

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Interview With Sam Donaldson of ABC's "This Week"

March 10, 2000

Gun Control Legislation

Mr. Donaldson. Mr. President, thank you very much for letting us come over and talk to you today. You know, among your top legislative priorities, everyone understands, is gun control. You want trigger safety locks; you want a 3-day waiting period for the sale at gun shows; you want photo ID's, among other things. Going to be tough to get?

The President. It's tough to get. We were able to get the Brady bill passed in '93 and the assault weapons ban in '94. And unfortunately, several of the Members who voted for those were defeated because they did. But it's a safer country because of that.

We've had half a million people who couldn't buy handguns because they were felons, fugitives, or stalkers, and we've got the gun death rate down to a 30-year low. So I think nearly everybody who looked at it thinks we ought to close the gun show loophole and require child safety locks on guns and ban the importation of these large ammunition clips. I hope we can do that.

Mr. Donaldson. The NRA says that the gun manufacturers have trigger locks now. They say all of the guns being manufactured in this country, the handguns, have the trigger locks. So what's the big deal?

The President. They don't all, actually; most of them do. We've worked with a lot of the gun manufacturers, and they deserve a lot of credit. And for the first time, they really showed some genuine independence from the NRA line that nothing ever needs to be done, ever. And they came up with the child trigger locks.

What our legislation would do would be to require the manufacturers to do it. And I would also like to see them make those available to retrofit guns, because a lot of people who have guns now in their homes would like to buy them, would like to protect them in that way. But I think that it would be important.

But closing the gun show loophole is really important because a lot of people who now know they will be checked in gun stores can go to the urban flea markets or to the gun shows and buy a gun and have no background check whatever. And I think it's a big mistake.

Mr. Donaldson. Well, of course the NRA says, "We're for that. We're for an instant check at gun shows." And they say, "The Congress appropriated money for you to put into the system so that the insta-check, just like our credit cards, can go through." And they say, "Why hasn't he done it?"

The President. Well, not all the records are subject to insta-check. For example, we offer, by the way—most of their allies in Congress want a 24-hour, not a 72-hour waiting period at gun shows. And there's something to be said for that if it's a weekend show and the people are moving on to somewhere else, and all that. So what we offered them was, okay, 24 hours for every one you can check in 24 hours, but over 90 percent of them you can check in 24 hours. But for those you can't check because of some problem with it, we ought to be able to hold them up to 3 days, because the ones that don't check out in 24 hours are 20 times more likely to be rejected because of the problems with the background.

So I think we can work this out. You know, when I brought the Congress in there the other day, the Republican leader in the House, Mr. Hyde, and the Democratic leader, Mr. Conyers, had competing proposals that were much closer together than the rhetoric of the debate would suggest. So I'm still hoping we can work this out.

I think it's fine to let the ones go in 24 hours if you can do the check. But if there is some problem with the records, getting the records, there ought to be some provision to deposit the gun in a neutral place, like the local sheriff's office or something, and finish the check.

Mr. Donaldson. When it comes to photo ID's, the NRA says what they say of a lot of your proposals. That is, the criminals are not going to line up; the criminals are not going to come in and say, "Take my picture;

here's my picture." It's the law-abiding citizen that you're going to penalize, who is not going to misuse that gun with all of this stuff.

The President. First of all, under my proposal, they would only do it as they buy new handguns, where they would get a photo ID license for showing that you passed a background check and they'd taken a safety course.

Now, therefore, that would make it even less likely that people with criminal backgrounds would try to buy handguns. And I think over the long run, licensing handgun owners is no more unreasonable than licensing people that drive cars, licensing people that do any number of other things, licensing people who want to go hunting or fishing. I don't think there's a thing in the world wrong with it, and I think it will help make us a safer society.

Mr. Donaldson. I can't help but remember the little dust-up you had with my colleague Charlie Gibson, who said, "Well, how about registration? I mean, why aren't you for that?" Have you changed your mind about that since Kayla Rolland and these other terrible tragedies?

The President. One of the things that I think—the argument for registration, of course, is that it would make it easier to trace these guns through their various incarnations, and I think you can make a strong argument for it. What I have said is that—look, I can't even pass a bill closing the gun show loophole through this Congress. If the people want more done, I think that should be heavily debated in this Presidential election.

The Vice President and Governor Bush are from dramatically different positions on the whole issue of guns, and I think it ought to be a big issue in the Presidential elections, because it's one of the things that will determine the shape of 21st century America—how we handle safety, whether we keep bringing crime down.

But right now, I think it will be a great thing if we can close the gun show loophole, ban the big ammunition clips, require the child safety locks, and require licensing for new handgun owners, including photo ID's and Brady background checks and a training course, safety training course.

Mr. Donaldson. But, of course the gun that killed Kayla Rolland, I think, was a .32. Apparently, it had been in the home, for some time, of the little boy who used it. None of this would have stopped that.

The President. Well, one thing that might do something was another provision that I asked the Congress to pass—that I asked them again to pass—which is to impose upon adults some responsibility for gun crimes committed by young children if the adults knowingly or recklessly permitted the child to get a hold of the gun. I think that should be a part of the law.

Now, some people say, "Oh, we shouldn't federalize the criminal laws; the States ought to do this." About 17 States have. So what I would—maybe if they don't want to do that, we ought to give some States some incentives to adopt these laws on their own. But it is wrong for adults to leave guns lying around that 6-year-olds can use to kill other 6-year-olds or to kill themselves, which is what most normally happens.

If people are going to have handguns in their homes, they should be rigorously secured and protected. And if they don't have these child trigger locks because they bought them before the child trigger locks were provided, they ought to have to lock them up someplace where the kids can't reach.

In addition—we're talking mostly now about killing. But the accidental gun death rate of children under 15 is 9 times higher in the United States—9 times higher—than that of the next 24 biggest industrial countries combined. So I think there ought to be some responsibility on adults to keep these guns away from children. And that would make a difference.

Juvenile Gun Offenders

Mr. Donaldson. By the way, the last time you and I talked about this was after Jonesboro, and one of those shooters there was, I think, 11 years of age. Now, we have a child, 6 years of age. What should we do about that child, that little kid?

The President. Well, first, I think that what happens to this child in terms of custody—who has custody over this child; where is this child going to go—ought to be very

carefully debated. Apparently, he was in miserable circumstances. I think that in addition to that, he's clearly below the age of criminal responsibility.

Mr. Donaldson. We can't punish that 6-year-old, can we?

The President. No, but he—human nature being what it is, he will probably wind up punishing himself as time goes on and he comes to realize what he's done.

Mr. Donaldson. And do you think people, as he grows up, will point at him and say, "That was the boy who shot that little 6-year-old many years ago"?

The President. If they know. But even if they don't, he'll know. He'll know. And one or two things will happen, unless he's very fortunate. Either he will grow up with no conscience because he won't be able to live with it, and then he'll repeat bad acts, or he'll grow up consumed with guilt for something that was beyond his ability to understand when he was 6. So that child is going to need a lot of help and needs to be in a more constructive upbringing.

But look, all of our sympathies are with the child that was killed and with her family and to trying to prevent that. But the idea that 6-year-olds can get a hold of guns is outrageous. And I think the adults should be held responsible in some way.

President's History With Guns

Mr. Donaldson. By the way, do you own a gun today? You used to, I know.

The President. Yes, but I don't have them here in the White House. I have owned guns. When I was a boy, I had a .22, when I was 12. And then I had a shotgun. And I've owned a handgun or two that have been given to me. But I've never kept them in the residence where my daughter slept.

Mr. Donaldson. Do you still shoot them today?

The President. No. When—I've gone hunting a few times since I've been President, but I've always just gone with friends and borrowed a shotgun.

Mr. Donaldson. Recently?

The President. When was the last time I went duck hunting? A couple of years ago, I guess.

Mr. Donaldson. Well, we started by—

The President. Let me say that I grew up in this culture. I've never called for banning guns, banning—I mean, I've never been against sport shooting. I believe that people ought to have the right to do these things. I even had a good relationship with the NRA at one time when I was Governor. They did a lot of good things in my State. They helped train people in gun safety courses, young hunters, for example. They helped to resolve property disputes in rural areas of my State, where we were worried about people hunting in various areas.

I just think that their knee-jerk reaction to any gun safety measure is wrong. That's what I think is wrong. We can't pretend that America can have no prevention, that the only answer here is just to find whoever does something wrong and throw the book at them, but the last thing in the world we'll do is have any prevention. We were all raised to believe that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And this is the only area where we're told there must be no prevention. I just think that's wrong.

National Rifle Association

Mr. Donaldson. Well, sir, you may have once had a good relationship with the NRA, but you don't have it today. I'm sure you're aware of the new television ads that they're running—Charlton Heston, himself, very effective—looks in the camera—and let me just read a portion of one of them. He says, "Bill Clinton says the NRA stands in the way of sensible gun safety. But it was the NRA who pioneered the criminal background check on gun violence, not Bill Clinton." He goes on. But he concludes this way, sir: "Mr. Clinton, when what you say is wrong, that's a mistake. When you know it's wrong, that's a lie." Now, that's tough. That's tough, sir.

The President. True or false: The NRA was opposed to the Brady law. True. True or false: The NRA was opposed to the assault weapons ban. True. True or false: The NRA happily ended the congressional careers of brave Members of Congress of my party who stood up to them and voted for the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban. True.

Now, they can say they pioneered background checks. That's a little sleight of hand, artful wording designed to cover up the fact

that they were opposed to the Brady bill. They were opposed to measures that are necessary to, in fact, close the gun show loophole. They're saying, "If you can do an insta-check, it's okay with us. So we don't mind you checking, as long as we're not put in any inconvenience whatever. But the public safety is not nearly as important as our convenience."

Well, you know, we all go through these airport metal detectors all the time. And a lot of us have to go through two, three, four times if we have a money clip or something. And it's a minor inconvenience, but we like it because we all get to stay alive that way. My view is, I have not asked the hunters and sports people of this country, or the sellers at these gun shows, to undertake inordinate inconvenience, but some little inconvenience to preserve the public safety and to do more to keep guns out of the wrong hands.

And all this sort of wounded rhetoric by the NRA, given how ruthlessly brutal they were to Members who were brave enough to vote for the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban is—these crocodile tears, I don't think it will wash with the voters. Even with Moses reading the script.

Mr. Donaldson. I've been around a long time. I'm old enough to remember people calling Harry Truman, when he sat there, in this office, a Communist, and a lot of things. But I don't recall a series of well-produced television ads which called the President of the United States a liar. How do you feel about that?

The President. It's the way they've treated me for more than a decade. I remember in 1991 the NRA lobbyist in Arkansas came up to me and wanted me to sign a bill that would have prohibited any city in Arkansas from having gun control legislation stronger than the State had. Little Rock, at the time, was being deluged by these gang members coming back, serious weapons and cop-killer bullets. They didn't want cop-killer bullets banned—remember this is the same NRA. True or false: They didn't want cop-killer bullets banned. True. They didn't want to ban them.

So I vetoed the bill. And this young NRA lobbyist, in the lobby of the State Capitol in Arkansas said, "Governor, you're going to run

for President in 1992. And if you veto this bill, we will wipe you out of Texas." And there were 50 people watching, just aghast that this lobbyist would talk to a Governor this way. And I knew I was growing up when I didn't hit him. I smiled, and I said, "Young fellow, if that's the way you feel, you saddle up, you get your gun, I'll get mine, and I'll see you in Texas." The rest is history.

They basically win through intimidation. People are scared of them.

Mr. Donaldson. They have almost 3.5 million members.

The President. Yes, but there's more people than that in America. And look, I think the reason that they intensely dislike me is because I have hunted in my life, because I'm not anti-gun, I'm not anti-sportsperson, I'm not against the legitimate use of guns. And I actually give credit for the good things they've done in my experience.

But they've got all these charts on the wall—they're domino theory people, you know—if you do one little thing that requires any accommodation to the public safety that requires any effort on the part of gun owners, they think it's the end of the world. And I just think that's wrong.

Maybe technology will give us insta-checks for everything, but there are some of these mental health records you can't get instantly. There are some of the criminal records that are not accessible instantly. I offered them—let's go back to the facts here. Get out of the name-calling and politics.

More people stay alive if you can close the gun show loophole, just like more people are alive because we passed the Brady background check. When a half a million people can't get handguns because they're felons, fugitives, or stalkers, there are more people out there alive today. That's all that I care about. I don't want to get into name-calling with the NRA.

Now, there's a big loophole. I would remind you the NRA—go back and look in '93, when we were trying to pass the Brady bill. They said, "Oh, the Brady bill won't do any good because all the criminals buy their guns somewhere else, at these gun shows or urban flea markets or out of the back of a pickup or the trunks of cars." So now that we want to close that loophole, oh, they don't want

to do that. Or only if it's an insta-check so there's no inconvenience.

Well, you can't get to all the records instantly. So I say, let's sit down and work this out so that there is a meaningful closing of the gun show loophole. That's all I care about. Then they—if we could do that, we save lives. They can call me anything they want and I'd be happy as a clam.

National Rifle Association's Debate Challenge

Mr. Donaldson. Well, let's forget the name-calling. The NRA spokesman said to me, "We'd like to debate President Clinton." Would you consider debating Charlton Heston on this issue? No name-calling, debate the issues.

The President. Well, I'll tell you what I want to do. I want to see the issues debated in the Congress. We've had the debate. They came after me in '92; they came after me in '96; we had the debate. They came after the Congress in '94, and they won that one. They elected the Gingrich Congress with the Contract on America. They had a big role in it, because they scared all these hunters into believing I was going to take their guns away.

By '96, the country knew that we were doing background checks and it was working pretty well, and nobody lost their guns. And I went to New Hampshire and said, "You know, they told you I was going to take your gun away, and if you missed a day in deer season, I want you to vote against me. But if you didn't, they didn't tell you the truth, and you need to get even." And that's what happened.

So they got rid of a Congressman in New Hampshire because he voted bravely for the Brady bill, and 2 years later they knew it was a bunch of hooley and they voted with me. So we've had these debates. What I want to see—I don't want to turn this into a circus. I want to turn this into saving lives. I don't want to take the extreme positions and the hot rhetoric.

Henry Hyde, who basically represents a lot of their point of view, offered a way to try to close the gun show loophole. We thought there were serious problems with that, but it was a good-faith offer. So John Conyers

made a counteroffer. Now, here is where the rhetoric is, way out here. Here's where the facts are, right here. And I was disappointed that Senator Hatch wouldn't agree to let them all get together and try to debate these two issues and try to resolve it.

There's got to be a fix here that will save people's lives. That's the only thing that counts. Nothing else matters. The rest of this stuff is all politics; it's inside baseball.

Mr. Donaldson. Mr. President, thanks very much.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 2:45 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House on March 10 for broadcast on March 12. In his remarks, the President referred to a 6-year-old Kayla Rolland, who was shot and mortally wounded by a 6-year-old classmate in Mount Morris Township, MI; Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association; and Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. The transcript of this interview was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 12. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks to the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference

March 12, 2000

Thank you very much. Mayor Knight, thank you for your leadership of the NLC and for your focus on eliminating racism. Mayor Archer, thank you for your speech and your many years of friendship to Hillary and me. Mayor Anderson; Executive Director Borut; we have the NACo president, Vernon Gray, here today, I know. And I want to thank Mickey Ibarra from the White House for being a good liaison for you and keeping me in touch with you over these years.

Appropriately enough for your commitment, Mr. Mayor, to eliminate racism, I'm thinking today that last Sunday at this time I was in Selma, Alabama, commemorating the 35th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, with John Lewis, Hosea Williams, and many others, and the Mayor of Selma, Governor Siegelman. And this time, when the marchers