Horror in Newtown

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The horrific massacre at a school in the small town of Newtown, Connecticut has sickened the entire country. Twenty-eight people lie dead, including twenty children between the ages of six and seven, who were shot multiple times. Six adults were also killed in Friday's shooting spree before the gunman, Adam Lanza, took his own life. Earlier that morning, he shot and killed his mother.

The inhumanity of the crime is deeply unsettling. Beyond the individual motivations of the killer, the shooting at Newtown lays bare a brutality that pervades American society.

Friday's mass killing is the latest in a long series of such incidents. The United States has historically seen repeated outbursts of violence. Yet the past two decades have been unusual, even by American standards. The frequency and scale of mass killings point to an underlying cause.

Among the most significant events have been the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (168 killed, including 19 children); the Columbine, Colorado massacre in 1999 (14 dead); and the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007 (34 dead). This year alone has seen massacres at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado (12 dead and 58 injured); a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin (6 dead); a sign business in Minneapolis, Minnesota (6 dead); a spa in Brookfield, Wisconsin (3 dead); and a mall six days ago in Portland, Oregon (3 dead).

The response of the American media and the political establishment to the latest shooting traces a well-worn path. There are the banal declarations of the incomprehensibility and senselessness of "evil." To the extent any broader response is offered, it is focused on the need for a "national conversation" on gun control and empty promises to do more to address mental health (made by politicians doing their best to slash health care programs to the bone).

The American ruling class has lost the capacity for self-examination. It knows that any serious analysis of the roots of this and other tragedies points back to itself and the society it dominates.

The speech by President Obama at a memorial service in Newtown Sunday night was typical—a combination of stock phrases, play acting and invocations of religion. It would have been better if he said nothing, as he had nothing intelligent to say.

The ceremony was an exercise in religious obscurantism, in which the parents of the murdered children were told not to grieve or lose heart, for their sons and daughters were in heaven.

"God has called them all home," Obama declared in concluding his speech. Such statements are not only insensitive to the families of those killed, they are insulting to the intelligence of the American people. One can understand a turn to religion as a source of solace by those who experience such unspeakable tragedy. In the hands of the state, however, it is a means of obfuscation to cover up the social and political roots of such events.

If the politicians insist on invoking religion, they would do better to ask themselves how Lincoln might have responded. In describing the carnage of the revolutionary war he led, the sixteenth president said that if God willed that "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword," then "the judgments of the Lord are righteous altogether."

The tragedies of this world (the Civil War), Lincoln insisted, are products of worldly crimes (slavery).

For what deeds are tragedies such as Newtown the reckoning? Far from being incomprehensible, the crime is all too comprehensible. The roots are not hard to trace: a society of unprecedented inequality, a thoroughly backward official political ideology without an ounce of progressive content, and, above all, an incredible level of violence perpetrated by the state,

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accompanied by the brutalization of society as a whole.

The character of the mass killings bears witness to this connection. Certain features appear with regularity: the use of military-style weapons, assailants (such as Lanza) dressed in combat fatigues, the frequent involvement of former soldiers.

The past two decades have been years of unending war. Born in 1992, the 20-year old Lanza spent most of his life during the “war on terror”—one neocolonial occupation after another, drone attacks, torture, rendition, a relentless assault on democratic rights. He could not have been unaffected by the constant efforts to promote fear and paranoia—the sense that the “enemy” is just around the corner.

Obama himself is the first US president to openly assert the right to assassinate anyone, anywhere, including US citizens. He devotes a significant portion of his time to selecting the targets of drone killings, with the full knowledge that civilians—including women and children—will be killed as a result. By conservative estimates, 3,365 people have been killed by drone strikes in Pakistan alone, including 176 children.

The government and the media praise the killings perpetrated by the US military, and soldiers sent to invade and occupy nations are venerated as “heroes.” The Navy Seals and Special Ops forces who do the murderous dirty work of the US military are glorified.

Can one seriously believe this country can inflict violence all over the world and not suffer deadly consequences at home?

In the coming days, more information will emerge shedding light on the specific motives behind this latest mass killing. By all accounts, Lanza was a deeply troubled young man. It would be impossible to commit such a crime otherwise. Yet the individual psychosis and its particular expression is, ultimately, the product of a profound social disease.

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