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# sundayforum

## Mental health becomes scapegoat for gun violence

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**THE CHILLING STATISTICS** on mass shootings and fatalities in our schools are outpacing those in our military. The issue of gun control is ever more polarizing. However, the perennial question remains: How do we, as a nation, stop this from happening again?

Our answers to this question are as tedious as the tragedy itself. On the one hand, there are calls to arm the public, to accept active shooters as a modern inevitability, and to train private citizens to react in these encounters with deadly force. On the other hand, there is a belief that preventing these appalling events is possible, in part, through tighter restrictions on guns.

Both sides are firmly convicted of their beliefs, and both perceive a fundamental fallacy in those of their opponents. The divide here is a cultural one, and stalemate is inescapable. In our uglier moments, the discussion can even lose focus on the issue at hand — that is, on the safety of the public, and of our children in particular — and dissolve instead into a squabble of identity politics, more concerned with our feelings toward the weapons themselves than with the violence they are used to perpetrate.

Several studies in the past year indicate that our country has rarely been more deeply divided along partisan lines than it is today, and in our brave new age of disinformation and post-factual politics, where truth is tolerated only as far as it is in agreement with our core beliefs, polarity has become the new American norm.

The debate around our guns is no different. In the wake of each tragedy, our policymakers are pressured to take action. With neither side of the debate appeased, we search instead for a different solution. We search for our scapegoat — a term of biblical origin used to describe how an animal was ritually burdened with the sins of the community and driven away. And when it comes to gun violence, that scapegoat has long been “mental health.”

For many, this is still a hard pill to swallow. How can someone commit such horrific, unprovoked atrocities and still be considered sane? If the problem had been identified and treated, couldn't the tragedy have been prevented? Doesn't the lack of a psychiatric history in these cases suggest that the problem is one of access to guns, not one of mental illness?

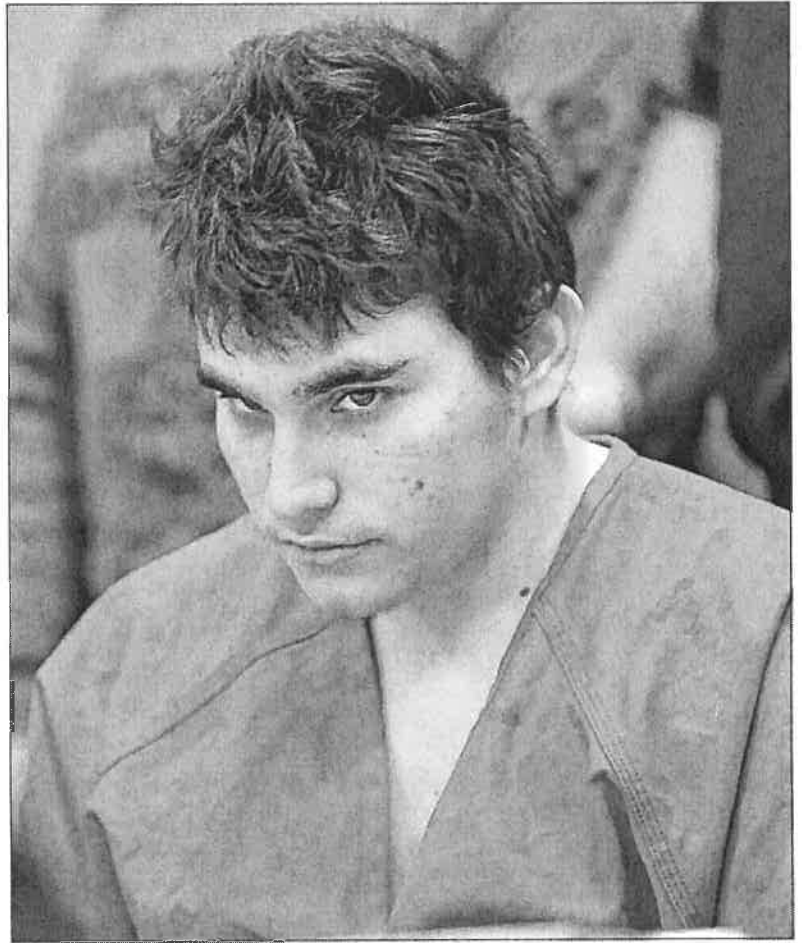
We are tempted to equate acts of extreme criminal violence with extreme psychopathology, to a mind utterly divorced from day-to-day reality. It's even comforting, in a way, to cement the “otherness” of these individuals, partitioning them from our culture and our society, and perhaps sparing us the pain of facing the proverbial mirror.

But it's important that we distinguish between the two. Criminal acts, including violent behaviors, do not arise from a disease without more debilitating symptoms. Even people with severe sociopathy don't have the kinds of cognitive distortions necessary for an acquittal in court.

Contempt for others is not an illness. A dearth of empathy is not an illness. Fascination with firearms is not an illness. This is the heart of the matter. Regardless of what resources we might pour into improving mental health services, medical and mental health providers will only succeed in managing their patients' violent tendencies if that violence stems from a mental disorder that can be diagnosed and treated.

It also worth noting, perhaps, that school shootings are not necessarily a new phenomenon in the United States. At least 11 occurrences were recorded between 1860 and 1900, and about two dozen more in the early half of the 20th century. However, associated fatalities rarely exceeded one or two.

The deadliness of these events has evolved alongside the technology of firearms, yet both our laws and our culture have too often failed to keep pace. This is still the United



Nikolas Cruz looks up during a court hearing held in April in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Cruz is accused of killing 17 people during an attack on Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February.

States of America, land of the free, and for many of us, guns will always be an integral part of both our national and personal identities.

Our culture need not be dissolved. But cultures, by nature, are fluid. They respond to new pressures. They adapt to new technologies. They evolve. A cultural paradigm that remains rigid — that fails to develop in a developing world — becomes dogma. It becomes isolated and irrelevant, and eventually it withers away.

In our zeal to defend our interpretations of the Second Amendment, too often we rail against things that aren't real-

ly infringements of our right to keep and bear arms, but upon the privilege to do so without inconvenience or accountability.

There are many, many modern inconveniences that we as law-abiding citizens tolerate for the purpose of public safety. We wait in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles for our vehicle registrations. We remove our shoes when passing through airport security. We leave our weapons safely stored at home when visiting federal buildings — including military installations and the floor of Congress.

There is room for growth here, and it's time to stop

scapegoating. The mental health needs in our country are great, and our mental health systems are in serious need of attention, but this is not and has never been the solution to reducing gun violence.

That burden rests upon us, collectively, to relearn the art of compromise, to take accountability for our history and ownership of our future, and to cultivate a solemn respect for our freedoms, as well as the ways in which they evolve alongside us.

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