

Our Turn to say 'No More'

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 06 February 2013 00:00



This is an important conversation for our children, for our communities, for Democrats and Republicans. Speaking is difficult but I need to say something important. Violence is a big problem. Too many children are dying. Too many children. We must do something. It will be hard. But the time is now. You must act. Be bold. Be courageous. Americans are counting on you. - **Statement of former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords to the Senate Judiciary Committee on January 30, 2013**

At the January 30 Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on gun violence, former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, the survivor of a gunshot to the head, gave us our marching orders. The United States stands alone in the world in our tolerance of gun violence but in the wake of the devastating Newtown, Conn. murders, a powerful outcry of ordinary Americans across the country is saying no more. This time we want our collective heartbreak and outrage to be followed by real change.

How have people in other countries responded after a gun massacre or mass shooting?

Australia and Great Britain provide two examples. In 1996, 35 people were killed and 23 others were wounded by a gunman at the Port Arthur tourist site in Tasmania, Australia, in one of the largest massacres ever committed by a single shooter. Within 12 days of the shooting, spurred by strong public support, the Australian federal and state governments agreed to the historic National Firearms Agreement (NFA), which banned semi-automatic and pump action rifles and shotguns and required registration of all firearms, strict standards for gun licenses, and a permit for each gun purchase subject to a 28-day waiting period. The NFA also prohibited private

Our Turn to say 'No More'

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 06 February 2013 00:00

sales, regulated ammunition sales, and required licensees to receive firearm safety training and to store firearms safely. To get banned rifles and shotguns off the streets, the federal government bought back or accepted turn-ins of more than 1 million guns which were then destroyed.

The National Firearms Agreement was supported by a coalition of groups from across the political spectrum, including women's organizations, seniors, religious leaders, police, parents, human rights organizations and schools, all demanding stronger gun violence laws in Australia. In the 18 years before the NFA there were 13 mass shootings in Australia. In the 16 years since, Australia has not had a single mass shooting. Rates of overall gun deaths, gun homicides, and gun suicides, which were declining prior to the NFA, started declining twice as fast after the reforms.

Just weeks before the Port Arthur massacre in Australia, 16 5- and 6-year-olds and their teacher were killed in a devastating school shooting in Dunblane, Scotland. After those murders the public outcry in Great Britain was very similar to the one we are seeing in the U.S. right now. The shooter owned his guns legally and the outrage over his crime started a public campaign for tighter gun control culminating in a petition being handed to the government with more than 700,000 signatures. A 1987 mass shooting by a man who killed 16 people and wounded 15 others had already led Great Britain to ban semi-automatic and pump action rifles and shotguns. This time, 11 months after the Dunblane murders, Great Britain passed the Firearm (Amendment) Act of 1997 instituting tighter controls over handguns. Soon after, the country went a step further and prohibited all handguns in civilian hands. The government also instituted firearm amnesties across the country resulting in the surrender of thousands of firearms and rounds of ammunition.

After Great Britain acted, gun-related crimes continued to rise for a while, following a trend that began earlier in the decade. Experts said it was inevitable that criminals were not going to surrender their illegal handguns and it took time to reduce the pool of illegal handguns after the ban and see declines in gun-related crimes. But after peaking in 2003 and 2004, the total number of firearm offenses has fallen every year since. In 2009, nearly 67 percent of U.S. homicides were committed with guns while in Great Britain the number was only 6.6 percent. In 2010, 27 people were killed by gun homicide in the United Kingdom, which includes both Great Britain and Northern Ireland and has a population of more than 62 million people. In California and Texas, with a similar combined population of 62 million people, there were 2,255 gun homicides. What a difference guns make.

Some will argue that other factors contribute to the lower gun violence rates in Australia, Great

Our Turn to say 'No More'

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 06 February 2013 00:00

Britain, and similar countries beyond their strong gun control legislation. Others note that the United States is a very different place, with entrenched attitudes equating guns with personal freedom, tens of millions more people, and tens of millions more guns, and we may never be able to expect the same success reducing the number of gun murders to near zero. These points may have some merit but are not reasons to dismiss anything other countries may be getting right in favor of continuing to do nothing new here.

In both Australia and Great Britain extraordinary tragedies pushed a groundswell of citizens to stand up and say no more and elected officials to follow through with significant action. If Americans had said no more after Columbine, there may never have been a Virginia Tech. If we had said no more after Virginia Tech, there may never have been a Tucson. If we had said no more after Tucson, there may never have been an Aurora. If we had said no more after Aurora, there may never have been a Newtown, and maybe some of the more than 31,000 other American gun deaths that occur each year could have been prevented.

President Obama was correct when he said at the interfaith prayer vigil at Newtown High School that “no single law—no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society. But that can’t be an excuse for inaction. Surely, we can do better than this. If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town, from the grief that has visited Tucson, and Aurora, and Oak Creek, and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg before that—then surely we have an obligation to try.”

Let’s heed Gabby Giffords’ moving testimony to be bold, to be courageous, and to act now for our children’s sake.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children’s Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.