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## Targeting Children: Killing Fields in the Age of Mass Shootings



Photograph Source: President Biden – Public Domain

Authoritarianism breeds violence, and revels in its use as a weapon of fear, division, and terror. The Republican Party in its white supremacy incarnation now holds firm to an absolutist view of the second amendment and argues that freedom is synonymous with unlimited gun rights. For instance, in Texas, where 19 elementary children and two teachers were murdered by an 18-year-old with an AR-15 type assault weapon, Governor Abbott defines freedom by putting into place laws that allow individuals to buy and carry guns without a permit. He and his fellow gun disciples refuse to recognize that with more

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guns comes more violence, especially in a country in which “a record 39,695,315 guns were sold to civilians in 2020.”<sup>[1]</sup> Too much gun industry money flows into the pockets of Republicans for them to note or even care about the fact that “around 35 people in the U.S. are murdered with a gun every day [and] that more than 550 school shootings [have taken place] in the U.S. since Columbine.”<sup>[2]</sup> Republican politicians completely ignore studies that connect the wide availability of guns to the fact that gun deaths in 2020 were the leading killer of U.S. children and that in the same year more than 4,300 young Americans died from gunshot wounds.<sup>[3]</sup> They also refuse to acknowledge that a vast majority of Americans support background checks on all gun sales, the creation of a national data base, the banning of assault-style weapons, and restrictions on private guns sales.<sup>[4]</sup>

The United States has become the wild west of violence and a signpost of the power of gun lobbies, the arms industry, and the military-industrial complex to buy off politicians in order to get their support. As one example, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas receives more money from the gun lobbies than any other Senator. Unsurprisingly, his response to the horrific mass shooting of children in Uvalde, Texas was to arm teachers. Other arms propagandists in the GOP have called for putting fewer doors in schools. It gets worse. Some politicians and media pundits have called for supplying students with bullet-proof blankets. It is hard to make this stuff up.

While the Democratic Party laments the lack of gun regulations, its hypocrisy is astonishing as it pours money into the military-industrial complex, the defense budget, and police departments in the form of outdated military weapons. As Jeffrey St. Clair points out, \$7.4 billion in military equipment has been transferred to police departments across the United States since 1990. He also observes rightly that both parties support, benefit from, and are in collusion with the merchants of death “whose arms exports totaled \$138.2 billion in 2021, before the blank check given to Ukraine.” Not to mention the millions racked up by gun manufactures who received COVID relief checks.<sup>[5]</sup>

The right-wing playbook does more than deflect anger after such shootings, it actively creates the conditions that produce them. Yet, the answer to such violence cannot be restricted to gun regulation and more mental health checks, however important. The US is plagued by a culture of violence and corruption, the roots of which lie deep in a form of gangster capitalism that elevates profit, greed, and self-interest over human needs. Under neoliberal authoritarianism, violence is not merely legitimated and used in the interest of political opportunism. Violence as a form of domestic terrorism is used by the Republican

Party and its followers to destabilize American society and reinforce their call for a national security state that dispenses with constitutional rights and social justice.

As one of the most violent countries in the world, the US has declared war on its own citizens. This is not a society that simply embraces war as a permanent feature of domestic and foreign policy, it is a society that revels in violence as an answer to all social problems, making it a defining feature of masculinity, and spectacularizing it as a form of entertainment and pleasure. Right-wing politicians and pundits such as Tucker Carlson and Sen. Josh Hawley suggest a connection among their defense of guns and a view of masculinity in which men are portrayed as soldiers–warriors in defense of their families, religion, and freedom against a government trying to crush them. The dark underside of this militarized view of masculinity suggest that men have become feminized, code for viewing women as eroding manhood and, as such, constituting both a threat to men and deserving of their aggression and control. In the name of protection, “men regularly acquire guns to protect women and children, but women and children in the U.S. are often the victims of gun violence and accidents.”<sup>[6]</sup> In this scenario, male violence and support for a gun culture are accelerated and legitimated by a view of hyper-masculinity and patriarchy that not only identifies with gun ownership but does so in the name of dangerous notions of gender identity, protection, security, weakness, and resentment.

A less visible expression of such violence can be found in a society that has lost its vision and punishes children through zero tolerance policies in schools, creates the largest prison system in the world, militarizes the police, produces staggering forms of inequality in wealth and power, and uses the language of violence to address social issues. For the Republican Party, violence is a political tool to instill mass fear, spread hate and racism, and strengthen its path towards fascism and the destruction of the very idea of democracy. The increasing call for violence as a form of political opportunism, buttressed by the Republican Party’s defense of the January 6th attack on the Capitol, reinforces and legitimates the Party’s appropriation of domestic terrorism as a viable political strategy to put in place a minority government.

The Republican response to the shootings in Buffalo and Texas is to pray for the victims and their loved ones, assign pure evil to the killers, and then do nothing to address such violence except to hide from view how they produce it. In the age of fascist politics, youth are no longer viewed as a marker of the future. In fact, they no longer have a future in the updated model of American fascism. They have become non-existent as viable long-term investment and resource for the future. Rather than viewed as central to the alleged

American dream, they are now portrayed as part of the American nightmare—lazy, unproductive, ethically indifferent, self-absorbed, and so it goes. Youth, especially youth of color, are mocked more than treasured and are increasingly written out of the script of democracy. They are told that critical race theory, critical thinking, and history will make them uncomfortable. This is simply code for keeping them uninformed about the political, social, and economic conditions that produce massive violence in the U.S. and pose a threat to their lives.

Violence in the US has been elevated to a defining feature of almost every aspect of American society. One example can be seen in how sports, reality TV and other sites of entertainment have become battlegrounds where violence becomes spectacularized. As John Whitehead observes, “Mass shootings have taken place in schools, on college campuses, movie theaters, nightclubs, grocery stores, concert venues, bars, workplaces, churches, on military bases, and in government offices. In almost every instance, the shooters were dressed in military-style gear and armed with military-style weapons.”<sup>[7]</sup> Not only are mass shootings ubiquitous, they are so routine as to become normalized. As I have sense elsewhere, “Given the profits made by arms manufacturers, the defense industry, gun dealers and the lobbyists who represent them in Congress, it comes as no surprise that the culture of violence cannot be abstracted from either the culture of business or the corruption of politics.”

The more general response to the endless mass shootings in the U.S. and the needless killing and maiming of innocent children is that something is not working in American society. Actually, the system is working. Under neoliberalism, society has become criminogenic, elevating the accumulation of capital over human needs, and increasingly defining itself under the banners of white nationalism and white supremacy. This is a society that under the rubric of fascist politics revels in hate and racial cleansing; it is deeply anti-intellectual, and it thrives in a newfound cult of authoritarianism. At the core of this society is a form of necropolitics wedded to violence, death, greed, and hatred. Violence in this setting terrifies, terrorizes, distracts, and legitimates the putrid language of “law and order” and racial divisions. As the blood flows freely in Mosques, malls, churches, schools, supermarkets, and other places, the latter point not only to the abyss of senseless violence, but a society that uses it to define its core values, principles, and interests.

The country has blood on its hands, the bodies of children are piling up, and the legitimacy of the system can no longer be defended. Fear and terror keep the public anxious and

create a mass psychology that encourages people to purchase more weapons in order to protect themselves against immigrants, Black people, youth of color, women defending their reproductive rights, trans-gender youth, and others considered a threat to the despicable mantra of neoliberal fascist politics. Protective spaces, especially for young people are disappearing. Every space from schools to the streets has become militarized, a battleground, and target those who embrace the second amendment with religious fervor. The good news is that many young people refuse to have their future cancelled out and are fighting back recognizing that without a struggle there is no future for them. Currently, many groups are now demonstrating across the country against gun violence. They are confronting the monsters and merchants of death with a new found sense of urgency. Hopefully, they will further organize to build a mass movement to put capitalism in the grave before it is too late for the planet and democracy itself.

#### **Notes.**

[1] Judd Legum, "5 facts about guns in America," Popular Information (May 26, 2022). Online:

[2] William Rovers Pitt, "Thanks to Republicans and Manchin, We May Get only 'Prayers' as Children Die," Truthout (May 25, 2022). Online: <https://truthout.org/articles/thanks-to-republicans-and-manchin-we-may-get-only-prayers-as-children-die/>

[3] BBC, "Gun deaths were the leading killer of US children in 2020," *BBC News* (April 22, 2022).

[4] Eugene Daniels, Ryan Lizza and Rachael Bade, "New poll shows huge support for gun restrictions," Politico (May 26, 2022).

[5] Jeffrey St. Clair, "Roaming Chares: The End of Innocents," *Counterpunch* (May 27, 2022).

[6] Craig Rood, "Addressing Gun Violence by Reimagining Masculinity and Protection," *The Gender Policy Report* (September 22, 2022).

[7] John Whitehead, "Mass shootings: The vicious cycle fueled by America's toxic cult of violence," *Augusta Free Press* (May 26, 2023).

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