

**THE STONE**

# Guns and the 'Price We Pay for Freedom'

**By Patrick Blanchfield**

Nov. 8, 2017

The murder of 26 people during a church service in Sutherland Springs, Tex., on Sunday was not the deadliest single-shooter mass shooting in American history. It comes a little more than a month after the deadliest — the Las Vegas massacre in which 58 people were killed and more than 400 injured. But Sunday's attack took more lives in an American place of worship than any previous shooting, and resulted in the largest body count of children since the attack on Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December 2012, in which 20 children died. Police now say that half the victims in Sutherland were children, the youngest a girl of 18 months.

Our national reaction to mass shootings in general, and to those involving children in particular, is saturated with theological rhetoric. Politicians call for prayers and bemoan senseless evil; critics denounce their appeals as cynical and skewer them for hypocritical complicity. The children themselves are described as angels, wrenched from the world too soon, leaving behind a heavy burden for those who loved them to bear. The suffering of children has long been seen as a litmus for how individuals and cultures stake their values — consider the poems of William Blake, or Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor in "The Brothers Karamazov" — and these brutal deaths are no exception. The dead children in Sutherland, like the dead in Sandy Hook, are framed as paradigmatically innocent; the society in which they died, as fallen, as corrupted.

Underwriting all this is a logic of sacrifice. It is present in both jeremiads against America's gun culture and macho celebrations of it. The logic of sacrifice is present when the writer Garry Wills powerfully compares guns in America to the god Moloch, to whom ancient Carthaginians supposedly offered their children, and condemns "the sacrifice we as a culture made, and continually make, to our demonic

god.” The logic of sacrifice is present, too, when pro-gun voices like the former National Rifle Association president Harlon Carter describe guns in the hands of those with violent intent as “the price we pay for freedom.” One way or another, the logic of sacrifice tells us, Americans accept or reject the presence of guns in exchange for something else, for better and for worse.

But when it comes to the reality of gun violence in America — of which mass shootings are only a part — sacrifice as a concept is insufficient, and the notion of innocence itself, suspect. Our compassion is readily activated by the idea of murdered innocents, but as the journalist Gary Younge observes, emphasizing innocence can be an “empathetic shortcut,” a way of implicitly accepting the premise that others deserve it. But no one deserves, at any age, to have their life cut short by a bullet, whether in a church pew or a back alley.

Sacrifice is, strictly speaking, a transactional concept. Something is given up in exchange for something else. The implicit paradigm here is of a loss that leads to redemption, a forfeiture that purifies. But there is nothing redeeming, or that could ever redeem, a dozen dead children.

Instead of using the lens of sacrifice, we should think of the toll of American gun violence as *waste*, pure and simple. Waste in many ways — as lives cut short, as potential squandered, as futures foreclosed. But also waste beyond any sense that restricts the lives of the murdered to mere human capital — waste as absolute, irredeemable carnage that generates only more destruction in its wake.

Not surprisingly, mass shootings are overwhelmingly committed by men, and by men who, more than any other defining characteristic, have histories of domestic abuse and of harming those closest to them. Rather than just “snapping,” these are wrathful men who nurse grudges and who are plagued by a sense of insufficiency and of having been slighted and exploited. In other words, they are men who see their own lives as wasted, and who then set out to lay waste to the lives of others around them in a self-destructive conflagration. This is the opposite of sacrifice, of any logic of exchange: It is a desire to simply annihilate self, other, and one’s entire world in a single grand gesture of destruction. It is waste, all the way down, to the bitter end.

What do we gain by seeing this slow-motion national nightmare as so much waste? Among other things, we can see it as an organic continuation of some of the most

basic and foundational American dreams. As the historian Nancy Isenberg documents, the architects of the early American colonial enterprise saw the “new” continent as a “wasteland” — an under-exploited landscape to be populated by the labor of “waste people,” the social detritus of the early modern British economy.

These marginalized individuals were understood quite literally as disposable human fertilizer for pastoralizing the American wilderness, only one facet of a settler-colonial regime’s ruthless exploitation and extinguishing of human lives, which extended from indentured labor to chattel slavery to ethnic cleansing and beyond. So, too, the realization of our Manifest Destiny was so much laying waste, and our rise to the status of world’s most powerful military nation, an achievement built, with no exaggeration, on the deaths of millions.

To speak of this history as having a “legacy” is to relegate to the past tense a reality that still operates within the present moment. It is also to foster the naïve dream that, since it is something separate from us, in the past, it is now something we can cleanly redeem in the present. But our American logic of waste unfolds in the grinding operations of a brutish society in which no wasted lives, no matter how nominally innocent nor how violently destroyed, seem able to galvanize change in our murderous status quo.

No transaction could ever redeem this, and to the extent that we remain wedded to the logic of sacrifice, we remain trapped in an endless cycle of waiting for a transaction that could. Only by truly seeing what we truly are can we hope to become something different.

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