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LaPierre: Don't blame us for the deranged

By: Neil W. McCabe January 30, 2013

The senior senator from the state with the freest gun owners in America held a hearing on restricting gun rights Jan. 30 in a packed Capitol Hill hearing room.

“In two recent cases, the Supreme Court has confirmed that the Second Amendment, like other aspects of our Bill of Rights, secures a fundamental individual right,” said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee in his opening remarks to the hearing he called “What Should America Do About Gun Violence.”

The chairman said that with more than 200 people in the hearing on the second floor of the Hart Senate Office Building, he did not want any applause or invective directed at any of the senators or witnesses.

“I expect everyone in this room to be respectful,” he said. “The Capitol Hill Police have been notified to remove any audience member who interferes in the orderly conduct of this important hearing,” he said.

Leahy said he was a supporter of gun rights and the Second Amendment.

“Americans have the right to self-defense and to have guns in their homes to protect their families,” he said.

“No one can or will take those rights or our guns away. Second Amendment rights are the foundation on which our discussion rests,” he said.

“They are not at risk,” said Leahy. “But lives are at risk when responsible people fail to stand up for laws that will keep guns out of the hands of those who will use them to commit mass murder.”

The hearing included testimony from former Arizona Democratic congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her astronaut husband retired Navy Capt. Mark E. Kelly; Wayne R. LaPierre, the CEO of the National Rifle Association; David P. Kopel, Cato Institute; Baltimore Police Chief James Johnson and Gayle S. Trotter, senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.

Holding the hand of her husband, Giffords slowly plied her way through a crush of photographers and onlookers to the witness table. The former congresswoman wore a bronze tan with fuller hair than her previous public appearances. While slow, she was nimble and actively waved and smiled as she made her way to testify.

“This is an important conversation for our children, for our communities, for Democrats and Republicans,” she said.

“Speaking is difficult but I need to say something important: Violence is a big problem,” she said. The former congresswoman, who was shot in the head Jan. 8, 2011, was halting, but had a strong voice as her husband leaned in to bolster her.

“Too many children are dying, too many children,” she said. “We must do something. It will be hard, but the time is now,” she said.

In a flourish, Giffords gestured as she completed her statement: “You must act. Be bold, be courageous. Americans are counting on you. Thank you.”

As arranged with Leahy, Giffords got up and left the room with the help of her husband, who then returned to the witness table.

In his testimony, LaPierre said the answer to the question about what America should do about gun violence is simple.

America should do what works—and not do what does not work, he said.

“Teaching safe and responsible gun ownership works—and the NRA has a long and proud history of teaching it,” said the leader of the country’s largest gun rights and sporting organization.

Only law-abiding citizens submit to a background check, he said.

“Law-abiding gun owners will not accept blame for acts of violence or deranged criminals, nor do we believe the government should dictate what we can lawfully own or use to protect our families,” he said.

In his questions, the committee’s former chairman, Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), asked LaPierre how the NRA’s proposals differed from executive actions put forward Jan. 16 by President Barack Obama.

The NRA supports enforcing current gun laws against criminals and fixing the country’s broken mental health system, but it would not support bans on military-style rifles nor a new ban on so-called assault weapons.

Studies showed that the 1994 ban on what was then called assault weapons did not lower crime and what is called the “Universal Background Check” will never be truly universal because criminals will not participate, he said.

LaPierre said what was frustrating to gun owners was that they are being treated like the problem, while there is no discussion about how the states of California and New York release scores of criminals back to the streets before their sentences are served because of budget decisions.

The NRA leader said it is also frustrating that there is a growing dichotomy between the elites, be they politicians or celebrities, who are protected by actual military weapons, and criminals, who ignore the laws, on one side, and the law-abiding gun owner on the other side with less protection.