



Giffords: 'We Must Do Something!' About Gun Violence

By: Mark Memmott – January 30, 2013

"Too many children are dying. Too many children. We must do something!" former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., told the Senate Judiciary Committee Wednesday in a brief, emotional appearance at the start of the panel's first hearing about what the nation should do about gun violence.

Her short statement kicked off a day of testimony from witnesses on all sides of the debate over the nation's gun laws and whether they need to be tightened in the wake of last year's mass shootings in Colorado and Connecticut. The points in dispute were familiar: Proponents of tighter background checks for gun buyers and bans on some weapons and high-capacity cartridges said their proposals would reduce shootings. Opponents of such measures said such actions would do little good and infringe the Second Amendment rights of gun enthusiasts.

The case was also made by opponents of new laws that many Americans have weapons, including assault-style rifles, because they want protection in case of chaos after natural or man-made disasters. Baltimore County (Md.) Police Chief Jim Johnson, though, testified that such thinking is "not based on logic."

The one point of agreement, Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said at the hearing's mid-afternoon conclusion, is that "we all want to do what we can to prevent future tragedies and put an end to the violence that breaks all our hearts."

Giffords was seriously injured in January 2011 when a gunman attacked an event she was holding in Tucson — an attack that left six people dead and another 13 (including Giffords) wounded. The former congresswoman, who was shot in the head, still has some difficulty speaking. But her voice was clear when she told the senators that "it will be hard, but the time is now. You must act. Be bold. Be courageous. Americans are counting on you."

She was followed to the witness table by her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, who said that he and his wife are "pro-gun ownership" but "anti-gun violence." He urged the lawmakers to tighten background checks for gun buyers and to have a "careful and civil conversation about the lethality of the firearms we permit to be legally bought and sold."

Denver law professor and Cato Institute analyst David Kopel criticized what he says has been a "political attack on firearms ownership" and urged the training and arming of more teachers and other school personnel to protect against attacks such as the December mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Conn.

Johnson, the Maryland police chief, said that organizations representing law enforcement officers across the nation support "a ban on assault weapons" and limiting high-capacity ammunition magazines to 10 rounds.

Gayle Trotter, a senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum, made the case for concealed carry laws because, she said, they help women gun owners stay safe. Weapon bans, she said, don't work.

And Wayne LaPierre, CEO of the National Rifle Association, laid out his organization's opposition to new laws. "We need to be honest about what works and what does not work. Proposals that would only serve to burden the law-abiding have failed in the past and they'll fail again in the future." He said "it's time to throw an immediate blanket of security around our children" by increasing the number of armed officers.

Responding to questions from Leahy, LaPierre said the NRA does not support extending background checks to "hobbyists and collectors" who buy and sell weapons at gun shows. Later in the day, LaPierre said studies show 1.7 percent of weapons used in crimes were bought at gun shows. That number roughly matches data from a 2002 Justice Department report that said "in 1997 among state inmates possessing a gun, fewer than 2% bought their firearm at a flea market or gun show, about 12% from a retail store or pawnshop, and 80% from family, friends, a street buy, or an illegal source."

Kelly, though, said he can't think of anything that would make the country safer than closing the so-called gun show loophole that exempts some purchases at those shows from such background checks. And Johnson, the Baltimore police chief, said "the best way to stop a bad guy from getting a gun in the first place is a good background check." That turn of phrase was a twist on a comment LaPierre has made that the "only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

As morning turned into early afternoon, LaPierre told Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., that many Americans have guns because they are worried about being left "in the cold and the dark" after a natural or man-made disaster. They don't want to see their right to bear arms limited with bans on assault-style weapons or high-capacity magazines, LaPierre said. Johnson, the police chief, said such thinking is "simply not based on logic. ... Law enforcement across the nation is well-prepared to deal with any man-made or natural disaster that can occur."

Kelly spoke of the attack on his wife and her constituents, and how the gunman was armed with magazines that could hold up to 30 rounds. "I am willing," Kelly said, to give up the right to such high-capacity magazines if it could prevent deaths such as that of 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green, who was among those killed in Tucson.

Kelly, who flew combat missions over Iraq and Kuwait before becoming an astronaut, also said he was likely only one of a few people in the hearing room who have been shot at. While putting an armed guard in a school may be "better than no security guard," he said, a fire is "chaos." It would do more good, said Kelly, to tighten background checks and close the gun show "loophole" so that "criminals, terrorists and the mentally ill" are less likely to purchase weapons.

Toward the end of the hearing, Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D) asked LaPierre if the NRA will support the Sandy Hook Promise — a pledge to "do everything I can to encourage and

support common sense solutions that make my community and our country safer from similar acts of violence."

"Our Sandy Hook promise is to always make this country safer," LaPierre responded, though he continued to oppose the kinds of legal changes advocated by Kelly, others at the witness table and the Democrats on the committee.

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Update at 9:50 a.m. ET: Kelly Will Call For A Line To Be Drawn:

Saying that he and his wife, former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, are "pro-gun ownership" but "anti-gun violence," Mark Kelly will tell the Senate Judiciary Committee today that laws on background checks for gun owners need to be tightened. He'll also say, according to the former astronaut's prepared testimony, that a line needs to be drawn that "protects our [gun] rights and communities alike" as lawmakers look to regulate semi-automatic assault-style rifles and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

At the same hearing on gun violence, National Rifle Association CEO Wayne Pierre will say that "proposing more gun control laws — while failing to enforce the thousands that we already have — is not a serious solution to reducing crime," according to his prepared testimony.

As we reported earlier, the committee is also expected to hear from Giffords herself. Six people were killed, and another 13 — including the then-congresswoman — were wounded, when a gunman attacked an event she was holding in Tucson in January 2011.

We'll be monitoring the hearing, which comes in the aftermath of last year's mass shootings in Connecticut and Colorado, and update with highlights.

Our original post — "NRA's LaPierre, Giffords And Husband To Lay Out Different Views On Gun Laws":

The national debate over gun laws that has taken on added urgency since last year's mass shootings at an elementary school in Connecticut and a movie theater in Colorado takes center stage on Capitol Hill today.

Mark Kelly, husband of former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) will talk with the Senate Judiciary Committee about the January 2011 shooting in Tucson that left six people dead and another 13, including the congresswoman, severely injured.

In an email to supporters of the political action committee that he and Giffords have established, ABC News reports that Kelly says "overwhelmingly, you told us that universal background checks and limiting access to high capacity magazines were top priorities — and I'll make sure to address each of those ideas in my opening remarks."

(8:05 a.m. ET: The Washington Post now reports that Giffords herself is expected to "testify alone at a witness table and take no questions from senators" before her husband comes to the microphone.)

On the other side of the debate, National Rifle Association CEO Wayne LaPierre plans to tell the lawmakers why the NRA opposes a ban on assault-style weapons, high-capacity magazine clips

and other proposed changes in gun laws. "We need to be honest about what works and what does not work. Proposals that would only serve to burden the law-abiding have failed in the past and will fail in the future," he says in prepared remarks sent to news organizations.

LaPierre will also say that the government should not "dictate what we can lawfully own and use to protect our families," NPR's Brian Naylor reports.

The hearing is set to begin at 10 a.m. ET. The committee plans to webcast it here. C-SPAN will stream its coverage. We'll watch for news and update with highlights later.

Among the committee's members is Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who has prepared legislation that would reinstate the ban on assault-style weapons that expired in 2004.