

Mr. President, we had a wonderful event last night here in Washington that I was able to attend. It was a night honoring champions for anti-gun violence measures across the country. It was put on by Sandy Hook Promise, which is an organization that has grown up out of the tragedy in Sandy Hook. A number of parents have become the organizers of an effort to try to learn from what happened at Sandy Hook and make sure that we don't repeat the mistakes of the past.

We actually got to honor two of our colleagues there. We honored Senator *Pat Toomey* for his work 2 years ago on the background checks bill, as well as Senator *Stabenow*, who, of course, has been a great advocate for increasing resources in our mental health system. And as wonderful a night as it was to honor these champions of change, it also was a night in which we were reminded about that terrible terrible morning in December of 2012.

We watched a short video of the news coverage, and we listened to the parents of Daniel Barden and Dylan Hockley. The husband of Mary Sherlach talked to us about what their lives have been like in the years since that shooting at Sandy Hook.

I remember the hours and days after the shooting. I remember feeling like I needed to be really restrained about talking about the obvious policy issues that, to me, were due for airing and that sort of tumbled out of the facts surrounding that tragedy. I mean, this kid—this really troubled young man—he walked into a school with a semiautomatic weapon designed for the military and shot 20 kids in less than 5 minutes. This gun was designed for the military, designed to kill as many people as quickly as possible, and it killed every single kid it hit. There were 20 kids shot. Twenty kids were dead in a matter of minutes.

So it seemed obvious to me that we should have an immediate discussion about why this kind of gun is still legal. But I held back because it felt like the mourning and the grieving should take precedence over action. It took me only up to the first wake that I attended to realize I was wrong. Senator *Blumenthal* and I went to every single wake and every funeral that we could over the course of that first week—it was dozens.

At first, I remember waiting in a really long line, standing next to Senator *Blumenthal*. I remember like it was yesterday, talking to a sobbing mother, who was standing in front of us waiting in that line, telling us about how her child survived the shooting only because she had been sick that day and she stayed home from school. But all her daughters' friends were dead. As we approached that family, I remember struggling with what to say. I am lucky that my senior Senator, who sits behind me in the Chamber, had the right words ready. He said to the parents something like this: If you are ever ready or willing to talk about how we make sure that this doesn't happen again, we will be waiting. The dad didn't pause more than a few seconds before he said, clear as day: We're ready. Now.

In the years since, these mass shootings have become as commonplace as rain storms. Since 2011, the number of mass shootings in the United States has tripled--tripled. After each one, the forces of the status quo--the defenders of the gun industry--tell us we can't talk about

policy reform in the days after a shooting. One prominent commentator called those of us who dare talk about change in the wake of Charleston “sick”. How convenient that is. How convenient that, at the moment when the world is watching, when the country is asking itself what we can do to make sure another mass slaughter doesn't happen again, the rules say that we can't say a word.

But think about how these rules would work, because Charleston happens 10 times over, every single day, across this country. Eighty-six people die, on average, every day because of guns.

Last Thursday the families of Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Tywanza Sanders, Sharonda Coleman Singleton, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Susie Jackson, Daniel Lee Simmons, Sr., and DePayne Middleton-Doctor, they mourned the loss of their loved ones in Charleston.

But the day before, on Wednesday, the families of Angel Feliciano, and Malik Mercer, and Eric Ferguson, and Michael Kidd, Jr., and Thomas Whitaker, and Roy Brown, and Martarese Gentry, and Keith Battle, and Ronald Collins mourned their loss. And those were just nine. There were dozens more on Wednesday, the day before, who were killed by guns.

If we can't talk about anti-gun violence policy the day after a large number of Americans are shot, then you will never talk about anti-gun violence policy, because on average, 86 people die from gun violence every single day. But even if you accept that there is never a bad time to talk about how we can end this carnage, then we also have to have the courage to take on all of the other ridiculous arguments about why we can't act.

Now, the first one is familiar because it comes right after the mass shooting happens. It was a former NRA board member trotted this one out within hours of Charleston: He said that the solution was to just arm more pastors and parishioners in churches so that they can defend themselves. The more people that have guns, the less people will die from guns--goes this logic. So don't act.

The problem with that argument – that's a simple argument that more good guys with guns equals less gun deaths – the problem with that argument is it is a boldfaced lie. Study after study show that the more guns there are in a community, the more crime there is. The more guns, the more gun homicides. New evidence makes the case even clearer. As states more clearly separate between those with lax gun laws and those with stricter gun laws, we can look to see what happens.

The second argument is one that I have heard from my Republican colleagues in the Senate just in the last few days--that these laws can't stop a madman like Dylann Roof or Adam Lanza from perpetrating violence. Some of my colleagues say that our only recourse is to close our eyes and pray that this doesn't happen again. But again, these stubborn facts betray that argument. As I said, now that we have states that have loose gun laws and states that have tougher gun laws, we can see what happens. Over and over research shows us that jurisdictions that make it a little bit harder for bad guys to get guns have less gun deaths.

In my state of Connecticut, Johns Hopkins researchers concluded that our permit-to-carry laws have reduced gun crimes by 40 percent. Similarly, they concluded that in Missouri, the repeal of a similar laws increased gun homicides by 25 percent. Now, both studies controlled for all other possible factors influencing gun crimes, and they still found these shocking results.

While the facts are still fresh out of Charleston, there is evidence that a different set of laws could have--not would have—could have stopped Dylann Roof without having any effect on law-abiding gun owners in South Carolina.

Roof had charges pending for trespassing and drug crimes. Alone, neither of them would have disqualified him from owning a gun. But what if our laws were different so that multiple misdemeanors--a pattern of criminal behavior--disqualified you from buying a firearm? Or what about a permit-to-carry law?

Maybe local law enforcement knew enough about Roof--his criminal past or his association with extremist rightwing organizations--to know that he shouldn't carry a weapon. Now, maybe not, but if South Carolina had a permit-to-carry law, at least there would have been a chance that law enforcement would have withheld a permit from a young man as plainly unstable as Roof.

But even if you don't believe that any specific law could have prevented the tragedy in Charleston or in Newtown, I am not sure that it matters, because separate and aside from the specific case-by-case impact of any law is the collective moral and psychological effect of non-action. No matter how maligned Congress becomes, we still set the moral tone for the nation. When we declare something to be morally out of bounds, especially when we do it in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner, Americans listen. They take cues from our endorsements and from our approbations.

That is why, in my heart of hearts, I believe that our silence has made us complicit in these murders. I don't care that an assault weapons ban or universal background check maybe wouldn't have stopped the slaughter in Charleston. When we do nothing year after year, our silence sends a silent message of endorsement to the killers. I am not saying we are in conscious alignment with these assassins, but when all we do in the wake of Newtown, and Tucson, and Aurora, and Charleston is rhetorical, then those on the fringe, those hanging on the edge of reason, those contemplating the unthinkable take a cue that we don't really mean it when we condemn mass violence, because if we did, we would at the very least, try to do something--anything--to stop it, and we don't.

Quite frankly, Mr. President, removing one flag from one building in South Carolina doesn't cut it, and neither does a handful of retailers ceasing to sell Confederate flag paraphernalia. Don't get me wrong. I actually think the tidal wave of sentiment to remove the last vestiges of this symbol of slavery and racism is significant. That flag has quietly endorsed conscious and subconscious racism, particularly in the South--but really all across the country--for as long as it has been perceived as a mainstream American symbol.

The events of the last few days are also important because they show that people of all political stripes—that conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans--have been so emotionally moved by the shooting in Charleston that they were inspired to some sort of action. That matters.

But removing the Confederate flag is a necessary but totally, completely insufficient response to Charleston. Taking down a flag from a building is a pretty easy giveback. Deciding to spend billions of dollars to make sure that troubled young men get the help they need for a sickness is harder, and so is taking on the gun industry and listening to the 90 percent of Americans who want to make sure that criminals aren't a continued profit center for the gun makers and sellers.

Now, Walmart should be congratulated for ceasing sales of the Confederate flag, but they still advertise an assault weapon online that even their description concedes is designed for use by law enforcement and the military. Did you know that last year there were at least 92 shootings in Walmarts? 16 people died in Walmarts? 42 people were injured by guns in Walmarts? Getting rid of the Confederate flag from their shelves isn't going to help that unbelievably disturbing trend line.

So we need real action, a real debate. We need real, honest policy to happen here. And no, it's not all about guns. It's about mental health, it's about law enforcement, and it's about a culture of violence and hate that we have just become immune to.

In South Carolina, Reverend Pinckney knew something about real action. He supported things like expanded background checks and body cameras for police, maybe because he came from a family of action. His father and grandfather were both pastors who fought to end White-only political primaries and segregated school busing. He wasn't just about condemnation. He lived his life to effectuate political change.

Last night, at the Sandy Hook Promise dinner, I chatted with my friend Mark Barden. His son, Daniel, massacred at Sandy Hook Elementary School by a young man wielding a military-style assault weapon with cartridges of 30 bullets apiece, would have just finished third grade last week. Mark recalled how special Danny was and how Daniel, just 6 years old, lived a life of action, too. Daniel was that kid who sensed when other children were hurting. His dad told me last night how Daniel would see little kids sitting alone at lunch with no one to talk to, and Daniel would go over, sit down next to them, and make a new friend, just because it was the right thing to do.

Reverend Pinckney and little Daniel Barden knew the difference between words and actions. They understood that actions are what really count.

The U.S. gun homicide rate is 20 times higher than that of our 22 peer nations. And 86 people die every day from guns--that is 4 Sandy Hooks, 10 Charleston's every day. Since Sandy Hook, there has been a school shooting, on average, every week.

How on Earth can we live with ourselves if we do nothing, or worse, if we don't even try.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.