

# Senators Compromise In Gun Control Battle

BY ALAN FRAM  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Conservative senators from both parties announced their support for expanding background checks for gun buyers Wednesday, giving a burst of momentum to advocates of stronger restrictions. But big questions remain about whether President Barack Obama can push significant gun controls through Congress.

The compromise between Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., boosted the chances that the Senate will agree to broaden required background checks, a step gun control groups laud as an effective way to keep weapons from criminals and the mentally ill. The senators are among the most conservative members of their parties, both have received "A" ratings from the National Rifle Association, and their endorsements could make it easier for hesitant colleagues to back the effort.

Gun control advocates still face opposition from many Republican senators and resistance from moderate Democrats, including several facing re-election next year in GOP-leaning states. In the Republican-run House, leaders have shown little enthusiasm for Obama's ideas, making that chamber an even higher hurdle.

Under the agreement the two senators announced at the Capitol, background checks would be expanded to all for-profit transactions including sales at gun shows and online, with records kept by licensed gun-dealers who would handle the paperwork. Exempted would be noncommercial transactions such as between relatives. Currently, the system applies only to sales by the country's 55,000 federally licensed firearms dealers.

The agreement also contains provisions expanding firearms rights, and that concerns gun control supporters. Some restrictions on transporting guns across state



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT

**Sens. Joe Manchin III (D-WVA) speaks as Patrick J. Toomey (R-PA) looks on during a press conference to announce a bipartisan deal on background checks for gun shows and Internet sales at the Capitol in Washington, D.C.**

lines would be eased, sellers would be shielded from lawsuits if the buyer passed a check but later used a firearm in a crime and gun dealers could conduct business in states where they don't live.

"Truly the events at Newtown changed us all," said Manchin, citing the Connecticut town where December's murders of 20 first-graders and six educators propelled gun control to the top rank of national issues. "Americans on both sides of the debate can and must find common ground."

Emotion, always prominent in the gun issue, cropped up late Wednesday when Manchin met with relatives of the Newtown victims in his Senate office, telling them that "this will not be in vain." He became choked up when a reporter asked about the impact of the family members' visit, saying, "I'm a parent, a grandparent ... and I had to do something."

Said Toomey: "Criminals and the dangerously mentally ill shouldn't have guns. I don't know anyone who disagrees with that premise." He said that expanding the checks wasn't gun control, "just common sense."

The agreement makes it all but

certain that the Senate will reject a conservative blockade and vote Thursday to begin debating Democrats' gun legislation. Besides broader background check requirements, the bill would also toughen laws against illicit firearms sales and provide a small increase in school security aid.

Underscoring that the fight was far from over, NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said the organization opposes the Manchin-Toomey accord. The group, which has fought most of Obama's gun proposals and claims nearly 5 million members, said the focus should be on improving the nation's mental health system and sources of violence like gangs.

"Expanding background checks at gun shows will not prevent the next shooting, will not solve violent crime and will not keep our kids safe in schools," the NRA said.

Also criticizing the deal was conservative Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who participated in a failed effort with Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., to reach a separate compromise. Coburn called the Manchin-Toomey effort a "good faith but unworkable plan" that "prioritizes collecting records over

protecting citizens."

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, repeated his view that the Senate should act, saying, "It's one thing for two members to come to some agreement. It doesn't substitute the will for the other 98 members."

In a written statement, Obama said he'd prefer stronger language than the compromise, but he said it represented progress.

"It recognizes that there are good people on both sides of this issue, and we don't have to agree on everything to know that we've got to do something to stem the tide of gun violence," he said.

Other highlights of Obama's gun agenda — including bans on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines — seem to have little chance of winning approval in the Senate, let alone the House.

Polls show more than 8 in 10 people back expanded background checks. Even so, the fight will be difficult in both chambers, especially the House, where increasing numbers of district lines are drawn to protect incumbents, said James Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police.

"They're not going to have a constituency in every instance that is championing for that bill," said Pasco, whose group has backed the drive for expanded background checks.

Reflecting concerns about unseen details about some gun rights language, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence took a more tempered view.

"While we continue to review the legislation, we believe a majority of the components are a good step forward," said Brian Malte, director of the campaign's network mobilization.

There are no current, definitive statistics on how many gun sales occur annually and what portion occurs without the checks. A study in the 1990s found that up to 40 percent of transactions involved no checks.

## Obama's First Budget Of New Term Is A Political Straddle

BY DAVID ESPO  
AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's first budget of his new term is a political straddle, aimed at enticing Republicans into a new round of deficit negotiations while trying to keep faith with Democrats who favor higher taxes in service of more government spending.

That gives everyone something to dislike if they are so inclined — and many in divided government are.

Obama's stated goal is otherwise, namely that his \$3.8 trillion budget should lead to the completion of a slow-motion grand deficit-cutting bargain by offering to save billions from programs previously sheltered from cuts. Medicare, Social Security and even military retirement are among them.

Perhaps to reassure Democrats unsettled by this approach, the president said his offer to trim future benefit increases for tens of millions of people is "less than optimal" and acceptable only if Republicans simultaneously agree to raise taxes on the wealthy and some businesses.

"If anyone thinks I'll finish the job of deficit reduction on the backs of middle-class families or through spending cuts alone that actually hurt our economy short-term, they should think again," he said in an appearance Wednesday in the White House's Rose Garden.

In rhetoric reminiscent of last

year's campaign, he added, "When it comes to deficit reduction, I've already met Republicans more than halfway."

That's not how they see it, and the issue was doubtless on the menu at the dinner for a dozen Republican senators that the president invited to the White House several hours later.

The early public reaction from Republicans was generally predictable, and none too positive.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said the president deserves "some credit for some of the incremental entitlement reforms that he has outlined in his budget."

"But I would hope that he would not hold hostage these modest reforms for his demand for bigger tax hikes," Congress' top Republican added, a repudiation of Obama's insistence on higher taxes.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell wasn't nearly as generous. "We need a balanced budget that encourages growth and job creation. We don't need an extreme, unbalanced budget that won't balance in your lifetime or mine," he said. He stopped short, barely, of accusing Obama of trying to blow up chances for compromise rather than improve them.

Overall, Obama's budget accentuated the vast differences between Democrats and Republicans in their approaches to igniting a slow-growth economy — the issue that the president said was "the driving force behind every decision that I make."

He proposed slowing the growth of federal deficits without eliminating them, and is seeking \$1 trillion in higher taxes over a decade. His plan wipes out roughly \$1 trillion in across-the-board spending cuts contained in legislation he signed more than a year ago and calls for new spending to expand pre-K programs and increase highway and mass transit construction and repair. The net impact on the deficit is savings of roughly \$600 billion over a decade, far less than the \$1.8 trillion the White House claimed.

By contrast, the budget that Republicans pushed through the House last month leaves across-the-board cuts in place, reduces spending by an additional \$5.6 trillion over a decade and shows a balanced budget without raising taxes.

Both sides also express support for an overhaul of the tax code, although neither has yet fully staked out a position.

That makes benefit programs the likeliest — possibly the only — fruitful area for another deficit-reduction compromise in the coming months.

Over a decade, the president's proposal to change the way the government calculates inflation — and therefore makes annual adjustments in benefits and income tax brackets — would produce savings estimated at \$230 billion.

That's a relatively small amount of savings in a decade, when overall spending will be counted in the tens of trillions of dollars.

### North Korean Residents 'We Will Win War'

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — As the world braced for a provocative missile launch by North Korea, with newscasts worldwide playing up tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the center of the storm was strangely calm.

The focus in Pyongyang on Wednesday was less on preparing for war and more on beautifying the capital ahead of the nation's biggest holiday: the April 15 birthday of the nation's founder, Kim Il Sung. Soldiers put down their rifles to blanket the barren ground with sod and students picked up shovels to help plant trees.

But the impoverished, tightly controlled nation that has historically used major holidays to draw the world's attention by showing off its military power could well mark the occasion by testing a missile designed to strike U.S. military installations in Japan and Guam.

South Korea's foreign minister said the prospect of a medium-range missile launch is "considerably high."

North Korean officials have not announced plans to launch a missile in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions barring Pyongyang from nuclear and missile activity.

### Postal Service To Keep Saturday Mail Delivery

WASHINGTON (AP) — The financially beleaguered Postal Service backpedaled on its plan to end Saturday mail delivery, conceding Wednesday that its gamble to compel congressional approval had failed.

With limited options for saving money, the governing board said the agency should reopen negotiations with unions to lower labor costs and consider raising mail prices.

Yet the board also said it's not possible for the Postal Service to meet its goals for reduced spending without altering the delivery schedule. Delaying "responsible changes," the board said, only makes it more likely that the Postal Service "may become a burden" to taxpayers.

Congressional reaction was mixed, mirroring differences that have stalled a needed postal overhaul for some time. Some lawmakers had urged the agency to forge ahead with its plan, while others had said it lacked the legal authority to do so.

The Postal Service said in February that it planned to switch to five-day-a-week deliveries beginning in August for everything except packages as a way to hold down losses

### U.S. Couple Returned To Florida From Cuba

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Joshua and Sharyn Hakken seemed to have a charmed life, doting on their two young boys, buying a comfortable home and building successful careers as engineers. It all derailed last year when police in Louisiana found the family inside a hotel room with drugs, weapons and promises from the parents to take "a journey to the Armageddon."

The couple is now jailed on charges they kidnapped the boys from their grandparents in Florida and sailed to Cuba on a boat called "Salty" to elude U.S. authorities. The family arrived in Florida early Wednesday morning, accompanied by federal, state and local authorities after being handed over by Cuban officials. Four-year-old Cole and 2-year-old Chase are now with their grandparents, and their parents are in jail, closing a bizarre ordeal that began with an Amber Alert and ended with diplomatic intervention.

Friends of the couple said the family seemed happy and had no marital problems.

"This is a train that went completely off the tracks, and I don't have any explanation for how it can go off the track that badly basically in a year and a half. It's very bizarre," said Darrell Hanecki, who employed Sharyn Hakken for nearly a decade at Hanecki Consulting Engineers.

Hanecki said she was an easygoing and relaxed employee who worked from the home they owned in sunny Tampa so she could spend more time with the kids. She brought the boys into the office a few times to show them off to her colleagues.

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