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War, Murder and the American Way

By: Robert C. Koehler
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He sat with them for an hour in prayer. Then he pulled his gun out and started shooting.

And today our national numbness is wrapped in a Confederate flag. The young man who killed nine members of Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday night was an old-school racist. "I have to do it," Dylann Storm Roof is said to have explained. "You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go."

Roof's roommate told ABC News the next day that he was "big into segregation and other stuff" and "he wanted to start a civil war." And this is America, where we have the freedom to manifest our lethal fantasies.

But this is bigger than racism and the pathetic monster of white supremacy. Racism is a name for one of the currents of righteous hatred that coils through our collective unconscious, and over the decades and centuries it has motivated terrible crimes against humanity. But the "civil war" that Roof participated in is, I think, much larger and much more meaningless. And not all the participants are loners.

“In a pattern that has become achingly familiar to him and the nation,” the New York Times reported, “Mr. Obama on Thursday strode down to the White House briefing room to issue a statement of mourning and grief as he called on the country to unify in the face of tragedy.”

Indeed, it’s the fourteenth time, according to The Guardian, he has done this since he’s been in office. It’s the fourteenth time he has said words like: “I am confident that the outpouring of unity and strength and fellowship and love across Charleston today from all races, from all faiths, from all places of worship indicates the degree to which those old vestiges of hatred can be overcome.”

America, America, land of the mass murderer.

Mass murders have increased fourteenfold in the United States since the 1960s, sociologist Peter Turchin wrote two and a half years ago, after the Sandy Hook killings. In his essay, called “Canaries in a Coal Mine,” Turchin made a disturbing comparison: Mass murderers kill the same way soldiers do, without personal hatred for their victims but to right some large social wrong. He called it the “principle of social substitutability” — substituting a particular group of people for a general wrong.

“On the battlefield,” Turchin wrote, “you are supposed to try to kill a person whom you’ve never met before. You are not trying to kill this particular person, you are shooting because he is wearing the enemy uniform. . . . Enemy soldiers are socially substitutable.”

“That is to say,” I noted at the time, “the definition and practice of war and the definition and practice of mass murder have eerie congruencies. Might this not be the source of the social poison? We divide and slice the human race; some people become the enemy, not in a personal but merely an abstract sense — ‘them’ — and we lavish a staggering amount of our wealth and creativity on devising ways to kill them. When we call it war, it’s as familiar and wholesome as apple pie. When we call it mass murder, it’s not so nice.”

Dylann Roof had a toxic “cause” — to reclaim the Old South, to reclaim the country, from an unwelcome human subgroup — but the solidarity in which he acted wasn’t so much with his fellow racists as with the strategists and planners of war. Any war. Every war.

Perhaps this is why, when I hear Obama laud “the outpouring of unity and strength and fellowship and love” in the wake of the Charleston murders, I feel only despair: despair as deep as a knife wound. War, not love, is structured into the nation’s economic and social fabric. We invest trillions of dollars into its perpetuation, across Central Asia and the Middle East and wherever else the strategists and planners see evil, which is to say, opportunity.

Every murderer believes the violence he is wielding is “good violence.” Think Timothy McVeigh, whose fertilizer bomb killed 168 people at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. He called his victims “collateral damage,” co-opting the official language of the Gulf War in which he served. Mass murderers mimic and find their inspiration in the official wars we wage as a nation. Take away the massive public relations machinery that

surrounds these wars and the deaths they cause are just as cruel, just as wrong. The abstract “enemy” dead, in every case, turn out to be human beings, who deserved to live.

And every war and every mass murder spread fear and hatred — and inspiration — in their aftermath. We can’t go to war without spawning imitators. The next day, USA Today reported, the vigils at two South Carolina churches, in Charleston and Greenville, were disrupted by bomb threats and the churches had to be evacuated. So did Charleston’s county building.

“At some point,” Obama said, “we as a country will have to reckon with the fact that this type of mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries. It doesn’t happen in other places with this kind of frequency — and it is in our power to do something about it.”

Until we begin demilitarizing our relationship with the world, such words uttered by presidents are as empty as the words Dylann Roof uttered in prayer at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday night.