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**Gun Violence in America: A Preventable Epidemic**  
**Remarks by Josh Sugarmann, Executive Director, Violence Policy Center**

**Americans Against Gun Violence Annual Dinner held in conjunction with the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility Sunday, October 22, Sacramento, California.**

When Bill and I were discussing the title of my presentation tonight, we decided to make it fairly generic, agreeing that when the topic is gun violence, the sad reality is that you never know what type of horrific event could occur that would shape the discussion. And so here we are, three weeks after the worst mass shooting in modern American history. An attack that came less than a year and a half after the last “worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history” – the Pulse nightclub attack in Orlando, Florida. And who knows how many weeks or months before the next “worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history.”

And while these attacks – occurring with increasing frequency – capture the attention of the American public, however briefly, each year tens of thousands of Americans die in gun suicides, homicides, and unintentional shootings. More than 36,000 deaths in 2015 – with twice that number injured. The bread and butter of gun violence in America.

I have been in the gun violence prevention movement for nearly 35 years, founding the Violence Policy Center in 1988. Two objectives frame our work.

The first is approaching gun violence as a broad based public health, as opposed to solely a crime issue. This means looking at the full range of gun death – suicides, homicides, and unintentional shootings – and focusing on prevention, as opposed to punishment. At the same time, we do original research that reveals the impact of gun violence on all of our fellow citizens, looking at its impact on different strata of American society.

The second is looking behind the gun store counter to the industry that manufactures these lethal consumer products. All too often, I think we act as if guns grow on little trees in the back of gun stores. And to many on the pro-gun side, to characterize firearms as mere “consumer products” is almost to denigrate them. Yet like all consumer products, they are manufactured by an industry with design and marketing plans driven by a profit motive. The only difference is that guns are the only consumer product manufactured in the United States not regulated by a federal agency for health and safety. At one time, it was guns and tobacco. Now it’s just guns. At the Violence Policy Center, we work to apply the proven lessons of consumer product safety regulation to the gun industry and its products while holding the firearms industry accountable for its dangerous actions.

So the question I'm asking tonight is this. How did we get to Las Vegas and what is the most effective approach to reducing gun violence in our nation: from mass shootings to the daily violence that claims nearly 100 lives every day and traumatizes families, friends, and entire communities?

In the wake of the Las Vegas attack, one focus of the media has been on the shooter's motive. I would offer that it doesn't matter. He did it because he could. He did it because anyone with a fairly clean record and a credit card can legally assemble their own arsenal and build their own army in America. He did it because today's gun industry has embraced heightened lethality as its marketing lodestar with no concern for public safety.

Most people would be shocked at what today's gun industry has become. Six-shot revolvers and traditional hunting rifles and shotguns have been supplanted by high-capacity semiautomatic pistols and crossover military technology in the form of assault rifles, assault shotguns, and assault pistols as well as long-range 50 caliber sniper rifles. And when this crossover military technology is marketed, almost always the only difference between the guns sold to private citizens in the U.S. and carried on the field of battle by soldiers is that "civilian" models are semiautomatic, firing one bullet per trigger pull, while the true military weapons are select-fire, able to fire full-auto – firing rounds as long as the trigger is depressed. In the real world this is a distinction without a difference. These are guns specifically designed – purpose built – to kill as many people as possible in as short an amount of time as available. The single bloody thread that runs through all mass shootings is a semiautomatic firearm with the ability to accept a high-capacity detachable ammunition magazine.

What is driving the gun industry? The gun industry is increasingly desperate to sell more guns to repeat buyers. Household gun ownership has been on a steady decline since the 1970s. In 1977 more than half of all U.S. households had a gun. By 2014, this number had dropped to a third of U.S. households. The primary reason is that the traditional gun buying market of white males is dying off with, to borrow a phrase from the tobacco industry, no 'replacement shooters' to take their place. As a result, the industry has focused on reselling this market focusing on assault weapons and concealed carry handguns. At the same time, in the past two years, in addition to an ongoing and so far failed effort to significantly increase the number of female gun owners, they've launched an organized campaign targeting African Americans, Latinos, and children. Their goals are simple: future customers and political foot soldiers for the gun control battles that lie ahead.

How is the gun industry able to do this? As I noted earlier, guns are the only consumer product sold in the U.S. not regulated for health and safety. That means that unlike the Consumer Product Safety Commission and household products, the Food and Drug Administration and prescription drugs and medical devices, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and motor vehicles, when the issue is firearms, there is no federal agency to set standards, force design changes to protect public safety, recall defective products from the marketplace, or restrict the availability of products that present an unreasonable risk to public safety.

Guns, however, come under the limited control of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), which can only enforce the gun laws that are on the books. The bottom line is that under federal law, if you make a gun that is semiautomatic (firing one bullet per trigger pull), is 50 caliber or less, and, if it's a rifle or shotgun, has a barrel over a certain length, you can make anything you want. Anything.

And if you want to design and manufacture a device that allows a shooter to increase the rate of fire so that his semiautomatic gun mimics a full-auto machine gun, you can do that as well. In the wake of the Las Vegas massacre, the media focused on the bump-fire device used by the shooter. There are a variety of such devices on the market. A common question asked was, "How could this be legal?" The answer, once again, is that ATF is extremely limited in its powers and lacks the clear regulatory authority to restrict these devices.

This is why Senator Dianne Feinstein was forced to introduce a bill in Congress to ban these types of devices – language that was taken from her more comprehensive legislation to ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines. Congress should be addressing these two issues – assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines – right now. Unfortunately, because of the current make-up of Congress and the current occupant of the White House they lack political viability – even in the wake of Las Vegas.

The NRA, after following its usual post-shooting protocol of remaining silent except to issue self-serving platitudes that 'now is not the time to talk about gun control' was quick to point the finger of blame at ATF and the Obama administration, urging the agency to "regulate" this add-on component – knowing full well that it lacked the clear authority to do so. The NRA's self-righteous commentary is undermined by the fact that the leading bump-fire stock manufacturer, Slide Fire, was an exhibitor at the NRA's annual meeting earlier this year. In the company's promotional text in the NRA program it promised, "Our stocks allow the freedom of controlled rapid fire. Unleash the potential of your firearm with Slide Fire Solutions!"

Think about what would happen if we applied this cynical NRA and gun industry response "template" to other horrific events.

In the wake of a crash of a jumbo jet – now is not the time to talk about airline safety, but to grieve.

Or if a *fire* broke out at the Mandalay Bay hotel, killing and injuring the same number of victims – now is not the time to talk about fire safety, but to grieve.

For the NRA and gun industry to try and make us feel that it's somehow inappropriate or disrespectful to talk about policies to stop the next mass shooting in the wake of the most recent mass shooting is shameful and grotesque. To them, our job is to go place flowers and candles, keep quiet, and let business continue as usual.

Equally disturbing, however, is that in wake of a horrific gun attack, all too often our policymakers, our opinion leaders, the news media, and even some in the gun violence prevention movement, want to talk about everything except the guns themselves. All too often we try to identify some loophole to possibly close, some tweak to implement, or offer policy proposals the limitations of which are illustrated by the very incident to which they're being offered as a solution. I would submit that this runs the risk of seeming to support the mistaken belief – among an element of the public who are actually sympathetic to our goals – that “gun control” doesn't work.

It's a well worn and all-too-often applied cliché, but to paraphrase James Carville, “It's the guns, stupid.”

Other Western, industrialized nations have learned this lesson. Most of these nations have banned or severely restricted civilian access to handguns, the type of firearm most commonly used in gun death and firearms crime. In these nations mass shootings are rare, but they do happen. And when they do, the common response is not to engage in a detached discussion that avoids the real issues – let alone gives credence to the NRA's self-serving argument that the answer to gun violence is *even more guns* – but, recognizing the unique lethality of firearms, immediately undertake a policy analysis to identify measures to further restrict the tools that make such violence possible.

Two examples.

Port Arthur. After an Australian killed 35 people with a semiautomatic rifle in Port Arthur in 1996, the government: banned automatic and semiautomatic firearms; adopted new licensing requirements; established a national firearms registry; instituted a 28-day waiting period for gun purchases; and, bought and destroyed more than 600,000 civilian-owned firearms.

The number of mass shootings in Australia – defined as incidents in which a gunman killed five or more people other than himself – dropped from 13 in the 18-year period before 1996 to zero after the Port Arthur massacre. Between 1995 and 2006, gun-related homicides and suicides in the country dropped by 59 percent and 65 percent, respectively.

Dunblane. In 1996, in an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, 16 children and their teacher were shot and killed before the shooter killed himself. Following a government inquiry into how to address the issue, the United Kingdom: banned semi-automatic and pump-action firearms; introduced mandatory registration for shotgun owners; banned private handgun ownership in mainland Britain; and, launched a \$200 million buyback program, which led to the collection of 162,000 firearms.

We know it from other nations. We know it from our own nation, where states with the lowest rates of gun ownership have lower rates not just of gun death, gun homicide, and gun suicide, but because of the unique lethality of firearms, lower overall rates of suicide and homicide. The answer to reducing gun death and injury is restricting to the degree possible the sale and possession of handguns, assault weapons, and other military bred firearms.

When I first started in this issue in 1983 the focus was on handguns and the issue was do we ban handguns or put in a series of heightened controls to limit them to the “right” hands, essentially the law-abiding – despite what we know about the reality of homicide and the fact that most suicides aren’t planned, but depend on the lethality of means at hand. A popular slogan at the time was working to “keep handguns out of the wrong hands.” Yet, if you think about it, this slogan is merely a slight reinterpretation of the most popular pro-gun slogan “Guns Don’t Kill, People Do,” essentially “Guns Don’t Kill, *Bad* People Do.” I would argue: “Guns Kill.”

It’s now 2017 and for decades Americans have been told that a handgun ban is not realistic, the U.S. Supreme Court in a rogue decision has found that there is a constitutional right to own a handgun in the home for self defense, and some gun violence prevention organizations have even withheld support for legislation banning assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

But throughout this period, roughly a quarter of the American public still supports a handgun ban. A majority of Americans support a ban on assault weapons. In many ways, the American public is ahead of the gun violence prevention movement. They are ready to fight, if only we would choose to lead them into battle.

This is not an all or nothing, either/or proposition. There are many policy approaches that can aid us in reducing gun violence, but I would suggest that it makes little sense to ignore proven solutions for the sake of perceived political expediency.

Before I conclude I’d like to offer one final observation.

The gun industry is not static. Hand in glove with its financial partners in the NRA, it is constantly working to expand its product line, resell old markets, and expand to new ones. Right now one of the top federal priorities of the industry and gun lobby is removing firearm silencers from the tight restrictions contained in the National Firearms Act of 1934, which has strict purchase regimen that also applies to legal machine guns for civilian purchase. Their goal is to make firearm silencers as easy to purchase under federal law as a standard hunting rifle. In an argument that would be funny if it weren’t grotesque, they argue that easing silencer sales is a “public health” issue to protect the hearing of shooters – even though it’s acknowledged that shooters should still use hearing protection with “silenced” weapons.

As Donald Trump Jr., a leading voice for this effort, told the head of SilencerCo in a promotional video, one benefit of silencers was “getting little kids into the game, it greatly reduces recoil.” The reality is that it’s just the latest hoped-for profit center for the industry: not just selling attachable silencers, but creating a whole new class of weapon: firearms with integral silencers. This is despite the strong concerns voiced by law enforcement of the impact this would have on public safety. At the same time, passage of such a measure would be one more step toward what I believe is a long-term goal of the gun industry: renewing civilian access to new machine guns.

The second gun industry/NRA federal priority is federally mandated concealed carry. Under this proposed law, a person who gets a permit to carry a concealed, loaded handgun would be able to carry

that weapon in any state in the union as well as Washington, DC – regardless of whether or not the issuing standards of the permit holder’s home state were as stringent as those of the remaining 49. Essentially, the law makes the lowest common denominator the law of the land. To put it into perspective, California, which has relatively tight restrictions on the issuance of permits, would be held hostage to states that have virtually no restrictions beyond a minimum age and the lack of a felony conviction. The benefits to the NRA and the industry: a whole range of concealed carry handguns, training, clothing, and other accessories to be purchased.

The most recent example of this is the NRA’s Carry Guard program – a massive commercial effort in partnership with the gun industry focusing on concealed handgun permit holders including insurance, training, and product expos. Among the sponsors of the NRA’s inaugural NRA Carry Guard Expo held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin were Winchester, Daniel Defense, Kel Tec, Ruger, Kahr Arms, and Browning. And in May 2017, for the first time in its history, the president of the NRA is a member of the gun industry.

At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, the NRA and industry, following a trail blazed by the tobacco industry, are targeting African Americans, Latinos, and children. While the NRA acts as a *de facto* trade association for the industry, gunmakers do have an actual trade association, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, which in a grim irony is located in Newtown, Connecticut. NSSF is to the gun industry as The Tobacco Institute was to cigarette manufacturers. For example, NSSF has argued that hunting is safer than bowling as measured by injuries – if you don’t include fatalities. They’ve also attempted to rebrand assault rifles as “modern sporting rifles.” Each year NSSF holds a closed to the public industry summit. In 2015, the summit’s theme was “diversity,” with the head of the NSSF promising that the industry in its marketing efforts was no longer “stale, male, and pale.” This assertion is especially offensive when you recognize that throughout their history, both the NRA and the gun industry, implicitly and explicitly, have exploited the disproportionate impact of gun violence on communities of color in America’s cities as a fear-based means to means to sell guns to potential white buyers in the suburbs and rural America.

And this brings me to my final point. We have been held hostage for far too long to a fading industry and the cynical organizations that promote and protect it. Most Americans don’t own guns. And don’t want to. Two thirds of Americans live in gun free homes. The five million members the NRA claims represent only 1.5 percent of the American population. We are the majority. And we must make sure that our voice is heard. And that we are demanding policies that will work to reduce gun violence regardless of how popular or unpopular they may be.

That is our job as advocates.

Gun violence is at epidemic levels in the United States, and this epidemic is preventable. You and I know that, and this knowledge is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that we know how to stop the epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our nation. The curse is that when the next "worst mass shooting" occurs, we can't just shake our heads like so many others and wonder why these horrific tragedies keep occurring. Instead, we have to ask ourselves, are we doing everything within our own power to prevent them?

I applaud the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility, Americans Against Gun Violence, and all of you here tonight for being advocates, not just for so-called "common sense" firearm regulations, but for measures that strike at the heart of our nation's gun violence crisis: the easy access we allow almost anyone to categories of weapons, such as handguns and assault weapons, that should not be available on the civilian market .

Thank you for your attention tonight. Thank you for all that you've done in the past to not only curb the epidemic of gun violence in our country, but, as Harry and Bill have described, for the work you've done on so many other fronts, including the nuclear weapons issue. And thank you in advance for the work that I know that you'll continue to do in the future to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country, to rid the world of nuclear weapons, and to make the world a healthier, safer, and more just and peaceful place in so many other ways.