

A Sick Nation

Written by Walter Fields

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In the sorrow of the Newtown Connecticut tragedy, as families shattered by tragedy prepare to bid farewell to their loved ones, we must finally confront the truth that we are a sick nation. We are sick, and I believe clinically so, because we fail to address the pain of mental illness and turn a blind eye to the destructiveness of our gun obsessed culture. We are in a state of denial. Despite a rising body count, and bloodstained streets and buildings, we insist we are healthy and the tragedies befallen upon us are simply aberrations; cultural outliers. The patient has been diagnosing himself and the time has come for a professional and clinical analysis of our violent tendencies.

We are in a state of shock over the brutal slaying of little children; we presumed were safe in their elementary school. But, were we not in a state of shock when young people were murdered in Columbine High School? Were we not in shock when a gunman mowed down patrons in an Aurora Colorado movie theater and when college students were slain at Virginia Tech University? And are we not in shock and disgusted by the violence that has overwhelmed Chicago and become a part of a daily routine in many of our cities? When does shock translate into acknowledging the obvious and taking steps to end the bloodshed?

The Newtown assailant may or may not have been suffering from a mental illness that triggered his violent attack. We do know that as a nation we have been reluctant to take on mental health issues. Just think about the controversy and effort it required to begin to acknowledge post-traumatic stress among soldiers returning from combat. Americans want to portray themselves as strong; we are fearful to acknowledge psychological suffering because we fear it will be looked upon as a sign of weakness. When troubles do arise, it is quickly attributed to some personal failing or moral deficiency in the individual. And even with that diagnosis, what seems to matter most is the profile of victims of violence. While the possible depravity of the Newtown killer is properly being assessed there lacks a similar clinical reasoning advanced for the behavior of young men who murder in urban settings. The absence of a broader analysis of

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urban violence is the result of cultural conditioning that has embedded a correlation between young Black men and violence in the minds of many Americans, and the tendency among African-Americans, mirroring the larger population, to ignore the signs of mental illness.

Our denial extends to our obsession with guns and our willingness to accept carnage and bloodshed as simply the cost of our constitutional right to bear arms. We have given more weight to an archaic and out of context principle and willingly sacrificed the lives of our sons and daughters, even our little children. "Gun rights" have become a priority over human rights and public safety. Even when those who are sworn to "protect and serve" call out for stronger gun control laws, our depraved national psyche goes into overdrive to protect the gun and the right to kill. Meanwhile, the killing continues and distraught families try to come to terms with their loss. We should have reached the turning point a long time ago and not have needed little children slaughtered to compel us to address our moral failings and our fragile mental state.

Our sickness extends beyond individuals and permeates our culture. We produce violent movies and music, and pretend there is no correlation between a growing embrace of violence and exposure to it visually and via auditory assault. Guns are glamorized on television and in the movies, and video games now bring it straight to the palms of our children. Yet, we deny no such influence but leave the grieving to parents when children are cut down by bullets. While the gun lobby shamelessly peddles and promotes weapons of mass destruction in our backyards.

We are a deeply disturbed nation and the quicker we recognize and acknowledge our illness, the faster we will heal. If the past is a predictor, and it usually is, another Newtown waits us around the corner. My hope is that our shock will not wear off, that the pictures of dead children will be etched in our minds to the point that we can't or choose not to forget. Hopefully, the pain cuts so deep this time that we will seek out medical assistance. There should be little doubt that we need help.

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