

Gov. Phil Scott:

On February 16, I was in my office preparing for the day ahead, when everything changed. That morning, I was handed a document containing charges against an 18-year-old, outlining his detailed plan to carry out a school shooting here in Vermont.

Just two days earlier, we had all witnessed the atrocity in Parkland Florida leaving 17 innocent people – Fourteen children and 3 teachers – dead.

As I read the 13-page affidavit, I was alarmed to learn just how close we came to the same tragic fate the people of Parkland faced.

The details were shocking, as the young man had been planning a shooting undetected for months.

He had what I would describe as a kill list and had researched the High School's calendar to know the best time to carry out his plan, which he detailed in a diary entitled, "The Journal of an Active Shooter."

His goal was to have more kills than the Virginia Tech shooting, where 32 innocent victims were murdered.

As I processed this information, I was shocked. Just 24 hours before – even in the aftermath of Parkland – I thought, as the safest state in the nation, Vermont was immune to this type of violence.

As I've said many times throughout my political life, public safety is the top priority of government – a responsibility I take seriously as Governor. Sitting there, I realized, only by the grace of God did we avert a horrific outcome.

Had this potential shooter followed through, overnight, we would've gone from one of the safest states in the country, to among the deadliest.

For a split second, I felt relieved. We had a close call, but just like the ones we've all experienced in our own lives – like a near-miss on the highway – we say to ourselves, "I'll never do that again." This is one of those moments where, as a state, we have the opportunity to do things differently.

The reality of how close we came to a tragedy like Florida forced me to do some soul searching. I've hunted and fished my entire life. I've got a safe full of guns, including the one I got when I was 13. As a state senator, Lt. Governor and Governor, I never felt the need to change our gun laws here in Vermont. I believed, since we were such a small, tightknit state, that we were different and somewhat insulated from the violence the rest of the world was seeing.

But I was wrong. And that's not always easy to admit.

I support the Second Amendment, but I had to ask myself, "are we truly doing everything we can to make our kids and communities safer?" Because if we're at a point where our kids are afraid to go to school, and parents are afraid to put them on a bus; or police don't have the tools they need to protect victims of violence; or families can't step in to prevent a loved one from taking their own life; then who are we?

The answers to those crucial questions forced me to reconsider, and after deep reflection, change some of my own views.

And so, I encouraged a conversation about how to better identify and treat mental health needs and root causes of violence, determine why so many kids slip through the cracks, and have an open dialog about gun safety, including access to guns by those who shouldn't have them.

One week after the young man's arrest in Fair Haven – eight days after the shooting in Parkland – I presented an [action plan](#), outlining steps to enhance school and community safety. At my direction, state police and local law enforcement completed a safety assessment of all schools and will report their findings within the week.

I want to thank the Legislature for working with me to allocate \$5 million for school security grants, so we can immediately invest in the safety of our kids.

My action plan also called for the Legislature to follow through on my request to upgrade our mental health system and expand our outreach program. I asked for the media's support in facilitating a "see something, say something" campaign, and for legislation to protect those who do speak up.

And, I'll sign an Executive Order to create a Violence Prevention Task Force. This group will include a range of perspectives and experts in the areas of public safety, education, security, gun rights, health and mental health, and more. And, its charge will be to identify strategies to help prevent violence in communities and schools.

This is not the time to hit the brakes because this critical work must continue!

I also called for legislative action on gun safety reforms that, from my standpoint, are reasonable and do not infringe upon second amendment rights. And that brings me to why we're here today.

I know these discussions have been difficult, emotional and complex – barriers that frequently lead to inaction. But this is not the time to do what's easy, it's the time do what's right.

I want every student in every school, every mom and dad, every victim of violence – in any form – to know today, we stand together as we take a step towards making our communities safer, for all of us.

With S.221, we'll provide Vermonters with a lifesaving tool to help reduce gun tragedies, such as suicides or murders.

With H.422, we'll give victims of domestic violence – who've endured unthinkable abuses – added protections, and a greater sense of security.

Both of these new laws had unanimous support from both sides of the aisle, as well as consensus among sportsmen and victims' rights groups. They will help keep guns out of the hands of those who should not have them, which is why I thought it was so important for the Legislature to move forward on these issues, and I thank everyone for their work.

Additionally, we are also here today to sign S.55. With this bill, we'll adopt gun safety reforms that will help protect and strengthen our communities.

While I know many celebrate the passage of each of these bills, I also acknowledge some do not, and I understand your frustration. So, I want to take a moment to ensure the facts are clear:

S. 55 includes gun safety provisions relating to background checks, bump stocks, magazine capacity and safety training requirements for those purchasing guns under the age of 21.

This legislation extends our existing background check process to private sales, with an exception for sales between family members – a reasonable extension of existing law to close the so called “parking lot loophole.”

What it does not do, is take away your guns, period. Nor does it take away magazines of any size. If you purchased them in Vermont before October 1, you can keep them.

S. 55 does not change possession laws. Our youth can still take part in hunting and recreational shooting, just like they do today.

While S.55 changes the age to purchase firearms from 18 to 21. Eighteen-year-olds can still purchase a gun if they are a member of law enforcement or the military or have completed a firearm safety course as approved by the Commissioner of Fish and Wildlife.

I want to be absolutely clear: I believe these measures will make a difference. And I firmly believe each and every one of them is consistent with both the United States and Vermont Constitutions.

I took an oath to uphold those documents — an oath I take very seriously. If I thought anything in this legislation limited Vermonters' rights, I would not sign it.

I know, no single law or combination of laws guarantee we will never see a mass shooting or other acts of violence. And as I've said before, this discussion is not, and cannot be, just about guns.

Our nation is struggling though a mental health crisis that threatens our future and affects our young people in disproportionate and heartbreaking ways.

Today in America, one in five people under the age of 26 struggle with a mental illness or disorder, while another 10 million of our youth will go untreated, or undiagnosed.

And sadly, in our country, the second leading cause of death among people age 10 to 24, is suicide.

As well, we see the effects of an opioid epidemic that knows no boundaries; that does not discriminate between rich or poor, young or old, black or white.

For more than a decade we've watched as the abuse of prescription drugs and heroin have eroded our communities, stolen once bright futures and ripped apart lives as overdose deaths rise across the state.

We must continue to work together to address these public health issues.

But that still won't be enough. As a society, we should all reflect on how we treat each other and the example we're setting for our kids. Because I believe our violence issue is fueled by our anger issue.

Today in America, too many of our fellow citizens – on both sides of every issue, not just on guns – have given up on listening, deciding to no longer consider other opinions, viewpoints or perspectives.

Our national dialogue has been reduced to angry, hateful social media posts that you can either “like” or not, with no room for conversation or respectful disagreement, and where facts and details no longer seem to matter.

We would be naïve to believe that the way we talk to each other, the way we treat each other, and the rise of violence are exclusive to one another.

Do we honestly think that the erosion of civility and respect for others is in some way unrelated to the type of violence and disregard for human lives we're seeing?

As Governor, as a Vermonter, as an American and as a dad, I am unwilling to accept any of this.

We must do better.

The idea that consensus and compromise is somehow unacceptable; that one side is always totally right or all wrong; that we can't debate the issues and find common ground or agree to disagree, respectfully; and that the growing divide is a dark place, where the embers of hate and bigotry and blame can grow.

These things are hurting our nation.

This is not a new trend and it's not related to any one issue or one party. Yet, in my opinion, we've reached an unacceptable and potentially dangerous point where our debates and activism have turned intensely and unduly personal. Sometimes, downright hateful.

We can't forget our children are watching how we engage with one another. It begs the questions: what are they seeing? What kind of role models are we?

Online insults, slurs and angry exchanges between people who've never met are far too common. Many say things online they'd never say face to face.

On cable news channels, so-called "experts" yell at each other, totally unwilling to acknowledge the viewpoint of others, much less learn from it.

We, as adults, are failing to teach our children how to handle important, often complex, conversations. Even how to treat people with whom you disagree, understanding all points of view and treating others the way you want to be treated.

I know, I am not alone. I know there are thousands of Vermonters who feel the way I do – that know we need to rise above it, treat each other better, even when we disagree.

If we can reduce the polarization we're seeing across the country, we can diminish some of the anger at the root of these larger challenges. And this must be part of our ongoing pursuit to reduce violence and make our communities safer.

Now, I recognize how hard it is for some to understand my change of heart on our gun laws, let alone come to the same conclusions I've reached. And that many who voted for me are disappointed and angry.

I understand I may lose support over the decision to sign these bills today.

Those are consequences I'm prepared to live with.

But, if we had not even *tried* to reduce the possibility of a tragedy here in Vermont, like Parkland or Virginia Tech, Aurora, Las Vegas, Orlando, Sandy Hook, Dallas, or Charleston.

If we didn't try to reduce suicide and the pain felt by the family left behind.

Or if we didn't try to prevent another death from domestic violence and another child growing up without a mother – that would be hard to live with.

That's why today we choose action, over inaction. Doing something, over doing nothing.

Knowing, that there will always be more work to do, today we chose to try.

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