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The Exceptional American Berserk

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Philip Roth wrote that these murders "transport" the victims out of the "longed-for American pastoral" and "into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral--into the indigenous American berserk."

Americans are not a uniquely violent people. We suffer crime rates that are similar to those of other wealthy nations. But American violence is uniquely deadly.

Harvard's David Hemenway and UCLA doctoral student Erin Richardson studied 23 wealthy nations. The **United States** had one-third the total population but accounted for eight in 10 firearm deaths.

"Everyday the United States has lots more accidents with guns, murders with guns.

Thus it's not crazy that we have these massacres," said Hemenway, who directs the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. "Every country has crazy people; we just give them easy access to firearms."

This is the armed American berserk. He murdered 32 at Virginia Tech in 2007. He killed five at a Pennsylvania Amish school the year before. He killed at Columbine in Colorado, and the myriad school shootings that echoed it. Older Americans recollect tragedies of earlier eras, the Austin rifleman who killed more than a dozen in 1966.

We met the same killer Saturday in Arizona. Six dead. A dozen others shot. The apparent target, Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, fights for her life in a hospital bed.

Political assassinations are uniquely jarring. A singular nobody strikes down a powerful somebody. They confine democracy. More security follows and with it, a higher wall between elected representatives and citizens.

The Arizona shooting reminds us of a half-century of political assassins. Most of these men lacked any coherent political motive--recall the shooter of Bobby Kennedy, George Wallace and Ronald Reagan. We still debate Lee Harvey Oswald's sanity and cause.

"Can there be any American of our century who, having failed to gain stature while he was alive, now haunts us more?" Norman Mailer wrote of Oswald. Some version of Oswald's ghost forever haunts us: the lone-disturbed gunman we now see in Jared Loughner. Sociologists fail to explain these gunmen, while political pundits foolishly try. In a nation so large, one crazed man changes American politics. It's inexplicable and yet familiar. We've watched this American berserk in films from "Taxi Driver" to "In the Line of Fire." But we rarely consider the hard question: what is uniquely American about him?

"We don't seem to have more crime, when you look at the crime victimization rates compared to high-income countries, except for gun crime," Harvard's Hemenway said.

RealClearPolitics analyzed the most recent United Nation's data to better understand American violence. The assault rate in Scotland, England, **Australia** and Germany is more than twice the US-assault rate, at times far more. Yet the US-murder rate is at least four times the rate of these developed nations. America's murder rate ranks 53 among 153 nations. No other developed nation ranks within the top half. The comparison between assault and murder rates is rough; an assault is not always reported or discovered. Both rates are, however, based on criminal justice sources from 2003 to 2008. And the comparison, for all its imperfections, captures an important fact: Americans are not exceptional for their violence

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but exceptional for their extreme violence--murder.

American violence has known far worse days. In 2008, the national homicide rate reached its lowest level since 1965. But there are still about 12,000 gun related murders annually. Guns are involved in two-thirds of American homicides. The US firearm-murder rate ranks among third-world countries. It's about ten times the rate of Western European nations like Germany.

But guns are not the entire story. People kill people, as the gun lobby line goes. All Swiss able-bodied young men are required to have a government-issued rifle at home. Switzerland has no standing army, only a militia. It has known firearm tragedy; a gunman killed 14 people there in 2001. Yet the Swiss homicide rate remains significantly below England's and roughly equivalent to Germany's, two nations with far fewer guns per capita. The US murder rate is about seven times that of Switzerland, despite broadly comparable gun ownership and recreational gun culture. Swiss public arms are, however, largely rifles. It has a small population (equal to New York City's). It's homogenous, stable and has a robust social safety net. It also appears to generally struggle with violence less than the United States. The Swiss assault rate is half the US rate.

Experts agree, regardless, that guns don't solely explain the American homicide rate. But they disagree over what else does. Some experts note that this nation was born in revolution. Yet [France's](#) revolution was far more violent. America's violent past is surpassed by the history of other developed nations (see [Germany](#)). The cowboy psyche is uniquely American, but [Argentina](#) and Australia have similar history and lore. We have a vast wealth gap. But destitution is not destiny. Poverty has increased with the recession, even as crime has declined.

What we do have is a Second Amendment. Guns represented the last recourse of American democracy. Many Americans hold tightly to that original belief. Democrats have learned the hard way that gun control is a losing issue in American politics.

Loughner used a Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol with a high ammunition magazine, enabling him to fire about 30 bullets in seconds. That magazine was illegal for a period until 2004. There will be discussion, perhaps public policy, concerning troubled individuals access to guns. There was after Virginia Tech. But that's likely the limit of viable policy recourse. Public support for gun control is at its lowest point in decades. Even the Columbine massacre, according to Gallup, only led to a fleeting uptick in support for stricter gun laws.

There is an unspoken willingness to tolerate our share of murders. American hyper-capitalism makes a similar tradeoff. We subscribe to social Darwinism to a degree unseen in Western Europe. It's one reason our economy is the fittest. But it also explains why the wealthiest nation in the world has a weaker social safety net than other developed countries. The conservative equation of freedom: lower taxes and fewer regulations on guns, equals more freedom. Liberals adhere to their own zealous formulation of American freedom. The left has won more civil rights for the mentally ill, but those rights will sometimes risk the public's welfare. It's this most-American value that Jonathan Franzen explores, within the ordinariness of middle class daily life, in his recent novel "Freedom."

The National Rifle Association has long understood that guns are best defended as tools of that value. It ran a multi-million dollar ad campaign to defeat Al Gore in the 2000 election. NRA billboards read: "Vote Freedom!"

As Franzen wrote in his novel, "The personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage." The Arizona tragedy is not an inevitable consequence of freedom. But the nation has accepted its American berserks as one of the prices of that freedom.

David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at david@realclearpolitics.com and his writing followed via [RSS](#).



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