

June 14 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

personnel as the U.S. contribution to the approximately 50,000-member, NATO-led security force (KFOR) now being deployed into Kosovo. The KFOR will operate under unified NATO command and control, and with rules of engagement set by the Alliance. As part of the central NATO role that we have insisted upon, and consistent with the recommendations of my senior civilian and military advisors, U.S. personnel participating in these efforts will be under the operational control solely of officers from the United States or other NATO countries. In addition, a total of approximately 1,500 U.S. military personnel, under separate U.S. command and control, will deploy to other countries in the region, as our national support element, in support of KFOR.

I expect that after the withdrawal of all Serb forces from Kosovo and an initial stabilization period, KFOR will be progressively reduced as the security situation permits and international

and local police forces are established. The KFOR ultimately will transfer responsibilities to the international provisional administration, local institutions, and other appropriate organizations.

I have taken this action pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive.

I am providing this report as part of my efforts to keep the Congress fully informed, consistent with the War Powers Resolution. I appreciate the continued support of the Congress in this action.

Sincerely,

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Strom Thurmond, President pro tempore of the Senate. This letter was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on June 14.

Remarks on Gun Control Legislation June 15, 1999

The President. Please be seated, everyone. Welcome to the Rose Garden on this beautiful afternoon. I want to especially thank those who will be speaking after me, Representatives Connie Morella and Carolyn McCarthy and our leader of the Democrats in the House, Dick Gephardt. I thank the many Members of Congress who are here, and others for whom they speak who are not able to be here this afternoon.

I also want to thank Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder, Treasury Under Secretary Jim Johnson, Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics Jan Chaiken, representatives of the law enforcement and faith communities, gun advocacy, and victims groups who are here today.

Five and a half years ago, here at the White House, I signed the Brady bill into law. I was especially pleased to be standing that day beside two great women fighters against gun violence, Sarah Brady and Attorney General Janet Reno. Today I am proud to be here with Congresswoman Morella and Congresswoman McCarthy and many other of the women Members of the United States House of Representatives, along

with some men they allowed to come along today—[laughter]—and who appreciated being invited.

I think it is important to note that women Members of both parties in Washington and women who belong to both parties in America, all over this country, have been in the forefront of this fight. They care about it as mothers, as sisters, as daughters, as citizens of this country. In the audience with us today are a number of mothers and fathers whose children have been victims of gun violence, and others who have personally suffered from it. Particularly to those who have been personally affected, I thank you for coming.

On that day when I signed the Brady bill, I said that our efforts to produce this bill proved once again that democracy can work. The American people and their grassroots demand for commonsense action against gun violence prevailed over the entrenched and very powerful Washington gun lobby. Now, in the aftermath of the terrible shootings at Littleton, our Nation is even more galvanized to act on every front

to reduce crime, especially violence committed by and against our children.

In recent weeks, we've talked about the need to reduce our children's exposure to violence in the media and have taken steps to do just that. We've talked about the need for parents to be more present in their children's lives, and we are taking steps to give parents new time to do so. We've talked about the need for a national grassroots citizens effort to combat violence against children, and we're in the process of establishing that. But we've also talked about the need to take new steps to keep guns out of the hands of juveniles, criminals, and others who shouldn't have them.

Now is the time for those of us in Government to act by strengthening the Brady law. Congress has a chance to do that this week. Once again, the gun lobby is resisting with all its might. Once again, we're battling not just for the safety of our families but for the soundness of our democracy.

Support for the Brady bill is as bipartisan, as broad as the American people. Teachers, doctors, law enforcement officials, even gun manufacturers, support it. About the only ones who are against it, still, are the NRA and its allies in Congress. It seems that every day they try another procedural or rhetorical trick to confuse everyone and avoid responsibility. These are the same kind of tactical smokescreens they threw up 6 years ago.

Back then—now, let's just remember—I want every Member of Congress to think about this before they vote on Thursday. What did they say 6 years ago? They said the Brady bill threatened the right of citizens to own firearms. Well, today we know the second amendment, hunting, and sport shooting are alive and well in America, just as alive and well as they were in 1994. But we also know they said gun violence wouldn't be reduced if the Brady bill passed. But since 1993, gun crimes have fallen by over 25 percent. Police chiefs all across America believe the Brady law is vital to their efforts.

You remember the gun lobby said that requiring background checks at gun stores wouldn't keep guns out of the hands of criminals, because criminals don't buy guns at stores, they said. Well, that claim has now been disproved hundreds of thousands of times.

Periodically, the Justice Department estimates how effective the Brady law has been in keeping guns out of the hands of those who shouldn't

have them. Today I'm pleased to announce the latest figures. Since it went into effect in 1994, the Brady law has blocked over 400,000 illegal gun sales. That's a pretty good record for the United States of America.

Two-thirds—two-thirds of those sales were to people indicted or convicted of felony crimes. Most of the rest were fugitives or had records of domestic violence, drug abuse, or mental illness. We have stopped over 400,000 gun sales that were dangerous since 1994 because Congress listened to the American people and not the NRA and passed the Brady bill. And I'll say again, every single red flag they threw up about all the danger and all the burden and all the problems this would be to gun owners was wrong, wrong, wrong.

Now, Congress has another vitally important choice before it. Are they going to strengthen the Brady bill or weaken it? The Brady law has worked. It's worked so well, in fact, that criminals now have to buy their weapons at places not fully covered by the gun laws, like gun shows and flea markets.

Now, you remember when the NRA said in 1994, "We don't really need the Brady bill, because people don't buy their guns at gun stores; these criminals don't buy their guns there." So, now they want to protect the sales at the places where the criminals do buy their guns, the flea markets and the gun shows. Someone ought to go back before we vote on Thursday and read them what they said in 1994 and remind them where they do buy the guns.

Earlier this year, I sent to Congress measures to close the loophole by expanding the background checks to gun shows and to flea markets where guns are sold along with other items. Last month the Senate passed these measures, thanks to a tie-breaking vote by Vice President Gore and despite efforts by the gun lobby to shoot new loopholes in the Brady law. The Senate did the right thing, and the House should follow suit.

Now, I want to be fair to the House Members who are not here. This is a harder vote in the House, and we have to work harder to help them and to stand by them. Why? Because some of our Members who desperately want to vote for this bill come from congressional districts which are less populous than almost all States and where the influence of the NRA and their ability to promote scare tactics and misinformation is relatively greater. So, it's a harder vote,

and we're going to have to work harder, all of us.

But look at what they're being asked to do. They're being asked to reject the measures that the Senate passed, which were by any standard moderate and commonsense, and instead adopt bills that were ghostwritten by the NRA. Listen to this: The gun lobby's bill would leave a gaping loophole in the gun show provision, would exempt flea markets from Brady checks altogether. Now, this is from the same group that told us in 1994 there was no point in regulating sales at gun stores because the criminals got their guns somewhere else. So, now we want to go somewhere else, and they can't wait to protect that. Someone should ask about this before we have a vote on Thursday.

This provision of theirs would invite felons, fugitives, and stalkers to buy their weapons at flea markets or walk out in the parking lot at the gun show. The gun lobby's bill would shorten the time allowed for background checks, giving thousands of criminals a year the chance to slip through the system. They would let gun dealers ship weapons—now, listen to this—I want to say this again. Sometimes we get up here, we read these speeches, and I get too much in a hurry. I want you to listen to this. They would let gun dealers ship weapons directly to unlicensed buyers across State lines, reversing 30 years of settled law that has helped to control interstate gunrunning.

I want the House to reject these bills and pass legislation that will strengthen, not weaken, the Brady law. I want us to honor the sacrifices of those people in Littleton, Colorado, not turn our backs on them.

I also think the House should take further action to reduce gun violence, especially among the young. Yesterday the Vice President announced a new Government study showing that young people, age 18 through 20, make up just 4 percent of our population but commit 24 percent of all gun murders. We could save lives by raising the legal age of handgun possession from 18 to 21, and I ask the House to do that as well.

I also call on the House to mandate that child safety locks be sold with all new handguns, as the Senate has done.

Let me say, I have been deeply encouraged by the comments we've been getting, the calls we've gotten here at the White House, from

people identifying themselves as Republicans as well as Democrats, people identifying themselves as long-time NRA members, who say, "This is crazy. Why are we out here fighting an attempt to close the loopholes in gun shows and flea markets? How can we be against child safety locks? Why should kids under the age of 21 be walking the streets with these guns?" America is in a different place than they were in 1994. The numbers are larger and more intense. We have all been sobered by what we have been through in these school shootings and the 13 children a day that die by gun violence in ones and twos and never make the evening news.

This is too important an issue to be decided by strong-arm lobbying tactics in Washington. The heart and soul of America is on the line. And out in America, this is not a partisan issue.

I would like now to introduce someone who embodies the best of our bipartisan efforts, Congresswoman Connie Morella, from the State of Maryland.

[At this point, Representatives Constance A. Morella, Carolyn McCarthy, and Richard A. Gephardt made brief remarks.]

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, we're about to adjourn. Congress has to go back to cast a vote. I want to thank Congresswoman Morella, Congresswoman McCarthy, Leader Gephardt, all the Members who are here.

I don't know what will be on the evening news tonight, but one thing I hope will be remembered: Carolyn McCarthy, who has earned a right to stand here before God and every American and say whatever she pleases about this issue, said that the Congress needed to hear from the American people in the next 2 days. And Dick Gephardt said that Congress needs to listen to its heart. Connie Morella said it is a nonpartisan issue. I hope those three things will be heard and remembered.

God bless you, and thank you for being here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:10 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sarah Brady, chair, Handgun Control, Inc.