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NRA Annual Meeting - Denver, Colorado



Good morning, and thank you for coming today.

Because of recent events, we've experienced unprecedented requests for our Association to express itself on a variety of related and unrelated issues. Out of solemn respect, we have remained silent.

But the policies of the National Rifle Association have become so widely mis-characterized that America can't keep in focus a clear understanding of what our principles are.

So I would like to take this opportunity to clearly state our positions in a comprehensive way.

More than anything, I want to frame my remarks as part of a constructive, respectfully-conducted discourse that will

surely follow in the weeks to come.

I wouldn't stand before you today if I didn't believe, and I couldn't prove, that our common-sense policies can have a more immediate impact on violence, and make more citizens safer, than anything that anyone else is proposing.

So I'd like to speak in response to the President's recent press conferences and news appearances. And please, listen not just for what we've done, but for what more we can all do.

First, we believe in absolutely gun-free, zero-tolerance, totally safe schools. That means no guns in America's schools, period ... with the rare exception of law enforcement officers or trained security personnel.

We believe America's schools should be as safe as America's airports. You can't talk about, much less take, bombs and guns onto airplanes. Such behavior in our schools should be prosecuted just as certainly as such behavior in our airports is prosecuted.

Of the 6,000 young people the President acknowledges were caught with a gun at school during the past two years, we believe all of them should have been prosecuted. But the truth is that only 5 were prosecuted in 1997 and just 8 in 1998. That's not zero tolerance.

The National Rifle Association believes in no unsupervised youth access to guns, period. We have always supported holding adults responsible for wilfully and recklessly allowing access to firearms. Just as every kid should have a guardian who knows where he is and keeps him safe, every firearm should have a guardian who knows where it is and keeps it safely stored.

That's why, for over a century, we've written the book on safe storage of firearms. We support and encourage the distribution, development and use of safety locks, trigger locks, gun safes, or any voluntary means necessary and appropriate to keep firearms away from, or inoperable by, those who shouldn't have them. We have always condemned anything less.

(pause)

But we believe that the most effective gun safety device is education. And the NRA does more about it than anybody, investing millions of dollars in our Eddie Eagle gun avoidance safety program that has now reached eleven million children. Even President Clinton agrees it has been effective.

Fatal gun accident rates are now lower than ever in American history. And if any American school wants

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... that gun accident rates are now lower than ever in American history. And if any American school wants the program, we'll find a way for that school to have it -- with or without NRA's name on it. But we call on the President and Congress to provide funding to put the Eddie Eagle program in every elementary classroom.

Still, we believe the real problem is unprosecuted criminal access to guns.

So we believe in zero tolerance for anyone illegally buying guns for juveniles.

We encourage the vigilance of everyone to keep illegal guns out of the hands of minors. But more importantly, of the thousands of criminals who bought guns for juveniles, we believe the Clinton Administration should have prosecuted more than just 5 in 1997 and 6 in 1998. That's not zero tolerance.

We believe gang bangers caught carrying guns shouldn't be let go just because they're under 18. So we support mandatory penalties for juvenile criminals caught carrying guns. But out of the thousands of these armed teen thugs, we believe the Clinton Justice Department should have prosecuted more than just 3 in 1997 and 8 in 1998. That's not zero tolerance.

We believe that even if violent juvenile felons get a second chance at going straight, they should never get a second chance at owning a gun. Some call it Juvenile Brady -- we call it common sense. We support barring all juveniles convicted of violent felonies from owning guns, for life.

We also believe that criminal records of violent juveniles ought to remain open indefinitely, not expunged in the middle of their crime spree. They shouldn't get a clean criminal slate to splatter with blood again just because they turn 18 or 21.

We support restoring full and perpetual funding for the National Instant Check System, which was the product of this Association's determined effort. It is a federal crime for a felon to try to buy a gun. So for the quarter million prohibited buyers President Clinton claims were turned away, we believe his Justice Department should have prosecuted more than zero in 1996, zero in 1997 and zero in 1998. That's surely not zero tolerance.

We believe that people adjudicated mentally incompetent should be prevented from buying guns. That's the law. But it can't be enforced because those records are often sealed. So we advocate that records of court-declared mental incompetents be unsealed and made available to the instant check system. Believe it or not, insanities like John Hinckley's would not prevent a gun purchase today because most mental records are invisible to the instant check system. Let's close the Hinckley loophole!

We believe that a lawful, properly-permitted citizen who chooses to carry a concealed firearm not only deserves that right, but is a deterrent to crime. We support the right to carry because it has helped cut crime rates in all 31 states that have adopted it ... with almost no abuse of any kind by the lawful citizens who took the courses, submitted to the background checks, passed the tests and became part of a proud citizens movement that's making America a safer place to live. The truth is, very few actually choose to carry a gun -- but the bad guys don't know which few they are.

We believe freedom should never be diminished for those who abide by the law. On the contrary, freedom should be diminished only for those who break the law. That is the principle upon which we stand opposed to waiting period proposals and one-gun-a-month schemes.

There is no evidence waiting periods work. And if there is authority to say one gun a month, there will eventually be authority to say none.

We believe it is felons who should get no guns any month. So of the thousands of criminals who bought guns for felons, we believe the Clinton Justice Department should have prosecuted more than just 13 in 1997 and 24 in 1998. That's not zero tolerance.

The National Rifle Association has never agreed that magazine capacity has any relationship to the criminal misuse of firearms. We cannot support pointless initiatives. It's as useless as trying to restrict the number of guns a criminal can carry, or the number of loaded magazines he can pack, or for that matter, the number of pockets he can lug his bullets in -- when chances are, he should be wearing prison fatigues in the first place.

We support reversing the Clinton Administration policy of not prosecuting felons with guns. We advocate national adoption of Project Exile, a zero-tolerance project that began in Richmond, Virginia, but can't seem to get the support of President Clinton's Justice Department. Any felon caught with a gun, no matter what he's doing, goes to jail for 5 years, period.

District Attorneys tell me they've never seen a program have such an immediate effect on violence. So instead of not funding Project Exile, we call on the President to support providing 50 million dollars for

nationwide implementation plus 25 million dollars to publicize awareness of it.

Finally, we believe that firearm freedom can't exist if firearms aren't as affordable as the free market allows. So we condemn the attempt of predatory lawyers and mayors to drive gun makers out of business and drive up costs of guns with frivolous lawsuits that make honest people pay for the failure of the criminal justice system.

Americans oppose it, and we support state and federal legislation that prohibits this abuse of the courts and our freedoms.

Incredibly, we've been asked if we would support an instant check on explosives purchasers. Well, we're not the National Explosives Association. But we would not oppose such a background check, as long as it does not include the traditional reloading powders used by millions of budget minded hobbyists. Trying to include those reloading powders is like imposing an instant check on matches, because they're made of basically the same stuff.

Lastly, I want to talk about gun shows. We have always supported the American tradition and right of private sales of firearms between lawful adults, friends and family. Gun shows are simply an extension of that freedom. But the NRA insists on absolute adherence to the law, with zero tolerance for any unscrupulous or illegal activity at gun shows, just like anywhere else.

We will consider instant checks at gun shows when, and only when, this Administration stops demanding new gun taxes and stops illegally compiling the records of millions of lawful gun buyers. Government list-keeping surveillance of law-abiding citizens is never a good idea.

That's where we stand on these issues, and why. The solutions are far more a matter of collective resolve, than of resources. If we have twelve billion dollars to fight violence overseas, surely we can find a few million to defeat violence at home.

It's my hope that the cruel and unfounded accusations against this association can be replaced by a civil and constructive debate. As discussions continue in the weeks ahead, we will take our responsible place at any gathering that seeks meaningful solutions as long as they do not erode, not even a little, the freedoms this Association exists to preserve.

Thank you for your attention in these most trying of times. The policies of the National Rifle Association have always been, and will always be, totally invested in preserving the safety and the freedoms of all Americans.

Thank you.