



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2026 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Winner

Gabriel Park

La Canada High School, La Canada Flintridge, California

Courage, Not Compromise

Dr. Michael North lost his five year old daughter, Sophie, in the 1996 mass shooting in Dunblane, Scotland, in which 15 other students and their teacher were also killed by a man who legally owned the handguns he used to commit the massacre. Britain already had a ban on what are referred to in our country as “assault rifles.” Following the Dunblane massacre, Dr. North helped lead the successful campaign to completely ban handguns in Britain. In a keynote address that Dr. North delivered at an Americans Against Gun Violence annual dinner in 2023, he made a statement that I can barely imagine.

Dr. North noted that following the Dunblane shooting, the ruling Conservative Party proposed a partial handgun ban “prohibiting high calibre handguns whilst still permitting .22 calibre weapons of the type used in Olympic Games shooting events.”¹ In the United States of America this would have seemed like a tremendous success because any reduction of the vast number of guns in private hands would be an enormous improvement in comparison to the situation we’re in. But Dr. North, fellow grieving Dunblane parents, and other British citizens who campaigned with him didn’t want to accept compromise as success. He explained:

“Only a complete ban on handguns was going to work as a long-term solution. We were not prepared to accept the Conservative government’s halfway house measure.”²

I didn’t realize until I read those words how much the United States has been accepting “halfway house” measures. We’ve been doing this for at least over half a century, compromising, letting U.S. residents, including children and youth, die of preventable gunshot wounds while being able to say to ourselves, “At least we compromised.” This is not success.

It took until the Gun Control Act of 1968 for the U.S. government to ban the sale of guns through the mail like the one that Lee Harvey Oswald bought through an ad in the NRA's *Rifleman* magazine to assassinate President John F. Kennedy.³ But compromise: the guns are still sold. Fifty-four years later, on June 25, 2022, after the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde Texas, in which 19 children and two teachers were killed by an 18 year old former student, President Biden signed what was hailed as "the most sweeping gun reform bill in decades,"⁴ the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The main components of the Act were to give the FBI up to 10 days to perform background checks on 18-20 year old prospective gun purchasers instead of doing them instantly by computer as in the case of older gun buyers; provide token amounts of increased funding for mental health services, school security, and "Red Flag" programs; and add boyfriends, not just spouses, to the list of convicted domestic violence abusers prohibited from owning guns.⁵ But compromise: background checks are only done on gun sales that go through federally licensed firearm dealers; most mass shooters, including 18-20 year olds, are still able to purchase guns legally;⁶ under "Red Flag" laws, police must go through cumbersome legal steps to temporarily remove guns from even the most unstable gun owners; and most domestic violence goes unreported. Compromise across decades, compromise that feels like a win, compromise that drowns out the need for courage. The British could see the waste of endless compromise, why can't we?

Since I graduated from grade school, more than 44,000 people have died of gunshot wounds every year in the United States.⁷ Do we compromise over this? Our country's rate of gun-related homicides for all ages combined is 25 times higher than the average for other high income democratic countries,⁸ and our rate of gun-related homicide for high school age youth is 82 times higher.⁹ Still worth the compromise? Since 1968, more U.S. civilians have died of gunshot wounds than all the U.S. soldiers killed by any means in all the wars in which our country has ever been involved.¹⁰ Compromise again?

This is what our constant compromising costs us. Tens of thousands of lives lost every year to preventable gun violence. And my generation is forced to participate in the biggest compromise of all: students like me, members of the "lockdown" generation. I've done drills. I've watched my teacher try to hide behind a podium desk only to have it fall over and make everyone laugh. I've seen that, and I've laughed too, forgetting that hiding behind desks was the best compromise our government could come up with to protect us from a school shooter.

But we're laughing because this whole situation lacks sense. Rather than keep this normal, so normal that it reaches the point of absurd humor, we must do better by being better. Rather than compromise, we must follow the example of Dr. North and his British colleagues and have the courage to demand that our government enact stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in Britain, including complete bans on civilian ownership of handguns and assault rifles, with no exceptions.

References

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² North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 9.

³ *Gun Control Act of 1968, Public Law 90-618*, 1968

⁴ Will Weissert, "Biden Signs Most Sweeping Gun Reform Bill in Decades," PBS News, June 25, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-signs-most-sweeping-gun-reform-bill-in-decades>.

⁵ Text - S.2938 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (2022), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2938/text>.

⁶ Glenn Thrush, "What Do Most Mass Shooters Have in Common? They Bought Their Guns Legally.," U.S., *The New York Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/politics/legal-gun-purchase-mass-shooting.html>.

⁷ "Fatal Injury Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed June 1, 2026, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.

⁸ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, "Violent Death Rates in the US Compared to Those of the Other High-Income Countries, 2015," *Preventive Medicine* 123 (June 2019): 20–26.

⁹ Ashish P. Thakrar et al., "Child Mortality In The US And 19 OECD Comparator Nations: A 50-Year Time-Trend Analysis," *Health Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2018): 140–49, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0767>.

¹⁰ Louis Jacobson, "More Americans Killed by Guns since 1968 than in All U.S. Wars, Columnist Nicholas Kristof Writes," @politifact, August 27, 2015, <http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/aug/27/nicholas-kristof/more-americans-killed-guns-1968-all-wars-says-colu/>.