A new wave of US school shootings and other violent acts

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The US has been beset in recent weeks by a new wave of school shootings and others acts of violence, reflecting extraordinary levels of social tension and alienation. The authorities have reacted, as they always do, with a combination of platitudes and promises of more police repression. The acts of mayhem speak, at least in part, to a deeply dysfunctional society in which large numbers of people feel themselves abandoned, without hope and alone.

On May 24, the day following a shooting rampage at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), Richard Martinez, whose son was one of the six students killed, made an impassioned appeal at a press conference: "Our family has a message for every parent out there: You don't think it'll happen to your child until it does."

"When will this insanity stop? When will enough people say, stop this madness, we don't have to live like this? Too many have died. We should say to ourselves—not one more."

Horribly, less than two weeks later, on June 5, another fatal school shooting occurred at Seattle Pacific University. Nineteen-year-old Paul Lee was killed and three others were wounded, before the shooter, Aaron Ybarra, was subdued by a student.

On June 10, 14-year-old Emilio Hoffman was shot dead at Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Oregon, fifteen miles east of Portland, by 15-year-old fellow student, Jared Padgett. According to the *Oregonian*, "Police found a green army-style bag with 'PADGETT L 0788' printed on it and a black Fender guitar case. They also found an AR-15 M4, .223-caliber semi-automatic rifle and numerous extra loaded magazines near the shooter's body."

According to Everytown for Gun Safety, the gun control group, there have been 74 school shootings since the Newtown, Connecticut tragedy in December 2012, in which 20 school children and six adult staff members were killed.

America is one of the most violent societies on the planet. When mayhem erupts at schools and involves children, television, radio and mass news publications present the events as shocking, unexpected, irrational and unexplainable. Yet as a *Huffington Post* headline suggested, "If It's a School Week In America, Odds Are There Will Be A School Shooting."

And this is not something restricted to schools. On June 8, two alleged white supremacists shot and killed two Las Vegas policemen and a third person before rushing into a Wal-Mart store and killing themselves. A headline in the *Las Vegas Sun* read, "What now? Three mass shootings in a week leave communities wondering how to react."

Reassuringly, the *Sun* commented: "The number of [mass shooting] incidents jumped 300 percent in the latter part of the first decade in the 2000s but hasn't ballooned since. From 2000 to 2008, there were an average of five mass killings each year in America, according to an FBI report. Since 2009, there have been an average 16 per year—more than one a month. The number of people injured or killed in school shootings has remained level, according to the Department of Education."

At a live Tumblr forum at the White House, President Barack Obama responded to a question submitted by a University of California, Santa Barbara student who knew one of those shot on May 23: "What can we all do?"

Obama's reply was almost incoherent. After expressing the appropriate shock, he said, "We're the only developed country on Earth where this happens. And it happens now once a week. And it's a one-day

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story. There's no place else like this."

The president then argued there was really nothing that could be done because "the bottom line is, is that we don't have enough tools right now to really make as big of a dent as we need to."

What "tools?" A "dent" in what?

A section of the US media slavishly promotes gun control laws as the solution to the explosion of violence in the schools. Another section argues, seriously, that there is no explanation without a reference to Original Sin and the existence of Evil. Disorientation, ignorance and bewilderment prevail in official circles. Mostly, officials simply hold their breath, waiting for the next eruption.

It would occur to no one in official circles to draw the obvious connection between the endless brutality pursued by Washington all over the globe, against essentially defenseless peoples, as well as the green light given to police forces within the US to shoot down whomever they please, and the violence of everyday life in America. To that must be added the absence of any mass progressive political alternative, the vast social inequality and the general cruelty and callousness of the establishment.

In the face of the indescribable suffering of losing a child to violence and the complete silence or worse on the part of the authorities, individuals can reveal an amazing capacity for compassion.

On Sunday, photos were released by Rally, the advocacy communications firm that represents Sandy Hook Promise, of Richard Martinez and Peter Rodger, father of the Santa Barbara shooter, embracing. While no details of the conversation that took place in early June were made public, the photos demonstrate the striving of two fathers to search for answers. Both of their sons died in Isla Vista, California on May 23. Christopher Martinez, 20, was one of the students shot dead by Elliot Rodger, who later turned the gun on himself.

After his national press conference the day after the UCSB shootings, Martinez expressed a desire to meet with the shooter's father. "I've been told that the shooter's father has said he wanted to devote his life to making sure that doesn't happen again. I share that with him," Martinez said. "He's a father. I'm a father. He loved his son. I love my son. His son died. My son died."

In the current "law-and-order" political atmosphere, to set aside the stupid and reactionary conceptions pushed by the media takes a great deal of courage and insight.

Another example: the family of Jared Padgett, the 15-year-old Oregon high school student who shot and killed classmate Emilio Hoffman and wounded a teacher before taking his own life, were the recipients of an online fundraising campaign to cover funeral expenses. Amy Evans said of the violence at Reynolds High School, her alma mater, that her "heart broke in every direction." A fund had already been started for Hoffman's family, but Evans told the press, "No one plans for the kid's [Padgett's] funeral."

Evans told the press, "This is a pretty horrific time for [his family]. I know it's pretty easy to demonize them, but they're not demons. They are real people and I think empathy is what we often lack in these kinds of tragedies."

Padgett's parents, Michael and Kristina, wrote in a statement, "We are deeply sorrowful for the family of Emilio Hoffman and share their pain, heartache, and grief for the loss of their oldest son and brother of the family. Our family does not condone and has never promoted violence or hatred toward anyone… We are horrified and distraught by the actions perpetrated by our son."

Oregon State Senate Pro Tempore Ginny Burdick told NBC News last week that Padgett's parents "are ultimately responsible."

There is no indication that the wave of violence will end any time soon. This is America in June 2014.

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