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13 Days Later: A Tale of Two Countries (Reprise)

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence
February 27, 2017

Note: If you've been reading my president's messages on a regular basis, the title of this message will be familiar. I used the same title after the October 1, 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas in which 58 people were killed and 422 were wounded. I'm going to keep re-using this title until there's a different ending to the tale of gun violence in the United States of America.

At the time of my writing this message, it's been **13 days** since 19 year old Nikolas Cruz shot and killed 17 students and staff and wounded 14 others with an AR-15 assault rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, Florida.¹ The school has an armed police officer stationed at the school at all times² and is located in one of our countries "safest cities,"³ in a school district that is at the "cutting edge" of preparedness for a mass shooting.⁴ In the seven years preceding the mass shooting at MSD High School, there had been at least 239 other school shootings in our country in which at least 138 students and staff were killed.⁵ If you include not just school shootings, over this same time period there have been 30 mass shootings (defined as a single shooting incident with five or more fatalities) in the United States in which 346 people have been killed.⁶

Following the MSD mass shooting, there's been a public outcry, led by high school students who survived the shooting, for the adoption of gun control laws that will prevent future school shootings.⁷ Six days after the shooting, though, the Florida State legislature voted 71 to 36 against a bill to ban the new sale of assault rifles,⁸ and at the time of this writing, it appears that there is little chance that even the most limited gun control legislation will be passed by Congress.

The tale of what occurred 13 days after a mass shooting in another English speaking high income democratic country has a very different ending.

In April of 1996, a lone gunman killed 35 people and wounded 23 others with a semi-automatic rifle and self-loading shotgun in the Australian resort town of Port Arthur.⁹ In the seven years before the Port Arthur massacre, there had been six mass shootings in Australia (defined as a single shooting incident with five or more fatalities) in which a total of 40 people had been killed.¹⁰ Within **13 days** of the Port Arthur massacre, the Australian government agreed to ban all semi-automatic rifles and self-loading shotguns. Approximately 1 million weapons were

subsequently surrendered by Australian gun owners in return for financial compensation, and the weapons were melted down.

Australia already had stringent handgun laws at the time of the Port Arthur massacre. Since the enactment of the ban on semi-automatic rifles and self-loading shotguns, there have been no further mass shootings in Australia.¹¹ From 1996 to 2012, the rate of gun homicide in Australia dropped from one fifteenth the US gun homicide rate to one twenty-seventh the US rate, and there has been no increase in homicides committed by other means.¹²

The United States has by far the most lax gun control laws of any high income democratic country in the world.¹³ As a result, the United States also has by far the highest number of guns per capita.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that the United States also has by far the highest rate of gun violence of any high income democratic country of the world,¹⁵ that youth ages 15-19 in the United States are 82 times more likely to be murdered with guns than youth in other high income democratic countries,¹⁶ or that the United States is the only high income democratic country in the world in which mass shootings, including mass shootings on school campuses, occur on a regular basis.¹⁷ And there is no mystery as to what we need to do to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country. We need to adopt the same kind of stringent gun control laws that have long been present in Australia and every other high income democratic country. As the late Senator Thomas Dodd stated in 1968:

Pious condolences will no longer suffice. Quarter measures and half measures will no longer suffice. The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world.¹⁸

Since Senator Dodd issued this statement 50 years ago, more US civilians have been killed by guns than all the US soldiers killed in all the wars in which the United States has ever been involved.¹⁹

Gun violence in the United States of America is a national disgrace. Donald Trump, who dodged the draft during the Vietnam War by claiming that he had "heel spurs,"²⁰ implied that the armed police officer at MSD high school who failed to enter the building in which the shooting was occurring was "a coward."²¹ But we as a society bear a collective shame for our failure to stand up to the gun lobby long ago and take the steps necessary to prevent this and other mass shootings from ever occurring in the first place.

Please contact your state and federal elected leaders and let them know that you expect them to openly advocate and do everything within their power to urgently enact the same kinds of stringent gun control laws that Australia adopted within just 13 days after the 1996 Port Arthur massacre and that have long been in place in every other high income democratic country of the world.

At the time of my writing this message, Americans Against Gun Violence remains the only national organization in the United States that openly advocates the adoption of these kinds of definitive control measures. We do not oppose the much more limited measures advocated by other gun violence prevention organizations such as banning “bump stocks,” increasing the age for purchasing an assault rifle from 18 to 21, or even banning the new sales of assault rifles, but it’s naïve to believe that in a country with an estimated 350 million guns already in circulation²² such measures alone will be adequate to prevent future mass shootings, including shootings on school campuses, or to reduce overall rates of gun in the United States to levels anywhere close to those in other high income democratic countries.

If you believe as we do that Americans have not only the ability, but also the moral responsibility, to reduce rates of firearm related deaths and injuries, including deaths and injuries to our children, to levels that are at or below those in the other high income democratic countries of the world, then please become a member of Americans Against Gun Violence, if you haven’t done so already done so, and please make an additional donation if you’re able. And please ask friends, family members, and colleagues to join us as well. Until we succeed in our goal of adopting stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in the other high income democratic countries of the world, when the next horrific mass shooting occurs, we shouldn’t ask ourselves why such tragedies continue to happen, but rather why we as a nation haven’t done everything within our power to prevent them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill".

Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician. Before becoming a doctor, he was an expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps and served in combat in the Vietnam War where he was decorated for “courage under fire.”

References

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