

The President Needs to Lead on Gun Safety

The terrible news from Connecticut has shaken the country and cannot help hit anybody who has children or once was a child particularly hard. Anybody who has sent their child to school with one last hug, or worse yet, without one last hug, and anybody who has gone to school assuming that they would safely return home that day can begin to understand what this must feel like for the families of those children. However, beginning to understand what the families are going through is about all the rest of us can do.

This shooting has already drawn attention to the need for better gun safety laws which is more apparent now than ever. It is clear that making guns harder to acquire, requiring better background checks and limiting the kinds of weapons that Americans can buy are among the kinds of issues that need to be addressed.

President Obama's promise to "use whatever power this office holds," to ensure that horrific shootings like this do not occur again, is the right promise to make. The question the President asked "are we really prepared to say that we're powerless in the face of such carnage, that the politics are too hard?" is the right question to ask. Obama's ability to follow through on this promise will be a test of his moral and political leadership. Passing meaningful gun safety laws will require the courage to take on powerful entrenched interests and to speak truth to NRA power, but it will also require deft political maneuvering to push national legislation through a congress in which one house is controlled by the Republicans and where Senate Republicans have enough votes to stop a cloture vote on key legislation.

Changing the regulations surrounding the ownership of guns would clearly be an extremely difficult task for Obama. It is possible that he will spend a lot of time, effort and political capital, but still fail. It is precisely for this reason that the President's decision about whether or not to seriously pursue gun safety regulations will define the feel of his entire second term.

Obama's first term was, according to most measures, reasonably mixed. Although Obama was a great improvement on his predecessor, he has been a good, but not great, president. A primary reason for this has been the timidity that characterized Obama's approach to both foreign and domestic policy. The major domestic pieces of legislation during his first term, the stimulus bill and health care reform, were not far reaching enough. Obama succeeded in passing something, but did not push hard enough and negotiate strongly enough against the Republicans. Similarly, on foreign policy he toned down some Bush era policies, but did not make a clear and needed break with the past in other areas. While this may be a simplification, the contrast between the boldness of Obama's 2008 campaign and timidity of his first term is apparent.

Making a serious effort to change gun laws will require Obama to shake off whatever timidity is left from his first term and begin his second term with the same audacity that propelled him to an unlikely election victory in 2008. Importantly, the moment to do this is now. The momentum has already begun

to shift as every day it seems that a previously committed supporter of unrestricted gun ownership and sales publicly states that he, and it is almost always he, is rethinking this. If Obama can force this issue onto the legislative agenda sooner rather than later it will have a better chance of passage.

Significantly, beginning his second term with a bold and progressive legislative success will increase his political strength and the perception that he won a mandate in November. More significantly, however, there is a political cost for Obama associated with inaction on gun safety issues. While fighting for this issue will put his political capital at risk, if Obama does nothing, his political capital will erode anyway, as it always does for newly reelected presidents. Doing nothing will also send a message to the President's adversaries that he has not changed and that his governance style remains overcautious and risk averse. Accordingly, they will continue to exploit this weakness as they negotiate with him on budget and other matters.

The country is approaching a tipping point on gun safety, just as we were on marriage equality a few years ago. President Obama can push the country more quickly to that tipping point or he can be paralyzed by excessive caution. If he chooses the former, win or lose on this issue, he will be remembered as a bold leader when these laws are inevitably reformed. If he chooses the latter, Obama will not fail politically in the short term, but will accomplish nothing on this issue and be remembered as a man whose fear of political defeat triumphed over what he knew to be the right thing.

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