

Dad Of Newtown Victim Asks For Weapons Ban

WASHINGTON (AP) — After weeks of arguing constitutional fine points and citing rival statistics, senators wrangling over gun control saw and heard the anguish of a bereft father.

Neil Heslin, whose 6-year-old son, Jesse, was among those cut down at a Connecticut elementary school in December, asked the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday to ban assault weapons like the one that killed his child.

"I'm not here for the sympathy or the pat on the back," Heslin, a 50-year-old construction worker, told the senators, weeping openly during much of his hushed 11-minute testimony. "I'm here to speak up for my son."

At his side were photos: of his son as a baby, of them both taken on Father's Day, six months before Jesse was among 20 first-graders and six administrators killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. That massacre has hoisted gun control to a primary political issue this year, though the outcome remains uncertain.

The hearing's focus was legislation by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to ban assault weapons and ammunition magazines carrying more than 10 rounds.

Syrian Rebel Victory Could Spark More Wars

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's prime minister warned Wednesday that a victory for rebels in the Syrian civil war would create a new extremist haven and destabilize the wider Middle East, sparking sectarian wars in his own country and in Lebanon.

Nouri al-Maliki stopped short of voicing outright support for Syrian President Bashar Assad's embattled regime. But his comments in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press marked one of his strongest warnings yet about the turmoil that the collapse of the Syrian government could create.

The prime minister's remarks reflect fears by many Shiite Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere that Sunni Muslims would come to dominate Syria should Assad be toppled, and his statements could provide a measure of moral support for those fighting to keep Assad in power.

"If the world does not agree to support a peaceful solution through dialogue ... then I see no light at the end of the tunnel," al-Maliki said in his office in a Saddam Hussein-era palace inside Baghdad's heavily guarded Green Zone.

"Neither the opposition nor the regime can finish each other off," he continued. "The most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq."

Days Numbered For Part Of Voting Rights Law?

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court's conservative justices voiced deep skepticism Wednesday about a section of a landmark civil rights law that has helped millions of Americans exercise their right to vote.

In an ominous note for supporters of the key provision of the Voting Rights Act, Justice Anthony Kennedy both acknowledged the measure's vital role in fighting discrimination and suggested that other important laws in U.S. history had run their course. "Times change," Kennedy said during the fast-paced, 70-minute argument.

Kennedy's views are likely to prevail on the closely divided court, and he tends to side with his more conservative colleagues on matters of race.

The court's liberals and conservatives engaged in a sometimes tense back-and-forth over whether there is an ongoing need in 2013 for the part of the voting rights law that requires states with a history of discrimination, mainly in the Deep South, to get approval before making changes in the way elections are held.

Van Cliburn, Pianist And Cold War Hero, Dies

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — For a time in Cold War America, Van Cliburn had all the trappings of a rock star: sold-out concerts, adoring, out-of-control fans and a name recognized worldwide. He even got a ticker-tape parade in New York City.

And he did it all with only a piano and some Tchaikovsky concertos.

The celebrated pianist played for every American president since Harry Truman, plus royalty and heads of state around the world. But he is best remembered for winning a 1958 piano competition in Moscow that helped thaw the icy rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Cliburn, who died Wednesday at 78 after fighting bone cancer, was "a great humanitarian and a brilliant musician whose light will continue to shine through his extraordinary legacy," said his publicist and longtime friend Mary Lou Falcone. "He will be missed by all who knew and admired him, and by countless people he never met."

The young man from the small east Texas town of Kilgore was a baby-faced 23-year-old when he won the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow just six months after the Soviets' launch of Sputnik embarrassed the U.S. and inaugurated the space race.

Cliburn returned to a hero's welcome and the ticker-tape parade — the first ever for a classical musician. A *Time* magazine cover proclaimed him "The Texan Who Conquered Russia."

Pope Benedict Holds Final Audience

BY HENRY CHU
Los Angeles Times

VATICAN CITY — They packed St. Peter's Square when he was named the new pope, and they came again by the thousands to see him off.

On the eve of his retirement as head of the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics, Pope Benedict XVI recalled the joy and burden of leadership Wednesday at a final general audience on which cheering devotees and a late-winter sun both smiled warmly. The eight years of his papacy, Benedict told the crowd, had been a grand journey, sometimes smooth, sometimes turbulent, but always steered by God.

"The Lord did not let us founder. ... This has been a certainty that nothing can obscure," the pontiff said, abandoning his usual practice of preaching a homily in favor of an uncharacteristically personal last address. "And it's for this reason that today my heart is full of thanks to God, because he has not deprived the whole church, or me, of his consolation, his light, his love."

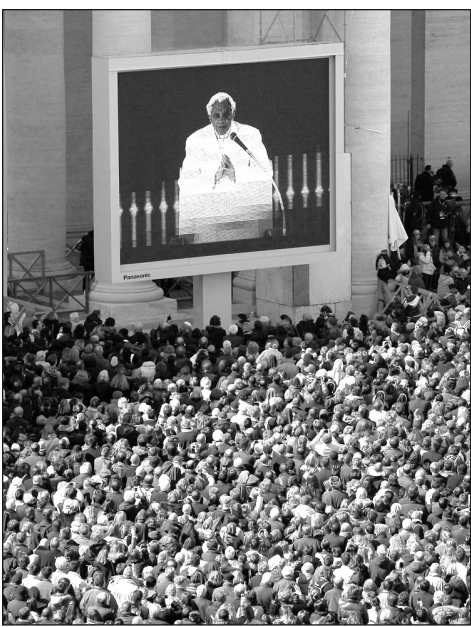
On Thursday evening, Benedict is set to go down in history as the first pope in 600 years to relinquish his office while still alive. He acknowledged again that his decision to step down because of failing health was a grave and novel one, but declared that he felt "a deep serenity in my soul."

"To love the church means also to have the courage to make difficult and painful choices, keeping sight of the good of the church and not ourselves," he said.

Some shouted, "Long live the pope!" as he spoke. Others held aloft banners with the word "Grazie," or "thanks" in Italian, which fluttered next to national flags belonging to pilgrims who converged on the imposing colonnaded piazza from all parts of the world.

It was clear that, for many in the crowd of more than 100,000, nothing in Benedict's papacy has become him quite like the leaving of it.

"It shows such humility to come down from a great level," said Nisha Antony, a nun from India. "Have you ever seen a politician give up a high seat?"



ANSA/ZUMA PRESS

The faithful fill St. Peter's Square as Pope Benedict XVI gives his final general audience Wednesday, the eve of his retirement as leader of the world's Roman Catholics at St. Peter's Square, Vatican City.

Julia G. Ferreras, a university professor from Spain, agreed.

"It proves he is a free man. He thinks this is what he should do, and he followed his conscience," she said. "He understands that he doesn't have the strength" to remain at the helm.

Benedict, 85, looked frail as he sat, robed in white, beneath a canopy on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica. His voice was hoarse but did not waver when he delivered his remarks, responded to tributes in various languages, sang the Lord's Prayer in Latin and gave a final blessing, lifting his hands above his slightly hunched frame.

"Oh, bless him," murmured Ann McKay of Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, as Benedict

zipped around the square amid the cheering crowds in his motorized Pope-mobile.

McKay was in Rome on a previously planned visit with her husband and came to show her respects.

"It's not an easy time for the Catholic Church," she said, alluding to the sex-abuse scandals that have severely undermined the church's moral authority. "The Catholic Church does have to be more with the times, to be sure. He's left it to someone younger to take it forward."

The adulation in the square was respectful and even reverential, but without the electricity that often attended the public audiences of Pope John Paul II, Benedict's charismatic predecessor. Still, those in the piazza were grateful for a chance to see the pope one last time, while Benedict had the benefit, almost unique among him and his predecessors, of knowing this was his final major appearance before the faithful.


He smiled and waved, looking more at ease among the throngs than usual, perhaps out of a sense of relief. Though known to be engaging in private, the pope has often seemed shy, aloof and even awkward in public.

On the steps with the pope were about 70 cardinals in their distinctive red skullcaps, the "princes" of the church, more than 100 of whom will assemble in the coming weeks to select his successor.

Exactly when that conclave will begin is still unknown, and may be the subject of some debate among the cardinals when they gather next Monday for the first of their meetings dealing with the end of Benedict's papacy and looking ahead to the next one.

On Thursday afternoon, after bidding farewell to the cardinals, a helicopter is scheduled to fly him to the papal summer retreat in Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome, where he will spend several weeks before moving into a monastery on the Vatican grounds.

He will still be pope when he takes off and lands. But at 8 p.m., his resignation takes effect, and the Swiss guards whose duty it is to protect the pope will immediately take their leave of him.

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