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A moment of unity

By DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

After violence pierces U.S. cities and towns, Americans come together. Later politics can drive them apart.

Or not, maybe just this once. As a grim Monday morning dawned in Las Vegas, Nevada representatives in Congress issued statements that eschewed gun politics. They stuck to themes of sympathy and shared useful information for constituents, such as where they could give blood. President Donald Trump delivered a somber, unifying address to the nation.

Outside Nevada, gun control advocates urged a more political approach, at the risk of appearing opportunistic, or ignorant about guns.

Monday morning Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., jumped on Twitter to say, "To my colleagues: your cowardice to act cannot be white-washed by thoughts and prayers. None of this ends unless we do something to stop it."

Murphy also sent out a fundraising email that directed the indignant to donate—with proceeds going to anti-gun groups and his 2018 re-election campaign. The link later excluded his campaign, but the whiff of opportunism clung to his effort.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tweeted, "The crowd fled at the sound of gunshots. Imagine the deaths if the shooter had a silencer, which the NRA wants to make it easier to get." (House Republicans were going to vote on a measure to streamline the purchase of gun suppressors last week, but delayed the vote after the mass shooting.)

Thus Clinton displayed the other common foible of gun control advocates—ignorance about firearms. Gun advocates scoffed her suggestion that silencers would have worsened the carnage, a notion which Politifact ruled as false, as silencers reduce a fired shot's noise a mere 20 percent or less.

On Wednesday all four Nevada Democrats in Congress—Sen. Catherine Cortez-Masto and Reps. Dina Titus, Ruben Kihuen and Jacky Rosen—announced their support of legislation to ban bump stocks, devices designed to increase the firepower of semi-automatic rifles. Authorities found bump stocks on a dozen of the firearms found in shooter Stephen Paddock's Mandalay Bay hotel suite.

UNLV political science professor John Tuman noted that there's deep widespread support "in the political culture of Nevada," but also believes the Democrats were responding to constituents who believe Washington should tighten gun laws.

Nevada GOP Sen. Dean Heller and Rep. Mark Amodei have reason

to urge the Trump administration to ban bump stocks administratively. Such an action would spare them from having to cast a vote likely to alienate some of their voters—and to ban a device that the vast majority of gun owners probably never heard of until last week.

Many gun rights advocates believe that lawmakers like Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., sponsor of the Senate bump stock ban, won't stop with bump stocks. She is after all the author behind the 1994 federal assault weapons ban that lasted for 10 years.

It's hard to argue against the slippery slope argument. When the NRA shocked Washington with its support for regulations to restrict bump stocks, Sen. Catherine Cortez-Masto said in statement, "The NRA's announcement is a welcome opening for conversation on additional measures we can take to protect the lives of Americans."

On the other side of the issue, there's a general suspicion that broad gun laws don't work. The *Washington Post* ran a much-discussed opinion piece last week in which statistician Leah Libresco disclosed how three months of team research on gun deaths crushed her belief that sweeping gun laws work.

"By the time we published our project, I didn't believe in many of the interventions I'd heard politicians tout," Libresco wrote. "I was still anti-gun, at least from the point of view of most gun owners, and I don't want a gun in my home, as I think the risk outweighs the benefits. But I can't endorse policies whose only selling point is that gun owners hate them."

Measures which Libresco once considered "common sense reforms" didn't really work. Good intentions yielded "policies that often seem as if they were drafted by people who have encountered guns only as a figure in a briefing book or an image on the news."

That is the hurdle supporters of gun restrictions will have to overcome: Would their prescription have stopped shooter Stephen Paddock, who bought his arsenal legally after passing a background check?

Keep in mind the number of guns that already exist in the United States—in 2013 the Pew Foundation cites estimates between 270 million and 320 million.

Asked on *Fox News* if he would support a measure to ban bump stocks, a frustrated Heller described the Sunday night shooting and responded, "You show me that law that would stop that, not only would I support it, I would be an advocate for that law."

(Creators Syndicate)

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America rises above its grievances

By MICHAEL GERSON

Who is left to defend the simple, often admirable, sometimes disappointing, American experience?

Our politics seems deeply divided between those who think the country is going to hell in a handcart and those who believe the country is going to hell in a handbasket.

Some of the tenured class that sets the intellectual tone of the left concluded long ago that America was built by oppression, is sustained by white privilege and requires the cleansing purity of social revolution (however that is defined). In this story, capitalism accumulates inequities that will eventually lead the rich to eat the poor. The American Dream is an exploitative myth. Change will only come through a coalition of the aggrieved. And those who are not permanently enraged are not paying proper attention.

But, at least on the populist right, the social critique is every bit as harsh. In this story, America has fallen in a boneless heap from a great height. It is unrecognizable to people—mostly white people—who regard mid-20th-century America as a social and economic ideal. The country has been fundamentally altered by multiculturalism and political correctness. It has been ruined by secularism and moral relativism. America, says the Rev. Franklin Graham, is "on the verge of total moral and spiritual collapse." And those who are not permanently offended are not paying proper attention.

A poll taken last year found that 72 percent of Donald Trump sup-

porters believe American society and its way of life have changed for the worse since the 1950s. And the most pessimistic and discontented lot of all was white, evangelical Protestants. Almost three-quarters believed the last 70 years to be a period of social decline.

Those of us who remember politics in the Reagan era have a mental habit of regarding conservatism as more optimistic about the American experiment and liberalism as more discontented. But representatives of both ideologies—in their most potent and confident versions—are now making fundamental critiques of American society.

They are united in their belief that America is dominated by corrupt, self-serving elites. They are united in their call for radical rather than incremental change. While disagreeing deeply about the cause, they see America as careening off course. Little wonder that Americans consistently say their country in on the wrong track by a margin of more than 2-to-1. Disgruntlement is our nation's common ground.

What group believes that American society has gotten better since the 1950s? About 60 percent of African-Americans and Hispanics. On a moment's reflection, this makes perfect sense. Compared with 70 years ago, when much of the country was legally segregated, daily life has improved for racial and ethnic minorities. As it has for gays and women seeking positions of social and economic leadership.

Many conservatives have failed to appreciate the mixed legacy of mo-

ernity. In recent decades, America has been declining community and family cohesion and what former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy calls "a loneliness epidemic." "We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization," he says, "yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s."

But the flip side of individualism is greater social freedom. Who would not prefer to be in a racially mixed marriage today compared with 70 years ago? Or to have biracial children? When conservatives express unreserved nostalgia for the 1950s, they are also expressing a damning tolerance for oppression. It does appear like a longing for lost privilege.

The alternative to disdain for American society on the left and right is not to sanitize our country's history or excuse its manifold failures. It is to do what reforming patriots from Abraham Lincoln to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. have done: to elevate and praise American ideals while courageously applying them to our social inconsistencies and hypocrisies. "What greater form of patriotism is there," asked President Obama in his admirable 2015 Selma speech, "than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?"

And this might be matched with a spirit of gratitude—for a country capable of shame and change, and better than its grievances. (Washington Post Writers Group)

other
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column

The people can change our gun culture

By GENE H. MCINTYRE

On Tuesday morning, October 3, the second day after the massacre in Las Vegas, media reported this and that as it does every day. One piece of information, nevertheless, stood out for me. It was among "story stocks" where the U.S. company, Sturm Ruger, a firearms maker, saw its shares trading higher with investors pondering whether the violence in Las Vegas will lead to greater gun sales. This news about profit-making among firearm makers is sadly repeated time and again after every mass shooting in America and subsequent to the foreboding University of Texas tower shooting in August 1966.

One can interpret this news however he likes; yet, to me, it notifies that more and more of my fellow Americans are getting armed. And that, statistically speaking, means more and more among us, including the mentally ill, those seeking to settle a score, the very-angry-about-something-crowd, will commit an act of violence with use of a firearm. The bottom line is that this violence problem is not shared to the same degree around the world in democracies like ours.

It is an old and tired story that reminds us that our legislators, in state capitals and Washington, D.C., are too often financially and ideologically beholden to the National Rifle Association (NRA), Gun Owners of America, firearms makers, gun clubs and their personal interpretation of the Second Amendment cannot put their heads, hearts and, most importantly, the gray matter they possess, to action sufficient to bring this matter of excessive firearms-use-violence under control. Simple adjustments even, like personalizing technology such as

fingerprint recognition, could make a big difference.

An experimental psychologist, Steven Pinker of Harvard, argues that people alive today are actually living with less violence than in former times. He sees a world, as we all do, with brutal wars, mindless killings, terrorism and even genocide yet

Pinker stands by his position as one who believes we actually appreciate improvement nowadays. One case study to support his contention was World War II, from September 1, 1939 to September 2, 1945, that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 60 million people. Meanwhile, events such as the one in Las Vegas could persuade a modern day observer to contend another point of view.

Analysis by Pinker sees motives in the human brain that attract us to violence as well as those motives that inhibit us from violence. He labels the former motives as *inner demons*, referring to pure predation or exploitation, drive for dominance, revenge and sadism. The other side of this paradox he calls the *better angels* or those motives that pull us away from violence, providing with empathy, self-control, fairness, reason, and rationality. In our lives, then, it depends on which motives have the upper hand: those inner demons or better angels which govern our decisions and consequent actions.

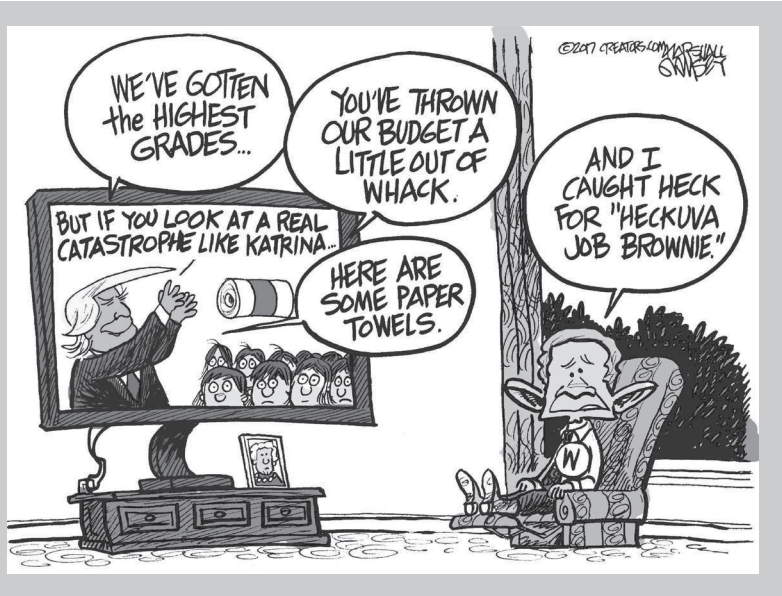
Why is violence so high in the U.S.? America was a land of lawlessness for much of the years before the 20th century what with the Revolutionary War, the Indian wars, the conflicts with other nations vying to con-

trol North America and the state of anarchy that prevailed just before and for long after the Civil War. Ordinary Americans often could not count on any government to protect them—such as when the nearest sheriff was 200 miles away—provide an insight to those former times. Without laws being enforced, Americans made up their own "laws" and decided what constituted justice. Deciding for oneself what's right and wrong determines the wild ways a whole lot of Americans behave to this day and a major reason why we have so many lawless events.

Other democracies, such as Australia and New Zealand, with frontiers to settle not entirely unlike our own, have come together with a common interest to establish and maintain a civilized society. We could and should do the same but have failed deplorably to date in not doing so. The most obscene and disgusting of violent acts, such as that at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., did not bring reform any more than the more than the 30,000 Americans every year who lose their lives to firearms along with day-in-day-out at least 30 Americans being shot and murdered.

Are we helpless? Have we not proven our mettle so many times in our history and thereby rise to wrestle this issue to a successful win should we set our minds to it. Most American-based surveys show that a clear majority of us want controls on firearms with those controls enforced; so, what's stopping us from stepping up in a ground swell to demand a safer America where every American no longer wonders whether he will be the next to be shot.

(Gene H. McIntyre lives in Keizer.)



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