

Remarks at a Rally for Gun Safety Legislation March 15, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Please be seated. Good morning, and welcome to the White House. I want to thank all the Members of the House who are here. We have a large contingent, as you can see, and a bipartisan one, for which I am very grateful. In a moment we will hear from Representatives McCarthy, Morella, and Lofgren, speaking on behalf of all the Democrats and Republicans who are here with me today.

I want to thank Attorney General Reno and Secretary Summers for being here and for their support of our endeavors. I thank Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder. The Chief of Police of the District of Columbia, Charles Ramsey, is here, and other representatives of law enforcement.

I want to thank Michael Barnes from Handgun Control, and former Member of the House, for his leadership. And I want to say a special word of welcome to my friend Suzann Wilson, who lost her daughter in the Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooting, who has bravely carried on the struggle for a safer future for the children of this country ever since. And I want to welcome all the young people who are here today.

Six years ago, at the White House, I signed the Brady law. I was especially pleased that day to be standing beside two very brave fighters against gun violence, Attorney General Reno and Sarah Brady. Today, as I stand with Congresswomen McCarthy, Morella, and Lofgren, I am reminded again that women from both parties have been and remain at the forefront of this fight. And I know I speak for the other people who are here today to say I am glad they allowed some of their male counterparts in the House—[laughter]—to join them.

When I signed the Brady bill, I said that our efforts proved once again that democracy can work. The American people, in their grassroots demand for commonsense action against gun violence, prevailed over a very powerful Washington gun lobby. Today, America is a safer place thanks to the Brady bill and other measures that many here in this room championed, from banning assault weapons to cop-killer bullets, to putting 100,000 police on the street.

The overall crime rate has fallen 7 years in a row, homicide to the lowest rate in 30 years. But time and time again we see still, from Columbine to Buell Elementary School, it is still far too easy for guns to fall into the hands of criminals and children.

We have been trying for some time now, as all of you know, to further strengthen our gun laws, by passing a strong juvenile justice bill that closes the gun show loophole, requires child safety locks with all new handguns, and bans the importation of large capacity ammunition clips, which unbelievably is still legal and threatens to make a mockery of our assault weapons ban.

Once again, the gun lobby and their allies in the leadership of the Congress are standing in the way of real progress. And once again, we battle not just for the safety of our families but for the soundness of our democracy. For over 8 months, the majority leadership, under pressure from the gun lobby, has refused to allow the House and the Senate conferees to meet and have a substantive debate on the juvenile justice bill.

Representative Conyers has negotiated in good faith with Representative Hyde. I had the conference leaders here last week, and it was clear to me, from the discussion between them and with the rest of us, that they were much closer together, even though still considerably apart, than the position that the NRA has taken against our legislation. But we still haven't been able to get the committee to meet.

Now Representative Zoe Lofgren from California has offered a simple motion. It simply says, one version of this bill passed the Senate; one version of this bill passed the House 8 months ago; the conferees should meet. That's all it says. It says the Congress ought to do the job it was hired to do.

Again, I want to thank the Republican Members who have shown up here to stand here today. I don't even know, because we haven't talked about it, whether they would agree with me on every provision of this bill. But they want a bill, and they want the conferees to

meet. And I will say again, I know the conventional wisdom is in election years we're not supposed to do anything. I think that's wrong. We all still draw a check in election years, just like we do in nonelection years, and we're all here. And these kids, they keep dying every day. They don't know it's an election year. So I thank Zoe Lofgren and all these people who are here, for saying that we ought to get on with the business of the Nation.

Now unbelievably enough, the gun lobby—who would do well in this conference, I think; I don't like it very much, but I think they'd do pretty well—they don't want this conference to meet. And they're actually threatening retribution against lawmakers if they vote for Zoe Lofgren's resolution to meet. Why is that? Because they know the people aren't with them, that's why. Because they know that the people who have experience out there in the country, whether they're Republicans or Democrats or independents, once they understand what the issue is and that nobody's trying to take any hunter's gun away or burden anybody's legal rights, we're just trying to keep children alive—once they understand that, they know that they cannot win the public debate.

I got a little tickled over the weekend when they got a little rough with me. I mean—[laughter]—you know, I have so much scar tissue now, I can't even feel it. [Laughter] So it's totally immaterial to me what they say. And that should not be an issue for any of you.

You know, none of us—any of us get these elected jobs, we ask for them; nobody makes us take these jobs. So that's completely irrelevant. The only thing that should matter—the only thing that should matter—is what is the best course in our country to make America the safest big country in the world and to save the lives of these dozen kids that are getting killed every day from gun violence. That should be the only thing that matters.

And there are legitimate, practical issues that have to be worked through in these areas. But believe me, I've been there. I'm one of the few Presidents that's ever been to any of these gun shows. I've actually been to them. And I've been to them way out in the country, where all of the practical problems allegedly arise. And in all candor, I think that taking a little time and a little inconvenience to save a lot of lives is a good deal for America.

I also believe that we cannot make this the only area of our national life where our only response is punishment and no prevention. Suppose I gave a speech to you today. Suppose I called you here to say, "My fellow Americans, I am incredibly burdened by the fact that these airport metal detectors are a pain for a lot of people. And 99.9 percent of all the people who walk into airports are good, law-abiding citizens and would never do anything wrong, and a lot of them have money clips in their pockets and have to go through those metal detectors 2 or 3 times, and I just think it's terrible. And so we're going to take the metal detectors out of the airport, and the next time somebody blows up an airplane we're going to put 10 years on their sentence." [Laughter] Anybody want to support that policy? [Laughter]

Suppose I said to you, "My fellow Americans, I brought you here because I'm getting older and a little heavier and those seatbelts are really uncomfortable for me—[laughter]—and because the overwhelming majority of automobile drivers in America are good, law-abiding people and safe people, I want to abolish the speed limits and rip the seatbelts out of all our cars—[laughter]—and if somebody does something wrong, I want to add 5 years to their sentence." Now, that's the logic here.

Why should this be the only area of our national life where we say no prevention, only punishment? Attorney General Reno has increased gun crime prosecutions. Why do we fight for 100,000 police? Why are all these police groups here fighting for 100,000 police? Not primarily to catch criminals quicker but because they knew if they were on the street in the neighborhoods, they would prevent crime in the first place. That's what this is about.

So, again, there's an old proverb that says, he who throws the first blow admits he has run out of arguments. [Laughter] In 1993, they said the Brady bill would violate the second amendment. But the right to keep and bear arms in deer season is still alive and well in Arkansas, but 500,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers weren't able to get handguns. It was the right thing to do.

Gun crimes have fallen by 35 percent-plus since 1993. Today I'm honored to announce the results of the Justice Department's first annual review of the instant criminal background check system put in place in November of 1988 under the Brady law. In the first year, the insta-check

system, in one year, stopped 179,000 illegal gun sales, over two-thirds to people who were indicted or convicted of felony crimes. Most of the rest were fugitives or domestic or drug abusers. All told now, as I said, half a million guns have been stopped from falling into the wrong hands since 1993, proof positive that those who opposed the Brady bill in 1993 were wrong.

This is not an argument—we're having the same old argument. We have evidence now. And when it comes to the gun show, I would just remind you that back in 1993 the same crowd that's fighting closing the gun show loophole said, "You don't need the Brady bill because no bad actors ever buy guns at gun stores. They get them all at gun shows and urban flea markets and out of the backs of pickups and trunks of cars." So now we say, "Well, we did get a lot of them, but you're right, there still are a lot of those bad"—now they say, "Oh, well, we can't do that. It's too much of a burden."

Now, I don't believe that we can't reach agreement here. But the leadership of the Congress continues to resist and to cling to arguments that won't stand up in honest debate. And I'll bet, in their heart of hearts, they're pretty embarrassed by some of the things that their allies have said in the last few days.

They say gun shows would be put out of business if unlicensed dealers who sell guns have to comply with the background checks, which can take up to 3 business days to complete. But licensed gun dealers at gun shows already have to do background checks, if they're licensed, and they're still doing a very brisk business. Nearly three-quarters—now, listen to this—nearly three-quarters of all the Brady background checks are completed within a few seconds under the insta-check system; 95 percent now completed in 2 hours or less. Less than 5—here's the rub, and I want everybody to focus on this—this is the rub of this legislation. Less than 5 percent of the Brady checks take longer than 24 hours. So if we put this in, most of this will be over in 2 hours; 95 percent will be over in 24 hours. But of the 5 percent that take more than 24 hours, they are 20 times more likely to be rejected for a problem. So this whole big old fight here is, in large measure, about those 5 percent.

Now, why in the wide world any organized group would be in the business of worrying about the inconvenience of those 5 percent is beyond me. Ninety-five percent of the people

are going to be out of here; 75 percent of them are going to be out of here in an hour or less. Representative Conyers here has offered an agreement that would have the whole thing done in 24 hours, except for those that can't be done.

So again I say, I've heard all this—if you read the press on it, because so much of it is—and this is not a criticism of the press, it's the rhetoric of the fight—you would think this is about will there be background checks or not. Why in the world would we not want to have an adequate check of these 5 percent that are 20 times more likely to be problem people and hurt innocent children and other people? That is the issue here.

And I'm telling you, I don't care what anybody says about people traveling from one town to the next to another gun show and being out in the rural areas and how much trouble it is. It's not that much trouble. They deposit the guns at the local police department or the sheriff's office. There's 50 different ways to solve this problem.

This is all just a smokescreen. Every last issue is turned into some major battle over the Constitution, when all we're trying to do is save lives.

So again, I want to say again, I'm grateful to the people who are here. I'm grateful that we have bipartisan representation. I hope the Republicans who are here don't get too much grief when they go back to Congress.

But I would like it if this were not a political issue. I would like it if it were not a partisan issue. I would like it if not a single vote could be made on this in the November election. I would like it if no one ever had to vote for any candidate on this ever again. I would like it if we had a national consensus to protect our children.

And it would not in any way, shape, or form interfere with Americans to go about their business in the ways that Americans in my part of the country have from the beginning, in the hunting season, in the skeet shooting, in the sport shooting, and all that. It doesn't have anything to do with this.

But we're making a grave mistake when we continue to put up excuses for that for which there is no excuse and to pretend that this is the only area of our national life where only punishment and not prevention is the answer.

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So I thank the folks who are here. I wish Representative Lofgren well, and I particularly appreciate the leadership of the women Members of the Congress in this issue that affects all of us.

I would like to now call on someone who, of all the people on this stage, has paid the highest price for our failure to do the right thing by our country, Representative Carolyn McCarthy.

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

The President. I want to leave you with two thoughts. First of all, not many people who pay the price Carolyn McCarthy did wind up having the personal strength to run for Congress. One of the biggest problems here is most of the people out there whose kids get killed in crimes or by accident, it's all they can do to put their own lives back together, take care of the rest of their kids, and go on with their lives. I can't believe that Suzann Wilson is still doing this after all these years. There is only a—it was just kind of a God's grace that Jim and Sarah Brady happened to be nationally prominent people and in a situation where they could go on. Mike Barnes is trying to organize people that don't have anything like the natural inclination or ability to come up with the kind of money and power and then employ the kind of tactics that the typical lobby group does. But they're everywhere.

Yesterday I was contacted by a man that I've known for many years, to remind me of the incredible damage done to his family when his

son and his son's friend were playing with a gun that killed the friend. His son doesn't have a mark on him, but it took him years to get over it, watching his best friend die there. There are people like this everywhere. And they shouldn't be denied and disenfranchised just because they're not organized. You have to speak for them.

The second thing I want to say is Congressman John Lewis is here. The Sunday before last, I joined him in the 35th anniversary of marching over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, a march that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. People in our lifetime, those of us that are old enough, over 35, actually died so all Americans could vote. I don't think they marched and died so that their votes would vanish in a howl of special interest politics in Washington. That's not what the Constitution or the Bill of Rights or the civil rights revolution was all about.

This is about more than guns. This is about whether democracy works. So I ask you, don't just go out and talk about how well these women did today and how moved you are. Do something. Mobilize your friends to do something. We can win this battle with your help.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Michael D. Barnes, president, and Sarah Brady, chair, Handgun Control, Inc., and former White House Press Secretary James S. Brady, who was wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan.

Statement on the Congressional Budget Resolution

March 15, 2000

Today the Republican Congress took a first step on a risky budget that threatens to undermine the fiscal discipline that has led to our current economic prosperity. The budget blueprint they have endorsed fails to strengthen Social Security or Medicare, takes us off the path to paying down the debt by 2013, and threatens to slash key priorities like education, law enforcement, and the environment. It was the

wrong approach for America last year—it is the wrong approach for America this year.

Republican leaders should work with me on a responsible budget that strengthens Social Security and Medicare, adds a prescription drug benefit, pays down the debt by 2013, and invests in education and other key priorities. Let's work together to meet America's long-term challenges and keep our economy strong.