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Neil Macdonald: Death and delusion in a nation of assault rifles

By Neil Macdonald, CBC News Posted: Dec 17, 2012 6:07 AM ET | Last Updated: Dec 17, 2012 7:36 AM ET



As residents of Newtown, Conn., grieve the victims of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on Dec. 14, U.S. legislators return to the controversial topic of gun control. (Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

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ANALYSIS



Neil Macdonald

Senior Washington Correspondent

Yet another "national discussion" about guns is under way here, and it's so anti-rational, so politically cowardly, so ...unbearably stupid that you have to wonder how a nation that has enlightened the world in so many other ways could wallow in this kind of delusion.

Twenty children are dead, and journalists and politicians have assumed those breathy, semi-hushed tones that have become so much the norm in covering tragedies.

Everywhere, there is talk about "the grieving process," with pious asides thrown in about the need to "go home and hug your children," or pray.

As if that is going to accomplish anything.

The American audience is a giant emotional sponge looking for distraction from its collective gun craziness, and the media obliges, broadcasting endless montages of victims, with sombre, hymnal piano music playing underneath.



American gun politics 3:34

After the state medical examiner had finished talking about multiple bullet wounds in each young victim, all inflicted by the same Bushmaster rifle, one reporter asked the man to talk about how much he'd cried — "personally" — while performing the autopsies.

To repeat: the 20-year-old shooter used a Bushmaster .223 assault rifle, a commercial model of the military M-16, and the reporter wanted to talk

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About The Author

Neil Macdonald is the senior Washington correspondent for CBC News, which he joined in 1988 following 12 years in newspapers. Before taking up this post in 2003, Macdonald reported from the Middle East for five years. He speaks English and French fluently, and some Arabic.

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about crying.

The weapon is designed for war, firing ultra-destructive bullets that travel at 3,000 feet per second. It is designed to destroy human life as efficiently as possible, causing maximum internal damage.

As a colleague of mine so bitterly remarked, just perfect for a kindergarten operation.

The shooter's mother, apparently the first victim in this rampage, is being described in media reports here as "an avid sporting enthusiast" who "enjoyed the independence" of shooting.

She reportedly trained her disturbed son (whom she had once yanked out of the system and home-schooled) at the firing range.

When he left home for the elementary school on Friday, he chose the Bushmaster and a few semi-automatic pistols, leaving behind his mother's slower, conventional rifles, along with her dead body.

Terrifying logic

Now, as the so-called national conversation proceeds, politicians and pundits talk sternly about the importance of remembering that gun ownership is a constitutional right, practised responsibly by millions of Americans.

In this country, people actually speak about "enjoying" shooting something like a Bushmaster, as if that were some sort of normal activity.

Jason Chaffetz, a Republican congressman from Utah, proclaimed on Sunday that the real problem underlying these kinds of incidents is the mental health issue: "I am a concealed carry permit holder. I own a Glock 23, I've got a shotgun, I'm not the person you need to worry about."

Well, sorry, congressman, but you are certainly one of them, at least in my (admittedly Canadian) book.

If I understand properly, you live in an urban area, and carry around a .40-calibre pistol with up to 17 bullets in the magazine, capable of firing up to five a second, just like one of the pistols the Connecticut shooter toted.

In other words, you pack the means to kill more than a dozen people in moments if you choose, and we just have to trust you to be sensible and hold your temper.

Chaffetz's position is, basically, the core of the pro-gun message in this country: The destructive power of the weapon is not the issue. It is all about personal responsibility. And personal freedom.

The logic is terrifying. You could extend it to hand grenades or flame-throwers. Some people here do. (Though grenades are actually illegal here).

Flame-throwers don't incinerate people, people incinerate people, to paraphrase a favorite gun-lobby aphorism.

The 'child-killing lobby'

For the moment, politically powerful pro-gun groups — "the child-killing lobby," as the New Yorker's Adam Gopnik, another Canadian, called them Friday — and most of their lawmaker allies are silent, save for the occasional declaration that this is a time to mourn, or to denounce "the gun control vultures already circling the corpses."

The National Rifle Association's website contains not a single word about the Connecticut massacre.

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But just watch. Soon enough will come the talk about how the Newtown school shooting just underlines the need for even more ordinary Americans to arm themselves in self-defence.

And the weird, horrible reality here is that there is some truth to that. The NRA has helped ensure it.

There are currently about 300 million guns in this country, and gun laws are looser every year. The high courts have slapped down states that have tried to restrict gun use.

It is now quite normal to see people carrying pistols on their hips in shops and restaurants. Plenty more carry concealed weapons.

And many of these are criminals. Police are overwhelmed.

At the same time, it's a safe bet that if Sarah Dawn McKinley, of Blanchard, Okla., didn't have a gun last January, she'd be a statistic, too.

Alone with her toddler as intruders tried to break in, she called 911. The operator told her to do what she had to do.

She killed one intruder with her late-husband's shotgun long before police arrived. He was armed with a 12-inch hunting knife.

The new normal

There are, of course, other good reasons to own guns, especially in isolated rural areas. There always have been.

I remember a large dog, obviously rabid with foam on its muzzle, staggering toward our farmhouse in Ontario when I was a child.

My dad shooed my brothers and me inside, fetched his bolt-action rifle from the bedroom, slipped in a single round, and shot the beast dead. (He was a pretty good shot).

Another time, he walked out with that rifle in the middle of the night and faced down a car full of menacing, drunken, hoodlums in our lane.

Years later, a neighbour on a nearby farm was murdered by the "Ottawa Valley killer," while watching TV. The nearest police station was an hour's drive from our rural gravel road.

But my father never owned a Bushmaster. Or an Uzi. Or a sniper rifle. Or a flame-thrower.

What's taken hold here in America is lunacy. There have been 16 mass shootings in the U.S. just this year alone, leaving 88 people dead. It's the new normal.

Some of the killers wore body armour and fired weapons that scare Marines.

President Barack Obama has tearfully called for "meaningful action" on guns, just as he did after another mass shooting during his last term, and followed up by doing, well, nothing.

Perhaps he will try something this time, now that his last election is behind him and the history books beckon.

But what, exactly? His first election sent gun lovers racing to stock up on ammo and new weapons, for fear Obama would take their guns away. He had to assure them he wouldn't.

Now, one of Obama's congressional allies, New York Senator Chuck Schumer, is mulling the notion of restricting weapon clips to 10 bullets. "We need a new paradigm," declared Schumer.








How about this instead: Start by taking weapons of war away from people who aren't soldiers or police.

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