

Gunshots at Christmas



By Jan Collins

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So, it's just one week until Christmas. If you haven't yet finished your holiday shopping, are you having second thoughts about going to a crowded mall? Or celebrating at a festive Yule party? Or, for that matter, attending a holiday game at a congested football stadium?

After the latest gun massacres in the United States – the horrific attack in San Bernardino on Dec. 2 that killed 14 people, and the Nov. 27 shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs that killed three – we have come to such a shocking state in America that some are afraid to leave home because of deadly shooting rampages in our streets, our women's clinics, our kindergartens, our shopping malls, our workplaces.

My friends in New Zealand and Scotland and Ireland and Australia and Japan are bewildered by this. They aren't afraid to leave their homes. But, then, these countries have common-sense gun laws. For example: in 1996 in Australia, a 28-year-old man walked into a café in Port Arthur, ate lunch, pulled a semi-automatic rifle out of his bag and killed 35 people, wounding 23 people. It was the worst mass shooting in Australia's history.

Australian lawmakers responded swiftly with new laws that, among other things, banned certain types of firearms, such as automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns. The result: Australia's firearm homicide rate dropped by about 42 percent in the seven years after the law passed, and its firearm suicide rate fell by 57 percent.

Also in 1996, 16 children were gunned down outside a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland. The following year, the British government banned the private ownership of automatic weapons and handguns on Britain's mainland.

And in the good old U.S.A.? After the hideous mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, the Congress did..... nothing. After every other mass shooting since then – and there have been

thousands, including the murder of nine worshippers at the venerable AME Church in Charleston in June – the Congress did nothing.

And after the mass shooting in San Bernardino two weeks ago? Congressional Republicans promptly blocked a measure that would extend FBI background checks on every firearms purchase – a measure that polls show is backed by most Americans. The day after that, the GOP killed legislation that would prevent people on the U.S. terror watch list from buying guns. Yes, you read that right. *As many as a million people on our terror watch list can buy guns because of a hole in gun check procedures.*

The NRA, with its perhaps 3.5 million members (out of 70 million American gun owners and 319 million American citizens) won again. Money for the NRA's lobbyists on Capitol Hill is indeed well spent.

And so, as the BBC declared on Dec. 3 as it opened its coverage of the San Bernardino shooting: “Just another day in the United States of America, another day of gunfire, panic and fear.”

The San Bernardino massacre was a terrorist attack carried out by a married couple (the husband was an American citizen) inspired by the ideas of radical Islam. But since 9/11, the number of Americans killed at home in jihadist attacks numbers 45. According to The Washington Post, that's about the number of Americans murdered with guns in an average day and a half.

Indeed, 95 percent of gun homicide victims in the U.S. don't die in mass shootings. In 2013, the most recent year for which we have complete data on gun violence, there were 363 mass shootings resulting in 502 deaths. But overall, again according to The Washington Post, 33,636 Americans died from gun violence that year. The number of gun homicides was 11,208. (The rest were suicides.) This means that victims of mass shootings made up 1.5 percent of all gun victims and 4.5 percent of gun homicide victims.

It always comes back to guns. Always. More guns mean more violent deaths.

More than 30,000 people are killed by firearms in this country each year, overwhelming the numbers in every other developed country in the world. Americans are 20 times more likely to be killed by a gun than residents of any other nation, according to NBC News.

Make no mistake about it: unrestrained gun violence in America is not just a women's issue. It is not just a man's issue. It is not just a children's issue, although our kids and grandkids will be dealing with this for decades to come.

Untrammelled gun violence in the United States is a national security issue. It is a local security issue. It is a public health issue. It is, literally, a life-and-death issue.

All I want for Christmas is for Americans to stop feeling numb and defeated and hopeless about ending the rampant gun savagery in this country, to cease viewing each new massacre as almost routine.

Legislators will do something when we, the people, are united and demand action – for starters, banning assault weapons that were manufactured originally for the military and have no purpose but to kill and to maim.

If we do not demand such action, Congress and our state legislators will continue to do the NRA's bidding. As they have been doing all along.

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