

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Signing an Executive Order on Combating Emerging Firearms Threats and Improving School-Based Active-Shooter Drills

September 26, 2024

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Good afternoon, everyone. Good afternoon. Thank you, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Please have a seat. Please have a seat.

Sari, you are extraordinary. You are right, I have been traveling our country for many years meeting with extraordinary heroes, and you are really an extraordinary leader. And when I look at you, I know the future of our country is bright. Thank you, Sari. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

And to all of the—all of the leaders here—survivors, family membered [members; White House correction], loved ones—thank you all for the work that you do and the voice that you carry for so many who are not in this room right now, but deserve to be seen, deserve to be known, deserve to be heard. I thank you all for all that you do to sacrifice your time and your hearts to give what you give to so many.

And so it is good to be with everyone, including our extraordinary President, Joe Biden.

And you know, I have the great blessing and fortune to work alongside our President. And wherever we are together, whether the cameras are in the room or not, he cares about the American people. He loves the American people. And he—in his leadership, so much of his leadership is always about fighting for the dignity of all people and understanding the pain that many might experience and what we must do as leaders to alleviate that pain.

And I thank you, Mr. President, for all that you are.

The President. Thank you.

Vice President Harris. And to all the Members of Congress who are here, all of the leaders who are here, I thank you.

So, before I begin, I will say a few words about Hurricane Helene. So the President and I, of course, are monitoring the case and the situation closely, and we urge everyone who is watching at this very moment to take this storm very seriously and please follow the guidance of your local officials.

And President Biden and I, of course, will continue to work closely with State and local officials to ensure that everyone is safe and to protect communities before, during, and after the storm.

So, with that, I will turn to the subject at hand.

I believe the right to be safe is a civil right and that the people of America have a right, then, to live, work, worship, and learn without fear of violence, including gun violence.

And yet our Nation is experiencing an epidemic of gun violence. I'm telling a bunch of leaders who know. Today, one in five Americans has a family member that was killed by gun violence. Gun violence is now the number-one cause of the death of children in America. Not car accidents, not cancer—gun violence—the number-one cause of death for the children of America.

And this is the result of many, many issues, including mass shootings and school shootings that are too frequently occurring in our Nation. And it is, of course, the result of everyday gun violence, which occurs in cities and neighborhoods and towns across our Nation.

And we know that the prevalence of this violence causes trauma that is far too often undiagnosed and untreated, which means that the effect of it is from that moment and lingers for a lifetime if we don't take seriously what are the seen and visible and unseen injuries that result from this violence.

Over the years, I have held the hands of far too many mothers and fathers to try and comfort them after their child was killed by gun violence.

And let us all agree: It does not have to be this way. We know—[applause]—we have in our possession, we know how to stop these tragedies. And it is a false choice to suggest you are either in favor of the Second Amendment or you want to take everyone's guns away. I am in favor of the Second Amendment, and I believe we need to reinstate the assault weapons ban and pass universal background checks, safe storage laws, and "red flag" laws.

When we took office, we promised to take on the crisis of gun violence. And we passed, under the President's leadership, the first major gun safety law in nearly 30 years, a bipartisan law which includes an historic investment to address the trauma caused by gun violence.

We are hiring 14,000 new mental health counselors in public schools across our Nation. We need to hire more. [Applause] We need to hire more. But it is the single largest investment in student mental health in history.

And for as much as we have accomplished, more must be done. We need more leaders—we need more leaders like the leaders in this room—in Congress who have the courage to take action, to stand up to the gun lobby, and to put the lives of our children first.

Last week, I met with a young leader. Her name is Natalie. She's a 15-year-old student at Apalachee High School and a survivor of gun violence. When we met, Natalie was still wearing bandages. And she is extraordinarily brave.

And so, on behalf of her, on behalf of all the survivors—all the survivors that we have lost, let us continue to fight to end the epidemic of gun violence and to keep our communities and our children safe.

And now it is my great honor to introduce a leader and a friend who understands the urgency of this crisis. He is a mayor who knows firsthand what it is like to lose a loved one to gun violence and to see his community shaken by tragedy. A dear friend who is not only a local leader, but a national leader, please welcome Mayor Randall Woodfin.

Mayor Randall L. Woodfin of Birmingham, Alabama. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, thank you.

Thank you, everyone. And thank you for the introduction, Madam Vice President.

As stated, my name is Randall Woodfin. I am honored to serve as mayor of the city of Birmingham, Alabama. I want you all to know that I am not here representing myself. I am here representing the 200,000 residents I serve.

Gun violence—gun violence is very—what I would say, very personal to me because I know the scream of a mother when her child is killed. I know that because I heard it from the voice of my own mother when my brother was killed by gun violence.

I know that scream. I heard that scream again this past Saturday as the lives of 4 people were stolen and 17 other victims were shot during the horrific mass shooting in Birmingham.

Saving lives—saving lives—should not be partisan. Saving lives should not be Democrat or a Republican thing. Saving lives, everyone—saving lives shouldn't even be political. Saving lives is the most American thing we can do together.

And so we have been working with our U.S. attorney, with the Justice Department to get machinegun conversions, like Glock switches, off our city streets. But still, my community—and I imagine other communities—are still finding the use of these devices at crime scene after crime scene.

And so that is why I am grateful to our President—that is why I'm so grateful to our Vice President as well—who today are taking more action to help people not only in Birmingham, but across our country. Today we work to loosen the grip that gun violence has on our communities.

I know firsthand what it means to have a President who is not only a partner, but a friend to a community and cities. The Biden-Harris administration is making historic and transformative investments in our neighborhoods, but most importantly, in our people.

Instead of being overlooked, I am happy to stand on this stage and tell you we have a President who not only sees us, but truly believes in us.

And that is why it is my honor to introduce President Joe Biden, who has been a true friend to Birmingham, Alabama.

The President. Thank you. Please. Thank you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please. Please. Thank you.

Audience member. We love you, Joe!

The President. [*Inaudible*] Thank you.

Audience members. Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe!

The President. Please have a seat. That was very nice of you all. Thank you very much.
[*Laughter*]

Mayor Woodfin, thank you for your introduction—[*laughter*—and, quite frankly, for your extraordinary leadership in Birmingham.

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. You know, through your love for your brother, you're helping ensure that he and all the victims of gun violence have not died in vain.

May I ask a question? How many of you in this audience have lost someone in the family to gun violence?

I know from experience of other losses that this is bittersweet. We want us to be doing this, but it brings back the very moment it happened, no matter how long it—since it's occurred. You're here, and you remember—you remember the first time you heard my son, my daughter, my mother, my father, my brother, my sister—somebody you lost. I know the feeling in a different context, and it's heartbreaking.

So thank you for the courage to be here. I know—I know—the intensity of your feelings. But thank you, because it really does require you to relive the moment it occurred, and that's tough. And I don't think people who haven't been the loss of someone through an accident or through violence fully understands it until it happens. And I hope that it doesn't happen to the rest of you in any circumstance.

So thank you for—Sari, for sharing your story and your classmates', your teachers', your friends' in Parkland. You know, an extraordinary courage, it inspires the Nation. And we stand with you, for real.

Quite frankly, you inspired me when I met many of you after that tragedy.

Hurricane Helene Preparedness Efforts

Before I begin, let me speak to our preparedness and—very briefly for the Hurricane Helena. We're expecting a catastrophic storm, winds and flooding throughout the Southeast, starting in Florida right now. Kamala and I have been briefed and spent many hours with FEMA, including recently.

Ambassador Griswell [Criswell; White House correction] is on the scene tomorrow. I've directed FEMA to work with the State partners to take proactive measures to ensure the communities in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina, and other States have the support and the resources they need. That includes improving prelandfall emergency declaration requests from the Governors of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama.

At my direction, more than 1,000 Federal personnel have already been deployed to those areas. We have search-and-rescue teams, medical teams, power restoration teams, generators, water, food on the ground and ready to support families throughout the coming days.

But let me say this: Everyone needs to take it seriously—extremely seriously. The potential storm surge is well beyond the immediate path of the hurricane. It could be significant and deadly.

You know, for you and your family's sake, I urge everyone in and near the path of the hurricane to listen to local officials and follow evacuation orders and been—when told to do so.

Remember 2 years ago—just 2 years ago—150 people were killed when the surge was only 14 feet. Now the surge is expected to be up to 20 feet—20 feet. So take this seriously.

I have—from the bottom of my heart, please take it seriously, anybody listening to this. And—because—anyway. The tendency is to say, "I can do this," but you can't. Twenty-foot storm surge—you can't.

Gun Violence Prevention Efforts

Folks, now for the reason we're here today. I want to thank Vice President Harris and members of our Cabinet, Members of the Congress, including Birmingham's extraordinary Congresswoman, Terri Sewell. Terri, stand up. Stand up.

I want to thank Congressman Mike Thompson. Mike, stand up.

And a good friend and one of the brightest people I know, Jamie Raskin. Jamie, stand up.

And Congressman Maxwell Frost, who started by organizing opposition to gun violence and is now the youngest Member of Congress. Even when I was the second youngest Senator in history, I never had that much hair. *[Laughter]*

And Representative Lucy McBath, whose son Jordan was killed by gun violence. Thanks, Lucy. Thanks for being here. I know events like this are difficult.

Look, folks, I want to thank you for the courage. And I also want to thank the chiefs of police and sheriffs, to all the advocates and allies, and especially to the survivors and families, many of whom I've met with. Jill and I have gotten to know some of you very well over the years. Thank you for being here.

With absolute courage, you have turned your pain into purpose—that's what it's all about, turning your pain into purpose—your loss into determination, your anger into commitment and the power in——

[At this point, a baby in the audience cried.]

——of a movement of saving lives.

That's okay. Babies rule in my house. *[Laughter]* Don't worry about it.

This past Monday, the FBI released data showing how crime is down in America. The year before we came to the Presidency, we saw the biggest increase in murder rates on record.

Last year, we saw the largest decrease in murder rates nationwide in recent history, thanks to guys like you wearing those uniforms. The homicide rate in 2023 was 16-percent below the year before we became President and Vice President. In the first half of 2024, in large cities across the country, homicide rate dropped another 17 percent. And last year, we also saw the lowest rates of all violent crime in more than 50 years; murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery all dropped, along with burglary, property crime. It matters.

And together, we're making clear: If we want to talk about reducing crime and violence in America, you need to talk about guns in America—*[applause]*. You need to talk about guns.

You just heard Kamala cite the statistics all Americans should be ashamed of. Guns are the number-one—hard to believe—they're the number-one killer of children in America; more than any other cause: accidents—more than any other cause. It's almost—unbelievable to think that's—it's sick.

Last year, after another school shooting, my predecessor said it—just said, like some Members of Congress say, just go—just "get over it." I'm going to be very blunt. Secretary *[Senator; White House correction]* Vance of Ohio has called these shootings "facts of life."

Who the hell do these people think they are? I mean it.

Think about it. The only industry that is exempted by law from being investigated and being dealt with is the gun industry. Imagine had that be the case with the tobacco industry, what cancer would be like. I mean this sincerely. Think about this.

This time last year, we stood in the Rose Garden to launch the first-ever White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention in our Nation's history.

I look around the room, and I see survivors, like our former magnificent Congresswoman, who is always out there fighting. Thank you, Gabby. Thank you, Gabby.

And you know, it's staffed by gun violence survivors and experts, overseen by our incredible Vice President. The purpose is to drive and coordinate the Government in a nationwide effort to reduce gun violence in America.

Over the past year, we've made tremendous progress: more background checks required for firearms sold at gun shows *[and; White House correction]* online; a new interagency response team to support communities after mass shootings.

And I've been to all but three mass shootings in the United States of America and spent time with surviving families, many of whom I see here in this audience. Because it's important to raise up what's happening.

The most comprehensive Federal guide ever on safe gun storage of firearms. The first-ever Surgeon General's advisory declaring gun violence to be a public health crisis.

And by the way, parenthetically, as I travel the world with other world leaders, they ask, "Do you really have a public—do you cite that you have a public health crisis with gun violence?"

Well, today I'm proud to announce a new Executive order that's going to—two additional things. First, the Executive order will establish a new Federal Task Force on emerging firearm threats.

Previously, my administration took action to crack down on private manufacturers of firearms, including kits of so-called ghost guns. This is probably the only audience that knows what ghost guns are. They don't have to have a serial number. When guns don't have serial numbers, it's hard for them to track back to the shooter and hold them accountable when something happens.

But today we're taking the next step. Our new Task Force will address 3-D-printed firearms. And for those listening—everybody in this room knows what that is—but they actually can produce a plastic firearm with a 3-D printer. That—you know, and magnetometers can't detect these, where they don't have a serial number.

This Task Force is also going to tackle machinegun conversion devices that were mentioned by the mayor, devices that illegally turn semiautomatic weapons, and including handguns, into fully automatic machineguns that can fire up to 20 bullets in 20—in 1 second—in 2 seconds—20 in 2 seconds.

These devices are already illegal under Federal law and can be made on a 3-D printer for just 40 cents in less than 30 minutes and sold for as little as \$20. But local law enforcement in cities across the country tell me the streets are flooded with machinegun conversion devices— isn't that right, Captain?

Audience member. Yes, sir.

The President. Because the parts are small, cheap, and easy to make. The impact of these devices is devastating.

Just this weekend, a machinegun conversion device was found at the scene of a mass shooting in Birmingham. I can tell you, over 100 shell casings—100 shell casings—were found, including 4 killed and 18 injured and a community shattered.

Enough.

Within 90 days of—our Task Force will send me a risk assessment and a strategy to address these emerging firearm threats. It's about sending a clear message to——

[A baby in the audience cried.]

Don't worry about the babe. It's okay. *[Laughter]* Really.

Sending a clear message to local law enforcement and cities across the country: We're here to help, and together, we can save lives.

Look, the second part of this Executive order relates to active shooter drills in schools. You know, it's a good thing, but people don't—you all understand, many of you in here—but the psychological impact that has on a child.

You know, I'm old enough we used to have drills for—you know, duck and cover for nuclear devices. But guess what? Now we're talking about kids know what's happening.

Kamala just talked about the worry of parents and the stress and fear of—students have when they're told to participate in active school shooter drills. The lack of guidance today on how to prepare students while minimizing the trauma of active shooter drills is—it's unacceptable.

So today I'm directing the members of my Cabinet to return to me within 110 days with resources and information for schools to improve active shooter drills, minimize its harm, create age-appropriate content, and communicate with parents before and after these drills happen so they know what's going on.

Folks, we just have to do better, and we can do better.

But that's not all. Today my administration is also announcing a whole series of new actions to address gun violence. We're releasing a new tool with resources to help schools communicate with parents about safety of storing firearms in their homes.

And by the way, I, along with Dianne Feins [Feinstein; White House correction], was the guy that passed the first assault weapons ban. And here's the deal: It was amazing—amazing—how many of those gun violence occurred with those fire—when they were outlawed, what—with the—with these firearms were a consequence of a parent not being responsible with the guns they own, or in a recent case—I won't get into because it's under litigation—a parent who provided an assault weapon to a young child.

It's been found that when school administrators communicate with parents about safe storage of firearms in their homes, it motivates parents to act.

We're awarding \$135 million on top of the \$238 million we've already awarded last year to 48 States for crisis intervention, including tools like "red flag" laws. I'm going to say—be very personal here. My son was attorney general—it was the first State in the Nation to institute that Statewide. Removing—temporarily removing firearms from those who are a danger to themselves and others.

Audience member. Yes.

Audience member. Right.

The President. Well, it's important.

We're awarding an additional \$85 million to 30 community violence-intervention programs on top of the \$200 million we've already invested in these programs.

As you all know, these local intervention programs stop shootings before they happen, utilizing trusted messengers, community members, leaders to work directly with people at risk who are the most vulnerable to gun violence.

And, folks, all these new actions build on historic steps we've already taken since I took office to address gun violence in America.

Through the American Rescue Plan—which, by the way, not a single one of the opposition voted for—[*laughter*]*—I don't say that for political reasons, I say that to make sure people understand it's not costless to do that—helped deliver more than \$15 billion, the largest investment ever in public safety. Let me say it again: All my opponents—all our opponents voted against the largest funding ever in public safety.*

I also announced a dozen Executive orders to reduce gun violence, more than any of my predecessors.

And, with your help, we passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the most significant gun violence [legislation; White House correction] in 30 years. And so many things because we had a first-rate prosecutor who had—[*applause*].

[*The President gestured toward Vice President Harris.*]

No—who has incredible experience dealing with this. Among many things, it strengthened background checks for anyone under the age of 21 seeking to purchase a firearm.

Since we implemented the background check system last year, we've kept almost 1,000 guns out of the hands of people under the age of 21. But, folks, the law also invested over \$1 billion, the largest one-time ever investment ever, in seeking to deal with mental health issues in our schools—[*applause*]*—*to help them deal with the grief and trauma of gun violence and other traumatic experiences.

We spent a lot of time—didn't we?—with those kids. Afraid to go back to school. Not an unusual thing to be concerned about if you've sat there and you're—the kid sitting next to you at your desk gets shot and killed.

My former Senate Deputy Chief of Staff is here with me today—Roger Harrison—sitting in the back there. He founded an organization that does outreach programs for middle and high school students dealing with mental health issues, and many others around the country are doing similar things.

We still have more to do, but the steps we've taken so far in reducing gun violence and saving lives are real. But we have to keep going. There's so much more we have to do.

I think it's time to reinstate the assault weapons ban and high-capacity magazines. When I was a Senator and I introduced the first effort to ban them, those weapons, I literally was walking through the swamps of eastern—the Northeast—excuse me, in Southern Delaware, down in the area where the swamps and rivers are. There was a guy fishing, and he looked at me and he said: "Biden, what the hell you going to take my gun for? Why are you going to take my assault weapon?" He was fishing. And I said—[*laughter*]*—*true story. And I said, "You need that?" And he said, "Yes." [*Laughter*] I said, "You must be one hell of a lousy shot." [*Laughter*] "And I don't see a lot of deer running around here wearing Kevlar vests." [*Laughter*] He said, "Well, that's not"—"Well, why do you have it?" "Well, I hunt." "You hunt? Like hell." [*Laughter*]

Look, it's time we establish universal background checks—[*applause*]*—*universal—and require safe storage of firearms. I mean it. Start holding parents accountable for being negligent.

By the way, if you pulled up here—wherever you parked here—and left your key in your car, and a student steals the car and gets in an accident, you are held responsible. Why in the hell would not that be the case if you leaved a gun case open? No, I mean it.

And I've been fighting for this. I'm going to continue after I leave this office: End immunity for the gun industry. End it. End it. End it.

Look, folks, I taught constituted law for years—constitutional law. Never was the Second Amendment meant to be absolute. Back when it was passed, you could not own a cannon. [*Laughter*] No, well I'm not joking. People are like, "The—you know, the—the—the liberty of Americans is watered with the blood of patriots." Like hell. [*Laughter*] I'm serious. Think about it. Think about it. It was never absolute—never, never, never, never.

It's time we increase funding for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives and other law enforcement agencies that deal with crime and solve crimes faster.

We get a lot of heat from the other guy—she's getting a lot of heat from the other guy, talking about "We're not helping"—we're the ones funding cops.

Vice President Harris. Yes, we are.

The President. We're the ones funding these things.

It's time to increase funding to help victims in crime and support community groups helping—and hurting—people hurting from gun violence. *[Applause]* No, I really mean it.

Unfortunately, my predecessor and a lot of congressional other people oppose all these steps to reduce gun violence. Instead, they tried to stop the crackdown on ghost gun kits, by the way. You know, that's a real big deal to them. "We can't deny the Second Amendment right to"—oh, give me a break. *[Laughter]*

If they got their way, criminals could traffic guns and commit crimes. Congressional—our opponents are trying to defund the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. There's an amendment to defund the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. "Bless me, Father," as we say in my church. *[Laughter]*

They attack the FBI and want to abolish the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and Explosives—by the way, that's out—written out—which is responsible for fighting gun crimes. Folks, you can't be pro-law enforcement and be anti-FBI and ATF. It's outrageous.

Well, that's why we're here today and why this is so important. We need your help in fighting and standing up to the gun lobby, gun manufacturers, the politicians who oppose commonsense gun legislation.

Because whether you're a Democrat or Republican or Independent, we all want our families to be safe. We drop families off at the house of worship or a child at a mall or a movie theater or a school—we don't have to worry about whether it was—that's the last time we'll see them. No, I mean, think about. Think about it. We all want our kids to have the freedom to learn how to read and write in schools instead of duck and cover.

Let me close with this. I know how difficult this work is, particularly for someone who's been through the tragedies of consequences of it. But I also have no illusions about the champions and heroes in this fight, including all of you. I really don't.

Look at what you've already done. Look at the movement you've built. Look at the elected officials standing alongside me in—that are here today.

Listen to the young people speaking out. That's the power of your loved ones and their memory. And that's the power of this movement. That's the power of America.

We just have to keep going, have faith in who we are.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're the United States of America. There is nothing beyond our capacity—nothing, nothing, nothing. I mean that. I swear to God.

I know I look like I'm only 40, but I'm a hundred years old. *[Laughter]* I've been around a long time.

I really mean it. There's nothing beyond our capacity. We're the only nation in the world—as a student of history, I can tell you—that's come out of every crisis stronger than we went in. And we've got to come out stronger now.

Now, I'm going to sign this Executive order.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[The President moved to the signing desk.]

All right. What I'm about to sign is "Combating Emerging Firearms Threats and Improving School-Based Active-Shooter Drills." I never thought I'd have to sign something like this, but we do.

Orange Ribbons for Gun Safety Founder Fred Guttenberg. And we thank you.

Former Representative Gabrielle D. Giffords. Thank you.

[The President signed the Executive order.]

Former Rep. Giffords. Bravo.

[After entering part of his signature, the President gave the pen to Representative Lucia K. McBath. He then completed his signature with another pen.]

The President. Keep it going, boss. *[Laughter]*

[The President gave the pen to Vice President Harris.]

Vice President Harris. Thank you.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 5:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to White House Gender Policy Council Special Assistant Sari Kaufman, a survivor of the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, who introduced Vice President Harris; Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell; Gov. Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida; Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia; Gov. Roy A. Cooper III of North Carolina; Gov. Kay E. Ivey of Alabama; Rep. Jamie B. Raskin; 2024 Republican Presidential nominee former President Donald J. Trump; and Roger M. Harrison, cofounder, Minding Your Mind. Vice President Harris referred to Natalie Griffith, a 15-year-old student who was injured in the shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, GA, on September 4. Mayor Woodfin referred to his mother Cynthia Woodfin-Kellum; Anitra Holloman, Tahj Booker, Carlos McCain, and Roderick L. Patterson, Jr., who were killed in the shooting in Birmingham, AL, on September 21; and Prim F. Escalona, U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Alabama. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 27.

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