

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ASPEN IDEAS FESTIVAL WELCOME AND CONVERSATIONS

CORY BOOKER

Aspen

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

CORY BOOKER
U.S. Senator from New Jersey at United States
Senate

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CORY BOOKER

MR. BOOKER: My name is Cory Booker.

(Applause)

MR. BOOKER: Thank you. It is a twisted and perverse privilege to think an urgency or a really serious problem is not really a problem unless it affects me personally. I was that kind of guy. I grew up in a very affluent neighborhood, I went to Stanford and Oxford and Yale.

But 20 years ago, I moved into an American inner-city and I began to hear things with a chilling regularity: constant, unyielding gunfire. My neighbors would tell their children to stay away from windows. I would meet kids who had traumatic shock from witnessing unrelenting violence all over my street and the streets of cities all across this country, or these little shrines, candles and teddy bears where our children have died.

My neighbors in the building that I lived in fell to gun violence. Hassan, the young boy that lived four floors below me, dead. Ms. Bradley right in front of her children was killed. And then I had the experience of watching gunfire and violence myself as a mayor on videotape after videotaped. Walking with my dad when gunshots wrung out, with a boy on the ground, trying desperately to keep him alive as blood poured from his chest, foaming blood from his mouth.

When I was mayor, I used to tell people coming to me with ideas or philosophies -- I used to say: "In god we trust, but everybody else bring me data. I want to see the numbers." Well, the numbers are clear. We've had more people die to gun deaths in our country since 9/11 than all the people dying in combat deaths in World War II from our nation.

We now have a nation that in the time that this wonderful weekend finishes there will be more than an Orlando, an Orlando 3X to people dying from gun violence in communities where people live with unrelenting fear.

And I also know the data that shows we can do something about this.

In states like mine and New Jersey that pass commonsense gun regulation, gun deaths go down. In fact not only homicides go down, but women who die at the hands of their intimates goes down dramatically. Suicides go down. But the challenge is what often goes up is gun smuggling from other states like we see in Chicago and in Newark and in Camden and in neighborhoods in New York.

And so King said so eloquently -- to paraphrase him he said: "We will have to repent in this day and age not just for the vitriolic words and violent actions of the bad people, but the appalling silence and inaction of the good people." That's us.

(Applause)

MR. BOOKER: And so why don't we do background checks when 84% of Americans who are gun owners believe in background checks, when 70 -- over 70% of (Technical difficulty) who are resisting this see no consequence because good people are not acting to make it (Technical difficulty)

More than this, though, those of us who are privileged are now seeing this gun violence come into our communities like never before. The rapidity and frequency of mass shootings are beginning to give people a taste of what the drumbeat of shooting is going on in poor places, what poor people are experiencing from our schools from Columbine to Newtown, from our neighborhoods and workplaces like San Bernardino to our churches like Charleston.

Now we see a challenge where the very enemy we have declared war against is telling us, telling people that they are trying to radicalize to go to America or stand up in America because they have lax gun laws, exploit them. These terrorists now have open doors to getting weapons, as the GAO has said between 2004 and 2014 over 2,000 suspected terrorists tried to buy weapons and 91% were able to get them.

And so what will change this? Edmund Burke said the only thing necessary for evil to be triumphant is for good people to do nothing. So what's my big idea? I've long since come to realize that the biggest thing we can do in any day is most often going to be a small act of decency, kindness and love. We cannot as a nation allow our inability to do everything to undermine our determination to do something.

We cannot as a nation get caught up in a state of sedentary agitation. We are upset about what's going on or willing to applaud a Congresswoman or a Senator. We are upset, but we don't get up and do something about it that we didn't do yesterday, because we all have a choice to make in every moment of our lives to accept things as they are or take responsibility for changing them.

And now we as a nation are going into July 4th. How will our symbols and substance of patriotism really be shown? Will it be through our songs and our flag pins? Or will it be a remembrance that this purpose of this nation and the preamble of our Constitution was founded for the common defense and domestic tranquility?

I ask you now as I close: how will we be patriots this year? Will we deplore the violence or will we act against it? It was a great man who spoke for poor and marginalized people through his poetry, who made a challenge to us Americans with simple words, where he said: "America never has been America to me, but I swear this oath America will be."

My big idea is that we Americans stop talking about change or hoping for change or deploring those actors who don't make it and we decide to be Americans in the most common and great tradition of our country that we be about change and show our patriotism through loving action. Thank you.

(Applause)

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