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### **Adresse**

Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO)

Université d'Abomey-Calavi.

**laboratoiresociolinguistique@yahoo.fr**

**Site : <https://lasodyla.uac.bj>**

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## Présentation

ReSciLaC (Revue des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication) est une revue du Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO) de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC). ReSciLaC est une revue pluridisciplinaire qui accueille des contributions abordant un grand nombre de champs d'études des sciences humaines et sociales.

ReSciLaC permet de faire la diffusion de travaux de jeunes chercheurs ou de chercheurs confirmés *en sociolinguistique, en linguistique, en didactique des langues, en communication, en littérature, en philosophie du langage, en sciences de l'éducation, en sociologie, en histoire, en histoire de l'art*, etc.

L'objectif de ReSciLaC est d'encourager des discussions scientifiques et théoriques les plus larges possibles portant aussi bien sur les sciences humaines que sur les sciences sociales.

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# LANGUES, LETTRES

# Safeguarding Americans from Gun Violence : President Obama's Unfulfilled Dream

Ferdinand Kpohoué & Nassourou Imorou

Université d'Abomey-Calavi (Bénin)

ferdinandkpo@yahoo.fr

## **Abstract**

*The 2008 US elections may well represent a watershed moment in American history, a turning point in which Americans rejected the politics of division and distraction, of wedge issues, single-issues, and "cultural" issues, as the extremists on both sides of the debate on a host of issues lost ground to those in the reasonable middle. After eight years of an Administration that catered to the gun lobby, deprived gun violence victims of their rights, and turned a deaf ear to law enforcement and communities seeking to strengthen, not weaken, gun laws, the incoming Obama-Biden administration represents an historic opportunity for this country to responsibly address gun violence problem. President Obama failed to show leadership on the gun issue. Administration officials who support common sense gun laws appear to have been muzzled for speaking out in favor of laws supported by Barack Obama as a candidate and Senator. Their constructive solutions to America's gun violence epidemic were quickly replaced with parroted NRA (National Rifle Association) slogans. The chief focus of this paper is to appraise the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the USA's legacy of preventing gun violence during his tenure. Our evaluation enables us to come up with this conclusion – Obama did so much noise for nothing. Rather,*

*he spent eight years without enacting a single gun law beyond his executive orders.*

**Keywords:** *Watershed moment, gun violence, administration, gun issue, commonsense, leadership.*

## **Résumé**

*Les élections américaines de 2008 pourraient bien représenter un tournant décisif dans l'histoire de l'Amérique, un tournant dans lequel les Américains ont rejeté les politiques de division et de distraction, des questions de divergence, des problèmes uniques et des problèmes culturels en tant qu'extrémistes par rapport à des causes perdues au détriment des questions centrales et raisonnables. Après huit ans d'une administration qui s'est occupée du lobby des armes à feu, qui a privé les victimes de la violence armée de leurs droits et a fait la sourde oreille aux autorités et aux communautés cherchant à renforcer et non à affaiblir les lois sur les armes, l'administration entrante d'Obama - Biden représente une occasion historique pour que ce pays aborde de façon responsable le problème de violence armée. Le président Obama n'a pas réussi à faire preuve de leadership dans le dossier des armes à feu. Les*

responsables de l'administration qui appuient les lois sur les armes à feu semblent avoir été muselés en faveur des lois soutenues par Barack Obama en tant que candidat et sénateur. Leurs solutions constructives à l'épidémie de violence armée aux Etats-Unis ont rapidement été remplacées par des slogans de la NRA. L'objectif principal de cet article est d'évaluer le legs du 44ème président des Etats-Unis de prévenir la violence armée

pendant son mandat. Il ressort de cette évaluation que le président Obama a fait beaucoup de bruit pour rien. Il a passé huit années à la maison blanche sans pouvoir faire voter une loi qui réglemente l'utilisation des armes à feu aux USA.

**Mots-clés:** Tournant décisif, violence armée, administration, problème des armes à feu, bon sens, leadership

## Introduction

“... don't tell me we can't up hold the Second Amendment while keeping AK-47 out of the hands of criminals.” (Obama 2008). Since 1982, there have been at least sixty-nine mass shootings in the United States, thirty-two of which occurred after 2006. More than three-quarters of the guns used by shooters were obtained legally. The United States leads the world in gun ownership, with almost nine guns for every ten people in the country, according to a Small Arms Survey. Among its developed counterparts, the United States has the second-highest percent of murders by firearm --68 percent of 17,128 murders in 2007 (The Century Foundation 2015). Does the arrival of the “Messiah” Obama in the White House curb the current trends?

President Obama came into office facing extraordinary challenges requiring decisive action. His Administration had been able to make progress on multiple issues despite the economic crisis that followed the wars waged by the Bush Administration. On the gun violence issue, however, his Administration's extraordinary silence and passivity has allowed the gun lobby to move its agenda forward, while the American people awaited any sign that the President will act to combat the plague of gun violence that kills and injures nearly 110,000 Americans a year.

During President Obama's second term, he failed to fulfil his campaign promises and strengthened the Americans nation's gun laws. He could have showed strong leadership by rejecting the extremist agenda of the NRA (National Rifle Association), and instead pushing for common sense strategies to prevent gun violence, such as requiring background checks at gun shows, prohibiting gun sales to suspected terrorists, and giving law enforcement the tools they need to crack down on corrupt dealers and traffickers. By acting decisively, the President could have protected Americans families and communities from the scourge of gun violence. Parroting NRA's slogans in order to enforce laws on the books, and using rhetoric of tragedy were not enough to safeguard Americans from gun violence.

The rationale of this paper is to assess the 44<sup>th</sup> US President's legacy regarding gun control during his tenure. I will adopt in this article both a qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. With a view of successfully address this article, I will use social sciences like history, sociology, psychology, I will also use political sciences, Health and economical sciences. All the aforementioned sciences are worth using so as to effectively address this social scourge, which is gun control issue. While dealing with gun issue, we need a political will, once a political will is voiced, one needs to know what past leaders did in this framework, while attacking gun issue one threatens people business and this may have an impact on the nation economy. Sometimes guns fall in bad guys arms, some with mental problem. To address this article two research questions were stated—do audacity of hope and rhetoric of tragedy safeguard Americans from guns violence? Will President Obama succeed where his predecessors failed?

## **I. Guns in America**

According to the Second Amendment to the U.S Constitution adopted on December 15, 1791, "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (NCC [www.nationalconstitutioncenter.org](http://www.nationalconstitutioncenter.org) 1988). This right is supporting the natural rights of self-defense and resistance to oppression, and the civic duty to act in concert in defense of the state. Therefore, Americans have a lot of guns. According to Small Arms Survey, 2007, there are currently about 270 million firearms in civilian hands in the United States, which means that approximately thirty-five to forty percent of households have at least one gun. (L. Hepburn et al., 2004 & 2007).

This omnipresence of guns has proved dangerous to people when insofar as it generates crimes, injuries and deaths. The number of crimes, injuries, and deaths involving guns has decreased significantly from peak levels reached in the early 1990s, but it remains high. The Department of Justice estimates that each year, in America, about 500,000 victims of violent crimes will face an offender armed with a gun. Each year, about 30,000 people in the United States die from homicides, suicides, and accidents with guns, (Wisqar Injury Mortality Reports 2005) and about 70,000 suffer non-fatal injuries from being shot (Wisqar Injury Mortality Reports 2007). These numbers put the United States far above other developed countries in rates of firearm deaths, injuries, and crimes. The total social cost America pays for misuse of firearms has been estimated at \$100 billion per year (P. J. COOK et al. 2000). Of course, guns can be used to prevent crimes as well as to commit them. Law enforcement officers and private citizens use guns to kill several hundred criminals per year and to wound over a thousand more. In many other instances, armed citizens deter or interrupt crimes without firing a shot.

The annual number of such defensive uses of guns by private citizens is a matter of great controversy, with government survey data suggesting the number is less than 100,000 per year and some researchers contending the number could be as high as 2.5 million per year (D. Hemenway, 1997, pp. 1430–32). Likewise, an enormously complex

controversy exists over how legal restrictions on guns affect crime rates, with some statistical analyses indicating that crime decreases when laws make it easier for people to carry concealed guns, and other studies reaching opposite conclusions (John 2000). Guns are undoubtedly one of America's most intensely divisive cultural issues. But when it comes to specific positions and policies, there is actually a high level of consensus. Public opinion polls consistently show that large majorities of Americans favor tougher gun control laws but also believe the right to have a gun should be protected. Despite the widespread agreement on these basic points, Americans are sharply divided in their fundamental feelings about guns, with some cherishing guns as symbols of traditional values, freedom, and rugged individualism, and others associating guns with fear, mistrust, and death. As it was charting a course for its gun policy, the Obama administration had to deal with this complex emotional atmosphere surrounding the issue.

## 2. The Gun Issue as seen by scholars

Many scholars address Gun issues under different administrations. Daniel Rice et al. (2009), in their report entitled *Obama's First Year: Failed Leadership, Lost Lives*, assessed the Obama administration's legal actions to protect Americans from gun violence during his first term. They have come to the conclusion that Obama did not show strong leadership to effectively address gun issue in America.

Gabriela Tscholl, in her Master of Arts thesis in Communication Studies, entitled *President Obama responds to Gun Violence: A Rhetoric of transformation*, she examines President Obama's seven memorial speeches pursuant to gun incidents. Faced with a divided government and an increasingly polarized political scene, President Obama turned toward the American people to resolve the issue of gun violence. A close reading of the texts reveals that he constructed a rhetoric of transformation which aimed to transform the audience from passive spectators of tragedy to agents of change. His work is so important in so far as it gives me some actual data about the seven gun incidents during Obama's tenure.

Allen Rostron in his article "Cease Fire: A "Win-Win" Strategy on Gun Policy for the Obama Administration", lays out a strategic approach to the gun issue for the Obama administration. As a candidate, Obama promised to try to overcome old dividing lines and partisan bickering. The gun issue gives him an excellent opportunity to translate that rhetoric into action. Gun control has been one of the most bitterly controversial political and cultural issues in recent decades, but despite the hostility and distrust surrounding it, the issue offers substantial room for building consensus and forging compromises. His work offers relevant insights regarding the gun issue from the past up to President Obama's election in 2008.

David DeGrazia in his essay "*The case for Moderate Gun control*" underscores the compatibility of gun rights and moderate gun control. It is the author's hope that the present discussion will be part of a growing body of ethics literature that helps to correct

the intellectual distortions, suppression of information, and legislative failures that have been promoted by the gun lobby and accepted by government officials who fear its leadership.

Gregory Koger on his part, underscores in his articles "Representation, Gun Control, and the Senate: Why Background Checks Failed", the institutional and organizational sources of the bill's defeat. Unlike prior studies of gun control, this paper finds that partisanship played a major role: support for gun control was influenced by party affiliation, state-level partisanship, and whether the senator was a Democrat running for reelection. His work is significant since it gives some oft-cited explanations for the paradox of gun control.

### **3. Right to Bear Arms: A poison chalice?**

"A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (Second Amendment/American Constitution, 1791). Since the beginning of the enforcement of the above amendment, have Americans been living safer? Have gun violence incidents declined? Has this provision done more harm than good to Americans? Is it a necessary evil? Let's have a glance at the following facts and figures.

Americans have a lot of guns. Studies suggest that there are currently about 270 million firearms in civilian hands in the United States, (Small Arms Survey 2007) and that approximately thirty-five to forty percent of households have at least one gun (Hepburn et al. 2007). The number of crimes, injuries, and deaths involving guns has decreased significantly from peak levels reached in the early 1990s, but it remains high. The Department of Justice estimates that each year in America, about 500,000 victims of violent crimes will face an offender armed with a gun (The Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008). Each year, about 30,000 people in the United States die from homicides, suicides, and accidents with guns (NAT'L CTR 2009) and about 70,000 suffer non-fatal injuries from being shot (NAT'L CTR 2009). These numbers show that the rates of firearms deaths, injuries, and crimes are much higher in the United States than in other countries with the same level of development. (NAT'L CTR 2009). The total social cost America pays for misuse of firearms has been estimated at \$100 billion per year (Hemenway, 2006).

Of course, guns can be used to prevent crimes as well as to commit them. Law enforcement officers and private citizens use guns to kill hundreds of criminals every year and to wound over a thousand more (Philip & Jens 2000). In many other instances, armed citizens deter or interrupt crimes without firing a shot. The annual number of such defensive uses of guns by private citizens is a matter of great controversy, with government survey data suggesting the number is less than 100,000 per year and some researchers contending the number could be as high as 2.5 million per year (Hemenway, 1997). Likewise, an enormously complex controversy exists over how legal restrictions on guns affect crime rates. While some statistical analyses indicate that crime decreases when laws make it easier for people to carry concealed guns, other studies have reached opposite conclusions (John, 2003). Guns are, without a doubt, one of America's most

intensely divisive cultural issues. But when it comes to specific positions and policies, there is actually a high level of consensus. Public opinion polls consistently show that large majorities of Americans favor tougher gun control laws but also believe the right to have a gun should be protected (Press Release 2008). Despite widespread agreement on these basic points, Americans are sharply divided in their fundamental feelings about guns, with some cherishing guns as symbols of traditional values, freedom, and rugged individualism, and others associating guns with fear, mistrust, and death (Dan, 2002).

In 2010, there were more than 31,000 firearm deaths in the United States: 62% were suicides, 36% were homicides, and 2% were unintentional (CDC 2012a). Almost as many Americans die from gunfire as die from motor vehicle accidents (almost 34,000 in 2010). Americans under 40 are more likely to die from gunfire than from any specific disease (CDC 2012a) as it charts a course for policy on guns, the Obama administration will have to deal with this complex emotional atmosphere surrounding the issue.

#### **4. President OBAMA had a Dream**

The 2008 election marked a major victory for common sense gun laws. Never in American nation's history have people had an incoming President and Vice President more supportive of strong gun laws. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence strongly endorsed the Obama-Biden ticket, and for good reason. Barack Obama has consistently supported strong sensible gun violence prevention laws throughout his career, and Joe Biden has been a leader in Congress for strong gun laws.

After eight years in the White House, and despite his political will, Obama failed to achieve his dream. As he explained in his nomination acceptance speech, "we can respect and not interfere with law-abiding gun owners who choose to own a gun for home defense or recreation, but at the same time keep criminals from arming themselves with military-style assault weapons" (Michael 2012). The same is true with many other reasonable gun policies. Whether the proposal is requiring background checks for all gun sales, barring terrorists from buying guns, or cracking down on corrupt gun dealers, the rights of law-abiding gun owners can be preserved. Solid majorities of Americans, including gun owners, favor enacting these and other reasonable policy responses to the epidemic of gun violence that claims 30,000 lives in America every year. There should now be a renewed momentum to enact common sense gun laws. Did the Sandy Hook Elementary mass shooting prompt President Obama to achieve his dream? On December 12, 2012, Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old young man, entered Sandy Hook Elementary, shot and killed 20 children and six adults before taking his own life. Prior to arriving at the school, Lanza is suspected of having shot and killed his mother, Nancy, inside their home. At the time, the shooting was considered the "nation's second-deadliest shooting," following behind the 2007 attack on Virginia Tech, which left 32 dead (Michael, 2012). President Obama stated that the Newtown shooting was the "worst day of his Presidency" (James 2012).

One month after, the harrowing and unfathomable massacre of 20 children and 6 adults in a Newtown, Connecticut, elementary school, Johns Hopkins University convened a summit that brought together preeminent researchers on gun violence from across the country and around the world. This was a moment when advocates, lobbyists, and politicians on both sides of the gun-control debate were beginning to mobilize and spar. In this unruly mix, Johns Hopkins seized the opportunity to discharge a critical role of research universities and provided principled scaffolding for the debate. On January 21, 2013, President Obama took the oath of office for his second term:

Unless we take action, during those four years some 48,000 Americans will be killed with guns— nearly twice as many people as were killed in combat during the entire Vietnam War. I have made it clear to the vice president that our bipartisan coalition of mayors is supporting seven measures— three that need legislation and four that require only executive action. We're hopeful that the vice president and president will support all seven (Obama 2013).

In recent years, representatives have attempted to pass numerous pieces of legislation to address gun control, with little success. The most notable attempt was in 2013, when an amendment that would have required background checks on all commercial sales of guns was defeated in the Senate by six votes. On January 16, 2013, President Obama announced twenty-three executive actions that his administration was taking to address gun violence, under the initiative "Now Is the Time." (The Century Foundation 2015): Three of the executive actions are Presidential Memoranda:

- improving availability of Relevant Executive Branch Records to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System;
- Engaging in Public Health Research on the Causes and Prevention of Gun Violence;
- Tracing of Firearms in Connection with Criminal Investigations.

The three memoranda reflect important issues that the administration believed were critical in helping to prevent future gun violence. A Facilitating Federal Background Checks Through presidential memorandum, Obama directed the Department of Justice to issue guidance to agencies regarding the identification and sharing of relevant Federal records and their submission to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). The memorandum specifies that agencies should prioritize making those records available to NICS and should report their progress to the President. Additionally, it establishes a NICS Consultation and Coordination Working Group to decide whether an agency possesses relevant records and whether such records should be provided to NICS.

Additional executive actions addressing this issue include, among others:

- providing States with incentives (\$20 million in fiscal year 2013 and a proposed \$50 million in FY 2014) to share information on their criminal history and mental health records;

- beginning the regulatory process to remove unnecessary legal barriers under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act so that States may more freely share information about mental health issues involving potential gun purchasers.

Improving Mental Health Research and Services Through presidential memorandum, Obama ends the freeze on gun violence research by directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services to conduct or sponsor public health research into the causes of gun violence. Scientific agencies are not allowed to use funds to advocate or promote gun control, but the memorandum specifies that research on gun violence is not advocacy, but rather, “critical public health research that gives all Americans information they need.” (The Century Foundation 2015).

Additional executive actions addressing this issue include, among others:

- issuing final regulations governing how existing group health plans that offer mental health services must cover them at parity with medical and surgical benefits under the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008;
- issuing a letter to State health officials making clear that Medicaid plans must comply with mental health parity requirements.

Strengthening Law Enforcement Tools to Prosecute Gun Crime Through presidential memorandum, Obama is requiring federal law enforcement to trace all firearms taken into federal custody. The reason for this, as given by the memorandum, is that tracing is an important investigative tool that may lead to the apprehension of suspects as well as provide valuable intelligence about patterns on regional gun movement. Additional executive actions addressing this issue include, among others: nominating a director for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF);

- proposing rulemaking to give law enforcement the ability to run a full background check on an individual before returning a seized gun.

In June of 2013, the White House released a Progress Report on the President’s Executive Actions to Reduce Gun Violence. It noted that the administration had completed or made significant progress on twenty-one of the twenty-three executive actions. On August 29, 2013, President Obama announced two new executive actions that would build on the previous twenty-three:

- the ATF issued a proposed regulation that requires trusts or corporations that acquire weapons which require registration and a fingerprint-background check to run such checks on any associated individuals ;
- the administration announced a new policy of denying requests to private entities to bring military-grade firearms back into the United States, with only a few exceptions, such as for museums.

In terms of Impacts, President Obama acknowledged in an interview that, “As important as these steps are, they are in no way a substitute for action by Congress.” However, these actions have had some impact already, such as:

- in the nine months that followed the president’s directive, federal agencies made available to the NICS over 1.2 million additional records identifying persons prohibited from possessing firearms, which is nearly a 23 percent increase from the number of records that federal agencies had made available by the end of January 2017;
- the expansion of mental health and substance use disorder benefits and parity protections in the ACA has the potential to help 62 million Americans.

Despite this strong political will during his second term, President Obama did everything except safeguard Americans from gun violence. But Obama’s election in 2008 did bring hope and optimism to American citizens. On January 20, 2017 President Barack Obama left office without having enacted any gun legislation beyond his executive orders. All that noise for such outcomes? Something must be done to preserve life and freedom to bear firearms in America.

## **Conclusion**

On February 14, 2018, a shooter armed with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle went to his former high school in Parkland, Florida, and shot and killed 17 people. The community was traumatized. Within days, student-survivors of the shooting helped organize a rally. Speeches by students went viral. Students confronted lawmakers at a televised town hall meeting. And their efforts gave the national debate on gun safety a new sense of urgency. Worse on October 29, 2018, Robert Bowers entered in a synagogue killed 11 Jews and leaving 6 Jews wounded in Pittsburgh. This mass shooting shocked Americans and heated the political rhetoric as the midterm elections is near. The aforementioned gun violence incidents show that effectively addressing gun issue is still a puzzle for duty bearers. President Barack Obama spent eight years without having enacted any gun legislation beyond his executive orders.

The political polarization that dominated much of the Obama presidency does not appear to be waning in the early stages of Donald Trump’s presidency. The discontent and division among citizens toward the new administration was reflected in the protests and marches that followed the inauguration (Meghan, 2017). In addition, Democrats and Republicans in both the House of Representatives and the Senate remain in a tense gridlock, with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) declaring that Senate Democrats represent the barrier to Trump’s policies (Carl, 2016). The tension between Democrats and Republicans, paired with President Trump’s support of gun rights policies, suggests that the issue of gun violence will remain an unsolved public policy issue open to contention and debate (Reena, 2016). At the same time, the gun control case illuminates a broader set of issues in contemporary American politics. In particular, it highlights the seductive lure of elite politics. Modern liberals, including gun

control advocates, model themselves on the civil rights movement, but in doing so, they misread the lessons of history. The civil rights movement stands for the proposition that there are no quick fixes in American politics, but contemporary liberal reformers draw from the movement exactly the opposite conclusion. The gun control case serves as a cautionary tale. The Founding Fathers meant for political reform to be slow and difficult. Movements that adapt their strategies to that reality will expand; movements that do not adapt will falter. Will President Trump succeed where all his predecessors failed? That is the question.

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