

“Gun violence: What Are We Going To Do About It?”

Remarks of Paul Helmke
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Thank you very much for inviting me here today.

Thirty-two people were murdered at Virginia Tech.

That number, in and of itself, was not extraordinary. Every day in our country, on average, about thirty-two people are murdered with guns. When you add suicides and unintentional shootings, the death toll from guns in America each day is about eighty people. And for every death there are another two or three seriously injured.

Since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while about thirty-seven hundred of our soldiers have died overseas, over one hundred and sixty two thousand of our citizens have died from gunfire here at home. The stories of these daily deaths are generally relegated to the inside pages of the local newspaper, if they are covered at all, and almost no one takes the time to think about how these lives could have been saved.

The stories come too frequently, and their volume brings a sense of inevitability and hopelessness about the toll of guns in America.

The gun epidemic is our monthly 9-11, our weekly Katrina, a continuing Iraq war on our streets and in our schools. It is our daily Virginia Tech. Yet we don't focus on this threat until we get a Virginia Tech.

And then we allow our political leaders to slowly and deliberately delay, until we are all busy with other challenges. And then our leaders let us down, content that we're no longer paying attention.

To say that we are sorry that these shootings happened is not enough. We should be ashamed –all of us should be ashamed that we have allowed this to happen. We must all say to the victims at Virginia Tech and their families, and to the families of gun violence victims every day: we have failed you. All of us. We can do better.

To a world community in which citizens generally accept reasonable restrictions on gun ownership, the massacre seemed both horrific and unsurprising. The rest of the industrialized world, after all, has figured out how to respond. After dangerous people used guns to kill people, these countries decided that they should keep dangerous people from getting guns. And guess what? Gun restrictions work.

More people are murdered with guns every day in America than in a year in England. We suffer as many gun deaths every sixteen hours as the Virginia Tech killer's native country, South Korea, suffers in a year.

Americans are not more violent than everyone else. We are not more criminal. We are not more mentally disturbed or dangerous. Our movies and video games and music may be too violent, but they aren't much different than those in other countries. Every industrialized country has people who are dangerous, disturbed, distraught, and depressed. But only in America do they have such easy access to guns – and extraordinary firepower at that.

After the Virginia Tech shootings, opinion leaders and politicians around the world – our friends and allies – begged us to take notice and change our ways.

The *Times of London* editorialized: "It's so familiar you could write the script yourself. Only the names change – Jonesboro, Columbine, Lancaster County and now Virginia Tech. The simple truth is that Americans themselves remain unwilling to take drastic measures to restrict gun availability."

The response was the same in Russia, India, Spain, and elsewhere. Australia's conservative prime minister, John Howard, was most pointed: "We took action to limit the availability of guns and we showed a national resolve that the gun culture that is such a negative in the United States would never become a negative in our country."

Hearing that legitimate, searing criticism of our country puts me at a loss for words. How do we defend our insane policies towards guns?

Some have suggested that Virginia Tech is a wake up call. But consider all of our previous wake-up calls:

- When a sixteen year old shot nine students, killing two, at a Pearl, Mississippi school in October 1997, that was a wake-up call.
- When a fourteen year old shot eight students, killing three, at a school in West Paducah, Kentucky in December 1997, that was a wake-up call.
- When an eleven year old and a thirteen year old killed five at their Jonesboro, Arkansas school in March 1998, that was a wake-up call.
- The school shootings at Edinboro, Pennsylvania, and Springfield, Oregon, and Lake Worth, Florida, and the six year old who killed his classmate at a Michigan elementary school, and the school shooting at Essex, Vermont – they were all wake-up calls.
- And Columbine. And Red Lake. And just six months ago, the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines. Children throughout the country gunned down in their schools. These were all wake up calls.

How about the workplace shootings? A man with an AK-47 killing four in Orange County, California. A fired worker shooting seven, killing four, in Aikens County, Georgia. An accountant killing four in Newington, Connecticut. A driver killing three in Pelham, Alabama. A day trader in Atlanta, Georgia, killing 12, then himself. The shooting at the Johnson Space Center just days after Virginia Tech. Working people gunned down in their jobs. All wake up calls.

And then there were the Washington, D.C. sniper shootings that terrorized the nation's Capital for weeks with the threat of gunfire. We recall those ordinary moments that turned out to be the victims' last: a trip to Home Depot, mowing a lawn, or preparing to drive a bus. Some of you remember living under the threat of the snipers' guns, living as if in a war zone. That wasn't enough of a wake-up call.

And these lists are not comprehensive; there isn't time to list them all. The assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the attempts on Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt and Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan were certainly wake-up calls, and some even led to the short list of Federal gun laws we have.

So the alarms have been relentless, but our response, again and again, has been to hit the snooze button.

There is no more need for a wake-up call. The need now is for action.

I'm reminded of the bumper sticker: "If you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention." At moments like this, we're all paying attention. We're wide-awake. We're outraged. At moments like this, change can happen.

How do we go about this change?

As in a twelve-step program, the first step is to admit we have a problem. Our problem is the insane gun policies we have in this country, policies that enabled the Virginia Tech killer to obtain the means to kill – and that enable so many other dangerous people to obtain guns each and every day.

Is "insane" too strong a word to describe our current gun policies? Let's analyze where we are now:

In almost every state there is no limit on the number of guns you can buy in a single purchase; purchases of multiple guns, whether one hundred or one thousand or more, do require another form notifying ATF, but the guns are sold, and no additional questions are asked about why someone wants an arsenal. Where do you think these weapons end up? Isn't it obvious why it is so easy for gang members to get guns on the street?

In most states, a felon or other person prohibited from buying guns can simply go to a gun show to an unlicensed seller, and buy any and all the guns he wants, with no identification or background check, no questions asked.

Recall that the guns used by the killers at Columbine were bought from unlicensed sellers at gun shows. The teenaged girl who bought three of the killers' guns said she wouldn't have bought them if she would have had to show an ID or do the legal paperwork. Yet here we are, eight years later, and we have done nothing to stop these unchecked, "off the books" gun sales by unlicensed sellers.

Uzis, AK-47s, fifty round magazines, and all manner of military hardware are wholly legal for civilians to purchase under federal law. Even fifty caliber sniper rifles that can shoot down airplanes and have a range of over a mile are available to anyone who can buy a rifle. No permits. No licenses. No wait.

Yet just two years ago, Congress and the President let the ban on high capacity magazines and assault weapons lapse. Law enforcement around the country stood up for the ban; they knew first-hand that these were tools of war, only useful to civilians for large-scale offensive assaults.

Then what happens? These high capacity magazines are apparently used by the Virginia Tech killer in just that sort of mass assault.

And from those unlicensed sellers at gun shows and elsewhere, that military hardware is available to felons, the mentally ill and dangerous individuals.

Suspected terrorists who are deemed too dangerous to fly on airplanes are allowed to buy all the guns they desire from any dealer.

After 9-11, the attorney general would not let the FBI see if suspected terrorists had purchased guns. Law enforcement can no longer check approved gun sales records, as most are destroyed within 24 hours. But the government can search library records to see what books a school kid has borrowed.

We used to get data that showed what types of guns were used in crime and where they came from. We learned that about one percent of gun dealers were responsible for selling almost 60 percent of all crime guns. But now Congress makes that data secret. The police are prevented from finding out about the corrupt gun dealers who flood their cities' streets with guns.

A bartender can be liable for serving too much beer to a patron who drives, but gun dealers who sell hundreds of guns to traffickers or terrorists are shielded from civil liability.

Is "insane" too strong a word to describe our weak gun laws?

Even the few laws we have are not adequately administered and enforced. The Virginia Tech killer was barred by Federal law from buying guns because he was adjudicated mentally ill and dangerous. But Virginia, like most states, didn't send the court orders about his mental health to the police, so he could simply lie and buy.

As a result, even our schools, that should be sanctuaries for our children, have been invaded by gun violence.

We must make our classrooms safe, and we should make our communities as safe as we would like our classrooms to be.

What are we going to do about this?

Here are three things we can do:

Number One – Comprehensively and effectively apply the Brady background check system, so no one who we want to prohibit from buying guns can legally buy one.

Effective background checks would have stopped the Virginia Tech killer from buying his guns.

Number Two – Reduce access to weaponry that is not for sport and not for self-defense.

Had Congress and the President not allowed the assault weapons ban to expire, the killer may not have been able to obtain the high-capacity magazines he used in his assault.

Number Three – Give our police and Federal law enforcement the tools and resources they need to fight gun crimes, including illegal gun trafficking and corrupt gun dealers.

This should include a focus on new technologies, such as microstamping and other ballistic identification systems, which might have allowed authorities to identify the Virginia Tech shooter earlier, before his second, most deadly, rampage.

Specific proposals to reduce gun violence that flow from these three general recommendations are on your tables and on our website.

There are other things that we, at the Brady Campaign and Brady Center, working with our Million Mom March Chapters and state allies, are going to do.

We intend to hold our political leaders accountable if they fail to take action, Democrats and Republicans alike.

We offered fair and principled criticism of the Republican controlled Congress for weakening America's gun laws over the past six years. We intend to be equally critical of the new Democratic Congress if they choose to ignore this crisis.

We will provide expert advice to state governments who want to strengthen their responses to gun violence. Virginia's leaders are taking steps to prevent individuals who have been adjudicated as dangerous because of mental illness from being approved for a gun purchase, and we are helping them determine how to do so. We are willing to give the same level of constructive assistance to every state of the union.

We are also setting up a website for Americans to answer what they are going to do to stop the gun violence: www.vidivoice.com.

You can tape your video right outside as you leave this luncheon, and we will post it online. Others can upload their personal videos to the site. Instructions will be available at our website: www.bradycampaign.org.

Gun violence prevention should not be controversial. The overwhelming majority of Americans believe that gun violence is a huge problem.

And most Americans believe that guns are too easily available to dangerous people. Most Americans believe that we should have tougher gun laws. Most Americans, including most gun owners, support the policy proposals I've suggested.

A small, vocal minority says that more guns are the solution, not the problem. To them I say: we have tried that.

We have tried a system where guns are easily available. We have tried a system where any felon or dangerous mental patient can buy the guns he wants from an unlicensed seller. We have tried a regime of easy access to assault weapons, and limitless gun sales. The result has been almost thirty thousand dead each year. What we are doing now isn't working.

We can do better.

What we need is outrage – sustained outrage.

Most Americans understand the problem, and they understand the solutions we need. Most people don't see why a felon or mentally ill person who is barred from buying guns can go to a gun show or respond to a classified ad and buy guns, no questions asked. Most people understand why a gun trafficker or gang member might want to buy ten or twenty guns at a time, but they don't see why a legitimate gun owner can't make do with some reasonable limits on the number of handguns you can purchase at one time.

What we need is vigilance – an insistence that we keep fighting for the safety of our children and families here at home, even after the news cycle turns back to the war abroad, the presidential horse race, or the latest celebrity scandal.

What we need is participation, from all sectors of society. In recent years, the business community has risen to fight efforts to force guns into the workplace. The educational community has fought to keep guns out of schools. They and others need to join in our national effort to bring common sense to the issue of guns.

What we need is hope – a belief that the epidemic of American gun violence can be solved, and that America is not fated to lose thirty thousand people to guns every year.

We need a national conversation about our gun problem. We need to ask elected officials and each other: what are you going to do about it?

I would suggest that all Americans have the responsibility to join this national conversation, and become part of the solution to the gun violence problem.

Gun owners need to join this conversation. Almost all gun owners are reasonable, decent Americans, and I believe they're willing to put up with minor inconveniences like a background check if this will stop guns from getting into the wrong hands. We all endure security lines and metal detectors. We recognize that speed limits apply to the Jeff Gordons and the Paul Helmkes alike, regardless of who can safely negotiate a ninety mile per hour turn.

We should all be willing to endure a little red tape if it helps reduce the amount of yellow tape – at crime scenes – in this country.

Doing something about gun violence will benefit every one of us. Last week, the NRA's chief, Wayne La Pierre, was quoted as follows: "We just don't think it's really gun control to try to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally defective." I guess it depends on what the definition of "gun control" is, but I'm encouraged to see Mr. LaPierre agree that we should do more to prevent the wrong people from getting guns.

I am publicly reaching out to Mr. La Pierre and the NRA. Let's set aside past attacks and sit down to see if we can find common ground on some steps to make our communities safer.

Since Virginia Tech, both the NRA and the Bush Administration have signaled publicly their willingness to support some new common-sense measures to make guns less easily available to dangerous people. Let's sit down and directly address these issues. Let's do this now.

There will be passionate voices opposing any step forward. They will change the subject, urge delay, impugn motives, call names, and complicate attempts to reach agreement.

But we must act. We can do better. We can't be a shining city on a hill when we're an armed camp. We want an America where children are free to go to school without fear of being shot, parents are free to go to work without fear of a shooting, and neighbors can stand on the sidewalk and talk without fear of a drive-by.

Too many of our neighbors are suffering that same pain experienced by the Virginia Tech victims and families every day.

Thirty-two times a day.

What are we going to do about it?

Thank you very much.

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