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OTHER VIEWS

What kind of nation do we want to be?

By Baker City Herald

This isn't the country we want it to be. Surely we can all agree on that much.

We don't want America to be the country where places are known not for their people or their scenery but for their mass shootings.

We don't want Parkland, Florida, where 17 people were killed last week at a high school, to join Las Vegas and Sandy Hook and Umpqua Community College on the grim roster.

What we don't want to be, unfortunately, is the easy question to answer, the easy platitude to repeat.

The infinitely harder part is deciding what we're willing to do, as a society, to make our country what we want it to be. Because we will have to make changes — and almost certainly significant changes — if we are to make meaningful progress in reducing the frequency of these massacres.

To make it more difficult (which, to be clear, is not the same thing as preventing) for people such as Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old suspect in the Florida shooting, from acquiring a semi-automatic rifle, or indeed any gun, we need to change laws.

But which laws?

Congress could reinstate the federal ban on the sale of "assault weapons" and high-capacity magazines. But that would have no effect on the millions of existing semi-automatic guns, both rifles and handguns. The sheer number of these guns makes it illogical to believe that anything but

government confiscation would greatly limit their availability, legal or not. This option has obvious constitutional connotations.

As for Cruz, media reports describe him as a "troubled teen who posted disturbing material on social media." He had been expelled, for disciplinary reasons, from the high school where he reportedly admitted opening fire, police said. If we believe any of these actions should prevent a person from legally buying or owning a gun, then we will need to change federal, and probably state, laws. This raises constitutional issues as well.

But let's not delude ourselves into thinking that those difficult issues needn't be raised if we are serious about making a significant difference. Despite implications to the contrary from politicians, pundits and others, we see no compelling evidence that easy legislative solutions exist — which is to say, solutions that don't require that we dramatically alter how we deal with people and with the availability of guns.

It's not enough to say, as many people say after every mass shooting, that we need to improve mental health services. Of course we should do so. But officials said Cruz had been treated at a mental health clinic and that he stopped attending more than a year ago. The question is whether we're willing as a society to mandate therapy for people who are "troubled" and who post "disturbing material" on social media, but who haven't been convicted of a crime.

And if we want the maximum protection from the possibility that such people will



Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star via AP

Millbrook High School students demonstrate against gun violence outside their school in Frederick County, Va., Wednesday following a school shooting in which over a dozen people were killed in Parkland, Fla., one week ago.

commit murder, then merely requiring them to meet with a therapist will never be sufficient. We would need to incarcerate them.

The deadly combination common to each of these tragedies is a person who procures guns and ammunition. Our challenge is to try to prevent that lethal link.

Stricter enforcement of existing gun purchasing and possession laws, and passing more stringent laws such as those requiring background checks, could occasionally keep a dangerous person from legally acquiring a gun (there are, of course, illegal means). These laws don't infringe on the constitutional rights of law-abiding gun owners — which is almost all gun owners, after all. Last February President Donald Trump signed a bill that canceled a federal regulation, which had yet to take effect, that was designed to make it more difficult for people to buy guns who receive Social

Security checks for mental illnesses, or who have been deemed unfit to handle their financial affairs. The law would have added about 75,000 people to the database used for background checks. This is a sensible precaution and it should be reinstated and used.

Cruz, we learned not long before our deadline, allegedly made comments about becoming a "professional school shooter," threatened classmates and possibly was identified by teachers as a danger.

All of this might not have qualified Cruz for the federal database. But it should have constituted ample reason for police to have paid him a visit before he showed up at school with a rifle. That's the aggressive approach local police took in late January when they learned that a man who had recently been in Baker City said he "might go shoot up a school." Fortunately, his was an empty threat.

OTHER VIEWS

A non-alarmist reading of the Mueller Russia indictment

There's been no shortage of breathless reaction to Trump-Russia special prosecutor Robert Mueller's indictment of 13 Russians and three Russian organizations for their efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election. "An attack that — but for the loss of life — is as bad as Pearl Harbor," tweeted veteran journalist Jonathan Alter.

That's one way to look at it. Another is that, combining the 37-page indictment with testimony from social media executives before congressional intelligence committees, the Russian operation, while warranting serious U.S. punishment, emerges as a small, poorly funded undertaking with a level of effectiveness that is impossible to measure but could be near zero.

The Russian project has been discussed almost exclusively in terms of Donald Trump, but it did not start out that way. According to the indictment, it began in May 2014, months before Trump began campaigning, with "the purpose of interfering with the U.S. political and electoral processes, including the presidential election of 2016."

The group's work was done through social media — Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Most of it consisted of buying ads or posting messages and keeping track of their spread through the social media world.

The indictment quotes an unspecified Russian document saying the goal was to create "political intensity through supporting radical groups," focusing on angry fringes and hot-button issues like immigration, the Black Lives Matter movement, and religion.

When attention turned to the 2016 race, the Russians at first focused on denigrating Hillary Clinton, and also Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, and supporting Bernie Sanders and Trump.

The intensified focus on Trump came, not surprisingly, as Trump emerged as the likely Republican nominee to challenge Clinton. "From at least April 2016 through November 2016," the indictment says, "defendants and their co-conspirators, while concealing their Russian identities and organization affiliation through false personas, began to produce, purchase and post advertisements on U.S. social media and other online sites expressly advocating for the election of then-candidate Trump or expressly opposing Clinton."

There's no evidence the Russians thought Trump had a chance to win, just like no U.S. political experts thought Trump had a chance to win. The goal was to harass Clinton — candidate Clinton and

then President Clinton — with a modern, social-media version of old-fashioned Soviet disinformation campaigns.

The indictment is vague on what the Russians spent. In terms of what the Russians paid for social media ads, the indictment just says "thousands" of dollars every month.

The sums amount to mere rounding errors in a race in which the Clinton and Trump campaigns spent a combined \$2.4 billion.

Facebook officials gave more details to the Senate and House intelligence committees a few months ago. First, Facebook said the Russian operation bought about 3,000 ads, spending about \$100,000 on Facebook and Instagram combined. That is compared to about \$81 million the Clinton and Trump campaigns spent on Facebook and Instagram combined.

Facebook said that of ad "impressions" — that is, how many times an ad appeared on screen in a person's news feed — just 44 percent came before the election, while 56 percent came after the election, and thus did not affect its outcome. And about 25 percent of the ads were never seen by anyone, Facebook added.

Looking at key states, the total spent on ads targeting the super-important state of Pennsylvania was just \$300, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The indictment says Russians used the fake Facebook accounts they created to team with unwitting Americans to stage a few real-world, pro-Trump events in Florida, Pennsylvania and elsewhere. A few days after the election, the Russians staged two rallies in New York — one to support the president-elect and another headlined "Trump is NOT my President."

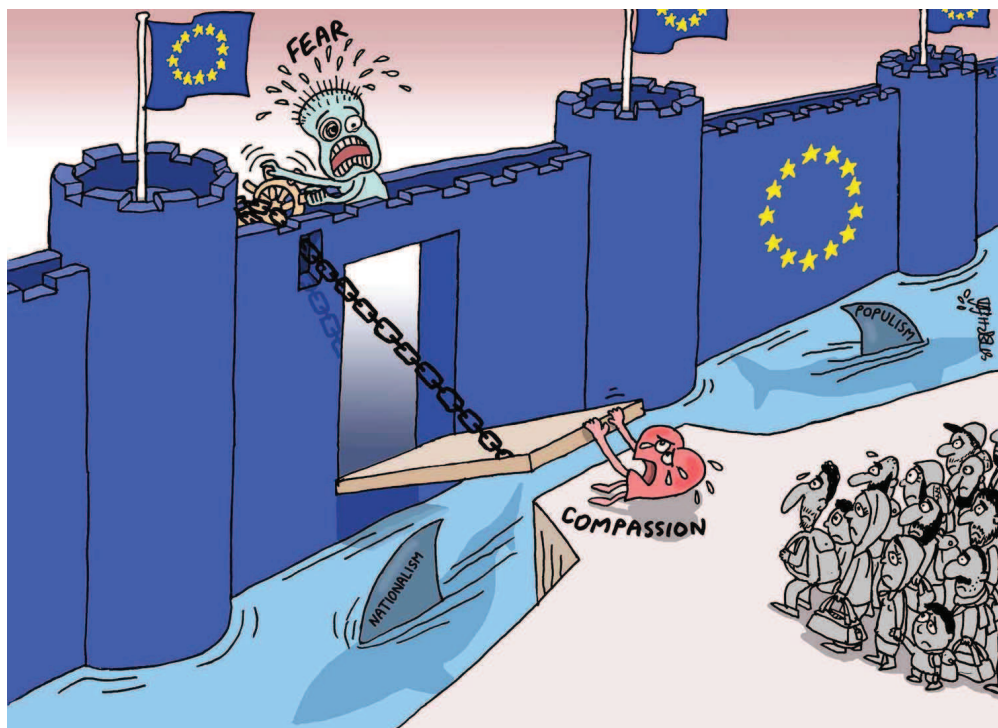
All Americans should be grateful that Mueller has gone after the Russian interference project. Russia needs to be prevented from doing it again, and also not allowed to get better at it.

But that doesn't mean the Russian interference outlined in the new indictment amounted to a lot. It didn't.

Of course, there's more to the 2016 Russian effort than the conduct outlined in the new indictment. The charges do not cover, for example, the Russian hacks of the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta, which could become the subject of future indictments.

So there is more to learn. But as far as the new indictment is concerned, there is good reason to stay calm. It's not Pearl Harbor, in any way, shape or form.

Byron York is political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.



YOUR VIEWS

Investment in community colleges pays big dividends

By CAM PREUS AND CHRIS BROWN
Blue Mountain Community College

Blue Mountain Community College is joining Oregon's 16 other community colleges in a legislative request that will allow it to maintain momentum in supporting students to complete their programs and prepare more people for local jobs.

The alternative could be cuts in student services and other programs, or larger increases in tuition. Both slow down our mission to prepare local people to contribute to the economic vitality and cultural richness of our community.

It is clear that no one — including our legislators — intended for this situation to occur. Last July, the legislature added \$70 million to Public University Support Fund to limit tuition increases and maintain student support at four-year schools, and \$6 million in state funds were added to the Community College Support Fund for the same purpose.

Unfortunately, the amount for community college was \$32 million short of accomplishing the same level of support for community college students as compared to students at four-year universities.

It forces most community colleges to choose between large tuition increases or significant cuts to programs and services.

The community college funding formula

is complicated, relying on revenues from both state and local sources.

It is possible that some confusion about this contributed to the situation as the state budget came together at the 11th hour last July.

Now we need action by the Legislature during its 35-day session, which began Feb. 5, so that community college students — and our communities — do not suffer a setback to local economic prosperity and student success.

A recent Emsi study has shown that for every \$1 invested in an education at BMCC provides a \$3.70 return on investment to a student over their working career — that's a greater economic return to local communities than any other public investment. Community colleges work in partnership with K-12, four-year universities, and local industries to ensure the best outcomes for both students and the community.

A \$32 million statewide investment in community colleges will pay huge dividends in momentum for our local economy. Please ask our local legislators to support BMCC and community colleges in Oregon.

Cam Preus is president of Blue Mountain Community College and Chris Brown is chair of the BMCC Board of Education.

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