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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

the provision for 3 days for the small percentage of buyers that can't be checked in a day, then you're giving up a huge percentage of the people that have a criminal background.

Mr. Brokaw. Let's talk about the larger picture when it comes to safety checks and gun controls and the question of gun control versus gun safety. If you put all of that on the table, and then you look at what happened in Columbine High School—and we know what was in the minds of Harris and Klebold; we've heard the tapes—there are no laws in the world that would have kept them from carrying out that act.

The President. Well, you may be right. The young woman who provided one of the guns said that if she'd been subject to a background check she wouldn't have purchased the gun at the gun show. But you may be right about that. There's been a recent study showing that a lot of these terrible instances don't necessarily fit a profile, that young people nearly always give some heads up to some peer and never do it to their own families.

But one of the things we do know is, since we passed the Brady bill and increased gun enforcement at the same time, a half-million people who were felons, fugitives, and stalkers haven't gotten their handguns. Gun crime is down 35 percent since I took office, and we've got the lowest homicide rate in 31 years. So we know we can do better.

You can't—there is no society that can prevent every tragedy, every outrage. But you do—if you have sensible prevention measures, you save more lives. That's what this is about. It's not being perfect; it's about not making the perfect the enemy of the good.

Mr. Brokaw. You have a big deal on the table at Congress. You want to get additional money for enforcement of gun laws—1,100 new prosecutors, 500 new ATF agents, $10 million for smart gun research. This comes at the end of your 8 years in office, and the NRA has been after you for a long time about enforcing the gun laws that are already on the books.

The President. Well, they say that, but they haven't endorsed this measure yet. And look at the facts. Since I've been President, we've increased Federal prosecutions by 16 percent; we've started operations like the one in Richmond and here in Colorado; we have increased by 2 years the average sentence of a violator of a gun law. We've increased enforcement. That is not an argument not to have prevention.

My argument with the NRA is not on enforcement. My argument is that guns can't be the only area of our national life where we don't have a balanced approach. I agree with them; we should do more to educate young people about gun safety. I agree that the media and parents and communities and schools have a responsibility.

But this shouldn't be the only area of our national life where we don't have sensible prevention measures. We would never think of applying this principle to airport metal detectors, to taking all of the seatbelts out of cars or—that's what my problem is. Prevention ought to be a part of our strategy. And the evidence of the Brady bill is it works, it drives down crime, and it saves lives. And we ought to close the loophole. That's what I believe.

Mr. Brokaw. One of the interested observers we have here is Jerry Whitman, who is the police chief, the acting police chief of the city of Denver. Mr. Whitman, one of the claims that the NRA makes is that around the country, law enforcement officers are unhappy with the Federal Government for not doing enough to enforce the Federal gun laws. Is that your judgment?

[*Jerry Whitman said that Federal partnership in law enforcement should go further and stressed the need for consistency laws, in order to protect the officers on the street.*]

Mr. Brokaw. What happens when you have a gun show here in the Denver area? In a number of other communities, they say the crime rate goes up, crimes committed with guns. Has that happened in Denver?

Mr. Whitman. Well, in 1989, the city council and city government put into law an assault weapons ban in the city, so we don't have gun shows in the city itself. I haven't noticed any increase as a result of the gun shows outside the city limits with the crime rate in the city of Denver.

Mr. Brokaw. And we also have in the audience Doug Dean, who is the majority leader in the Colorado State House of Representatives.

You were among those who defeated your own Governor's gun control bill that he put before the House. Why did you do that?

[*Representative Dean stated that he believed the legislation would not have had any effect on the Columbine tragedy since Robin Anderson, who purchased the guns for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, would have passed the background check supported by the President.*]

The President. I agree with that. She would have passed the background check. What she said was, if she'd been subject to one, she probably wouldn't have bought the gun. But let me point out—again, I say, you can't solve—you can't refuse to vote for a law because it's not perfect, it won't solve every problem.

Last year we had a study done by the Department of Justice and the Department of the Treasury, involving over 300 sellers at gun shows—and without background checks. Thirty-four percent of them resulted in sales of guns that were later used in serious crimes, a total of 50,000-plus gun crimes committed. Now, if there had been background checks, those would not have occurred.

So to say, well, it wouldn't have solved every problem, therefore we won't do it—I don't think that's a good answer.

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. Dean——

The President. If the Brady bill works, if you believe in the Brady bill, if you accept the fact that it's kept a half-million felons, fugitives, and stalkers from getting handguns, then it would by definition work to have the same background check at the gun shows.

And let me just say one other thing. Everybody says, enforce the law, enforce the law, enforce the law. The more we prosecute violations of the Brady bill, the more we enforce the law, the more illegal people will turn to the gun shows to buy their guns, unless we close the loophole.

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. Dean, a question that I have for you. Eighty percent of the Coloradans, in a survey about gun laws in this State, said they really did want to crack down on gun shows; they wanted to crack down on sales to 18-year-olds. All of this is possible—and they wanted background checks for gun shows. So, are you representing the people of Colorado when you defeat those very measures?

[*Representative Dean stated that the vast majority of people in his district did not support the measures.*]

Mr. Brokaw. But let me just ask you, so I understand perfectly well your position personally. You think that there can be unlicensed dealers at gun shows, and that background checks should not be required at gun shows, and that guns can be sold to 18-year-olds at gun shows. You're in favor of all three of those points?

[*Representative Dean responded that 18-year-olds were adults who could serve in the military and be sent to war. He said he was concerned that regulation of every private firearm transaction would create a Government registry of firearm owners. The program then paused for a commercial break.*]

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, we're back, and these are just some of the Federal firearms regulations that we already have on the books. If you could add just one or two that you think would change the current climate in this country, what are the two priorities that you have for the end of your term?

The President. I would close the gun show loophole, because the Brady bill has worked superbly. It has given us a 35 percent drop in gun crimes and a 31-year low in the homicide rate and kept a half-million people—felons, fugitives, stalkers—from getting handguns. That's the first thing I'd do.

And then the second thing I would do is to require safety provisions for children. I also believe that the loophole in the assault weapons ban should be closed; we banned assault weapons and then we still allow the import of these large capacity ammunition clips. But I think that child safety and doing more to keep guns out of the hands of criminals through preventive measures that haven't delayed by a day or an hour a hunter going to the deer woods, anybody going to a sport shooting contest, any law-abiding person buying a handgun for safety at home—hasn't done any of that—I think it is a tiny burden to pay to give lots of people their lives back. So that's what I'd do.

Mr. Brokaw. But do we have to get beyond the laws and get to a dialog as well about the place of violence in our culture?

The President. No, no, that should all be a part of it. I mean, I think the media has a responsibility here. I'll say again, communities, schools, and families have heavy responsibilities. I think when we've got a lot of guns out there, we should do more to teach young people how to use them safely. But you can't say that guns are the only area in our life, because of the second amendment, where we're not going to do prevention.

You know, the same people that are arguing now, we can't close the gun show loophole, said to me 6 years ago when I signed the Brady bill that it wouldn't do any good, it would just burden people, because all the criminals bought their guns at gun shows, they didn't buy their guns at gun stores. Turned out that wasn't right. Prevention makes sense in every area of our national life. That's my message and my belief.

Mr. Brokaw. One of the places in America where this dialog has been going on with a very, very heavy price, of course, is Columbine, Colorado. And Lance Kirklin is with us today. He was one of the students who was shot in Columbine. And Lance and his family also still like to use guns.

Lance, what did you learn about guns in the last year, being a victim of a gunshot?

Lance Kirklin. Well, I mean, it's not guns that kill people, it's people who kill people. You don't see guns jump off tables and start shooting people. It's people that have it in their possession, and it's their mind that does the crime.

Mr. Brokaw. What would you change, however, in the teenage culture, if you will, or in the culture of young people—not just in Columbine, but across the country, in terms of their attitudes about violence and the use of guns?

Mr. Kirklin. I don't know.

Mr. Brokaw. Do you think that they are open to change? Do you think that they learn—I mean, you go out hunting with your father, for example, right? You shoot guns from him, and you've learned from him. But how many other young people only know about guns from video games or from some violent movie and don't really know what the impact is?

Mr. Kirklin. I think a lot of people my age know about guns from movies and video games and stuff, but they also know the other side of it. You know, they are dangerous, and they also can be used for hunting and good, I guess.

Mr. Brokaw. Would you be uncomfortable if the gun show loophole were closed?

Mr. Kirklin. Kind of.

Mr. Brokaw. You would be uncomfortable?

Mr. Kirklin. Yes.

Mr. Brokaw. Let's ask Dave Thomas, who came to be known nationally as well, who is the district attorney for the county in which Littleton resides, about how his attitudes have changed toward guns in the last year, or having to deal with the tragedy there?

[*Mr. Thomas stated that he agreed with Lance Kirklin, except that he believed that people's access to guns increased the lethality of the acts that they commit. He agreed with President Clinton that the Brady bill worked better than anticipated. He also advocated closing the loophole, providing resources for investigations, and prosecuting violators agressively.*]

Mr. Brokaw. We also have—in that very area is Diana Holland, who is the co-chair of the Littleton Community Task Force. The task force is officially neutral on the whole question of gun control. But I wonder, Ms. Holland, has your work, in effect, been impeded some by the emotional divisions of gun control debates bring to the table?

[*Ms. Holland said that task force members left their political and personal agendas out of their work. The program then paused for a commercial break.*]

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, I know it's no surprise to you that you have been a very large target for the National Rifle Association and its spokespeople in political arenas and on television. We're going to share a couple of the ads that they've been running so that you can respond to them and so that we can talk to some people here who are supporters of the NRA.

Let's see one of those ads.

[*A videotape ad was shown.*]

Mr. Brokaw. Pretty harsh language, Mr. President.

The President. Well, actually, Mr. Heston is right, I guess. If you say something is wrong unintentionally, it's a mistake; and when you know it's wrong, it's a lie. That's what he said.

Now, when that child—when the one child killed the other child, I said, A, there ought to be child safety locks, and B, another provision of my bill, which I couldn't get through either House, was to hold people like the people in that crackhouse criminally responsible when they allow children like that little boy to have access to guns. That was a provision of my law. That was my position. And actually, I believe they supported me. So they knew I was for that, because they supported it. But he didn't say that on the airwaves.

Now, I'm not going to call him a name like he did; I still like his movies, actually. [*Laughter*] But this is not about me and him. You have to understand—the NRA, if they can make a demon out of me, then they can raise more money. If they can terrify people who live in a district like the House Majority Leader there, where there really is a cultural divide here—because they don't have many people in his district who would ever violate the gun laws, and they have a lot of people who own guns, they use them safely, they taught their kids to use them safely, and they can't imagine the kind of culture that a lot of these kids live in, these urban cultures. So they don't understand what the deal is, and they're afraid it's a slippery slope.

So that's what this is about. They just keep everybody all agitated, and they raise a lot of money, and maybe they beat the bill. But again I say, let's calm down here. Since I've been President, gun crime is down 35 percent, nobody's missed a day in the deer woods, nobody's been unable to go to a sport shooting contest, and the prevention has worked. And what we need is more prevention that doesn't unfairly burden the right of hunters and sports people and people who want guns for their own safety. Those are the facts.

The gun death rate in America is still higher than any other country in the world. And I want to say this: The accidental gun death rate of children under 15 is 9 times higher here than in the next 25 largest countries combined. We could use a little more prevention. That's what this is about. That's all it's about—not about a fight with the NRA—it's about a fight to save lives.

Mr. Brokaw. We had hoped in our next hour, which we'll play tonight, to have Wayne LaPierre, who is a very conspicuous officer of the NRA, appear with us. And he had accepted, but then cited a scheduling conflict, so he won't be with us later tonight. But we do have in the audience, I know, some people who are not only enrolled members of the NRA—but are outspoken proponents of the NRA's position on a lot of things.

Bob Ford is the president of Rocky Mountain Arms, Inc. He is a gun dealer, and he joins us now. Mr. Ford, right here. Mr. Ford, Wayne LaPierre has said two rather provocative things about the President, in addition to the Charlton Heston commercial that we just saw. He said the President "has blood on his hands" as a result of what happened to the coach that was tragically shot in the hate crime shooting in Northwestern. And he said that this President wants a "certain level of violence in America to further his political agenda." Do you agree with that?

[*Bob Ford disagreed, and stated that too much rhetoric was coming from both sides. He said that we need to send a message to felons that if you use a gun, you will be sent to prison.*]

Mr. Brokaw. And what about gun shows in places like Colorado and across the American West and across the American South, for that matter, where they're so popular? You're a regular gun dealer and represent gun dealers. Do gun shows unfairly compete with people who go out and set up their shop in a brick-and-mortar operation?

[*Mr. Ford stated that individuals selling private or estate gun collections are engaged in business transactions and thus should have to apply for a license to sell firearms or get out of business, and the ATF should enforce that position.*]

The President. I agree with that.

Mr. Brokaw. But this administration raised the standards for licensing. And here

in Colorado, just this week, after I arrived, many Colorado Republican legislators were saying they've made it too hard to get a license. They only raised the price from $10 to about $30 and put some additional standards in there. Wasn't that the appropriate thing to do, or not?

[*Mr. Ford stated some dealers who used to have Federal firearm licenses were liquidating their personal inventory, but the ATF was requiring them to get a license and perform background checks. He emphasized that no dealer in the country objected to performing background checks.*]

Mr. Brokaw. Were you surprised when the Colorado Legislature defeated the attempts to tighten the laws governing gun shows?

Mr. Ford. No, I was not. Our members of our Colorado Legislature are responsive to their constituents.

Mr. Brokaw. Thank you very much.

Matt Bai is a colleague from Newsweek magazine, and he has been covering extensively this whole question of the gun culture in America, the gun laws, and the political debate that has heated up across America. Matt?

Matt Bai. Well, Mr. President, the NRA, in a letter to gun dealers last week, called you "the most antigun President in history." That may or may not bother you, but along the same lines of what we've been watching, there are a lot of gun owners and gun dealers who believe that you won't stop until you get an outright ban on handguns, and that whatever you get, you're going to want more. I'd like to know what specific provision, of the ones you've outlined today, it would take for you to go away and leave the gun companies and the gun dealers alone.

The President. Well, first of all, I have said specifically I would not support a ban on handguns. You may know that a major newspaper in Washington, DC, the Washington Post, has actually advocated that. And so we were all asked about it, and I said, no, I wouldn't support that.

I would go further than my proposals here. I also think that it's all right to register these sales the same way we register cars, because what I'm trying to do is improve the ability of law enforcement to trace weapons when they're used in a crime. And none of this in any way interferes with the second amendment. You know, historically there were a lot of people who had to have a license to carry a concealed weapon. No one ever thought that interfered with the second amendment.

So my basic view is, I am for anything that will increase our capacity to prevent guns from going into the wrong hands. But I'm not for preventing law-abiding people from having a gun that they have the right to have, to hunt, to sports shoot, or, if they choose, to protect themselves in their own homes.

I do think, in addition to that, we should invest a lot more in this smart gun technology. We will be able—within 3 years, we will have guns on the market that can only be fired by their lawful owners. I think we ought to have internal as well as external child trigger locks. I believe that. That's what I—and I believe when we do that, you will see a much safer country. I think that if you look at the evidence here, there have been no assaults on hunting; there's been no assaults on sports shooting. But we do have a safer country than we did because I've taken on these fights.

And so I think that the fears are unfounded. We should take—instead of getting into big verbal battles, we ought to look at the specifics of every proposal and debate it, and decide whether it's right or wrong.

Mr. Brokaw. As you know, many people believe that if you register every handgun, that's going to be a national registry, and the Government someday is going to show up at your door and say, give me your guns.

The President. Well, I don't agree with that. But that wasn't my proposal. I think first of all, that's impractical, because there are already over 200 million guns out there. And now, that just scares a lot of people. The truth is that the vast majority of them are in the hands of collectors and law-abiding hunters and sports people. There are too many that are kind of floating around on the streets and in the criminal culture, but the answer to that, I think, is aggressive local buy-back programs, which we've tried to support.

But if you registered new gun sales, then they could be—the guns could more easily

be traced in the event of a crime. That's all I'm interested in. I would oppose any effort to say that people couldn't have firearms in this country. You know, maybe others disagree, I suppose, but it's part of the culture I grew up in, and I'm still a part of it. But I also think that the people—most of the folks I grew up with, if I have a chance to talk to them, and they understand we're trying to save kids' lives and trying to prevent crimes from happening in the first place, and it doesn't burden their ability to do what they want to do lawfully with their guns, will support these specific measures. That's the direction I think this debate ought to take.

Mr. Brokaw. You've tried to make it a local State option as well. Would that be the answer, that gun owners would be more inclined to trust their State governments than the Federal Government? The Federal Government can provide the appropriate incentives for the States to install those kinds of laws?

The President. Well, they probably would. But to me, how it's done is not as important as whether we have done everything we possibly can.

Look, let me just say this. When I started in '93 as President, we had a rising crime rate. Most people didn't think you could drive it down. Now, the Congress not only passed the assault weapons ban and the Brady bill, they put 100,000 police on the streets. They put more resources into law enforcement. They did more to help local agencies, as well as to strengthen our Federal efforts. And crime is at about a 25-year low, the murder rate at a 31-year low. But I won't be satisfied until America's the safest big country in the world.

And if I were running the NRA, I would love—I'd have a whole different take on this. I would be for all this prevention business, because I would want to prove that a country where lots of people hunt, sports shoot, and have guns for their home protection could also be the safest country in the world. So I would have a totally different take on this. I might not raise as much money through the mail, but I think it would be better.

Mr. Brokaw. Let me just be absolutely clear about this. You're going to be out of work in less than a year. Does that mean that you're thinking about running for the NRA presidency? [*Laughter*]

The President. I think—you know, somehow I think I'd have a better chance of getting elected to the school board at home than I would to the NRA presidency. [*Laughter*] But I'm just trying to say—again I will say, let's go back to what the gun dealer there said. We don't need to turn this into personal animosity. We need to debate every single one of these issues, bring out all this stuff, and figure out how we can make America the safest big country in the world. That's really what we all want, isn't it? Wouldn't you like it if your country was the safest big country in the world? I mean, that's what we all want.

Mr. Brokaw. I think we have a question from the audience for you, Mr. President.

Q. I'm a junior here at the University of Denver. I have a question I'd like to direct to the President. Sir, do you believe the second amendment is absolute or something that can be limited by gun control legislation?

The President. Well, there is no such thing as an absolute, if you mean it can never be restricted. The first amendment, which most people believe is the most important one, let's say freedom of speech—the Supreme Court has said there's a limit on the freedom of speech; pornography is not protected; you can't shout "fire" in a crowded theater when there's no fire. Freedom of religion— the courts have upheld that people who want to join the United States military, for example, may not be able to have beards, even if their religion says they're supposed to have one.

So all of these amendments have to be interpreted over time in terms of the real circumstances. If you look at the history of the second amendment and what led to its adoption, there is—it's my view—nothing in there which prevents reasonable measures designed to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and kids. To say that criminals have an absolute right to get guns and we're just going to throw the book at them if we catch them, but we can't prevent them from committing a crime in the first place, I think is wrong.

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, we have in the audience a group of women who are interested on both sides of this issue, and one of them is Robin Ball, who is a spokeswoman for the Sisters of the Second Amendment. Is Robin here? I was misinformed. [*Laughter*]

Tom Mauser is here, though, from Columbine. He lost his son at Columbine, and he appeared, obviously, at the State of the Union speech, and you came out here to speak to this group today. Mr. Mauser, have you been surprised in the almost year now since the tragedy at Columbine and the loss of your son, by the divisions in the Colorado community generally, and specifically in Littleton, about how to resolve these issues of violence in America and especially what we do about guns?

Tom Mauser. No, I haven't been that surprised, because I think Littleton is no different than any other community. There are differences of opinion of how we deal with this terrible epidemic of gun violence.

Mr. Brokaw. And where do you think it will lead to in Colorado, given how the Colorado Legislature voted this time?

Mr. Mauser. Well, clearly, where it's leading to right now is that we're taking—my organization, SAFE Colorado, is taking a ballot initiative to the people to close the gun show loophole. And I think, clearly, the polls show that people see that it's reasonable common sense.

Mr. Brokaw. We also have in the audience Richard Gephardt, who represents your party in the House of Representatives. There is a letter, Mr. Gephardt, that we got a copy of just today. It may come as some surprise to you. It's signed by—Henry Hyde is the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and John Conyers, who is the ranking Democrat on that committee, and they're sending it to Orrin Hatch, saying they want to request a juvenile conference meeting as soon as possible, because they think that they have agreed on some terms of where they can get to in closing these loopholes. For example, on gun shows, John Conyers is signing off on a 24-hour check. Does that have any chance of passing?

Representative Richard A. Gephardt. Well, I hope that that can happen. We've been trying to, on a bipartisan basis, get this conference to meet and get them to bring out something that we can get a vote on in the House and the Senate. I'm very optimistic that we can get this done. And as the President has said, we all have our eye on safety, and this bill would help.

Mr. Brokaw. Twenty-four-hour checks would be okay with you?

Representative Gephardt. If it can be done feasibly, if we think that we can catch the people. As the President said, even under the 72-hour rule, 90 percent of the people passed the check; we're only inconveniencing about 10 percent, and a large portion of them are the people that we're trying to stop from getting guns.

So if we can work it out to get a 24-hour check, clear everybody or not clear everybody in that period of time, that would be great.

Mr. Brokaw. Would you sign that bill?

The President. Well, I want to see the details, but I almost certainly would sign anything that had the support of both Mr. Conyers and Mr. Hyde and, therefore, got a majority of both their caucuses.

You know, we may never get a perfect bill, and I don't know what they mean by 24 hours, because John Conyers had offered Henry Hyde 24 hours before, but he wanted some provision for this group—small, small group for whom there is a very large rejection rate. So I don't know where they settled; I want to see the details. But if we could get a big, bipartisan bill to come out of the House that would save people's lives, even if I thought it weren't perfect, of course, I would sign it.

Mr. Brokaw. Would it be worth trying a conditional bill—we'll try the 24-hour check for 2 years with a time limit on it, and if it's not working, we'll come back to it again, just so that we get some effort to begin to close the door on gun shows?

The President. I think we ought to do the very best we can on that. The one thing I did not want to do that was suggested by some is that we just go for the child trigger locks and leave the gun show loophole alone altogether, just because it's almost impossible to come back. So if we can make some progress, obviously I'm open to it. But I think

that even—without regard to party, what is uncomfortable is, everybody would like—because a lot of these gun show are held on the weekend, and people are passing on. And as a gun dealer, a gentleman pointed out, a lot of these people are just getting rid of their own personal stock.

And I've been to gun shows way out in the country where you're 10 miles, 15 miles from the nearest town, and they're passing through. So everybody would like to minimize the inconvenience. The real issue is, what do we do about this very small percentage of people that don't clear within a day and do have a 20 times higher rejection rate?

But I can't believe we can't find a fix for that so we can let everybody else go in a day. Look, the ones that clear in 30 seconds, I'm for letting them go in 30 seconds. I don't want—the Government should never be in a position of imposing a burden for which there is no benefit. I can't believe that we can't work this out, and I'm encouraged by this letter.

Mr. Brokaw. Speaking of that, Smith & Wesson recently came to you and volunteered to put in place a number of guidelines that rankled other gun manufacturers in this country—not only gun locks but they're not going to allow their guns to be sold at gun shows, they're not going to allow multiple handgun sales in the course of a fixed period of time. The NRA has already pointed out that that's a foreign company, and it may be up for sale. Are you going to put the pressure on other gun manufacturers to follow the Smith & Wesson model, or are you going to leave it to them to do what they want to?

The President. Well, first of all, I think they did a good thing. Second, let me tell you exactly what they did, because I think it's important. And you might want to go back to some of the people in the audience.

What they said was, they would not allow their guns to be sold at gun shows unless all the people selling at the gun show did a background check. Then, they said they would require trigger locks, both internal and external, and within 3 years would have smart gun technology. And they said that they would not continue to distribute their guns through dealers that had a bad record.

Another thing, a lot of these gun dealers get an unfairly bad name. An extraordinary percentage of the guns sold to criminals by gun dealers are sold by a tiny percentage of the dealers. Most of the dealers are perfectly law-abiding and very vigilant. So Smith & Wesson said,"Hey, I want to get in and support this process." And what I'm going to do is encourage other manufacturers to do the same, and I think you're going to see a lot of city and State governments that buy a lot of guns and encourage other manufacturers to do the same.

Now, there is some evidence that a lot of the other manufacturers are trying to gang up on Smith & Wesson, which I think is a mistake. Again, what did they do that was wrong? All they did was to promote prevention. And they're in the business of selling guns. They're obviously not trying to ban guns; they're making money selling guns.

Mr. Brokaw. There's somebody in the audience who has some pretty strong feelings about that. Paul Paradis is a gun dealer here in the State of Colorado. You've decided, Mr. Paradis, not to sell the Smith & Wesson weapons?

[*Paul Paradis said that his store no longer sold Smith & Wessons, and he also noted that the agreement involved more ATF inspections.*]

Mr. Brokaw. Why do you think that selling Smith & Wesson weapons would bring more ATF inspections?

Mr. Paradis. It's one of the things that dealers have to do. There's a number of other things. I carry over 400, 500 guns in my store.

Mr. Brokaw. Right.

Mr. Paradis. One of the things that they were requiring us to do is remove every gun from the shelf and lock it up in a safe every night. Well, you take two employees, me and my wife, usually, to spend a couple of hours unpacking and putting guns up and next morning taking them out; that's a lot of money lost.

You know, the States, a short time ago, were very upset about Federal unfunded mandates. Now, it's businesses, especially small businesses like mine, that are receiving Federal unfunded mandates.

Mr. Brokaw. Do you have an answer to that, Mr. President?

The President. Well, I think what Smith & Wesson agreed to do, though—and they kind of initiated a lot of this—was to try to make sure that if a gun store was broken into at night, that it would be harder to steal the guns, and if you left them all out in full view, that it would be. But I can see—it's obviously some burden on them. It's an extra lot of trouble for 2 people to store 400 guns. But again you have to ask yourself, on balance, is this a good requirement if these stores might be broken into?

Mr. Brokaw. I think a lot of people in America probably don't realize that most gun manufacturers are now shipping their guns with trigger locks.

The President. They are. They've been great.

Mr. Brokaw. Are they getting enough credit?

The President. No. But I've tried to give them credit. You know, we've had at least two events at the White House to compliment and thank the manufacturers who are putting trigger locks on their guns when they ship them now, the new guns. And there are, I think, even—there are some people I think out here that are even providing trigger locks to people that can be applied to guns that they already have. And all this is good. We should do more of it.

Mr. Brokaw. We have one quick question. I'm sorry, it's going to have to be very quick.

Q. I am a sophomore here at DU. How many laws were broken last April 20th at Columbine, and why do you think one more will make a difference?

Mr. Brokaw. I think there were 18 broken, if I can help you with that, Mr. President. [*Laughter*] Is that right?

The President. Well, as I said—let me go back to Columbine. If you look at the troubled history of those young men, no one can be sure that anybody could have done anything in law enforcement to stop it. And you all know the facts better than I do. You must have all asked yourself a thousand questions about whether anybody, including any of their classmates, should have known, could have known, could have done something. But the main thing is you shouldn't evaluate these proposals solely in terms of Columbine. What you should say is, would it make a difference?

Why do I think one more will make a difference? Because if you close the gun show loophole, then all gun sales will be subject to the same background checks the Brady bill imposes on gun dealers today, which has resulted in a half-million felons, fugitives, and stalkers not getting handguns. And the gun crime rate today is 35 percent lower than it was 7 years ago. That's my argument.

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, thank you very much.

The President. Thank you.

Mr. Brokaw. On behalf of NBC News and MSNBC, I certainly appreciate this attentive and very articulate audience, and especially the President of the United States to take time out of his busy schedule to address this issue that, clearly, so deeply divides so many Americans. But I hope that with this dialog here today and many others like this in the course of the coming months in Colorado and across the country, we can take that one step toward some common ground.

This, after all, is a debate about much more than just gun safety, gun laws; it's about who we are and what we want our children to think of us in the future. Thank you all very much for joining us here today.

[*Following a commercial break, Mr Brokaw invited the President to make further remarks.*]

The President. I think this country would make better decisions across the whole range of issues if we could all find a way to give each other forums like this, because I have seen repeatedly how, on this gun issue, each side—once one side strikes a personal blow, then the other one wants to strike a personal blow back. And before you know it, we're all into demonizing each other, which is—it may make for good television—no offense—[*laughter*]—but it makes for bad decisions.

We're not talking about—there's no need in us demonizing each other. And I think we have to recognize that most of the advocates of strong gun control and most of the advocates—opponents of it really come out of different cultures and have different experiences which lead them to the positions they

hold. And what we've got to do—I've spent a lot of time, since I came out of—basically out of the hunting and sport shooting culture, I've spent a lot of time explaining to the people on my side of this why the people on the other side think the way they do and argue the way they do and feel the way they do. And I think it's important that we try to minimize calling each other names, and try to hear what each other is saying. And I thought the gentleman who is the gun dealer today made some particularly cogent points. And I appreciate what you said.

And I also want to say, not every problem has an easy answer. I don't have an answer to what the gentleman up there said, that he quit using Smith & Wesson guns because he and his wife didn't want to spend 2 hours every night that they didn't have running their small business to load up 400, 500 guns. There's not an easy answer to every one of these things.

But we'll get through this, and we can make this the safest big country in the world if we keep listening to each other and dealing with each other respectfully, the way all of you have today. And I just want to thank you. And I want to thank all the officials who came here today for the role they played in this.

Thank you.

NOTE: The townhall meeting began at 1 p.m. at the University of Denver. In his remarks, the President referred to Gov. Bill F. Owens and State Attorney General Kenneth Salazar of Colorado; and Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Statement on the America's Private Investment Companies Initiative

April 12, 2000

Last fall in Chicago, Speaker Hastert and I agreed to work together on a bipartisan legislative initiative to bring new private investment to America's economically disadvantaged communities. Today I am pleased to report that we have made some progress on that pledge. Passage of the APIC's initiative by the House Banking and Financial Services Committee represents the first crucial step in this bipartisan effort. America's Private Investment Companies (APIC's) will spur as much as $1.5 billion in new private investment in new markets across America. They represent a smart, innovative way to help ensure that all communities share in America's economic prosperity.

I would like to thank Representatives LaFalce, Leach, Lazio, Kanjorski, and Baker for their leadership in moving this legislation forward. I look forward to continue working with Congress on comprehensive legislation to help renew America's communities and tap into the full potential of our new markets this year.

Statement on Organ Donation Legislation

April 12, 2000

I am pleased by Senator Frist and Senator Kennedy's announcement that they have reached a compromise on legislation that moves our Nation forward to promote greater equity and effectiveness in the allocation of our Nation's organ supply. This compromise takes a first step towards ensuring that those Americans most in need of receiving these life-saving resources will be able to better access them. At the same time, we must redouble our efforts to encourage voluntary donation by all Americans.

Proclamation 7291—National D.A.R.E. Day, 2000

April 12, 2000

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Children face many challenges in today's complex society. Peer pressure to abuse drugs and alcohol; negative influences in films, music, television, and videos; school violence; gang activities; fear and low self-esteem—any or all of these pressures can lead young people to make unwise choices that can jeopardize their future and even their lives. Since 1983, however, there has been a strong positive influence in the lives of America's children that is helping them to navigate safely through these dangers and