

Chapter Four

THE GREAT AMERICAN TEAR

America and the Gun

The stars

In your flag,

America,

Are like bullet holes.

—Yevgeny Yevtushenko

ON 6 SEPTEMBER 1949, HOWARD UNRUH WALKED OUT of the three-bedroom apartment he shared with his mother and began walking down a busy commercial street in Camden, New Jersey. A decorated marksman, Unruh had returned from the war with a very particular set of skills that simply didn't translate into civilian life. He felt alienated and underappreciated. He kept records in his diary of those who had offended him, fantasizing about "retaliation," which would, he said, come when the time was right.¹

That time came on the morning of 6 September. Unruh rose, dressed himself smartly in a summer suit complete with polka-dot bow tie, and had his breakfast with his mother. After breakfast, he descended to the basement, where he had a makeshift shooting range and a cache of rifles, handguns, and ammunition. When he emerged from the apartment, he was holding a loaded Luger P09 in his hand. In his pockets were a second loaded clip, 16 loose cartridges, a tear-gas canister, and a six-inch knife. It was just after 9 a.m., and within a few short hours, newspaper hawkers all over the country would be shouting his name on street corners. A “quiet, well-dressed young man” had, said the *Leominster Daily Enterprise*, gone “on a maniacal shooting rampage,” killing a dozen and injuring five in only 12 minutes.² It was Unruh’s *Walk of Death*—America’s first modern mass shooting.³

The first shot Unruh fired was at a passing bread delivery truck, narrowly missing the driver. His next shots came as he entered the shoe-repair shop, where he shot the cobbler twice, killing him. He walked from there to the barbershop. A six-year old boy sat in the chair having his hair cut. Unruh entered and, calling out the barber by name, shot him in the stomach. The barber tried to shield the boy from Unruh’s fire, but the next shot caught the child in the chest. The barber collapsed on the floor before Unruh crossed the room and shot him point blank in the head. The boy’s mother, ignored by Unruh, picked up her boy and clutching him to her chest, ran shrieking out of the barbershop—the boy would die before reaching the hospital.

He moved from the barbershop toward his primary target, the drug store and its proprietors, the Cohens, shooting randomly through the locked doors of the tavern on the way. At the entrance to the drug store, he shot and killed a man who, according to Unruh, didn’t get out of his way fast enough. Inside were the Unruhs’ neighbors, the Cohens. The couple had been a thorn in Unruh’s side since he had returned from the war. They argued frequently—most often about Howard’s use of the Cohens’ gate, which he would use to cut through their yard. Unruh had installed a gate of his own and, on the morning of 5 September (the morning before his *Walk of Death*), he rose to find his new gate destroyed. He was convinced that this was the work of the Cohens—the proverbial last straw.

The Cohens, who had heard the shooting, were hiding in the adjoining apartment. Unruh first found Rose Cohen in the closet.

He shot her multiple times through the closet door before opening the door and shooting her in the face. He then found her husband, Maurice Cohen, on the roof. Unruh shot him in the back, and the chemist's lifeless body fell into the street. Finally, he found Mrs. Cohen's 63-year-old mother, who was on the phone with the police. He shot her multiple times before he left the house, leaving only one survivor: the Cohens' 12-year-old son, whom Rose Cohen had pushed into a closet just moments before Unruh had discovered her hiding in a closet of her own.

On the street in front of the drug store, Unruh began to fire randomly at motorists. He leaned into the open window of a car that had slowed down and shot the driver, killing him. Re-emerging from the window, he fired at a car that had stopped at a red light, killing a woman and her mother and fatally injuring her nine-year-old son (he would die 18 hours later on the operating table, becoming Unruh's thirteenth victim). Unruh looked up to see a curtain moving in a window across the street, and he fired at what he thought might be somebody about to return fire. His shots killed an infant playing in the curtains.

Unruh entered the tailor's shop, where he found the proprietor's wife. Through the open door, witnesses could hear the tailor's wife pleading with Unruh to spare her. Without a word, he shot her at close range, killing her instantly. From there, he walked toward his home, stopping briefly at the home of a neighbor, where he fired his last two shots at a couple as he burst into their home, injuring them both, but not killing either of them. He then barricaded himself in his mother's apartment. Police surrounded the building and, after a volley of tear gas, brought him out in cuffs. His Walk of Death was over. As the police drove him back to the station, Unruh sat in cuffs and, calmly, confessed to everything. He would have killed 1,000, he said, if he had had enough bullets.

When Unruh was evaluated by psychologists, he displayed most of the hallmarks we've learned to associate with mass shooters. He was an alienated white male, a ticking time bomb of impotence and rage. World War II had given Unruh an opportunity to practice killing humans, and he took an inordinate amount of pleasure in his wartime killing work. He may have concealed this from his comrades, but he kept a diary, each page filled with records of his kills on the

battlefield. He marked the day, hour, and place of each German he killed, describing the corpses in grisly, meticulous detail.

When he returned from the European theater, he kept up this habit of writing in his diary. He believed that his neighbors talked about him behind his back (he may have been right, for he undoubtedly cut a strange figure in the neighborhood, and the open secret of his homosexuality marked him as a deviant at a time when homosexuality was still illegal). He made cryptic notations in his diary, writing “Ret. W.T.S.” (Retaliate When Time Suitable) and “D.N.D.R.” (Do Not Delay Retaliation) next to his neighbors’ names.

* * *

Unknowingly, when Unruh exited his apartment, his Luger hanging slackly at his side, he was introducing a new kind of toxin into America’s bloodstream. We were a gun-obsessed nation long before Unruh’s Walk of Death, but we hadn’t yet crossed that threshold—hadn’t yet had our eyes opened to the kind of carnage one determined man could produce if armed with twentieth-century firepower and a pocketful of ammunition. Unruh exploded our notions of what was possible. He lifted the bar for the killers who came after him. He lived (confined in a mental institution) until 2009—long enough to see the kind of killing spree he inaugurated become woefully commonplace, long enough to see mass shooters like himself become vivid and recurring features of modern American life, long enough even to see the Columbine killers push America into its new and grisly age of the rampage killer.

In all these long years bridging Unruh’s Walk of Death and today, we *could* have done something to address the true roots of the problem: the combination of our national obsession with the gun as a symbol of unlimited personal freedom and the widespread availability of guns. We could have adopted (at any point, really) sensible gun control,⁴ but we have not done so. As a nation, we have sat on our hands because we are enthralled with the gun and with all that it evokes (freedom, masculine power, and personal protection). Because we accept these connections reflexively, we have allowed bad-faith arguments to turn our heads, allowing the NRA and its talking heads to turn each new tragedy into yet another opportunity for gun manufacturers to push more and deadlier weapons into American consumers’ hands. The

personal firearm is, we have decided, quintessentially American, and any attempt to regulate the manufacture or the purchase of firearms is therefore un-American to its core. This is the bad-faith argument we have allowed to frame the gun debate, and, quite literally, it's killing us.



*A student protesting during National Walkout Day at the Capitol, Washington, DC,
14 March 2018.*

The problem, or at least our difficulty in addressing it, is nearly as old as this country. It began when the smoke was still clearing from the Revolutionary War, in the final decade of the eighteenth century. James Madison offered a series of corrective proposals that would address what anti-federalists saw as deficiencies in the Constitution. There were 12 of these proposals when Madison drafted them, but only 10 of them were added to the constitution—10 amendments, including the second:

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

For nearly a century and a half, it was quite literally the wild, wild west out there, with no federal regulations⁵ concerning the sale or ownership of firearms. It wasn't until automatic weapons began

appearing with increasing frequency on America's streets that the call for national gun-control legislation was answered. The *National Firearms Act (NFA)* of 1934 and the *Federal Firearms Act (FFA)* of 1938 were Roosevelt's responses to the increasing number of automatic weapons being used in the commission of crimes. The St. Valentine's Day Massacre (the Capone-orchestrated gangland slaying that resulted in seven deaths), Bonnie and Clyde's spree of mayhem, and Dillinger's string of bank robberies (10 of them in 1933) demanded nothing less than a national response. The *NFA* created a \$200 tax⁶ on certain kinds of guns that were popular among the criminal classes (machine guns and short-barreled rifles and shotguns), and the *FFA* forced those who sold guns to keep detailed records of these sales. Gun owners also had to register their firearms with the Secretary of the Treasury.

Of course, there were challenges to these laws, but the Supreme Court chose to interpret the Second Amendment narrowly, rebuffing plaintiffs who wanted to use the Constitution as a shield. In the 1939 case *United States v. Miller*,⁷ for instance, the court could find no evidence that a sawed-off shotgun "had some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia"; they ruled that the Second Amendment did *not* guarantee "the right to keep and bear such an instrument."⁸ The justices saw no reason to question the continued relevance of the Second Amendment, but they did show a willingness to place some limits on its interpretation.

It wasn't until the 1960s were drawing to their close that the gun-control debate widened to include questions about not just what kind of guns Americans could own but also what kind of Americans should be allowed access to firearms at all. Americans were beginning to question the belief—perhaps appropriate when the country was still young, but growing less so as the wild frontier disappeared and the federal government became less provisional—that the gun and the American male needed each other to be truly complete. The gun had become woven into America's mythology, and it took a trio of high-profile assassinations (JFK, MLK, and RFK) and another mass shooting (this one from a clock tower in Austin, Texas) for us to step back and wonder out loud whether it was time to bring to a close America's long-toothed age of the gun.

Even then, journalists with both feet in the mainstream were criticizing the United States for its fetishization of firearms. *Time*, only two weeks after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, published a cover story on guns in America, enlisting Roy Lichtenstein for the cover. Lichtenstein's image is so striking because the viewer stares down the barrel of the gun. The man who holds the gun is not pictured. The artist had to place the wrist at an almost impossible angle to remove the shooter from the frame, but that's exactly what he's done, and the intention is clear. *Time* had featured both Lee Harvey Oswald and his widow on its cover in the aftermath of the JFK shooting, reflecting America's obsession at the time with the assassin. Five years later, following two more high-profile assassinations, the editors of *Time* wanted to change the focus, shifting America's attention from the shooter to his weapon. What is clear from the image on the cover is that what will be under discussion here is the tool—the instrument of death, not the grim musician who plays it.⁹

After a brief preamble, the story begins with these words:

All too widely, the country is regarded as a blood-drenched, continent-wide shooting range where toddlers blast off with real rifles, housewives pack pearl-handled revolvers, and political assassins stalk their victims at will.

The image, of course, is wildly overblown, but America's own mythmakers are largely to blame. In U.S. folklore, nothing has been more romanticized than guns and the larger-than-life men who wielded them. From the nation's beginnings, in fact and fiction, the gun has been provider and protector.¹⁰

Americans were at least starting to question whether guns were indeed the protective force their manufacturers claimed them to be. Following the first Kennedy assassination, the public had called on the government to ban mail-order sales of firearms (Lee Harvey Oswald had purchased the gun that killed Kennedy by responding to an ad in *American Rifleman*), but the federal government had dragged its feet, with bills stalling in the House. With the Robert Kennedy assassination, though, the public outcry became more intense and more difficult for lawmakers to ignore. Within two weeks, the House

passed the *Gun Control Act (GCA)*. Three months later, on 22 October, President Lyndon Johnson signed the act into law. The *GCA* banned mail-order firearm purchases, demanded that gun merchants keep records of gun sales, and banned felons, “mental incompetents,” and minors from purchasing guns. It also limited the kind of guns that could be imported into the United States, allowing only for the import of guns that had a clear “sporting purpose.”

Even the NRA’s president at the time said that these new restrictions were reasonable. The NRA successfully lobbied against universal registration and mandatory licensing, calling these measures “unduly restrictive,” but they were on board with the rest.¹¹ The organization, which started in 1871 as a marksmanship club, had always stood firmly on the side of gun owners, but it had not been against *all* forms of gun-control legislation. It had actually helped shape some of America’s earliest attempts at gun control, and in the 1960s the NRA backed gun-control measures—first, California introduced as a bill to outlaw open carry (then practiced defiantly by members of the nascent Black Panthers), and then, a year later, national gun-control legislation restricting gun ownership and inter-state commerce. Pictures of armed black men occupying California’s State Capitol and stories of the Black Panthers’ “police patrols,” which saw armed black men ensuring that young black men knew their rights and that police respected these rights, were enough to convince NRA leadership that *some* forms of gun control were necessary.

Less than a decade later, though, the NRA had changed tack. The organization’s initial support for gun control had been seen as a way to keep guns out of the hands of undesirables (i.e., black males). In the 1970s, though, a growing faction of NRA hardliners framed the issue differently, presenting gun control (*any* gun control) as something of a slippery slope. If the federal government could keep guns out of black hands, what would prevent them from similarly restricting white “law-abiding” gun owners?

This led to a changing of the guard in the NRA—a dramatic rightward shift that moved an already conservative-leaning organization into the hyper-partisan territory it has occupied ever since. Led by Harlon Carter, the New Right, a fusing of socially conservative factions of the Republican Party with the religious right, staged something of a putsch at the NRA’s annual meeting in Cincinnati,

pushing out centrists in favor of rabid ideologues like Carter who promised to oppose all forms of gun control. Carter became the new face of the NRA, and his extreme positions became the new NRA dogma: guns in dangerous hands, he said, are “the price we pay for freedom.”

Over the next eight years under Carter’s leadership, the NRA would endorse its first political candidate (Ronald Reagan) and would triple in size, growing from one million members in 1977 to more than three million in 1985.¹² The NRA became the natural home of dog-whistle politics and its now-trademark single-issue inflexibility. It may have, at one time, been an organization with which compromise was possible, but that time ended quite suddenly when Harlon Carter and his New Right acolytes seized control of the organization.

Americans began digging in, with either side of the gun-control debate settling into trenches in decidedly partisan political territory. The NRA had, through its open alliance with the Republican Party, seized control of the gun-control debate and, with powerful messaging, had managed to convince a wide swath of Americans that guns were necessary to the exercise of personal freedom.

As the NRA was seizing complete control of the gun debate and foreclosing any possibility of a political response, the toxin that Unruh had introduced into America’s bloodstream was seething beneath the surface, manifesting in visible symptoms every few years. In the 1980s, mass shootings began to appear more frequently, but crime was on the rise nearly everywhere, so we treated the problem as a subset of the larger problem of crime in America. But the crime wave crested in the early 1990s. Violent crime began to fall. Mass shootings, though, continued unabated and, as the decade drew to a close, we turned a corner. With Columbine, we entered a new age of American gun violence: the age of the rampage shooter.

Columbine seemed to be the moment when the toxin entered a new phase. The blood-borne illness went airborne, spreading more quickly than even the most pessimistic outlooks could have foreseen. There had, according to a *New York Times* piece immediately following Columbine, been 100 rampage killers between Unruh and Columbine, with the trend line curving slightly in the latter decades.¹³ In the years following Columbine, though, the number of rampage killers began to climb. The toxin was spreading.

We understood that we were ill, but we couldn't (and still can't) agree on the roots of the issue or the course of treatment that should follow. In the media, everything received the blame—those on the right blamed violent video games, movies, and heavy-metal music (Marilyn Manson being a particular target for conservative finger-pointing); those on the left suggested that the boys had been targeted by bullies and this had left them with deep emotional scars that led them to do what they did. A narrative emerged of the bullied and ostracized teen taking revenge on those who made his daily high-school existence a torment—whether this reflected the actual facts (which it didn't) was unimportant. It was a way for Americans to make sense of the tragedies without any deep soul searching or close scrutiny of the deeper underlying causes.

The Columbine shooters didn't want to get even with bullies or to emulate their video-game avatars. They, like Unruh, wanted to amass a body count, with Dylan Klebold writing before the shooting began that he wanted to inflict "the most deaths in U.S. history." Armed with high-powered weapons of war, they got the infamy they were after, becoming, for a time, the deadliest high-school shooters in US history (they have since been supplanted by the Parkland shooter).

They set a grisly precedent. In the decade and a half following Columbine, school shootings and other rampage killings began appearing more regularly. A recent study commissioned by the FBI found that there were 160 active-shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013 (a little less than one per month), resulting in 486 deaths and 557 injuries (not including the shooter or shooters). If we zoom in a little closer, the trend line becomes more troubling. Between 2000 and 2006, there was an average of 6.4 incidents annually; between 2007 and 2013, this number nearly tripled, rising to 16.4 incidents annually.¹⁴ In the years following the study, mass killings have continued to rise. There were 20 active shooters in 2014, 2015, and 2016, 30 of them in 2017, and 27 in 2018.

And, at the time of writing, 2019 looks as though it will be no different. Last night was 3 August. As I fell asleep, in an Illinois hotel room, talking heads on CNN were discussing a mass shooting at a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas. After publishing his manifesto online, a young white supremacist had taken 20 lives. When I woke up the next morning, 4 August, it was to news of a shooting in Dayton,

Ohio—only short miles from my home. I stepped outside my hotel room to try to clear my head, and my phone rang to inform me that one of the families I am close with had lost a child in the shooting. Not long after, I sat on the phone with the shocked and grieving parents and, together, we bowed our heads in prayer. I prayed fervently and earnestly, asking God to guide and help us in these dark times. I wonder if it will take some form of supernatural intercession for anything to change. I know that, this time next week, the nationwide outrage will have subsided and the now-age-old talking points will have won out once again. The needle will seem to move then find its center once again. We'll be no wiser and no more determined than before. We'll be as unwilling as ever to accept that our gun culture is the one feature that clearly distinguishes this country from all others. There are unacceptably high levels of gun violence in South and Central America and in Africa, but they don't have the same kind of problem we do with rampage shooters. A recent study that looked at 292 mass shootings globally found that 90 of them took place in America; though we have only 5 per cent of the world's population, we account for 31 per cent of its mass shootings.¹⁵ What is it about America that makes us so prone to attacks of this nature, and why have they risen so sharply over the last two decades?

The obvious answer is availability—particularly the availability of high-powered urban-assault weapons that seem tailor-made for the kinds of mass shootings we've seen become more frequent over the past two decades. In 2001, in the midst of the assault-weapons ban, the firearms industry produced around 60,500 AR-15s (mostly in a watered-down version that complied with tight restrictions); 10 years later, untethered by legislation, they made 1.27 million of them.¹⁶ The guns no longer merely looked like military issue; they now performed in nearly identical ways.

The NRA managed to convince gun owners that Obama would soon be coming for their guns, so collectors got while the getting was good, snatching them up in record numbers. They also leaned into messaging that explicitly connected assault rifles with freedom and patriotism, calling them "America's Rifle." The gun became a must-have item for all those who took this messaging to heart. The ultimate in-home defense, the AR-15 is the gun with the most stopping power, the gun that makes the loudest statement about your love of country,

your willingness to defend your castle, your virility. What's more, in our hyper-partisan age, owning an AR-15 has become a political statement—a middle finger raised to liberals and their increasingly urgent calls for gun control. There are millions of these guns in America (estimates of how many assault rifles in America range from 8 to 15 million, and, with one in five guns sold in America being an assault rifle, that number is rising with each passing day).

The AR-15 is, undoubtedly, one of the loudest statements (political and otherwise) available to the American male (and particularly to the alienated white male, who, in his isolation and his rage, is, with alarming frequency, choosing to make that statement with bloody consequences). Those men who, filled with rage, take an AR-15 in their hands have at their disposal a gun like no other, a purpose-built killing machine of the highest order. An unmodified AR-15 can fire at about the same rate as a semi-automatic pistol, but the amount of force it puts into each bullet makes all the difference. Comparing a handgun to an AR-15 is like comparing an ice pick to a harpoon. “A handgun [wound],” says Dr. Peter Rhee, a trauma surgeon and retired Navy captain with more than 24 years of service, “is simply a stabbing with a bullet. It goes in like a nail”; because of its high-velocity firing power and the shape of the bullet, Rhee says, shooting somebody with an AR-15 is like shooting somebody “with a Coke can.”¹⁷ It quite literally blows a hole through the middle of whoever is unlucky enough to be in front of one.

This was the gun used by the shooters in yesterday's shooting in El Paso, and it was the one used in this morning's shooting three miles from where I write. It was the gun used by the shooters in Sandy Hook, Aurora, San Bernardino, Parkland, Newtown, Sutherland Springs, Orlando, and, of course, Las Vegas, where the shooter used a bump stock to turn his AR-15 into a de facto automatic rifle, which allowed him to take more than 50 lives and injure 10 times that many. Thanks to the yet-unclosed gun-show loophole, which allows private gun sales to take place without the purchaser having to show ID or pass a background check, it is virtually impossible to keep these guns out of the hands of motivated buyers.

Without question, the ubiquity of guns (and particularly guns like the AR-15 that have, at best, a questionable place in civil society) contributes significantly to America's unique problem with rampage

killers. Legislation might address this issue, but, with each passing day, the size of the problem legislators are facing grows. Long ago, we crossed that tipping point when the problem of mass killings went from epidemic to endemic—the point of no return when an isolated illness ceases to be containable or even treatable without radical and universal treatment. Unless we change something soon, rampage killings will become a permanent feature in the American landscape, a scar carved across our land every bit as deep and lasting as the Grand Canyon.

We've sat by and watched as the NRA has tied together firearms and patriotism with a Gordian knot. Severing the knot with one swing of the pen may pull this country into open and perhaps bloody conflict with its most passionate gun owners. We let what might have been our moment to act decisively pass us by. We did *nothing* when 20 children between the ages of six and seven were gunned down by a young man with an assault rifle. If that wasn't enough to spur us to action, what kind of horror do we have to witness before we act? When does Harlon Carter's *price of freedom* become more than we are collectively willing to pay? If not Sandy Hook, if not Las Vegas, when?

We are outraged each time we hear the news of a mass shooting. We fume and fulminate, calling the shooters every name in the book. They are, we say, heartless monsters, deranged psychopaths, cold-blooded murderers, but this notoriety (a perverted form of celebrity status) is more alluring than we might realize. In the eight years after Columbine, school shooters modeled themselves on the killers, with two-thirds of school shooters citing Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as inspiration for their crimes; researchers found that at least 17 attackers between 1999 and 2014 were inspired by the two, and a further 36 teenagers were foiled in their plans to do to their classmates and teachers what Eric and Dylan had done.¹⁸ Sensationalized coverage of mass killings in America has given those with the stomach for mass murder an all-too-easy path to becoming a household name. On online message boards (particularly on sites like 8chan—a veritable hotbed for homegrown white-nationalist terrorists), young white males are dabbling in fringe extremism. The counterculture rebel has been replaced by more noxious forms of rebellion. The isolated and ostracized have found fellowship in some of the internet's darkest

corners, and, from there, they fantasize gleefully about mass murder and revenge. For some, this is an act of play—a short-lived experimentation with the limits of the permissible. For others, though, the game becomes very real, the line between fantasy and reality blurring and then evaporating.

Each new shooting explodes the limits of the possible. With Sandy Hook, Orlando, Las Vegas, California, El Paso, and now my town, Dayton, the previously inconceivable became conceivable. The contagion gathers force and spreads further and further—aided by sensationalized media coverage. “‘The transmission mechanism,’ says Philip Cook, professor of public policy at Duke University, ‘seems to be nothing more or less than that it’s an idea that’s in the air. So you have these kind of catastrophic consequences from what seems a minor change in the environment.’”¹⁹ We react with attention and fascination, with social media and water cooler outrage, but not with action. Unknowingly, we are spreading the contagion, not fighting it.

Thanks to our inaction, we’ve watched in helpless paralysis as mass shootings have proliferated. We have not changed the climate in any measurable way. Quite the opposite. If anything, guns are even easier to obtain than they were in 1999, and the contagion of rampage killers has made landfall in nearly every state in the nation. We could have done something (after Columbine, after Sandy Hook, after Vegas, after El Paso and Dayton), but we’ve allowed the NRA to convince us that legislation won’t work.

It has worked, though. When, after a spate of mass shootings in Australia, the government brushed aside conservative opposition and passed the National Firearms Agreement, the result was a complete elimination of mass shootings; they had 13 of them before 1996, when the NFA was passed (only 12 days after the Port Arthur Massacre), and none of them since.²⁰ In New Zealand, the response to the Christchurch shootings was the immediate introduction of a ban on semi-automatic, military-style weapons like the AR-15. New Zealand’s legislators voted nearly unanimously (119 to 1), striking while the iron was hot and tempers were high. Here in America, though, we are told by gun-rights advocates that the aftermath of the most recent rampage killing is *not the time* to be talking about gun control. They pivot quickly to their established talking points, arguing for more guns rather than fewer as the solution to the issue. They

are more interested in protecting our obscenely broadly interpreted Second Amendment than in doing *anything* to curb the epidemic.

The NRA and its corporate partners are actually motivated to do less than nothing about America's mass-shooting epidemic. For a time, gun-rights advocates found themselves on the defensive in the aftermath of shootings, but they've managed to turn mass shootings into yet another sales pitch. They no longer move gradually from the defensive to the offensive position; they forego defense entirely, calling immediately and urgently for *more* guns in public spaces and fretting about the imminent arms seizure that will target law-abiding gun owners. This toxic combination means that mass shootings are driving gun sales rather than gun regulations. This means that gun ownership responds in trackable ways to mass shooting events. Each time there is a shooting, and particularly when the weapon involved is, for example, an AR-15, sales shoot up in the days following the event, with buyers citing worry about a lack of future availability.

This is also true for gun accessories, like the bump stock. Only gun enthusiasts could have told you what a bump stock was on the morning of 1 October 2017, but the next day, after extensive reporting on the deadly efficacy of the bump stock used by the Las Vegas shooter, gun stores all over the country were fielding calls from collectors who wanted to get their hands on one before bans went into place.²¹ Indeed, the Trump administration outlawed bump stocks a little more than a year after the Vegas shooting, giving owners 90 days to surrender their assault weapon mods to authorities. Even though owning a bump stock is now the equivalent of owning a machine gun (i.e., a felony), law-enforcement officials have reported that they have seen very few instances of owners surrendering the now-illegal devices, and because bump stocks do not come printed with a serial number, it is impossible to track the devices and the people who own them.²² With each new tragedy, the problem of how to disarm Americans (or at least how to reduce civilian firepower to more reasonable levels) grows larger. Doing so after Columbine would have been a logistical nightmare—doing so now, following the more than decade-long surge in assault-weapon production and sales in the United States, would be, well, *better late than never*.

Trump offered thoughts and prayers when he addressed the nation following the Parkland shooting, a learned and impulsive response

that has grown now unmoving. In his scripted remarks, he reminded the nation's children that they are not alone and that there are people who will do *anything* to help. Trump promised to tackle “the difficult issue of mental health,”²³ staying on NRA script by focusing on the mentally deranged killer, as though it was mental illness and mental illness alone that allowed him to take as many lives as he did. He urged them to seek the counsel or assistance of teachers, family members, police officers, or faith leaders—but not, apparently, their elected leaders, for they will do nothing to help. As unassailable as the problem seems to be, a handful of plucky high-school students have begun to show us a way forward, showing us an example of the kind of courage we will need even to approach (let alone tackle) this issue. These high-school students—survivors of the Parkland school shooting—have turned their status as victims into a powerful lobbying force. They've used social media as a rallying point rather than an echo chamber, pushing for (and getting) floods of phone calls to representatives and a million-strong march on Washington complete with stirring speeches from survivors and allies. Even if they haven't produced the dramatic changes that they have called for, they've moved the public needle. They've paid a cost. They have exposed themselves to the slings and arrows of outraged pundits and menacing trolls. The young activists have borne these threats and insults bravely, knowing that their status as survivors places them in the best position to turn the tide.

Those who oppose them, armed with bad-faith arguments about the efficacy of intervention, want to present the problem as though it were unsolvable—as though the only solution is to meet the threat of violence with yet-deadlier threats of violence. Gun-clutching Republicans (and no small number of purple-state Democrats) argue that nothing can be done: cities like Chicago and Los Angeles, they say, are already “gun-free zones,” which proves, so they say, that gun control doesn't work. These are emotional arguments that almost never carry anything more than anecdotal evidence (and sometimes not even that).

Even a cursory look at the evidence shows that gun control *does* work and that the NRA's solutions (more guns and more laws allowing civilians to use guns as a first recourse) have done *nothing* to reduce the contagion's spread. When guns are easier to obtain, and

when civilians are encouraged to use them for self-defense, the result is more deadly violence, not less. When legislation makes firearms more difficult to obtain, there is a palpable reduction in homicide rates.²⁴

Though we have little to expect from the Trump administration in the way of gun-control legislation, the next liberal in the Oval Office may be able to hit the ground running. Action is piling up at the state level, and the calls for national legislation are growing louder by the day. According to Giffords Law Center, there were 1,638 firearm-related bills introduced in 2018, and a total of 67 gun-violence–reduction bills were signed into law in 2018. These included new gun-control laws in deep red states. Bump stocks were banned in Florida; background-check requirements were either added or beefed up in Florida, Louisiana, and Tennessee; laws designed to prevent domestic abusers from obtaining firearms were passed in Louisiana and Kansas; extreme-risk–protection orders (laws allowing either law enforcement, family members, or even members of the community to petition to have firearms confiscated from an at-risk individual) were introduced in Florida.²⁵ Not only are sensible gun controls moving through state legislatures, but measures designed to fight fire with fire are also being struck down: in Missouri, a strong common-sense campaign resulted in the defeat of a handful of bills designed to arm teachers and to allow guns in bars, childcare facilities, hospitals, and polling places.²⁶

The public (or at least a sizable percentage of it) is at least starting to see the NRA's transparent jingoism for what it is. Collectively, we're starting to hear the false note struck when the NRA's representatives lean on their favorite adage: guns don't kill people, people kill people (the NRA has been trotting this one out each time somebody does something awful with a gun for at least six decades—perhaps longer). We know that this bad-faith argument neglects the ease with which a gun allows us to take a life. A knife can be an implement of death, as can a sturdy board or even a clenched fist, but none of these is remotely effective from across the street; none of these can snuff out a light in an instant with no more strength than it takes to strike a match.

We've started to hear the false note in their largely imaginary descriptions of good guys with guns who, apparently, are America's

last and best line of defense against mass shooters. In only 3.1 per cent of the active-shooter incidents were the shooters stopped by a “good guy with a gun” (13.1 per cent of incidents were defused by unarmed civilians; more than half of the active shooters profiled ended the shootings themselves, either by fleeing the scene, surrendering, or committing suicide—this does not include those who committed *suicide by cop*).²⁷ The NRA would say that this shows we need *more* guns, but we’re starting to see those arguments for what they are.

As those around us arm themselves to the teeth (with the average owner of an assault rifle owning at least three of them), the need for self-protection begins to feel more pressing, and, when those in our communities are armed with semi-automatic rifles (perhaps converted into all-but-fully-automatic machine guns), there is an understandable pull toward self-armament, especially among vulnerable communities that have been the target of escalating hate crimes. Thanks to the NRA’s transparent alignment with the Republican Party and its willingness to demonize and scapegoat black communities (my hometown of Chicago being the most obvious example), black Americans justifiably feel themselves to be an uneasy fit with the NRA, but this doesn’t mean that they are leaving the shooting or even the shooting clubs to white folks. The National African American Gun Association (NAAGA), with over 25,000 members at last count, has offered a place for black Americans to learn to shoot and to find solidarity with other black gun owners. Trump’s America has seen emboldened white supremacists and, perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been a surge of interest in the organization since Trump’s election, going from 14 chapters to 52 across America since his inauguration.

Black Americans have, of course, a complicated history with guns and, more particularly, with the Second Amendment and its defenders. There is a feeling in the black community—and a justified one—that the NRA is not interested in protecting black bodies or preserving black Second Amendment rights. They have held up Black Lives Matter as an example of the kind of dangerous organization that Americans need to arm themselves against. They traffic in racist dog whistles—we know what they mean when they talk about Chicago; we know what word they would rather use when they call us “thugs.” They pay lip service to equal rights for all gun owners, but

they have shown a moral duplicity by their silence in the wake of the case of Philando Castile, a licensed gun owner who was shot to death by a Minnesota police officer. NRA spokesperson Dana Loesch said that Castile was to blame for his own death because he had marijuana in the car. The group has, over and over again, made it crystal clear that blue lives matter more to them than black ones. Each time there is a controversial shooting, the NRA finds a way to blame the victim if they are black, either for carrying a gun or for not carrying a gun: “If innocent unarmed black men [...] are shot, it’s because they lack firearms; if innocent black men who are armed [...] are shot, it’s because they had a gun. Heads, you’re dead; tails, you’re also dead.”²⁸ Over and over again, they stand up for those who take black lives in either an official or an unofficial capacity (they held up George Zimmerman, who shot Trayvon Martin, as a model gun owner, for example). They are, make no mistake about it, the militant wing not only of the Republican Party but also of white America and white supremacist America—and the line between these is growing fainter by the day.

Though we may (slowly—painfully slowly) be starting to see through the NRA’s messaging, the American love of guns remains largely unchanged. Our love of the gun and all it stands for is, without doubt, a defining feature of America. We may never cast this off entirely. Our love of guns is here to stay, and this tells us more than we might wish known about our perpetual adolescence, about our fragile egos and particularly our fragile masculinity. The NRA and Fox pundits tell their viewers that manliness is under attack from every angle. Whiny libs, so they say, want men to be second-class citizens (they tip their hand frequently enough when they say the libs want men to be no different from women). Any challenge to male supremacy and to the ideas at the root of that supremacy must be resisted with hyper-masculine displays of virility. Want to stick it to the liberals? Buy a gun. Want to show the leftists that your manhood is intact? Buy a big gun, a deadly gun. Even better, brandish this weapon in public. It’s your right. Hold your weapon in your hand. Show the whole world what a big man you are (as long as you are not black or brown).

The comparison between male members and guns is not inapt. We want to believe that we hold power in our hands when we stand with our feet spread, our weapons extended. The gun is the great

equalizer. It makes the small man feel as big as the large one, and it makes the large one feel like a king. No wonder so many of us bristle at the mere mention of gun restrictions. They are the tether that connects us to some shred of old-fashioned manhood; take them away, and we must deal with the world without something that guarantees our superiority. Take them away and we are naked and vulnerable, and the American male is never, and can never be, vulnerable.

The taking of a life remains, for some, the ultimate symbol of virility. The caged hunt, the dentist with the lion's head adorning the wall of his study, these things show man's attempt to grasp at the straw of his manhood, at older, more primitive notions of masculinity that demand a blood sacrifice. Ask the man who keeps a loaded pistol beneath his pillow or in his nightstand and he will, almost invariably, tell you it is for protection—to protect his property and his family, he will, he says, take a life without a second thought. Listen when he tells you how and why he will do this. It is not a horror barely to be imagined. It is engorged fantasy, the consummation of virile manhood, the king protecting his castle and chattel with fire and steel.

The voices of men like these are amplified in the gun debate. Instead of their voices, we need to start letting the dead enter the debate. The dead can't speak, but they can still have a politically charged voice. The Greeks called this *prosopopeia*—when the names of the dead are evoked as examples of sacrifice and suffering. We do this today with our hash tags, with *I am Eric Garner* printed on shirts, and with our use of the names of the dead to connect ourselves and our audience with our innocent dead. Obama: “If I had a son, he would have looked like Trayvon.” This naming is a crucial part of our act of public mourning. Numbers have swelled beyond reckoning, and we need to descend to particulars in order to, as Simon Stow says in *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience*, break these events down “into their constitutive parts”²⁹ to show not just the scope of these tragedies on the community but also their impact on families. When we feel each victim as a tearing asunder of a family, a removal of a father, a brother, a sister, a mother, a friend, our blood must seethe and roil beneath our skin. In the same way, we must (as some medical professionals have forced us to do) confront the visceral with our own eyes, must see without flinching what bullets do to bodies. We must do this to make transparent the stories we

tell ourselves about gun violence—stories about heroism and sacrifice. These stories allow us to live in unreal worlds in which the gun is merely a tool—a tool of murder but, more important, a tool of protection. We are wrapped up in these worlds and these stories, wrapped in our fantasies.

For as long as we remain wrapped up in these fantasies, we will remain in the gun lobby's thrall. The contagion will continue to spread, and the problem will grow larger with each passing year. When we speak of the last mass shooting, we know that there will be another one and another one on the road ahead. Without something drastic, we will never be able to speak of the next last shooting as *the last mass shooting*.

Notes

- 1 Many of the details that follow are recorded in Harold Schecter, *The Serial Killer Files: The Who, What, Where, How, and Why of the World's Most Terrifying Murderers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).
- 2 "Young Veteran Goes Berserk Killing 12 at Camden, N.J.," *Leominster Daily Enterprise*, 6 September 1949.
- 3 Almost half a century earlier, in 1903, 30-year-old Gilbert Twigg opened fire with a shotgun on a crowd that had gathered for a concert, killing eight people before turning the gun on himself. Twigg has been called the first modern mass shooter (and he does fit the profile), but Unruh was the first to generate significant national press coverage—a hallmark of modern mass shooters.
- 4 E.g., universal background checks, a new (and permanent) assault-weapons ban, stricter regulations governing who can own guns and how they should be stored, etc.
- 5 This is not to say that there was no regulation of any kind. Nearly every state, for instance, had bans on concealed weapons in the nineteenth century, but it was left to the states to decide what to do about guns within their borders.
- 6 Nearly a century later, the tax is *still* \$200.
- 7 Miller, it is worth noting, was a known bank robber. He would be found shot to death before the Supreme Court would arrive at its decision. See *United States v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939).
- 8 "The Gun under Fire," *Time*, 21 June 1968.
- 9 Thirty years later, *Time* would use the same cover for an updated story on gun control, adding only the year below the title.

- 10 “The Gun under Fire.”
- 11 S. Rosenfeld, “The NRA Once Supported Gun Control,” *Salon*, 14 January 2013.
- 12 M. Powell, “The NRA’s Call to Arms,” *Washington Post*, 6 August 2000.
- 13 F. Fessenden, “They Threaten, Seethe and Unhinge, Then Kill in Quantity,” *New York Times*, 9 April 2000.
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- 20 Ibid.
- 21 J. Ax and G. Cherehus, “After Las Vegas Massacre, ‘Bump Stock’ Is Hot Item at U.S. Gun Shops,” 4 October 2017, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/las-vegas-massacre-bump-stock-hot-item-u-001444967--finance.html>.
- 22 J. Skebba, “Bump Stocks Illegal Now, but Few, if Any, Local Owners Have Turned Theirs In,” *Blade*, 13 April 2019.
- 23 “Read Trump’s Speech Addressing the Parkland School Shooting,” *CNN*, 15 February 2018.
- 24 Julian Santaella Tenorio et al., “What Do We Know about the Association between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries?,” *Epidemiologic Reviews* 38.1 (2016): 140–57.
- 25 A. Anderman, “Gun Law Trend Watch: 2018 Year-End Review,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 14 December 2018.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Blair, “A Study of Active Shooter Incidents.”
- 28 A. Serwer, “The NRA’s Catch-22 for Black Men Shot by Police,” *The Atlantic*, 13 September 2018.
- 29 Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 51.