

Is America the Beautiful becoming America the Brutal?

By the time you finish reading this article gun violence will have taken another life, or two, or three, or ... But, easy there NRA and Second Amendment enthusiasts, this is one peace blog where the emphasis in "gun violence" is less on the *gun*, and more on the *violence* . . . (read more . . .)

... bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore, the land mourns and all who live in it languish. . . (Hos 4:2-3).

I must confess, some of the data in this article may be wrong -- not because I was careless, but because data on deaths due to gun violence change so rapidly that their accuracy has a very short shelf life. Even the definition of *mass shooting* eludes us. Some consider any shooting where there are multiple(?) victims to be a mass shooting; others narrow it down to four or more victims. If we replace "mass shooting" with "multiple-victim shooting" I think we could cover just about every occasion. But, again, I want to address the violence, defined as aggression in the extreme, inherent in all these incidents more than the weapon.

After the Newtown school shooting in 2012 I posted an article¹ on my Website Solutions4Peace about gun violence being more about violence than guns. Nothing in the intervening years has led me to second guess my original thesis. There have been [153 school shootings](#) since Newtown. Now, let's not forget the many other *multiple-victim* shootings -- Aurora, Charleston, the Navy Yard. And then, too, there have been numerous violent riots resulting from lethal police interventions: Ferguson (Michael Brown), Baltimore (Freddie Gray), New York (Eric Garner). Beyond these episodic mass tragedies, however, runs a consistent daily dose of violence -- just listen to your local news! I was recently reminded of my conviction when I read the following article: "[White America will ignore this video:](#) The hideous & predictable violence of our schools, our legal system, our society." The key words in that headline are: "predictable violence," and "our society."

¹ "[The Land Mourns](#),"

After all multiple-victim shootings there is the predictable round of debates as to the cause -- violent video games, violent movies, "violent" rap music, too many guns, too few guns, mental illness, not enough God in schools, the culture. Many of these can be dispensed with quickly. In a [study of ten countries](#) where violent video games are prevalent, none come close to the U.S. in violent shootings. Canada, which receives our violent television shows, is not plagued with such wanton acts of violence. Most English-speaking countries, and non-English speaking countries for that matter, show our violent movies and play our violent music and yet none experience such shooting violence. Mental illness and quality of treatment for mental illness is statistically equal in most developed nations, but the U.S. leads in mentally ill perpetrators of mass shootings. Countries that have very restrictive gun laws and fewer guns per capita, also have less violent crime. There is no school prayer in the United Kingdom, Canada, certainly not in Japan, nor in most developed countries, and yet those countries do not experience such gun violence. Mandating that God be put back in schools only proves the hypocrisy of a conservative segment of Christianity that supports, condones, and asks for Divine help in their war against [Muslims](#), [homosexuals](#), and [women](#). Religious fundamentalism perhaps has done more to [alienate](#) the masses from God than has Hollywood. Of all the aforementioned theories for our violent behaviors only two are left-- too much gun "stuff" and culture -- and those two are inextricably intertwined, thus leading to our unique propensity for violence.

Made in America

Immanuel Kant defined propensity as, "[T]he predisposition to crave delight which, when once experienced, arouses in the subject an inclination to it."² This is no different than an addiction, and the first step in beating an addiction, basic to all Twelve Step programs, is to confront the denial that the addiction exists. By pointing to some external source for our multitude of crying examples of violence we avoid the truth -- Americans are unique among advanced countries in their propensity for violence. It's in our cultural DNA; we take a perverse subconscious delight in it. Other countries may watch violent videos, movies, and television -- but such things originate in the American psyche. Producers (of both movies and guns) know what Americans want.

² [Kant and the Role of Pleasure in Moral Action.](#)

The gun has garnered a venerated place in the American collective unconscious. After all, our country was forged from the blue-grey steel of the gun barrel, used first to eliminate Native Americans, then against the British overlords, then against ourselves, then once again to eliminate more Native Americans. We delight in tales of how Colt and Winchester cleaned up the Wild West. Now the gun is needed to protect us from terrorists, black-helicopters, things that go bump in the night, a hooded someone walking in the neighborhood, and those who we *think* might want to take our guns away. With or without violent movies, videos, music, or God in school, we convince ourselves that there is, and always will be, a threat, real or perceived, for which we need the gun. Our homage of the gun is evident in our foreign policy as well; after all, a bomb is just a big bullet.

The message of the right to own a gun, which I support, has segued into a message from the right of ownership to the right of use anytime, anywhere we feel threatened. Gun sales spike after a mass shooting because either people believe their safety is threatened, or they believe their right to own a gun will soon be threatened. The perpetrators of mass violence, whether psychotic, delusional, victims of abuse or bullying, or just plain stupid, feel threatened and they take their responsive cue from the American standard for dealing with a threat -- shoot it! How is that different from an American foreign policy that currently has us [engaged in 134 wars](#)? A threat to the nation--bomb it! The concept of the right to stand "my ground" (foreign and domestic) is so hardwired into the American psyche that anything is justified to protect it. If the threat does not exist we make it up, as in Iraq, or go looking for it, as did George Zimmerman. Just like the pathological personality disordered person will cut upon him or herself to relieve tension, too many Americans relieve "threat tension" by being violent. Even the death penalty, a culturally sanctioned form of violence at which the US excels, is a way of dealing with the tension

The United States: Brutal Facts

- [# 1 supplier of weapons to the world](#)
- [#94 out 162 nations for peacefulness](#)
- [# 1 for incarcerations](#)
- [# 1 in executions among advanced nations; #5 overall](#)
- [#1 in mass shootings](#)
- [#1 among developed countries in gun related deaths.](#)
- [#1 in dollars spent on defense](#) but is
- [#1 Christian nation](#)

brought on by the thought of a criminal not getting what he deserves or, worse, coming back into society.

My Quaker Faith

In its aftermath, I tried to square what happened in Newtown with my Quaker beliefs. I began with "there is that of God in every person". I reminded myself that there was that of God in the shooter Adam Lanza, as well as in the children he killed; as well as in the Muslim children killed by American bombs and drone strikes but for whom few in this country grieve. They were all victims of the American propensity for violence. As regards our Peace Testimony, I remembered that it is not simply a "No War" poster but a call to live in such a manner that makes war unnecessary. Perhaps we should now include it to mean violence is unnecessary, or, at least, the last resort *in the extreme* for dealing with threats, both foreign and domestic. René Girard reminds us that "To do violence to a violent person is to be contaminated by his violence."³ In how much contamination are we willing to languish?

We can take small steps, for example, eliminating assault weapons and multi-round clips, not as an assault on the Second Amendment but in an effort to begin rehabilitating our propensity for violence. And while we're at it, perhaps we can eliminate the death penalty as well; maybe even cut back on a war or two, or a drone strike here and there. Given the violence hardwired into our national mindset these are small steps indeed, but they are necessary steps if for no other reason than to send a message to ourselves that we have the ability to say "No" at some point along the violence continuum. If we don't take that first step then you can be sure that bloodshed will follow bloodshed and there will be more mourning throughout the land. And we will continue to languish in our contaminated grief until we recognize the hypocrisy of our mourning inside our addiction to violence.

Step one--admit our addiction: "*Hello, my name is the Untied States, and I am violent.*"

Other resources: [Mass Shooting Tracker](#); [Everytown](#)

³ *Violence and the sacred*. 1979. Richmond, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.