lot more. Look what the Gov has done here in this State.

Less than 2 weeks ago here in Connecticut, Governor Lamont signed a bipartisan legislation with more than a dozen measures to improve gun safety, from providing open carry and strengthening—from prohibiting open carry and strengthening the ban on assault weapons and ghost guns.

Illinois, Washington State passed assault weapons bans this year, bringing the total to 10 States and the District of Columbia. Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, Vermont passed legislation establishing or strengthening the "red flag" laws. Now, 21 States plus the District of Columbia have "red flag" laws in effect. Since 2021, seven States have passed an increase in accountability for gun—for the gun industry.

I said, beginning—at the beginning, you—they've turned their pain into purpose. You turned your cause into reality.

I believe we've reached a tipping point in this Nation. I really do. Swear to God. People in this room are the big reason why we reached that tipping point. As Senator Murphy says, "Success begets success." But the converse is also true: Failure begets failure. That's why Jill and I, Kamala, and the entire administration are more determined than ever that you should be successful as well.

Look, let me close with this. I know many people here who have been impacted by gun violence, lost someone they loved, fought so hard for so many years. A lot of you are tired.

*Audience member.* Yes, sir! [*Inaudible*]

*The President.* You're tired. No, I—I——

*Audience member.* Yes, sir!

*The President.* I get it. Try being 110 and doing it again. [*Laughter*]

All kidding aside, a lot of people are frustrated. My mother, God love her—all 5-foot-1—Catherine Eugenia Finnegan—she'd look at me and say: "Joey, never bow. Never bend. Never yield. Never kneel." We never will on this issue. Never, never, never, never, never. [*Applause*]. Until we have a rational policy.

Folks, are we ever going to make progress we need to make? I'm here to tell you we cannot give up. We will not get there—I still remember the people I met with in Newtown, in Orlando, in Las Vegas, in Pittsburgh, in Charleston, Parkland, El Paso, Uvalde, Buffalo, Monterey Park, and so many other places that never make the headlines.

I've never forgotten them, and I never will forget them. And I'll never stop fighting for them. I promise you. And I believe this is true: that everyone in this room, you'll never stop fighting for them as well.

We will ban assault weapons in this country. We will ban multiround magazines. We will hold gunmakers liable. We will beat the gun industry. We will beat big money that sits behind them and the politicians who refuse to stand up and act.

It won't be easy. I have no illusions how fiercely they'll fight back, but I also have no illusions about the people in this room.

Look at what you've already done here in Connecticut and around the country. Look at the movement you've built. Look at the people you've helped elect. Look at the progress you've made in statehouses. Look at all the mothers organizing all across the country.

Listen to the young people who've spoken out here today. They're speaking for a whole generation, and they will not be ignored. They will not be shunned. They will not be silent in this moment.

In this moment, we have to remember what—I got to know him—Nelson Mandela—when I tried to get to Africa—to South Africa to meet him. And he came back, and he met me when he was finally freed. He met me at the White House. And he looked at me, and I swear to God—it wasn't unique to me, I'm sure—he said, "It always seems impossible until it gets done."

There's nothing beyond our capacity. That's the power of memory of your loved one. That's the power of this movement. That's the power of America. Our lives and the lives of our Nation find purpose: something to do, someone to love, something to hope for. We have just to keep going and keep the faith.

Every time I'd walk out of my Grandpop Finnegan's house up in Scranton, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." My grandmother would yell, "No, Joey, spread it."

Remember who we are. We're the United States of America. And there's nothing beyond our capacity when we do it together.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

We can get this done. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I mean it. Thank you.

Now, as you—some of you know, I'd usually come down and say hi to all of you. They tell me there's a storm coming in. Is that right? It's still—is that still the deal?

*Audience members.* Nooo!

*The President.* If that's the truth, now, don't make a lie—[laughter]. As that—as that scene in the John Wayne movie, "Don't make me a dog-faced, lying pony soldier." [Laughter]

All right, well, I tell you what, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to ask the White House photographer to come up. And what I'm going to do is, I'm going to stand—I can't—I usually shake everybody's hand. But I'm going to stand in front of each section. No, I really mean it. And then—and if you can see the camera, they can see you. And it's the least consequential part of this whole meeting for you, I promise.

All right? God save the Queen, man.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:53 p.m. at the University of Hartford. In his remarks, he referred to former President Barack Obama; Rep. Lucia K. McBath; former Rep. Gabrielle D. Giffords; Sen. Mark E. Kelly; Mark Barden, cofounder and chief executive officer, Sandy Hook Promise Action Fund, whose son Daniel was killed in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, on December 14, 2012; Mayor Shari Cantor of West Hartford, CT; President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico; and Vice President Kamala D. Harris.

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