

Mar. 2 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

122, 124, and 125 of the Uruguay Round Agreements Act, includes the Annual Report on the World Trade Organization and a 5-year assessment of the U.S. participation in the World Trade Organization.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,

March 1, 2000.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 2.

Interview With Katie Couric of NBC's "Today" Show March 2, 2000

Michigan Shooting

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, thank you so much for joining us.

The President. Good morning, Katie.

Ms. Couric. Good morning. Let me ask you, first of all, when you heard the story of a 6-year-old boy in Michigan, a first grader bringing a gun to school and shooting to death his 6-year-old classmate, what was your reaction?

The President. Well, first, I think I had a normal human reaction. I didn't respond as President. I was just—as a parent I was heartbroken, and then I was angry. I thought, you know, how did this child get the gun in the first place? What's a 6-year-old doing with a gun?

Gun Safety Legislation

Ms. Couric. When something like this happens, politicians often jump on it as an excuse for more gun control. But I know that, Mr. President, you're very proud of pointing out that gun deaths have dropped to their lowest levels in more than 30 years in this country. So should we view this more as a tragedy than a reason to call for more gun control?

The President. Well, it's both. The gun death rate has dropped to its lowest point in 30 years, but it's still by far the highest of any advanced nation in the world. And if we had passed the child trigger lock provision and we applied it to all new guns, then at least those guns would not be used by 6-year-olds to kill other 6-year-olds. I think that's very important. That's a part of this bill, which also closes the gun show loophole in the background check law, bans the import of large ammunition clips, that the Congress has had for 8 months now with no action.

So I'm going to call the leaders of both parties in both Houses and ask them to come down

here and break the logjam. There's been a House version and a Senate version of this bill for 8 months, and they have done nothing, and meanwhile, 13 kids every day—every single day there are 13 children who die from guns in this country. So I do think we need more legislation.

Ms. Couric. Well, why is it locked in committee, why has it been stalemated? And when would you like them to come to the White House?

The President. Well, I think it's been locked in committee because the Senate—the Vice President cast the tie-breaking vote in the Senate, so we got a tough bill in spite of fierce lobbying against it by the NRA. And the two Houses can't resolve their differences. But maybe this tragic death will help. We need these child trigger locks on the new handguns. That will begin to make a big difference. And then in this year's budget, I've asked them to fund some more research into smart gun technology, which would enable us to have guns that could only be fired by the adults who own them. That also would be a big advance.

One of the things that's being debated in Michigan is whether there should be parental accountability provisions. We had provisions in our law for that, so that all States would have these laws—several do, but most don't—and those were taken out, so maybe they'll be revisited in the conference as well.

But the main thing is, if we can just get the child trigger locks and fund investment in the smart gun technology, I think we'll be a long way down the road. Of course, I think ultimately what we ought to do is license handgun owners the way we license people who drive cars. I think that is the critical next step. And I hope that we will consider that, as well.

Now, this guy stole a gun, apparently—that’s the allegation—in the house where the child took it. But it would clearly make a big difference in the future to people’s lives.

Ms. Couric. Let me deal with some of those issues that you’ve just raised, Mr. President. What about registering guns? All Americans are required to register their cars. Why not require them to register guns?

The President. You could do that, but the problem is there are over 200 million guns out there; some say 250 million guns out there now. And most of the experts with whom I talked before I made my proposal believe that if we required all handgun owners to be licensed, we could achieve the same results. That is, whether you’ve got an old gun or you’re buying a new gun, if people could come in when they do get new guns and get a license, then I believe we’d have the same result. I’m not sure, practically, that we could get all the guns registered in this country because there are so many out there already. So I’d like to begin with that.

You know, keep in mind, we had all those kids die at Columbine, and when I fought for the Brady bill—which has kept a half a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from getting guns—and the assault weapons ban, about somewhere between 8 and 12 Members of Congress were defeated in the next election by the NRA because they voted for that.

And then when all those kids were killed at Columbine, I thought, surely, we can close the gun show loophole, have the child safety locks, and maybe have the parental responsibility provisions and ban ammunition clips. And those bills have been just lingering up there for 8 months. I don’t think most Americans have any idea what a stranglehold the NRA has had on this Congress. And the people in our party have taken the lead, with a few brave Republicans, in trying to fight for sensible legislation. But we need the public aroused on this. We need the public to be heard.

I would not be opposed to registering guns, as well, but I just want you to understand there are practical problems with that, and you get most of the benefit if you license the gun owners. So I would like to see us start with that.

Ms. Couric. When it comes to licensing, Mr. President, Wayne LaPierre, who you know is the executive vice president of the NRA, said, quote, “Criminals aren’t going to stand in line to get their photos taken. They’re not going

to stand in line—stand,” rather, “for licenses. You’re walking way out on a limb.”

The President. Well, you could say that about people with automobile licenses, too. But when people don’t have gun licenses and they’re found with guns and they’re in violation of the law for that, very often you can get them before they commit a crime.

If the facts, as they’ve been reported, are true about the tragic circumstances in which this 6-year-old boy lived and have the even more tragic consequence of killing that totally innocent young girl—this man apparently stole that gun. But the point is, he could never get a license to carry a handgun.

Ms. Couric. But meanwhile, is it practically possible to check every gun owner in America to see if he or she is carrying a license?

The President. Well, none of these things will happen instantaneously, overnight. But yet, they will begin to make a difference.

Look, when we passed the Brady bill, Katie, let me remind you, people said, “Well, this won’t make any difference, because criminals don’t get their guns at gun stores.” It turned out, a lot of them did. It turned out we were able to deny 500,000 people who were trying to buy handguns the right to do so because they were felons, fugitives, and stalkers. Now, there are a lot of kids alive and there are a lot of adults alive in America because we did that.

Now a lot of them are using the gun shows or these urban flea markets. If we close that loophole, do the background check there, license new handgun owners—license—excuse me—handgun owners, and put safety locks, these trigger locks on the guns to protect the kids—and then the next big step is to technologically develop guns that can only be fired by their lawful owners—we can turn this situation around.

But like I said, we’ve got over 200 million guns out there. We’re losing 13 kids a day. The accidental rate of children—that’s another thing I’d like the American people to think about. The rate of kids being killed by accident with guns is 9 times higher in America than that of the next 24 biggest countries combined—combined.

So we have not done nearly enough, and we need to identify these things and just systematically go do them. None of them interfere with the right of any lawful citizen to hunt or to

engage in sport shooting. And it's an unbelievable thing, after what we saw clearly at Columbine and all the problems that were there, that 8 months have gone by, and the Congress can't act. And the reason they can't act is because of the heat the NRA has put on them.

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, why haven't you publicly asked gun manufacturers to produce these so-called smart guns voluntarily?

The President. Oh, I have. Let me say, we're getting some support from responsible gun manufacturers. Many of them have already said they want to put the child safety locks on their new guns. Many of them are engaged in this technology.

But what I want to do is to have the Government also fund some of the research, just as we funded the initial research that led to the Internet, just as we fund the initial research that is leading to the sequencing of the human genome. A lot of this basic research to solve big national problems often starts with Government funding. So I'd like to see the Government do its part.

But I have asked the gun manufacturers to do so. And some of the responsible manufacturers have already said, "Yes, we're going to go with the child safety locks, and we want the smart gun technology." I just think we ought to get there as quickly as we can, which is why I want the Government to invest as well.

Ms. Couric. All the Presidential candidates seem to agree on this point, so you would think it could be accomplished. What is the NRA's biggest beef, in your estimation, about the technology that would enable only the person who owns a gun to actually fire it?

The President. Well, first of all, I don't think that's accurate, that all the Presidential candidates do.

Ms. Couric. Well, George W. Bush favors trigger locks, I understand. John McCain—

The President. This morning.

Ms. Couric. Pardon?

The President. This morning, Senator McCain voted against the Brady bill.

Ms. Couric. But he says he favors technology that would enable the gun user to wear a special bracelet. He said that last night.

The President. They were against the Brady bill. They're against extending—closing the gun show loophole. They're against the licensing of handgun owners.

But nobody could be against technology. So I hope that we can get 100 percent of the Congress to at least vote for the research and the new technology.

Ms. Couric. What is the NRA's biggest beef about smart guns?

The President. I don't know that they'll be against smart guns, but they're basically against anything that requires anybody to do anything as a member of society that helps to make it safer. That is, if they were making this argument on car licensing or licensing of car drivers, they would say that everybody has an individual right to drive a car, and therefore, no lawful car owner should be required to undergo the terrible burden of getting a car license because there are some people who are irresponsible and shouldn't be driving cars.

I mean, that's the essential argument they're making. They're saying guns are special, guns are different than cars, and the rights of individual citizens are far, far more important than the safety of society as a whole. That's their argument, and I just disagree with them.

Ms. Couric. An NRA spokesman actually told us last night that this isn't about making guns safer, it's about prosecuting criminals, and that your Justice Department hasn't done enough in that area.

The President. Well, we've increased gun prosecution since I've been here, and we have a lot of people in jail for it. All I can tell you is, we have a higher percentage of people in jail than all the other advanced countries, and they have a lower gun death rate. Why is that? That's because they don't have an NRA in their country, and they take sensible steps to protect children and society as a whole from people having guns who shouldn't have them, doing things they shouldn't do with them. You've got to keep guns away from criminals and children if you want a safe society.

Look, if the NRA were arguing years ago in this vein, they'd be against airport metal detectors because, after all, everybody—most people that go through airport metal detectors are innocent. Why should we burden them with having to go through and empty their pockets and take out their money clips and all that because there's just a few criminals around? And you know, you're interfering with their individual rights to walk on an airplane. That's the argument they make. You shouldn't burden an individual law-abiding handgun owner, because

most of them are lawful, just because there are a few criminals.

But the point is that society takes steps with speed limits, with licensing laws, with airport metal detectors, and any number of other ways, where we all make a little bit of sacrifice in time and effort to comply with a system that makes us all freer. And we still get to do our lawful activity.

So I just think they're wrong about that. They're saying that guns are different—guns are different than cars, guns are different than any other area of our national life where we seek for common safety, we protect ourselves from the people who would abuse our liberty, abuse our freedom, and abuse our safety. And I just think they're wrong about this, and I hope that a majority of the Congress will agree. And I hope that more and more members of the Republican Party will agree. As I say, we have had some few brave members of the Republican Party that have joined the vast majority of Democrats in trying to responsibly deal with this without in any way undermining the right of people to do legitimate hunting or sport shooting activities.

And we can do this. We can make America a lot safer.

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, before we go, in closing, when do you plan to invite congressional

leaders to the White House to discuss the juvenile justice bill?

The President. Well, I'd like them to come down next week, as soon as we can set it up, because we're running out of time, and we need to get out of this terrible logjam. And I hope that these tragedies will give a little impulse, a profound sense of obligation to do that. As again I say, nobody is trying to interfere with individual rights here. What we're trying to do is to promote the common safety of the American people, and we're not nearly safe enough. All you've got to do is look at these incidents.

Can we eliminate every problem? No. Is there a silver bullet that will solve it overnight? No. Can we save a lot of lives, including a lot of children, 13 every day—13 funerals a day? You bet we can, and we ought to.

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, again thank you very, very much for spending some time with us this morning. We really appreciate it.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 7:08 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Jamelle Andrew James, who was accused of supplying the gun used by 6-year-old Dedrick Owens to shoot 6-year-old classmate Kayla Rolland in Mount Morris Township, MI. Ms. Couric referred to Gov. George W. Bush of Texas.

Remarks on Patients' Bill of Rights Legislation March 2, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you, and good morning. Dr. Herald, thank you for your powerful statement. I would like to thank Senator Kennedy, Senator Specter, Senator Chafee for being here; and Representatives Norwood and Dingell, Representatives Berry, Morella, and DeLauro; Secretary Shalala, Secretary Herman.

I especially thank the doctors and nurses who stand with us today, the Patients' Bill of Rights coalition, representing our Nation's top health, consumer, and provider organizations.

Dr. Herald's testimony was powerful, but unfortunately, as she made it clear, not unique. For more than 2 years, we've heard health care

professionals tell us the same thing. For more than 2 years, we've heard heart-wrenching accounts of families across our Nation denied the basic patient protections they need. For more than 2 years, we've worked for a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights that says you have the right to the nearest emergency room care, the right to see a specialist, the right to know you can't be forced to switch doctors in the middle of a treatment, the right to hold your health care plan accountable.

Along the way, with the help of others in our administration, I've done everything I could, through executive action, to extend patient safeguards to some 85 million Americans who get