

From Grief to Action

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Gun violence is a tragic, pervasive part of American life. Assassins' bullets have felled presidents and national icons. Americans are 20 times more likely to be killed by a gun than residents of other developed countries. Even those who had grown numb to the everyday carnage were shaken last month by the unthinkable murder of the most innocent of innocents—young children in their classrooms. In the weeks since the tragedy in Newtown, Conn., more than 900 people in the United States have died from gun violence. This must end.

Tomorrow, America will honor and mourn a great man whose life was cut short by a bullet. And we will inaugurate a president committed to curbing gun violence through commonsense measures. Yet, in the decades since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and in the wake of the shooting deaths at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the gun lobby—which is not synonymous with responsible gun owners—has vigorously fought virtually every attempt to reduce gun violence. While the gun lobby may be doubling down, there is widespread public support for many gun safety measures, even among gun owners.

There is a recognition that Second Amendment rights, like First Amendment and other rights, come with responsibilities and limitations. There is no reason both sides of the gun debate can't support policies that both protect the right to legally own guns for sport and safety, and reduce the likelihood of mass fatalities.

After the shootings in Newtown, I spent time with educators who were in Sandy Hook Elementary School that day. They, and their colleagues who died or were injured as they protected their students, are remarkable heroes. Think about the teacher who sheltered her students in a closet with only her body and a thin door between them and the shooter. And just last week,

after another school shooting, we learned that a teacher and a guidance counselor bravely talked an armed student into putting his weapon down. That's who teachers and school staff are, and we owe it to our children and those who care for them to ensure our schools and communities are safe havens.

Just how to create these safe havens is open to discussion. The AFT has suggested ways not only to reduce gun violence, but also to create and maintain safe, secure and nurturing school environments and to increase access to mental health services. Some schools have trained security personnel as part of their safety plans, and others may follow suit. Many schools desperately need caring professionals like guidance

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counselors and social workers to ensure students' emotional, social and educational needs are met. But proposals to arm teachers are irresponsible and dangerous. The role of educators is to teach and nurture

our children, not to be armed guards.

How can we best honor the legacy of nonviolence of Martin Luther King Jr.? How can we pay tribute to the children of Sandy Hook Elementary, who had only just begun to live their lives, and to the countless young people gunned down every day by senseless and heartbreaking violence? Commonsense steps such as those taken this week by President Obama will help fulfill what Vice President Biden calls our "moral obligation" to address gun violence.

Sandy Hook Promise, a group of Newtown residents including some who lost family members in the school shooting rampage, called this past week for a national dialogue on guns, mental health and public safety. Their mission statement is a series of promises, including the promise to do everything in their power to be remembered not as a town filled with grief and victims, but as a place where real change began. The National Rifle Association, rather than airing repugnant commercials invoking the president's children, should take a page from these Sandy Hook residents.

The real change we seek must come swiftly. A child or teen dies from guns every three hours in America. We ask the 113th Congress to act posthaste and send legislation to curb gun violence to President Obama, whose signature would mark a defining achievement of his presidency and of our time.



White roses with the faces of victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting are displayed on a telephone pole near the school.

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