

The Social Pathology of the Las Vegas Massacre

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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In yet another eruption of savage impersonal violence, at least 59 people were killed and 527 people wounded as an outdoor music festival on the Las Vegas Strip, attended by more than 20,000, was suddenly converted into a war zone.

The alleged gunman, Stephen Paddock, used multiple semi-automatic weapons that had been converted to fully automatic use, through an attachment known as a bump-stock device—available for a mere \$40 per weapon—as he opened fire on the helpless crowd from his vantage point on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel and casino. He took his own life after the rampage.

Paddock could lay down a field of fire on a military scale, nearly 100 rounds per minute. He was found in possession of about 20 weapons, many of them high-powered semi-automatics, along with additional ammunition. The first minutes of gunfire triggered a smoke alarm that allowed police to locate Paddock far more quickly than through a search of the huge 3,300-room hotel, a fact that suggests that the toll of death and injury could have been much higher.

The gunman's motives are unknown, and his identity sheds little light on what drove him on this murderous course. Paddock was 64 years old, shared a comfortable home with his female companion, and was, according to some reports, financially well-off. One of his brothers described Paddock as a real estate multi-millionaire. He had a pilot's license and owned two small planes. He had no known associations with any political or religious group.

There is a family history of mental illness—Paddock's father, Richard Hoskins Paddock, was a bank robber and diagnosed as a psychopath. He was on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List for nearly a decade. But Stephen Paddock had no contact with his father after he was seven years old, and there are no reports that he exhibited mental illness or received any treatment for it.

As in virtually all such shootings, the gunman knew none of the wounded and killed. They did not exist for him as individuals. Paddock saw the concert-goers packed below him in a parking lot not as fellow human beings, but as objects to be destroyed. The victims were the random targets of the uncontrolled and impersonal hatred of a gunman indifferent to their fate and the lifelong suffering that awaits their surviving family and friends.

Clearly, this was not the act of a normal person. Some form of mental illness, even if not previously diagnosed, must be involved in Paddock's crime. But there is certainly a socially induced element in this terrible event. The frequency of these occurrences cannot be explained in purely individual and personal terms. The Las Vegas massacre is a peculiarly American crime, arising out of the social pathology of a deeply troubled society.

What is the social context of this latest episode of domestic mass killing? The United States has been at war more or less continuously for the past 27 years. The US government has treated tens of millions of people in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Africa as targets for extermination through bombs, bullets, and drone-fired missiles. These wars have penetrated deeply into American culture, celebrated endlessly in film, television, music and even sport.

Social relations within the United States, characterized by the growth of economic inequality on a scale that exceeds any previous era in American history, fuel a culture of indifference, and even outright contempt for human life.

One telling detail: on the day that the media was filled with reports about the worst mass shooting in American history, the stock market continued its relentless march upwards, with new records for the Dow-Jones Industrial Average and other indexes. Wall Street is celebrating in anticipation of the Trump administration pushing through the biggest tax cut for corporate America and the super-rich in history.

The damage inflicted on American society by constant war and deepening social inequality has found expression in an endless series of events like the mass shooting in Las Vegas. With only 5 percent of the world's population, the US accounts for 30 percent of the mass shootings. And the scale of such horrors is increasing: the four worst mass shootings, in terms of casualty toll, and six of the seven worst, have taken place since 2007.

Corporate media pundits and government officials are incapable of more than perfunctory expressions of shock and dismay over such atrocities, which recur with appalling frequency in the United States. Even uttering such rote statements seems to be too much to ask of President Trump, whose remarks Monday morning were both banal and palpably insincere. How can anyone take seriously a foul-mouthed misogynist and pathological liar as he begins a sentence with the words, "Scripture teaches us"?

As for his moronic statement that the killings in Las Vegas were "pure evil," such a characterization explains nothing. It doesn't even explain Trump himself, who gave a speech two weeks ago at the United Nations where he threatened to use nuclear weapons to incinerate the 27 million inhabitants of North Korea. Yet CNN, ever the sycophant, described his televised remarks on Las Vegas as "pitch perfect."

Trump is to visit Las Vegas Wednesday, one day after an equally stage-managed and bogus display of compassion set for Puerto Rico. There he will view the devastation inflicted by Hurricane Maria, while pursuing his Twitter feud with local government officials who have dared to criticize the poorly executed federal response to the catastrophe.

During the 16 years since the 9/11 attacks, during which the US government has been supposedly engaged in a "war on terror," an average of one American per year has been killed by a foreign terrorist. During the same period, at least 10,000 Americans have been killed every year by other Americans. Mass shootings like Virginia Tech, Newtown, Orlando and now Las Vegas have killed six times as many Americans as all the terrorist attacks in that period.

Further investigation into the circumstances of the Las Vegas tragedy is vital. But one conclusion can surely be drawn: what happened late Sunday night outside the Mandalay Bay hotel was a manifestation of a deep sickness in American society.

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