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Barack Obama

Navy Yard Shooting Memorial Address

Delivered 22 September 2013, The Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Secretary Hagel, Secretary Mabus, Admirals Greenert and Hilarides, Mayor Gray, leaders from across this city and our Armed Forces, to all the outstanding first responders, and, most of all, the families whose hearts have been broken:

We cannot begin to comprehend your loss. We know that no words we offer today are equal to the magnitude, to the depths of that loss. But we come together as a grateful nation to honor your loved ones, to grieve with you, and to offer, as best we can, some solace and comfort.

On the night that we lost Martin Luther King Jr. to a gunman's bullet, Robert Kennedy stood before a stunned and angry crowd in Indianapolis and he broke the terrible news. And in the anguish of that moment, he turned to the words of an ancient Greek poet, Aeschylus:

*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.*

Pain which cannot forget -- drop by drop upon the heart.



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The tragedy and the pain that brings us here today is extraordinary. It is unique. The lives that were taken from us were unique. The memories their loved ones carry are unique, and they will carry them and endure long after the news cameras are gone. But part of what wears on as well is the sense that this has happened before. Part of what wears on us, what troubles us so deeply as we gather here today, is how this senseless violence that took place in the Navy Yard echoes other recent tragedies.

As President, I have now grieved with five American communities ripped apart by mass violence: Fort Hood. Tucson. Aurora. Sandy Hook. And now, the Washington Navy Yard. And these mass shootings occur against a backdrop of daily tragedies, as an epidemic of gun violence tears apart communities across America -- from the streets of Chicago to neighborhoods not far from here.

And so, once again, we remember our fellow Americans who were just going about their day doing their jobs, doing what they loved -- in this case, the unheralded work that keeps our country strong and our Navy the finest fleet in the world. These patriots doing their work that they were so proud of, and who have now been taken away from us by unspeakable violence.

Once more we come together to mourn the lives of beauty and to comfort the wonderful families who cherished them. Once more we pay tribute to all who rushed towards the danger, who risked their lives so others might live, and who are in our prayers today, including Officer Scott Williams. Once more our hearts are broken. Once more we ask why. Once more we seek strength and wisdom through God's grace.

You and your families, this Navy family, are still in the early hour of your grief. And I'm here today to say that there is nothing routine about this tragedy. There is nothing routine about your loss. Your loved ones will not be forgotten. They will endure in the hearts of the American people and in the hearts of the Navy that they helped to keep strong, and the hearts of their coworkers and their friends and their neighbors.

"I want them to know how she lived," Jessica Gaarde said of her mother Kathy. "She is not a number, or some statistic." None of these 12 fellow Americans are statistics. Today, I want every American to see how these men and women lived. You may have never met them, but you know them. They're your neighbors -- like Arthur Daniels, out there on the weekend, polishing his white Crown Victoria; and Kenneth Proctor, with his beloved yellow Mustang, who, if you asked, would fix your car, too.

She was the friendly face at the store. Sylvia Frasier, with her unforgettable gold hair, who took a second job at Walmart because, she said, she just loved working with people. She was the diehard fan you sat next to at the game. Kathy Gaarde loved her hockey and her Caps, a season ticket holder for 25 years.



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They were the volunteers who made your community better. Frank Kohler, giving dictionaries to every third-grader in his county; Marty Bodrog, leading the children's Bible study at church. They lived the American Dream -- like Kisan Pandit, who left everything he knew in India for this land of opportunity, and raised a wonderful family and dedicated himself to the United States Navy. They were proud veterans -- like Gerald Read, who wore the Army uniform for more than 25 years; and Michael Arnold, who became one of the Navy's leading architects, of whom a colleague said, "nobody knew those ships like him."

They were dedicated fathers -- like Mike Ridgell, coaching his daughter's softball teams, joining Facebook just to keep up with his girls, one of whom said, "he was always the cool dad." They were loving mothers -- like Mary Francis Knight, devoted to her daughters, and who had just recently watched with joy as her older daughter got married. They were doting grandparents -- like John Johnson, always smiling, giving bear hugs to his 10 grandchildren, and who would have welcomed his 11th grandchild this fall.

These are not statistics. They are the lives that have been taken from us. This is how far a single act of violence can ripple. A husband has lost his wife. Wives have lost their husbands. Sons and daughters have lost their moms and their dads. Little children have lost their grandparents. Hundreds in our communities have lost a neighbor, and thousands here have lost a friend.

As has been mentioned, for one family, the Daniels family, old wounds are ripped open again. Priscilla has lost Arthur, her husband of 30 years. Only a few years ago, as Mayor Gray indicated, another shooting took the life of their son, just 14 years old. "I can't believe this is happening again," Priscilla says.

So these families have endured a shattering tragedy. It ought to be a shock to us all as a nation and as a people. It ought to obsess us. It ought to lead to some sort of transformation. That's what happened in other countries when they experienced similar tragedies. In the United Kingdom, in Australia, when just a single mass shooting occurred in those countries, they understood that there was nothing ordinary about this kind of carnage. They endured great heartbreak, but they also mobilized and they changed, and mass shootings became a great rarity.

And yet, here in the United States, after the round-of-clock coverage on cable news, after the heartbreaking interviews with families, after all the speeches and all the punditry and all the commentary, nothing happens. Alongside the anguish of these American families, alongside the accumulated outrage so many of us feel, sometimes I fear there's a creeping resignation that these tragedies are just somehow the way it is, that this is somehow the new normal.

We can't accept this. As Americans bound in grief and love, we must insist here today there is nothing normal about innocent men and women being gunned down where they work. There is nothing normal about our children being gunned down in their classrooms. There is nothing normal about children dying in our streets from stray bullets.



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No other advanced nation endures this kind of violence -- none. Here in America, the murder rate is three times what it is in other developed nations. The murder rate with guns is ten times what it is in other developed nations. And there is nothing inevitable about it. It comes about because of decisions we make or fail to make. And it falls upon us to make it different.

Sometimes it takes an unexpected voice to break through, to help remind us what we know to be true. And we heard one of those voices last week. Dr. Janis Orłowski's team at Medstar Washington Hospital Center treated the wounded. And in the midst of one of her briefings, she spoke with heartbreaking honesty as somebody who sees, daily and nightly, the awful carnage of so much violence. We are a great country, she said, but "there's something wrong." All these shootings, all these victims, she said, "this is not America." "It is a challenge to all of us," she said, and "we have to work together to get rid of this."

And that's the wisdom we should be taking away from this tragedy and so many others -- not accepting these shootings as inevitable, but asking what can we do to prevent them from happening again and again and again. I've said before, we cannot stop every act of senseless violence. We cannot know every evil that lurks in troubled minds. But if we can prevent even one tragedy like this, save even one life, spare other families what these families are going through, surely we've got an obligation to try.

It's true that each of the tragedies I've mentioned is different. And in this case, it's clear we need to do a better job of securing our military facilities and deciding who gets access to them. And as Commander in Chief, I have ordered a review of procedures up and down the chain, and I know that Secretary Hagel is moving aggressively on that. As a society, it's clear we've got to do a better job of ensuring that those who need mental health care actually get it, and that in those efforts we don't stigmatize those who need help. Those things are clear, and we've got to move to address them.

But we Americans are not an inherently more violent people than folks in other countries. We're not inherently more prone to mental health problems. The main difference that sets our nation apart, what makes us so susceptible to so many mass shootings, is that we don't do enough -- we don't take the basic, common-sense actions to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and dangerous people. What's different in America is it's easy to get your hands on gun -- and a lot of us know this. But the politics are difficult, as we saw again this spring. And that's sometimes where the resignation comes from -- the sense that our politics are frozen and that nothing will change.

Well, I cannot accept that. I do not accept that we cannot find a common-sense way to preserve our traditions, including our basic Second Amendment freedoms and the rights of law-abiding gun owners, while at the same time reducing the gun violence that unleashes so much mayhem on a regular basis. And it may not happen tomorrow and it may not happen next week, it may not happen next month -- but it will happen. Because it's the change that we need, and it's a change overwhelmingly supported by the majority of Americans.



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By now, though, it should be clear that the change we need will not come from Washington, even when tragedy strikes Washington. Change will come the only way it ever has come, and that's from the American people. So the question now is not whether, as Americans, we care in moments of tragedy. Clearly, we care. Our hearts are broken -- again. And we care so deeply about these families. But the question is, do we care enough?

Do we care enough to keep standing up for the country that we know is possible, even if it's hard, and even if it's politically uncomfortable? Do we care enough to sustain the passion and the pressure to make our communities safer and our country safer? Do we care enough to do everything we can to spare other families the pain that is felt here today?

Our tears are not enough. Our words and our prayers are not enough. If we really want to honor these 12 men and women, if we really want to be a country where we can go to work, and go to school, and walk our streets free from senseless violence, without so many lives being stolen by a bullet from a gun, then we're going to have to change. We're going to have to change.

On Monday morning, these 12 men and women woke up like they did every day. They left home and they headed off to work. Gerald Read's wife Cathy said, "See you tonight for dinner." And John Johnson looked at his wife Judy and said what he always said whenever they parted, "Goodbye beautiful. I love you so much."

"Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What Robert Kennedy understood, what Dr. King understood, what all our great leaders have always understood, is that wisdom does not come from tragedy alone or from some sense of resignation in the fallibility of man. Wisdom comes through the recognition that tragedies such as this are not inevitable, and that we possess the ability to act and to change, and to spare others the pain that drops upon our hearts. So in our grief, let us seek that grace. Let us find that wisdom. And in doing so, let us truly honor these 12 American patriots.

May God hold close the souls taken from us and grant them eternal peace. May He comfort and watch over these families. And may God grant us the strength and the wisdom to keep safe our United States of America.