

GUN MASSACRE ESSAYS

By

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A LOST CAUSE

Legislators are ambushed. And a gun-numbed land shrugs and moves on.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “It’s going to be in my pocket from this day forward. It’s got all the punch you need.” House member Chris Collins (R-Ala.) was of course referring to a gun, specifically the 9mm. pistol [that he occasionally carries](#) in the glovebox. But the Congressman’s resolved to ramp up his game. His decision to “pack” 24-7 was prompted by [the June 14 shooting](#) at a Congressional baseball practice in Alexandria that wounded four, most seriously fellow Republican legislator Steve Scalise, the Majority Whip.

Congressman Collins isn’t the only one looking to guns as a solution for...well, guns. Reacting to the same tragedy, his Alabama GOP colleague, Rep. Mo Brooks [asked that D.C. exempt legislators](#) from laws restricting concealed carry (applicants are [presently required](#) to demonstrate a “good reason”):

Right now, when we’re in Washington, D.C., once we’re off the Capitol Hill Grounds complex, we’re still congressmen, senators — we’re still high-profile targets — but we have absolutely no way to defend ourselves because of Washington, D.C.’s rather restrictive gun laws.

Fellow GOP stalwart Rep. Chuck Fleischmann (R-Tenn.), who hit the ground to avoid the assailant’s fusillade, heartily agrees:

Put it this way: If we had had more weapons there, we’d be able to subdue the shooter more quickly. Thank God that the Capitol Police were there and were armed, because otherwise we’d have had a situation where there’d be a lot more damage.

Naturally, the Dem’s don’t see it that way. But let’s not get trapped into parsing ideological disputes. Considering what actually happened, it seems unlikely that a passel of armed citizens would have helped. [James T. Hodgkinson](#), the assailant, was in a more-or-less secluded position [about two to three house-lengths](#) away from his victims [when he began firing salvos from an SKS 7.62 cal. semi-automatic rifle](#). Consider whether a group of startled, frightened lawmakers could have even organized an effective response. Then imagine how many would have perished or accidentally plugged one another while trying.

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Six and one-half years earlier [Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords \(D-Ariz.\) was fighting for her life](#) after being shot in the head during an Arizona political event. Her assailant, Jared Loughner, a 22-year old recluse was standing in a crowd when he suddenly pulled a Glock 9mm. pistol and opened fire, killing six and wounding thirteen. It could have been much worse had several citizens not tackled the gunman when he paused to reload. None of these heroes was armed. A Johnny-come-lately who *was* [described what nearly happened](#) when he stumbled on the scene:

As I approached the people wrestling with him [Loughner] one of the other gentlemen actually had gotten the gun away from him. And that's what I saw first was him holding the gun. And, you know, I had my hand on my pistol and I saw that the gun he was holding was locked back, and so it was empty. And I decided that instead of pulling my gun, I would try and get that gun from him. So, I ran up to him and grabbed his wrist and pushed him up against the wall. At that point, everybody around me says no, no, it's this guy, you got that wrong guy.

It's possible to conceive of circumstances that would benefit from the presence of armed citizens. Still, if everyone that wished to be armed *was*, what might the unintended consequences be? For a hint, read our [prior gun control posts](#). Here's an extract from "[Don't Blame the NRA](#)":

We've become so accustomed to gun violence that we seldom think about the gang members, "ordinary" criminals and otherwise law-abiding heads of household who commit countless mini-massacres year-in and year-out with weapons whose unthinkable lethality would have horrified the framers of the Second Amendment. That's what's really insane.

It's not simply a question of "who" carries. "What" they possess is equally crucial. Indeed, the lethality of guns commonly in use has reached levels that would have been unimaginable to the Founders. Once more, [let's self-plagiarize](#):

In December 1791, when the Second Amendment went into effect, a "handgun" wasn't a .40 caliber Glock with a fifteen-round magazine. It was a bulky, muzzle-loading single-shot flintlock that could take nearly a minute to prepare for a second round.

So what about Hodgkinson's SKS? Lacking a handgrip and other external baubles, the Eastern-block military surplus rifle [was never deemed an "assault weapon"](#) under (now-expired) Federal law. Imported in large quantities, it's widely available at moderate cost. (Four-hundred bucks can get you a nice one. We assume that's about what Hodgkinson paid when he legally bought his at a gun store.) "Assault weapon" or not, SKS rifles are

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extremely effective killing machines, boasting projectiles that travel nearly twice as fast and carry more than three times the energy of the 9mm. pistol ammo that supposedly now lines Rep. Collins' pockets. (See Di Maio, "Gunshot Wounds," 2nd. ed., p. 168.) And even when its bullets don't kill [they inflict devastating wounds](#):

According to Di Maio...as these projectiles traverse tissue they create a temporary, undulating cavity that can be as much as 12.5 times the bullet diameter. "Organs struck by these bullets may undergo partial or complete disintegration. The pressures generated are sufficient to fracture bone and rupture vessels adjacent to the permanent wound track but not directly struck by the bullet." (p. 171)

This "cavitation" is exactly what happened to Rep. Scalise, [who nearly perished from an SKS-inflicted wound to the hip](#). (Click [here](#) for a recent *New York Times* op-ed on point.) Incidentally, this lethal threat [is a risk that cops face whenever they don the badge](#):

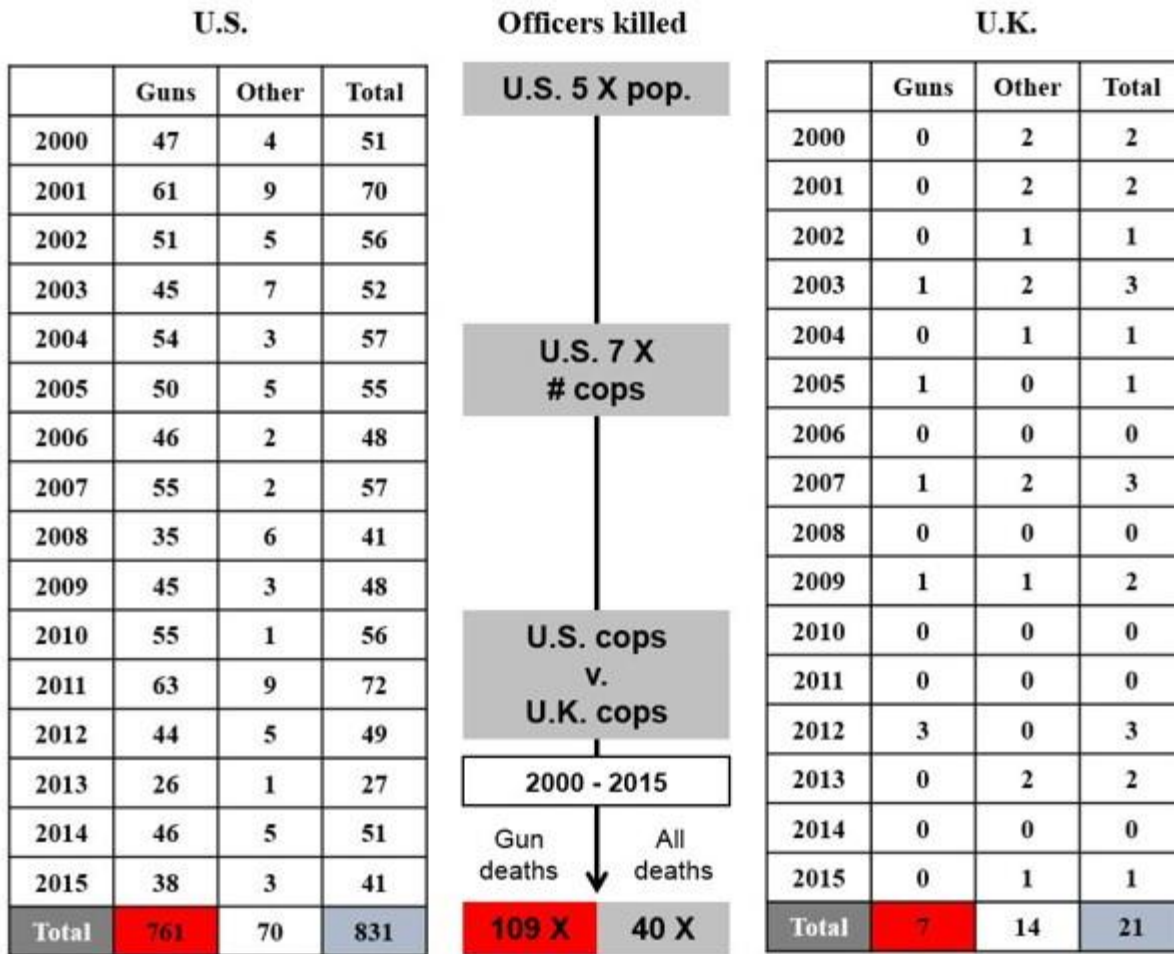
Nye County (Nev.) sheriff's deputies responded to a call about a domestic argument with shots fired. Diverting to a nearby casino where the woman supposedly went to take refuge, they encountered her male partner in the parking lot. Without warning the man retrieved an SKS semi-automatic rifle from his vehicle and opened fire. Deputy Ian Deutch, 27, was struck and killed by a round that penetrated his body armor. A member of the National Guard, the deputy had just returned from a tour in Afghanistan.

[Table 38](#) of the UCR's latest "Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted" report quantifies the threat in stark terms. Nineteen of the 454 officers gunned down during the decade ending in 2015 were slain by projectiles that penetrated their body armor. All but one of these deaths was caused by rifle rounds. Due no doubt to their lethality and ubiquity, 7.62 X 39 caliber bullets were the most frequently responsible. Of course, cops well know that the body armor they normally wear cannot protect them from high-powered rifle rounds (armor that can be far too heavy and clumsy for daily wear.) It makes perfect sense that police have increasingly turned to armored cars. They've "militarized" because so has everyone else. And now [there's a proposal to relax the ban on silencers](#). Meaning that shooters will be more comfortable, while cops will have even less cues about the location of a lethal threat.

What could be done? In "[A Ban in Name Only](#)" we discussed the 1987 massacre in Hungerford, England, where sixteen persons were gunned down by a man wielding a handgun and two rifles. In response, Great Britain promptly enacted laws banning all semi-automatic rifles beyond .22 rimfire. Nine years later, when a handgun-toting

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British subject murdered sixteen children and a teacher, our (for now, European) cousins virtually banned handguns. Not that we're suggesting cause-and-effect, but forgive us for pointing out that in 2015 murder in Great Britain [was less than one-quarter the U.S. rate](#). As for what their cops and ours face, consider that in 2015 the gunfire death rate for U.S. law enforcement officers was four per thousand, while the U.K. rate was their typical zero.



Of course, in Great Britain firearms restrictions enjoy widespread public support. But as my dear father pointed out when our ferry docked in Miami, we're in America now! So forget "could." What *can* be done? Apparently, nothing. Our highly polarized political atmosphere has shelved all thoughts of tightening gun controls. Even Bloomberg news (you know, the outfit owned by that gun-phobic gazillionaire) [considers further restrictions a lost cause](#). Here's a snippet from their interview with Senator Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), the baseball catcher who represents the liberal side of the aisle:

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“I think we’re beyond the place in which Washington responds to mass shootings...After Orlando and Sandy Hook, that’s clearly not how people’s minds change here.”

What might actually propel change seems too horrific to contemplate. In the meantime, life isn’t a baseball game, and it will most likely be ordinary citizens and street cops who’ll continue to bear the costs of doing nothing.

p.s. Hodgkinson reportedly purchased both guns legally. Still, he had several past gun-related run-ins with the law, including a 2016 arrest for striking a person with the butt of a shotgun and firing a round. But the victim didn’t show up in court so charges were dropped. Although Hodgkinson retained his gun rights he was certainly a dangerous man and ripe for an intervention (click [here](#).)

Posted 6/2/14

COMING CLEAN IN SANTA BARBARA

Good police work could have prevented a massacre

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. During the past decade a wave of mass shootings has drawn attention to the threat posed by the armed and mentally ill. Federal law prohibits firearms possession by persons who have been adjudicated to be mentally defective. But adjudication is controlled by State laws, and most require proof, before someone can be detained, that they pose an imminent physical risk to themselves or others. Absent demonstrably violent behavior, that's a tough standard to meet. So in practice, mental issues are usually only taken up in court after a crime has already occurred.

So much for prevention!

It's usually up to police to collect and present evidence of dangerousness. When Santa Barbara (Calif.) sheriff's deputies knocked on [Elliot Rodger's](#) apartment door on April 30, the 22-year old Isla Vista resident and sometime college student was not an unknown commodity. He had come to official attention twice before, once as the victim or instigator of a minor brawl, and again as the complainant in a petty theft. On this occasion the circumstances were different. Alerted by Mr. Rodger's parents that their son, who had a history of psychological issues, might be experiencing an emotional crisis, state mental health authorities alerted police. Several officers promptly conducted a "welfare check." After reportedly spending ten minutes with Mr. Rodger they left.

Three weeks later Elliot Rodger would become a mass killer, stabbing three students to death, then gunning down three others and wounding thirteen. He left behind a thick manifesto excoriating the many co-eds who had spurned his advances. Yet according to Santa Barbara County sheriff Bill Brown, the deputies who spoke with Rodger found him in good mettle, with a "very convincing story" that persuaded them he did not pose a threat.

Rodger himself would have disagreed. In his manifesto he wrote that had deputies entered the apartment, he would have surely been arrested. Aside from his as-yet incomplete rant, which professed his intention to commit mass murder, he had three high-powered pistols, a large quantity of ammunition and numerous ammunition magazines.

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But the officers stayed outside. According to Sheriff Brown, they had found no legitimate reason to pursue the matter. After all, Rodger had his rights.

California requires that all gun sales, including private transactions, go through a dealer and be recorded with the state. A ten-day waiting period is also in effect. Computerized decades ago, the “Automated Firearms System” (AFS) allows peace officers to instantaneously determine if someone legally purchased a handgun in California by entering their name and birthdate into any police terminal. (As of this year perpetual, centralized records of long gun transfers will also be kept.) Had the sheriff’s dispatcher or one of the deputies bothered to check, they would have immediately discovered that Mr. Rodger had been amassing pistols since turning 21, the minimum legal age for buying a handgun.

Now comes some informed speculation. To someone who spent his career in law enforcement, it seems inconceivable that an officer who knew that Mr. Rodger had bought three handguns in quick succession would not press his inquiries and ask to see the weapons, and if told “no” to cajole and insist, in the way that cops do every day when dealing with recalcitrant citizens. This, as we know, didn’t happen, as neither the dispatcher nor the responding officers had checked to see whether Mr. Rodger had guns.

This failure to do some very basic fact-gathering is plainly obvious to any law enforcement professional. One assumes that in the future sheriff’s dispatchers will run AFS checks so that deputies are properly informed. Yet Sheriff Brown’s comments are not reassuring. True enough, dealing with the mentally ill is not simple. And no one wants cops to overstep. But when the sheriff of Santa Barbara County puts off his officers’ failure to act to the complexities of the factual and legal environment, he is being disingenuous. Street cops are not unfamiliar with the mentally ill, and fully expect them to dissemble. Any reasonably competent officer who knew that Rodger had a small arsenal would have been legally justified to press his inquiries beyond the front steps, and would have felt morally compelled to do so. Even if Mr. Rodger didn’t cooperate, minimal investigation would have yielded plenty of cause (among other things, ominous YouTube postings) to search his apartment and detain him for mental evaluation.

Now, days after the tragedy, with calls for more tightly regulating gun sales, lowering the legal threshold of dangerousness, and even creating mental health teams to respond with deputies, it seems that the Santa Barbara Sheriff’s Department has artfully sidestepped the real culprit: shoddy policing. As cops well know, in the real world of limited time and resources there is no substitute for doing a quality job. When a chief law enforcement officer deflects blame by attributing a preventable tragedy to the

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supposedly greater flaws of the system, he's essentially given up. Hopefully his subordinates won't follow suit.

Posted 12/12/07

**DISTURBED PERSON + GUN = KILLER
DISTURBED PERSON + ASSAULT RIFLE =
MASS MURDERER**

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the AK-47, the weapon designed by the famous [General Mikhail T. Kalashnikov](#) to help Communists win the struggle against Western imperialism. From the jungles of Southeast Asia to the killing fields of America's inner cities, the simple, reliable weapon became an instant hit. Now the battleground has expanded into the epicenters of capitalist consumption. We're talking, of course, about shopping malls.

It's unlikely that the [19-year old gunman](#) who murdered five in a Nebraska mall last week knew anything about the political history of the gun in his grasp. What little is known paints him as a mentally disturbed teen playing out his demons in the established pattern: grab a gun and lots of ammo, go to a place where people gather and shoot as many innocent strangers as you can. Then reload.

What's to be done? Apparently, nothing. Thanks to permissive laws that make it virtually impossible to force anyone to accept treatment, the mentally ill are left to medicate themselves, or not, and the rest of us are left to duck and cover. (Anyone who thinks that's too harsh an assessment should go be a cop or social worker, then report back.)

If we can't do anything about individuals, what about guns? Oh, please! When a weak, loophole-ridden piece of legislation like the [Federal assault weapons ban](#) expires and even the Democrats applaud, there is absolutely no hope of regulating ourselves out of this mess. Now, it's true that a handful of States, including California, have laws that make high-caliber, high-capacity shoulder-fired weapons less available. But since these can be legally purchased elsewhere (e.g., Arizona, Texas, Nevada, Washington, etc.), with no ID required when buying from private parties or at gun shows, the impact of localized restrictions is negligible.

Wackos and assault rifles are an impossibly lethal combination. Handguns have limited range and their projectiles can usually be defeated by quality ballistic garments.

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But rifle cartridges are far more powerful, imparting a velocity, hence energy, that allows most bullets beyond a .22 short to penetrate ordinary ballistic vests (those that can stop rifle rounds are far too heavy and cumbersome to wear on patrol). The large magazine capacities and high cyclic rates of civilian assault-type rifles can pin down anyone reckless enough to advance on a shooter. That's what LAPD discovered during the infamous [North Hollywood shootout](#) of February 28, 1997, when two bank robbers armed with a 9mm pistol and five semi-auto rifles (several made full auto, an illegal but often simple conversion) held off platoons of cops, wounding eight officers and five civilians.

According to the FBI, only 4% of [firearms murders](#) in the U.S. between 2002-06 were committed with rifles. But for [killings of police](#), the figure was 18%. Why are officers disproportionately vulnerable to long gun fire? FBI data reveals relatively few through-the-vest shots. But there's something else that makes rifles so lethal. It's the ability to accurately place a shot at distance, in the most vulnerable part of the body and the one most difficult to protect: the head. Between 1997-2006, 58% of officers killed by gunfire died from head or neck wounds (gun type wasn't specified.) A tragic, well-known Southern California example is the February 1994 murder of [LAPD Officer Christy Hamilton](#), struck above the vest with a .223 caliber round fired from an AR-15 rifle. Her assailant, a 17-year old youth who murdered his father, then committed suicide.

Many police agencies shifted tactics after Columbine. It's now common for cops to carry rifles, and when there is an "active shooter" they don't necessarily wait for SWAT. But impulsively going after a madman with a rifle is incredibly dangerous. If the bad guy takes cover and simply waits a dead or wounded officer is likely. Even if the good guys ultimately triumph, by the time that police arrive or the shooter kills himself it's usually too late.

So what's the solution? Only days after Nebraska a disaffected 24-year old wielding a rifle, two handguns, a pair of smoke grenades and a backpack full of ammunition shot nine and killed four in Colorado. His spree was finally brought to an end by an armed ex-Minneapolis cop working as an armed security guard. Setting aside that it *was* a guard with police experience, the event was instantly seen as confirmation of the value of citizens carrying guns. But consider another example. In November 2005 [Brendan McKown](#), 38, a CCW permit holder with *no* police experience drew his pistol as Dominick Maldonado was shooting up the Tacoma Mall with an AK-47. Not wanting to kill a "kid," McKown put his gun away and tried to talk Maldonado into giving up. Maldonado aimed the rifle. McKown went for his pistol, but before he could get it out he was shot multiple times, leaving him a paraplegic. (In all, six citizens were shot; McKown was the most seriously injured. Maldonado got a life sentence.)

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In the end, neither SWAT teams nor armed citizens are a realistic solution to the threat posed by assault rifles. Thanks to our culture's infatuation with guns and politicians' reluctance to call a halt to the insane escalation of firepower, we're entering an era where no one is safe from angry young men and their killing machines. Do we really want our cities to turn into Baghdads? Whatever one's views on the Second Amendment, this cannot be what the Founding Fathers intended.

Posted 11/19/17

MASSACRE CONTROL

What can be done to prevent mass shootings?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Please forgive us if this essay seems a bit more prescriptive than what *Police Issues* normally offers, but it's only been a few days since an angry, heavily armed man [opened fire in a rural Texas church](#), leaving twenty-six dead and more than a dozen injured, many critically.

It's not to make light of this horror to point out that within hours of last month's reveals about [Hollywood Harvey](#), waves of similar accusations engulfed prominent figures on both sides of the Atlantic, leading a growing number of highly-placed "untouchables" to lose lucrative contracts, past honors and memberships in influential groups and making them vulnerable to unwelcome non-sexual advances by aggressive prosecutors.

So where's the follow-through when dozens of innocents are gunned down? That's the question we should have asked after [Las Vegas](#). And [Orlando](#). And [San Bernardino](#). And [Sandy Hook](#). And [Aurora](#). And on and on. (Click [here](#) for CNN's comprehensive list of mass shootings.) To be sure, one might argue that every killer was appropriately punished. Excepting a few such as James Holmes, who drew life without parole for murdering a dozen movie-goers in Aurora, Colorado, mass shooters have usually perished at their own hands or those of the police.

When it comes to violent crime, it really *is* all about prevention. Poor behavior is far less likely when one has the capacity to reason and a lot to lose. Publicly shaming Hollywood Harveys affords a lot of welcome support to victims of sexual misconduct. Lasting cultural reform seems just around the corner. In contrast, calling it a day (as we usually do) after yet another unhinged killer commits suicide or is killed by a cop seems wildly inadequate.

So far, though, the White House has played it close to the chest. Sure enough, President Trump called the Las Vegas shooter "[sick](#)" and "[demented](#)." But our Commander-in-Chief otherwise declined to show his hand. Gun control? "At some point perhaps that [discussion] will come. That's not today." [His reticence was mirrored](#) by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell: "Look, the investigation has not even been completed, and I think it's premature to be discussing legislative solutions, *if there are any*." (That's our emphasis, by the way.)

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Then Texas happened. Once more, President Trump [attributed the massacre to mental illness](#): “Mental health is your problem here. This was a very, based on preliminary reports, this was a very deranged individual, a lot of problems over a long period of time.” This time, though, he also addressed gun laws. In his view, [tougher restrictions would not have helped](#):

...there would have been no difference three days ago, and you might not have had that very brave person who happened to have a gun or a rifle in his truck go out and shoot him, and hit him, and neutralize him. I can only say this, if he didn't have gun, instead of having 26 dead, you would have had hundreds more dead. So that's the way I feel about it...You look at the city with the strongest gun laws in our nation is Chicago, and Chicago is a disaster, a total disaster....

This post will outline a variety of approaches to prevent mass shootings. We'll begin with the two championed by our Twitterer-in-Chief, then move on to address our long-running preoccupation with firearms lethality.

Keeping firearms from the mentally ill

Fear of punishment can't be expected to deter those whose capacity to reason is seriously impaired. Skimming the personal histories of mass shooters suggests that they are indeed a flaky bunch. Consider, for example, the [title](#) of a recent New York Times piece about the Texas shooter: “In Air Force, Colleague Feared Church Gunman Would ‘Shoot Up the Place’.” Or the [headline](#) that crowns a CBS News report on the Orlando gunman: “James Holmes saw three mental health professionals before shooting.”

Mental problems have beset at least a few so-called “terrorists.” Consider, for example, [Ahmad Rahami](#), the prototypical holy warrior who was recently convicted of planting improvised bombs in New York City, injuring several dozen. Although he seemed normal as a youth, by the time he reached his late twenties Rahami [had become sullen and aggressive](#), leading to repeat entanglements with the law, once for violating a restraining order and another for stabbing a relative.

[A detailed 2016 study](#) for the Department of Justice reported that forty-eight percent of “solo” mass killers (four or more victims) had a history of mental illness (p. 23). But some experts [caution against](#) equating one with the other. [A recent Congressional report](#) concedes that most mass killers “arguably suffered from some form of mental instability, at least temporarily.” However, many didn't meet the clinical definition of “psychotic” or “hallucinatory” and lacked significant encounters with police or the mental health system (p. 30).

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Therein lies the crux of the dilemma. [Federal law](#) prohibits possession of firearms by any person who has been “*adjudicated* as a mental defective” or “*committed* to a mental institution.” (Emphases ours.) Prior judicial determinations are also required under State laws (e.g., [Arizona](#)). So the law’s present reach is at best limited. What’s more, most states don’t require background checks [for gun transfers between private parties](#); even if someone is of record as mentally ill, enforcement is uncertain.

What about early intervention? “[A Stitch in Time](#)” suggested that police officers are well placed to identify candidates for mental health services. Rahami might have benefitted from such early attention. Ditto for [Kevin Neal](#), the Northern California man who went on a rampage earlier this week, gunning down five including his wife and wounding several others before deputies shot him dead. His guns included several “[home-made](#)” [AR-15 type .223 caliber rifles](#) whose sale was never registered in California, where all gun transfers (including between private parties) must be recorded. Neal faced assault and robbery charges, was under a restraining order for allegedly stabbing a girlfriend and striking her mother, and had been ordered by a judge to surrender his guns because neighbors had repeatedly complained of his reckless gunfire and harassment. But he still wasn’t considered sufficiently deranged to be forcibly committed.

What could be done?

- Compel aggressive citizens to mental health treatment and make it part of the official record
- Extend legal prohibitions on gun possession to persons who have been treated for mental illness although not formally adjudicated
- Subject all gun transfers, including between private parties, to a background check
- Prohibit private citizens from assembling firearms from parts, or require that such weapons be registered

To be sure, these measures are inherently intrusive and could conflict with Federal and State laws and constitutional provisions. They are also at odds with some sentiment in the mental-health community. [According to a major advocacy group](#), “most people with mental illness are not violent” and barring them from guns would be counter-productive:

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Creating new federal or state gun laws based on mental illness could have the effect of creating more barriers to people being willing to seek treatment and help when they need it most. Solutions to gun violence associated with mental illness lie in improving access to treatment, not in preventing people from seeking treatment in the first place.

Arming private citizens

After massacring more than two dozen parishioners, [Devin Kelley](#) left his Ruger AR-556 .223 caliber rifle (an AR-15 clone) in the church and stepped out brandishing two handguns. That's when an armed citizen opened fire with a rifle, wounding Kelley twice. After a wild car chase, Kelley shot himself dead. Although President Trump's claim that "you would have [otherwise] had hundreds more dead" seems wildly overblown, private citizens brought the episode to an end, safeguarding the lives of other persons and police.

It's to be expected that in a society as awash with guns as the U.S. interventions by armed citizens will occur with some frequency. A pro-gun website, [Crime Research](#), tracks such incidents, or at least those that turn out well. Those that don't are fodder for [groups with opposing views](#). Indeed, past posts have mentioned significant goofs by armed "good guys." In one, [a well-meaning armed citizen](#) tried to take on the [Tacoma Mall shooter](#) and lost – badly. And there was the Johnny-come-lately armed citizen who mistakenly [went after the wrong person](#) at the 2011 Tucson massacre. (Thankfully, unarmed civilians apprehended the real shooter.)

Academics have long debated the value of arming ordinary folks. [A 1999 paper](#) by John R. Lott Jr. (a well-known booster of gun carry) and William M. Landes reported significantly fewer multiple victim shootings where permissive gun carry laws were in effect. In his [seminal pro-gun book](#), "More Guns, Less Crime," Professor Lott went so far as to conclude that "without concealed carry, ordinary citizens are sitting ducks, waiting to be victimized" (p. 197). As one might expect, anti-gunners [have risen to the challenge](#).

For a "fair and balanced" assessment we turn to [an exhaustive 2005 meta-review](#) by a CDC-affiliated working group. Its members examined fifty-five studies that assessed the influence of gun laws on violence, including four that addressed the effects of permissive ("shall issue") concealed-carry statutes. (Eight papers including [one co-authored by John Lott](#) were excluded for the same methodological flaws that have some academics to criticize his alleged pro-gun bias.)

No matter. After a substantial effort, the task force concluded, in effect, that no conclusion was possible:

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Based on findings from national law assessments, cross-national comparisons, and index studies, evidence is insufficient to determine whether the degree or intensity of firearms regulation is associated with decreased (or increased) violence. (p. 59)

“[Do Gun Laws Work?](#)” arrived at a similarly unsatisfying end. We initially found that as the [strength of state gun laws](#) increased, [homicide rates](#) significantly declined ($r = -.366^*$). But when differences in poverty were taken into account, the association between gun laws and homicide became statistically non-significant ($r = -.196$). (On the other hand, the relationships between gun law strength/gun deaths and gun law strength/gun suicides remained substantial.)

Arming private citizens raises some critical issues:

- Psychological suitability. Would expanded carry laws imperil public safety by encouraging mentally unstable persons to “pack”?
- Effects on the police workplace. Can armed citizens help? Would they be readily distinguishable from criminals? Or are they more likely to disrupt the police response, adding needless complexity to fluid and uncertain situations?

One might tackle such concerns by revisiting the concept of a citizens militia. Certain gun privileges could be conditioned on membership in an organized, vetted and well-trained citizen group. Excluding marginal characters wouldn't be easy, though, and require a process that resembles what's presently done when hiring police.

Limiting gun lethality

Prior posts (see, for example, “[Bump Stocks](#)” and “[A Ban in Name Only](#)”) have commented about this concern in considerable detail, so here we'll summarize aspects that seem most pertinent to mass shootings.

Mass killers have nearly always used “assault weapons,” usually militarily-derived semi-automatic rifles with large magazine capacities and fearsome ballistics. AR-15 clones in .223 caliber have proven especially popular, featuring in the recent Northern California massacre as well as those in Texas, Las Vegas, Orlando, San Bernardino, Sandy Hook and Aurora. Lethally equivalent AK-47 clones in 7.62 caliber were used by the shooter who wounded four at a [Congressional baseball practice](#) in June and the sniper who murdered five officers and wounded nine [while perched in a Dallas office building](#) last year.

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These weapons share particularly lethal features. Large magazine capacities reduce the need to reload. A high cyclic rate allows quick discharge of a volley of rounds. Accuracy at range lets snipers deposit accurate fire from a distance. Yet the possibly most significant characteristic, ballistics, is seldom mentioned even by the most rabid anti-gunners. High-velocity centerfire rifle projectiles such as .223 and 7.62 calibers create temporary cavities in flesh that are many times the bullet diameters, shattering bones and pulverizing organs and blood vessels (Vincent Di Maio, “Gunshot Wounds,” Chapter 7, summary [here](#)).

We’ve repeatedly warned, most recently in “[Bump Stocks](#)”, that rounds fired by such weapons [easily penetrate the ballistic vests](#) normally worn by street cops. That’s how two Palm Springs (Calif.) police officers died last October, struck by .223 caliber rounds fired through a home’s front door. [Table 38](#) of the UCR’s latest “Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted” report quantifies this threat in stark terms. Rifle fire killed all but one of the twenty-two officers slain between 2007-2016 with rounds that penetrated body armor. That’s why police have “militarized,” deploying armored vehicles and adopting tactics that seem more attuned to combat zones than our nation’s cities.

So what can be done? “[A Ban in Name Only](#)” pointed out the futility of reinstating the Federal assault weapons ban. Cannily devised to avoid upsetting the firearms industry and gun enthusiasts, it made much hash of irrelevant external baubles such as handgrips and flash suppressors while allowing substantial magazine capacities and ignoring ballistics altogether. For a study in contrast consider [England’s reaction](#) to the 1987 Hungerford massacre. One year after sixteen persons were gunned down by a deranged man wielding a handgun and two rifles Great Britain banned all semi-automatic rifles beyond .22 rimfire, a prohibition that still stands.

Of course that seems a very far stretch in the U.S., where massacres (their victims are invariably ordinary citizens and street cops) draw far less of a response than the sexual peccadillos of the wealthy and famous. With that in mind, here are a few options:

- Devise a point system that scores firearm lethality. Factors to consider include ammunition capacity, cyclic rate, accuracy at range and, of course, ballistics. Guns whose scores exceed specified thresholds could be subject to a range of controls, including limits or outright prohibitions on manufacture, possession and transfer.
- Require that all gun transfers to private parties, or all that involve firearms whose lethality exceeds a specified threshold, go through a licensed dealer and be

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subject to a criminal records check.

- Prohibit the marketing of parts that private persons can use to assemble firearms while circumventing a records check. (For more on that click [here](#) and [here](#)).

Your faithful blogger is ready to help (*pro bono*, no less) a public university or major nonprofit assemble a public symposium on mass shootings. Sure, it's politically chancy. But given what keeps happening, it's really, really hard to think of a more pressing concern. Here's hoping that there will be a taker!

Incidentally, this also happens to be our three-hundredth blog post. Pop a cork!

Posted 11/4/18

PREVENTING MASS MURDER

***With gun control a no-go, early intervention is key.
Might artificial intelligence help?***

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “We’re under fire! We’re under fire! He’s got an automatic weapon and firing at us from the synagogue. Every unit in the city needs to get here now!” Broadcast by one of the first officers at Pittsburgh’s “Tree of Life” synagogue, [the stunning message](#) graphically conveys the unimaginably lethal threat that just one of America’s well-armed citizens gone wrong can pose to the public and the police.

On Saturday morning, October 27, Robert Bowers, a 46-year old loner, [armed himself with an AR-15 rifle and three Glock .357 pistols](#) and burst into the Tree of Life, gunning down eleven congregants and wounding two. He then opened fire on arriving patrol officers and [wounded two](#) who approached on foot. Two SWAT team members would eventually encounter Bowers on the third floor; during an exchange of gunfire [both sustained multiple gunshot wounds](#). According to the police chief, that officer [might have bled to death](#) had a colleague not applied a tourniquet. Bowers was also wounded, although not as seriously. While being cared for he reportedly said “that he wanted all Jews to die and also that they (Jews) were committing genocide to his people.”

Apparently, those whom Bowers claimed as “his people” are white supremacists. This [“isolated, awkward man](#) who lived alone and struggled with basic human interactions” secretly wallowed in a vicious subculture, frequently posting flagrantly bigoted comments disparaging Jews on “[Gab](#),” a social media site popular with extremists:

The vast majority of [Bowers’] posts are anti-Semitic in nature, using language like “Jews are the children of satan,” “kike infestation,” “filthy EVIL jews” and “Stop the Kikes then worry about the Muslims.” Other posts repeat standard white supremacist slogans, such as “Diversity means chasing down the last white person.”

Bowers, who has a concealed-carry license, waxed enthusiastically about guns and [posted photos of his Glocks](#). Police found three more handguns and two rifles in his residence and [a shotgun](#) in his vehicle. To law enforcement, though, the sometime truck driver was a cipher. “At this point,” said the local FBI head, “we have no knowledge that Bowers was known to law enforcement before today.”

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Cesar Sayoc is different. Before his arrest on October 26 for [mailing more than a dozen explosives-laden packages](#), the 56-year old bodybuilder/male stripper [accumulated a criminal record](#) that included a conviction for grand theft as well as arrests for theft, battery, fraud, drugs and, in 2002, threatening to settle a dispute with a bomb, a transgression that ultimately earned him a year's probation.

As one might suspect, Sayoc's personal life was a mess. Estranged from his birth family, divorced and bankrupt, he was living in a beat-up van [festooned with pro-Trump messages](#). Sayoc promoted far-right conspiracy theories and lambasted liberals on social media. In contrast to Bowers, though, [Sayoc posted on major platforms: Facebook and Twitter](#). His rants had recently turned downright scary:

He directed a tweet at Ms. Waters, the California Democrat, with a photo of what appeared to be her house. The message read: "see you soon." He sent another to Eric H. Holder Jr., an attorney general under Mr. Obama, that read, "See u soon Tick Tock." And he told Zephyr Teachout, a Democrat who ran unsuccessfully for attorney general in New York, that he had a surprise waiting for her. "We Unconquered Seminole Tribe have a special Air boat tour lined up for you here in our Swamp Everglades," he wrote. "See u real soon. Hug your loved ones."

Complaints to Twitter went unheeded. (It has since apologized.) After Sayoc's arrest [family members and their lawyer came forward](#). Among other things, they bemoaned the absence of a "safety net" that might have kept their kin from plunging into the abyss.

Compared with Bowers and Sayoc, [Scott Beierle](#), the deranged middle-aged Florida man who killed two and wounded five in a Tallahassee yoga studio on November 2, was really, *really* different. We say "was" because Beierle ended things by committing suicide. We emphasize "really" because he was not your archetypal terrorist. Beierle's complaint wasn't about politics or religion: it was that women refused to pay him attention, at least of the erotic kind. So he fought back with a series of YouTube videos that championed the "[Incel](#)" (involuntary celibacy) movement and praised its late spiritual master, the murderous [Elliot Rodger](#), who in 2014 killed six and injured more than a dozen before committing suicide.

Beierle didn't simply convey beliefs – he personalized his messages, disparaging and threatening women by name (e.g., "could have ripped her head off."). Neither was his deviant behavior just online. University and local police had twice arrested Beierle for grabbing women from behind, but charges were eventually dismissed. His odd behavior was noticed by others. A former college roommate said that Beierle seemed mentally unstable [but not to the point of involving the authorities](#):

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He was very weird and made everyone uncomfortable. It worried me at the time. There was concern for sure. But there wasn't enough evidence, and I would have been wasting the police's time if I had made any kind of report. I had nothing.

What could have been done?

- As current law goes, not much. Felons and persons who have been adjudicated as mentally defective are barred from having guns. By these standards, neither Bowers nor Beierle was prohibited. Sayoc, who had a substantial criminal record, didn't use guns.
- Our pages (see, for example, "[Massacre Control](#)") have discussed various approaches to keeping America safe. One of our favorites is limiting gun lethality. Most recently in "[Ban the Damned Things!](#)" we pointed out the unparalleled killing power of assault-type rifles, whose fearsome ballistics have increasingly forced police to deploy armored cars. Even so, making highly lethal firearms available to the public seems coded into America's DNA. No matter how many massacres take place, that's unlikely to change.
- President Trump [suggested posting armed guards](#) at religious services. Of course, the most likely outcome of a shootout between a stunned guard and a determined, AR-15 toting assailant is still (you guessed it) a massacre. Perhaps fewer might have been shot at the synagogue, or the yoga studio, had one or more of those present been packing guns. On the other hand, crossfire by agitated gunslingers might have likely caused even more casualties.

So, case closed? Not so fast. "[A Stitch in Time](#)" argued for identifying those whose "documented behavior indicates they are at great risk of harming themselves or others" and [applying measures](#) such as home visits, counseling and mental "holds" preemptively, *before* they strike. To be sure, that essay's human examples – Eric Garner, Deborah Danner, Manuel Rosales – were long-term chronic disrupters, well known to local cops. Beierle might fit that mold. But picking out villains inspired by ideology such as Bowers and Sayoc may, as we suggested in "[Flying Under the Radar](#)," prove a challenging task:

Cast too wide a net and you'll be overwhelmed, swamping the system, irritating honest citizens and possibly infringing on their rights as well. Select too few and should a bomb go off you'll be criticized for overlooking what critics will quickly point out should have been obvious from the start.

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On the “positive” side, Beierle, Bowers and Sayoc each used social media. Their posts brimmed with violence and hate. To be sure, parsing through the countless online messages generated each day might seem an overwhelming task. That’s where artificial intelligence (AI) might help. A recent NIJ report, [“Using Artificial Intelligence to Address Criminal Justice Needs”](#) discusses the use algorithms to analyze large, crime-related datasets. For example, video images can be scanned to “match faces, identify weapons and other objects, and detect complex events such as accidents and crimes in progress or after the fact.”

AI also holds out the promise of “predicting” crime: “With AI, volumes of information on law and legal precedence, social information, and media can be used to suggest rulings, identify criminal enterprises, and predict and reveal people at risk from criminal enterprises.” To that end, [a recent award](#) (“Combating Human Trafficking Using Structural Information in Online Review Sites”) funds the development algorithms that could identify victims and traffickers, in part by analyzing user posts in sex “review” websites:

Machine learning models will be trained using a ground truth dataset based on online reviews recovered and processed using these keywords. The resulting models will then be trained and optimized to detect and classify online reviews, according to criteria such as trafficking, adult, and child.

Along these lines, it seems likely that algorithms could be devised to analyze social media posts and law enforcement, criminal and gun registration records and compare their contents to established “truths” derived from actual episodes of terrorism. Leads could of course be used to kick off or inform investigations, and we expect that in one form or another some of this is already being done. But our emphasis here is preventive, to use leads generated by AI or other means to expose ne’er-do-wells who have been flying under the radar so that interventions such as those mentioned in [“A Stitch in Time”](#) can be applied.

Sounds good. But we live in a democracy. What about liberty interests? [A recent article in Smithsonian](#) warns that AI’s application to crime mapping has led critics to complain that using past patterns to devise algorithms creates the risk of “bias being baked into the software”:

The American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], the Brennan Center for Justice and various civil rights organizations have all raised questions about the risk of Historical data from police practices, critics contend, can create a feedback loop through which algorithms make decisions that both reflect and reinforce attitudes about which neighborhoods are “bad” and which are “good.”

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Still, no one is forced to reside – or post – in the “neighborhoods” of Gab, Facebook and Twitter. Reacting to the handiwork of Bowers, Sayoc and their many forebears (we can now add Beierle to the mix) *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni complained that the web has become a “delivery system” for grotesque notions that encourage twisted minds to do the unthinkable:

It [the web] creates terrorists...I don't know exactly how we square free speech and free expression – which are paramount – with a better policing of the internet, but I'm certain that we need to approach that challenge with more urgency than we have mustered so far. Democracy is at stake. So are lives. (“[The Internet Will Be the Death of Us](#),” 10/30/18)

What's to be done? If we're certain that ordinary citizens will have invariably steady minds *and* hands, we can encourage gun-carry. Well, good luck with that. Yet with serious gun control out of favor little else of promise remains. That's where early intervention comes in. Here's hoping that the lamentable deficit in “urgency” identified by Mr. Bruni gets fixed real soon so that acting *before* the fact gets a chance to work before the next madman strikes.

Posted 8/8/10

SAY SOMETHING

Is society powerless in the face of mass shootings?

911: "State Police."

Shooter: "Hey, is this 911?"

911: "Yeah, can I help you?"

Shooter: "This is Omar Thornton. The shooter over in Manchester."

911: "Yes, where are you, sir?"

Shooter: "I'm in the building...ah, you probably want to know the reason why I shot this place up. Basically this is a racist place."

911: "Yup, I understand that."

Shooter: "They treat me bad over here and treat all other black employees bad over here, too, so I took it into my own hands and handled the problem. I wish, I wish I could have got more of the people."

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Connecticut state trooper William Taylor was overseeing dispatch at Troop H on the morning of August 3rd. [when a call came in](#) from the man who just [gunned down eight co-workers](#) at a Manchester liquor warehouse. It seemed that the killer couldn't wait to justify his brutal act and bemoan what he considered a low body count.

Omar Thornton, 34, had quit his job minutes earlier after watching a private investigator's video depicting him stealing beer from his delivery truck and placing it in a car. After resigning he went to the kitchen on a pretext, retrieved two 9mm pistols from his lunch box and exited, guns blazing. He ultimately holed up in a corner of the plant and dialed 911. Four minutes into the call, as a police SWAT team closed in, he set down the phone and put a bullet in his brain.

Thornton, a gun enthusiast, frequented a nearby shooting range. He had a shotgun in his car and more weapons at his home. All had been legally purchased.

Shootings by purportedly "ordinary" people have become such a common feature of American life that we seldom give them much thought. Here are some of this year's other examples:

[July 12, 2010 – Albuquerque, New Mexico.](#) An armed man walked into a plant where he once worked and shot six persons, killing two, then turned the gun on

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himself. Robert Reza, 37, had recently split up with his live-in girlfriend, who was still employed there and whom police suspect was his main target. She was gravely wounded.

[June 6, 2010 – Hialeah, Florida](#). A man with a .45 pistol shot and killed his estranged wife outside the restaurant where she worked, then burst inside, killing three female employees and wounding three. He committed suicide when police arrived. Gerardo Regalado, 38, was despondent about his failed relationship and apparently angry at women.

[May 6, 2010 – South L.A. County, California](#). A man armed with an assault rifle broke into a home and fired numerous rounds, killing his former girlfriend, her brother and their father and wounding two others. Joseph Mercado, 26, then set out to burn down the house. He might have succeeded had he not been confronted by a patrol deputy who heard the gunfire. Fortunately, the officer also had an assault rifle and wounded Mercado. The killer's excuse? He was mad at his ex about a child custody dispute.

[April 14, 2010 – Chicago, Illinois](#). A 32-year old man shot and killed his pregnant wife and infant son, a pregnant 16-year old niece and a 3-year old niece and critically wounded his mother and a 13-year old nephew. He also fired a round at his fleeing 12-year old niece but missed. Finally out of ammo, James Larry asked cops to shoot *him*. They didn't.

[January 17, 2010 – Appomattox, Virginia](#). A man shot and killed eight persons, including his sister and brother-in-law and their two children, then fired on officers and a police helicopter, puncturing its fuel tank and forcing it down. Christopher Speight, 39, a sometime security guard, had dozens of guns on his property, including a number of assault rifles. He also had an assortment of homemade bombs.

[January 7, 2010 – St. Louis, Missouri](#). A heavily armed worker stormed into a manufacturing plant and started blasting away. Timothy Hendron, 51, a thirty-three year employee, was armed with an assault rifle, a shotgun and two pistols and wore a fanny pack stuffed with extra ammunition. By the time it was over he had slain three co-workers and wounded five. Hendron was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the firm and was having conflicts with superiors.

Not enough? Going back to 2009, remember the [North Carolina man](#) who went to the nursing home where his estranged wife worked and shot eight dead and wounded three,

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including a police officer? How about the [Alabama man](#) who armed himself with two assault rifles, a handgun and shotgun and killed his mother, seven relatives and two bystanders and wounded six more, including two cops? Or, in 2008, the [Kentucky man](#) who settled an argument about workplace safety by getting a .45 pistol and killing his boss and four others?

And on and on. Editorial reactions to the carnage run the gamut from [bitter denunciations](#) of our firearms-obsessed culture to limp pieces that bemoan the tragedies but offer little in the way of a remedy. In an otherwise thoughtful [commentary](#) about the Timothy Herndon massacre, St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist Bill McClellan took such pains to prove that he's no reflexive gun-hater that even after what happened in his city he endorsed (for others) the idea of bringing guns to work for protection. "I say sure. If it makes you feel better, go ahead."

But will these firearms be wisely used? To paraphrase the gun lobby's favorite jingle, (inanimate) guns don't kill people, (fallible) people do. From what he wrote, Mr. McClellan would have probably said "go ahead" to Omar Thornton, Robert Reza, Timothy Hendron and Wesley Higdon (the Kentucky killer.) He would have probably been fine with arming the others, too.

Indeed, there's no indication that any of the killers bought their guns intending to misuse them. Several, including Thornton, the Manchester shooter, were gun aficionados. Yet in fits of anger, jealousy and just plain craziness, misuse them they did. In the end, it was the presence of a firearm at a particular point in time that made all the difference. Summarizing [recent findings](#) that weak gun laws and high rates of gun ownership lead to more gun deaths, the Violence Policy Center's Kristen Rand said, "The equation is simple. More guns lead to more gun death, but limiting exposure to firearms saves lives."

Well, that's fine. Yet the unmistakable trend is in the direction of making guns available to everyone, all the time. Perhaps it's time to tackle the threat posed by gun misuse as we do with other causes of death, say, impaired driving. In 2007 41,259 persons were [killed in traffic collisions](#), including 29,072 occupants of passenger motor vehicles. DUI's (BAC of .08 and above) figured in 13,041 deaths. According to the [CDC's injury reporting system](#) there were 31,224 deaths from firearm injuries during the same period. Ninety-seven percent (30,335) were violence-related, meaning purposeful; fifty-six percent (17,352) were suicides.

With more people having and carrying more guns you and I and our families are at increasing risk of being shot by someone who may suddenly go berserk. Counting on

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armed citizens to come to the rescue is delusional – in fact, they’re part of the problem. So here’s an idea. Let’s use the White House as a bully pulpit for a national campaign to remind everyone – gun owners, their friends, family members and co-workers – that guns and anger are a lethal combination. “Friends don’t let [angry] friends pack guns.” “If your [angry] friend has a gun, say something.” Take out ads in print and on TV, put up billboards, place posters at gun stores and firing ranges. It’s something worth considering.

Posted 1/11/11

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Restrict the possession of “ordinary” guns or get used to regular massacres

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “I have a Glock 9 millimeter, and I’m a pretty good shot.” That’s what Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D - Ariz.) [told a New York Times reporter](#) last year. Only months later she would be fighting for her life, [shot through the head](#) with the same brand and caliber of pistol.

On January 8, Jared Loughner, 22, opened fire with a Glock 9mm. pistol during the Congresswoman’s “Congress on your Corner” event at a Tucson supermarket. The unemployed, sometime student – he got booted from college for disruptive behavior – killed six, including a 9-year old girl and a Federal judge. He wounded thirteen, including Ms. Giffords.

Loughner was tackled by citizens while reloading his pistol. A search of the home where he lived with his parents [yielded a prior letter](#) from the Congresswoman and several notes suggesting his intent to carry out the assassination.

By any measure Loughner is a very sick puppy. His MySpace account was full of disconnected thoughts and delusional ramblings about off-the-wall subjects like government thought control. He wrote about returning to the gold and silver standards – with him in charge of the Treasury. “Mein Kampf” was listed as one of his favorite books, which might seem insignificant until one considers that his intended target, Ms. Giffords, is active in Judaism.

Loughner fits the archetype of the murderous loner to a tee. [Past acquaintances described him](#) as odd and reclusive. His in-class rants at Pima Community College frightened classmates and instructors. A video he posted about the college was the last straw. He and his parents were called in and told that Loughner couldn’t return unless he was psychologically cleared. In his one known run-in with the law police cited him for scrawling the letters “C” and “X” on a street sign, which he said symbolized Christianity.

Loughner might have been a very odd duck, but he was nonetheless qualified under [Federal law](#) to buy a handgun. He was a legal U.S. resident, over 21 years of age (the minimum to buy a handgun), not a convicted felon, not under indictment, and was

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never adjudicated (meaning, in court) as mentally defective. [On November 30, 2010](#) Loughner walked into Sportsman's Warehouse in Tucson and purchased a Glock 9mm. pistol. Arizona has no state waiting period or gun-training requirement, so Loughner left with the gun right after passing the criminal record check. Oh, yes. Thanks to [a 2010 amendment to state law](#), as a legal possessor over the age of 21 [he was also automatically entitled](#) to carry the weapon either openly or concealed on his person, no permit required.

But it's not just Arizona. Ordinary handguns like the Glock 9mm. can be purchased anywhere in the U.S. In California, which is considered the most restrictive state – magazine capacity is limited to ten rounds and a permit is required for concealed carry – buyers must pass a brief safety exam and wait ten days to pick up their gun. And that's it.

It's really quite convenient.

Actually, what most stands out about the events in Tucson are their ordinariness. In ["Say Something"](#) we pointed out that "shootings by purportedly 'ordinary' people have become such a common feature of American life that we seldom give them much thought." Troubled young males who use guns to give vent to their demons are nothing new. Prior examples include the [April 1999 Columbine \(Colo.\) High School massacre](#), where two male students killed 13 and injured 21, the [March 2006 Capitol Hill massacre](#), in which a deranged 28-year old man opened fire at a youth party in Seattle, killing six and wounding two, and the April 2007 [massacre at Virginia Tech](#), where a mentally disturbed 23-year old college senior killed 32 and wounded 25.

Virginia Tech has remarkable parallels to the Tucson massacre. Its perpetrator, Sung Hui-Cho, was armed with two pistols that he had recently bought at gun stores. One was a Glock 9mm (the other was a Walther .22). Cho also had mental problems; indeed, his were so serious that a judge had ruled him mentally ill. Unfortunately, Virginia's procedure for entering that information into the database used to clear gun purchases was lacking, enabling Cho to buy guns.

Reaction to the Tucson shooting was swift. Many observers, including outspoken Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, [laid blame on a "toxic political environment"](#) that replaced reasoned discourse with posturing and threats. During last year's Congressional races Sarah Palin's political action committee televised ads to which Congresswoman Giffords objected: "The way that she has it depicted has the cross hairs of a gun sight over our district. When people do that, they've got to realize there's consequences to that." Sheriff Dupnik and others [also blame lax gun laws](#) and the

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expiration of the assault weapons ban, which also prohibited high-capacity ammunition feeding devices such as the 30-round magazines used by Loughner.

But if we're seeking to prevent wackos from going on a rampage, all the half-hearted "bans" and regulatory initiatives in the world would make little difference. Ordinary guns are the elephant in the room. Medium-caliber semi-auto pistols such as the Glock 9mm. are exceedingly lethal regardless of magazine capacity. And that's to say nothing of the increasingly popular and even more deadly .40 caliber pistols (yes, Glock makes those, too.) Or the wildly popular "[Big Boomer](#)" handguns, whose projectiles pierce ballistic vests as easily as knives cut through butter.

What's needed, of course, is a fundamental reset in our attitude about firearms. Unfortunately, guns, politics and ideology have become impossibly conflated. What's more, in 2008 the Supreme Court decided in [Heller](#) that having a gun, at least in the home, is an individual right. While the Justices suggested that they would support "reasonable" regulation, their decision put proponents of gun control on the defensive. It's no longer about moving forward: it's about not losing any more ground.

Bottom line: without severely restricting the kinds of guns that citizens can possess (which, by the way, isn't going to happen) there's no way – none – to prevent massacres. Don't believe it? Read the posts linked below.

Posted 10/23/11

THERE'S NO ESCAPING THE GUN

A prosperous community discovers that mass murder is an equal opportunity threat

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. A paunchy middle-aged man turned away from the grisly scene and headed for his car. Eight were dead or dying, including his ex-wife. [Scott Dekraai](#) had just set a record that would go down in infamy.

Acquaintances said that Dekraai, 41, had been a pleasant, easy going man until a 2007 tugboat accident that killed a shipmate and left him partly disabled. His life quickly unraveled. Within months a court order was filed directing him to stay away from his father in law, who claimed that Dekraai had beat him up. (The order, which required that Dekraai temporarily give up his guns, expired one year later.) Dekraai's wife Michelle, a hair stylist, filed for divorce, and they became embroiled in a child custody dispute that would drag on for years. [She told coworkers](#) at a beauty salon that she feared he would kill her.

No one took it seriously. After all, this was Seal Beach, a tony Southern California coastal community of 25,000 where such things don't happen. Who could predict that Dekraai would don a bulletproof vest, [invade Salon Meritage](#) and blaze away with three large-caliber pistols?

But on October 12, 2011 that's exactly what he did.

"He stopped to reload, and then continued gunning people down," said Orange County D.A. Tony Rackauckas. "He was not satisfied with murdering his intended target, his ex-wife. For almost two minutes, Dekraai shot victim after victim, executing eight people by shooting them in the head and chest. He was not done. He then walked out of the salon and shot a ninth victim, a male, who was sitting nearby in a parked Range Rover."

In addition to Michelle, who was first to be gunned down, Dekraai murdered the shop owner, Randy Fannin, stylists Victoria Buzo and Laura Elody, Christie Wilson, a nail artist, customers Michele Fast and Lucia Kondas, and David Caouette, 64, a passer-by whom Dekraai encountered in the parking lot. Laura Elody's mother Hattie Stretz, who was visiting the salon, was gravely wounded but survived.

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Dekraai (he quickly surrendered) wasn't a criminal in the conventional sense. Neither was Orange County's previous record holder. In 1976 [Edward Charles Allaway](#), a 37-year old custodian at Cal State Fullerton, turned a semiautomatic rifle he bought at K-Mart on fellow employees, killing seven and wounding two. Allaway's wife had just sued for divorce. Psychiatrists diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to a mental hospital, where he remains to the present day.

Los Angeles County's mass murder record is held by [Bruce Pardo](#). He, too, was no ordinary criminal. On Christmas eve 2008 the 45-year old, freshly divorced engineer barged into the residence of his former in-laws with five pistols and a homemade flamethrower that he had concealed under a Santa suit. By the time he was done nine were dead including his ex-wife, her parents, a sister, a nephew, and two brothers and their wives. Like Dekraai and Allaway, Pardo had no criminal record. Unlike them, he had the good sense to kill himself.

Learning theory says that behavior is shaped by watching others. While America isn't the only place where disturbed persons use guns to release their demons (keep in mind the recent massacre in Norway) the frequency of these events – what we've referred to as their "ordinariness" – suggests that there's a lot of monkey-see, monkey-do going on in the U.S.A. In March we wrote about the [Tucson massacre](#), where an college dropout with mental issues shot and killed six and wounded thirteen including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D - Ariz.) A post in August 2010 spoke of a disaffected truck driver [who shot and killed eight co-workers](#) after being fired for stealing beer. We took that opportunity to review six other multiple-victim shootings between January and July 2010 that seemed motivated by no purpose other than letting off steam.

Here is an update. Keep in mind that this is only a sample, as to list all such incidents would take a lot more than a blog post.

[10/18/11](#): A New York man facing a divorce trial beat his estranged spouse to death and used a shotgun to kill their two children, Molly, 10, and Gregory, 8. Samuel Friedlander, 50, then shot himself dead.

[10/6/11](#): A "well liked" but disgruntled Northern California truck driver opened fire on coworkers with a handgun and a rifle, killing three and wounding six, some critically. Shareed Allman, 46, then tried to carjack a vehicle, wounding its driver. He was later shot and killed by police.

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9/7/11: Disturbed by a failing relationship, a West Virginia man shot and killed five persons inside a home. Shayne Riggleman, 22, then ran over a motorist and critically wounded a gas station attendant. He committed suicide as police closed in.

9/6/11: A Nevada man opened fire with a rifle at a Carson City retail center and inside an IHOP restaurant, killing four and wounding seven. He then killed himself. Eduardo Sencion, 32, was said to have “mental issues.” His motive is unknown.

8/7/11: Angered by comments about the appearance of a home where he lived with his girlfriend, Ohio resident Michael Hance, 51, went on a shooting rampage. He killed seven and wounded two before police shot him dead.

7/24/11: A stormy relationship ended at a roller rink, where the husband shot and killed his wife and four of her family members. He also wounded four others. Tan Do, 35, then turned the .40 caliber Glock on himself.

7/11/11: Wyoming man Everett Conant III, 36, shot and killed his three teenage boys and his 33-year old brother inside the mobile home where they lived. He also seriously wounded his wife. A former employer said that Conant was having personal problems. Police arrested him without incident.

7/8/11: Angered by his wife’s decision to leave him, a reportedly bipolar 34-year old ex-con with a violent past shot and killed her, their daughter and his in-laws. He then went gunning for others, killing a former girlfriend, her sister and the sister’s daughter. Rodrick Dantzler then took his own life.

6/13/11: Barred by a restraining order from visiting his children, Maine resident Steven Lake, 37, grabbed his shotgun, went to his estranged wife’s home, and shot and killed her and their two children. He then committed suicide.

11/14/10: A 29-year old Pennsylvania man shot the mother of their three children, then shot the kids and himself. A two-year old was the sole survivor. The “sweet” couple had reportedly been arguing.

9/27/10: A 41-year old Florida man ignored a restraining order and went to the home of his estranged wife. He shot and killed her and four stepchildren, ages 10 to 14, and wounded a 15-year old. He committed suicide as officers arrived.

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[9/11/10](#): Enraged that his eggs weren't cooked right, a rural Kentucky man "not known to be a violent person" used a shotgun to murder his wife and four neighbors. He then turned the weapon on himself.

[9/1/10](#): A few days after being arrested for violating a restraining order a California man shot six persons in an Arizona resort city, killing five including his estranged spouse. He returned with two children to California, where he committed suicide. The children were unharmed.

We've long argued that the availability of guns overwhelms our ability to prevent their misuse. [According to the NRA](#) there are nearly 300 million firearms in the U.S., including 100 million handguns, with about 4 million new guns entering circulation each year. That may actually be an underestimate. According to ATF in 2010 [American gun makers produced](#) a whopping 5,403,714 firearms. Only four percent were exported.

Here's one old refrain: "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Here's another: "Let's enforce the laws we have." Federal and state laws bar convicted felons, persons adjudged as mentally defective and individuals under active restraining orders from possessing firearms. But our examples aren't about ordinary criminals. Our chronology of terror includes only one ex-con. True, some of the shooters were emotional basket cases, yet none had been adjudicated mentally ill, the threshold before laws kick in. And while three were under active restraining orders, trusting in a piece of paper to convince an embittered man (all the killers were male) to give up his guns seems a very, very long shot.

It's for such reasons that the NRA promotes gun carry laws. Armed citizens, it insists, can keep shootings from happening in the first place. Well, good luck with that. An armed citizen was present at the [Tucson massacre](#). He didn't intervene, partly for fear that he might shoot an innocent person, and partly because responding officers might shoot *him*. As for the episode in Seal Beach, it would have taken snipers lying in wait to repel Dekraai's attack. And what's to be done about the many incidents that take place inside a home? Should family members pack guns to the dinner table? Should spouses always be armed? And when it's time to go night-night, who puts away their Glock first?

Carrying pro-gun arguments to their inevitable, ridiculous conclusion highlights the profound intractability of America's gun dilemma. But while we can't rely on the law to work miracles, maybe we can promote the notion of watching one's temper and using guns wisely.

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Consider, for example, that the UCR attributes at least [one in four homicides in 2010](#) to “arguments,” and that these led to the deaths of 323 wives, 60 husbands, 28 mothers, 62 fathers, 39 sons and 15 daughters. [NIJ](#) reports that about 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are assaulted by an intimate partner each year, and that as many as half of all female homicide victims ([2,918 women were feloniously slain in 2010](#)) were murdered by their partners.

Domestic murder-suicide has become such a common occurrence that it merits [its own NIJ page](#). As one might expect, virtually all are by gun: “More incidents of murder-suicide occur with guns than with any other weapon. Access to a gun is a major risk factor in familicide because it allows the perpetrator to act on his or her rage and impulses.” According to the [Violence Policy Center](#) there were 591 such deaths during the first six months of 2005. Three out of four involved an intimate partner, and three out of four happened at home. Researchers coined the category of “family annihilator” to describe men who go berserk and gun down everyone, including the kids and the dog. Nearly all (92 percent) of murder-suicides are done with guns, so their availability is thought crucial:

The most common catalytic component in murder-suicide is the use of a firearm. Firearms allow shooters to act on impulse...The presence of a gun allows the offender to quickly and easily kill a greater number of victims. If there had not been easy access to a firearm, these deaths may simply have been injuries, or not have occurred at all. Efforts should be made to restrict access to firearms where there is an increased risk of murder-suicide, for example where an individual has a history of domestic violence and/or has threatened suicide.

Well, good luck with that, too. We’ll instead peddle our favorite remedy, a national campaign to alert the public to the problems of gun violence. Let’s remind everyone that rage and guns are a lethal combination and that early intervention by friends, family members and mental health professionals is the best preventive.

Friends may not be able to keep angry friends from owning guns, but they can surely do *something*. In our gun-crazed culture there is really no alternative.