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# OPINION

## Irresponsible Leaders Normalize Violence

### Mass killings evidence of broken society

By BEN JEALOUS

The mass killings at the elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, 10 days after the white supremacist killings in Buffalo, N.Y., are further evidence of how deeply our society is broken, and how urgently we need to figure out how to begin fixing it.

The slaughter of so many young children and two of their teachers is shocking at a human level. It is absolutely gutting to me as a parent of school-aged children. Millions of us send our kids off to school every day, trying to set aside the knowledge gnawing at our insides that our school and our kids could be next.

It should be unimaginable, and in most countries it is.

But it is not unimaginable in our country. It is so not unimaginable that we subject our young children to the trauma of live shooter drills. We make teachers responsible for preparing students to deal with what too many of our policymakers have decided is not worth trying to prevent.

A decade ago, after the slaughter of elementary school students and educators at



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Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut, most Republican senators used filibuster rules to block passage of a bill to require background checks for all gun purchases. That is about the least we could do to try to limit gun violence. It is supported by huge majorities of Americans, including most gun owners.

We see similarly misplaced priorities at the state level. According to news reports, the killings in Uvalde were the fifth major mass shooting in the state during Gov. Greg Abbott's tenure. After previous mass killings, Texas Republicans have weak-

ened gun regulations. In 2015, Abbott urged Texans to buy more guns, tweeting that he was "embarrassed" that the state was falling behind California in gun purchases. Just last year, Abbott signed legislation to loosen gun restrictions, making it possible for Texans to carry handguns without any license or training.

This is a virtual invitation to increased gun violence.

These recent shootings come at a time when violence is increasingly being normalized and justified by irresponsible leaders.

The two-year anniversary of the police killing of George Floyd over the Memorial Day holiday was a reminder that Black Americans are all too familiar with the threat that "routine" interactions with police can turn deadly.

In response to widespread protests against Floyd's killing, extremists mobilized armed mobs with false fear-mongering claims that "antifa" and Black Lives Matter activists were planning to ransack suburbs and small towns. Far right-wing activists also insist that the Second Amendment allows private ownership of even the most powerful military weapons, so that they can be turned against a "tyrannical" government.

We are also just days away from congressional hearings on the violent Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. We will hear about extremists in the so-called

Stop the Steal movement who threatened civil war if Trump did not stay in power. In spite of Republican efforts to sabotage the investigation, we will learn more about the crimes that led to that day's deadly violence. And the violent rhetoric goes on: Trump himself recently used his own social media platform to amplify a self-identified MAGA activist's prediction of – or call for – civil war. That is utterly irresponsible.

Scholars have identified the kind of polarization taking place in our country, and the kind of diminished commitment to democracy we have seen among Trump Republicans, as predictors of a country's vulnerability to civil war.

For families who lost loved ones in Buffalo and Uvalde, and for the many communities that have been scarred by mass murder, it may feel like that war has already arrived. That suffering would be multiplied beyond measure if the extremists calling for civil war in our country get their wish.

We should not tolerate the slightest encouragement for that kind of catastrophe from political leaders, including the former commander in chief. And we should not tolerate continued inaction on the violence that stalks our streets and schools.

Ben Jealous serves as president of People for the American Way and Professor of the Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.



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