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AMERICA AND ITS KILLING FIELDS!

DETROIT – As a student at Detroit’s Central High School, I remember on occasion having mandatory fire drills. Today our children have mandatory gun drills. They are being taught to “run, hide, or fight” in between reading, writing, and arithmetic. The latest count of sixty-seven mass shootings since the beginning of 2023 is making our nation resemble a modern day killing field. From Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 where 13 were killed and 20 wounded, to Michigan State University in East Lansing, Mich., where three were killed and five wounded in 2023. While our hearts and our fervent prayers of condolences go out to the victims, families, students, and staff of MSU and every other field of despair, it is just not enough. To send your child out the door with a kiss and a remember to run, hide, or fight on the way to school each day is not the way for an America that some call exceptional. The Violence Project of the National Institute of Justice recorded 185 mass shootings from 1966 to December 2022. In death, America is certainly exceptional. Las Vegas Nevada - 60 dead, 413 wounded, 867 reported injuries. Yes, we are exceptional. Orlando Florida - 49 killed, 53 wounded. Virginia Tech - 32 killed, 17 wounded, 6 others injured. Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut - 26 killed (20 of the victims were children between ages 6 and 7, six were adults). El Paso Texas - 23 killed and 23 injured. Highland Park Illinois Parade - 7 were killed, 48 others injured. Uvalde, Texas - 22 killed, 18 wounded, 40 injured. Buffalo New York - 10 killed, 3 wounded, 13 injured. Dayton Ohio - 9 killed, 27 injured. Virginia Beach - 12 killed, 4 injured. Atlanta Georgia - 8 killed, 1 person wounded. How tragic it is that students from Oxford High School in Michigan where 4 were killed and 7 wounded, in their first year at Michigan State University found themselves repeating the trauma, death, and nightmare of another horror of violence by gunfire. America is an exceptional nation.

We have more guns than people. A Small Arms survey has reported 120.5 firearms per 100 residents. The country with the second highest rate of citizen firearm ownership is Yemen with a rate of 52.8 guns per 100 residents. America has a population of 326 million people. It has been reported that we have at least 393 million guns. Not every American owns a gun. There are what is known as “super owners,” people who own ten to twenty guns or more. America has a gun violence problem. In a special report by ABC News called Rethinking Gun Violence, examining the level of gun violence in the United States, a gun violence tracker system to illustrate total gun violence was utilized. Over the past five years, 2018 to 2023, there were a reported 93,376 deaths, 180,803 injuries. Over the past year, there were 19,210 deaths, 36,805 injuries. In one week, February 4-10, 2023, there were 354 deaths, 592 injuries. There are a number of gun related factors to these killings. Some range from premeditated acts of aggression, domestic disputes, robberies, even suicides. Yet, the one common factor is access to guns. This unbearable situation has caused the health care system an estimated one billion dollars a year for injuries alone.

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According to a report released in June by the United States Government Accountability Office, many people believe gun violence is limited to urban America, particularly among Black communities. I have a news flash for you - it's happening more and more in smaller communities all around the nation. For example, Mississippi County Arkansas has a population of a little more than 42,000 based on the U.S. Census data. Yet, it has a gun homicide rate of over 23 per 100,000 according to the Center for Disease Control. The majority of Americans want to do something to end gun violence. An ABC News *Washington Post* poll conducted in 2019 found 89% of Americans support universal background checks and 86% support red-flag laws (a law permitting the state court ordering the temporary removal of firearms from a person believed to present a danger to themselves or others). Six in ten support banning high-capacity ammunition clips. Fifty-six percent support banning the sale of assault weapons. Among Democrats, 81% support a ban, 55% of independents, but only 33% of Republicans favor a ban.

We must end the gratuitous prayers for the victims, flowers and teddy bears for the deceased, litanies of how bad we feel that another killing field has occurred. It is not enough to send up a prayer for the dead. We must send out a policy change for the living. We cannot allow political leaders who are supposed to serve the people to disregard the will and determination of the people. Hiding behind the NRA resistance to reasonable gun regulation, claiming that leaders just want to take all guns away and disregard the Second Amendment right to bear arms, proclaiming nothing can be done about a shooting like this, are all damnable lies. The people want safety. Our children and all children deserve a future without fear, injury, or death. I am not a pessimist. I am an optimist. But more important than that I am a man of faith. *"I know that faith without works is dead,"* James 2:17. It is time to put some work with our prayers. Politicians who ignore the will of the people, putting guns before children and money before safety, should be voted out of office. Governors and legislators who stand in the doorway to prevent the entrance of a better way to end this senseless violence do not deserve nor have they earned the right to lead the people. If they do not move on these issues, then it is up to the people to move them out of the way. We must pass gun regulation laws, background checks, support for mental health, regular mental and psychological evaluation of law enforcement officers, the elimination of assault weapons and military armament off the streets, pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, and inspire not by words but by our deeds a new and secure generation of young people. Whitney Houston sang it well, *"I believe the children are the future. Teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty they possess inside. Give them a sense of pride to make it easier. Let the children's laughter remind us of how we used to be."* America, the sound of laughter is always more pleasant to the ear than the sound of silence.

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