

Let Our Teachers Teach, and Insist Our Leaders Lead

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Will Saturday's astounding March for Our Lives become the defining protest of our time? Some say it's comparable to Vietnam War era anti-war marches. Not actually comparable, I hope. Because it took daily news of American deaths month after month to sustain those protests.

March 24th's nationwide event was led by youngsters, Americans even younger than the 1960s protesters. It is certainly a stirring event to witness—unarguably inspiring for millions like me viewing it on television. Saturday's rally demonstrated the leadership of 'just' teenagers. (We generally only hear about our youths' drug habits or sports and cell phone obsessions, their sex lives or their music and clothing trends.)

I hope the political work these new leaders have launched is sustained. I hope this movement doesn't need further killings anywhere to keep the issue alive, to activate media interest and to swell the numbers of activists. It is essential too that America's adult responses are not technical, namely: not calling for still more security devices to sell to schools and municipalities, not commissioning more experts to invent even more bizarre safety measures.

Whenever a massacre at a school or concert hall or other public event occurs, there's ample television footage to demonstrate how authorities respond—police, FBI and other armed forces 'secure' neighborhoods and control onlookers with massive military-like tactics and equipment. (Only recently have Americans realized how much like a military occupation of our streets, local police forces had become.) Unquestioned is the associated tactic called "lockdown".

Following the end of deadly sieges, we witness survivors of an attack emerging from "lockdown", moving in single file, hands above their heads, stripped of any bags or backpacks, obediently proceeding down a path past armed guards. (This presumably after they've been frisked to ensure they are not part of a terror group.) This scary procession is now a common procedure executed without questions about what affect these practices have on those innocents.

Every school in this nation is geared for terror. With the powerful testimonies of the March 24 speakers in D.C. last week, those who may not normally visit schools hear how children are taught lockdown drill, procedures they must practice and then follow if their school is under threat. One 17-year old at a March for Our Lives event in Detroit confesses:

“The fire alarm at Trenton High School is scary, ...We don’t know if it’s an actual drill or if someone’s actually inside the school, going to take your life.”

As a journalist I have occasion to visit local schools. When I do, I can secure entry only if I’ve made an appointment with a staff member who knows me and is expecting me. My name is listed beforehand, and when I arrive at the (locked) school door, a security guard, usually armed, calls the staff person I’m to meet, who then comes to the reception desk to accompany me into the school. I’m given an ID which I must wear while inside and relinquish when I leave. (Every schoolchild wears his/her special ID all the time at school.) This is the same process I go through when I visit a prison!

Not to deny our youths their credit and our gratitude for their initiative today, one wonders: what took *us* so long? That is, what took so long for youths to dump any expectations they had of leadership by adults: elected officials as well as community leaders, teachers and other educators, social workers, police and trauma experts, journalists and celebrities. How many deaths by gun-loving, angry, disturbed and embittered young men does it take for a sensible strategy to emerge? Maybe these youngsters stepping into the forefront marks a watershed, a turning point not only in gun reform but in American civic action.

Regarding solutions: look what some in the (political) room have been advising in response to gun violence. (We know the U.S. president’s suggestion.) Even clear-headed, mature leaders have little to offer beyond assigning more money to build more safety mechanisms into schools. (This in addition to adding more on-duty armed officers inside and around schools.) When a recent threat of violence at indistinguishable school in my own semi-rural neighborhood occurred, the [director announced measures](#) including retrofitting every door in the place. This is an educator’s all-too-common solution in an institute already patrolled by two armed guards!

From what we heard from school-age activists in their fearless and unequivocal statements these past weeks, they are not demanding more security measures in classrooms and hallways. They want their teachers to teach; they want political their leaders to enact gun reforms; they want to hold elected representatives accountable to the citizen, not to special interests.

One may be unable to expect any reduction in safety measures. While the downside of increasing them is twofold: first, our places of learning become hazardous zones. Students report how they move through their classrooms in a state of fear. The educational budgets of public schools are already inadequate. From teachers’ rallies in Virginia and Arizona, we learn that teachers’ salaries are low and getting lower, with many teachers working at a second job. Core curricula are threatened by educational budgets cuts or freezes. If more funds are allocated to military-like solutions, basic educational facilities will suffer. Second, the main beneficiaries of all those technical solutions will be security companies who provide guards and who manufacture safety devices— part of the mammoth American arms business. The security industry is equally involved in diversionary costly solutions as is the NRA.

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