

The mass shootings in America

David Walsh
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Ten years ago this month two students opened fire on their classmates and teachers at Columbine High School near Denver, Colorado, killing 13 and wounding 23 others, before committing suicide. The event, although it was hardly without precedent even then, horrified the nation. Newspaper editors and columnists, self-proclaimed experts on school violence, pundits of various types all weighed in, but their analyses offered little insight.

President Bill Clinton remarked, “Perhaps we may never fully understand.” He added, “Saint Paul reminds us that we all see things in this life through a glass darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening.”

Two years ago, also in April, a student at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia killed 32 people and wounded 17 others, also before turning the weapon on himself. The official experts again provided their generally banal and superficial opinions. President George W. Bush commented, “It’s impossible to make sense of such violence and suffering... In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God.”

In the past month, an eruption of violence in the US has accounted for the deaths of 53 people in seven mass shooting incidents. In response to the worst of these tragedies, the murder of 13 people in Binghamton, New York, President Barack Obama issued a statement in which he said, “Michelle and I were shocked and deeply saddened to learn about the act of senseless violence in Binghamton, New York today. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims, their families and the people of Binghamton.”

Changing what needs to be changed, the response of the Obama administration is identical to those of its predecessors: uncomprehending, vacuously pious and, in the end, indifferent. No one in Washington cares to say the obvious: That the slaughter is a symptom of a diseased social order.

As for the pundits, the tragedies that all too rapidly succeed one another in the headlines barely stir them into taking up column space or airtime. The comments and

attempted explanations become ever more perfunctory.

The *New York Times* published a brief editorial in response to the massacre that began the recent wave of violence, a rampage in southern Alabama March 10, urging Congress “to reinstate, in tightened form, the national assault weapons ban that it let expire in 2004.” Since then, not a word.

The *Washington Post*, in the aftermath of the Alabama, Carthage, North Carolina and Binghamton shootings, editorialized: “No one may ever fully understand what kind of fury or demon gripped the gunmen.” The *Post* too called for tighter gun laws and left it at that.

For their part, the cable television channels, in their pursuit of viewers and ratings, seek to transform the coverage of the carnage into something approaching entertainment, with lurid headlines and promises of “in-depth” coverage that never materializes.

That a human being might suffer a mental collapse under extreme conditions is an element of everyday life. That seven individuals pick up multiple, extremely lethal weapons and attempt to blot out as many lives as they can, often before taking their own, is a phenomenon shaped by social and historical circumstances.

The present socio-psychological environment, in which so many individuals, deranged though they may be, can cause the massive suffering and death of innocent people without flinching, cannot be accounted for without reference to recent trends in American life.

Such a state of affairs must be bound up with the decades of political reaction in the US, rooted in economic decline and characterized by the promotion of force as the solution to all problems, the encouragement of militarism and chauvinism, the worship of “free market” ruthlessness and selfishness, and a popular culture pervaded by brutal imagery and lyrics.

In the manner of mob bosses, Obama administration officials, like their counterparts under Bush, speak of “killing” or “taking out” their political enemies in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The “lone gunmen,” in some sense, are Frankenstein

monsters produced by American society in advanced social and moral decline. In their own psychotic fashion, such individuals are merely taking the premises on which Wall Street, the Pentagon and the White House routinely operate and applying them to their personal dilemmas.

The economic crisis is undoubtedly exacerbating these tendencies, as it places the psychologically vulnerable under far greater than usual stress. All the more under conditions where America's social safety net, highly porous at the best of times, has been shredded by Republican and Democratic governments at every level.

A Florida social agency reports that "as a direct result of the economic crisis" domestic violence centers have reported a 37 percent increase in demands for services.

A University of Buffalo news release in January cited the comments of Sampson Blair, a family psychologist at the school: "Family murder-suicide is still relatively uncommon, but I expect an increase in such incidents over the next few years because economic strain on families provokes depression and desperation."

Blair added, "The economic situation also portends a significant increase in other forms of family violence, including spousal and child abuse, child neglect and other forms of dysfunctional behavior like substance abuse. What makes this situation even worse... is that there is also a clear association between suicide rates and the state of the larger economy."

Job loss has been a factor helping to trigger a number of the recent mass shootings.

A study reported in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2003 found that unemployment is the single strongest predictor in cases where men murder their wives. An abuser's lack of employment increased the risk fourfold, the research found.

The *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* published a study, also in 2003, concluding that "Being unemployed was associated with a twofold to threefold increased relative risk of death by suicide, compared with being employed. About half of this association might be attributable to confounding by mental illness."

America is a country seething with discontent. Wide layers of the population, whose own conditions of life are deteriorating rapidly, watch in helpless fury as the very bankers and speculators who drove the country into the ground are handed trillions of dollars, with no strings attached, by the federal government. The trade unions, bound hand and foot to the ruling elite, long ago abandoned any struggle in the defense of working people.

Millions of people are losing everything—a job, a house,

a decent standard of living. Tent cities have sprung up in numerous communities. Five million jobs have been destroyed since December 2007, and the new administration's "stimulus package" will not scratch the surface of the problem.

The election of Obama occasioned a mass outbreak of wishful thinking, cultivated by the media and the political establishment. Perhaps, many thought or hoped, here would be a president and an administration that would concern themselves, at least a little bit, with the welfare of the people. In less than three months, those hopes have been substantially dashed.

Even if the character of the new government is not yet grasped in a politically conscious manner, there is an increasing sense that "Nothing has changed": the political system—sclerotic, corrupt, held in contempt—remains impervious to the interests and needs of the population.

What has not yet emerged is a revival of mass popular struggle against the attacks of the corporations and the government, and the political perspective that could guide such a struggle. The individual, *anti-social* violence erupts in the absence of a consciously *anti-capitalist* social and political upheaval, which would offer a way out of the present condition.

But that is coming. As Trotsky noted in the early 1930s, "Even in these days of unexampled world crisis, suicides fortunately constitute an unimportant percentage. But peoples never resort to suicide. When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution."

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