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Remarks at a Gun Safety Rally in Denver, Colorado

April 12, 2000

The President. Thank you. Thank you so very much for making me feel welcome. And I thank you for reminding me again what this is all about. I want to thank my long-time friend Wellington Webb for his leadership in this fight and his leadership of Denver. I thank Tom Mauser for having the courage not to be broken by his loss but to give his son the legacy he deserves.

I thank John Head and Arnie Grossman for reminding us that this is not about party politics; it's about saving people's lives. And I also want to thank my longtime friend, your former Governor, Dick Lamm, who's here, and former Governor John Love, who's not here, for also reminding us this is not about party politics. I thank Attorney General Ken Salazar and Governor Bill Owens, who is also not here, but I want to thank them both for what they tried to do in the legislature and for what they're trying to do to help you pass this referendum.

I want to thank the other SAFE board members who are here on stage. And I want to acknowledge—it's already been mentioned by Arnie, but I want to tell you that I had the privilege of meeting with the SAFE students—David Winkler, Ben Gelt, and their other colleagues in Washington. They told me today, David and Ben, that they've now been to 30 States, and they have 10,000 young people across America enlisted in this cause. So I want to thank them. I think we ought to give them a big hand. [*Applause*]

Finally, I will say more about this in a moment, but as you know, I'm trying to pass some legislation on this subject in Washington, and there are three people I want to acknowledge. First of all, a former Congressman from Maryland, Mike Barnes, who's the president of Handgun Control, who came with me, and he's up here today. Mike, thank you for coming. Secondly, Representative Diana DeGette from Colorado, who is supporting our legislation in Washington. Thank you, Diana, for what you're doing. Thank you. Thank you. And someone who's not on the platform, I don't think, today, but who came all the way from Washington with me because he believes so strongly in this, and he wanted to express his solidarity with you, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, Dick Gephardt from Missouri, came all the way from Washington to be here today. And I want to thank him for doing that.

Let me say that not only Denver but the whole State of Colorado is a mile high in the eyes of your fellow Americans today. You come from all backgrounds, different communities, and surely different political parties, to speak with a single voice for common sense and safety and the future of our children. I want to tell you, first, you are not alone; and second, America is listening.

All across America, people like you are speaking up: here, where you're taking the lead, working to close the gun show loophole because the legislature wouldn't do it for you, in spite of the leadership of Governor Owens and Attorney General Salazar; in Maryland, another State with a lot of hunters and sports shooters, which yesterday became the first State to require built-in safety locks for all new handguns; in California, which banned junk guns, a new generation of assault weapons, and limited handgun sales to one a month; in Massachusetts, now enforcing consumer product safety rules for guns, banning junk guns, requiring child trigger locks and other devices to prevent children from firing guns. All these steps have helped to protect more of our children. But every child in America deserves these protections. Reducing gun violence is a national challenge.

I came here, first, to say I support what you're doing. And in spite of all the attempts to put roadblocks in your way, you must not be deterred. Your leaders told me you need 62,000 signatures to put this initiative on the ballot. The purpose of all these delaying tactics is to put off the day when you can start gathering the signatures. I want every one of you who is here today to sign up with these folks when you leave, because you ought to be able to get 62,000 signatures in 2 hours if everybody who is for this will sign up and go get the signatures.

The second thing I wanted to do is to say that you deserve a National Government that follows your lead, and Congress is the only body that can provide the kind of national approach we need to protect all the children in every State. That's why I asked——

[*At this point, there was a disturbance in the audience.*]

The President. That's why I asked——

[*The disturbance continued.*]

The President. Sir, this meeting is not about you and not about me. So would you please let me give the speech? [*Applause*]

I'll be glad to speak to him out there, but you came here to talk about something else.

Now, let me say to all of you, the thing—I'm very proud of the fact that you've made this a bipartisan effort. And as John said when he spoke, it is true that even in Washington not every Democrat is for this legislation, and not every Republican is against it. This is largely a matter of political organization and power among the opponents of this legislation—here, too—and a matter of culture.

One of the reasons I wanted to come here is that I grew up in a State not all that different from Colorado. I was 12 years old when I first shot a can off a fencepost with a .22. Unlike most elected officials in Washington, I've actually been to gun shows. I understand what is going on here. But I will say this: The message you are sending the country is not that this is the only answer but that it's an important answer. The message you are sending the country is not that we shouldn't have stronger enforcement of the laws—we should; not that we shouldn't teach firearms safety—we should; not that we shouldn't have community efforts like our national campaign against youth violence is promoting, to strengthen the role of parents and families and schools and community groups—we should. But that is not an excuse for saying that guns are the only area of our national life where there will be no prevention. That is their position, and that is wrong.

We punish reckless drivers, but we still have seatbelts in our car and child safety seats for our kids. We punish people who hijack airplanes and terrorists who blow them up, but we still—thank God—have got airport metal detectors. Every one of us, just about, at least my age, were raised by usually our mothers telling us that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Gun safety cannot be the only area of our national life where we say no to prevention. Colorado is here to say we have lost enough of our children; it's time to have prevention, too, in this important area of our national life.

When I signed the Brady bill into law in 1993, a law which had been vetoed by the previous President, the same people who are fighting you said the Brady bill would do no good because all the criminals bought their guns at gun shows and urban flea markets—[*laughter*]—and out of the back of trunks from one another. And therefore, this prevention would do no good; it would just be a terrible burden for hunters and sports people.

Well, 6 years later and a few months, over half a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers have been unable to get handguns. Gun crime down more than 35 percent; homicide down to a 31-year low: it worked.

But no one believes this country is safe enough. I don't want any future President to have to go to Columbine, or to Springfield, Oregon, or to Jonesboro, Arkansas, or to all the other places I have been. It's tough enough to comfort the families of our service men and women who die in the line of duty. Children have no duties, except to their studies and their families. Our duty is to protect their lives and give them futures.

I know I'm talking to the converted here, but I want the evidence to get out. This gun show loophole is now a serious problem. Last year a study by the Departments of Justice and Treasury of 314 gun show investigations showed the following: 34 percent of the sales investigated involved guns later used in serious crimes, a total of 54,000 gun crimes. This is a serious problem.

Now, should we have—I will say again—should we have a comprehensive strategy? Of course, we should. Does the media have a responsibility? Do communities have a responsibility—schools, parents? Absolutely. Is teaching people gun safety an important part of this responsibility? Of course, it is. When the NRA was focusing on teaching young

people gun safety in my home State, I supported them in every way I could. But it is no excuse not to have prevention.

Let me tell you something. I come from a State where factories in small towns shut down on the first day of deer season every year. And when we were debating the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, I heard all this stuff, and I told them, I said, "If you miss a day, even an hour in the deer woods, I'll be against this bill." Of course, they haven't. That's not what this is about. So I say to you, you have to go out and say this. Now, people say—the same people who said 6 years ago that all these criminals were getting their guns at gun shows and urban flea markets and, therefore, the Brady bill wouldn't work, now say you can't have background checks at gun shows because it would be so burdensome.

Well, let me tell you what the burden is. More than 70 percent of these checks can be done within minutes; 95 percent can be done within a day. The 5 percent that can't be done within a day should still be done. Why? Because they are 20 times more likely to be rejected because of a criminal background or another problem. Those are the facts. Now, I don't know about you, but I think it's worth a little bit of inconvenience to save a few thousand lives over the next few years.

Now, should we enforce the law? Yes, we should. Gun crime prosecutions are up by 16 percent since I've been President. The average person convicted is serving 2 years longer. Gun crime down, as I said, by 35 percent.

Here in Colorado, your U.S. Attorney, Tom Strickland, is working with local officials on Colorado's Project Exile. They're enforcing the laws more vigorously, including against those who violate the Brady bill. But I will say again, the real question is, with the children's lives at stake, with the accidental gun rate of kids under 15 in this country—the accidental gun rate—9 times higher than that of the next 25 biggest economies combined, how can we say prevention has no role?

You all believe this, but I want you to have these facts to argue. And I want you to understand that the country is looking very closely at Colorado. We know it's a State that has Republicans and Democrats. We know it's a State that has a strong culture that favors hunting and sport shooting. We know it's a State with a broken heart over Columbine. We know it's a State where people can put aside their partisan differences, and maybe even their lifetime culture, to look at the facts.

Now, other States will follow your lead. I hope and pray Congress will follow your lead, as well. But you must not get tired or frustrated. You must not even get angry. You've got to go talk to these people. Believe me, not every member of the National Rifle Association is dead set against you. They get this stuff in the mail; they hear this stuff over the airwaves, but they love their children, too. I wouldn't give up on anybody.

But the main thing you have got to do is win here. So I will say again, if you haven't signed up to be with SAFE, sign up on your way out, and find out when those petitions get circulated, and do your part.

Look how many people are here. If everybody in this room—everybody in this room—there's about 3,000 people here, right?—if you got 20 signatures, it would be a done deal.

In the end, change is always difficult. But you must understand how important it is for your children and people all over the country. If you do this, you will give so much energy to people who have been sitting around in other States like yours, thinking it was a hopeless battle, thinking they couldn't win. If you do this, you will give enormous impetus to our efforts in Congress to try to provide national protections.

And most important, if you do this, you will say, we're going to treat this area of our life like every other area of our national life. America is the country that respects the rights of people. But we've still got our rights over 200 years later, since we started, because we also exercise our responsibility, especially for our children and their future.

I admire you. I support you. Don't quit until you win.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. in the Colorado Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Wellington E. Webb of Denver;

Tom Mauser, political director, and John Head and Arnold J. Grossman, co-presidents, Sane Alternatives to the Firearms Epidemic (SAFE) Colorado; former Governors Richard D. Lamm and John A. Love and current Gov. Bill Owens of Colorado; and Colorado State Attorney General Kenneth Salazar.

Remarks at MSNBC's Townhall Meeting on Guns in Denver

April 12, 2000

Tom Brokaw. And to start our discussion here at the University of Denver, the President of the United States, who earlier today spoke at a rally here in Colorado organized by the families of the victims of Columbine. Mr. President, what message do you bring on gun control, not only to the citizens of Colorado but to the rest of the Nation as well, with these appearances?

The President. Well, first of all, I wanted to come to express my support for the people of Colorado who are trying to put this initiative on the ballot to close the gun show loophole. A bipartisan effort led by Governor Owens and Attorney General Salazar failed to get the legislation through the legislature, so the people are trying to put it on the ballot, and I wanted to support it.

And secondly, I wanted to highlight the fact that even though Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, California, and other States are moving to increase gun safety, we really can't do what we need to do until there is national legislation passed by the Congress to close the gun show loophole, to require child safety locks, promote safe gun technology, and stop importing the large capacity ammunition clips that make a mockery of our assault weapons ban.

Mr. Brokaw. But do you think that this issue has become so highly politicized, especially in a Presidential election year—Governor Bill Owens, for example, didn't want to appear in this hour with you; he'll be appearing later tonight on MSNBC—that it's become so politicized that it's highly unlikely that we'll achieve any consensus in this year?

The President. Actually, I think the fact that it's an election year increases the chances that we can get something done. If it weren't an election year, there would be no way, because the—in Washington at least, the influence of the NRA is so great that even though some people are afraid of them at election time, they know the public is for commonsense prevention measures, overwhelmingly. So I think in a funny way, the fact that it's an election year might help us to pass it, especially since—you know, I'm not running for anything, so I'm just out here trying to do what I think is right.

Mr. Brokaw. It seems that one of the real hangups is this whole question of how long the waiting period should be at a gun show for a background check. The NRA and other people who are critical of your position say they would be willing to take the 24-hour waiting period. You've been holding out for 72 hours.

The President. Here's the problem—and there may be a way to split the difference—but 70 percent of these checks can be done in minutes. Over 90 percent can be done in 24 hours. The problem is that the less than 10 percent that can't be done within 24 hours, where you need 3 days, they have a rejection rate of 20 times the rejection rate of the other 90-something percent.

So their position puts them in—I think it's a totally untenable position. They're basically arguing for the group that is most likely to have criminals in it. So there's got to be a way to do the checks, clear them, let the people have their guns who clear, and still hold those that can't be cleared and—in rural areas, for example, I've actually been to very rural gun shows, because that's the kind we mostly had in my State—there's got to be a way to find that common place to deposit the gun and the check if it's over the weekend, and then do the background check, and send for the gun—to the gun owner and the check to the seller.

Mr. Brokaw. So there may be some room for compromise in the 24 versus 72 hours if you can find, if in effect, what we would call an escrow for the gun?

The President. Sure. There are practical problems in these rural gun shows, but they don't approach the cost to society of not doing the background checks. And the problem is—again, once the background check is done, people ought to be able to get their guns. But the problem is, if you don't have