

4 Pinocchios for a slashing NRA ad on security at Sidwell Friends School

By Glenn Kessler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tec8N7FRYjQ>

"Are the president's kids more important than yours? Then why is he skeptical about putting armed security in our schools when his kids are protected by armed guards at their school? Mr. Obama demands the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes, but he's just another elitist hypocrite when it comes to a fair share of security."

— voiceover of a new National Rifle Association television ad, released Jan. 15, 2013

The National Rifle Association, in a tough television ad on gun-control measures and in a longer 4-minute video presentation, has highlighted what it see as "elitist" hypocrisy by President Obama because his children are "protected by armed guards at their school."

After some blowback for involving the president's children in a political debate, NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam insisted that the ad was not about Malia and Sasha Obama: "If anyone thinks we're talking specifically about someone's children, they're missing the point completely. This isn't an issue about comparing the president's kids. This is an issue about school safety and protecting all our children, regardless of tax bracket and how important their parents are. The intent of our ad is to make sure that we point out that there is a double standard that exists."

Still, the ad features an image of NBC newsman David Gregory, whose children also attend Sidwell Friends School, which is a selective Quaker private school. And the longer version of the ad quotes a conservative Web site as saying: "Armed Guards — Good enough for the David Gregory's kids' school, not for the rest of us. ...[The] school Obama's daughters attend has 11 armed guards."

While some news organizations reported that the ad was referencing the Secret Service protection provided to the Obama family — as required by federal law — the longer ad makes it clear that the NRA is specifically referring to the security force at Sidwell Friends.

Indeed, it would be remarkably odd for the NRA to suggest that Obama ignore the law and refuse Secret Service protection for his children. Moreover, those Secret Service agents are there only to protect those children — and no one else at the school.

In an interview with The Washington Post, however, Arulanandam brought up the Secret Service: “The president and his family enjoy 24-hour-security from law enforcement at taxpayer expense, and this ad asks very real questions: If it’s good enough for the president, why shouldn’t it be good enough for the rest for us?”

The Facts

The NRA ad notes that Obama said he was skeptical about armed security in schools, which the organization has touted as a solution to mass shootings such as at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December. Obama did use the word skeptical, in an interview with Gregory, but the NRA has clipped the full meaning of his words.

GREGORY: “Should we have an armed guard at every school in the country? That’s what the NRA believes. They told me last week that that could work.”

OBAMA: “I’m not going to prejudge the recommendations that are given to me. I am skeptical that the only answer is putting more guns in schools. And I think the vast majority of the American people are skeptical that that somehow is going to solve our problem.”

Note that Obama said he was skeptical that armed guards were the “only answer,” not that he was skeptical of the idea. Indeed, in the package of gun-control proposals he unveiled on Wednesday, he called on Congress to help schools hire more guards or other school resource officers.

“Each school is different and should have the flexibility to address its most pressing needs,” the White House said. “Some schools will want trained and armed police; others may prefer increased counseling services.”

So the frame of hypocrisy is already a bit misshapen. But what about the claim that Sidwell Friends has 11 armed guards, which some Web sites have depicted with images of armed police with binoculars?

This is based on the fact that the online directory for Sidwell Friends lists 11 people as working in the Security Department. Five are listed as “special police officer,” while two are listed as “on call special police officer,” which presumably means they do not work full-time. The directory also lists two weekend shift supervisors, one security officer and the chief of security.

Under the District of Columbia General Order 308.7, a special police officer is a private commissioned police officer with arrest powers in the area that he or she protects. They may also be authorized to bear firearms — but it is not required. Security officers, by contrast, cannot carry firearms and in effect are watchmen. So five to seven security personnel in theory could be licensed to carry firearms.

But we spoke to parents who said they had never seen a guard on campus with a weapon. And Ellis Turner, associate head of Sidwell Friends, told us emphatically: “Sidwell Friends security officers do not carry guns.”

Sidwell Friends, by the way, has two distinct campuses, a lower school in Bethesda and a middle and upper schools in Washington. So given shift rotations and three different schools, it appears that the 11 “armed guards” is really just one or two unarmed guards per school at a time.

The most recent data on school security by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that 27 percent of public schools have either police or security guards on campus, with virtually all of the larger schools (1,500 students or more) having such security. Indeed, 58 percent of all public high schools have security personnel.

Interestingly, only 6 percent of all private schools have security personnel, though more than 50 percent of those with more than 1,000 students do have security. Sidwell’s enrollment is just over 1,000 students, so having some security guards is not unusual for a private school of its size.

An NRA spokesman did not return a call for comment.

The Pinocchio Test

A slashing attack like this has an especially high threshold to get its facts straight. The ad gives the impression that a phalanx of armed police are guarding students, such as the Obama and Gregory children, at Sidwell Friends.

But that is completely false. Far from being elitist, the relatively small force of unarmed security guards at Sidwell is not unusual for a school of its size.

Moreover, the ad also suggests that Obama rejects out of hand boosting security at schools, when in fact his proposals include provisions that would provide funding for more school security.

If the NRA is also trying to count Secret Service protection for Obama’s children as part of that force of armed guards, that’s even more ridiculous. As we noted, such protection is mandated under federal law — and only exists for the president’s children.



Four Pinocchios
