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Shootings in America: The Psychology of It All

By Arie W. Kruglanski

SYNOPSIS

Following the assassination attempt on Donald J. Trump, a resounding question for publics everywhere concerns the shooter's motivation. While the specifics of this case are of abiding human interest, a more general question is why shooters in America embark on their acts of heinous violence. A psychological analysis suggests that the end motivating their deeds is their quest for significance and mattering, whereas the means, gun violence, is deeply rooted in the US culture.

COMMENTARY

Following the assassination attempt on former US President Donald J. Trump by the 20-year-old Pennsylvania resident, Thomas Crooks, a question emblazoned on front pages of major world newspapers is what were the shooter's motives? Why did he choose to throw his life away to perpetrate the heinous act of violence? While an assassination attempt against a former president and current presidential contender is particularly attention-grabbing, the very same question is raised time and time again after each mass shooting, of which there were [already 302 in the US in 2024](#) to date.

The specifics of Crooks' case are of abiding human interest to be sure. They likely involve a sad tale of suffering, torment and exclusion (some people who knew him have attested how he was bullied and isolated in high school), as well as Crooks' value confusion (reportedly a registered Republican, he apparently also made a contribution to a liberal cause). Yet more general answers are needed to understand what motivates assassinations and shootings in America in the first place, and why some people are willing to risk everything for it.

Answers to these questions centre on the distinction between *ends* (the why) and the *means* to those ends (the how). The ultimate end of shootings, psychological research

reveals, is [people's basic quest for significance](#) and mattering, the “mother” of all social motivations. A shooting event with multiple casualties lends the perpetrator the image of someone with a “life or death” power, to whom awesome respect and recognition are due. In a shooting incident, then, violence is the means, and significance is the end.

Why, though, if everyone yearns for significance and respect, only very few individuals drop everything to attend to concerns of their ego. And why do they choose gun violence when there are many other ways of gaining recognition (through good works, career achievements, athleticism, etc.)? The answer to the first question is personal, and to the second – cultural.

The quest for significance needs to be strongly activated to elicit action. Humiliation, discrimination, history of bullying and exclusion (apparently suffered by Crooks), can bring one to a boiling point, ready to do just about anything to restore one's hurt sense of self-worth. Violence, unfortunately, [is a most direct and immediate means](#) for humans to assert dominance and power, hence, to earn the respect of others. Therefore, it comes to mind almost automatically when feeling belittled, dishonoured, or treated as if one didn't matter.

Ostensibly, violence is shunned by society at large. It is not only outlawed but also runs counter to moral, religious and social norms of the American ethos. In parallel, though, there exists in America a gun culture that adulates firearms and portrays their use as the expression of freedom (as in the 2nd Amendment to the US Constitution), courage and manliness. The “good man with a gun” (portrayed in Western film classics by beloved superstars like John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Allan Ladd, or Clint Eastwood) who settles accounts with their evil nemeses outside the bounds of the law, has been an inspiration to generations of Americans.

[The US stands out](#) among high-income nations in its high levels of gun violence. [Over 70%](#) of mass shootings in developed countries happen in the US. Too, there has been an astronomical [increase](#) in the number of active shooter incidents over the first quarter of the 21st century, [from 329 such incidents in 2015 to 689 in 2021](#).

Assassination attempts of political figures are not [uncommon in American history](#): in the last 150 years, there have been at least 15 such attempts on the lives of US presidents, presidents-elects and presidential candidates.

Whereas most cases of intentional shootings are motivated by the quest for significance and the desire to demonstrate to likely audiences one's dominance and power, political assassinations add to these psychological benefits a patina of ideological commitment presumably intended to effect a political change for the common good.

What then can be done to turn back the tide of violence in America? Two things, both of tall order.

One is reducing the feelings of hurt, inequality and insignificance in large segments of American society. This means implementing policies and procedures affecting society's systems and institutions across the board by taking into account their likely

psychological impacts on *all* their stakeholders. It also means discouraging demonization of “the other” across political, ethnic, and religious divides, and nudging people away from simplistic extremism that inevitably drifts toward aggression.

The second thing is changing the US culture by de-glorifying the gun (and other firearms), and gradually erasing their current image as symbols of empowerment and significance. The first step in that direction would be reducing the ready availability of firearms by imposing the much-debated legal restrictions on their acquisition. Making guns harder to access would curb people’s current impulse to assert their significance by shooting others, and gradually reduce the pernicious association in people’s minds between shooting and respect.

Implementing these measures would take time, nor would it magically eliminate all instances of deadly shootings. But given the current epidemic of violence in the US, it bears serious re-assessment of what led to this unacceptable state of affairs, and how to change it. Understanding shooters’ psychology could prove essential in this endeavour.

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