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OUR VIEW

The spotlight of politics shines everywhere

The past two weeks, President Donald Trump has shoved the National Football League and its players into the spotlight. That's normally a place a private enterprise would love to be, but this president's spotlight is often too hot and too harsh.

Trump's comments about what should be done to any athlete using the national anthem as a protest platform — they should be out of a job, put decently — has been what many Americans have been talking about. But we should all consider whether sparking a futile debate was just what President Trump's goal was all along. Discussing kneeling, the anthem, Black Lives Matter and the American military was a fake handoff — a reverse, a flea flicker, a Statue of Liberty, if you will. It was faux action on one part of the field meant to distract from the real action happening on the other side.

Do you remember that just recently 21 states learned their voting systems were hacked by Russians in the run-up to the 2016 election? That Republican attempts to repeal Obamacare failed for a third time? That almost all of Puerto Rico's 3.4 million residents remain without power?

By and large, we don't, and we're instead writing about the NFL and the American flag. Trump is a master media manipulator, and he has us chasing the rabbit again.

But while we're on the subject, we do think the concept of patriotism is important, especially at a moment when many of our democratic institutions and ideals are shifting radically and our allegiances are under fire.

It is critical — now more than ever — to remember the ideals that made this a nation to be proud of, and what we must defend. The aspect of forced patriotism — you must stand, you must sing, you must remove your hat and hold your hand over your heart — are being vastly overlooked by the "patriot" crowd. It should be an honor to stand for the flag, not a requirement. It should not be a meaningless gesture, done without thought or purpose.

The places in the world where it is a mandatory and empty exercise are the very opposite of America.

The NFL has backed themselves into this tight spot. For decades, the league has (often cynically) worked to equate itself with America and the U.S. military. That includes flag-waving before, during and after games, military salutes, fly-overs and fatigue-clad military months.

Many other sporting events do it, too, from NASCAR races to Major League Baseball games with not only the anthem beforehand but "God Bless America" sung at many parks during the seventh-inning stretch.

This is all good for business: It helps ratings and helps the NFL ingratiate football as a nationwide endeavor — America's sport. But it does, however, entangle a private enterprise with patriotism. And when an employee of the NFL wants to protest against police brutality, it gets tied up as an assault against America, our symbols and our military.

We love sports, and see their usefulness as a safe retreat from the complexities and divisions of everyday life.

But the spotlight of politics is shining everywhere these days, and don't be surprised if your industry, your union, your ethnicity, your religion, your family is soon labeled negatively by the president.

What then, is the patriotic response?

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Daily Astorian.

Letters should be fewer than 350 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than

mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner.

Submissions may be sent in any of these ways:

E-mail to editor@dailyastorian.com; online at www.dailyastorian.com; delivered to the Astorian offices at 949 Exchange St. and 1555 N. Roosevelt in Seaside or by mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR 97103.



AP Photo/Chris Carlson

Flowers and candles are left at a makeshift memorial site on Las Vegas Boulevard on Tuesday in Las Vegas.

Why Las Vegas could change gun control debate

By ROSS DOUTHAT
New York Times News Service

After mass shootings like the nightmare in Las Vegas, there are always complaints that we don't talk enough about gun control in America, that we need to actually have the debate about guns and mass murder that

the National Rifle Association and the Republicans supposedly keep shutting down.

I don't think this is right. We do keep having a debate over guns in the United States; it's just that the side that's convinced that new regulations will prevent another Newtown or Orlando or Las Vegas keeps on losing the argument.

Twenty years ago, you could argue that gun rights was a strictly minority cause that thrived because of its partisans' intensity and its lobby's clout and money. But that's no longer true. Despite the best efforts of Barack Obama, Democratic politicians and a raft of activists, celebrities and talk-show hosts, despite a dramatic leftward shift on many other social issues and despite wall-to-wall media coverage of mass shootings, gun control is substantially less popular than it was in the 1990s — and gun rights is one of the few issues where the Republican Party is actually in touch with what many Americans seem to want.

Why is gun control losing?

One answer is structural. Gun ownership is a form of expressive individualism no less than the liberties beloved in blue America, and it makes sense that a culture that rejects erotic limits would reject limits on self-defense as well. Especially since the appeal of gun ownership is also linked to individualism's dark side — to distrust of your neighbor and your government, to the decay of communities and families, to a sense of being unprotected and on your own.

But the gun control cause also has a more specific political

problem. Anti-gun activists seize on the most horrifying acts of killing, understandably, and use them as calls to legislative action. But then the regulatory measures they propose, even when they poll well, often lack any direct connection to the massacres themselves.

If you go back through the list of recent mass atrocities, for instance, you don't see many killers buying guns through the supposed "gun show loophole" or without a background check. Instead you see examples of why, in a well-armed country, legal barriers to gun ownership don't necessarily prevent lunatics and fanatics from getting them: Some of the killers passed background checks with flying colors, some passed them because of human and bureaucratic errors, and others simply used someone else to acquire their weaponry, circumventing legal and regulatory obstacles entirely.

The diversity of weapons used in the massacres, too, has made it hard to claim that reviving the Clinton-era assault weapons ban (whose likely effect on murder rates was nil) would make deadly sprees much rarer. James Holmes and Adam Lanza used high-powered rifles, but Nidal Hasan, Jiverly Wong and Dylann Roof were all extremely deadly just with handguns. Aaron Alexis was prevented from buying an assault rifle; he killed a dozen people at D.C.'s Navy Yard with a shotgun. In a free society, madmen and monsters find a way to kill — as the killer in Vegas, a man of means and no significant criminal history, almost certainly would have even with tighter gun regulations and stiffer background checks.

But there is one way in which the latest massacre could be different. If, as it seems right now, there was a link between the sheer scale of the Las Vegas killer's spree and his apparent use of a "bump stock" that lets a semi-automatic weapon fire at the rate of a machine gun, then gun-control advocates could make a more-direct-than-usual case for making such stocks illegal in response.

Right now tight regulations on fully automatic weapons are a settled part of our gun laws, and as restrictions go they seem relatively effective; no recent mass killer has acquired or used a machine gun. A new law banning "bump stocks" could still be flouted, of course, but it seems like a plausible extension of the principle that our machine-gun laws already enshrine. If you can't manufacture automatic weaponry and you can buy only an old automatic under strict conditions, you shouldn't be able to make a nonautomatic weapon fire like a machine gun by simply adding on a legal part.

Would this be a meaningless gesture, given that no recent mass killing before this one has involved automatic fire? Not necessarily: Remember that mass killings are a form of social contagion, whose perpetrators copy their predecessors and seek to construct what Ari Schulman, the editor of The New Atlantis, has described as "a crafted public spectacle, a theater of violence in which we are the unwitting yet compliant audience."

This reality has led Schulman to urge media organizations to reduce their coverage of the killers' personalities, plans and alleged grievances. But it also suggests that when a mass murderer pioneers a new form of satanic performance art, like the hail of automatic-seeming fire that fell on concertgoers in Las Vegas, others will seek to imitate his methods. So moving pre-emptively to block a specific means of imitation isn't necessarily fruitless; it might be an entirely reasonable precaution against some dark ambition that's just now taking shape.

Seeking a modest precaution after such a monstrous bloodletting will no doubt strike gun control advocates as a hopelessly insufficient goal. But a cause that has been losing ground for 20 years can't be picky in the victories that it seeks.

Las Vegas seems to offer a clear case for a particular kind of gun regulation. I'm provisionally convinced. So let's study the facts, have the argument and see how it turns out.