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Biden responds to mass shootings in the US: Empty words and political diversions

Speaking the day after the fourth highly publicized mass shooting in the United States in barely three weeks, President Joe Biden announced a series of executive actions to limit the availability of firearms that amount to a Band-Aid over a gaping wound.

Biden directed the Department of Justice (DoJ) to write a rule to require companies selling kits for building guns to include serial numbers on the parts. Gun control groups had labelled the weapons “ghost guns” because they cannot be traced if they are used in violent crimes. This is a purely symbolic action, as these do-it-yourself weapons account for only a tiny fraction of all guns sold in America each year.



Police outside the office building where the shooting occurred in Orange, California on March 31, 2021. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The department will also issue a proposed rule to tighten regulations on pistol-stabilizing braces and designate pistols using such braces as short-barreled rifles, which would subject them to greater regulation and require a federal license. The mass shooter in Boulder, Colorado, who opened fired in a King Soopers market March 22, used such a weapon.

The DoJ is also directed to publish sample “red flag” bills for states that want to pass such legislation, permitting police or relatives of a disturbed person to petition the courts to limit their purchase of firearms. Biden also instructed the department to issue a comprehensive report on gun trafficking, a routine bookkeeping operation blocked by Republican administrations and Republican congresses.

Biden also urged Congress to pass a national “red flag” law, claiming that it would help prevent suicides, domestic violence and mass shootings, as well as legislation to end the legal immunity that gun-makers have from being sued for shootings in which their weapons are used.

The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act bestowed legal immunity on the gun manufacturers, unlike any other industry in the United States. It was enacted in 2005 after New York City and other cities and states began suing manufacturers for damage caused by their weapons. The bill was pushed through a Republican-controlled Congress and signed into law by Republican President George W. Bush.

Democrats, however, played a key role in passage of the legislation, which could have been blocked by a filibuster in the Senate were it not for the support of 14 Senate Democrats, including the party leader and future Majority Leader Harry Reid. Some 49 Democrats supported the bill in the House, including some still prominent in Congress, like Tim Ryan and Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, Peter DeFazio of Oregon, and David Scott and Sanford Bishop of Georgia.

Biden’s appeal to Congress has a purely rhetorical character. As in 2005, he knows that the 2021 Congress has a clear majority in the Senate opposed to any legislation that could be portrayed as an infringement on “gun rights.” While the Democrats in 2005 would not filibuster against the legislation giving immunity to the gun industry, Republicans (and

some Democrats) in 2021 would certainly filibuster against repealing this 2005 sweetheart deal for the gun manufacturers.

The White House announced one other action on guns Thursday, the nomination of former federal agent David Chipman to head the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). Chipman, who spent 25 years as an ATF special agent, retired from the bureau and went to work for the gun control group Everytown for Gun Safety, funded by billionaire Michael Bloomberg. He has worked for the last five years as an adviser for the gun-control group Giffords, established by the former Arizona congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who was shot and severely wounded in a mass shooting in 2011.

The ATF has not had a permanent director since 2015. Trump nominated the head of the Fraternal Order of Police, Chuck Canterbury, in 2019, then withdrew the nomination after some Republican senators objected that Canterbury was too “soft” on the defense of gun rights.

Biden offered emotional but empty rhetoric about the prevalence of gun violence in the United States in his speech Thursday. He criticized members of Congress, saying, “They’ve offered plenty of thoughts and prayers. ... But they’ve passed not a single new federal law to reduce gun violence.”

It was only a few months ago, however, that Biden was declaring that he wanted a “strong Republican Party” and that this was necessary to maintain the stability of the American political system. He can hardly complain now when the Republican Party does what it has done for decades, obeying its paymasters in the gun lobby, and siding with fascistic “gun rights” groups.

The focus on the weapons is itself a gigantic diversion from the social and political roots of widespread gun violence, which is a product of the systematic promotion of violence and militarism in American society. The US government spends nearly \$1 trillion a year on weapons and soldiers to use them. Militarism saturates the American media and culture. The police, supposedly bearing arms to protect the population, kill more than 1,000 people every year, more than three a day. It should shock no one that under these conditions disturbed individuals respond to crises in their lives by taking up weapons and using them.

Biden, of course, will no more curb American militarism than he will flap his wings and fly to the Moon. He has already unleashed American missile strikes against targets in Syria, supposedly in retaliation for an attack on US forces stationed in Iraq. His administration is openly threatening military action against Iran, China and Russia on a variety of pretexts, and his military budget will match the vast sums already allocated with bipartisan support under Trump.

As for the social causes behind individual eruptions of violence, investigating them would require adopting a ruthlessly critical attitude towards capitalism, which Biden and all the corporate politicians defend, Democratic or Republican. It is the profit system that underlies the dehumanization and alienation and brutality that pervade American society, well before the eruption of the coronavirus pandemic added the weight of 570,000 needless deaths.

The Biden press appearance both followed and preceded violent events, which unroll in America like a nightmare horror movie that never ends.

In South Carolina Wednesday, Philip Adams, a former National Football League player, killed a physician neighbor, the doctor's wife, their two grandchildren, and someone working on their yard, then turned his gun on himself. Police have not yet found any professional link between the doctor and Adams, but Adams's father said that years of playing football had damaged his son's brain and contributed to the mass killing.

Barely an hour after the Biden event, a gunman opened fire inside a warehouse in Bryan, Texas, killing one person and wounding four others. No further details were available as of this writing, except that the gunman had fled the scene and was later confronted by police and taken prisoner after a gunfight in which a policeman and the gunman were both wounded.

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