

Interview With Dan Rather of the CBS Evening News March 2, 2000

Gun Safety Legislation

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, thank you for doing this. You're proposing registering guns like cars. But if you're going to do that, then why not take the next step and regulate guns, as we do cars? After all, if there's something seriously wrong about cars, the Government can regulate automobiles. Are you willing to do that?

The President. Well, first of all, I don't think we should minimize the impact that licensing handgun owners themselves would have. That's what I want to do. And I think it's a very important step. Now, it's tough to pass in this Congress because most of the Republicans agree with the NRA that guns are different, and even though it might save lives, we shouldn't do it. But I think it's very important.

There's a practical problem with the guns, of course. There are over 200 million of them already out there. But I think if we would begin the process of making handgun owners get a license before they can buy a gun, pass a Brady background check, and then have a gun safety course, I think it would make a difference.

I think if we did that, plus had child safety locks, closed the big loophole in the background registration law by covering the gun shows and the urban flea markets, and then continue this technology into safe guns so that as soon as possible we can sell guns and adjust them so that, by fingerprints, they can only be fired by the adults who own them, all these things together would make our country a much safer place. And I'm going to continue to fight for it.

We need to start by passing this legislation that the Congress has had for 8 months now. The Senate passed a pretty strong law, with the Vice President casting the tie-breaking vote. The House passed a much weaker law. And they've just been sitting on this for 8 months. I hope that these last 2 tragic days will finally move the Congress to act. And I'm going to meet with the leading conferees on the two bills in the next few days to try to do that.

Mr. Rather. But you're not prepared to take the step to try to regulate guns?

The President. I think that the most important thing we can do now is to pass the legislation

before the Congress, and then try to pass legislation that would require the owners themselves, people who want to buy handguns, to be licensed, just as car drivers are. I think that's the next big step, and I think it will make a big difference.

Just with the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban and the more police on the street, we've got the murder rate down to a 30-year low. But it's still way too high. And the accidental death rate from children is astronomical. It's 9 times higher than the next 24 industrial nations combined. So we've got to do more with this. And I want to focus on this agenda. I think it will drive the death rate down from guns both for murders and from accidental death rates.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, how, if in any way, would your new proposals have prevented or even helped to prevent the shooting of this 6-year-old girl in Michigan?

The President. Well, I think—there are two things I'd like to mention. One is something that is still in the bill. If this gun had a child trigger lock on it, then the child, in all probability, could not have figured out how to undo the child trigger lock and fire the gun. So that's very, very important.

Then I had a provision which neither the Senate nor the House passed, to make national a law that today I think fewer than 20 States have, which would hold adults responsible for the kinds of activities that this young boy tragically engaged in when he killed that little girl. I think that it ought to be national, not just in a few States.

And so I hope the Congress, and maybe the conference, will reconsider that, even though even the Senate wouldn't pass that. They ought to take a look at this now, because clearly the adults bear the primary responsibility here. And people would think twice before just leaving a gun hanging around the house that a kid could walk off with if that were the case.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, there are so many questions about this issue that run so deep in the American character, as well as our history. With, as you've mentioned, at least 200 million guns out there, what about the argument that

says, listen, there's really no chance that we're going to have meaningful gun control in this country unless you go out and get those guns back, and that's simply not practical?

The President. Well, I think, first of all, you never want to make the perfect the enemy of the good. Look how much good the Brady bill has done. It's kept a half million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from getting handguns. And that's one of the reasons that the murder rate is at a 30-year low. So it won't solve all the problems, but it will solve some.

Secondly, especially if we could license people when they come in to buy handguns, we could then couple that with a very aggressive gun buyback program. Keep in mind, yes, there are more than 200 million guns out there, but a lot of them are in the hands of collectors and not regularly in use. What we need to do is to get these cheap guns off the streets, and with an aggressive gun buyback program we could do that. Just with the few million dollars we spend on it every year, we get a huge number of guns, offering about \$50 a gun. So I would also like to see that program expanded.

If you could get a lot of the older guns that are just out there floating loose off the street, if you could license the handgun owners, if you could have child safety locks, and then if we could proceed with this safe-gun technology so that in the future all the guns that were sold could only be fired by the adults who are their rightful owner, I think you'd go a long, long way toward making this a much, much safer country.

And it wouldn't in any way infringe on the rights of hunters and sport shooters, except to ask them to do what the rest of us do when we go through airport metal detectors or get driver's licenses. We undergo a little bit of inconvenience so that society as a whole would be a lot safer. And I think we have neglected this far too long.

As I said, there's not enough urgency in the Congress. You've got a dozen kids a day still getting shot to death out there, and this bill has been up there for 8 months. So this is one place where I think the United States Congress is completely out of touch with the American people, largely because of the genuine fear people have of the organized NRA interest back in their district. And they just no longer reflect the views of the majority of the people.

I had a woman tell me yesterday, when I was touring a high-tech facility in northern Virginia, that her husband was a Republican and an avid hunter who strongly supported these initiatives. And I think that's where the American people are. It's time for Congress to get in step with the American people and take these actions that will make our children safer.

Mr. Rather. Is it or is it not your contention, Mr. President, the basic problem has been the Republican-led Congress?

The President. Oh, absolutely. Now, we have some Democrats who live in rural districts where there are a lot of hunters and where they're afraid of this, because when I passed the assault weapons ban and the Brady bill back in '93 and '94, there's no question that the NRA beat about a dozen of our Members. There's no question they did. These people who voted with us to make our streets safer and save lives gave up their seats in Congress.

But public opinion has shifted a lot since then. And this is primarily a problem of the leadership in the Republican Congress being unwilling to part from the NRA. And I hope that they will do it now, because I think a lot of their Members want to. And almost all these Members of Congress could vote for this legislation and not be threatened at all, and they need to do that.

Mr. Rather. When I talk to the Republican leadership in Congress, they—and I will say, somewhat gleefully—say, “Look, there are at least 60 Democrats in the House who no way, no how are going to vote for any additional gun control legislation.”

The President. Well, that leaves us with about 140 on our side, which means they only have to produce 80 for us to have a majority. So they ought to do that. There's 80 Republicans who come from suburban districts where their constituents strongly support this and where they would not be defeated by the NRA if they went with us.

Mr. Rather. You've mentioned the NRA several times. Everybody knows the National Rifle Association pours a lot of money into a lot of campaigns to beat just this kind of legislation that you have proposed. But is it or is it not reality that what you have are tens of millions of Americans who own guns and, whatever their party affiliation, however they feel about you, are just adamant about not controlling guns any further, and that's the real problem?

The President. Well, it is, but most of them—a lot of gun owners—keep in mind, I'm convinced a majority of hunters and sport shooters, once they understand that these regulations do not in any way, shape, or form, impact their ability to conduct their lawful affairs, will support what amounts to a minor inconvenience—doing a background check at a gun show, for example, having a child safety lock on a handgun—to save lives.

And I'll say again, I know public opinion has changed. In New Hampshire, we lost a Democratic Congressman who voted for the assault weapons ban and the Brady bill. He lost his job in '94. And I went up there in '96 and met with a bunch of people who were hunters and sportsmen, and I said, "Now, the NRA told you we were going to take your guns away and inconvenience you." And I said, "If you missed a day in a deer season, I want you to vote against me, too. But if you didn't, they didn't tell you the truth, and you need to stick with us." And we won, and won handily there.

So I think people are changing as they understand this is simply commonsense safety measures. And as a society, we all undergo minor inconveniences so that our children can grow up safe. And it's ridiculous—the United States is the only country in the world that would allow this kind of, I believe, recklessness with the public interest. Nobody else does it, and that's why we have the highest murder rate and the highest accidental gun death rate of children, because we don't take these commonsense measures. I think we ought to make this a safer country. And we can do it, I'll say again, without interfering with people's right to hunting and sport shooting.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, I know you have a meeting to go to. You've been very generous with your time. A last question. So many people, when I talk to them, they say, "Look, it's fine for the President to talk this way, but he's going to see rocks grow and water run uphill before he sees any real gun control legislation." Now, you've made it clear you don't believe that. What can you do to move this along? Can you call the Members of Congress to the White

House for a special meeting to compromise? What can you do?

Mr. President. Yes. Well, I'm going to bring down the leaders of the House and the Senate, the Republicans and Democrats, who are in charge of this bill in the conference. The House and the Senate version are in a conference. They're supposed to come up with a unified bill and let the House and Senate vote on it. And I don't have any doubt if they report out a good bill, it will pass. And I'm going to do everything I can to pass it.

I don't believe that. They said—once they said we'd see water run uphill before we had Brady background checks, and then before we banned assault weapons, and then before we banned these large capacity ammunition clips. We did all that, but we left some loopholes in the law that we ought to close. We ought to require child safety locks. We ought to invest in safe-gun technology. And we ought to license handgun owners.

You know, every significant reform in a controversial area is considered to be impossible when you start. But you just start, and you keep working, and you keep working, and you keep working, and eventually it happens.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, thank you. I'd love to come by sometime and talk to you about Colombia and China and Taiwan. But I appreciate you taking time today to do this.

Thank you very much.

Mr. President. Thank you very much, Dan.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, I really appreciate you taking time to do this. Great. Thanks a lot. Tell the First Lady hello for us.

Mr. President. I'll do it.

NOTE: The interview was videotaped at approximately 4:06 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room for later broadcast, and the transcript was embargoed for release until 6:30 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to Kayla Rolland, who died after she was shot by 6-year-old classmate Dedrick Owens in Mount Morris Township, MI. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.