News

President Joe Biden speaks about the latest round of mass shootings, from the East Room of the White House in Washington June 2, 2022. Biden is attempting to increase pressure on Congress to pass stricter gun limits after such efforts failed following past outbreaks. (Evan Vucci/AP)

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WASHINGTON (AP) — "Enough, enough," President Joe Biden exclaimed over and over as he delivered an impassioned address to the nation imploring Congress to take action against gun violence after mass shootings he said had turned schools, supermarkets and other everyday places into "killing fields."

If legislators fail to act, he warned, voters should use their "outrage" to turn it into a central issue in November's midterm elections.

Speaking at the White House on June 2, Biden acknowledged the stiff political headwinds as he sought to drive up pressure on Congress to pass stricter gun limits after such efforts failed following past attacks.

He repeated calls to restore a ban on the sale of assault-style weapons and high-capacity magazines — and said if Congress won't embrace all of his proposals, it must at least find compromises like keeping firearms from those with mental health issues or raising the age to buy assault-style weapons from 18 to 21.

"How much more carnage are we willing to accept?" Biden asked after last week's shootings by an 18-year-old gunman, who killed 19 students and two teachers at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, and another attack Wednesday in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where a gunman shot and killed four people and himself at a medical office. "Don't tell me raising the age won't make a difference," he said.

The most recent shootings came close on the heels of the May 14 assault in Buffalo, New York, where a white 18-year-old wearing military gear and livestreaming with a helmet camera opened fire with a rifle at a supermarket in a predominantly Black neighborhood, killing 10 people and wounding three others in what authorities described as "racially motivated violent extremism."

"This time we have to take the time to do something," Biden said, calling out the Senate, where 10 Republican votes would be needed to pass legislation.

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For all the passion of Biden's address, and for all his big asks and smaller fallback alternatives, any major action by Congress is still a long shot.

"I know how hard it is, but I'll never give up, and if Congress fails, I believe this time a majority of the American people won't give up either," he added. "I believe the majority of you will act to turn your outrage into making this issue central to your vote."

Adding a stark perspective to young people's deaths, he noted that Centers for Disease Control data shows "guns are the number one killer of children in the United States of America," ahead of car crashes.

"Over the last two decades, more school-age children have died from guns than on-duty police officers and active-duty military — combined," he said.

Aware of persistent criticism from gun-rights advocates, Biden insisted his appeal wasn't about "vilifying gun owners" or "taking away anybody's guns."

"We should be treating responsible gun owners as an example of how every gun owner should behave," Biden said. "This isn't about taking away anyone's rights, it's about protecting children, it's about protecting families."

He called on Congress to end "outrageous" protections for gun manufacturers, which severely limit their liability over how their firearms are used, comparing it to the tobacco industry, which has faced repeated litigation over its products' role in causing cancer and other diseases.

"Imagine if the tobacco industry had been immune from being sued, where we'd be today," Biden said.

All major broadcast networks broke away from regular programing to carry Biden's remarks at 7:30 p.m. EDT, before the start of prime-time shows.

Biden has given major speeches on the coronavirus pandemic and the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. But the president has used such addresses sparingly during his nearly 18 months in office, especially during evening hours.

President Joe Biden arrives to speak about the latest round of mass shootings, from the East Room of the White House in Washington on June 2, 2022. (Evan Vucci/AP)

Earlier Thursday, Vice President Kamala Harris spoke about the Oklahoma shooting, saying, "All of us hold the people of Tulsa in our hearts, but we also reaffirm our commitment to passing commonsense gun safety laws."

"No more excuses. Thoughts and prayers are important, but not enough," Harris said. "We need Congress to act."

Visiting Uvalde on Sunday, Biden mourned privately for three-plus hours with anguished families. Faced with chants of "do something" as he departed a church service, the president pledged, "We will." In his address, he spoke of being passed a note by a woman in a Uvalde church grieving the loss of her grandchild, calling on people to come together and act.

His Thursday night address coincided with bipartisan talks that are intensifying among a core group of senators discussing modest gun policy changes. Republican

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said the group is "making rapid progress," and Biden has spoken to Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, among those leading Democrats' efforts on the issue.

Democrats are hoping Biden's remarks encourage the bipartisan Senate talks and build pressure on the Republicans to strike an agreement. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden is "encouraged" by congressional negotiations but the president wants to give lawmakers "some space" to keep talking.

The private discussions in the Senate, which is split 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans, are not expected to produce the kinds of sweeping reforms being considered by the Democratic-led House — which has approved expansive background checks legislation and will next turn to an assault weapons ban.

A House package debated Thursday — and approved by a committee, 25-19 — is less sweeping but includes a provision raising the required age for buying semi-automatic firearms to 21. It still faces slim chances in the Senate.

Instead, the bipartisan senators are likely to come up with a more incremental package that would increase federal funding to support state gun safety efforts — with incentives for bolstering school security and mental health resources. The package may also encourage "red-flag laws" to keep firearms away from those who would do harm.

While the Senate approved a modest measure to encourage compliance with background checks after a 2017 church mass shooting in Texas and one in Parkland, Florida, the following year, no major legislation cleared the chamber following the devastating massacre of 20 children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.

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Associated Press Writer Lisa Mascaro contributed.