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Who's to Blame When a 14 Year Old Boy Shoots and Kills His Entire Family?

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

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Late on the night of Monday, September 2, a 14 year old boy in the small town of Elkmont, Alabama, called 911 to report that he heard gunshots in his home. When police arrived, they found one adult and two children dead in the home, apparently as a result of gunshot wounds. Another adult and child lay critically wounded and subsequently died in area hospitals. The 14 year old boy initially told police that he had run outside the house when he heard the gunshots, but when police noted inconsistencies in his account, they questioned him further, and the teen admitted that he had committed the murders. He subsequently led police to the 9mm handgun that he had used to kill his 38 year old father, John Wayne Sisk; his 35 year old stepmother, Mary Sisk; his five year old step sister; and his two step-brothers, one six years old, and the other six months old.

The teen's name was not released by police, but an adult cousin told reporters that he had been well behaved until about a year earlier when he began engaging in vandalism and cruelty to animals. He had just recently learned that Mary Sisk was not his biological mother.¹ Ms. Sisk worked as a special education teacher and had posted the statement on her school website staff profile, "I am happily married with a great husband and four beautiful children."²

It's not clear from the reports I read who owned the gun used by the teen to commit the murders. A police spokesman told reporters that the handgun used in the killings was in the home "illegally," but he did not elaborate further.³ A local news station reported that the teen's father, John Sisk, had pleaded guilty to a felony charge of sexual misconduct with a minor in Indiana in 1999, when Sisk was 18 years old.⁴ As a convicted felon, John Sisk would have been prohibited from purchasing or possessing a firearm under federal law, but he still could have easily acquired the handgun without a background check from a source other than a federally licensed firearm dealer.

Most people who keep a handgun in their home are men, and most cite "protection" as the reason for having the gun.⁵ Most guns in homes in which children live are stored loaded and/or unlocked.⁶ Adult gun owners consistently under-estimate the ease with which children can gain access to guns in the home,⁷ and female domestic partners are often unaware that there even is a gun in the home.⁸ By the time the average American boy reaches the age of 18, he's been exposed to at least 200,000 acts of violence through one form of entertainment media or another.⁹

A police spokesman in the Elkmont shooting reported that the 14 year-old boy who committed the mass shooting had been charged with five "juvenile counts of murder," and "pending the adjudication process, could face adult charges of multiple counts of murder and/or capital murder."¹⁰ Even if the teen's parents had not been killed in the attack, they probably would not have been charged with a crime for the teen gaining access to the gun and killing their other three other children. Alabama has no child firearm access prevention laws, and there are no such federal laws. On the contrary, in the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision, a narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court not only overturned Washington DC's partial ban on keeping handguns in the home, it also overturned the District of Columbia's safe storage laws on the basis that they violated the Second Amendment.¹¹ The same 5-4 majority ruled in the 2010 *McDonald* decision that *Heller* applied to the states as well as to the District of Columbia.¹²

I first learned of the Elkmont mass shooting while listening to the BBC News. The shooting didn't make the print edition of our local Sacramento newspaper, nor did it make the PBS News Hour, although the September 3rd edition of the News Hour did devote a segment to a prayer vigil for the victims of the mass shooting in Midland and Odessa, Texas, on August 31, in which 7 people were killed and 25 were injured.

One of the online news sources that covered the Elkmont shooting quoted the mayor of Elkmont, Mr. Tracy Compton, as stating, "We pray as a community for healing in this unprecedented situation and know that together we will persevere and eventually overcome." To his credit, Mayor Compton also encouraged residents of Elkmont to pray "for the accused,"¹³ adding, "We can't begin to understand the 'Why?' or 'How?'"¹⁴ I couldn't find any news report that cited the easy availability of handguns as a contributory factor in the mass shooting or that quoted anyone as calling for restrictions on civilian handgun ownership to prevent such shootings from recurring in the future.

We will probably never know the answer to the question, "Why?" in the case of the Elmont shooting. The 14 year-old boy who committed the shooting probably doesn't fully know the answer himself. As the American Academy of Pediatrics noted in its position paper on *Firearm-Related Injuries Affecting the Pediatric Population* in April of 2000:

Adolescence is marked by a search for identity, independence, and autonomy. Accompanying characteristics may be curiosity, the strong influence of the peer group, rites of passage, belief in invincibility, impulsiveness, immaturity, mood swings, and substance abuse. The perception of danger by adolescents may be influenced by many factors, including the media, as well as the reality of their own lives. The world seen as a dangerous place during this particularly vulnerable developmental period may lead to conflict, injury, and death, especially when access to guns is easy.¹⁵

I don't interpret this statement to mean that the teen who committed the mass shooting is not responsible for his own actions, or that he didn't know that killing his entire family with a handgun was terribly wrong. But I do believe that the authors of this statement would agree that the 14 year-old boy doesn't deserve the full blame for the killings, and that, as Mayor Compton implied, "the accused" is, in a sense, a victim himself.

Within a couple of days of the Elkmont mass shooting, coverage of the event and its aftermath had already completely disappeared from media attention, and I can't find any more information about the source of the gun. Assuming, though, that it was the deceased father who brought the handgun into the home and who failed to store it safely, he certainly bears some of the blame for the mass murder.

If it was the father, John Sisk, who brought the gun into the home, and if it's true that he did have a past felony conviction that made it illegal for him to own a firearm, it's hard to have much sympathy for him, even though he was one of the victims. On the other hand, despite the fact that there is extensive evidence that a gun in the home is much more likely to be used to kill, injure, or intimidate a household member than to protect against a home invader;¹⁶ and that a gun in the home is an independent risk factor for a homicide or suicide in the home,¹⁷ particularly when there is an adolescent in the household,¹⁸ John Sisk, like most other handgun owners in the United States, probably believed that having a handgun in the home made his family safer.¹⁹ But Americans have not always held this misconception.

A Gallup poll conducted in 1993 showed that the majority of Americans correctly believed that having a gun in the home made the home a more dangerous place for household members. By 2014, though, almost two thirds of Americans mistakenly believed that having a gun in the home made the home safer.²⁰ Another Gallup poll in 1959 showed that 60% of Americans supported banning civilian ownership of handguns. By 2016, the percentage of Americans who supported banning handguns had dropped to 23%.²¹ What accounts for these shifts in public opinion?

The counterfactual shifts in public opinion in recent decades are a tribute in large part to the effectiveness of the misinformation campaign waged by the gun industry and its associated lobby. The entertainment industry, to the extent that

profits from glorifying and romanticizing the use of firearms, also deserves some of the blame for promoting the myth of guns for protection. But there are also less obvious, and in some ways, more pernicious sources of misinformation, such as the five members of the Supreme Court who, in the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision, not only endorsed an interpretation of the Second Amendment that the late Supreme Court Chief Justice had called “one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American public by special interest groups” that he had ever seen in his lifetime,”²² but who also endorsed the myth that a handgun is “the most preferred firearm in the nation to ‘keep’ and use for protection of one's home and family.”²³

Many politicians – and not just those who take big donations from the gun lobby - also promote the myth of “guns for protection.” While running for president in June of 2008, Senator Barack Obama lauded the *Heller* decision when it was first announced.²⁴ And during a press conference in 2011, President Obama said:

So I believe in the Second Amendment. It does provide for Americans the right to bear arms for their protection, for their safety, for hunting, for a wide range of uses.²⁵

Obama had taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School. He knew, or should have known, that the Founders who wrote, debated, and voted for the Second Amendment never intended for it to confer an individual right to own a gun unrelated to service in a “well regulated militia.”²⁶ And Obama should have also known that the Supreme Court had rejected the “individual right” interpretation of the Second Amendment in four other cases prior to the *Heller* decision.²⁷

Presidential hopefuls continue to promote the myth of guns for protection in the run-up to the 2020 election. The Democratic candidate, California Senator Kamala Harris, stated while campaigning in Iowa in April of this year:

I am a gun owner and I own a gun for probably the reason that a lot of people do, for personal safety.²⁸

During a social media town hall hosted by *Parents* magazine in 2013, former Vice President Joe Biden, who is another contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, was asked how citizens could protect themselves in their homes if assault weapons were banned. Rather than pointing out that having a gun in the home results in far greater risk than protection, Biden replied, “If you want to protect yourself, get a double barreled shotgun.”²⁹

There is no presidential candidate who panders more to the gun lobby than the current occupant of the White House, Donald J. Trump. Trump told NRA members at their annual convention on his 99th day in office, “I can proudly say I will never, ever let you down,”³⁰ At the same time, though, I don't know of any current presidential candidate – or, for that matter, any congressional candidate or current member of Congress - who openly challenges the myth that honest, law abiding people should own or carry guns for “protection;” or who openly advocates

overturning the *Heller* decision and adopting stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in the other high income democratic countries of the world – countries in which mass shootings are rare or non-existent,³¹ in which the average rate of gun deaths is one tenth the rate in the United States,³² and in which “self defense” is not considered to be a legitimate reason for owning a gun.³³

Politicians typically tell people what they think their constituents want to hear and what they think will win them votes. Given that almost two thirds of Americans currently believe that having a gun in the home makes the household safer; and given that about three quarters of Americans currently oppose banning handguns; it's not that surprising that politicians don't challenge the myth of guns for protection or advocate adopting stringent gun control laws like those in Australia and Great Britain. What's more surprising – and disappointing - is the fact that the other major gun violence prevention organizations in the United States don't challenge the myth of guns for protection or advocate stringent gun control laws either. Many of them recommend that guns in the home be stored safely, but none that I'm aware of currently emphasize the facts that a gun in the home is far more likely to harm household members than to protect them and that about 80% of all gun deaths are committed with handguns.³⁴

The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence previously publicized the fact that “the choice to keep a gun in the home creates far more risk than it prevents,”³⁵ but the Law Center has changed its messaging since partnering with the Giffords organization and changing its name to the “Giffords Law Center.” Former U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was herself critically wounded in a mass shooting in 2011 in which 6 other people, including a 9 year old girl, were killed, and 12 other people wounded.³⁶ Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in December of 2012, Giffords and her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, founded Americans for Responsible Solutions, which was subsequently renamed, “Giffords.” The 2014 book, *Enough*,³⁷ which heralded the founding of Americans for Responsible Solutions, lists both Gabrielle Giffords and Mark Kelly as authors, although it is written in the first person in Kelly's voice. In the book, Kelly not only fails to challenge the myth of “guns for protection,” he endorses it. Kelly writes that shortly after he married Gabrielle Giffords in 2007, he bought her mother “a .357 Smith and Wesson revolver for her protection.”³⁸ In the final chapter of the the book, Kelly writes that he and his wife “wholeheartedly agree with the NRA's belief that ‘guns don't kill people – people kill people,’”³⁹ and he states on the final page:

Gabby and I are proud gun owners and protectors of the Second Amendment's right to bear arms. We can own guns for self-protection, to hunt, as a hobby, as a cherished memento from a family member.⁴⁰

Kelly doesn't specify to which version of the Second Amendment he's referring – the original version, which begins with the phrase, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of the free state,” or the NRA rewrite, which deletes this

phrase, and which, sadly, a narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court endorsed in the 2008 *Heller* decision.

Getting back to the “How?” and “Why?” of the mass shooting in Elkmont and the question of who's to blame for murders, although we'll probably never fully understand the “Why?” of this and other mass shootings - or of the more than 100 gun related deaths that occur on an average day in our country⁴¹ – the answer to the question, “How?” is obvious. It's with a gun. And in about 80% of firearm related deaths, it's with a handgun.⁴²

And as far as the issue of blame goes, I believe that when a 14 year-old boy shoots and kills his entire family; when the shooting barely makes the news; when hardly anyone even mentions the fact that easy access to guns was a contributing factor to the shooting or that in order to prevent future mass shootings, as well as the more than 100 gun deaths that occur on an average day in our country, we need adopt stringent gun control laws like the ones that have long been in place in every other high income country of the world; and when this theme in variations is replayed over and over again in the United States of America; then our entire country bears a significant share of the blame.

In his 2001 book, *Every Handgun Is Aimed At You*, the executive director of the Violence Policy Center, Joshua Sugarmann, wrote:

America's gun lobby would be on the run, if only the gun control advocates would bother to chase them. Instead, trapped by their perception of the politically achievable, gun control advocates are always on the defensive⁴³....They nibble around the edges of half-solutions and good intentions dramatically out of sync with the reality of gun violence in America.⁴⁴

After trying to work with other gun violence prevention organizations for most of the past two decades, I helped found Americans Against Gun Violence in 2016 in part because I believed that Mr. Sugarmann's statement was still true at that time and that our country needed a new organization that **would** put the gun lobby on the run; that would change the perception of what kind of gun control legislation is politically achievable in the United States; and that would advocate definitive measures - not “nibble around the edges of half-solutions and good intentions” – in order to stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our country.

The definitive measures that Americans Against Gun Violence advocates include completely banning civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, as Australia did following the 1996 Port Arthur massacre,⁴⁵ and completely banning civilian ownership of all handguns, as Great Britain did following the 1996 Dunblane Elementary School massacre.⁴⁶ There have been no further mass shootings with the types of weapons that were banned in either of these countries since the bans went into effect,⁴⁷ and in the last year for which data are available,

the rate of gun deaths in the United States was 12 times higher than in Australia and 61 times higher than in Great Britain.⁴⁸

We also advocate following the example of every other high income democratic country in requiring registration of all firearms and licensing of all firearm owners; and in placing the burden of proof on anyone seeking to acquire a gun to show convincing evidence that he or she needs one and can handle one safely, instead of placing the burden on the government to prove that he or she meets certain narrow criteria for being prohibited from owning a gun.⁴⁹ And given the large body of evidence showing that there is no net protective value from owning or carrying a gun, “self defense” should not be automatically accepted as a reason for owning a gun in the United States, just as it is not accepted in most other high income democratic countries.

Finally, in order to adopt the measures we advocate, we must first overturn the 2008 *Heller* decision, which is worse than a rogue decision, and worse than a “fraud on the American public.” By creating a constitutional obstacle, where none previously existed, to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries, *Heller* is a death sentence for tens of thousands of Americans annually.

We’ve made steady progress in terms of our infrastructure and outreach since we founded Americans Against Gun Violence in 2016. As I noted in my previous president’s message, just last month, we filed an *amicus* brief in the upcoming Supreme Court case of the *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. New York City*, in which the Supreme Court will be reviewing a case involving the Second Amendment for the first time since the 2008 *Heller* decision and the related 2010 *McDonald* decision. Americans Against Gun Violence was one of just three gun violence prevention organizations to file an *amicus* brief in support of New York’s stringent handgun laws in this case (the other two being Everytown and March for Our Lives); and we were the only organization in the entire country to make the case that *Heller* was wrongly decided, and that the Court should take the opportunity of this case to overturn the *Heller* decision.

Earlier this year, we hosted our second annual National High School Essay Contest, with the prompt being the following statement by the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackum in the majority opinion in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*:

The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have “some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.”⁵⁰

We awarded \$16,000 to 20 winning students this year, bringing the total awards in our essay contest to \$31,000 over the past two years. The winning essays are posted on the High School Essay Contest page of our Americans Against Gun Violence website. I suggest that you read them to get an idea of the physical and

mental toll that gun violence is taking on our nation's youth. As one student wrote, "Only in the United States of America do students fear for their lives every day because of senseless, preventable gun violence."

I've also been meeting and talking with the leaders of other gun violence prevention organizations throughout the year. So far, they don't seem to be listening much to what I'm saying, but then again, our teenage son never seemed to listen to my wife and me when we gave him advice during his last couple of years in high school, before he went off to college. But now and then, my wife and I would overhear him paraphrasing advice that we'd given him as he gave his own advice to his friends. I'm beginning to observe a similar phenomenon in the gun violence arena. At a meeting with about 25 representatives of other gun violence prevention organizations earlier this year, the legislative director of one of California's largest and best known gun violence prevention organizations made a statement and then caught herself, seemingly shocked, and said, "I'm beginning to sound like Bill." Up to now, though, none of these other organizations has accepted our invitation to break up the monopoly that Americans Against Gun Violence has in being the only national gun violence prevention organization that openly advocates overturning the *Heller* decision and adopting stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries.

Although we've made considerable progress since founding Americans Against Gun Violence in 2016, I'll be the first to acknowledge that we need to vastly expand our capacity and effectiveness in order to accomplish our ultimate goal of reducing rates of firearm related deaths and injuries in the United States to levels that are at or below the rates in the other high income democratic countries of the world. In order to accomplish this goal, we need your help, and the help of many more supporters like you.

Please become an official, paid member of Americans Against Gun Violence, if you haven't already done so. The annual membership rate is just \$25 (\$10 for students). And please make an additional donation, if you're able. Over the past couple of months, we gave out \$16,000 in essay contest awards and spent about \$14,000 in filing our *amicus* brief, so we need to raise at least \$30,000 to get back to the point that we can offer the essay contest again next year and be prepared to file another *amicus* brief when an important case comes up.

Please encourage friends, family members, and colleagues to join Americans Against Gun Violence with you. If everyone on our email list became a member and recruited just two more new members, and if each one of those new member recruited two more new members, and so on, our membership – and our clout – would grow exponentially.

Finally, please contact your elected officials – and candidates for elected office – and let them know that you expect them to openly advocate and do everything within their power to accomplish the enactment of stringent gun control laws in the

United States comparable to the laws in other high income democratic countries like Australia and Great Britain. And when you contact them, let them know that you're a member of Americans Against Gun Violence. We know from talking with elected officials and their staff that hearing from their constituents in their own words (unlike mass online petitions and form letters) makes a difference in what positions elected officials take on issues and in how they vote. The gun lobby knows this too. That's why NRA members attend legislative committee meetings wearing T-shirts that say, "I'm an NRA member, and I vote." That's also why gun owners who oppose gun control contact their elected officials about twice as often as those who believe firearm regulations should be more strict.⁵¹

In Conclusion

In June of 2013, when it became clear that the United States wasn't going to adopt any new gun control laws following the December 14, 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in which 20 kindergarten and first grade children and six teachers were killed, a British political commentator, Dan Hodges, famously "tweeted:"

In retrospect, Sandy Hook marked the end of the U.S. gun control debate. Once America decided killing children was bearable, it was over."⁵²

The implied corollary to this statement is that the United States of America is a country that loves its guns more than its children.

In some respects, Hodges was right. Many gun violence prevention organizations no longer even use the term, "gun control." Instead, they use terms like "sensible gun laws" to describe the measures that they advocate – measures that fall into category of "nibbling around the edges of half-solutions and good intentions."

At Americans Against Gun Violence, we believe that it is not sensible to be satisfied with anything less than the adoption of stringent gun control laws like the ones that Australia and Great Britain adopted after mass shootings in their countries in 1996 – laws that have effectively prevented any further mass shootings and that have helped reduce rates of gun deaths in those countries to a tiny fraction of the rate in the United States.

For us, the gun control debate is not over. Our work is ongoing, and we will persevere until we achieve our goal. Thanks for joining us in demonstrating through actions, and not just words, that we love our children more than our guns.

Who's to blame when a 14 year-old boy shoots and kills his entire family



Sandy Hook Elementary School Victim Emilie Parker, age 6,

Sincerely,

Bill

Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician and a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, decorated for courage under fire during the Vietnam War.

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- ⁴⁷ Peters, "Rational Firearm Regulation: Evidence-Based Gun Laws in Australia"; Alpers, "The Big Melt: How One Democracy Changed after Scrapping a Third of Its Firearms"; North, "Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings."
- ⁴⁸ "Guns in the United States — Firearms, Gun Law and Gun Control."
- ⁴⁹ "Guns in the United States — Firearms, Gun Law and Gun Control."
- ⁵⁰ Lewis, 445.
- ⁵¹ J. Baxter Oliphant and John Gramlich, "Gun Owners Contact Officials about Gun Laws More than Non-Owners Do," *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 12, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/12/supporters-of-stricter-gun-laws-are-less-likely-to-contact-elected-officials/>.
- ⁵² Leonard Pitts Jr., "Leonard Pitts Jr.: Even the Murder of Children Is 'Bearable' | Miami Herald," *Miami Herald*, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/oped/article33250299.html>.