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Sacrificing Our Children to the Gods of the Gun Lobby

A message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence
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It was accepted practice in many primitive cultures for adults to sacrifice children to the gods in the belief that the ritualistic killing of their most beloved offspring would somehow bring good fortune to their societies as a whole. Fortunately, this barbaric practice has been abolished in modern cultures – at least, in its most overt form. But how different are we, really, in the United States of America today?

The school shooting at Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky on January 23, 2018, in which two students were killed and 12 others wounded, was the 11th school shooting since the start of the New Year.¹ A report issued earlier in the month showed that the gun homicide rate for youth ages 15-19 in the United States during the years 2001-2010 was 82 times higher than the rate in the other high income democratic countries of the world.² But during this decade, we as a nation failed to take the obvious steps necessary to stop this carnage – these steps being adoption of stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws that have long been in place in all those other democratic countries. Instead, we bowed to the gods of the gun lobby, and as a nation, we did nothing to stop the slaughter. Even after twenty kindergarten and first grade children were massacred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012, we took no action whatsoever at the national level to protect our children.³

Primitive cultures didn't have enough understanding of the world around them to realize that sacrificing children to the gods didn't bring their societies commensurate rewards from the forces of nature. We can't use that same excuse today. In this context, who should bear the greater shame – the primitive culture that sacrificed its children to mythical gods that it didn't understand; or our modern society that sacrifices its children to the gods of the gun lobby whose insatiable appetite for profit and firepower we understand all too well?

We've been sacrificing our children to the gods of the gun lobby for a very long time in this country. On August 1, 1966, a student at the University of Texas hauled an arsenal of what would today be considered relatively rudimentary firearms up to the top of the university clock tower and began shooting at people below, killing 13, most of whom were students, and wounding 31 others over the timespan of an hour and a half before police finally killed him.⁴

The University of Texas mass shooting was the first such incident on a U.S. college campus. In 1968, citing this shooting, along with the subsequent assassinations of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut spoke of "the ridiculous ease with which Americans, both responsible and irresponsible, have been able to obtain arms for themselves," and "the 30

years of inadequate and ineffective gun control laws” in the United States. He called for the adoption of “stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world,” and he introduced comprehensive gun control legislation in Congress.⁵ But the gods of the gun lobby, to whom Senator Dodd referred as “gun nuts,”⁶ were displeased, and only a much watered down version of Senator Dodd’s Gun Control Act of 1968 was eventually passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson.⁷ The Act prohibited the importation of guns “with no sporting purpose,” imposed stricter federal oversight of the domestic gun industry, and prohibited felons, “mental defectives,” and certain other categories of individuals from owning guns.⁸ Nothing in the final version of the Act, though, would have prevented the University of Texas mass shooting, and the congressional disciples of the gods of the gun lobby further weakened the Act with the passage of the Firearm Owners’ Protection Act, also known as McClure-Volkmer, in 1986.⁹

In 1989, Patrick Purdy, a 25 year-old drifter with a history of substance abuse and multiple brushes with the law, walked onto the playground of Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California and began mowing down schoolchildren – most of them of Southeast Asian descent - with an AK-47 semi-automatic rifle.¹⁰ Purdy killed five children and wounded 29 others and a teacher before killing himself. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California subsequently introduced a bill in Congress to ban civilian ownership of AK-47’s and all similar “assault weapons.”¹¹ As with the Gun Control Act of 1968, the gods of the gun lobby were unable to defeat the Assault Weapons Ban completely, but they were able to substantially weaken it before it was passed by Congress and signed into law.

During the time that the assault weapons ban was being debated in Congress, the manufacture and sales of assault weapons surged in the United States.¹² The final version of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 13, 1994, contained a “grandfather clause” that allowed everyone who already legally owned an assault weapon to keep it – and for the weapon to be resold an unlimited number of times. While the ban prohibited the manufacture or sale of certain assault weapons either by name or according to their characteristics, it exempted many other types of semi-automatic firearms. Gun manufacturers exploited the loopholes in the ban to make and sell new, slightly modified assault weapons that were every bit as lethal as those prohibited by the ban, mocking the law by giving the weapons designations such as “AB,” for “after ban,” or “PCR,” for “politically correct rifle.” Moreover, Congress included a 10-year sunset clause in the law, after which the ban would cease to be in effect unless Congress renewed it.

During the 10 year lifetime of the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban, the overall rate of firearm related deaths dropped by 31% in the United States, and the rate of firearm related deaths in children and youth under the age of 19 dropped by 52%.¹³ The Brady Act, requiring background checks for firearm purchases through federally licensed firearm dealers, also went into effect in 1994. The extent to which either law was responsible for the decline in firearm related deaths over the following decade has been debated.¹⁴ It’s impossible to know to what extent factors other than the Assault Weapons Ban and the Brady Act - including the adoption of stricter state and local gun control laws, improvements in the economy, tougher sentencing laws for criminals, and a decline in the use of crack cocaine - were responsible for the decline in gun deaths from 1994 to 2004. It’s certain, though, that neither the Assault Weapons Ban nor the Brady Act prevented high school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold from murdering 12 fellow students and

one teacher and wounding 21 others in a mass shooting at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado on April 20, 1999. Among the weapons used by Harris and Klebold was a TEC DC9 semi-automatic pistol, an assault weapon that had been grandfathered in by the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban.¹⁵

When the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban expired in September of 2004, instead of enacting a new, more stringent assault weapons ban with no grandfather clause, Congress once again payed homage to the gun lobby gods and merely let the old ban lapse. The Brady Act remains in effect requiring background checks for gun sales through federally licensed firearm dealers, but it's estimated that as many as 40% of gun purchases continue to occur through other private channels without background checks,¹⁶ and Congress has repeatedly refused to make background checks mandatory for all gun purchases.¹⁷ Rates of gun deaths, including pediatric gun deaths, are on the rise again, although they haven't yet reached 1993 peak levels.¹⁸

From 1984 to 1997, the federally funded Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC), whose mission is to protect the health and safety of the American people,¹⁹ was actively engaged in conducting research on the gun violence issue and in funding and reporting on research conducted by other investigators. Such research included studies showing that:

- Gun related suicides and homicides were the leading cause of injury related years of potential life lost in the United States before age 65.²⁰
- The significantly higher homicide rate in Seattle, Washington, as compared with the neighboring city of Vancouver, British Columbia, was due almost entirely to lax handgun regulations in Seattle and a five-fold higher rate of handgun related homicides.²¹
- A gun in the home was 43 times more likely to be used to kill a household member than an intruder.²²
- There was a strong association between the presence of a gun in the home and the risk of an adolescent family member committing suicide.²³
- In 1992, gunshot wounds were the third leading cause of unintentional deaths of U.S. children ages 10-19 years old.²⁴
- The presence of a gun in the home, rather than being protective, was strongly and independently associated with an increased risk of a household member being murdered by a family member or other intimate acquaintance.²⁵
- The rate of death from traumatic brain injury (TBI) in the United States decreased by 22% from 1979 through 1992, driven mainly by a 42% decrease in the rate of fatal TBI due to motor vehicle crashes,²⁶ but that over this same time period, the rate of death from gun related TBI increased by 9% in all age groups combined and by 72% in youth ages 15-24.
- From 1992-1994, there were 105 violent deaths on U.S. K-12 campuses, of which 81 (77%) were committed with guns.
- From 1950-1993, the overall death rate for children less than 15 years of age declined substantially due largely to improvements in medical care and child product safety, but the pediatric homicide rate tripled and the pediatric suicide rate quadrupled, mainly due to increased rates of gun violence.²⁷
- The rate of gun-related deaths in U.S. children under the age of 15 was 12 times higher than the average rate in the other 25 high income democratic countries of the world.²⁸
- Scientific principles rather than polemics should be applied to guide strategies to prevent gun violence in the United States.²⁹

The gods of the gun lobby were much angered by the CDC's blasphemy. The fact that the CDC was promoting scientific research that debunked the myth of "guns for protection" was a major threat to the control the gods held over the American public. The gods were also angered that the CDC was calling attention to fact that the lives of American children were being sacrificed to satisfy their greed. They instructed their disciples in Congress to quash the CDC's gun violence research, and their minions readily complied. Led by Representative Jay Dickey of Arkansas, Congress cut the funding of the CDC by \$2.6 million in 1996, exactly the amount that the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control had spent the previous year on gun violence research. The debate on the floor of the House of Representatives made it clear that the intent of this funding cut was to silence the CDC on the gun violence issue.³⁰ To make their intent even more explicit, the disciples of the gun gods inserted language into the omnibus federal budget bill for fiscal year 1997 stating that "none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control."³¹

To its credit, the CDC continued to report on the gun violence problem for several years after its funding had been cut by Congress. Studies conducted or supported by the CDC after the 1997 funding cut showed:

- From 1994-1999, there were 164 additional gun related deaths on U.S. K-12 campuses.³²
- The majority of guns used by student perpetrators in school shootings came either from the perpetrator's home or from the home of a friend or relative.³³
- From 1992-2001, guns were the most common mechanism used in completed suicides for youth ages 10-19 years old.³⁴
- From 2006-7, gun homicide was the second leading cause of injury related death and gun suicide was the fifth leading cause for youth from 10-19 years old.³⁵
- From 2009-2010, gun homicide remained the second leading cause of death for 10-19 year-olds, but gun suicide had risen to the third leading cause.³⁶

In studies published followed the 1997 funding cut, though, CDC researchers struck an entirely different tone than in studies published before the cut, and they were exceedingly careful to avoid any mention of gun control, either directly or indirectly. For example, in the study of school associated violent deaths from 1994-1999, although Table 3 of the report showed that 164 of the deaths (75%) were due to guns, the terms, "gun(s)," "firearm(s)," or "shooting(s)" did not appear even once in the body of the report or the discussion.³⁷ The authors concluded that school-associated violent deaths were "rare" events. The Canadian press commented that only in the United States would 164 fatal shootings in K-12 schools over a five-year period be considered "rare" events by a governmental agency charged with protecting the public health.³⁸

In 2012, the CDC devoted just \$100,000 of it's \$5.6 billion budget to firearm injury prevention, a 96% decline from 1995-1996 levels.³⁹ Since 2013, there have been no further publications in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports* that specifically focus on the gun violence issue. Moreover, the prohibition on the use of any CDC funds to promote gun control has been renewed in every annual federal budget bill through 2017 and has been extended to also apply to any funds appropriated to the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and related agencies.⁴⁰

Suppressing gun violence prevention research and blocking gun control legislation during the latter part of the 20th Century and the first part of the 21st Century was a minor victory for the gods of the gun lobby, though, as compared with a much darker deed that they accomplished in June of 2008. With the help of five disciples in black robes, they effectively rewrote the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.⁴¹

The full text of the Second Amendment reads:

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

When referring to the Second Amendment, the gods of the gun lobby and their followers routinely omit the first part that refers to “A well-regulated militia.” Instead, they quote only the second half referring to the “right of the people to keep and bear arms.” Prior to 2008, it had been repeatedly established in four separate Supreme Court decisions,⁴² in more than 30 decisions of lower courts,⁴³ and in reviews by legal historians⁴⁴ that the Second Amendment was not intended to confer an individual right to own guns. In fact, the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger stated during an interview in 1991 that the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment as guaranteeing an individual right to own guns “has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud - I repeat the word 'fraud' - on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”⁴⁵ In the two most recent Supreme Court cases prior to 2008, the Court ruled in 1939 in *U.S. v. Miller*⁴⁶ and reiterated in 1980 in *Lewis v. United States*.⁴⁷

“The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have ‘some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.’”

In June of 2008, though, in a narrow 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court reversed over two centuries of legal precedent by ruling in the case of *District of Columbia v. Heller*⁴⁸ that Washington DC’s partial ban on handgun ownership violated the Second Amendment. The same 5-4 majority of the Court subsequently overturned Chicago’s partial handgun ban in 2010 by ruling in *McDonald v. Chicago*⁴⁹ that the *Heller* decision applied to the states as well as to the District of Columbia.

The gods of the gun lobby had found a loyal disciple in the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, author of the majority opinion in the *Heller* decision. In purporting to decipher the original meaning of the Second Amendment by analyzing it word by word, Scalia claimed that the truth had been revealed to him. The gun gods were right! The first half of the Second Amendment really is irrelevant! A complete analysis of the *Heller* decision, including the multiple inaccuracies and internal contradictions in Scalia’s majority opinion, is beyond the scope of this message. Suffice it to say that constitutional experts I’ve spoken with about the *Heller* decision have called it “a rogue decision,” “a snow job,” “an abomination,” and “the worst decision since Dred Scott.” But the *Heller* decision is much worse than all that.

The *Heller* decision created a constitutional right to keep a handgun in the home “for protection” where no such right previously existed. As noted in the studies referenced above, a gun in the home is much more likely to be used to kill household members than to protect them, especially when children are present; most gun homicides and suicides are committed with handguns; and most school shootings are committed with handguns

brought from home. To the extent that the *Heller* decision limits the ability of governments – local, state, and federal – to stringently regulate, if not completely ban, handgun ownership, it assures that the sacrifice of our children to the gods of the gun lobby will continue. In this sense, the *Heller* decision is worse than “a rogue decision,” “a snow job,” “an abomination,” and “the worst decision since Dred Scott.” *Heller* is a death sentence. And just like other death sentences handed down based on false evidence – and in the case of *Heller*, to please false gods – it should be overturned. The specific means by which *Heller* can be overturned will be the subject of a future message. Overturning *Heller* begins, though, by becoming informed oneself about the true history and meaning of the Second Amendment and by informing others.

I'll conclude by discussing the rituals involved in sacrificing children to the gods. I'll spare you the gory details of the methods of child sacrifice used by ancient, primitive cultures. I'll also spare you the gory details that have been provided in many cases by first hand witnesses and forensic investigators concerning the shootings of children in the United States over the past half century– as well as my own observations based on gunshot victims I've personally treated during my long career as an emergency physician. The ritual that we continue to observe, though, and now consider the norm following every high profile shooting of children in our country is nothing short of bizarre.

The ritual begins with elected officials and other community leaders extending their thoughts and prayers to the families of the dead and wounded children and their condemnations of the perpetrator. There is often a vigil that includes a reading of the names of the most recent victims followed by a “moment of silence.” People wring their hands and ask why the shooting could have occurred. Answers are offered such as bullying, mental illness, or, in the words of Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin following the mass shooting at Marshall County High School, “a cultural problem.”⁵⁰ There is usually a call to action followed, in the final phase of the ritual, by the absence of any definitive action.

The gods of the gun lobby preside in the background over these rituals, immediately branding as heresy and “exploitation of a tragedy for political purposes” any mention of the fact that the reason why children in our country are being killed by guns at a rate that is many times higher than in any other high income democratic country in the world is that fact that our country is awash in guns; or the fact that the action needed to stop the sacrifice of our children is to adopt stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws that have long been in place in all other high income democratic countries. The gods of the gun lobby often agree to consider, but subsequently reject, even the weakest new gun control legislation. The final benediction offered by the gun lobby gods is always the same – “more guns.”

There are other bizarre rituals that are being practiced on a regular basis in educational institutions all over our country, from preschools to universities. These rituals are called, “lock-down drills.” During lockdown drills, students are taught to hide quietly in closets, bathrooms, or locked classrooms and to avoid open windows. Older students are told the reason for these drills – to reduce the chances of themselves being the ones who get killed or wounded in a mass shooting in their school. Pre-school and early elementary school children aren't told the reason for the drills, though - just that the drills aren't a game; and that during the drills, they shouldn't move, talk, laugh, cry, or be afraid. Bizarre rituals, indeed.

What exactly are we teaching our children with lockdown drills? A student, Alexandria Caporali, who was present during the Marshall County High School shooting but who escaped injury, was interviewed afterward by the Associated Press:⁵¹

“No one screamed. It was almost completely silent as people just ran,” said Caporali, 16. She said most students knew what to do because they are drilled throughout the year on how to respond to an active shooter at school.

I would submit that the lessons we are teaching our children with lockdown drills are that it is normal to expect that a mass shooting may occur at their school at any time; that it is their own responsibility to avoid getting shot during such an event; and that they should not expect adults to prevent such shootings.

Children and youth **should** scream during mass shootings. They should scream every time that they're asked to participate in a lockdown drill. Teachers and school administrators who are directed by elected officials to conduct such drills should scream too. All of us who love our nation's children more than our guns should be screaming.

Please contact your local, state, and federal elected officials and let them know that it is unacceptable in the 21st century to continue the barbaric practice of sacrificing American children to the gods of the gun lobby. Please tell them that you expect them to openly advocate and do everything within their power to enact stringent gun control laws in our country comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in the other high income democratic countries of the world - countries in which, on average, the rate gun related deaths for children below the age of 15 is 12 times lower than in our country⁵² and the rate for youth ages 15-19 is 82 times lower.⁵³ And if you haven't already done so, please become a paid member of Americans Against Gun Violence by going to the Join/Donate page of our website; and please make an additional donation if you're able.

The late civil rights leader, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who was himself a victim of an assassin's bullet, said:

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.

He was speaking, of course, about the issue of civil rights, but he could as well have been speaking about the issue of gun violence. Thank you for not being silent about the killing of innocent children to appease the gods of the gun lobby.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a retired emergency physician and a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marines, decorated for courage under fire during the Vietnam War

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⁵⁰ “Kentucky Governor Says Shootings Are A ‘Cultural Problem’ « CBS Denver,” CBS Denver, January 27, 2018, <http://denver.cbslocal.com/2018/01/27/kentucky-shooting-cultural-problem/>.

⁵¹ Kristin M. Hall and Dylan Lovan, “2 Dead, 17 Injured in Kentucky School Shooting; Teenage Suspect Held,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-kentucky-school-shooting-20180123-story.html>.

⁵² “Rates of Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm-Related Death among Children--26 Industrialized Countries.”

⁵³ Thakrar et al., “Child Mortality In The US And 19 OECD Comparator Nations.”