

Remarks on the Anniversary of the Brady Handgun and Violence Prevention Act

November 30, 2000

Thank you very much. It's ironic; I might say that I was not able to come and receive the award from Jim and Sarah because I was at Sharm al-Sheikh in Egypt, trying to stop a different kind of shooting. And I'm delighted and honored to receive it today.

I want to thank Secretary Summers for his work and the Treasury Under Secretary for Enforcement, Jim Johnson; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Director, Brad Buckles. I can't say enough about what Janet Reno and her Deputy Attorney General, Eric Holder, have done over these years to forge a serious partnership with local law enforcement and to move beyond rhetoric to real policies that would work to make America a safer place.

I want to thank the people here from Handgun Control and the Million Mom March and the other gun safety organizations, and the leaders from the religious community and the National Council of Black Churches, the American Jewish Congress, and law enforcement. And of course, especially, I want to thank Jim and Sarah for all these years of courage and determination.

A few years ago, I gave Jim the Medal of Freedom, and not very long ago we actually named the White House briefing room in his honor. But no honor can possibly repay Jim and Sarah Brady for what they have done to give America a safer future. And I'm very grateful to them.

I want to say, Secretary Summers said that before he became Treasury Secretary, he knew about the economy, but he didn't know much about the law enforcement responsibilities of the Treasury Department. But actually, the work required to have an impact on both challenges is not all that different. People ask me all the time; they say, "You had such a brilliant economic team, you know—Summers, Rubin, Sperling, Bentsen—what great new idea did you bring to Washington, to economic policy management?" And I always say, "Arithmetic." [Laughter]

We brought arithmetic back to Washington, and you know, 2 and 2 is 4 again. [Laughter] And miraculously, the deficit went down, and interest rates went down, and the economy—

what do I mean by that? Former Governor of New York Mario Cuomo used to say we campaign in poetry, but we must govern in prose, which is a fancy way of saying ideas matter and policies matter, and rhetoric becomes less important than actually what you do and whether it has a solid foundation in fact. So when I say arithmetic, it's really a shorthand way of saying we got back to clear-headed, fact-based economic policymaking.

Well, the same thing is true when it comes to criminal justice and safe streets. Most people who run for office know that they will be all right as long as they talk tough and as long as they say, "Show me another bill to raise the penalties, and I will vote for it." And because there are all kinds of countervailing pressures out there, if you actually want to do something, as we have seen, and because Washington is a long way from the streets of almost every city, except the one in which we live, people can get elected and stay elected, from the White House and the Congress, by having the right poetry, even if there is no prose.

And that was essentially the problem, in my judgment, with Federal criminal justice policy. I was—the first elected office I ever held was attorney general; 24 years ago this January I became attorney general of my State. And to me, this was always serious business, and I never believed that there was necessarily a liberal or a conservative position. It seemed to me that we ought to do what would work to protect the lives of our people, to give our police officers the tools they need to do the job, to empower community organizations, and to do what makes sense.

So we started a serious debate almost 8 years ago now about what it would take to make America safer. It was a genuine and honest debate, and like all debates, it has been marked by a conflict and often, I think, by people who forget about the arithmetic of crime control and safe streets.

Jim and Sarah and so many of you had been battling for the Brady bill for 7 years. The vast majority of the American people supported it, but we all know why it wasn't law. And I have

pled guilty before to this, so let me plead guilty again. In 1982, when I was running for Governor in my State—and I had been elected in '78 and defeated in the Reagan landslide in '80 and then trying to get reelected—I endorsed the Brady bill—1982, before it was called the Brady bill.

I said, “You know, we ought to have a 3-day waiting period. We ought to do background checks.” And I sparked the awfulest firestorm; you can imagine how popular that was in Arkansas in 1982. [*Laughter*] And I wimped out, just like a lot of other people have. And I got elected Governor, and I went on and did my business, and we did a lot of good things, in education, in the economy, and other things. But I never quite got over it.

And I realized that if I became President, I would have a chance to talk to the Nation about these issues in a way that no one else could and that we had a chance, because of the work that Jim and Sarah had done, to actually have an impact and to get this done. And obviously, the votes in Congress were there to pass it. But it wasn't just about Congress passing the law and my signing it. We also had a genuine discussion, a serious effort to think about not what the poetry of safe rhetoric, when it comes to crime, is but what the prose of hard work would be.

One of the main reasons I asked Janet Reno to be Attorney General is that she had been one of the most innovative prosecutors in a big, difficult environment in the United States. Hillary's brother had worked as a public defender in one of the drug courts that she set up, that diverted thousands of people from prison who were first-time, nonviolent drug offenders, but also helped the crime rate to go down because they were people who got off drugs, and if they didn't, then they had to go to prison. And now under her leadership, we've helped set up hundreds and hundreds of these drug courts across America—another part of this serious debate about what it really takes to make America a safer place.

And we've had a world of help. We've had great people in the United States Congress, like Senator Joe Biden and many others. We've had law enforcement officials, community leaders, clergies, and moms joining hands. So this is a safer country than it was 8 years ago. Now the cynics say, “Well, the crime rate always goes down when the economy improves.” That's true.

But if you look at past trends, the crime rate has gone down more this time and gun crime, as you heard, down 35 percent, because of the other things that were done.

The Brady law—we finished the first 100,000 police ahead of schedule and under budget, and we're now in the process of putting another 50,000 police on the street in the highest crime neighborhoods in the country. It is something that I hope will be continued.

We also had, after the Brady law and the crime bill, in addition to 100,000 police, the ban on assault weapons and support for the most innovative local crime-fighting strategies to keep kids out of trouble in the first place. And one of the things I'm really proud of in our education budget is, we've gone from funding zero to 800,000 kids in after-school programs in America in the last 3 years. And if this education budget passes when the Congress comes back next week, we'll double that. And make no mistake about it, that's also a profoundly important element of this whole debate.

So America is a different place than it was 8 years ago, in many areas, but certainly in the area of crime: crime down 8 years in a row, for the first time ever, the lowest overall rate in 26 years; the lowest murder rate in 33 years. In addition to the prevention measures that I mentioned, Federal prosecutions are up, as well. And today there is more good news. According to the latest figures, the Brady bill has now stopped more than 611,000 felons, fugitives, and domestic abusers from buying guns.

Now, the opponents of the Brady bill, who are still alive and well, said at the time that it would be an enormous burden on hunters and sport shooters, law-abiding citizens that wanted weapons in self-defense, and it wouldn't make a lick of difference. But after all these years, we now know nobody's missed a day in the deer woods, nobody's missed a sport-shooting contest, and it sure made a difference. It made 611,000 differences. That means more children are alive; more police officers are alive; more citizens are alive; fewer people wounded like Jim.

I'll never forget going to Chicago one day to do an event on this, and we did it near a trauma center where most of the people there were young people who were victims of gunshot wounds. And the speaker there was a local Chicago policeman who went through a very, very dangerous tour in Vietnam and never got a nick,

and had 11 bullets in his body because of his service in the streets of Chicago. I'll never forget that guy as long as I live, standing there with all those young kids that were going to spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs.

Now, this is the record. But I want to say two things as you think about the future and I return to the role of vocal citizen. It's already been said, but I want to emphasize it again. This country is still too dangerous for our children. The crime rate is still too high. The level of violence we put up with is still unacceptable. Thirty thousand Americans are lost to gunfire a year, about 10 kids every day. That's down from 13. That's really good, but it's still 10.

So nobody believes America is as safe as it should be. And if I could go back to the economic analogy, I have said for the last year the American people ought to set big goals because the country is in good shape. And economically, I think one of our goals ought to be to get the country out of debt for the first time since 1835, because that will keep interest rates down and keep the economy going and help the police do their jobs for safer streets. But I think that we ought to say in this area that we do not intend to stop working until America is the safest big country in the world. We do not have to accept—[applause].

Now, I want to talk a little today about what I think the next steps should be, because I think that's the way we should mark the anniversary of the Brady law every year. Every year I think we ought to gather—and when I'm not President anymore, we ought to do it anyway, and I hope you'll have a friendly forum in which to do it here, but if you don't, go somewhere else—[laughter]—and measure where you are and where you want to go.

First, we have to make law enforcement more effective in this area. So today I'm asking Attorney General Reno and Secretary Summers to build on the success of the national instant-check background system to develop a new system to enhance enforcement of the gun laws by notifying State and local law enforcement officials when felons and other restricted individuals try to buy illegal guns. We should be notifying them immediately, something that we haven't been doing.

Second, even as we work hard to keep criminals from getting guns through the front door of a gun shop, we should do even more to lock the back door by cracking down on illegal

gun traffickers. An enormous percentage of these illegal gun sales are done by a relatively small number of people.

Secretary Summers just spoke of the national initiative we started 4 years ago, to build on the success of cities like Boston, in tracing guns seized from young criminals. Today I got the third annual report from that initiative, detailed findings on over 64,000 crime guns recovered by law enforcement and sent to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for tracing. The data paints a clear picture of where juveniles and criminals are getting their guns, how they're getting them, and what kind of guns they're getting. It shows that kids and guns continue to present a serious crime problem; about 45 percent of all crime guns were recovered from young people.

Now, ATF and its State and local partners are putting all of this trace information together so that we can identify the gun traffickers and get them off the streets. In the last year alone, ATF initiated almost 900 criminal trafficking investigations. And now we're going to expand these efforts in the coming year to 12 more cities, from Newark to Nashville, from Oklahoma City to Anaheim, to find, to prosecute, to punish people who pedal guns illegally to our kids.

Third, I want to ask Congress again to do two things when they come back next week. First, send me a budget that actually funds our proposal for the largest national gun enforcement initiative in history, resources for 500 ATF agents and inspectors, and hundreds more Federal, State, and local gun prosecutors. And second, close the gun show loophole. Close the gun show loophole in the Brady law, require child safety locks on handguns, and stop the importation of large capacity ammunition clips, which enable guns already in the United States legally to be altered so that they get around the assault weapons ban.

Now this, I think, is very important. Where are the American people on this? The results are both encouraging and troubling. Earlier this month, the voters of Oregon and Colorado, in overwhelming majorities—I think 65 percent in one place and 70 percent in Colorado, where they've gone through the searing experience of Columbine—voted to approve initiatives to require background checks at gun shows.

Yet let's be frank, folks. Supporters of these measures are still very vulnerable if they happen

to be candidates for Congress or running for Congress in places where fear can be used to make people think that they're for something they're not. And so I want to say to you what I have said so many times. I decided that I could probably do this for America because I was a southern white male who first shot a .22 before he was a teenager, and that I thought I could go out and talk to people about this.

Janet Reno and I were talking on the way in here about her going to a sporting club, when she proposed the gun safety measure as prosecutor, and sitting there and spending 2 hours with people. And finally, when she left, they were for what she wanted to do.

Every time we propose something like this, it becomes part of some great culture war in America, and it becomes a pretext for fund-raising, campaigning, getting people to vote against their own interest because they're afraid. And I thought maybe I should do this in part because I felt like I could talk to the people that were being stampeded in election after election. But it's still a real serious problem. All you have to do is look around the country and look at the huge disconnect between the votes in Colorado and Oregon on the initiative and the votes in culturally similar places on specific elections.

Now, does that mean we ought to fold up our tent and go home? No. Does it mean that we have no choice but to try to put an initiative on the ballot in every State and get the people who disagree with us to spend their money on something that's at least specific? [Laughter] Not necessarily, no. But it does mean, if we want elected Representatives who come from challenging environments to stand up and vote for things that we know make sense, we have to keep working to learn how to speak to people who are good people, who were subject to being stampeded. We have to look for ways to make the specifics our friend. The facts are our friends. If the facts were not our friends, this initiative would not have passed 70 to 30 in Colorado, a clearly Republican State. And if you ask people to identify themselves out there, most people would identify themselves as conservatives, but they dealt with the facts.

So I just want to encourage you not to stop but to keep trying to become more effective by not engaging in the rhetorical wars with people who disagree with us, but going straight to the people themselves who vote, who either

vote in these referenda or vote in the elections for Congress and for Governor and legislature, and talk to them about the facts, because the facts are our friends. Fear is our foe.

And I think this is so important, because we just can't walk away from all this now. We've got a good head of steam going. And nobody—nobody—has proposed a single thing yet that I'm aware of that would keep a hunter out of the deer woods or a sport shooter out of a contest. But all these things would make America a much safer place. And you just have to keep working at it, and you can't be deterred. But you must be, also, effective. And you have to realize that when people get scared, they are liable to resolve doubt against you. But when they understand what the deal is, they're going to resolve doubt in your favor. The facts are your friends.

So I want to encourage you to do that. Jim and Sarah have shown amazing perseverance and courage. They've kept their spirits up. They've kept our spirits up. They've battled on against the odds. That's what we have to do. But I don't want you to worry about being mad or being angry or even getting even. I just want you to understand that you can win the battle, but you've got to be smart, and you've got to be willing to keep working through setbacks, and you have to be willing to trust the good common sense and fundamental decency of the American people.

If you can get through all the smokescreens and argue the facts and if you look over the last 8 years—if someone had told me 8 years ago that crime would go down every year, that it would be at a 26- or 27-year low, that so many more people would be alive, that we'd actually pass the Brady law and the assault weapons ban and we'd be working on 150,000 police, we'd have 800,000 kids federally funded in after-school programs, I would have been pretty happy. But now, after 8 years, I have to tell you, I still think more about the kids that are left out and left behind. I still think more about those that have been victimized instead of those that have been avoided, because I know we have to keep going until this is the safest big country in the world.

So I implore you—I implore you—do not get discouraged. We know what works. We know what the arithmetic answer is, and we just have to keep after it. We should be gratified and happy in this holiday season that America is

safer, but we should be resolved to make it the safest big country in the world.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:05 p.m. in Presidential Hall in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred

to former White House Press Secretary James S. Brady, who was wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan, and his wife, Sarah, chair, Hand Gun Control, Inc.; former Secretaries of the Treasury Robert E. Rubin and Lloyd Bentsen; and Hillary Clinton's brother, attorney Hugh Rodham.

Statement on the Death of Robert G. Damus

November 30, 2000

I am deeply saddened by the sudden passing of Bob Damus, General Counsel for the Office of Management and Budget. Bob made invaluable contributions to the common good in his 20 years of Government service, embodying the very finest qualities of our Nation's career civil servants.

Bob's fine intellect and the breadth of his knowledge were respected throughout Government and beyond. This administration and the American people benefited greatly from his keen judgment and wise counsel, and he served my

two predecessors with the same loyalty, dedication, and commitment to excellence.

With a distinguished academic background, Bob chose Government service out of a deep desire to contribute to the public good. In recognition of his outstanding service, he twice received the Presidential Rank Award as a Distinguished Executive, the highest honor for career civil servants in the Senior Executive Service.

Bob's probity and integrity were unsurpassed. He was a supremely decent man, and his memory will serve as an inspiration to us all.

Remarks at the G&P Foundation Angel Ball 2000 in New York City

November 30, 2000

Well, first of all, thank you, Denise, for the saxophone. I'll have a little more time to play it in a week or two. [*Laughter*] And thank you for the wonderful gift. But let me say to all of you, I think that we should be here honoring Denise for remembering her daughter in such a magnificent way.

And I also want to thank Philip for all that you have done to make this evening possible. And I want to thank the other honorees tonight, for the power of their examples. Michael Jackson, who has been so kind to us, thank you for the wonderful thing you said, and Sir Paul McCartney. I don't know, I got the saxophone at an event which honored two of the greatest musical geniuses of the 20th century. I don't know what that says. [*Laughter*]

And I would like to thank Her Majesty Queen Noor, who has been a wonderful friend to Hillary and to me and I think is one of the truly

great citizens of the world alive today. I thank her.

And thank you, Larry King, for being here. I forgive you for using this occasion to hit me up for our exit interview. [*Laughter*] I am not a very good story. You should be down in Florida doing interviews tonight. [*Laughter*]

Let me say to all of you, I want to just echo a thing or two Hillary said. I love this event. I had a wonderful time 2 years ago. I've had a terrific time tonight. But I look forward to the time when we will be forced to find another reason to meet, because the war on cancer will have been won. Like all of you, I am tired of burying my family members and friends from diseases that it seems that we ought to be able to find a way to cure or even to prevent. It won't be long now, and when that happy day comes, all of you can take pride in knowing that you did something to hasten the moment.