

United States: Massacres, militarism and the culture of cruelty

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Phil Hearse writes we have to go deeper, if we really want to understand why the US is stuffed with guns, violence is accepted as just a part of mainstream culture and weapons are fetishised symbols of hyper-masculinity.

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In the light of the recent spate of mass shootings in the United States, the call for gun controls, and blaming the Republicans and their base in the National Rifle Association, for stopping serious anti-gun measures are obviously correct. Last Sunday's Republican-Democrat deal on background checks for under-21-year-olds is only a tiny step forward. But, we have to go deeper and examine the issue of why America is stuffed with weapons, why legal and illegal guns are so easy to come by, why violence is so routine in popular culture—and why guns have become fetishised symbols of hyper-masculinity, so much so that a notorious advertisement for an assault rifle proclaims 'Your manhood card re-issued'.

To get to the heart of the matter, it's necessary to see gun violence not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a product of key features of how American capitalism works and the popular culture it generates. The central features of gun violence include militarised policing, racist violence, the rise of extreme right-wing militias, gun violence against women, a military apparatus that has slaughtered millions since the end of WW2, and the glorification of gun violence in popular culture. And there is one crucial fact to be examined: of all the deaths caused by guns, 54% are suicides. What causes young people, mainly young men, to kill themselves?

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The warfare state and popular culture

By every single measure, the United States has the largest military in the world with the biggest global reach. More than three million service people are employed, creating an automatic base for

the glorification of the military, seen in movies like *Top Gun* (and its new sequel *Top Gun: Maverick*) and *An Officer and a Gentleman*. This romanticised version with handsome actors like Tom Cruise and Richard Gere goes hand in hand with blunter versions that are also glorified. For example, *American Sniper*, based on the autobiography of marine sniper Chris Kyle, glorifies a homicidal maniac who claimed 255 'kills', many doubtless civilians. In the film, Kyle returns home to find many people don't understand him, but it's him who is sane and the stay-at-home liberals who are deluded. In real life, Kyle was shot dead by one of his friends on a shooting range, after he left the Navy Seals.

Horrific US violence is also celebrated in the movie *Black Hawk Down*, in which Ridley Scott depicts the rescue of the crew of an American helicopter shot down in Somalia in 1993—in which hundreds of Somali civilians and paramilitaries were killed in an orgy of violence during the rescue attempt. More realistic still is the video released by Wikileaks of the 'Crazy Horse' massacre of civilians in Iraq, depicted in Banksy's famous New York public installation of the same name, using the voice-over of the video of the real events.

When the authors of *The New American Century* put out their much-heralded report in 1997, it was to be an *American* century and one based on updating and renewing US *military* dominance. Right on cue, four years later the 9/11 attacks provided the rationale for launching the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which between them by the time of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, had resulted in the deaths of several hundred thousand people.

The ideology of American militarism is based on the right to American leadership, which in turn is based on the ideas of American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is a 'bright shining light on a hill' —the most democratic, prosperous and creative place on the planet. During the period of the 'war on terror', American exceptionalism dovetailed with the notions of what Edward Said called Orientalism, the idea of the 'clash of civilisations' in which Western Christian (or in some versions Judeo-Christian) civilisation was superior and more rational than others, especially Muslim civilisation. Orientalism was embodied in the writings of Samuel P. Huntington [1] and his mentor Bernard Lewis [2].

The war on terror, now no longer the US foreign policy priority, became the ideology to replace the Cold War anti-Communism, defunct after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In turn, the war on terror is being replaced by preparations for putative wars against Russia and China. Indeed the New American Century had argued for preparations to enable fighting two major wars simultaneously (obviously against Russia and China). The dominant military ideologies now, SeaLand battle, and multi-Doman Dominance, are based on war with China.

The arms industry is massive. The military budget all told is one trillion (one thousand million) dollars. Huge amounts of it are pumped into armaments, both hi-tech like the most effective conventional military weapon on the planet, the F-35 stealth fighter but also comparatively low-tech rifles and artillery. The US arms industry is deeply involved with companies that provide the digitalised hardware that the military need—even companies like Facebook and Amazon provide key services to the military, in a process that William I Robinson calls 'militarised accumulation' [3]

The United States is the world's biggest exporter of weapons, and it uses its military dominance to build political-military alliances like NATO and AUKUS. Every opportunity is taken to glorify the US armed forces, which is why the Pentagon has a permanent office in Hollywood, and why the use of real military equipment and soldiers as movie extras [requires agreement from the Pentagon on the movie content](#). The glorification of gun violence seeps into popular culture at every level.

After the Second World War, as the United States reached outward to strengthen its own imperial

power, it carried out acts of genocidal violence abroad, only rivalled by the Nazi Holocaust. Probably two million people were killed in Vietnam during the American intervention from the early 1960s until 1975. The majority of these were non-combatants.

Militarised policing

In 2014 a community uprising in Ferguson Missouri, a suburb of St Louis, took place to protest the police murder of local man Michael Brown. Protestors and journalists alike were astonished by [the police response](#). Officers facing the protestors were all dressed in army-style uniforms and the weapons deployed included heavy machine guns and armoured cars. Evidently, the local police had benefitted from the cheap sale of leftover weapons from the Gulf War in 2003. Even small towns couldn't resist the temptation of their own armoured car, helicopter or the equipment needed to build their own SWAT squad- the Special Weapons and Tactics brigades originally justified for use against armed criminals. So widespread has military equipment become that anyone suspected of sometimes even minor felonies, such as possession of drugs for personal use or non-payment of rent or fines, will get a visit from SWAT. The SWAT squads effect 'no-knock searches' which means breaking into homes with machine guns at the ready. From 2010 to 2016 83 people were killed during no-knock searches, as well as 13 police officers.[4] No-knock searches are a case of self-fulfilling prophecy. All criminals or alleged felons are stereotyped as being violent, and their arrest leads to shoot-outs and death.

During the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 a range of armed services, such as prison guards or border guards, were used against demonstrators. The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in Seattle used CS gas and 'baton rounds' against demonstrators and effected hundreds of arrests, sometimes with great brutality. Fatal encounters with CBP at the Mexican border have been escalating, with just six 'illegals' killed by border guards in 2010, rising to 58 killed in 2021. There are no figures for how many of these so-called 'illegals' were unarmed. In the year to May 2022, 1009 people were shot dead by American police.

Violence is embedded in the history of American police forces. In the Southern states, they were often called the 'slave patrol', an open declaration of their function of keeping the slaves under control by violence. Early police forces were often used against organised labour in general, and strikes in particular [5].

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Mike Davis argues [6] that the American working class and the labour movement have been undermined and derailed by two things—violence from the state and bosses, and racism, which from the earliest days of American capitalism divided the working class—especially by hostility to the latest wave of immigrants, for example, Irish, Jewish and Germans.

Violence against protestors is routine. The Occupy! movement of 2010-11 received huge quantities of police violence, a precursor to the response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Within living memory of many of us, the Black Panther movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s was crushed by murderous police violence. The anti-war movement of the same period and student protest also was met with huge quantities of violence, symbolised by the police massacre at Kent State

University and the attack on demonstrators at the Democrat conference in 1968 [7]. But throughout the 1960s the civil rights movement, mainly inspired by non-violent tactics, was subject to egregious amounts of police violence in the Southern states. This was symbolised by the police killing of three members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Michael Schwerner, James Goodman and Andrew Chaney, by police in Mississippi.[8]

Rise of the militias

The far-right militia movement has been on the rise since the 1990s, but the election of Donald Trump in 2016 encouraged them tremendously. Armed groups with their assault rifles were prominent in the Charlottesville 'Unite the Right' rally in 2017. According to anti-fascist activists, the right-wing militias have killed 329 people since 1990 (as against 92 by Islamist terrorists). In Charlottesville anti-fascist demonstrator Heather Heyer was killed by fascist activist James Fields Jr. In 2020 a fascist militia member, Kyle Rittenhouse, shot dead two Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Rittenhouse became a poster boy for the far right, including Spiked! in Britain. A Wisconsin court found him not guilty of murder on the preposterous grounds of self-defence. No matter that he had travelled from Illinois to be present at a Black Lives Matter demonstration, staying out after curfew with the apparent approval of some of the police officers present. He had an AR-15 assault rifle and a pistol, in order to 'defend private property' according to the defence.

Although they came without firearms, the militias played a key role on January 6 2021 at the Capitol building. No one really knows the number of people in the armed militias, but it is certainly in the tens of thousands, and they have widespread approval inside the Republican party—especially after Trump told them to 'stand by' during his fight to overturn the Presidential election result. Support for the militias, and probably membership too, is widespread in the police as well as the Republicans.

Gun Violence and the Black Community

The main victims of gun violence are the minority communities, especially the Black community.

In the last two years, there have been mass shootings against the Black community (in Buffalo, New York state) and the Asian community in El Paso, Texas.

Since 2012 the number of Americans dying from gun violence has been around 40,000 a year. Of those, nearly 15,000 have been in the Black community. Despite being only around 13% of the population, deaths in the Black communities constitute around 58% of gun murders—about 15,000 a year. Only a very small proportion of these deaths are a result of police shootings. Much more frequent are shootings as a result of drug gang violence. And this in turn reflects turf wars in those sections of the Black neighbourhoods controlled by the drug gangs. Which reflects poverty on a gigantic scale. The pressure on young men in the Black neighbourhoods to get involved in drug crime is enormous, brilliantly portrayed in the Baltimore-based TV series *The Wire* (and in its London equivalent in the Netflix series 'Top Boy').

Gun violence against Women

While gun violence is the near-exclusive preserve of men, this is not true of its victims. Between 2015 and 2019 more than 11,000 women were shot to death. Each month on average 57 women are shot dead by a partner—in other words, the availability of guns and the ideology of hyper-masculinity (see below), results in numerous gun-related deaths of women. In addition, each month

200 women on average are wounded in non-fatal shootings; more than a million women alive today have been threatened with gun violence. Women are generally not directly involved in drug gangs or militias. But when there are more guns than people in a particular country, and when armed violence is culturally glorified, gun violence against women inevitably follows.

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It's also no surprise that the LGBTQ+ community has been the victim of mass shootings, most notoriously the 2016 attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida which left 49 dead.

The Neoliberal Personality and Hyper-Masculinity

If millions of young and middle-aged Americans use assault guns to 'renew their man card', there is something seriously wrong, even pathological, in the dominant culture. A few hours spent using video games like Full Spectrum Dominance reveals a glorification of militarised and para-militarised violence, as well as of super-violent individuals. The ability to dish out violence to business or other rivals is celebrated in video games and movie after movie. Militarised policing, the glorification of the military in popular culture and the widespread availability of guns is a lethal mix which generates wave after wave of shooters.

Republicans say there's a mental health crisis, and it's this and not guns causing mass shootings. But the counterposition of guns to the mental health crisis is foolish, indeed the two things are closely related. Universities in America and the UK report a mental health crisis, especially (but not only) that of young men. Decades of neoliberalism, fiercely competitive capitalism in which individualism and individual ability and struggle, rather than social solidarity is lauded. It has created what Henry G. Giroux calls a 'culture of cruelty'.^[9] This culture of cruelty creates a glorification of individual success and scorn for 'failure', from poverty to lack of socially constructed personal attractiveness, as a result of individual failings, of personal uselessness, that weighs heavily on young men. These weigh just as heavily, probably more so, on young women. The huge rates of suicides among young people are symptoms of this range of neoliberal tropes, in which individual 'success' is all, social solidarity is nothing or even worse something for 'suckers. Only the naive and the incapable care for others.

Successful neoliberal personalities are generally sociopathic, a form of personality disorder in which empathy, and caring for others, is impossible. Others are tools for success, not real human beings with strengths and weaknesses, and prone to failing human attributes like loneliness and a feeling of emptiness. The film *Up in the Air*, in which George Clooney plays a travelling corporate downsizer, shows how a real human being struggles with a job in which he mainly has to fire people. In the end, their pleas get to him. One woman says she's going to go out of the office, go to a bridge near her house, and jump off it. Which she does.

Neoliberal personality disorders produce a breed of top executives—chief officers of companies, hospitals and colleges as well as senior police and military officers—who literally are sociopaths. If they didn't instrumentalise human beings they wouldn't be able to do their jobs.

Millions of working-class and young people are being treated as what Hilary Clinton called 'deplorables', people who are incapable of being 'successful' in the warped ideology of neoliberalism, creating massive anger—shown in the mass support for Donald Trump. That anger comes out in the final messages of many shooters. An astonishing fact is that more than 50% of gun deaths in the United States are suicides. A tragic result of neoliberal capitalism and the widespread availability of guns.

Hypermasculinity is a form of extreme individualism, the rugged tough-guy alpha male who is highly attractive, wealthy and who can 'deal with' all difficulties in life, if necessary, through violence. And the hypermasculine persona can be created, at least in part, through owning and displaying deadly weapons.

Imperial Genocide

After the Second World War, as the United States reached outward to create its own imperial power, it carried out acts of genocidal violence abroad, only rivalled in the post-war world by the Nazi Holocaust and the deranged genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia. Probably two million people were killed in Vietnam during the American intervention from the early 1960s until 1975. The majority of these were non-combatants. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. American bombing killed more than 10% of the population of North Korea during the Korean war [10]—then notorious Air Force General Curtis Lemay said he thought it was [around 25%](#).

Numerous other examples of American violence against international enemies could be given. What is striking is the way that civilians have been deliberately targeted, or have been the victims of American indifference towards 'collateral damage', perhaps most strikingly shown by the way it [destroyed Manila in 1944-5](#) during its campaign to defeat the Japanese occupiers of the Philippines. This indifference to civilian deaths is paralleled today by Russian tactics in Syria and Ukraine. That America is the world leader in killing international opponents and civilians, in no way justifies Russia's own toll of civilian deaths or their murderous tactics in Ukraine.

Through its economic strength the United States, in the first half of the 20th century, was able to establish itself as the world's most militarily powerful state, and through that military strength take the lead of the West in military alliances, notably NATO.

If you have a state that is determined to preserve and enrich itself through military strength and the use of violence; if you add to that the easy availability of military-grade weapons; put into that mix a gigantic social and mental health crisis—then what you create is gun massacres.

One last startling fact: thousands of illegal guns in the United States originate in the military. According to Associated Press:

"Government records covering the Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force show pistols, machine guns, shotguns and automatic assault rifles have vanished from armouries, supply warehouses, Navy warships, firing ranges and other places where they were used, stored or transported. These weapons of war disappeared because of unlocked doors, sleeping troops, a surveillance system that didn't record, break-ins and other security lapses that, until now, have not been publicly reported. While AP's focus was firearms, military explosives also were lost or stolen, including armour-piercing grenades that ended up in an Atlanta backyard. Weapon[ph1] theft or loss spanned the military's global footprint, touching installations from coast to coast, as well as overseas.

In Afghanistan, someone cut the padlock on an Army container and stole 65 Beretta M9s — the same type of gun recovered in Albany. The theft went undetected for at least two weeks, when empty pistol boxes were discovered in the compound. The weapons were not recovered.”

Everywhere the military went, guns and military-grade weapons were stolen.

Phil Hearse

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P.S.

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- Phil Hearse is a member of Anti*Capitalist Resistance and joint author of both Creeping Fascism and System Crash.