

# The American Impulse to Equate Guns With Freedom and Masculinity With Violence Is Killing Us

**N** thenation.com /article/the-american-impulse-to-equate-guns-with-freedom-and-masculinity-with-violence-is-killing-us/

By Joan Walsh Twitter October 2, 2017

10/3/2017



People wait in a medical staging area after the mass shooting in Las Vegas in the early hours of October 2, 2017. (Reuters via Las Vegas Sun / Steve Marcus)

## Ready to Resist?

Sign up for *Take Action Now* and we'll send you three meaningful actions every Tuesday.

On Sunday morning, the president of the United States humiliated his secretary of state, derided diplomacy as "wasting time," mocked North Korea's national leader as "Little Rocket Man," and renewed his macho threat to "do what needs to be done" to thwart North Korea's nuclear program—at the UN last month he said he might "need" to "destroy" the country. As always, analysts struggled to make sense of Trump's tweets—geopolitically, psychologically—but the conclusion seemed inescapable that he is itching for a military conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary.

On Sunday night, a 64-year-old retiree by the name of Stephen Paddock took at least 10 rifles, some of them semi-automatic or automatic weapons, to the 32nd floor of the gilded Mandalay Bay resort casino, and gunned down hundreds of people, killing at least 50, in the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. Paddock shot his

prey from up high and watched them scatter, like ants, like animals. There is no connection between Trump's threat and Paddock's massacre, except a profound lack of empathy, a toxic male willingness to indulge grievances (we don't yet know Paddock's, but we soon will) with violence, and an obsession with the display of absolute power.

Maybe it's because I went to bed fearing a war, even a nuclear conflict, with North Korea, and woke up to random bloody gun terror at a country-music concert in Las Vegas that I see the two tragedies as entwined. There is something deeply wrong with the American male identification of guns as a symbol of freedom. We need to translate that correctly: By this definition, it is the capacity for brutal violence that is also a symbol, maybe even a prerequisite, of freedom. Of almost strictly male freedom, we must emphasize. This set of values wasn't invented by the madman in the White House; he is just a symptom of a country and an electorate that value guns over children's lives. On social media today I saw a heartbreaking impotence among many pundits and political activists, repeatedly expressed this way: If we didn't do something to regulate guns, especially automatic weapons, after the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre—in which 20 first-graders and six school staffers were murdered—we'll never do anything. I don't share that point of view, but I understand it.

## ADVERTISING

### [inRead invented by Teads](#)

Once again, the National Rifle Association has blood on its hands. At one time a respectable organization of gun owners promoting proper gun use and gun safety, three decades ago the NRA began to turn itself into a trade association for big gun manufacturers, and a purveyor of canny right-wing paranoia designed to spur gun sales. In the 1990s, as right-wing anti-government zealots began a backlash against what they perceived as a Democratic administration intent on taking their guns and their freedom, the NRA channeled that paranoia. Even after the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995 by government-hating extremists, NRA head Wayne La Pierre was describing Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents as “jackbooted government thugs” in a fundraising letter. Guns went from being something used to hunt or—perhaps, in a rare event—to protect oneself and one's family, to being a symbol of individual sovereignty and freedom from control of government. The Obama administration was a great gift to the NRA; gun and bullet purchases soared after the election of our first black president. Nonetheless, the NRA spent \$30 million to elect Trump, who spoke at its national convention and praised LaPierre as a patriot.

Trump repaid the NRA's investment by signing a bill that lifted Obama-era limits on gun sales to the mentally ill. Yet, with the departure of the Obama administration, gun sales have sagged; the first black president is no longer around to take your guns, and the NRA-loving Trump is in the White House, so maybe it's safe to stop hoarding guns? Not so fast, said the NRA. In a despicable propaganda video earlier this year, [NRA cheerleader Dana Loesch spun a lurid tale](#) of Black Lives Matters protesters and Women's Marchers as the latest threat to guns and, yes, freedom. Hollywood liberals, the fake-news media, as well as an ex-president (you know whom they mean) are painting Trump as an illegitimate “Hitler.” Only the NRA—and, yes, more guns—can protect your freedom.

On Monday morning, Trump again repaid the NRA's \$30 million investment with a pathetically passive statement that described the Las Vegas massacre as though it were a natural disaster, never once mentioning the weapons of hell that caused it. He called it “an act of pure evil,” extolled the bravery of police and first responders, and made appeals for love, prayers, and unity. He displayed his trademark lack of empathy about the victims' families: “We cannot fathom their pain or imagine their loss.” What a strange thing to say: Many of us can, and if we can't, it's our human responsibility to try, to bear witness. If we really can't fathom their pain or loss, we don't have to do anything about it.

Sadly, we are unlikely to do anything about it. In the wake of the murders, gun stocks are soaring, anticipating a rise in gun sales as the result of a possible move to restrict firearms such as used to be routine after a bloody spree like this one. I don't think the gun industry has much to worry about. I hope to be proven wrong. Nevada has among the most lax gun laws in the country, with no limits on the number of firearms one can own, no requirement of

registration, no limits on automatic weapons. The dead suspect's brother, Eric Paddock, told reporters: "Find out who sold him the machine gun!" Will any Nevada lawmaker be brave enough to make that an issue?

## Current Issue

[View our current issue](#)

Subscribe today and Save up to \$129.

This morning, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders announced that Trump still planned to visit Puerto Rico this week. That's good—there's plenty he could do to help the storm-ravaged island. One easy helpful move would be to shut down his Twitter attacks on San Juan Mayor Carmen Cruz and on the people of Puerto Rico as lazy. With reports over the weekend that the commonwealth's morgues are filling up, there may well have been more than 50 deaths last night there. But their slow-motion tragedy has been nearly blasted out of the news by this cruel assault on people Trump more easily sees as real Americans.

President Obama used to use these occasions, which hit him all too frequently in his eight years, to search for ways to prevent future tragedies, usually ideas for gun-safety legislation and mental-health funding. In his brief remarks Monday, Trump did nothing of the kind. He seemed to warn against "searching for some kind of meaning; the answers do not come easy." I preferred the response to the massacre that came from Senator Chris Murphy, who represents Newtown, Connecticut: "It's time for Congress to get off its ass and do something."

We'll see, but I'm not optimistic. The president rode a wave of white male paranoia and perceived lost power to the White House; the GOP has stoked those emotions for 50 years. It's hard to imagine this president, or this Congress, begin to unravel the connections they've woven between masculinity, power, guns, and violence. The best short-term outcome I can see? Trump may be too busy to tweet insults and up the likelihood of war with North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

