

## Report

### **Beyond 'Terrorism':**

America's Ideological Bunkers in Defining Political Violence

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**Las Vegas Metro Police and medical workers at the intersection of Tropicana Avenue and Las Vegas Boulevard South after a mass shooting [Reuters]**

## Introduction

It has become a déjà vu-playing-out rivalry between Republicans and Democrats about gun ownership/control whenever a mass shooting occurs either in Orlando in 2016 (49 casualties), San Bernardino in 2015 (22), Newtown in 2012 (26), Fort Hood in 2009 (13), Virginia Tech at Blacksburg in 2007 (32) or elsewhere. However this time, the public sphere has been embroiled, either in print media or social media, by an unsettled -controversy: was Las Vegas massacre "terrorism", "mental disorder", "pure evil", "an angry white man with a gun", or just a bad day of "gun violence"?

Above all descriptive nuances, it was an act of violence which terrorized Americans and left 58 innocent civilians dead and several hundreds in hospitals instead of enjoying a country music concert. The deadliest mass shooting in America's history was committed by 64-year white American Stephen Paddock; however, was not categorized as an 'act of terrorism'. President Trump simply called him "a sick man, a demented man", and Las Vegas Mayor Carolyn G. Goodman described him as a "crazed lunatic".

Some commentators have pointed to a double-standard in conceptualizing these acts of violence in the backdrop of rushing, in other cases, to a blanket judgment of 'terrorism' when a shooter's identity is Muslim/Arab, or when the attack occurs in the Middle East. Journalist Glenn Greenwald captured this irony as he wrote "in the early stages of mass shooting, 'no signs of terrorism' means: 'shooter isn't Muslim'."<sup>(1)</sup> From the early hours after the massacre, U.S. media outlets, like the Washington Post, focused on the fact that Paddock was a regular man who "liked to gamble, listened to country music, and lived quiet retired life." This paradox has raised several questions: how does America define 'terrorism'; is it the act of lethal violence, the attacker's identity, the type of weapons/explosives, or the scope of civilian devastation? Why does America still wrestle with the label of 'terrorist' amidst some cut-to-measure fluidity of the political discourse in addressing various forms of political violence?

## Anatomy of Gun Massacre

What happened in Las Vegas displays America's complex relationship with guns, constitution, and the evolution of the White majority's social identity. Americans own 48 percent of the estimated 650 million civilian-owned guns world wide, and 48 percent of them said they grew up in a house with guns.(2) A recent Pew Center study concluded that a majority 66 percent of U.S. gun owners own multiple firearms, with "nearly three-quarters of gun owners saying they couldn't imagine not owning one."(3) Between 1994 and 2015, hand gun ownership grew from 65 millions to 111 millions.

The United States also ranked first per-capita gun ownership, followed by Yemen, in a study of 178 countries completed by criminologist Adam Lankford. In the last 10 years, there has been a sharp upturn in the 30 deadliest shootings the United States has endured since 1949. Not surprisingly, it comes first among countries with the most mass shootings with 90 incidents; Philippines 18; Russia 15, Yemen 11, and France 10.(4)

Stephen Paddock had the total of 47 guns and rifles and 1600 rounds of ammunition between his hotel room and his home. He amended his semi-automatic rifle into a bump stock, a weapon that triggers bullets automatically. With this devise, he was able to fire 400 to 600 rounds per minute. He had also purchased 50 pounds [nearly 23 kilos] of Tannerite explosives, and had apparently other plans for more lethal attacks.

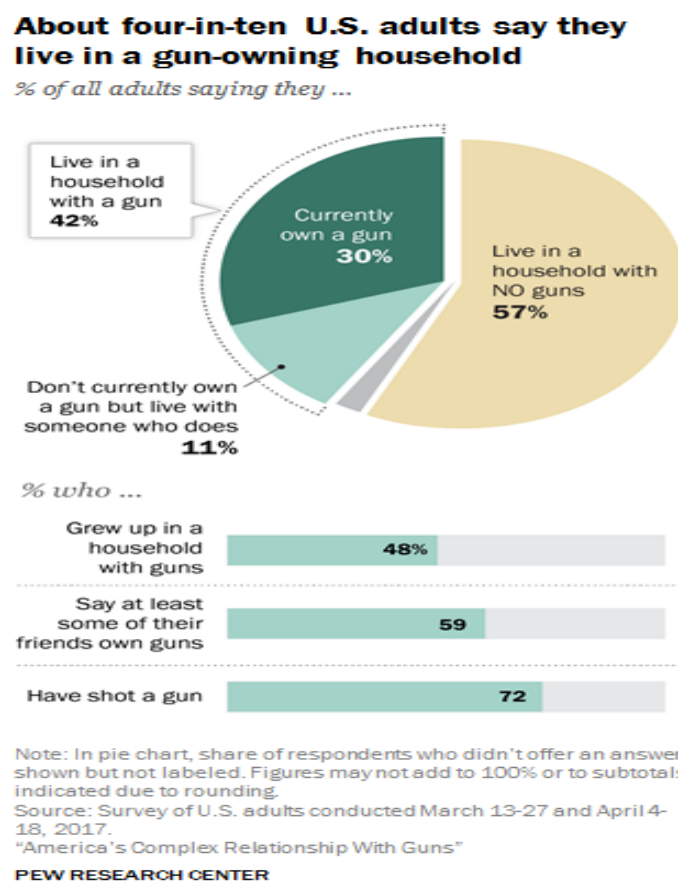


Figure 1: America's Gun-owning Households – Pew Center

## The Political Economy of Gun Lobbying

Las Vegas massacre has opened a box of worms for Republican legislators who defend the right to bear arms, one of the tenets of American conservatism. They base their argument on historical attachment to the Second Amendment of the Constitution; "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State; the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

Both liberal and conservative political elite in Washington have resorted back to their entrenched positions about gun control versus constitutional right. Civil-rights icon and member of Congress John Lewis (D-Ga.) argued for moral courage and called on his fellow congressmen to "have courage, be unafraid, do your job, bring common-sense gun control legislation to a vote," He asked "how many more dead bodies will it take to wake up this Congress? This must stop, and it must stop now. We were elected to lead."<sup>(5)</sup> However, most Republicans fiercely argued against any restriction. As Kentucky Republican Governor Matt Bevin stated, "To all those political opportunists who are seizing on the tragedy in Las Vegas to call for more gun regulations. You can't regulate evil!"<sup>(6)</sup>

The gun control regulations remain a taboo for most conservative Americans, and "the idea of roving bands of liberals grabbing for your guns and robbing you of a fundamental freedom is scary to lots of people."<sup>(7)</sup> The well-funded National Rifle Association (NRA) maintains its strong lobbying machine by giving generous contributions to various electoral campaigns. It has also maintained steady presence at arts events and the media, and enjoys significant influence among conservative communities. NRA's strong grip on the legislative process succeeded also in having the research project about firearm injuries and deaths canceled at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for twenty years now. Back in 1996, NRA accused CDC of promoting gun control, and subsequently the Republican-majority Congress threatened to strip funding from CDC unless it stopped funding the research program.

Gun ownership has derived its appeal from the glorification of American exceptionalism as a virtue of the New Nation. Back in 1831, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his "Democracy in America" book, "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one." In recent years, several albums have romanticized the white man's freedom and power, and expressed support for the Second Amendment, including Justin Moore's "This Is NRA Country", Hank Williams Jr.'s 2016 single "God and Guns", and Tennessee Ernie Ford's "The Shotgun Boogie".

In retrospect, there is a well-consolidated nexus of power, lobbying, and arm proliferation. The Gun control debate remains an empty shell in its moral call for preventing further massacres. Despite the growing numbers of victims, America is

struggling with its own ideologization of the Second Amendment and manipulation of the legislation process by the gun industry.

According to a detailed paper completed by three Harvard scholars between 1989 and 2014, the most probable policy response to a mass shooting was a loosening of gun laws. They found that "a mass shooting increases the number of enacted laws that loosen gun restrictions by 75 percent in states with Republican-controlled legislatures. We find no significant effect of mass shootings on laws enacted when there is a Democrat- controlled legislature." (8) As one journalist put it, "our leaders are afraid to tolerate limits on Second Amendment 'freedoms'." (9)

## Two Massacres, Two Distant Interpretations

Americans have constructed different categorizations of mass killings inside and outside the scope of 'terrorism'. The fluidity of America's judgment can be better seen through a comparative analysis of the narratives which have circulated around two recent mass killings five months apart in 2017: Las Vegas massacre October 1st and twin explosions in Coptic churches in Egypt April 9th.

### 1. Las Vegas Massacre

Trump's depiction of the shooter as "sick man" or "demented man" and other non-incriminating narratives overshadowed the discussion of home-grown 'terrorism' executed by white folks, while Las Vegas police are "still working to find a motive". In contrast, some Democratic lawmakers like Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) characterized the attack as an "act of terror." Pramila Jayapal, Democrat congresswoman of Washington, protested against "the absolute silence on the deaths that have been created through guns and irresponsible gun ownership." (10) In the backdrop, Timothy McVeigh's act of terror in Oklahoma City in 1995 has left an open wound in America's collective memory. He killed 168 individuals including 19 children whom he considered "collateral damage"; and remains the only terrorist executed by the United States.

Civil society organizations and intellectuals have contested the illogic 'logic' of not considering Las Vegas shooter a 'terrorist'. Some progressive commentators argued that "only with the Second Amendment do we hear that the price of freedom is the occasional Stephen Paddock, locked away in his own madness on the 32nd floor of a luxury hotel and casino, deciding coolly whose brains he will blow out next a few blocks away in the 273rd such unfortunate exercise of Second Amendment rights this year." (11)

One of the striking ironies here is the way the Republican establishment has tried to derail the public debate. In his response to the massacre, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) asked for mental health reform. This reaction was not much different when leading republic Senator Mitch McConnell who resisted the idea of contemplating some gun

control legislation. He stated that "the investigation's not even been completed, and I think it's premature to be discussing legislative solutions, if there are any." The main focus of Republican legislators has been on the so-called "Hearing Protection Act". It is a gun rights measure that would eliminate a \$200 tax on firearm silencers, refund silencer-tax payments back to October of 2015, and ease registration requirements.(12)

The counter image of the mass shooting has been avoided in most political rhetoric in Washington. If the massacre were actually associated with Islam or Muslims, "It would be instantly called an act of domestic or even international terrorism;" asserts Ibrahim Hooper, spokesperson at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, "it wouldn't be individualized, but collectivized to the entire Muslim community or faith of Islam."(13)

In a well-pointed article, Harvard scholars Connor Huff and Joshua Kreutzer decided to poke this controversy. They found in their survey experiment on 1,400 adult Americans that "the identity of the perpetrator matters for defining 'terrorism', but it's not the only thing that matters. How we define 'terrorism' also depends on other contextual factors that might — or might not — be highlighted in the media."(14) Still, the predictive models based on their experimental results show that "subjective descriptions of the perpetrator make it more/less likely that Americans see the event to be terrorism."(15)

## **2. Egypt's Church Twin Massacre**

To the vast majority of Americans, the Middle East remains a dangerous neighborhood with high probability of mass killing. They presume that all types of violence are pure 'terrorism' inspired by religious fanaticism. This common assumption was recently illustrated by the Trump Administration's reaction to the twin explosions in Egypt, which killed 45 injured 126 on April 9 Palm Sunday at St. George's Church in Tanta and Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, seat of the Coptic papacy, in Alexandria.

There was swift denunciation of the 'terrorist' nature of the attacks by the White House and the State department. Trump tweeted, "So sad to hear of the terrorist attack in Egypt. US strongly condemns. I have great confidence that President Al-Sisi will handle situation properly."(16) Meantime, the State Department made a standard connection between the two massacres and the "barbaric" nature of 'terrorism'. The statement also vowed that "the United States will continue to support Egypt's security and stability in its efforts to defeat terrorism."

For several media organizations, Egypt's massacres were a good opportunity to reinforce their political correctness vis-à-vis the Trump Administration and conservative audiences. One of Fox News anchors started the news item saying "radical Islamic terrorism has struck yet again. This time on a holy day at the heart of the Christian Coptic community just weeks before Pope Francis is due to visit Egypt..." before

introducing David Lee Miller, Fox News' Middle East Bureau Chief, to continue the coverage from Jerusalem, not Cairo or Alexandria where the Cathedral was stormed by the second explosion.

The frame of 'terrorism' was dominant throughout the U.S. coverage for several days. Some commentators pushed toward implying the 'Clash-of-Civilizations' hypothesis as proposed by late Samuel Huntington, who formulated of has apparently become the new manifesto of the extreme right movement in the West. The U.S. media discourse gradually shifted into evaluating the Muslim-Coptic relations as a majority/minority conflict, and implied the need for a moral stand in favor of the Copts in Egypt.

In his essay "Why Do Coptic Christians Keep Getting Attacked?" published in the Atlantic, H. A. Hellyer insinuated there was deliberate intolerance among Muslim Egyptians to push their fellow citizens out of the country: "it's difficult not to see this attack as having a deeply political purpose: to encourage the exodus of Christian Egyptians from their homeland. Through attacks like these, the perpetrators appear to be indicating that they don't simply want to make life difficult for Christians—they want Egypt to be Christian-free. In a radical extremist vision for Egypt, it seems, there is no room for this ancient and rooted Egyptian community."[\(17\)](#)

### **Variability of Lexicon and Discourse**

Over the past seventeen years, the evolution of America's political discourse has correlated with George W. Bush's conservatism and interventionism in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has institutionalized the 'War on Terror' paradigm which has come back stronger with the Trump Administration. However, his Obama pushed for a liberal agenda, a diplomatic approach, and a containment policy vis-à-vis various extremist organizations worldwide including ISIL.

Obama avoided the use of "Muslim/Islamic terrorism", as a labeling construct, in order not to help reinforce ISIL's jihadist discourse. However, he faced numerous killing tragedies inside America as de-facto 'consoler-in-chief' par excellence. He made a record number of twelve visits, more than his predecessors, to meet with the victims' families. He gave seventeen consoling addresses to the nation in the wake of random mass killings.

In contrast, Trump has positioned himself as the exterminator of 'radical Islamic terrorism', and pushed for a 50-nation alliance for counterterrorism while attending the Riyadh Summit last May. His tough talk might have caught the attention of some radical groups overseas; but has also indirectly empowered extreme right-wing groups inside the United States. Las Vegas massacre has showcased two main dilemmas in the evolution of the political discourse:

- a) Selective avoidance of the term 'terrorism' and the unwelcome nexus between identity, territoriality, and white-on-white Christian violence when the shooter is white American. In a polarized country, the term constitutes a "verbal weapon, freely wielded — especially when the accused is Muslim."<sup>(18)</sup> 'Terrorism' expert Martha Crenshaw explains that 'the label is so powerfully pejorative and carries so much weight. In today's political climate, it's so polarized that people are hoping it's not pinned on their side.'<sup>(19)</sup>
- b) The emergence of alternative terms with less-incriminating connotation. The English lexicon provides flexible options depending not necessarily on the nature and human casualties of the violent act, but on the subjectivity of the political/security establishment before the media take their lead of what to call it. The following chart illustrates the nuances of certain labels and their resonance and latent value judgment of the shooter:

Killer	Gunman	Criminal	Lone Wolf
Radical	Militant	Fanatic	'Terrorist'
Dealer	Hoodie	Gang member	Gangster

Figure 2: Futility of lexicon in describing individuals who commit mass killings in America

## Conclusion: Romanticized White Power

In the very Nevada state where the massacre occurred, the law defines 'terrorism' as "any act that involves the use of violence intended to cause great bodily harm or death to the general population."<sup>(20)</sup> Still, the White House avoided the term in describing the killing of 58 civilians by a spree of bullets coming from Paddock's rifle(s). The media coverage remains captivated with one question: why did he do it?

Right-wing communities and militia groups perceive themselves as victims of America's diversity. They fear the demographic growth of the minorities, mainly Hispanics who will become the new majority in the next four decades. In his inaugural speech, Trump focused on redressing the perceived 'injustices' of the "forgotten man", and boosted the white victimization narrative. While America's plight with gun violence remains a self-made moral dilemma, Las Vegas massacre has showcased three socio-cultural and normative dilemmas, if not contradictions, of the conservative collective self:

- a) **Perceived self-entitlement of regaining America:** The 'angry white man with a gun' narrative implies that white people, especially men, are entitled to everything. If they cannot, they resort to gun shooting as a default mechanism of white power that should not lose its glory. The numbers of these white 'rebels',

who act out of the Wild Wild West fantasy, is staggering. 131 out of the total of 134 shooters who terrorized America since 1966 are men.

**b) Symptoms of schizophrenic impulses in the political discourse:** This is the underlying current of selective categorization of gun violent acts between 'terrorism' and 'mental disorder'. Trump's America is escalating its war against 'Islamic radical terrorism'. However, it has made peace with similar acts of violence with the same lethal consequences on ordinary citizens, while favoring the frames of 'gun violence', "pure evil", or 'sick man". What stands out here is the underlying irony in condemning "their terrorists" [as part of "they" in the Middle East and beyond], while protecting "ours" [as part of "we"], from any moral denigration.

**c) Correlation between Trumpism and White identity:** Las Vegas massacre can be an indicator of the growing communal masculine ideology, stimulated by the rise of the extreme right and Trump's popularity among the so-called "super-owners" of guns – "a group of mostly-male extremists who make up just three percent of the adult American population, but own an average of 17 guns apiece."<sup>(21)</sup> As a candidate and as a president, Trump's rhetoric has pivoted around tough language, confrontational power, and regrouping the tribal white identity.

Trumpism has energized the pride of white exceptionalism and its "making America Great Again" base. It has also blurred the lines between the morality and immorality of bearing arms, killing innocents, and terrorizing the population since some of the gun super-owners may turn to be "sick" or "demented" men. The gun remains an external symbol of the underlying ideology, and as lawyer and writer Jill Filipovic put it eloquently, "White male power comes through physical domination. These are the same men we have been hearing a lot about since the election of Donald Trump."<sup>(22)</sup>

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