Remarks in an Interview and Townhall Meeting on ABC's "Good Morning America"

May 12, 2000

[*"Good Morning America" cohosts Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer welcomed program participants and described the goals of the Million Mom March against gun violence, scheduled for May 14th in Washington, DC.*]

Charlie Gibson. We are here in the Oval Office with the President, who is joining us this morning. It's nice to have—nice to be here. I shouldn't say nice to have you with us, since it's your office. Mr. President, good to see you again.

The President. Good to see you.

Gun Safety Legislation

Mr. Gibson. Diane is going to go over with the mothers, and we understand you will join us in there in a few moments. But we'd like to talk a little bit first.

It as a year ago, Mr. President, that we were here with you with the students talking about gun violence. And you talked to me then about the hopes that you had for new gun control legislation. It hasn't happened. What went wrong?

The President. Well, nothing went wrong. We passed legislation in the Senate—Vice President Gore cast the tie-breaking vote to require child safety locks, to ban the importation of large capacity ammunition clips, which would make our assault weapons ban much more effective, and to require background checks when handguns are bought at gun shows and urban flea markets, just as they are now at gun stores.

It passed in the Senate; it didn't pass in the House. And frankly, I think it was because of the intense lobbying effort against it and the longstanding ability of the NRA to influence Congressmen. I think that that was a big part of it.

I think, also, the label "gun control" is not nearly as effective as the specific safety measures. I mean, if I said to you, let's take these seatbelts out of cars and repeal the speed limits and repeal the requirement that drivers get licenses because it's "car control," you might be against it, too. When you talk about the specifics, do they make sense or not, do they work or not, the answer is yes.

Frankly, I still don't understand why anybody would be against these things. And the evidence is clear that it works.

Mr. Gibson. But the Congress is jammed up. I've got here a pile of all the gun legislation that's been proposed in the past year, since we were here before, and none of it has passed. By my count, we have more States rejecting new gun control legislation than have passed it. We have 15 States that have passed prohibitions on cities suing gun manufacturers. That hardly seems like progress.

The President. Well, first of all, I think you have to look at the fact that the States, which our Founding Fathers thought would be the laboratories of democracy, have seen some progress. If you look at what Maryland and California and Massachusetts have done—Maryland particularly is interesting because it is not what you would think of a socially or culturally liberal State, and people from very difficult districts passed some very tough child safety legislation. I think that there has been some movement at the State level.

In Colorado, a conservative Republican Governor proposed closing the gun show loophole, couldn't pass it through the legislature, and they're going to put it on the ballot. It will be interesting to see what the people of Colorado do.

I think that as a practical matter, until the public demonstrates its will on this, there may not be more substantive progress. The people are going to have to decide what they believe the right approach is.

Mr. Gibson. When we were here a year ago, you gave me a rather stern talking-to about the political realities on the issue of gun control. Isn't it fair to say that the political realities right now are that nothing is going to happen for this year, while people wait to see the results of the November election?

The President. I'm not sure. That is one possible outcome. It may be the more likely outcome. But keep in mind, you've still got bills that have passed the House and the Senate. Essentially what's happened is—though, that this is the part about Washington that

drives people crazy. We've got a version of this bill that passed the House, a version of this bill that passed the Senate. And the conferees are supposed to get together, both parties, both Houses, come up with a bill and send it to me; I sign it or veto it; and then they override the veto or they don't, if I veto it. That's the way the system is supposed to work.

As a practical matter, what happens is they're just not meeting, and because they don't want to report out a bill that, again, they can't label as "gun control," but it will have specifics, and people either like it or not, and it will either pass or not. That's what's frustrating. It's just been stalled. And I think the fact that what's really important about it is closing a loophole in a background check law that has plainly worked to save lives in America, closing a loophole in an assault weapons ban that the American people overwhelmingly support, and putting in child trigger locks—those are the three main elements—it's unconscionable that it hasn't been voted out.

Million Mom March

Mr. Gibson. As a practical matter, doesn't this administration have something of a stake in Sunday's march, hoping that some mothers can do politically what Columbine, what a preschool shooting out in California, what a 6-year-old shooting another 6-year-old didn't do, which is to create a gun control lobby as strong as the pro-gun lobby?

The President. Well, I think, as a practical matter, what we really have is hoping that these mothers will create a sense of awareness in America that this is not a debate framed the way the NRA has debated, gun control or not, implying that this is the beginning of a slippery slope to take people's guns away no matter how law abiding they are, and that it's about very specific, very concrete measures of prevention to reduce the likelihood of guns falling into the hands of children and criminals. That's what this is about.

Gun Safety and 2000 Elections

Mr. Gibson. You have made this very much a priority in this administration. Does it surprise you when you see the latest polls, Gallup poll, just out recently, indicating that a plurality of this country actually thinks that Governor Bush would be stronger on gun control and better equipped to handle the issue than the Vice President?

The President. No, because I think the public doesn't have the information. I don't think there's any—I think if you gave—did the Gallup poll give the public a test about whether—which candidate was for the following specific measures? I think people form general impressions. And the Republicans, keep in mind, until our administration came in, because of their tough rhetoric and their theory that the answer to every crime was just to put more people in jail and keep them there longer, and they talked about it like that, they had the overwhelming advantage on all crime-related issues.

But it's not like there's no evidence here. I mean, crime has come down 7 years in a row—8 years in a row, now. This is the eighth year that crime is coming down. Partly it's due to the improved economy, but partly it's due to the fact that we put 100,000 police on the street, that we passed the Brady bill, that we passed the assault weapons, that we increased enforcement as well. No one can dispute the evidence.

And so what I think there is, when the campaign really starts in earnest, we need to make sure that voters have all the evidence, and then we'll see what they say.

Gun Safety Legislation

Mr. Gibson. Don't you to some extent make the NRA's case when you say that, though? They say, "Enforce existing laws; you're not doing enough of enforcing existing laws." And yet, you've got murder down 25 percent since '93, gun crime down 35 percent since '92, violent crime overall down 27 percent. That's done with a good economy, better policing, and not necessarily such stronger gun control laws.

The President. That includes the Brady bill, the assault weapons ban, a ban on cop-killer bullets. They were against all those things. When we passed the Brady bill—keep in mind, the Brady law, which requires the background checks, was vetoed in the previous administration of President Bush. We passed it again, and I signed it. And what did they say? The same crowd here who is

against closing the gun show loophole, what did they say then? Then they said, because they were making a different argument, because they're against all prevention measures, they said then, "Oh, this Brady law won't make any difference because criminals do not buy guns at gun stores; they buy guns at these gun shows or flea markets or out of the back of pickup trucks on streets. It won't make any difference."

Okay, now it's 2000, and since we passed the Brady bill, over 500,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers have been unable to get handguns. There is no question that they used gun stores, and no question that the Brady bill made a difference, and no question it would be even better if all handgun sales were subject to background checks, including the ones at gun shows.

Now, so we're not arguing about that. If it's a prevention measure designed to keep more guns out of the hands of criminals, they're against it. If it's punishment for any kind of gun violation, they're for it. They say that this is the one area of American life where there must be no prevention and where people who own guns must be subject to no reasonable efforts to construct a system of prevention.

This is not gun control in the sense that we're taking people's guns away from them who make the decision that they'd be safer or better off to have guns or that they want to engage in a wide range of lawful activities. And that's really—they've been working this for a long time, and they're good at it. They just say the same things over and over again.

But why were they against this banning cop-killer bullets? Why were they against the Brady bill in the first place? Why were they against the assault weapons ban? What's wrong with banning the importation of large capacity ammunition clips? Let's get out of the name calling and labeling and get right down to specifics. Is this going to reduce crime or not in America? Is it going to make Americans safer? I think it is.

Million Mom March

Mr. Gibson. Let's get to the specifics of why the mothers are here to march. If you'd join us across the hall, we've got a number of mothers there anxious to talk to you.

Diane, let me go to you over in the Roosevelt Room.

Diane Sawyer. That's right, Charlie. Sitting in this room, I've noticed a lot of women nodding heads and shaking heads and bursting to ask questions. I'll give you a preview, just one question; what's it going to be?

[*At this point, participant Linda Halpin asked why gun safety legislation had been held up in Congress for so long. Following a commercial break, Ms. Sawyer stated that the women assembled in the Roosevelt Room represented many sides of the issue, and some had personal stories of gun violence. Ms. Halpin then explained that her son was shot and killed last Mother's Day, and she asked the President what he could do to prevent such tragedies.*]

The President. Well, first of all, the short answer is I'm going to do everything I can. In our country's history, as far as I know, no administration before ours has taken any kind of systematic, aggressive approach to this, except after Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were killed in 1968, President Johnson tried to do something. He tried to pass—he did pass a very weak background check law, not as strong as he wanted, and he tried to pass licensing. And since then, until we came in and began with the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, no one had done anything.

I have done as many townhall meetings as I could. I have lobbied the Congress as hard as I could. I've also taken a lot of executive action to strengthen the enforcement of the laws and to give us some options we didn't have before. But the truth is, in the United States, we have by far the highest gun death rate of any advanced country in the world and by far the highest accidental gun death rate in the world, because we have taken the position that any sort of sensible prevention measures here should not be passed, we—I say, we, as a people—and I think that's the wrong position.

So I've tried to change what would happen. I thought surely after Columbine we would get some action. The Senate passed, 51–50—the Vice President cast the tie-breaking vote—I think, a good bill that would aggressively move us forward. But there are

things we can do at the executive level without congressional action to continue to increase the effectiveness of the enforcement of the laws we have. And we're doing that.

But we don't have authority to require, for example, background checks on people that buy guns at gun shows or at flea markets. We have an assault weapons ban, but people can import large capacity ammunition clips and then adjust guns here and turn them into assault weapons. We have a few States that require safety locks on guns for kids. That's one thing that not many people talk about, but let me just say, the accidental rate of death from guns of children under 15 in the United States is 9 times higher than the accidental rate in the other countries combined.

So I am doing everything I can do. I am not a dictator. The Congress believes—I'll just tell you the truth—the Congress believes—ask Congresswoman McCarthy, she's paid a pretty high price for this—they believe that if they vote with the NRA, they will not be defeated. They believe if they vote with you, they may be defeated.

This is not complicated. You have to understand, they believe that as long—you know when Charlie Rose asked me about the poll—I mean, Charlie Gibson asked me about the poll—Charlie Rose normally asks me about other things—asked me about the poll in there. You have to understand what they believe. They believe that as long as they can turn it into a gun control, gun control, gun control debate and stay away from the specifics, they can scare a bunch of guys into thinking that they're going to lose their guns and that more people will vote against them for voting for gun control measures, if it's called that instead of the specifics, than vote for it.

Now look, I know you're heartbroken. I'm doing everything I can. Let me remind you that Mr. LaPierre, the representative of the NRA, said that I wanted people to die so I could make an issue out of this. That's what he said. Now, I can only tell you that I wake up every day thinking about this. I am heartbroken about this. And I am frustrated, because they do well if they can turn this into a gun control battle. We do well when we turn this into a specifics battle.

The thing that the mothers coming here will do, I hope, is to make this a voting issue. But if it's not, they're going to keep winning. And you just have to realize that.

Mr. Gibson. Mr. President, I want to interrupt you for just a second. We're supposed to take a commercial break here at this point, but we're going to keep going. And we just want to tell our local stations we want to keep going—because you want to follow up, I know.

[*Ms. Halpin said she needed accountability for her son's death and asked again what would the President do on the issue in his remaining days in office.*]

The President. Where are you from?

Ms. Halpin. I'm from New York, sir. Howard Beach.

The President. Well, I'm going to do my best to pass this legislation, and I'm going to do my best to make sure that we're enforcing the existing laws, and I'm going to do my best to find more people like you to tell your stories in the hope that more people in the Congress will be emboldened to do what, I believe, a majority of them think is the right thing to do.

This has been a big issue with me, and I have been very frustrated in my inability to get more done. We did—we got the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban through. I just want to tell you this. This is a very—you just need to know this. We have some people on the other side of this issue today, so I want to compliment them.

I got the first Congress I had to pass the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, and at least a dozen of them, maybe as many as 20 of them in the House lost their seats because they did that, trying to help people like you—because the NRA beat their brains out, because they went home to their districts and told people they were going to take their guns away. Now, 7 years later, none of them have lost their guns, and we've got a safer America. And so now they're fighting the new list of prevention measures. But you need to know what happened.

I know this hurts you. And I'm telling you, we're—ask Congresswoman McCarthy—we've been up here fighting this for all these years, and it is very, very frustrating.

Ms. Halpin. It still won't bring our children back.

The President. It won't bring your children back. But I'll tell you what will save more children, is if they believe people like you will mobilize other people to change the voting behavior of the American public. That is what will bring—[*applause*]. That's the truth.

I know this sounds so cruel in the face of your human loss. You have to understand how things work here. Look, I'm not running for anything. I'm doing what I think is right. I have taken on these facts; I have done everything I know to do. And you heard what Charlie said, gun violence is down 30 percent, gun crime, since I took office—35 percent. The crime rate is down, actually now, to about a 27-year low. The murder rate is down to a 30-year low.

We are making it better. But this is still way too dangerous a country because we take the position that when it comes to these issues, this is the only area of our national life where we will not have prevention. Now, that's really what—that is the truth. And it breaks my heart, too.

Gun Safety and 2000 Elections

[*Ms. Sawyer cited a newspaper report that Gov. George W. Bush of Texas proposed to distribute free trigger locks if he is elected President. Ms. Sawyer asked if the President would support such a program.*]

The President. It's a good idea, but why is he doing that?

Ms. Halpin. And why now?

The President. No, no, wait—yes, that's good—that's also good. Why now? Because he's running for President. That's okay. That's what elections are for. People get better ideas all the time. We can't hold people—anybody who wants to join and start doing things should be complimented. So that's fine.

But I think you have to understand what's going on here. There was a report in the newspaper last week that a lobbyist for the NRA said they would have an office in the White House if Governor Bush is elected. And they were, I think, the first or second biggest contributor to the annual Republican Party gala last week. So he wants to move away from that image; he wants people not to think that he won't do anything, that basically the NRA will control policy on this—which they will if he wins. And if he comes out and gives away gun trigger locks, then he doesn't have to explain why we're still importing large capacity ammunition clips and why he doesn't want to close the gun show loophole.

I know you have people here from Texas who believe that their concealed weapons law is very effective. I know that, and we could talk about that if you like. But the truth is that everybody is going to want to look like they're doing something, but the most effective measures are opposed by most of the people in the Republican Party. I wish that weren't true. We do have some support from them, and I thank those who are supporting us.

State Concealed Weapons Laws

[*Ms. Sawyer said that representatives of the Second Amendment Sisters, who plan a countermarch to the Million Mom March, were also present. She introduced Texas State Representative Suzanna Gratia Hupp, an advocate of concealed weapons laws. However, a video clip about her which was to be shown had technical difficulties.*]

Mr. Gibson. Well, Suzanna, where are you? Why don't you give me a basic of what happened in that restaurant.

[*Ms. Hupp described the subject of the video, an episode in Texas where a man drove his truck through a restaurant window and then shot 23 people.*]

The President. I remember that.

[*Ms. Hupp said she had stopped her former practice of carrying a concealed weapon illegally out of fear of losing her chiropractic practicing license. She stated that her parents were killed by the man in the truck and that laws against carrying a concealed weapon had left her defenseless in that situation.*]

Mr. Gibson. And you are now in the statehouse of Texas?

Ms. Hupp. Yes, sir, I am.

Mr. Gibson. And there is now a concealed weapons law in the State of Texas.

Ms. Hupp. Yes.

The President. Okay. First of all, let's concede something. She might be right about this. That is, on this particular incidence, if there had been someone in that restaurant who knew how to use a gun and was lawfully carrying it, for example, an off-duty police officer or somebody—or in a State with a concealed weapon law, someone who was properly trained and had it, maybe they could have stopped this horrible incident.

There is no law that covers every set of facts. However, what the truth is in most instances is, is that a lot of people have guns who don't know how to use them. And the accidental death rate in America is—again I will say this—9 times higher than that in the next 25 biggest countries combined. So it's a question of what makes you safest overall.

But my view of the concealed weapons law is, if a State wants to have one, what do people have to prove to carry a concealed weapon? How well have they been trained? How likely are they to avoid doing something crazy, so that they're only used in cases like this?

But the second thing is, whether you've got a concealed weapons law or not should have nothing to do with whether you close the loophole in the background check, whether you ban the large capacity ammunition clips, and whether you require child trigger locks, including those that are built into the guns, assuming they're feasible.

She may be right about this, about this example. But I don't think that example is an argument against our legislation.

Gun Safety Legislation

[*Ms. Sawyer noted that the Second Amendment Sisters said there was no evidence of a correlation between increased gun control laws and a decrease in violence, using England as an example.*]

The President. Wait, wait a minute—an increase of violence from a very low base.

Ms. Sawyer. From a low base.

The President. From a low base. In America, I will say again—forget about the crimes, just look at the accidental gun rate. In America, the death rate of children under 15 from accidental gun violence is—I will say again—9 times higher than that in the next 24 biggest industrial countries put together.

So we say, in order to avoid inconveniencing people who have firearms or might want to get firearms, we will not have sensible prevention measures, because it scares everybody because we'll call it gun control. Now, that's a decision we've made as a society.

Look, there is no perfect system. The level of violence will depend upon the kind of people you have in your society, the condition of the economy, the way the children are raised, the values of the society, the values of the community, the effectiveness of law enforcement—there are many factors involved here. And there is no perfect system. But there is no question that if we want to become the safest big country on Earth, without impinging on our freedom, we will have to do more in the area of prevention.

National Rifle Association Board Member Susan Howard. Excuse me, could I ask a question if it's all right?

The President. Sure.

Ms. Sawyer. And we should point out, you are Susan Howard.

Ms. Howard. Yes, I am. I would like to ask this lady——

Ms. Sawyer. Let's tell people, Susan, who you are, those who don't know you. You've seen her in the ads for the NRA.

Ms. Howard. Yes, for the child safety. Was your son killed accidentally with a gun, or was it a crime?

Ms. Halpin. It was a crime.

Ms. Howard. Mr. President, I really have to ask you something. You just made the statement that just sent shivers up and down my spine. You said, let's forget the crimes and——

The President. No——

Ms. Howard. No, no, no, sir, excuse me——

The President. This is the way the NRA operates.

Ms. Howard. No, sir, it's not. No, sir——

The President. All I did is—I don't want to forget the crimes——

Ms. Howard. No, sir, you said, let's forget the crime and talk about the accidents—because there is nobody that——

The President. You know that's not what I meant, to forget the crime, Ms. Howard.

Ms. Howard. But that's what you said, Mr. President. And I guess this is——

The President. Well, what I—I was making the prevention——

Ms. Howard. No, sir, let me finish.

The President. All right.

Ms. Howard. Please, may I finish, because you have a bully pulpit. And I know every single person here in this room, the majority of them, are really for you, and they love you, and they trust you, and they believe you. But we are right now living in a country, sir, where our children—it's not how many gun laws you can continue to pass; it's about my grandchildren; it's about their children; it's about your daughter and whether she ever has any children or not. Bottom line, the issue is about are we ever, ever, ever, ever going to look at the children and say, that's the focus? Because right now what this is all about is the children have been pushed out of the side, they do not exist right now——

Mr. Gibson. Get to the question.

Gun Safety Legislation

Ms. Howard. No, what I'm saying is, if we—you are the education President, am I correct? Are you the education President? That is what you have built your——

The President. Well, that's what the teachers said yesterday when they all came here.

Ms. Howard. I agree, but I think that's what you built your platform on. What is it about educating children and gun safety that you have a problem with?

The President. Nothing. Now, wait a minute. Charlie, I have to answer this. On many occasions—not one, many occasions—I have complimented, as President, in the face of all the criticism I've gotten from the NRA, on many occasions I have complimented the NRA on the gun safety legislation, efforts they've made, the gun safety education programs. I have talked about what they did when I was Governor. I've also complimented them on some other things they did when I was Governor to reduce violence—but wait a minute, let me finish.

I think the laws should be more vigorously enforced. I have asked for more resources to do that. Gun enforcement is up since I've been President. But I've asked for resources to do more.

Look, here's my argument. Let me just be very careful here. I do not believe that America has done enough on the prevention side. And I do not believe this problem can be addressed solely by stiffer punishment, by education, and in the case of the Texas, if a State wants to have a concealed weapons law. I believe we must do more to try to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and away from children in the first place. That's all I said. That's my only position.

But I think the NRA, the education programs, the gun safety education programs, are good and would do a lot of good.

Mr. Gibson. Susan, let me address this. Marjorie Hardy is here——

Ms. Sawyer. Marjorie Hardy of Muhlenberg College—she is a psychologist——

Mr. Gibson. ——and assistant professor who worked—Marjorie, if I quote you correctly—you worked with your children on education over and over again, correct?

Ms. Hardy. That's correct——

Mr. Gibson. And you used those children as part of an experiment that we did on "20/20."

Ms. Sawyer. ——which we did at "20/20." And we also had the Eddie Eagle education program come in. And we were talking with kids about how—what you do when you see a gun in the room, specifically. And they all sat there and nodded, yes, they got it, you get an adult, you don't touch it, you don't touch it, including Marjorie's son, Matthew, who had grown up with nothing but education against guns.

I'm going to roll the clip. And what happened with Marjorie's son was a traditional—or typical with what happened with the other kids as well. And we found that the education, by and large, didn't work with this age kid. Here is Marjorie's son, Matthew.

The President. How old is your son?

Ms. Sawyer. He was age 4 at the time.

[*A video tape was shown.*]

Ms. Sawyer. And I want to point out, Marjorie, that the kids knew these were not

toy guns. You could hear them saying, "This is a real gun," and reacting to the fact that it was a real gun. Anything you want to add?

[*Ms. Hardy asked what evidence the NRA had to prove their Eddie Eagle gun safety education program was effective. Ms. Howard responded that the NRA did not claim to have the only answer to the gun violence problem, but that education was an imperative.*]

Parental Responsibility

Ms. Sawyer. ——I engage the President on this issue, if I can, this question of parental responsibility and parental role in general. If I can just move to that. When you talk about everybody being responsible, the question really becomes, are there just too many guns out there for parents to be able to maintain control?

Participants. Yes!

Ms. Sawyer. And what do you do about your neighbors? And I'm going to show you a tape, and then we're going to meet Lori Smith, because this is the story of what happened to her daughter, Shannon.

Let's see if we have the tape.

[*There were technical difficulties with the video tape.*]

Ms. Sawyer. I'm going to go to Lori and let you tell us what happened.

[*Ms. Smith said that while her 14-year-old daughter was talking on the telephone in her backyard last June 14, a bullet fell from the sky and killed her instantly. Ms. Smith noted people in the Phoenix, AZ, area where she lives often fire guns randomly into the air in celebration or for other reasons.*]

Ms. Sawyer. And random accidental shootings, as we know, take place by the thousands all the time. Mr. President, what about the guns out there?

The President. Well, here's a case—of course, that probably is illegal. And if it isn't, it should be.

Ms. Smith. It was only a misdemeanor two——

The President. Did they ever find out who did it?

[*Ms. Smith said the shooter was not found, but she fought the Arizona State Legislature to elevate the penalty to a felony, with great opposition from the NRA. She then noted that the law changing the crime to a felony offense was signed April 3.*]

The President. There's a case—let me just say this. First, I'm very sorry about what happened. It's a terrible thing. And I think what you did in the legislature was a good thing. But I think there's a case where people really do need to be sensitized to the fact that bullets that go up will come down. I think there are some of these things where a public campaign to educate people would make a difference. And that's one I think would make a difference.

The larger question for me, going back to this question of whether there are too many guns in the society—I think that sometimes there's a lot of loose talk about this. We ought to talk specifically about what we mean. A lot of these—most of the guns in America are in the hands of hunters and sports people and law enforcement people, are those guns—most of the guns that are in those people's hands, I think, they're safe, and they're going to be properly used.

But there's a huge sort of sea of guns that's out there just kind of flowing around. And that's one of the reasons I think that all the sales have to be checked, there has to be a background check on all the sales; and one of the reasons I support these gun buyback programs that a lot of cities are doing. And we're trying to put more money into it now, as well, because—[*inaudible*]—are law-abiding citizens, and you've got as many of these loose weapons as you can off the street.

Is your film on now? Are they trying to get it on now?

Ms. Sawyer. No, no, I think we've got you in an echo chamber there for a moment.

We're going to take a break, in fact, Mr. President. And when we come back, we can explore more issues of, do we hold the parents accountable? To what extent? In what ways?

The President. Yes, I think you should. I think you should.

[*Following a commercial break, Mr. Gibson asked if representatives on either side of the issue opposed laws enforcing parental responsibility.*]

Participant. I have a caveat to it, though.

Mr. Gibson. All right, but basically not opposed. Because I want to get the question to the President. People seem to believe in this bill, and yet it's a law in only 17 States, and in only 3 States is it a felony.

The President. And we couldn't get it in the legislation here. Representative McCarthy just pointed out that that was the one provision in my bill I couldn't get in either the Senate or the House version. So I think maybe—this is something that is encouraging to me, because what you saw on that film with those young children, below a certain age you can't expect an education program to work; you have to keep the guns away from the kids.

I think that's something we could all agree on, we could get done here. That's very important. And I think the adults should be held responsible.

Mr. Gibson. And yet when you proposed it on a national level, neither House or Senate——

The President. In the Kayla Rollins case, there is no question in my mind that if there had been responsible adults in that home, that child would be alive today.

Ms. Sawyer. That is the Michigan case, we should point out, where a 6-year-old boy killed a 6-year-old classmate.

Gun Registration

Mr. Gibson. A question here. Your name?

[*Donna Dee-Thomases, organizer of the Million Mom March, said that education was important but that licensing firearms, as one would an automobile, was equally important so that guns used in crimes could be more easily traced.*]

Mr. Gibson. Comment on the registration——

The President. I think—let me back up and say, we cannot pass in this Congress licensing of handgun owners, which I have proposed. I think when people buy a handgun, they ought to pass a Brady background check, have a gun safety education program, and have a photo ID license, just like when you have a car. That's what I believe.

And the registration of guns, the main virtue of that would be that you could trace them when they were used in a crime. If I steal your car, Charlie, and I drive it down to Maryland and rob a bank, and I leave it in a shopping center parking lot, and it's found, because the registration is on the National Crime Information Center computer system, you can find out within literally 30 seconds after it's found what happened to your car.

But we can't even pass a bill to close the loophole in the Brady law when we know the Brady law has kept 500,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers from getting handguns in the first place. So we can't pass that now. But should it be done? Well, of course it should be done.

Gun Safety Locks

[*Following a commercial break, Ms. Sawyer asked how many participants opposed gun safety locks.*]

Participant. Safety locks, or a law that requires safety locks?

Ms. Sawyer. Okay. How many of you are for mandatory safety locks? And how many of you are for only voluntary? All right, we almost have a consensus issue there. At least safety locks should be on guns, one way or the other.

Mr. Gibson. You have a comment over here.

Lawsuits Against Gun Industry

[*Johnny Mae Robinson from New York stated that her son was killed last year and asked if cities would continue to have the right to sue the gun industry.*]

The President. Well, I think we should. And we supported the development of that lawsuit. But there is a move on by the gun manufacturers and their allies to try to get State legislatures to prohibit cities from being able to bring such suits, and their theory is—I'll make their case for them real quick—they say, "If a gun is a legal product, it's wrong to be able to sue the person who makes it."

The other side of the argument is there is—if you look at the way the guns are marketed and sold, a relatively large percentage of guns used in crimes and used illegally are sold by a relatively small number of the gun

dealers in America, and there is some evidence that the people who distribute the guns know that and do it anyway. And that's basically the argument behind the lawsuit.

And lawsuits are supposed to find facts, and this is the fact-finding process we're going to find, to see if a change in these policies, again, would make us safer. That's what it's about. Do I think they ought to have the right to bring the suit? I do, and I have supported it, and I've done what I could to protect it.

Trigger Locks

Ms. Sawyer. On that front, Mr. President, I'm going to give the microphone to Lynn Dix, who has a story to tell.

[*Ms. Dix said that she was suing a gun manufacturer because her son would still be alive if the gun that killed him had been equipped with an integral trigger lock or load indicator. She concluded that she cannot understand opposition to prevention measures.*]

The President. I think one of the most troubling things that I've seen in this whole episode is a lot of the people who are opposed to what I want to do say these things should be voluntary, trigger locks should be voluntary—let me just finish—because I'm where you are on this. So Smith & Wesson comes along and they say, "Okay, we'll put the trigger locks in, and we'll stop dealing with bad dealers, and we'll do other things which we think will help." And they didn't lose a lawsuit to do it; they came in on the front end and said they were going to do it.

And there was the awfulest reaction to them. They were treated like they had betrayed the country, like they had committed treason, and other gun manufacturers and everybody, they gave them a gut shot—it was unbelievable what happened, the reaction to them. And this is something where a free corporation decided they would change their policy in ways that plainly would make America a safer place. And the reward they got was having the other gun manufacturers and some of their allies just try to literally take their heads off. And I think it was wrong. I think what they did was the right thing.

Conclusion

[*Mr. Gibson invited the President to summarize the meeting, noting the President's earlier statement that he thinks about this issue more than any other.*]

The President. Domestic—yes, because it's the one we have made the least—we have both made the most progress on, but we've got a long way to go. And I think about it also because I grew up in a culture where more people thought like the minority here in this room who are in dissent.

Last weekend I was up in the Ozark Mountains, and I stopped at this little country store in the middle of the Ozarks. The last time I was there, 10 years ago, it was because I was out on a turkey hunt. Most of the people I spent time with were either, if they weren't members of the NRA—when I was hunting, you know, duck hunting, or whatever—they had favorable opinions. As I said, when I was Governor, I had both good and one horrible experience with the NRA.

But my view of this is, I think we all have to realize we don't—none of us claim that any of our positions are absolute and that we can make a perfect world, and nobody will ever get hurt, no bad person will ever get a hold of a gun, nothing wrong will ever happen. The people who are coming here to Washington, including many people in this room who have lost members of their families, understand that not every law they're advocating might have saved the particular life of the particular loved one they lost. Their loss got them interested in this, and they began to ask themselves: How can we make a safer country? How can we save more children like my children? How can we save more loved ones like my loved one?

I think, in fairness, the people who oppose them are good people. They really believe, I think—I don't know if they'll say it, but maybe after I'm gone they will—I think they think we have some—we either are weak on enforcement or we have some dark hidden agenda to take guns away from everybody, including lawful gun owners. And they think that would change America forever for the worse.

I don't have that agenda. I have never proposed any such rule. What I've tried to do,

I'll say again, is I think that this area of our national life is an area where—to go back to the very first question I was asked—where I think we should not rest until we think we have done everything we can to prevent bad things from happening in the first place.

Every other area of our national life we first choose prevention. Then if things go haywire, we punish. This should not be the area where we say, "Because we're worried about people doing something someday that's bad, we're not going to have prevention; we'll just start with punishment. But we'll be for education, but we'll start with punishment." That's my whole take on this.

I think we could do a lot more on prevention, make it a lot safer country, and achieve the objectives of the Million Mom March, which is that all these women that are here, they want fewer stories like theirs. That's my own take on this.

So I just wanted to put this into context. I want you all to talk to each other when I leave. I've talked too much here. I learn more when I listen.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Gibson. Mr. President, thank you very much.

The President. Thank you all very much.

Ms. Sawyer. Thanks for letting us stay in the house while you're away. [*Laughter*]

The President. It's your house, not mine. I'm just passing through. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The interview segment of the program, entitled "GMA Live at the White House: Moms & Guns," began at 7 a.m. in the Oval Office. The townhall meeting segment originated from the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Gov. Bill F. Owens of Colorado; Representative Carolyn McCarthy; news talk show host Charlie Rose; and Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president, National Rifle Association.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Ohio Representatives of the Million Mom March and an Exchange With Reporters in Akron, Ohio

May 12, 2000

Good morning everyone. I have just had the opportunity to meet this fine group of mothers who are leading Ohio's participation in Sunday's Million Mom March for commonsense gun safety laws. I want to thank them for their commitment, their determination, and their courage. What they are doing is profoundly important.

Like millions of mothers all over America, they are outraged by the senseless acts of gun violence that continue to plague our communities, and they are determined to do something about it. Every day, nearly a dozen of our children are killed by guns. Twelve families suffer a wound that never heals. What is almost as senseless is the fact that Congress refuses to act on legislation that would prevent many of these shootings.

These moms will be marching in Washington and in more than 60 other cities on Mother's Day to say to Congress, enough is enough. It is unconscionable that over a year after Columbine, over 10 months since they've had a chance to send me meaningful legislation, Congress still refuses to act.

Well, they can ignore my requests to move. They can ignore the evidence that commonsense prevention won't cost any law-abiding citizen a gun but will save lives. But this Sunday they will not be able to ignore the fact that the voices of more than one million moms across America will be demanding action.

The great sociologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The women who are organizing this march are such a group of thoughtful citizens. They understand they have to be in this for the long haul. They understand that they have a lot of work to do.

But the evidence is on their side. The arguments are with them. And the power is on the other side. The whole story of America is the story of bringing down established walls of power in the face of argument and evidence, and passionate commitment to liberty and to the dignity of individuals. That's what the Million Mom March represents. I'm honored to be here with them today, and again, I thank them for what they will be doing in Ohio.

Thank you.