

Are Dead Children the Price of Freedom?

The most common question asked on this side of the Atlantic is: “Why can’t they see what these weapons are doing to their country?”

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Featured image: A scene from the Houston gun show in 2007. (Photo: [M&R Glasgow](#)/flickr/cc)

There is a sickness eating at the body and soul of my home country, and it is on full view for the world to see.

When the news broke on Valentine’s Day that 17 people—mostly young students—had lost their lives in Parkland, Florida, one could be forgiven for being numb. Of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in US history, six have come after 2012. Of those six, three have occurred in the last 5 months, including the October 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas that claimed 58 lives, the deadliest in US history.

While these events attract the headlines and outrage, the vast majority of gun deaths in the United States are not as a result of mass shootings. Over the past five years, there have been, on average, 12,500 firearm-related homicides per year. This number does not include accidental deaths or suicides.

Let’s put that number into perspective. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 took 3,000 lives. At an average of 12,500 deaths a year, 200,000 people in the United States have been murdered with the use of a firearm since those attacks 16 years ago. That’s equal to 67 September 11 attacks. That’s equal to filling New York’s Madison Square Garden to capacity, killing everyone inside, and then repeating that process 9 more times. That’s equal to killing every single person in Salt Lake City.

200,000 people.

The most common question asked on this side of the Atlantic is: “Why can’t they see what these weapons are doing to their country?”

To answer this question, one needs to understand two things about the United States: the economics of fear, and the depths of paranoia many have about government intrusion into everyday life.

Since 1989, gun rights groups in the US have donated \$42 million directly to political candidates, with 90% of that money going to Republicans. In 2016 alone, the National Rifle Association – lobbyists for gun manufacturers – spent \$54 million in so-called non- direct “outside expenditures” which candidates do not need to disclose. Compare that \$54 million to just \$3 million in outside spending from those advocating in favor of gun control.

As a result, Republicans have stopped many of the attempts to pass gun control legislation. And, in 1996, a Republican-majority Congress, pushed by the NRA, passed an amendment that banned the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from treating gun violence as a public health issue, and from using money to “advocate or promote gun control.”

The NRA message? Simple. First, people need to buy guns to protect themselves because crime is everywhere. The beauty of this argument is that the more guns that are out there in society, the more gun crime there will be, and the more people feel that they need a gun. So, a vicious circle. The second message is that the government wants to take your guns away, and guns are your right under the US constitution.

Again, fear.

The gun control debate also needs to be understood as part of the “culture wars” that have been raging in the US since the 1960s.

Attempts to restrict access to weapons are seen by many on the political right in the United States as part of a broader attempt by the political left to restrict individual freedoms. The enemy is the state. Here is where many Europeans cannot follow the logic. It’s not simply that many in the US refuse to give up their weapons, it’s that the US has no universal healthcare, no paid parental leave, no paid vacations or sick leave and no subsidized daycare. Yet, there are those in the US who will argue that universal healthcare is basically a form of “socialism” that doesn’t belong in a capitalist US system. The ultimate problem is that these views of the world combine to form a toxic ideology of fear, violence, individualism and alienation. This led me to send the following tweet when I heard about the killings in Florida:

The moral perversity that allows one to think that universal healthcare is tyranny but dead school children are the price of freedom is what is corroding the soul of the United States.

These are troubling days in the United States. And they will continue until the politics and business of fear are rejected as tools for maintaining power.

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A Swedish version of this article appeared in the newspaper [Aftonbladet](#).

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