

Mass Shootings in the White Noise of Anywhere USA

Phil Rockstroh muses on how the impulse to possess an unlimited number of firearms fits into the late-imperium scheme of things.

By [Phil Rockstroh](#)



The U.S. is less of a nation than a collective, psychotic episode.

Within day-to-day life in the nation, a cultural aura exists that shifts, mingles and merges between a sense of nervous agitation and displaced rage, in combination with a sense of weightlessness. The fragmented quality of daily life imparts an insubstantial, unreal quality wherein the citizenry of the capitalist/consumer empire of hungry ghosts drift through a nadascape comprised of ad hoc, fast-buck-driven, suburban/exurban architecture and the ersatz eros of constant, consumer come-ons.

Yet beneath the nebulous dread and nettling angst of it all, there exists the primal human imperative for connection and social communion i.e., authentic eros. The most lost among the lost in the ghostsphere of the collective mind attempt to animate the realm of shades with libations of blood. The gods of the capitalist death cult demand no less.

Where does an impulse to possess an unlimited number of firearms fit into the scheme of things? A firearm's heft, for one. The weapon's substantial feel, when held and hoisted, serves, provisionally, to mitigate a psychical sense of weightlessness. The act of engagement eases nervous agitation. Gun reality offsets the weightless content of

media reality. Focus is achieved when one aims the weapon on a target. Nebulous dread transforms into adamantine purpose. The presence of an Angel of Death will focus the mind. The ground, for the moment, feels solid beneath one's feet. Hence, there arrives a craving, in the sense of addiction, to hoard the object that provides relief; in addition, massive quantities of ammunition must be stored as emotional ballast.

The mystifying, rankling, uncontrollable criteria of this weightless Age and the white noise of uncertainty seem to yield to the clear and decisive crack of a rifle shot. Relief is imagined in the concomitant carnage. The late British author Rebecca West captures the phenomenon in her book, "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon:"

"Only part of us is sane: only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations."

Feedback Loop of Carnage

Because we, on a personal level, in most cases, choose the primary option, our hidden, shadow half will live out the latter on a collective basis. During the blood lust on display at President Donald Trump's rallies, the mob finds a

collective comfort zone in catastrophic longings. The domestic landscape of paranoia works on behalf of the profiteers of perpetual war, perpetrators of the U.S.-created deathscapes overseas, and vice versa, in a self-resonating feedback loop of carnage.

In our era, in which, the U.S. empire is in decline and the white supremacist order is giving way, Trump's frightened legions feel as if their identity is under siege. Seal off the nation's borders. Construct an unscalable wall. Create a cordon sanitaire to protect and preserve racial purity. A strong authority figure is craved to set the world back in order. The phenomenon could be termed, Authoritarian Simpatico Syndrome (ASS) – a pathology manifested in personality types who have been traumatized by the authoritarianism of the U.S. socio-political milieu but who seek to assuage their hurt and humiliation by identification with the very forces responsible for their torment. It's the stuff of a cultural nervous breakdown.

To that end, according to its own laws, the nation's citizenry, sufferers of mental distress, should be restricted from purchasing a gun. Yet without a doubt, the most disturbed of all are the nation's political class, those responsible for gun legislation. There is compelling evidence that they present a clear and present danger to themselves and others. The political class is a menace to society; they make decisions, more often than not, based on delusional thinking, that are responsible for harm on a massive scale. They should be subject to institutional-style restraint, within the confines of the most heavily secure, lockdown ward in an asylum for the criminally insane.

Although the so-called mentally ill, as a rule, are not any more inclined to commit violent crimes than are the general population of capitalist dystopias. The U.S. was founded in genocidal violence and the fortunes of its ruling class' are protected by the state sanctioned violence of the police and are bloated by the violence inherent to imperialist shakedown operations.

It comes down to this: In our emotionally brutal era, those deemed mentally ill are suffering from capitalism. The pummeling stress and boot-in-the-face, hierarchy-inflicted humiliations inherent to the system inflict trauma on large swathes of the citizenry.

Epidemic levels of middle-aged U.S. citizens are dying with needles in their arms. The inherent and internalized white supremacy of the societal order has been exacerbated by Trump's self-serving, reckless agitprop and acts in a drug-like manner causing dopamine levels to rise in those experiencing emotional torment due to humiliation-caused despair. Demagogues such as Trump are aware and exploit the manner in which despair can be mitigated by the emotional displacement of rage.

Fascist insignias rise when the hopes and aspirations of the working class lie shattered across a capitalist economic wasteland. Hoisted torches provide the illusion that dark despair has been banished. The fascist mob becomes possessed by a belief that they, en masse, can ascend into the precincts of heaven by scaling a mountain of corpses comprised of outsider groups.

Fascism as Psychoactive Drug

Fascism acts as an anesthetic to the wounds delivered by capitalism. It is also a psychoactive drug; its incantatory rhetoric and imagist psychical material provides an intoxicating, crude allure.

Capitalism is borne on manic wings. The economic elite move from corporate skyscrapers and high-rise rooftops in order to travel by helicopter, where upon landing, they board private, luxury jets, then, whereupon landing again, they are transported by helicopter to corporate skyscrapers and high-rise rooftops. Touching the Earth is a fleeting experience. The ruling class have lost touch with ground-level verities. In a classical sense, such displays of hubris were understood as the progenitor of madness. The gods first elevate those they drive mad.

And, yes, race-based fears and animus are in play. Racism engendered mass murder has been coming to pass since armed Europeans trudged ashore in the Americas, with their blood-sodden religion and their murderous craving for gold and land. Of course, the racist demagoguery of the Bloated Orange Tub of Nazi Goo oozing into and agitating the limbic systems of violent cretins during homegrown Nuremberg Rallies and his compulsion to blitzkrieg the pixel-sphere with Der Stürmer tweets is fomenting racist mayhem that includes bacchanals of blood. U.S. mythos is rancid with the reek of the corpses of the innocent slaughtered by white men brandishing firearms. Mass murderers have been and continue to be enshrined as heroes, from Wounded Knee to Afghanistan.

The nation was established by gun-enabled genocide and the intimidation of African slaves held at gunpoint on

capitalist plantations. The truth has never been faced e.g., the suppression of the Nixon tape in which Ronald Reagan displayed his racist mindset.

The U.S. citizenry thanks the soldiers of its racist wars of aggression for their “service.” The origins of perpetual shooting sprees can be traced to the heart of darkness of the nation and its concomitant white supremacist creed. The killings happened long before the rise and election of the Tangerine Tweet Führer. Of course, the racist shit-heel Trump has exacerbated the situation. He deserves all scorn cast his way. It is obvious his capacity for malice does not possess a governor’s switch.

Trump is a two-legged emblem of the hypertrophy at play in late U.S. imperium. Gun-inflicted violence is steeped into the blood-stained fabric of the U.S. (sham) republic. Withal, Trump is not an anomaly; he is an emblem. Gun-strokers are no more going to shed their mythos than liberals and progressives are going to shed theirs that the U.S. is a democratic republic, governed by the rule of law, and progressive reforms will be implemented by its High Dollar owned and controlled political class that will serve to turn around the trajectory of the blood-built and maintained U.S. empire.

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WATCH: CN LIVE! The Latest on Assange; Plus America and Guns: Episode 5

The fifth episode of CN Live! discussed the latest on Julian Assange and the problem of guns in America.

John Pilger saw Assange at Belmarsh prison on Tuesday and reports a troubling deterioration in his health. We discussed Assange and governments' treatment of him and how the people are manipulated with Australian psychologist Lissa Johnson. Plus Mark Davis, a prominent Australian television journalist, revealed new details about *WikiLeaks'* relationship with *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* during publication of the Afghan War Logs.

And then, in the wake of the massacres last weekend in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas, we got two perspectives on the crisis that has gripped the U.S. for too long: mass murder.

First we were joined from Sydney, Australia by Rebecca Peters, who helped negotiate Australia's gun laws enacted after a 1996 mass murder that has made a dramatic difference; and James Howard Kunstler went deep into what's

unwell about American culture that contributes to the ongoing, senseless massacres.

All on today's episode of CN Live! with your hosts Elizabeth Vos and Joe Lauria.

Watch the replay here!

Hold the Teddy Bears & Candles

In a nation afflicted by fads, crazes, manias and rages, mass murder is the jackpot for nihilists, writes James Howard Kunstler.

By **James Howard Kunstler**

Clusterfuck Nation



In a nation afflicted by fads, crazes, manias and rages, mass murder is the jackpot for nihilists – begging the question: why does this country produce so many of them? Answer: this is exactly what you get in a culture where anything goes and nothing matters. Extract all the meaning and purpose from being here on Earth, and erase as many boundaries as you can from custom and behavior, and watch what happens, especially among young men trained on video slaughter games.

For many, there is no armature left to hang a life on, no communities, no fathers, no mentors, no initiations into personal responsibility, no daily organizing principles, no

instruction in useful trades, no productive activities, no opportunities for love and affection, and no way out. This abyss of missing social relations is made worse by the everyday physical settings for everyday lives based on nothing: the wilderness of parking lots that America has turned itself into. Such is the compelling myth of the New World as a wilderness that we obliged ourselves to re-enact it, minus nature, including human nature, especially what may be noble and sacred about human nature.

The old truism sticks: when nothing is sacred, everything is profane, and what could be more profane than slaughtering your fellow humans en masse, for no good reason? Just because you felt like it at the time? Another time, you might feel like scarfing some tacos, or checking in on the free porn sites, or tweaking some crushed-up oxycontin. One message from the culture of *anything-goes-and-nothing-matters* comes through loud and clear: if it feels good, do it! And if you feel bad, do something to make yourself feel better.

Grotesque Landscape

The wonder is that the way we live these days hasn't turned more people into homicidal maniacs, considering how many are out there feeling bad in this grotesque landscape of incessant motoring, vivid purposelessness, and lost aspiration – unless these bloody skirmishes are the precursor to some more general outbreak of murderous havoc. It's not hard these days to imagine the political animus ratcheting up to something like a new civil war. If it works out that way, it will be the most psychologically confused political event of modern history.

Walmart is the perfect setting for these ceremonies of nihilist wrath. The sheer size of these places makes the "consumers" inside feel small, and informs them that they are at the mercy of colossal forces for their pitiful daily needs, their Hot Pockets, their disposable diapers, their roach spray. The shooter is just a momentary concentration of everything else grinding the dignity and meaning out of American lives. The bad karma in these dynamics compels some periodic release. Cue some young man jacked on his own hormones and a comic book conception of human power relations.

I'm not persuaded that a ban on gun sales will do anything to prevent more of these deadly episodes because there are already too many firearms loose in America. But it is probably necessary to make some kind of statement, say a ban on military-type weapons, and I rather expect that will happen. But the political process of recognizing what really ails this society is mired in bad faith, idiocy, and neuroticism. And the political actors are signaling their ineptitude clearly, which only adds to the sweeping demoralization of everybody else.

We await a restructuring of American life into real communities of people working together at things that matter, and it will require the demise of the things that have worked so hard to destroy all that, namely, the tyranny of the giants, the town-killing Walmarts, the suffocating monster of government, the media manipulators of reality, the too-big-to-fail banks. The people alone won't loosen the grip of these monsters and, honestly, they lack the will to even imagine life without all that. But history onrushing

will do it for them, first in the form of a financial fiasco that upsets the meaning of what “money” is, and all the instruments calibrated in it; and then with an economic collapse of supply lines and activities that we can’t afford to carry on anymore.

The people may have to be dragged kicking and screaming into that new disposition of things, just because it’s so hard to let go of what you’re used to. Something like this appears to be underway now in global business and markets. For a while, it will only add to the confusion. Clarity is a lagging effect.

James Howard Kunstler is author of “The Geography of Nowhere,” which he says he wrote “Because I believe a lot of people share my feelings about the tragic landscape of highway strips, parking lots, housing tracts, mega-malls, junked cities, and ravaged countryside that makes up the everyday environment where most Americans live and work.” He has written several other works of nonfiction and fiction. Read more about him [here](#).

This article first appeared on his blog, [ClusterfuckNation](#).

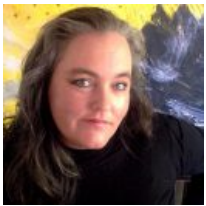
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Beware Calls in US for Domestic 'Terrorism' Laws

Mass shootings by white supremacists should not be exploited to further militarize the police and lose more civil liberties, says Caitlin Johnstone.

By [Caitlin Johnstone](#)

[CaitlinJohnstone.com](#)



[Two mass shootings](#) have rocked the United States in less than 24 hours, leaving dozens dead and many more wounded. The first in El Paso, Texas, was [allegedly perpetrated by a white supremacist](#) whose racist motives are outlined in a rambling “manifesto,” the second [allegedly by a self-described “leftist”](#) whose motives, [like those of the 2017 Las Vegas shooter](#), are [presently unknown](#). These incidents occurred a week after [another mass shooting in Gilroy, California](#).

All the usual U.S. gun control debates have of course reignited, which is understandable. Alongside this debate, however, we are seeing another, far more pernicious agenda being raised that I would like to address here.

Malcolm discusses the need for congress to pass domestic terrorism laws.

[@MalcolmNance](#) [#AMJoy](#) [pic.twitter.com/PwLH85IYF6](#)

– La Femme Nikita (@LaF3mm3Nikita) [August 4, 2019](#)

In [an interview](#) with MSNBC’s Joy Reid, [notorious liar](#) and [propagandist](#) Malcolm Nance claimed that existing laws aren’t sufficient for prosecuting the El Paso shooter, because there are no laws designating his act of mass murder

as “domestic terrorism.”

“I think that Congress needs to take up right away a series of domestic terrorism laws,” Nance said. “It’d be very simple: just match them to the words ‘international terrorism,’ so that a member of al-Qaeda and a member of a white nationalist terrorist cell or a militia that thinks they’re going to carry out international acts of terrorism are equal all the way around. Right now there are no laws called ‘domestic terrorism law.’ They can get you for firearms, they get you for hate crimes, but you are not treated as a terrorist. This act in El Paso was clearly by all definitions a terrorist attack in the United States, but of course by the nature of the person being white and American he can’t be treated like a member of ISIS or al-Qaeda. He can’t even be detained, he can only be treated as a murderer.”

(The accused, for the record, is in fact under arrest currently, and prosecutors say that they are treating it as a domestic terrorism case for which they are seeking the death penalty. This is in Texas; he’ll be dead before the next “Fast & Furious” movie. Nance’s notion that prosecutors’ hands are somehow tied here is silly.)

“But he’s a murderer with a political intent who is spreading an ideology,” Nance continued. “So Congress should take that up immediately. And let’s see if the White House won’t sign that legislation. That would be very revealing.”

In other words, shove the legislation through and call anyone who opposes it a Nazi lover.

‘Islamic Terrorism’ Alarm

Political commentary is flooded with the word “terrorism” today. People are demanding that the El Paso shooter in particular and white supremacists in general be labeled terrorists by the narrative-making commentariat, and you know what? I totally get it.

The push since 9/11 to tar Muslims as “terrorists” has been extremely obnoxious and fueled by hate and bigotry, so it makes sense for progressive-minded people to push for the egalitarian usage of that term. But before doing so, please reflect on what lessons we learned from the post-9/11 “Islamic terrorism” scare.

“Years of misguided alarmism over ‘Islamic terrorism’ resulted in the erosion of civil liberties, militarization of police, and a host of other bad outcomes. Applying the same alarmist logic to ‘white nationalist terrorism’ is likely to produce a host of similarly bad outcomes,” [tweeted](#) independent journalist Michael Tracey in response to the chatter.

Years of misguided alarmism over "Islamic terrorism" resulted in the erosion of civil liberties, militarization of police, and a host of other bad outcomes. Applying the same alarmist logic to "white nationalist terrorism" is likely to produce a host of similarly bad outcomes

– Michael Tracey (@mtracey) [August 4, 2019](#)

“I am telling you now that the government will use the violence that Trump himself has rallied as an excuse for more militarization, more surveillance, more violations of civil liberties – and a lot of people are going to welcome these things because they are afraid,” [tweeted](#) *Truthout*’s Kelly Hayes. “I’m not guessing or being creative here. This

is about having a sense of history and a sense of how these systems function in the present. I would love to be wrong. I would celebrate being wrong. But I'm not."

I am telling you now that the government will use the violence that Trump himself has rallied as an excuse for more militarization, more surveillance, more violations of civil liberties – and a lot of people are going to welcome these things bc they are afraid.

– Puff the Magic Hater (@MsKellyMHayes) [August 4, 2019](#)

Indeed, it is an established fact that the U.S. will use the narrative about the need to fight terrorism to advance pre-existing agendas. The first draft of the massive USA Patriot Act was introduced [a week after the 9/11 attacks](#), far too fast for anyone to have gathered the necessary information from all the relevant government bodies about what changes were necessary and typed out the hundreds of pages of the bill. Legislators [later admitted](#) that they didn't even have time to *read* through the densely worded bill before passing it the next month, so to believe that it could have been *written* in a week would be childish.

High-altitude surveillance balloons have been deployed over America to "deter narcotic trafficking and homeland security threats" via "hi-tech radar". To be clear, this is not something they're considering or opening up for public debate. This has already happened. <https://t.co/q7IKr5WMLN>

– Caitlin Johnstone ? (@caitoz) [August 3, 2019](#)

In 2011 then-Congressman Ron Paul [told Politico](#) that "the Patriot Act was written many, many years before 9/11," adding that the attacks simply provided "an opportunity for some people to do what they wanted to do." Paul was serving

in Congress when the Patriot Act was passed. The law has since been used to erode human rights at home and abroad by destroying Fourth Amendment protections and legalizing Orwellian surveillance, and it's safe to assume that the opaque and unaccountable government agencies that were greatly empowered by it had already wanted this to happen.

I have no easy answers for America's mass shooting epidemic, and as an Australian I see the gun control debate as outside my sovereign territory. I will simply suggest, as I so often do, that if Americans really want to address the problem then the best place to start is to do the first ever honest and in-depth study on the effects of domestic propaganda on the American mind, particularly war propaganda. There are only so many times a certain type of mind can be told violence-glorifying lies before it snaps; if anyone researches mass shootings in the light of the constant psychological abuse that Americans suffer at the hands of their mass media, I guarantee they'll find a connection. Americans are the most propagandized people on earth because of their proximity to the most strategically crucial part of the empire; it's not a coincidence that they're also by far the most prone to mass shootings.

One thing I can tell you *won't* fix your problems, America, and that's listening to the propagandists who want you to hand over even more control to a government that has already begun floating high-altitude surveillance balloons over your country without your permission.

Don't let them bully you with fear.

Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia

prepper who publishes regularly [at Medium](#). Follow her work on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#). She has a [podcast](#) and a new book "[Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers](#)."

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American Suicide & What Trump Isn't Doing About It

It's an epidemic with life-and-death significance for a pivotal portion of Trump's base, but the president has paid no attention to the way it is afflicting U.S. civilians, writes Rajan Menon.

By [Rajan Menon](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



We hear a lot about suicide when celebrities such as [Anthony Bourdain](#) and [Kate Spade](#) die by their own hand. Otherwise, it seldom makes the headlines. That's odd given the magnitude of the problem.

In 2017, [47,173](#) Americans killed themselves. In that single year, in other words, the suicide count was nearly [seven](#) times greater than the number of American

soldiers killed in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars between 2001 and 2018.

A suicide occurs in the United States roughly once every 12 minutes. What's more, after decades of decline, the rate of self-inflicted deaths per 100,000 people annually – the suicide rate – has been increasing sharply since the late 1990s. Suicides now claim two-and-a-half times as many lives in this country as do homicides, even though the murder rate gets so much more attention.

In other words, we're talking about a national epidemic of self-inflicted deaths.

Worrisome Numbers

Anyone who has lost a close relative or friend to suicide or has worked on a suicide hotline (as I have) knows that statistics transform the individual, the personal, and indeed the mysterious aspects of that violent act – Why this person? Why now? Why in this manner? – into depersonalized abstractions. Still, to grasp how serious the suicide epidemic has become, numbers are a necessity.

According to a 2018 Centers for Disease Control study, between 1999 and 2016, the suicide rate increased in every state in the union except Nevada, which already had a remarkably high rate. In 30 states, it jumped by 25 percent or more; in 17, by at least a third. Nationally, it increased 33percent. In some states the upsurge was far higher: North Dakota (57.6 percent), New Hampshire (48.3 percent), Kansas (45 percent), Idaho (43 percent).

Alas, the news only gets grimmer.

Since 2008, suicide has ranked 10th among the causes of death in this country. For Americans between the ages of 10 and 34, however, it comes in second; for those between 35 and 45, fourth. The United States also has the ninth-highest rate in the 38-country Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Globally, it ranks 27th.

More importantly, the trend in the United States doesn't align with what's happening elsewhere in the developed world. The World Health Organization, for instance, reports that Great Britain, Canada, and China all have notably lower suicide rates than the U.S., as do all but six countries in the European Union. (Japan's is only slightly lower.)

World Bank statistics show that, worldwide, the suicide rate fell from 12.8 per 100,000 in 2000 to 10.6 in 2016. It's been falling in China, Japan (where it has declined steadily for nearly a decade and is at its lowest point in 37 years), most of Europe, and even countries like South Korea and Russia that have a significantly higher suicide rate than the United States. In Russia, for instance, it has dropped by nearly 26 percent from a high point of 42 per 100,000 in 1994 to 31 in 2019.

We know a fair amount about the patterns of suicide in the United States. In 2017, the rate was highest for men between the ages of 45 and 64 (30 per 100,000) and those 75 and older (39.7 per 100,000).

The rates in rural counties are almost double those in the most urbanized ones, which is why states like Idaho, Kansas, New Hampshire, and North Dakota sit atop the suicide list.

Furthermore, a far higher percentage of people in rural states own guns than in cities and suburbs, leading to a higher rate of suicide involving firearms, the means used in half of all such acts in this country.

There are gender-based differences as well. From 1999 to 2017, the rate for men was substantially higher than for women – almost four-and-a-half times higher in the first of those years, slightly more than three-and-a-half times in the last.

Education is also a factor. The suicide rate is lowest among individuals with college degrees. Those who, at best, completed high school are, by comparison, twice as likely to kill themselves. Suicide rates also tend to be lower among people in higher-income brackets.

The Economics of Stress

This surge in the suicide rate has taken place in years during which the working class has experienced greater economic hardship and psychological stress. Increased competition from abroad and outsourcing, the results of globalization, have contributed to job loss, particularly in economic sectors like manufacturing, steel, and mining that had long been mainstays of employment for such workers. The jobs still available often paid less and provided fewer benefits.

Technological change, including computerization, robotics, and the coming of artificial intelligence, has similarly begun to displace labor in significant ways, leaving Americans without college degrees, especially those 50 and older, in far more difficult straits when it comes

to finding new jobs that pay well. The lack of anything resembling an industrial policy of a sort that exists in Europe has made these dislocations even more painful for American workers, while a sharp decline in private-sector union membership – down from nearly 17 percent in 1983 to 6.4 percent today – has reduced their ability to press for higher wages through collective bargaining.

Furthermore, the inflation-adjusted median wage has barely budged over the last four decades (even as CEO salaries have soared). And a decline in worker productivity doesn't explain it: between 1973 and 2017 productivity increased by 77 percent, while a worker's average hourly wage only rose by 12.4 percent. Wage stagnation has made it harder for working-class Americans to get by, let alone have a lifestyle comparable to that of their parents or grandparents.

The gap in earnings between those at the top and bottom of American society has also increased – a lot. Since 1979, the wages of Americans in the 10th percentile increased by a pitiful 1.2 percent. Those in the 50th percentile did a bit better, making a gain of 6 percent. By contrast, those in the 90th percentile increased by 34.3 percent and those near the peak of the wage pyramid – the top 1 percent and especially the rarefied 0.1 percent – made far more substantial gains.

And mind you, we're just talking about wages, not other forms of income such as large stock dividends, expensive homes, or eyepopping inheritances. The share of net national wealth held by the richest 0.1

percent increased from 10 percent in the 1980s to 20 percent in 2016. By contrast, the share of the bottom 90 percent shrank in those same decades from about 35 percent to 20 percent. As for the top 1 percent, by 2016 its share had increased to almost 39percent.

The precise relationship between economic inequality and suicide rates remains unclear, and suicide certainly can't simply be reduced to wealth disparities or financial stress. Still, strikingly, in contrast to the United States, suicide rates are noticeably lower and have been declining in western European countries where income inequalities are far less pronounced, publicly funded healthcare is regarded as a right (not demonized as a pathway to serfdom), social safety nets far more extensive, and apprenticeships and worker retraining programs more widespread.

Evidence from the United States, Brazil, Japan, and Sweden does indicate that, as income inequality increases, so does the suicide rate. If so, the good news is that progressive economic policies – should Democrats ever retake the White House and the Senate – could make a positive difference. A study based on state-by-state variations in the U.S. found that simply boosting the minimum wage and Earned Income Tax Credit by 10 percent appreciably reduces the suicide rate among people without college degrees.

The Race Enigma

One aspect of the suicide epidemic is puzzling. Though whites have fared far better economically (and in many other ways) than African Americans, their suicide rate is

significantly higher. It increased from 11.3 per 100,000 in 2000 to 15.85 per 100,000 in 2017; for African Americans in those years the rates were 5.52 per 100,000 and 6.61 per 100,000. Black men are 10 times more likely to be homicide victims than white men, but the latter are two-and-half times more likely to kill themselves.

The higher suicide rate among whites as well as among people with only a high school diploma highlights suicide's disproportionate effect on working-class whites. This segment of the population also accounts for a disproportionate share of what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have labeled "deaths of despair" – those caused by suicides plus opioid overdoses and liver diseases linked to alcohol abuse. Though it's hard to offer a complete explanation for this, economic hardship and its ripple effects do appear to matter.

According to a study by the St. Louis Federal Reserve, the white working class accounted for 45 percent of all income earned in the United States in 1990, but only 27 percent in 2016. In those same years, its share of national wealth plummeted, from 45 percent to 22 percent. And as inflation-adjusted wages have decreased for men without college degrees, many white workers seem to have lost hope of success of any sort. Paradoxically, the sense of failure and the accompanying stress may be greater for white workers precisely because they traditionally were much better off economically than their African American and Hispanic counterparts.

In addition, the fraying of communities knit together by employment in once-robust factories and mines has

increased social isolation among them, and the evidence that it – along with opioid addiction and alcohol abuse – increases the risk of suicide is strong. On top of that, a significantly higher proportion of whites than blacks and Hispanics own firearms, and suicide rates are markedly higher in states where gun ownership is more widespread.

Trump's Faux Populism

The large increase in suicide within the white working class began a couple of decades before Donald Trump's election. Still, it's reasonable to ask what he's tried to do about it, particularly since votes from these Americans helped propel him to the White House. In 2016, he received 64 percent of the votes of whites without college degrees; Hillary Clinton, only 28 percent. Nationwide, he beat Clinton in counties where deaths of despair rose significantly between 2000 and 2015.

White workers will remain crucial to Trump's chances of winning in 2020. Yet while he has spoken about, and initiated steps aimed at reducing, the high suicide rate among veterans, his speeches and tweets have never highlighted the national suicide epidemic or its inordinate impact on white workers. More importantly, to the extent that economic despair contributes to their high suicide rate, his policies will only make matters worse.

The real benefits from the December 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act championed by the president and congressional Republicans flowed to those on the top steps of the economic ladder. By 2027, when the Act's provisions will run out, the wealthiest Americans are expected to have captured 81.8

percent of the gains. And that's not counting the windfall they received from recent changes in taxes on inheritances. Trump and the GOP doubled the annual amount exempt from estate taxes – wealth bequeathed to heirs – through 2025 from \$5.6 million per individual to \$11.2 million (or \$22.4 million per couple). And who benefits most from this act of generosity? Not workers, that's for sure, but every household with an estate worth \$22 million or more will.

As for job retraining provided by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the president proposed cutting that program by 40percent in his 2019 budget, later settling for keeping it at 2017 levels. Future cuts seem in the cards as long as Trump is in the White House. The Congressional Budget Office projects that his tax cuts alone will produce even bigger budget deficits in the years to come. (The shortfall last year was \$779 billion and it is expected to reach \$1 trillion by 2020.) Inevitably, the president and congressional Republicans will then demand additional reductions in spending for social programs.

This is all the more likely because Trump and those Republicans also slashed corporate taxes from 35percent to 21 percent – an estimated \$1.4 trillion in savings for corporations over the next decade. And unlike the income tax cut, the corporate tax has no end date. The president assured his base that the big bucks those companies had stashed abroad would start flowing home and produce a wave of job creation – all without adding to the deficit. As it happens, however, most of that repatriated cash has been used for corporate stock buy-backs, which totaled more than \$800 billion last year. That, in turn, boosted share

prices, but didn't exactly rain money down on workers. No surprise, of course, since the wealthiest 10percent of Americans own at least 84 percent of all stocks and the bottom 60percent have less than 2 percent of them.

And the president's corporate tax cut hasn't produced the tsunami of job-generating investments he predicted either. Indeed, in its aftermath, more than 80 percent of American companies stated that their plans for investment and hiring hadn't changed. As a result, the monthly increase in jobs has proven unremarkable compared to President Obama's second term, when the economic recovery that Trump largely inherited began. Yes, the economy did grow 2.3 percent in 2017 and 2.9 percent in 2018 (though not 3.1 percent as the president claimed). There wasn't, however, any "unprecedented economic boom – a boom that has rarely been seen before" as he insisted in this year's State of the Union Address.

Anyway, what matters for workers struggling to get by is growth in real wages, and there's nothing to celebrate on that front: between 2017 and mid-2018 they actually declined by 1.63 percent for white workers and 2.5 percent for African Americans, while they rose for Hispanics by a measly 0.37 percent. And though Trump insists that his beloved tariff hikes are going to help workers, they will actually raise the prices of goods, hurting the working class and other low-income Americans the most.

Then there are the obstacles those susceptible to suicide face in receiving insurance-provided mental-health care. If you're a white worker without medical coverage or have a policy with a deductible and co-payments that are high and

your income, while low, is too high to qualify for Medicaid, Trump and the GOP haven't done anything for you. Never mind the president's tweet proclaiming that "the Republican Party Will Become 'The Party of Healthcare!'"

The Republican Party will become "The Party of Healthcare!"

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [March 26, 2019](#)

Let me amend that: actually, they *have* done something. It's just not what you'd call helpful. The [percentage](#) of uninsured adults, which fell from 18percent in 2013 to 10.9 percent at the end of 2016, thanks in no small measure to [Obamacare](#), had risen to 13.7 percent by the end of last year.

The bottom line? On a problem that literally has life-and-death significance for a pivotal portion of his base, Trump has been AWOL. In fact, to the extent that economic strain contributes to the alarming suicide rate among white workers, his policies are only likely to exacerbate what is already a national crisis of epidemic proportions.

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School Shooters and Drones

Allegra Harpootlian links gun violence at home to U.S. wars abroad.

By [Allegra Harpootlian](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



In the wake of the Feb. 14, 2018, mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 students and staff members, a teacher [said](#) the school looked “like a war zone.” And to many young Americans, that’s exactly what it felt like. But this shooting was different. Refusing to be victims, Parkland survivors disrupted the [“thoughts and prayers”](#) cycle by immediately rallying student activists and adults across the country, mobilizing them around such tragedies and the [weapons of war](#) that often facilitate them.

[Recent history](#) suggested that such a movement, sure to be unable to keep the public’s attention or exert significant pressure on lawmakers, would collapse almost instantly. Yet, miraculously enough, the same fear – of their school being next – that had kept young Americans paralyzed for almost 20 years was what drove these newly impassioned activists not to back down.

Let me say that, much as I admire them, I look at their remarkable movement from an odd perspective. You see, I grew up in the “school-shooting era” and now work for a non-profit called [ReThink Media](#) tracking coverage of the American drone war that has been going on for 17 years.

To me, the U.S. military and CIA drones that hover constantly over eight countries across the Greater Middle East and Africa, and regularly terrorize, maim, and kill civilians, including children, are the equivalents of the disturbed shooters in American schools. But that story is hard to find anywhere in this country. What reports Americans do read about those drone strikes usually focus on successes (a major terrorist taken out in a distant land), not the “collateral damage.”

With that in mind, let me return to those teenage activists against gun violence who quickly grasped three crucial things. The first was that such violence can't be dealt with by focusing on gun control alone. You also have to confront the other endemic problems exacerbating the gun violence epidemic, including inadequate mental health resources, systemic racism and police brutality, and the depth of economic inequality. As Parkland teen organizer Edna Chavez explained, “Instead of police officers we should have a department specializing in restorative justice. We need to tackle the root causes of the issues we face and come to an understanding of how to resolve them.”

The second was that, no matter how much you shouted, you had to be aware of the privilege of being heard. In other words, when you shouted, you had to do so not just for yourself but for all those voices so regularly drowned out in this country. After all, black Americans represent the majority of gun homicide victims. Black children are 10 times as likely to die by gun and yet their activism on the subject has been largely demonized or overlooked even as support for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students rolled

in.

The third was that apathy is the enemy of progress, which means that to make change you have to give people a sense of engagement and empowerment. As one of the Parkland students, [Emma Gonzalez](#), put it: “What matters is that the majority of American people have become complacent in a senseless injustice that occurs all around them.”

Washington’s Expanding Drone Wars

Here’s the irony, though: while those teenagers continue to talk about the repeated killing of innocents in this country, their broader [message](#) could easily be applied to another type of violence that, in all these years, Americans have paid next to no attention to: the U.S. drone war.

Unlike school shootings, drone strikes killing civilians in distant lands rarely make the news here, much less the headlines. Most of us at least now know what it means to live in a country where school shootings are an almost weekly news story. Drones are another matter entirely, and beyond the innocents they so regularly slaughter, there are long-term effects on the communities they are attacking.

As [Veterans for Peace](#) put it, “Here at home, deaths of students and others killed in mass shootings and gun violence, including suicide gun deaths, are said to be the price of freedom to bear arms. Civilian casualties in war are written off as ‘collateral damage,’ the price of freedom and U.S. security.”

And yet, after 17 years, three presidents, and little transparency, America’s drone wars have never truly made it

into the national conversation. Regularly marketed over those years as “precise” and “surgical,” drones have always been seen by lawmakers as a “sexy,” casualty-free solution to fighting the bad guys, while protecting American blood and treasure.

According to reports, President Donald Trump actually expanded the U.S. global drone war, while removing the last shreds of transparency about what those drones are doing – and even who’s launching them. One of his first orders on entering the Oval Office was to secretly reinstate the CIA’s ability to launch drone strikes that are, in most cases, not even officially acknowledged. And since then, it’s only gotten worse. Just last week, he revoked an Obama-era executive order that required the director of national intelligence to release an annual report on civilian and combatant casualties caused by CIA drones and other lethal operations. Now, not only are the rules of engagement – whom you can strike and under what circumstances– secret, but the Pentagon no longer even reveals when drones have been used, no less when civilians die from them. Because of this purposeful opaqueness, even an estimate of the drone death toll no longer exists.

Still, in the data available on all U.S. airstrikes since Trump was elected, an alarming trend is discernible: there are more of them, more casualties from them, and ever less accountability about them. In Iraq and Syria alone, the monitoring group Airwars believes that the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS is responsible for between 7,468 and 11,841 civilian deaths, around 2,000 of whom were children.

(The U.S.-led coalition, however, only admits to killing 1,139 civilians.)

In Afghanistan, the U.N. recently found that U.S. airstrikes (including drone strikes) had killed approximately the same number of Afghan civilians in 2018 as in the previous three years put together. In response to this report, the U.S.-led NATO mission there claimed that “all feasible precautions” were being taken to limit civilian casualties and that it investigates all allegations of their occurrence. According to such NATO investigations, airstrikes by foreign forces caused 117 civilian casualties last year, including 62 deaths – about a fifth of the U.N. tally.

And those are only the numbers for places where Washington is officially at war. In Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Libya, even less information is available on the number of civilians the U.S. has killed. Experts who track drone strikes in such gray areas of conflict, however, place that number in the thousands, though there is no way to confirm them, as even our military acknowledges. U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Veale, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, put it this way last year: “As far as how do we know how many civilians were killed, I am just being honest, no one will ever know. Anyone who claims they will know is lying, and there’s no possible way.”

After a U.S. strike killed or injured an entire Afghan family, the trauma surgeon treating a 4-year-old survivor told NBC, “I am sad. A young boy with such big injuries. No eyes, brain out. What will be his future?”

In other words, while America’s teenagers fight in the most

public way possible for their right to live, a world away [Afghanistan's](#) teenagers are [marching](#) for the same thing – except instead of gun control, in that heavily armed land, they want peace.

Trauma Is Trauma Is Trauma

Gun violence – and school shootings in particular – have become the preeminent fear of American teenagers. A [Pew poll](#) taken last year found that 57 percent of teens are worried about a shooting at their school (1-in-4 are “very worried.”) This is even truer of nonwhite teens, with roughly two-thirds of them expressing such fear.

As one student told [Teen Vogue](#): “How could you not feel a little bit terrified knowing that it happens so randomly and so often?” And she’s not exaggerating. More than 150,000 students in the U.S have experienced a shooting on campus since the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, considered the first modern mass school shooting.

And in such anticipatory anxiety, American students have much in common with victims of drone warfare. Speaking to researchers from Stanford University, [Haroon Quddoos](#), a Pakistani taxi driver who survived two U.S. drone strikes, explained it this way:

“No matter what we are doing, that fear is always inculcated in us. Because whether we are driving a car, or we are working on a farm, or we are sitting home playing... cards – no matter what we are doing, we are always thinking the drone will strike us. So we are scared to do anything, no matter what.”

Similar symptoms of post-traumatic stress, trauma, and anxiety are commonplace emotions in countries where U.S. drones are active, just as in American communities like Parkland that have lived through a mass shooting. Visiting communities in Yemen that experienced drone strikes, forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld found that 92 percent of their inhabitants were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with children the most significantly affected. Psychologists have come up with similar figures when studying both survivors of school shootings and children who have been psychologically affected by school-lockdown drills, by the media's focus on violence, and by the culture of fear that has developed in response to mass shootings.

Voices Left Out

The Parkland students have created a coherent movement that brings together an incredibly diverse group united around a common goal and a belief that all gun violence victims, not just those who have experienced a mass shooting, need to be heard. As one Parkland survivor and leader of the March For Our Lives movement, David Hogg, put it, the goal isn't to talk for different communities, but to let them "speak for themselves and ask them how we can help."

The Parkland survivors have essentially created an echo chamber, amplifying the previously unheard voices of young African-Americans and Latinos in particular. At last year's March For Our Lives, for instance, 11-year-old Naomi Wadler started her speech this way: "I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African-American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national

newspaper, whose stories don't lead the evening news."

In 2016, there were nearly 39,000 gun deaths, more than 14,000 of them homicides and almost 23,000 suicides. Such routine gun violence disproportionately affects black Americans. Mass shootings accounted for only about 1.2 percent of all gun deaths that year. Yet the Parkland students made headlines and gained praise for their activism – Oprah Winfrey even donated \$500,000 to the movement – while black communities that had been fighting gun violence for years never received anything similar.

As someone who spends a lot of her time engrossed in the undercovered news of drone strikes, I can't help but notice the parallels. Stories about U.S. drone strikes taking out dangerous terrorists proliferate, while reports on U.S.-caused civilian casualties disappear into the void. For example, in January, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command claimed that a precision drone strike finally killed Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Badawi, the alleged mastermind behind the deadly October 2000 suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen. Within a day, more than 24 media outlets had covered the story.

Few, however, focused on the fact that the U.S. command only claimed al-Badawi's death was "likely," despite similar reports about such terrorists that have repeatedly been proven wrong. The British human rights group Reprieve found back in 2014 that even when drone operators end up successfully targeting specific individuals like al-Badawi, they regularly kill vastly more people than their chosen targets. Attempts to kill 41 terror figures, Reprieve reported, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,147

people. That was five years ago, but there's no reason to believe anything has changed.

By contrast, when a U.S. airstrike – it's not clear whether it was a drone or a manned aircraft – killed at least 20 civilians in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in December 2018, only four American media outlets (Reuters, the Associated Press, Voice of America, and The New York Times) covered the story and none followed up with a report on those civilians and their families. That has largely been the norm since the war on terror began with the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. In the Trump years so far, while headlines scream about mass school shootings and other slaughters of civilians here, the civilian casualties of America's wars and the drone strikes that often go with them are, if anything, even more strikingly missing in action in the media.

When Safa al-Ahmad, a journalist for PBS's Frontline, was asked why she thought it was important to hear from Yemenis experiencing American drone strikes, she responded:

“I think if you're going to talk about people, you should go talk to them. It's just basic respect for other human beings. It really bothered me that everyone was just talking about the Americans... The other civilians, they weren't given any names, they weren't given any details. It was like an aside to the story... This is part of the struggle when you construct stories on foreign countries, when it comes to the American public. I think we've done [Americans] a disservice, by not doing more of this... We impact the world, we should understand it. An informed public is the only way there can be a functioning democracy. That is our duty as a

democracy, to be informed.”

This one-sided view of America’s never-ending air wars fails everyone, from the people being asked to carry out Washington’s decisions in those lands to ordinary Americans who have little idea what’s being done in their name to the many people living under those drones. Americans should know that, to them, it’s we who seem like the school shooters of the planet.

Waking Up an Apathetic Nation

For the better part of two decades, young Americans have been trapped in a cycle of violence at home and abroad with little way to speak out. Gun violence in this country was a headline-grabbing given. School shootings, like so many other mass killings here, were deemed “tragic” and worthy of thoughts, prayers, and much fervid media attention, but little else.

Until Parkland.

What changed? Well, a new cohort, Generation Z, came on the scene and, unlike their millennial predecessors, many of them are refusing to accept the status quo, especially when it comes to issues like gun violence.

Every time there was a mass shooting, millennials would hold their breath, wondering if today would be the day the country finally woke up. After Newtown. After San Bernadino. After Las Vegas. And each time, it wasn’t. Parkland could have been the same, if it hadn’t been for those meddling kids. Having witnessed the dangers of apathy, Gen-Z seems increasingly to be about movement and action. In fact,

in a Vice youth survey, 71 percent of respondents reported feeling “capable” of enacting change around global warming and 85 percent felt the same about social problems. And that’s new.

For so long, gun violence seemed like an unstoppable, incurable plague. Fed up with the “adults in the room,” however, these young activists have begun to take matters into their own hands, giving those particularly at risk of gun violence, children, a sense of newfound power – the power to determine their own futures. Whether it’s testifying in front of Congress in the first hearing on gun violence since 2011, protesting at the stores and offices of gun manufacturers, or participating in “die-ins,” these kids are making their voices heard.

Since the Parkland massacre, there has been actual movement on gun control, something that America has not seen for a long time. Under pressure, the Justice Department moved to ban the bump stocks that can make semi-automatic weapons fire almost like machine guns, Florida signed a \$400 million bill to tighten the state’s gun laws, companies began to cut ties with the National Rifle Association, and public support grew for stricter gun control laws.

Although the new Gen Z activists have focused on issues close to home, sooner or later they may start to look beyond the water’s edge and find themselves in touch with their counterparts across the globe, who are showing every day how dedicated they are to changing the world they live in, with or without anyone’s help. And if they do, they will find that, in its endless wars, America has been the true

school shooter on this planet, terrorizing the global classroom with a remarkable lack of consequences.

In March 2018, [according to](#) Human Rights Watch, American planes bombed a school that housed displaced people in Syria, killing dozens of them, including children. Similarly, in Yemen that August, a Saudi plane, using a [Pentagon-supplied](#) laser-guided bomb, blew away a school bus, killing 40 schoolchildren. Just as at home, it's not only about the weaponry like those planes or drones. Activists will find that they have to focus their attention as well on the root causes of such violence and the scars they leave behind in the communities of survivors.

More tolerant, more [diverse](#), less trustful of major institutions and less inclined to believe in American exceptionalism than any generation before them, Generation Z may be primed to care about what their country is doing in their name from Afghanistan to Syria, Yemen to Libya. But first they have to know it's happening.

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American Terror is Not New

There were hate crimes before Donald Trump ran for president, most of

them sanctioned by the state, including anti-black violence, as old as white settlement on this continent, says Margaret Kimberley of Black Agenda Report.

American Terror is Not New

By Margaret Kimberley

Black Agenda Report



The casual, endemic and racist violence that characterizes American behavior at home and abroad cannot be laid at the doorstep of the current buffoon in the White House.

Within the past week very disturbing and violent events took place in quick succession across the country. Two black people were shot to death in a Louisville, Kentucky supermarket. The white shooter made it clear that his goal was to kill black people when he said, “Whites don’t shoot whites,” as he was apprehended. No sooner had this crime occurred than a Florida man was arrested and charged with sending explosive devices to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, Maxine Waters, and Eric Holder among others. One day later a shooting at a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania synagogue left 11 people dead.

The unnamed suspect in all of these cases is Donald Trump. The bombing suspect made clear his love for the 45th president. He was described by his attorney as a previously apolitical man who nonetheless “found a father in Donald Trump.” The Louisville killing is the latest in a long line carried out by white racists. Anti-black violence is as old as white settlement on this continent.

Analysis of these recent incidents must be made very carefully. Trump differs from his predecessors mostly by tearing away the veneer of humanity and civility from a system which is relentlessly brutal. But the façade keeps many would-be terrorists from carrying out their sick

fantasies. There are people who keep their hatred to themselves until they know that they may be given some cover and acceptance. Hatred expressed by a president emboldens people who might not ordinarily act upon their racist impulses.

It is very dangerous for these hidden haters to think they can come out of their closets. At the same time we cannot forget that a racist shooter succeeded in entering a black church in Charleston, South Carolina and killing nine people in 2015 when Barack Obama was president. The most prevalent racially motivated murders are carried out by police across the country when they kill an average of 300 black people every year.

It is a mistake to see Trump as a singular evil in American history. He is also not an anomaly among world leaders. An avowed fascist just won a presidential race in Brazil. White supremacists march openly in European countries like Ukraine where the Obama administration helped to overthrow an elected president and install Nazis among the new leadership. Fascism is carried out daily not only by the police but by the neoliberal state and by the military as it carries out a war of terror all over the world.

The current moment is perilous and requires serious analysis. Trump is the low hanging fruit in any discussion of racism and other forms of bigotry. But the country cannot be given a pass and allowed to behave as if all was well until he was elected. White people cannot play innocent and black people can't relax when the day comes that he is out office.

Trump Given Pass for Raising Nuclear Danger

If Trump can be connected to all of these incidents it should be with the knowledge that the entire country is suffering from a terrible sickness that few want to confront. Americans prefer to think well of themselves and their nation and treat any information contradicting that belief as an inconvenience to be avoided at all costs. There were hate crimes before Donald Trump ran for president and most of them weren't carried out by individuals. Most of them are still sanctioned by the state.

The crazed Trump lover may have tried to send bombs to Obama and Clinton but they sent bombs to Libya and destroyed a nation that still suffers from their terrorist acts. They are quite literally guilty of committing hate crimes, along with other NATO leaders and their predecessors in high places. The fact that they know how to express diplomatic niceties is no reason to see them as being on our side as we fight to defeat fascism at home and around the world.

Their enablers cannot be given a pass either. When we fight to make war and peace a political issue we are derided as purists and spoilers who ought to be quiet and allow imperialism to take place without hindrance. The people who join in the chorus of denunciation should not be allowed to wring their hands when dead bodies appear within our borders too.

If they want to denounce Trump they had an excellent opportunity recently. Trump announced that the United States was withdrawing unilaterally from the INF missile treaty with Russia. This decision quite literally puts the world closer to nuclear war. But the liberal Trump haters have had very little to say about a policy change which quite literally endangers all life on the planet. The numbers of people who realize the danger and speak against this action is minuscule, unlike the near unanimous condemnation of racist gun men and the would-be mail bomber.

We have always lived in a very dangerous nation. Trump makes it more difficult to be in denial. But we must fight against the crowd which averts its eyes until a racist buffoon enters the White House. There is nothing new about American terrorism. It can be found in high and low places regardless of presidential civility or lack thereof.

This article originally appeared on BlackAgendaReport.com

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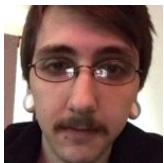
At War With Ourselves: The Domestic Consequences of Foreign Policies

There is a direct connection between gun violence and suicide rates in the United States and America's aggressive foreign policy, argues Will Porter.

How America's Gun Violence Epidemic May Have Roots in Overseas War Zones

By Will Porter

Special to Consortium News



In recent months a string of school shootings in the United States has rekindled the debate over gun violence, its causes and what can be done to stop it. But amid endless talk of school shootings and AR-15s, a large piece of the puzzle has been left conspicuously absent from the debate.

Contrary to the notion that mass murderers are at the heart of America's gun violence problem, data from recent years reveals that the majority of gun deaths are self-inflicted.

In 2015, suicides accounted for over 60 percent of gun deaths in the U.S., while homicides made up around 36 percent of that year's total. Guns are consistently the most common method by which people take their own lives.

While the causes of America's suicide-driven gun epidemic are complex and myriad, it's clear that one group contributes to the statistics above all others: military veterans.

Beyond the Physical

According to a 2016 study conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, on average some 20 veterans commit suicide every single day, making them among the most prone to take their own lives compared to people working in other professions. Though they comprise under 9 percent of the American population, veterans accounted for 18 percent of suicides in the U.S. in 2014.

When veterans return home from chaotic war zones, resuming normal civilian life can present major difficulties. The stresses of wartime create a long-term, sustained "fight-or-flight" response, not only producing physical symptoms such as sweating, shaking or a racing heart rate, but inflicting a mental and moral

toll as well.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) accounts for some of the physiological effects of trauma, the “fight-or-flight” response, but the distinct mental, moral and spiritual anguish experienced by many veterans and other victims of trauma has been termed “moral injury.”

A better understanding of that concept and the self-harm it motivates could go a long way toward explaining, and ultimately solving, America’s suicide epidemic.

“Moral injury looks beyond the physical and asks who we are as people,” Peter Van Buren, a former State Department Foreign Service officer, said in an interview. “It says that we know right from wrong, and that when we violate right and wrong, we injure ourselves. We leave a scar on ourselves, the same as if we poked ourselves with a knife.”

While not a veteran himself, during his tenure with the Foreign Service Van Buren served for one year alongside American soldiers at a forward operating base in Iraq. His experiences there would stick with him for life.

“Over the course of the year I was there, the units I was embedded with lost three men, and all of them were lost to suicide, not to enemy action,” Van Buren said. “This left an extraordinary impression on me, and triggered in me some of the things that I write about.”

After retiring from the Foreign Service, Van Buren began research for his novel “Hooper’s War,” a fictional account set in WWII Japan. The book centers on American veteran, Nate Hooper, and explores the psychological costs paid by those who survive a war. Van Buren said if he set the book in the past, he thought he could better explore the subject matter without the baggage of current-day politics.

In his research, Van Buren interviewed Japanese civilians who were children at the time of the conflict and found surprising parallels with the soldiers he served with in Iraq. Post-war guilt, he found, does not only afflict the combatants who fight and carry out grisly acts of violence, but civilians caught in the crossfire as well.

For many, merely living through a conflict when others did not is cause for significant distress, a condition known as “survivor’s guilt.”

“In talking with them I heard so many echoes of what I’d heard from the soldiers in Iraq, and so many echoes of what I felt myself, this profound sense of guilt,” Van Buren said.

'We Killed Them'

Whether it was something a soldier did, saw or failed to prevent, feelings of guilt can leave a permanent mark on veterans after they come home.

Brian Ellison, a combat veteran who served under the National Guard in Iraq in 2004, said he's still troubled by his wartime experiences.

Stationed at a small, under protected maintenance garage in the town of ad-Diwaniyah in a southeastern province of Iraq, Ellison said his unit was attacked on a daily basis.

"From the day we got there, we would get attacked every night like clockwork—mortars, RPGs," Ellison said. "We had no protection; we had no weapons systems on the base."

On one night in April of 2004, after a successful mission to obtain ammunition for the base's few heavy weapons, Ellison's unit was ready to hit back.

"So we got some rounds for the Mark 19 [a belt-fed automatic grenade launcher] and we basically used it as field artillery, shot it up in the air and lobbed it in," Ellison said. "Finally on the last night we were able to get them to stop shooting, but that was because we killed 5 of them. At the time this was something I was proud of. We were like 'We got them, we got our revenge.'"

"In retrospect, it's like here's this foreign army, and we're in their neighborhood," Ellison said. "They're defending their neighborhood, but they're the bad guys and we're the good guys, and we killed them. I think about stuff like that a lot."

Despite his guilt, Ellison said he was able to sort through the negative feelings by speaking openly and honestly about his experiences and actions. Some veterans have a harder time, however, including one of Ellison's closest friends.

"He ended up going overseas like five times," Ellison said. "Now he's retired and he can't even deal with people. He *can't* deal with people, it's sad. He was this funny guy, everybody's friend, easy to get along with, now he's a recluse. It's really weird to see somebody like that. He had three young kids and a happy personality, now he's broken."

In addition to the problems created in their personal relationships, the morally injured also often turn to self-destructive habits to cope with their despair.

"In the process of trying to shut this sound off in your head—this voice of conscience—many people turn to drugs and alcohol as a way of shutting that voice

up, at least temporarily," Van Buren said. "You hope at some point it shuts up permanently . . . Unfortunately, I think that many people do look for the permanent silence of suicide as a way of escaping these feelings."

A Hero's Welcome?

By now most are familiar with the practice of celebrating veterans as heroes upon their return from war, but few realize what psychological consequences such apparently benevolent gestures can have.

"I think the healthiest thing a vet can do is to come to terms with reality," Ellison said. "It's so easy to get swept up—when we came home off the plane, there was a crowd of people cheering for us. I just remember feeling dirty. I felt like 'I don't want you to cheer for us,' but at the same time it's comforting. It's a weird dynamic. Like, I could just put this horror out of my mind and pretend we were heroes."

"But the terrible part is that, behind that there's reality," Ellison said. "Behind that, we know what we were doing; we know that we weren't fighting for freedom. So when somebody clings onto this 'we were heroes' thing, I think that's bad for them. They have to be struggling with it internally. I really believe that's one of the biggest things that contributes to people committing suicide. They're not able to talk about it, not able to bring it to the forefront and come to terms with it."

Unclear Solution

According to the 2016 VA study, 70 percent of veterans who commit suicide are not regular users of VA services.

The Department of Veteran Affairs was set up in 1930 to handle medical care, benefits and burials for veterans, but some 87 years later, the department is plagued by scandal and mismanagement. Long wait times, common to many government-managed healthcare systems, discourage veterans from seeking the department's assistance, especially those with urgent psychiatric needs.

An independent review was carried out in 2014 by the VA's Inspector General, Richard Griffin, which found that at one Arizona VA facility, 1,700 veterans were on wait lists, waiting an average of 115 days before getting an initial appointment.

"People don't generally seek medical help because the [VA] system is so inefficient and ineffective; everyone feels like it's a waste of time," said a retired senior non-commissioned officer in the Special Operations Forces (SOF) who wished to remain anonymous.

“The system is so bad, even within the SOF world where I work, that I avoid going at all costs,” the retired officer said. “I try to get my guys to civilian hospitals so that they can get quality healthcare instead of military healthcare.”

Beyond institutions, however, both Ellison and Van Buren agreed that speaking openly about their experiences has been a major step on their road back to normalcy. Open dialogue, then, is not only one way for veterans and other victims of trauma to heal, it may ultimately be the key to solving America’s epidemic of gun violence.

The factors contributing to mass murders, school shootings and private crime are, no doubt, important to study, but so long as suicide is left out of the public discourse on guns, genuine solutions may always be just out of reach.

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