

The Fight to Protect Children from Guns is not Over

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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The United States Senate's failure to pass common sense gun safety measures – the Manchin-Toomey Amendment to expand background checks to keep guns away from underage or dangerous people, and amendments to ban assault weapons and high capacity magazines designed only to kill as many human beings as possible — is a moral failure of great magnitude.

Once again, the safety of children has been sacrificed by political leaders in service to the gun lobby. As Americans do we value guns more than the lives of children? Do we really want to continue to have political leaders who kowtow to the threats and money and half-truths of the gun lobby and who think their political jobs are more important than the right of children to live and learn and grow up in safety?

The fight to protect children, not guns is not over because:

Ninety percent of Americans want a universal background check. This includes 94 percent of North Dakota voters, 89 percent of Indiana voters, 89 percent of New Hampshire voters, 84 percent of Arkansas voters, and 79 percent of Montana voters—all states where at least one senator went against the will of their constituents and of the American people. Getting 90 percent of Americans to agree on anything is extremely difficult.

No one elected the National Rifle Association to be in charge of our children's and our nation's safety. We have elected federal, state, and local governments, a national defense department, and federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to perform this crucial function. The NRA represents less than 10 percent of gun owners and is a minority view. Their stance against universal background checks defies not only 90 percent of all Americans, but 88 percent of those with a gun in the household and 74 percent of the NRA's own membership. The NRA

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claims up to 5 million members but there are many more Americans who are not NRA members. We must lift our voices and use our votes to protect children over guns.

Lies and misinformation must not rule the day in a democratic society. The NRA claimed that the Manchin-Toomey Amendment would prevent people from transferring guns to relatives and lead to a gun registry. Neither is true. As co-sponsor Senator Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), an “A” rated NRA member, said: “That is simply a lie . . . You can loan your hunting rifle to your buddy without any new restrictions . . . You can give or sell a gun to your brother or your sister, your cousin, your uncle, your co-worker without a background check. You can post a gun for sale on the cork bulletin board at your workplace or on your church bulletin board without a background check.”

Senator Manchin also said, “[Anybody] that has read that bill that would think that would allow or entice the government to begin a registry is misleading and lying.” The NRA may have won the first round by spreading lies and confusion, but they must not and will not win in the end. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “However difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’ How long? Not long, because ‘no lie can live forever.’”

Our children have a right to grow up in a caring and decent society that protects their right to live and learn in safety. That right must take precedence over anyone’s right to own assault weapons or high capacity magazines that have nothing to do with self-defense or hunting and have no place in the hands of non-military and non-law enforcement personnel. Without these weapons of war applied to our children, how many would be alive today? How many Newtown or Aurora or Columbine victims would have survived?

There have been 166,562 children and teens who have died since 1965 from guns on American soil, while 52,280 U.S. soldiers were killed in action in the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq wars combined. On average during that period, 3,470 children and teens were killed by guns every year – 174 classrooms of 20 children. This is intolerable in a decent and democratic society. When will the number of children killed by guns in our country be sufficient for enough of our Congressional leaders to pass common sense gun safety laws to protect them as Connecticut, New York, Colorado, and Maryland have recently done?

I hope that everyone who believes in protecting our children’s right to live and grow up will become as vocal and passionate and organized as those who seek more and more dangerous

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weapons of death in a nation already saturated with more than 300 million guns. We must stop this relentless war against our children and dethrone the NRA whose reign obstructs what 90 percent of Americans want.

I woke up the morning after the Senate votes thinking about Sojourner Truth, one of my role models, a brilliant and indomitable slave woman who could neither read nor write but who was passionate about ending unjust slavery and second-class treatment of women. At the end of one of her antislavery talks in Ohio, a man came up to her and said, “Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? Why, I don’t care anymore for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea.” “Perhaps not,” she answered, “but, the Lord willing, I’ll keep you scratching.”

Some of our Senators have just told us that they don’t care what 90 percent of us want and have closed their ears to the pleas of those who have lost their children and family members to gun violence. But we must be determined and persistent fleas until we move them either to change their minds or kick them out of office. I hope enough of us will bite them, bite them, and bite them until they do care about the children whose lives have been cut short and those at risk of the same fate. Enough fleas biting strategically can make the biggest dog uncomfortable. And if they flick some of us off but even more of us keep coming back and biting with our calls, emails, visits, nonviolent direct action protests, and votes (the most important nonviolent protest)—we’ll win.

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 .