

- Mass shooting in El Paso: Gun Culture Has Always Been About White Supremacy

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The mass shooting in El Paso reveals the darker undercurrents of the gun control debate.

The death of Justice John Paul Stevens earlier this summer occasioned a look back at what he considered his cruelest defeat in his 35 years on the Supreme Court [1]: the 2008 decision *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which affirmed, for the first time in the Court's history, an individual's right to bear arms. More than that: It presumed, as Stevens noted in his rueful dissent, that the Framers of the Constitution wanted to limit, for all time, the ability of elected officials to regulate the civilian use of deadly weapons—weapons with a capacity to maim and murder that would be utterly unrecognizable to the Framers. The latest testaments to their devastating power come from El Paso, Texas, where a gunman killed 20 people at a Walmart in what appears to be a racially inspired rampage, and Dayton, Ohio, where a gunman clad in body armor killed nine and wounded dozens with a high-capacity rifle.

The post-*Heller* landscape is littered with bullet-ridden bodies. Since the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012, there have been more than 2,000 mass shootings in America [2], while overall gun violence has risen. It is plainly preposterous to hold that the Framers, in all their wisdom, wanted to deprive the government of a means to put an end to this widespread destruction. Perhaps this obscene phenomenon, which afflicts victims of every age, color, and geographic location, is better understood as *self-destruction*: The body politic bleeds again and again, while our faith in democracy's mettle is weakened, if not eliminated altogether. It is absurd to reach back to seventeenth-century English common law, as Justice Antonin Scalia did in his triumphant majority opinion, to justify the unraveling of the republic that is happening right now, right before our eyes. It is absurd, too, looking back on *Heller*, to think that this sort of conservative jurisprudence was ever taken seriously, instead of being considered the decades-long culmination of efforts by the NRA [3] and other right-wing institutions to turn the judiciary into an anti-democratic bulwark serving the interests of the wealthy and the powerful.

Donald Trump's presidency, as always, has clarified the true motivations of conservative America, which no longer pretends to care about the niceties of the Framers' views on the English Bill of Rights. The reason there are millions of guns in this country, the reason that thousands of people are sacrificed on the altar of guns every year, is an aggrieved minority of undereducated rural whites who have transformed the gun into this country's most powerful tribal totem and who have been delighted to find their every ugly feeling expressed by the president. The overlap between racist politics and gun culture has come into Technicolor focus with the mass shooting in El Paso, which appears to have been inspired by the alleged gunman's fear and loathing of a "Hispanic invasion of Texas," according to an online manifesto that is believed to be his and that takes clear cues from Trump's rhetoric. The emerging wisdom is that newly galvanized white supremacists have collided with our nihilistic gun culture to produce a spate of racist slaughters, from Charleston to Poway to El Paso. As David Atkins wrote in *Washington Monthly* [4], "We have a gun problem. We have a white supremacy problem. They are increasingly intertwined." In fact, they are, and have always been, one and the same thing.

Mass shootings, of course, have been conducted by all sorts of people—incels, jihadis, the mentally ill. But it is not the incels and jihadis and mentally ill who are standing, arms locked, to stop Congress and statehouses from passing gun control reform; who have a formidable, lavishly funded political operation in the form of the NRA, which punishes lawmakers who dare to step out of line; who have a death grip on the damned soul of the Republican Party. No, gun culture thrives because of conservative whites who have

invested the greater part of their political and cultural identity in the right to wield deadly weapons. It is conservative whites whom Texas Governor Greg Abbott was attempting to tickle when he playfully tweeted a few years ago that he was “embarrassed” that his state was behind California when it came to new gun purchases [5], the group’s spokeswoman at the time, recounted all the crimes that an unnamed “they” had committed against “our” way of life: comparing Trump to Hitler, getting Hollywood elites to push “their” narrative, recruiting “their” ex-president to spearhead the hashtag-resistance. “The only way we stop this, the only way we save *our* country and *our* freedom,” she said, “is to fight this violence of lies with the clenched fist of truth.” The other-ization, the paranoia, the not-so-subtle call to arms—all hallmarks of white supremacist propaganda.

The NRA trafficked in racist tropes well before the Trump era, reaching a kind of delirious peak during the presidency of Barack Obama (“their” ex-president). One ad from 2015 features NRA head Wayne LaPierre excoriating Obama for failing to crack down on crime in his hometown of Chicago [6], where “gangbangers” and “thugs” were causing “third-world carnage” with their violent acts—the implication being that the black president was happy to take guns away from white hicks every time a mass shooting occurred, but was silent on the real gun problem being perpetuated by black criminals. “He waits for a crime that fits his agenda,” LaPierre said, “and blames the NRA.” He added, “The good, honest Americans living out in farm towns, in Nebraska or Oklahoma, or working two jobs in inner-city Chicago or Baltimore ... they see through it all.” (The people in the inner city working only one job, well, they’re presumably almost as bad as those gangbanging layabouts.)

To be sure, mass shootings are responsible for only a small fraction of the 33,000 yearly gun deaths in this country [7]. A third of all gun deaths can be attributed to homicides; half of those victims are young men, and two-thirds of that cohort are African American. But, again, it is not African American activists who are protesting gun control by stalking legislative grounds armed to the teeth and bearing *noli me tangere* banners. It is white conservatives who are doing this, in a bid to shore up their waning dominance.

The shooters in El Paso and Poway *do* seem to represent a new, horrific trend, their abominable acts forming an unambiguous link with the “they will not replace us” chants of Charlottesville and a president who regularly incites racial hatred and violence. But these shootings would not have been possible without a more ancient force, one that predates even the very founding of this country. Donald Trump’s great gift to us is the stripping away of the pretense and cant that has long surrounded the gun control debate specifically and the culture war more broadly. Constitutional originalism, appeals to gun culture’s long and glorious revolutionary tradition, the “rugged individualism” of the conservative ethos that even Obama and other liberals have paid homage to—all are part of a superstructure that has been rigged atop a base urge to perpetuate the power of one race at the expense of others. To attempt to solve our gun problem, then, as well as numerous other problems, from the health care problem to the problem with inequality, is to butt up against this other, bigger, older problem of white supremacy, which, if Trump’s presidency teaches us anything, remains the essential fact of American life.

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P.S.

• The New Republic. August 5, 2019:
<https://newrepublic.com/article/154652/gun-culture-always-white-supremacy>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://newrepublic.com/article/154488/john-paul-stevens-obituary-dc-heller-dissent-antonin-scalia>

[2] <https://www.vox.com/a/mass-shootings-america-sandy-hook-gun-violence>

[3] <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/12/16418524/nra-second-amendment-guns-violence>

[4] <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2019/08/03/we-have-a-gun-problem-and-we-have-a-white-supremacist-terrorism-problem/>

[5] <https://twitter.com/kirbkirbz/status/1158018292365299713>}. It is conservative whites whom Texas Senator John Cornyn is placating when he says that “we simply don’t have all the answers” when it comes to solving entirely preventable problems like gun-inflicted mass death. It is conservative whites who have taken over one of the two major parties in this country and made it subservient to their retrograde whims.

Guns, for them, are not about hunting or self-defense or the frontier spirit or any of the other fig leaves that are brandished every time their true agenda starts to show. It is about asserting the primacy of a group identity, protecting it from threats both real (inexorable demographic change) and imagined (invasions of Hispanic rapists and murders). We know this because the NRA broadcasts these fears back to its own acolytes all the time. In 2017, some six months into Trump’s presidency, the NRA released a notorious ad in which a scowling Dana Loesch [[<https://billmoyers.com/story/new-low-nra/>

[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKE-4cqhego>

[7] <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/gun-deaths/>