

# Background Checks Should Not Be the End of the Gun Discussion

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President Obama's time in the White House is now more than half over. Presidential aspirants from both major parties are beginning to think more seriously about the 2016 campaign. Soon speculation about what Obama will do after leaving the White House will commence. Given his temperament, intellect and background, academia might be a good fit for Obama when he is no longer president. It is not hard to imagine Obama holding a position, and occasionally teaching at a prominent law school. For young law students, taking a course from Obama would be an extraordinary opportunity. However, if he offers a course on negotiating, students might be wiser to take that particular course from another instructor.

The recent efforts to reform our country's gun laws are only the latest example of this. At the center of the gun debate in Washington is the issue of background checks. Supporters of regulating gun ownership would like prospective gun owners to pass a background check, while opponents believe this would be an invasion of privacy and lead to a national registry of guns. It is worth noting, that a few months after the horrific killings at Sandy Hook, we are now debating whether somebody buying a gun should be able to avoid the scrutiny that many volunteer youth sports coaches now encounter. This is a long way from passing meaningful laws to keep our children, parents and each other safe from wanton shootings.

Background checks are a good idea but they are only a first step. Many of the tragic deaths from guns which we hear about every day would not have been prevented by background checks. Many killers do not have criminal records until they start shooting. Background checks would also do little to address the availability of the kinds of weapons which make these mass shootings possible.

A debate about background checks is something of a lose-lose proposition for advocates of gun regulation. If that proposal fails, it will be extremely difficult to pass any laws regulating gun ownership, but if it passes it will not be a big victory. Background checks will probably have only a modest impact on gun violence, but, because of the nature of the discussion and negotiations around the issue, will be seen as a significant concession by gun advocates.

Once again, the policy debate seems to be beginning with most of the concessions already made. This pattern is most familiar to Obama supporters from the negotiations around health care reform, but the general approach has permeated much of what the president has done on domestic politics. Instead of having a robust discussion of how to curb gun violence, we are

having a debate about right-wing fantasies of big brother with a list of all the gun owners in the country.

Taking on the NRA and their numerous supporters in the Republican Party is not easy, but being able to do things like that is a core of what it means to be a leader. Obama's basic approach to this has been risk averse, raising awareness about why it will be difficult and lowering expectations, rather than being bold or visionary. This is a mistake. As a second-term president who every day moves closer to lame duck status, there is little downside to taking risks, even if they lead to failure. Leading and forming public opinion, building support for gun regulation and passing something is the kind of thing, perhaps the only kind of thing, that can help Obama, or any second term president, remain at the center of policy making.

Stopping gun violence and making shootings like the one last December in Sandy Hook will require more than background checks for gun purchases. It will require legislation, public education and ultimately a change in the culture. None of these things will happen quickly, but the problem, and calls for various solutions are not new. It is already clear that the road from Sandy Hook to meaningful gun regulation will, at best, be a long and winding one.

Obviously background checks are a step in the right direction, but that is all they are. Seeing Obama embark on this negotiation process yet again, which will, at best, lead to an outcome that the White House will celebrate as a big victory, but which have little real impact, is a reminder of the damage Obama's timidity has done to his presidency. While the big picture impact of Obama's presidency, and the damage that John McCain or Mitt Romney would have wrought if they had won, cannot be overlooked, it remains true that Obama sacrificed the potential for true greatness and for charting a historic and progressive course for the country, to the altars of compromise and caution. The gun debate is many things, but it is also a profound reminder of this.