

I must confess that when I was asked to speak, I was unsure of the tone I should strike. My first impulse is almost always to focus on the positive. The American civil rights activist Cesar Chavez's memorable refrain "si se puede", or the version later adopted by Barack Obama, "yes we can", is usually my cup of tea, rhetorically as well as philosophically.

But on May 14, a despicable racist massacre at a supermarket in an African-American neighborhood in Buffalo left 10 innocents dead and thrust America's grievous problem with mass shootings back into the spotlight.

And then on May 24, Uvalde happened. Nineteen fourth-graders and two teachers mowed down by a gunman in an act of sheer cruelty and abject wantonness, just two days before the start of their summer vacation. This week, instead of celebrating, those 21 gentle souls now each lie in a casket. Their funerals have begun and will take place daily until June 16.

This rapid succession of two vile and senseless tragedies has left me beyond saddened. I stand before you seething with righteous anger over the depravity of not just the gunmen, but of a social system that would allow such acts of unmitigated suffering and wickedness time and time again.

And that they do take place with obscene frequency is as incontestable as it is perverse. Let me rattle off some numbers for you (these, from the Gun Violence Archive):

- As of Wednesday, with the killing of 4 people at a Tulsa hospital, there have now been 233 mass shootings in the US this year.
- Tulsa was this nation's twentieth mass shooting since the unspeakable tragedy in Uvalde eight days earlier.
- Mass shootings, where four or more people are injured or killed, have averaged more than one per day so far this year.
- Not a single week in 2022 has passed without at least four mass shootings taking place.
- And these tragic events are on the rise. In 2021, almost 700 mass shootings occurred, up from 611 in 2020 and 417 in 2019.
- This year is on pace to match last year's high, with 232 mass shootings during the first five months of 2022 versus 240 over the same period in 2021.

Truth is, the public policy arc from Sandy Hook in 2012 to Buffalo and Uvalde in 2022 has been a ten-year period of failure when it comes to gun control. Since Sandy Hook, this nation has experienced more than 3,500 mass shootings (again, according to the Gun Violence Archive). These tragedies have touched nearly every imaginable slice of American life. To wit:

- A Black church in Charleston, SC (2015).
- A government-funded nonprofit center in San Bernardino, CA (2015).
- A gay nightclub in Orlando, FL (2016).
- A country music festival in Las Vegas, NV (2017).

- A high school in Parkland, FL (2018).
- A synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA (2018).
- A Walmart in Hispanic El Paso, TX, followed just hours later by a popular nightlife corridor in Dayton, OH (2019).
- Three Asian-American spas in Atlanta (2021).

In the nearly decade-long stretch between Sandy Hook and both Buffalo and Uvalde, Congressional efforts to enact significant federal gun-control legislation have repeatedly come up short. Painfully short. Tragically short. Fatally short.

So, the question I must ask is the following: How will future historians treat this generation's patent inability to pass sensible gun laws that, much like Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, promote the safety of the general public?

Will they record that we, as a nation, watched 20 schoolchildren massacred (in the case of Sandy Hook) and then 19 more schoolchildren massacred (in the case of Uvalde) and did nothing at all?

The simple truth is we need an aggressive plan to tackle the rampant scourge of gun violence plaguing our nation. And we need it now. Too many innocents are dying. Too many families are being ripped apart by preventable acts of gun violence. Time and time again.

But how do we do this? Here are two modest proposals:

(1) First, we take a cue from the rest of the world. Australia, Britain, Canada, and others have enacted reforms that turned mass shootings into rare, aberrational events rather than everyday occurrences.

Australia is a case in point. Following its Port Arthur Massacre in 1996, the Australian government quickly banned semiautomatic firearms, introduced a successful gun-buyback scheme, implemented a national registry of gun owners, and embarked on an effective public education campaign about gun safety.

And those measures have been extremely successful. Last year, Australia marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the implementation of its sensible gun laws. In a country of 27 million, there are still a lot of guns in private hands (an estimated 3.5 million, in fact). But the number of mass shootings has declined precipitously. In the decade before Port Arthur, there had been 11 such incidents. In the quarter-century since, there have been just 3, the worst resulting in 6 fatalities.

(2) The second thing we must do is hold the obstructionists politically accountable!

Specifically, we must hold to account those *directly* responsible for our nation's failure to enact laws that would bring gun violence under control. It turns out the US House of Representatives *has* in recent years passed bills that would require (i) universal back ground checks, (ii) limitations on the purchase of military-style weapons, and (iii) crackdowns on gun shows and straw

purchases. But, Senate Republicans, backed by the gun lobby, have consistently stymied such efforts.

So these Senate Republicans are one obvious culprit. And the issue here isn't really the filibuster, which they've used to prevent a straight up or down vote on the reform bills passed by the House. Rather, it is that you can't find even 10 Republican Senators right now who are willing to do the right thing, the honorable thing, to care more about the lives of our nation's children than the flow of campaign contributions from a wealthy interest group.

Put simply, this cadre of Republican Senators has sold its soul to the gun lobby. They offer pious thoughts, prayers and excuses, but never concrete action.

As I see it, the only solution (admittedly no mean feat) is to drive these obstructionists from their perch of power and influence.

To do nothing in this respect is no longer an option. We have a moral imperative to model our gun-control laws after those of forward-thinking nations such as Australia. And a necessary condition for doing so is the infusion of new legislative actors who take seriously this tragically defining moment in American history.

Folks, we cannot allow "American Exceptionalism", to come to mean standing alone, on the periphery of the civilized world, in a collective willingness to accept mass shootings, including the massacre of innocent schoolchildren, as in some sense "normal".

In this dark hour of our national anguish we must redouble our effort to do the right thing. To enact sensible gun laws. To protect our neighbors, our friends, and our loved ones, especially our children. We can do this. We must do this. Si se puede! Yes we can!

Thank you.