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Editorial: We are victims of out-of-control gun culture

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 26, 2012

If the popular definition of insanity -- doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results -- applies in the matter of shooting massacres, then we have reached a dangerous level of cultural madness.

Adhering to what has become near ritual in these killings, President Barack Obama traveled to Colorado to console the victims of the July 20 movie theater massacre, promising them they won't be forgotten; news anchors did their solemn duty to acknowledge the inconsolable loss of victims to their families and friends; religious people held public prayer rallies; and we wondered endlessly in our living rooms at another public display of demented behavior, this time by a man who allegedly booby-trapped his apartment with explosives before taking off with his newly -- and legally -- acquired assault weapon and his thousands of rounds of ammunition (some allegedly acquired online) to mow people down at the local cinema.

Hour after hour we pick through the details of the tragedy, lamenting our inability to do anything in the face of such evil and grieving the loss of another place of innocence -- we've already seen the madness in high schools, colleges and places of work -- to the crazed random violence of a heavily armed, disturbed loner. What is shoved to the background, however, by the candidates and the respectable news anchors and most of the endless talking heads is the searing reality that in these massacres as well as in nearly 30,000 per annum killings, we have become, as a society, victim of an unrestrained, out-of-control gun culture.

It is futile, of course, to try to enter the tortured psyche of such an actor as the man charged with killing 12 and injuring 58 in Aurora, Colo. At the same time, it is essential to realize that while he might have been alone in his conception of this violence, he was not alone in acquiring the means to pull off the horror.

Standing squarely behind him, assuring him access to whatever means and level of gun violence he might wish to get his hands on, is the National Rifle Association, a lobby that holds an entire country hostage to its twisted notions of freedom and security and its agonized interpretation of the Second Amendment to the Constitution. The power of both its money and its propaganda is again evident. It has intimidated otherwise responsible and reasonable public servants into silence in the face of gun laws that are patently absurd in their lack of oversight.

The NRA loves to pose as a protector of constitutional rights and friend of law enforcement. In fact, however, since the first meaningful federal gun control legislation passed in 1968, the lobby has repeatedly and effectively interfered with law enforcement, backing measures that have seriously handcuffed the ability of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to investigate and prosecute crimes involving gun dealers and gun owners.

An elaborate 2006 report by the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence -- "The NRA: A Criminal's Best Friend" -- details the lobby's efforts to counter the most reasonable restraints on sales of weapons and ammunition and to hamper the ability of federal authorities to track gun sales and to prosecute violations of whatever remnants of gun control statutes remain.

The NRA is beyond extreme in its efforts to allow virtually anyone to buy any manner of weapon and

ammunition at any time, endangering not only the public but also law enforcement officers who have nationally opposed many of the NRA's initiatives.

Following the killings in Colorado, gun advocates, taking up the NRA strategy, immediately denounced any suggestion that we might, as a society, raise the issue of gun control anew by claiming that such talk was "exploiting" the tragedy and its victims.

As *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne pointed out: "Nobody who points to the inadequacy of our flood-control policies or mistakes by the Army Corps of Engineers is accused of 'exploiting' the victims of a deluge. ... Nobody who lays part of the blame for an accident on insufficient regulation of, say, the airlines or coal mining is accused of 'exploiting' the accident's victims."

Health care writer Rob Waters, on the *Forbes* magazine website, cited gun violence as a major public health issue, noting, "In the 10 years from 2000 through 2009, more than 298,000 people died from gunshots in the U.S. [far more than anywhere else in the world that isn't a war zone], about 30,000 people a year." Excluding natural causes of death, guns constituted the second-leading cause of death, behind only car accidents, which killed 417,000 people in those 10 years.

During that same period, two-thirds of the 179,000 homicides in the United States involved a gun.

The gun control debate can become complex in its finer points and as the talk runs to smaller arms and those used for sport and hunting. There is little danger that those privileges, indeed rights, will ever be infringed.

No rationale exists for anyone, save law enforcement officers and members of a "well-ordered militia," to own an assault rifle and hundreds, even thousands, of rounds of ammunition. To allow another gun massacre to go by with nothing more than hand-wringing and empty words is not being considerate of victims. It is rather buying into a culture-wide denial and giving assent to the insanity. We need to talk seriously about gun control.

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