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## Connecticut school shooting: President Barack Obama girds for a gun fight

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As Americans lay to rest the “beautiful children” and their teachers to whom President Barack Obama paid tearful tribute at Sunday’s prayer vigil in Newtown, Conn., many are asking: *What now?* After the shock, tears, heart-tugging memorials and prayers, will this latest and most traumatic slaughter of innocents in the nation’s gun-haunted history finally rouse political leaders to turn grief into action?

Certainly, Obama seems prepared to press Congress for stiffer gun control, and that is an encouraging sign. “We can’t tolerate this any more,” he told the weeping families of 20 children and six staff from Sandy Hook Elementary School. “These tragedies must end .... We must change.” Gun control is part of the needed change. So is paying closer attention to mental health issues and access to lethal weapons.

Yet while Obama may be moved to try to address America’s malaise, and its 30,000 gun deaths a year, his call to “meaningful action” had a sadly familiar ring. After the shootings in Tucson, Ariz., last year that killed six and injured Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, he said Americans “cannot and will not be passive in the face of such violence.” And in Aurora, Colo., where 12 died in a movie theatre slaughter earlier this year, he expressed the hope that Americans would “all reflect on how we can do something about some of the senseless violence.”

Americans are quick to decry, as Obama did, the “indescribable violence ... unconscionable evil” of mass shootings such as the one at Columbine in 1999, where 13 died, or Virginia Tech in 2007, where 32 were killed. Politicians vilify the murderers, praise the bravery of those who try to resist the killers, and grieve victims. But follow-through rarely happens. There is scant will in Congress to effect reform. Republicans fiercely resist gun control and Democrats run scared of the gun lobby. The Supreme Court has upheld gun rights. And sadly, popular American culture glorifies violence and the right to bear arms. This dynamic makes it hard to be optimistic.

Canadians have no reason to be smug, of course. Despite our far tougher gun laws, we have had our own horrors including the rampage at Montreal’s École Polytechnique. We feel Newtown’s grief. Moreover, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative government is witlessly rolling back gun control here.

Yet despite the hurdles in the U.S., Newtown may yet be a turning point. A majority of Americans, 54 per cent, now favour tougher gun laws, a five-year high. Speaking for many, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said “It’s time for the President, I think, to stand up and lead, and tell this country what we should do.” Even Sen. Joe Manchin, a leading pro-gun Democrat, wants tougher laws, saying “never before have we seen our babies slaughtered.”

Sanity begins, as California Senator Dianne Feinstein has bluntly and rightly pointed out, by getting “weapons of war” off the streets.

As a start, Congress should revive a 1994 ban on high-powered, military-type “assault” weapons that expired in 2004. No one needs such a weapon for self-defence, hunting or target practice. It should ban high-capacity magazines of the sort used at Newtown; they make even regular semi-automatic handguns and rifles all the more lethal.

There’s a need as well for stricter background checks on people who apply for permits to buy guns, including those with a history of mental illness. The courts should prosecute those who lie during the process. Longer waiting periods should be mandatory. And loopholes in the background check laws that exempt gun shows and antique weapons ought to be closed.

Even the stiffest gun laws cannot prevent determined murderers from killing. Not in a nation awash with 250 million guns. But they can put licensing hurdles in the way, keep the deadliest weapons out of the public’s hands, and limit their firepower. That would save lives. It is the place to begin to reverse the madness.



A mourner leaves the funeral service of Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victim, Jack Pinto, 6, Monday.

DAVID GOLDMAN/AP