

President, Critics Connect at CNN's Town Hall on Guns

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President Barack Obama, trying to do something about gun violence, and critics who believe he's determined to confiscate their weapons came face-to-face Thursday in a CNN town hall televised nationally. The President fielded tough questions from gun owners in a rare respectful and reasoned interlude in one of America's most poisoned political debates.

FAIRFAX, VA - President Barack Obama, who has vowed to do something about our nation's blight of gun violence, and critics who believe he's determined to confiscate their weapons came face-to-face here Thursday in a rare respectful and reasoned interlude in one of America's most poisoned political debates.

The President fielded tough questions from gun owners in the CNN town hall moderated by Anderson Cooper and televised nationally. For once, the nation's bitter, polarized politics failed to swamp a conversation on gun violence.

President Obama faced off against critics of his new executive actions, including expanded background checks for gun sales, but both sides listened carefully, referred to shared concerns and avoided histrionics. One absent voice was the National Rifle Association, which declined CNN's invitation to participate.

The event at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, came as Obama rededicates himself to an effort to reduce gun violence following a string of mass shootings and his own failure to get expansive reform efforts through Congress.

Obama fielded questions from supporters of his actions, including a priest, gun violence victims and a Chicago schoolboy who fears being shot, as well as critics ranging from a gun executive to a sheriff, a rape survivor and a murder victim's widow.

The meeting of about 100 people invited by CNN on all sides of the debate was an unusual forum for the President. While Obama has conducted hundreds of town hall events as a candidate and president, it's rare for him to hear so directly from ordinary Americans who oppose his policies.

While the President respectfully conversed with those who questioned him in person, he did not spare his foes in the gun rights debate, accusing them of spouting "imaginary fiction" about his motives and evoking the partisanship that typically encompasses the issues.

"The way it is described is that we are trying to take away everybody's guns," Obama said. "Our position is consistently mischaracterized ... If you listen to the rhetoric, it is so over-the-top, it is so overheated."

He dismissed the notion that he was behind a plot to take away everybody's guns "so we can impose martial law". And he tried to dispel it by pointing out that he lacked the time remaining in office to take away the nation's 350 million firearms.

The President had sought tougher laws after the Newtown massacre that killed 20 small children and 5 teachers, but said he was foiled by the NRA. He has made his changes this time using his lawful executive powers, enraging Republicans who say he has overstepped his authority.

"All of us need to demand leaders brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby's lies," Obama had wrote in column in the New York Times that was published on Thursday.

It is not clear if Obama's efforts this time will cut through the wall of suspicion that has been built up over many years by the gun lobby and their Republican allies in Congress. But it is clear that the President has not given up the fight.

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