

Twenty-six dead in Texas church massacre: A society ravaged by pathological violence

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7 November 2017

A small town in Texas was the scene of a horrific mass shooting Sunday morning. A lone gunman, wearing black tactical gear and a ballistics vest, and toting what authorities described as an “assault-type rifle,” opened fire at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, population about 700, southeast of San Antonio, killing 26 people.

At least a dozen of the dead were children, one as young as 18 months. Eight members of one family were killed. The grandmother of the shooter’s wife was also killed. Fifteen of the 20 wounded remain in area hospitals, several in critical condition.

The shooter, Devin Patrick Kelley, 26, was pursued by a local resident, who saw the attack and drew a weapon and fired on the gunman. Kelley dropped his weapon and attempted to escape by driving away. Two people followed him by car and he was eventually found dead in his vehicle, crashed by the roadside in a neighboring county. Authorities believe he died of a self-inflicted wound, with several weapons at his side.

When Americans turned on their televisions or checked their phones or laptops midday Sunday, many shook their heads in disgust at the news of yet another gruesome mass shooting in America. More innocent lives gunned down in what authorities would have us believe are “senseless killings,” with no real explanation provided aside from describing the gunman as someone gripped by “pure evil.”

But do such banal explanations hold up under conditions where these mass shootings continue to occur with regularity and increasing brutality? The Sutherland Springs shooting took place just five weeks after the Las Vegas shooting at a country music festival, the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history, which left 59 dead and 546 injured.

Eight of the 20 deadliest mass shootings in the US have taken place over the past five years (all figures include the perpetrators):

- November 5, 2017: Sutherland Springs, Texas church shooting—27 dead
- October 1, 2017: The Harvest music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada—59 dead

- June 12, 2016: Pulse Nightclub, Orlando, Florida—49 dead

- December 2, 2015: San Bernardino, California shooting—14 dead

- October 1, 2015: Umpqua Community College shooting, Oregon—10 dead

- September 16, 2013: Washington Navy Yard shooting, Washington DC—13 dead

- December 14, 2012: Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Newtown, Connecticut—28 dead

- July 20, 2012: Century 16 movie theater shooting, Aurora, Colorado—12 dead

Following Sunday’s shootings, the authorities were quick to chime in with their religious platitudes, as well as cynically seizing on the tragedy as an opportunity to advance their pro-gun-lobby or gun-control agendas.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Japanese President Abe Shinzo in Japan, President Trump stated: “I think that mental health is a problem here. Based on preliminary reports, this was a very deranged individual with a lot of problems over a very long period of time ... but this isn’t about guns.”

Former president Barack Obama tweeted: “We grieve with all the families in Sutherland Springs harmed by this act of hatred, and we’ll stand with the survivors as they recover. May God also grant all of us the wisdom to ask what concrete steps we can take to reduce the violence and weaponry in our midst.”

But such statements are cold comfort to the Sutherland Springs families who are grieving and offer little by way of explanation to the public at large as to why such atrocities continue to happen. Of course, the perpetrators of these mass shootings are invariably deranged individuals. How could it be otherwise? What “sane” person would gun down innocent people at a church, a university, an elementary school, or a music festival? But there are always deeper societal issues at work in the lives and actions of these individuals that drive them to lash out with violence.

In his 26 years, Devin Patrick Kelley had already

participated in his share of violence before Sunday's incident. A spokeswoman for the Air Force confirmed that Kelley, who joined the military after graduating from high school in 2009, was court-martialed in 2012 on two charges of assaulting his first wife and her child. The child reportedly suffered a fractured skull.

He was confined for a year, given a bad conduct discharge, and reduced in rank to an airman basic. Although this discharge should have barred him from purchasing weapons, the Air Force never informed the FBI of the charges against him.

Kelley's first wife divorced him in 2012 and he remarried in Texas in 2014. Authorities say there was a "domestic situation" between him and his in-laws that led to the assault. His mother-in-law was a parishioner at the Sutherland Springs church, and she had reportedly received threatening text messages from him, although she was not present at the church on Sunday.

NBC also reported that two of Kelley's ex-girlfriends said he stalked them after breakups. A search of criminal records in Comal County, Texas, where he lived, found a record of only minor violations, including driving with an expired registration, speeding, and driving without insurance.

While Kelley lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado for a short time in 2014, he was arrested on an animal cruelty charge, according to police records, involving beating a dog with both fists and punching it in the head and chest, a witness said. He paid a fine in that case.

But the question remains, what kind of society molds such an individual, willing to settle a seemingly petty score by carrying out mass murder? One must first look to the US military. For Kelley and other young men and women, the US has been in a perpetual state of war—in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Africa and elsewhere—for their *entire lives*. The current occupant of the White House is threatening the obliteration of an entire nation and people in North Korea.

Kelley—faced with the prospect of unemployment, a low-paying job in the service industry or the precarious "gig" economy—chose to enlist in the military upon graduation from high school. He likely absorbed the military's jingoism and "America First" mentality, but the Air Force eventually spit him out with a bad conduct discharge after he abused his family.

Thousands of young people have also been drawn into the abuse of opioids, spurred on by the lack of job opportunities and the predatory drug companies. Opioid overdoses claimed the lives of about 64,000 Americans last year, a jump of 21 percent over the previous year, according to new figures release by the Centers for Disease Control.

And while the Trump administration claims that not one cent in additional funding can be provided for the opioid

"public health emergency," the White House and the Republicans are pushing through a massive tax cut for corporations that will lower the corporate tax rate from the current 35 percent to 20 percent.

Increasing numbers of older workers are unable to retire, and are working into their 70s to maintain their health insurance and enough money to pay their rent or mortgages. For the first time since 1993, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, life expectancy actually declined between 2014 and 2015.

It is no wonder that a new report from the American Psychological Association, "Stress in America: The State of Our Nation," reveals that nearly two thirds of Americans (63 percent) are "really, really, really stressed" about the future of the United States. This stress about the future of America supersedes even the usual suspects: money (62 percent) and work (61 percent).

Other common sources of stress reported by those surveyed include social divisiveness (59 percent), health care (43 percent), the economy (35 percent), potential wars/conflicts with other countries (30 percent), unemployment and low wages (22 percent), and climate change and environmental issues (21 percent).

Despite these very real concerns among ordinary Americans, the two big-business parties have no interest in addressing issues of social inequality and the struggles of workers and young people on a daily basis to survive and provide for their families.

The mainstream media and cable news networks took some time away from talk of "Russian meddling" in the 2016 elections to provide some sensationalist and uninformative coverage of the Sutherland Springs church massacre. But this coverage was peppered with new "revelations" about Russia and Vladimir Putin's intervention into every aspect of American political life. It would not be shocking to hear one of the media's talking heads suggest that Putin may have somehow been responsible for Sunday's shooting tragedy.



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