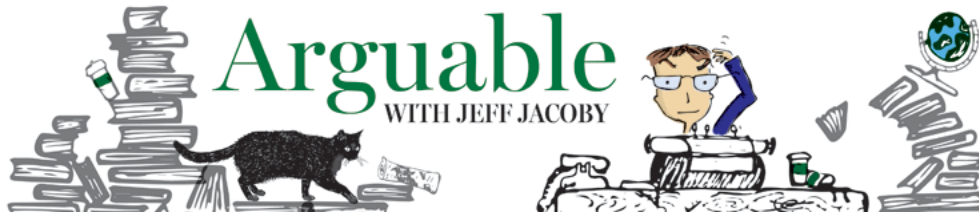


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The Boston Globe



Monday, August 5, 2019

Our sociopathic civil discourse

Like many Americans, I went to bed Saturday night aghast at news of the massacre in El Paso, Texas, only to wake up Sunday morning to reports of a second awful massacre in Dayton, Ohio. Later on Sunday I learned of yet another mass shooting, [this one in Chicago](#); no one was killed, but seven victims ended up in the hospital. All this came just a week after a gunman opened fire at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in California, yelling “I’m really angry” as he killed three people before shooting himself in the head.

Already a tsunami of comment about this carnage has flooded over the public square, most of it vehement, angry, defensive, or bitter; all of it wearily familiar; virtually none of it constructive or empathetic.

I don’t really wish to add to the flood of words, except to observe that the spreading sickness in American society is not the fault of one man, or one political party, or one ideological tribe, or one race — and the ferocious urge, seemingly on all sides, to identify and demonize a villain only makes the sickness spread faster.

The killer in El Paso is believed to have posted an anti-immigrant screed online shortly before starting his murderous rampage; he denounced the “Hispanic invasion of Texas” and said “race mixing” is ruining the country. Similar racist rhetoric has accompanied other slaughters, from Dylan Roof’s massacre of nine black adults studying the Bible in a Charleston, S.C., church to the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting last fall in which worshipers were gunned down by a killer who railed against Jews as an “enemy of white people.”

As I write these words, #WhiteSupremacistTerrorism is trending on Twitter. That certainly appears to be the right phrase to sum up the El Paso bloodbath. Anyone with sense must be alarmed by the way the vicious alt-right white-supremacist fringe of 2016 has escalated from poisonous online harassment to something considerably more deadly.

But from what I have seen on social media and heard from the TV talking heads over the past 24 hours, too many people want to condemn *only* white supremacists for the violence of mass shootings. Some broaden their target to white supremacists plus President Trump. [Beto O’Rourke](#), the former congressman running for president, told CNN that Trump’s language about immigrants is “reminiscent of something that you might hear in the Third Reich.” New Jersey Senator Cory Booker [declared flatly](#): “Donald Trump is responsible for this. He is responsible because he is stoking fears and hatred and bigotry.”

Others rushed to level a racial indictment: “Mass shootings reflect the most antisocial facet of white American identity. It’s always white guys,” [one liberal writer tweeted](#). Actor Rainn Wilson seethed to his 4.4 million social media followers that “the biggest threat to Americans, terrorist or not, is [ANGRY, WHITE MEN with guns](#).”

Then there are those in a rage at the availability of firearms in the United States; *their* fury is focused on the National Rifle Association, or on Republican lawmakers who oppose more stringent gun control. (#MassacreMitch — a repellent reference to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell — is also trending on Twitter as I write.)

Elizabeth Warren, meanwhile, decided to demonize a major news outlet. “Fox News is a hate-for-profit machine that gives a megaphone to racists and conspiracists,” she posted on Twitter, using language as malicious as Trump’s when he vilifies liberal newspapers and networks as “enemies of the people.”

On Sunday evening came word that the Dayton killer had been a leftist who proclaimed he would “happily” vote for Warren. Commenters on the right rushed to [trumpet the news](#), and to complain angrily that it wasn’t getting nearly enough attention.

Everywhere, the impulse was to score political points, to denigrate the opposing party, to lob grenades at the other end of the ideological spectrum, to denounce Trump — or to denounce his denouncers. Racemongers rushed to express their

outrage in the harshest racial terms; for Republicans, the priority was to blast Democrats; liberals couldn't wait to heap blame on conservatives.

This sociopathy, this antisocial madness, is what passes for civic discourse in America now. I don't know what it will take to rein it in. Perhaps we have passed the point at which anything can restore a measure of decency and goodwill to the public arena. Maybe we will go on hurling invective at each other, depicting each other in ever more vile and unspeakable terms, turning the verbal flamethrowers on every venue where ideas and opinions are voiced. Maybe we won't stop this festival of malevolence and scorn until every disagreement gives rise to mass shootings and bombings, because we will have forgotten any other way to express strong feelings.

In recent years, massacres in America have been carried out or attempted by white supremacists and [Islamists](#), by anti-Semites and immigrant-bashers, by [anti-abortion fanatics](#) and [Republican-haters](#). Violent extremists have been white, black, and Asian, male and female, religious and atheist, left-wing and right-wing. There is no single profile of a mass shooter, no single cause of such mayhem, and no single scoundrel to blame for the poisoning of American culture.



Edie Hallberg searched for her mother after a gunman opened fire in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas.

There have always been violent people in America. There have always been guns and bigots and mental illness.

What there *hasn't* always been is always-on social media and hyperpartisan cable

TV that keeps millions of Americans in a permanent state of agitation. There hasn't always been a culture of the digital mob, in which cutting insults and character-assassination reap greater rewards than thoughtful reflection or measured debate. There hasn't always been a president willing to use the nation's foremost bully pulpit to pit Americans against each other, whipping both fans and foes into a frenzy of mutual disdain and distrust.

We aren't the first Americans to live in polarized, passionate times, nor the first in which political rhetoric has grown so malignant.

"We must not be enemies," Abraham Lincoln implored his countrymen in his [first inaugural address](#). "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." But Lincoln implored in vain. The bonds of affection did break, and a terrible calamity ensued.

America today may not be on the verge of a civil war. But our public sphere has grown venomous, and it is getting worse, not better. We are hurtling toward a cliff, and will be unable to stop ourselves before it's too late.