

Remarks Announcing Proposed Gun Control Legislation *April 27, 1999*

Thank you very much, Carolyn, John Conyers, Senator Chafee, Senator Feinstein, all the many Members of Congress who are here. I thank the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Treasury, and Secretary of Education. I'm glad to see our old friend Mayor Helmke and Bob Walker and others here. We have, I think, over 40 Members of Congress here and two Senators who went back to the floor to fight for this issue to be put on the floor today.

I would like to do two things. First, I want to tell you specifically what we are proposing, and I'll do that. But secondly, I would like to tie what we are proposing to all these culture arguments and talk about, if you will, at least two cultures that exist in America, and say that I think this, in the end, is going to come down to what our conception of America as a community is and what our responsibilities to one another are.

I want to begin by saying a lot of people have made remarkable contributions, I think, to this effort to get us to look at the violence of our culture and how it makes the most vulnerable of our children, without regard to their income or their social status, closer to the line of taking violent action, and how it complicates family life for everyone.

I want to thank Hillary for what she's done. I also want to thank Al and Tipper Gore, who have done enormously important work on this for years, to try to help us deal with the TV issues, the ratings, the V-chips, and now, the new efforts we've been making with the Internet community to give parents some more control over that and the efforts we have to make to train the parents to figure out how to do it, since their kids all know more about it than they do.

But this is very important stuff. In June, Tipper Gore's going to host our White House Conference on Mental Health. And the Attorney General and Hillary and I were just talking about some of the things we can do to help to make sure all of our schools have the adequate mentoring and mediation and even mental health services our kids need. All this is very important. And we have to deal with that.

But if you believe that we have special cultural challenges, it seems to me that that's an argument that we ought to bend over backwards to try to remove the opportunities for bad things happening, if we have more kids that are vulnerable to doing those things, not an argument that we ought to say, "Well, we should walk away from that and just try to make sure everybody individually in the whole country never does anything wrong."

And what's the real problem here? The problem is, we have another culture in our country that I think has gotten confused about its objectives. We have a huge hunting and sport shooting culture in America, and unlike many of you, I grew up in it. I was 12 years old the first time I took a .22 and shot it at a can on a fencepost in the country. I know about this.

We always talk about the NRA; the NRA has been powerful not only because they have a lot of money but because they can influence people who vote. And in that culture, people believe everybody should be personally responsible for their actions; if you just punish people who do wrong more harshly, fewer people will do wrong; and everybody tells me I've got a constitutional right to keep and bear arms, so don't fool with me; and every reasonable restriction is just the camel's nose in the tent, and pretty soon they'll come after my shotgun, and I'll miss the next duck hunting season.

And we smile about that, but there are some people who would be on this platform today who lost their seats in 1994 because they voted for the Brady bill, and they voted for the assault weapons ban, and they did it in areas where people could be frightened. And the voters had not had enough time, which they did have within 2 more years, to see that nobody was going to take their gun away.

So we have more than one cultural problem here. And I want to make a plea to everybody who is waiting for the next deer season in my home State to think about this in terms of what our reasonable obligations to the larger community of America are.

Do we know for absolutely certain that if we had every reasonable law and the ones I'm going

to propose here, that none of these school violence things would have happened? No. But we do know one thing for certain. We know there would have been fewer of them, and there would have been fewer kids killed in the last several years in America. We know that for certain. We know that.

Cultures are hard to change. And cultures should never be used to avoid individual responsibility. But we—when we get to where we change, then we wonder. We look back and we say, “How could we have ever done it otherwise?”

Let me ask you something. Next time you get on an airplane, think about how you’d feel if the headline in the morning paper right before you got on the airplane was “Airport Metal Detectors and X-Ray Machines Abolished as Infringement on Americans’ Constitutional Right To Travel.” Think about it. That’s the headline in the morning paper. And right next to it there is another headline, “Terrorist Groups Expanding Operations in the United States.” And you read the two headlines, and you’re getting on the airplane, exercising your constitutional right to travel, which is now no longer infringed by the fact that you might have to go through the metal detector twice and take out your money clip or take off your heavily metaled belt and that somebody is x raying your luggage as it gets on the airplane. It’s unthinkable now, isn’t it? This will become unthinkable, too, that we should ever reverse these things if we ever have enough sense to do them.

But we still have a cultural and a political argument that says, to defend Americans’ rights to reasonable hunting and sport shooting, you have to defend the indefensible, as well. This is—it doesn’t make any sense at all, unless you’re caught up in this sort of web of distorted logic and denial.

But Carolyn McCarthy may have made the most important point here. We’re all in here preaching to the saved. You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t agree. But somebody needs to call these Members that grew up where I grew up, that lived in the same culture I did, that belong to both parties, and say, “Hey, we’ve got to make this like airport metal detectors and x-ray machines. This is about our community. This is about our responsibility to our children. This is about protecting our children and—the vulnerable children themselves—from people who are about to go over the line here. And this

is crazy that we’re living in a society that takes no reasonable steps to protect the larger community.”

So it’s not just a culture of violence that has to change; it’s the culture of hunting and sport shooting that has to stop financing efforts to frighten their members, who are good, God-fearing, law-abiding, taxpaying citizens out there, into believing that every time we try to save a kid’s life, it’s a camel’s nose in the tent.

I have had to go through those metal detectors as many as 3 times, back when I had a real life and I was traveling around, because I had all kinds of stuff in there—[laughter]—and every time I start to get a little aggravated, I think, “Boy, I don’t want that plane to blow up.” [Laughter] You know, make me go through a dozen times if you want to—and the person behind me.

Now, we’ve got to think about this in that way. These are the folks we have to reach. When there are no constituents for this movement, the movement will evaporate. When people from rural Pennsylvania and rural West Virginia and rural Colorado and Idaho start calling their Congressmen and saying, “Hey, man, we can live with this. We can live with this. This is no big deal, you know? I mean, we’re just out there doing what we do. We’ll gladly put up with an extra hassle, a little wait, a little this, a little that, because we want to save several thousand kids a year.”

That is my challenge to you. That is what is going on.

Now, here are the things we want to do. A lot of you won’t think they’re enough, but you remember the culture. You change the culture; we’ll change the laws. You change the message; we’ll do it. And none of them have anything to do with anybody’s legitimate right to hunt.

First of all, we ought to strengthen the Brady law. It’s kept 250,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers—the States now have the insta-check system, which is good. The mandatory waiting period has expired; that’s bad because we need it in addition to the insta-check system to give a cooling-off period to people who are in a fit of rage. It’s important.

The law that we would present, the act, will also prevent juveniles who commit violent crimes from ever buying a gun. It would apply the Brady law’s prohibition to juvenile violence. It would require Brady background checks on

anyone who wants to buy explosives—very important. And it would abolish, at long last, as Senator Feinstein said, a dangerous loophole that was likely exploited in Littleton, which allows people to buy weapons at gun shows without any background checks at all.

Now, you need to go make this case on this gun show deal. I don't know how many of you have ever been to one of these gun shows. I've been to gun shows in rural America. People walk around, and they've got their cars, and they've got their trunk open, and people walk in and say, "This is nice, and that's nice," and "This is a 100-year-old rifle," and blah, blah, blah. And then they say, "This is just too much hassle, you know." People pay cash, and nobody, you know—so it's going to be a hassle for them. It's worth it. It's worth it. We're sorry. It's worth it.

You don't have to pretend it won't be a hassle. Tell them you know it will be a hassle. It's worth it. People's lives are at stake here. What these shows started out doing, which was a good way for people who live in rural areas—it started out primarily in rural areas—who enjoy hunting and interested in different kinds of weapons, to have an interesting experience on a weekend afternoon, has turned out to be a gaping loophole through which criminals and deranged people and other people get guns they could not otherwise get.

And so we have to say, "We haven't asked you to abolish your gun shows, but we've asked you to undergo the inconvenience necessary to save more lives." We don't have to be insensitive; we just have to be determined. But I'm telling you, if we don't do something about this gun show loophole, we're going to continue to have serious, serious problems. And it's very important.

The second thing we've got to do is to strengthen the assault weapons ban, to close the loophole that allows dealers to sell older, high-capacity ammunition magazines manufactured abroad. Now, I bet you—when Senator Feinstein was talking about this, you thought, now, who in the world could be against this? I actually had a conversation with a Member of Congress who said to me—serious, a good person, it was a really good person, when we were doing this back in a '94, a really good person, this person I was talking to—who told me—[laughter]—let me tell you, I just want you to understand what the argument was. He said, "But

you've got to understand, we've got people who use these bigger magazines for certain kinds of sport contests." And I said, "Well, so what?" [Laughter] But he said, "They'll beat me if I vote for this." I said, "They'll beat you if they think all you're doing is making their lives miserable because some Washington bureaucrat asked you to do it. If you can explain to them that it's worth a minor alteration in their sporting habits to save people's lives, they won't beat you."

But my point is, you've got to help these people. You hear this, and you think, "God, this is a no-brainer. This is a hundred-to-nothing deal. Who in the wide world could ever be"—you have to understand, there is another culture out there. And almost everybody in it is God-fearing, law-abiding, taxpaying, and they show up when they're needed. And they don't like this because they don't understand that if they do what you're asking them to do, they can save a lot of lives. And we have got to fix this. This is just pure mathematics; you're going to have fewer people die if you get rid of these magazines. So you need to go out there where the problem is and debate your fellow citizens and discuss it with them. It's important.

The third thing the legislation would do is to raise the legal age of handgun possession from 18 to 21 years. It would also strengthen our zero tolerance for guns in schools, which, as one of the previous Members said, had led us to 6,000 suspensions or expulsions last year, by requiring schools to report to the police any student who brings a gun to school and requiring that the student get counseling. That, I think, is very important.

The provision holding adults criminally responsible would only apply, but—this is quite important—but it would apply if they recklessly failed to keep firearms out of the reach of young people. This would mandate a steep increase in penalties for adults who transfer guns illegally to juveniles. It would require child safety locks to be sold with all new guns.

Finally, it would crack down on illegal gun trafficking, doubling the number of cities now working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to trace every gun seized by the police. I know this is very important to Congresswoman McCarthy.

It would require that dealers submit information not only on the guns they sell but on used

guns, which are often very hard for law enforcement agencies to trace. It would significantly increase penalties for gun runners caught trafficking large numbers of firearms. It would establish a national system, as soon as it's feasible, to limit handgun purchases to one a month, following the lead of Virginia.

You know, I've got to say—this is very interesting. When we were going over the list of things we wanted to propose, some people said, "Well, that might be a loser because it sounds to people who care about this like that's too many, and what is this?" You know, the States that have had big problems in the past, with lots of illegal gun purchases and guns then being used for illegal purposes—Virginia did this, and it really helped them. This was a big deal. And I just talked to Senator Robb about this a couple days ago, and he said, "You know, all I can tell you is it's working in our State." So I would ask you to seriously consider what this might mean for our efforts to control the law enforcement aspects of this.

So these are the things that I wanted to say. But I hope you'll remember what I said to you about the culture. We do have to keep working on the culture. Hillary's right about it. Al and Tipper Gore are right about it. We've got a lot of responsibilities. We've got to keep working on the services for kids. We've even got to work on helping parents actually communicate with their children.

One Senator called me the night before last and said he'd had a town meeting in his State with children. And he asked how many of the schoolchildren had actually talked to their parents about what happened in Littleton. And only 10 percent of the kids raised their hands. And one child said, "I had to go and turn off the television and tell my parents we were going to talk about it." She said, "They're just scared. They're scared. They didn't know how to talk about it."

So there are all these cultural issues. And then there's this big cultural issue of the gun and sport hunting culture. And I hope that—a lot of my folks at home might take offense at what I said today, but I'm trying to help explain them to you. And I felt comfortable taking on these issues, and I thought maybe I was in a unique position to take on all these gun issues all these years because of where I grew up and because I understand how people think who don't agree with this.

But I'm telling you, we've got to keep working until people start thinking about this stuff the same way they think about x rays and metal detectors at airports. That's the goal. We have to redefine the national community so that we have a shared obligation to save children's lives. And we've got to get out of this crazy denial that this won't make a difference. It's crazy; it won't make—just because it won't make all the difference doesn't mean it won't make a difference. It will make a difference.

I implore you to remember what these Members have said. I implore you to go out and get people going at the grassroots, as Carolyn McCarthy said. We need help. We can pass all this if the American people want it bad enough. We can pass it all if the American people want it badly enough. And we don't need to go through another Littleton for the American people to want it badly enough. You can help make sure that happens.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:15 p.m. in Presidential Hall (formerly Room 450) in the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Paul Helmke of Fort Wayne, IN; and Bob Walker, president, Handgun Control, Inc., and the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of First Lady Hillary Clinton.

Remarks on Presenting the National Medals of Science and Technology April 27, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. I want to begin by thanking Neal Lane and Secretary Daley for the terrific job they do for our admin-

istration every day and for the American people. I also want to welcome the two eminently qualified Members of Congress to be here, Senator