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## ‘These Tragedies Must End,’ Obama Says

By MARK LANDLER and PETER BAKER – December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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NEWTOWN, Conn. — President Obama vowed on Sunday to “use whatever power this office holds” to stop massacres like the slaughter at the school here that shocked the nation, hinting at a fresh effort to curb the spread of guns as he declared that there was no “excuse for inaction.”

In a surprisingly assertive speech at a memorial service for the 27 victims, including 20 children, Mr. Obama said that the country had failed to protect its young and that its leaders could no longer sit by idly because “the politics are too hard.” While he did not elaborate on what action he would propose, he said that “these tragedies must end.”

The speech, a blend of grief and resolve that he finished writing on the short Air Force One flight up here, seemed to promise a significant change in direction for a president who has not made gun issues a top priority in four years in office. After each of three other mass killings during his tenure, Mr. Obama has renewed calls for legislation without exerting much political capital, but the definitive language on Sunday may make it harder for him not to act this time.

“No single law, no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society,” he said. “But that can’t be an excuse for inaction.” He added that “in the coming weeks I’ll use whatever power this office holds” in an effort “aimed at preventing more tragedies like this.”

“Because what choice do we have?” he added. “We can’t accept events like this as routine. Are we really prepared to say that we’re powerless in the face of such carnage? That the politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?”

Mr. Obama, speaking on a stark stage before a table of votive candles for each victim, mixed his call to action with words of consolation for this bereaved town. When he read the names of teachers killed defending their students, people in the audience gasped and wept.

The service came as new details emerged about the terrifying moments at the Sandy Hook Elementary School on Friday. Authorities said Sunday that the gunman, Adam Lanza, shot his mother multiple times in the head before his rampage at the school and that he still had hundreds of rounds of ammunition left when he killed himself. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy of Connecticut said Mr. Lanza shot himself as the police were closing in, suggesting that he may have intended to take more lives had he not been interrupted.

The president's trip here came amid rising pressure to push for tighter regulation of guns in America. The president offered no specific proposals, and there were no urgent meetings at the White House over the weekend to draft legislation. Administration officials cautioned against expecting quick, dramatic action, especially given the end-of-the-year fiscal crisis consuming most of Mr. Obama's time.

But the administration does have the makings of a plan on the shelf, with measures drafted by the Justice Department over the years but never advanced. Among other things, Democrats said they would push to renew an assault rifle ban that expired in 2004 and try to ban high-capacity magazines like those used by Mr. Lanza in Newtown. The president also said he would work with law enforcement and mental health professionals, as well as parents and educators.

The streets outside the memorial service and the airwaves across the nation were filled with voices calling for legislative action. By contrast, the National Rifle Association and its most prominent supporters in Congress were largely absent from the public debate.

"These events are happening more frequently," Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, the independent from Connecticut, said here before the service began, "and I worry that if we don't take a thoughtful look at them, we're going to lose the pain, the hurt and the anger that we have now."

Governor Malloy said on the CBS program "Face the Nation" that when someone can burst into a building with "clips of up to 30 rounds on a weapon that can almost instantaneously fire those, you have to start to question whether assault weapons should be allowed to be distributed the way they are in the United States."

The grieving in this small New England town, aired nonstop on national television, adding emotional energy to the pressure on a newly re-elected Democratic president who has largely avoided the issue during four years in the White House. Mr. Obama has long supported the restoration of the assault weapon ban, which first passed in 1994 only to set off a backlash among supporters of gun rights that helped cost Democrats control of Congress. Given that political history, he has never made a robust, sustained lobbying effort for it.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York, appearing on the NBC program "Meet the Press," all but demanded that Mr. Obama confront the prevalence of firearms in the nation. Mr. Bloomberg, an independent who gave his support to the president shortly before the November election partly on the basis of gun control, bluntly said he expected more of Mr. Obama.

"It's time for the president to stand up and lead," he said. "This should be his No. 1 agenda. He's president of the United States. And if he does nothing during his second term, something like 48,000 Americans will be killed with illegal guns."

Mr. Bloomberg added that it was no longer enough that Mr. Obama shared his position on banning assault weapons. "The president has to translate those views into action," he said. "His job is not just to be well-meaning. His job is to perform and to protect the American public."

While the Sunday programs were filled with politicians, mainly Democrats like Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, demanding stronger gun control, supporters of gun rights

were noticeably absent. David Gregory, the moderator of “Meet the Press,” said his program invited 31 senators who support gun rights to appear on Sunday. “We had no takers,” he said.

The National Rifle Association’s headquarters was closed Sunday and a spokesman could not be reached. A spokesman for Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican minority leader, said he had no comment, while Representative Eric Cantor, the Republican House majority leader, could not be reached.

Robert A. Levy, chairman of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute and one of the organizers behind a Supreme Court case that in 2008 enshrined a Second Amendment right for individuals to own guns, said Sunday that with more than 250 million guns already in circulation in the United States, restrictions on new weapons would make little difference. He said by e-mail that tough gun laws did not stop a mass shooting in Norway or regular violence in places like the District of Columbia.

“I’m skeptical about the efficacy of gun regulations imposed across the board — almost exclusively on persons who are not part of the problem,” he said. “To reduce the risk of multivictim violence, we would be better advised to focus on early detection and treatment of mental illness. An early detection regime might indeed be the basis for selective gun access restrictions that even the N.R.A. would support.”

Attention focused mainly on Mr. Obama, who has shied away from a major push on gun control, even after events like the shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson last year and the mass killing at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., this year. Some Democrats said the number of children involved in the Newtown massacre might change the dynamic but only if the president seizes the moment.

“Nothing’s going to happen here unless Obama decides to put it front and center,” said Steve Elmendorf, who was a top Democratic congressional aide in 1994 when lawmakers passed the now-expired assault weapon ban. “He’s not running for re-election. This is one of those moments where you have to decide, ‘I’m not going to sit here and examine the politics and I’m going to do what’s right.’ ”

In the interfaith ceremony here, clergy members quoted from Psalm 23, a Hebrew memorial chant and a Muslim prayer. The Rev. Matthew Crebbin, senior minister of the Newtown Congregational Church, said the message of the service was that “these darkest days in the life of our community will not be the final words heard from us.”

Some of the children in the audience of 1,700 clutched stuffed puppies handed out to them by the Red Cross. Some talked excitedly to one another about the coming holidays, their laughter a counterpoint to the sorrow of the service that followed.

In his 19-minute remarks, Mr. Obama said he had been reflecting on whether “we’re doing enough to keep our children, all of them, safe from harm.” He concluded: “If we’re honest with ourselves, the answer is no. We’re not doing enough.”

He concluded with biblical references and said the town reminds Americans of what should really matter. “Let the little children come to me, Jesus said, and do not hinder them,” Mr. Obama said. “For such belongs to the kingdom of Heaven.”

He then slowly read the names of the children who were killed on Friday as some in the audience sobbed, a haunting roll call of a class that will never convene again.

“God has called them all home,” the president said. “For those of us who remain, let us find the strength to carry on.”

*Mark Landler reported from Newtown, Conn., and Peter Baker from Washington.*