

Obama's tough talk on guns divides area Jews

JONAH L. ROSENBLUM | STAFF REPORTER | Posted: Thursday, January 7, 2016 1:15 pm

President Barack Obama's nationally televised Jan. 5 speech on gun safety, calling for several distinct executive actions to address the nation's recent violence, touched a nerve in Ohio's Jewish community, on both sides of the divide.

After establishing "why we're here today" and prior bipartisan support for gun safety, including quotes from Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, the president suggested a series of reforms, from boosting gun safety technology to investing in mental health to closing the gun show loophole that bypasses background checks by buying guns online or at such shows.

The president cited widespread support from the public even as Congress has been unwilling to provide the support necessary for passage of legislation.

"Ninety percent of Americans supported (virtually universal background checks)," Obama said. "Ninety percent of Democrats in the Senate voted for that idea, but it failed because 90 percent of Republicans voted against that idea."

For Susan Reis, of the National Council of Jewish Women Greater Cleveland, it was a powerful speech – and message to gun safety advocates who have won few battles nationally over the years. The NCJW has long worked with Greater Cleveland Congregations to combat gun violence – in part through measures like safe gun technology like that pushed by the president.

"Things that we have been asking the president to do, he's doing, which is just incredible," Reis said. "It was very exciting. It's very hopeful."

She added the government through its purchasing power can help push implementation of safe gun technology. Law enforcement is responsible for a sizable chunk of the nation's firearms purchases.

Longtime gun rights advocate Kenneth Kabb, of The Kabb Law Firm in Beachwood, was less enchanted.

"The bottom line, as far as I'm concerned, is that this is political theater," Kabb wrote in an email.



Susan Reis

“Criminals don’t obey laws. The only thing sociopaths respect is victims prepared to defend themselves, and law enforcement that has real teeth. None of the things proposed by The White House will have any real effect on safety.”

Reis, for her part, said she didn’t understand why the issue has turned so partisan, thus requiring executive action to move past a gridlocked Congress, in the first place.

An October 2015 Gallup poll found that 86 percent of Americans would favor a law requiring universal background checks for all gun purchases in the United States.

“It’s so hard to understand how partisan this has become,” Reis said. “It is hard to understand how you can listen to the proposals that the president has said today and not think, ‘Oh, this totally makes sense.’”

A choir of national voices joined the fray, whether it was the Republican presidential candidates uniformly criticizing the president; 2008 Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain of Arizona stating that “regardless of merit,” it was an “abuse of executive power,” or Ohio Democrats Sen. Sherrod Brown of Cleveland and U.S. Rep. Marcia Fudge of Warrensville Heights coming out in favor.

“These are commonsense steps to make our communities safer by closing loopholes that can allow criminals and terrorists to evade background checks, helping more people get the mental health treatment they need and better enforcing the laws that are already on the books,” Brown said.

“President Obama has taken the first step toward making our communities safer, but Congress must act to eradicate gun violence in the state of Ohio and across the nation,” Fudge said.

Their Republican counterparts, Sen. Rob Portman of suburban Cincinnati and Rep. Dave Joyce of Russell Township, begged to differ.

A “disappointed” Portman said, “Instead of going around Congress with executive actions that may well threaten Second Amendment rights, I encourage the Administration to work with Congress, including helping us pass legislation I have co-authored to address these root causes, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act and the Second Chance Reauthorization Act.”

And Joyce, calling himself “the only member of Congress to have actually dealt with prosecuting a school shooting,” said Obama “has decided to run roughshod over the Constitution once again.” Like Portman, he said the focus should be on mental health. The former Geauga County prosecutor prosecuted Chardon High School shooter T.J. Lane in 2012.

Kabb argued Jewish citizens have a special obligation to fight gun control. He cited how “reasonable” gun control measures under the Weimar Republic turned into “a blueprint for disarming Jews” for the Third Reich. He said it is always tempting to outlaw the “perceived evil of the day,” be it alcohol, drugs or guns.

“Jews ought to be wary of any scheme that gives total power of self-defense to the state,” Kabb wrote.