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Guns Don't Kill People, Americans Kill People

But it was also the fifth night of one of the greatest war crimes of the new century — the illegal invasion and bombing of Iraq by George W. Bush and the people of the United States of America. A whopping 72% of the American public backed Bush and the war, as did the majority of Democrats in the U.S. Senate. Bush's cronies — Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Elliott Abrams, etc. — desperate to take control of Iraq's oil and eliminate Saddam Hussein, concocted a lie claiming Iraq was involved in the 9/11 terrorist attack and that it now possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Of course, Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11 (Osama bin Laden plus 15 of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia). And, of course, the U.S. invasion force never found a single weapon of mass destruction. They did manage to annihilate hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, a mass murder of human beings who never threatened any Americans. Nearly 5,000 American troops, sent to kill the Iraqis, were themselves sent to their own senseless slaughter. Their parents and families, to this day, have never been given a reason for what they died for, and no apology has yet to be issued to them for Bush selfishly sacrificing their lives for absolutely nothing but his own personal revenge.

The utter sadness over this premeditated war crime is felt to this day. Bush and Cheney have never been indicted by the International Criminal Court and they remain free to do as they please. Few Democrats have apologized for being their enablers. I find it difficult to celebrate today's anniversary of us "winning an Oscar" when the only thing we should consider remembering of what happened 20 years ago this week is this crime against humanity, committed in our name against the Iraqi people.

But I will use this "Bowling for Columbine" Substack moment to once again demand that we, the people, stop and examine why we have such a thirst for violence, a desire to kill our "enemies," and an insane fear of "the other" — which causes us to possess nearly 400 million guns in our homes.

Those who didn't see "Bowling for Columbine" think it's a movie about guns. It isn't. It's about us. Americans. Yes, I know the title references what was, at the time, the worst gun slaughter at a school in our history. There had never been a mass shooting like it. The Colorado cops who showed up at Columbine High that morning, fearing for their lives, refused to enter the high school while the massacre was taking place. For hours they remained frozen outside. Which caused injured students and a teacher to bleed to death. Hundreds of parents showed up — but not one of them charged into the school to stop the massacre of their children. They obeyed the police who told them to stand like sheep behind the yellow "DO NOT CROSS" police tape line. One child's uncle broke through that police line to make a run into the school. The cops tackled him and dragged him away.

There was no plan of action, nobody knew what to do because it had never happened before. In 1999, a mass shooting at a school was not "a thing." It was non-existent. I didn't say "rare." I said non-existent — there were no mass school shootings in the United States back in 1999.

That afternoon, my crew and I (who were working on our weekly TV series, *The Awful Truth*) stopped production and sat down to talk about the shock over what we were witnessing. We decided we should act, to begin gathering footage, to figure out what we should do. One thing we felt certain of: This may be the first such school shooting in the U.S. ever on this scale, but we also knew the country we lived in — and we knew this wouldn't be the last. We decided on the spot to immediately begin making a movie that hopefully would prevent anything like this from happening again. I called the Canadian studio that was funding our TV series to ask them if they would fund a film on American gun craziness — and they didn't even wait 30 seconds before saying yes and giving us the entire budget we needed to make what would become "Bowling for Columbine".

(Note: No American studio or financier would agree to be the primary funder of a single one of my films or TV shows for my first 20 years as a filmmaker, even though my first movie, "Roger & Me", set the all-time documentary box office record. We went to the Canadians for help to make "the gun movie" because we lived in a country where Democrats and liberals were frightened of the National Rifle Association and refused to fight them on any level — including in Hollywood. The Canadians, they were just frightened of living next door to a nation of gun nuts, killers, and invaders of Third World countries. So they gave refuge to our Vietnam draft resisters, they refused to join us in invading Iraq, and they funded our film.)

As I said, we decided “the gun” would not be the star of our movie. We actually sort of agreed with the NRA’s propaganda line — “Guns Don’t Kill People. People Kill People.” Except we decided to change it to the truth: “Guns Don’t Kill People — Americans Kill People.” Because we are the only country on Earth who kills so many of their own in this way. And why is that? Why us? What is it specifically about us? Was it our American DNA? Just like us, though, many on this planet have committed mass genocide. There is a huge mental illness problem throughout the world. Every country’s teenagers watch violent movies, play violent video games. Why not them? Why don’t they slaughter each other like we do? Why don’t they have millions of guns in their homes?

We thought if we could answer this question of “what is wrong with us,” then maybe we could help fix this madness. Our madness.

So we decided to make a documentary that asked the audience to join us in trying to answer this crucial question. The film never accomplished its first goal — to make Columbine the first and last of these mass shootings, these school shootings. We now have, on average, more than 1 mass shooting a day in the U.S. Guns are now the #1 cause of death among American children. More than cancer. More than auto accidents. Guns. And yet no one here hangs their head in shame. We just hope our school, our child, isn’t next. And, if they are, well, millions of Americans will be sure to send us their thoughts and prayers.

So on this anniversary tonight of our fellow filmmakers handing us a gold statue while our bombs rained down on Baghdad, I’m going to sit quietly at home and watch “Bowling for Columbine” and think anew about what else I can do to help fix our American soul.

I’d like to invite you to join me. I don’t have enough room in my living room for all of you to come over, but I can make the film available to you, free of charge, free to invite others, free to share it far and wide. Just click here and it’s yours for today, tonight and through the weekend. I’d like it if you would watch it with me. It will, I guess, I dunno, feel better. Less alone in trying to understand. Less alone in acting to do something.

In this month since the mass shooting at Michigan State University, I have not written to you about it. I’ve pretty much stuck to my 2013 promise after the Sandy Hook massacre to turn down all calls from cable news to have “the Bowling for Columbine guy” come on TV to discuss the latest school shooting. I did that for 11 years between “Bowling for Columbine” and Sandy Hook, and then one night I was on Piers Morgan who had replaced Larry King on CNN. Sitting there discussing the 20 dead first graders (and 6 adult school staff), I felt sick knowing what I knew about the tragedy, the way the children actually died, the devastating grief of their parents who may never truly recover, the killer whose father was a vice-president of General Electric (the press never wanting to sully the narrative by reporting that insignificant fact), and none of their reporters wanting to go just three miles down the road from the school and dare to walk through the doors of the national headquarters of the gun manufacturers association, euphemistically called the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the chief corporate lobbying group stopping gun control laws from being passed in America. They’re the main group responsible for keeping the AR-15 assault rifle — the weapon of choice for a majority of the school, church and workplace mass shootings — readily and easily available. Their HQ of evil, just down the road from the school where 26 souls lay dead.

Shortly after Sandy Hook, the state of Connecticut literally passed a law aimed specifically at me because I said somewhere that I was going to make a film about Sandy Hook. So they made it a crime for me to obtain the truth and pass it on to you and the American public. I don’t really want to say anything more about this, because the other truth is that I’ve spent time over the past ten years working on something...and, well, I’ll just end it here by saying you can pass whatever “laws” you want, but if you’ve figured out one thing about me by now it’s that there’s no way to stop me or my crew from imparting to the American people what you don’t want them to see or know. I’m sorry. That’s just the way it is. I’m an American. Freedom. Press. Truth. The majority of us (70%) don’t own a gun, the vast majority (79%) want stronger gun control laws, and the many, many of us know that none of this will change until we all change as Americans — and I believe most of us will settle for nothing less. We, the majority, now reject the Violent America, the one that killed off the First Peoples who lived here, the Violent America that was built on the backs of enslaved humans who were repeatedly raped and forced to give birth, who were tortured and lynched, and now we are not supposed to teach our children of this history.

We remain the Violent America because lying to children and enforcing ignorance and stupidity upon them is an act of violence. All racism and misogyny and homophobia is an act of violence. Destroying the Earth is violence. The rich getting richer at the expense of the poor is violence. Capitalism is violence. Greed is violence. Silence is violence! Our national women’s gymnastics team being assaulted and raped by a university doctor, and then no one listening to these young women, THAT is violence. The violence is everywhere. Yes, I know, it’s everywhere around the world. But the American violence is its own breed. It’s because we’ve figured out how to normalize it, to make it not something that we just do, but rather to make it exactly who we are.

To simply accept that we all know there will be at least one mass shooting today, and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and ad infinitum is immoral. “I AM YOUR RETRIBUTION!!” we are promised. It just rolls off the tongue. One day a few years ago, Glenn Beck began a segment on his massively popular radio show with this line: “I’m thinking about killing Michael Moore.” He then went into a fantasy rant on how he would kill me, wondering if he could get away with it, could he muster the courage to actually kill me when he’s wearing a wrist band that says, “What Would Jesus Do?” And then he suggested maybe Jesus might give him a pass this one time.

Or the day a Fox News host was pondering live on air, “How is it that Michael Moore is still alive?”

Michigan State. They’re the only university that would give me a degree. Not one I earned. I’m a college dropout. They gave me an honorary degree. A doctorate! Some right-wingers in Michigan were upset when they heard the news this was going to happen, so MSU was forced to also give one to the conservative columnist George Will. When it was my turn to speak at the Honors dinner the night before, he stood up from his seat on the dais and walked out in front of the whole audience. A month later a local investigative reporter ran a story revealing that, in order to get Will to come and accept his honorary degree, he told MSU they’d have to pay him \$47,500 to come to East Lansing for the privilege of his presence. Of course, I received no fee nor would I ever ask for one. I got the degree my parents always wanted me to have!! Secretly handing George Will his required payoff to placate Michigan’s haters of me, well, that’s a form of violence, too.

I haven’t been able to write about the MSU shooting because the night it happened it became personal for me for reasons I can’t discuss here because, well, for reasons you can probably figure out. There are 50,000 students at Michigan State. That means that for one to three long, grueling hours on that awful night last month there were 100,000 parents who experienced a holy terror of not being able to contact their sons or daughters. Is my child one of those who’ve been shot? Is she...dead? How many of these parents simply broke down? How many just broke in two, fearing the worst? Uncontrollable sobbing, screaming, rushing to the car to drive at 80mph to get to East Lansing to save your baby. These 50,000 kids also had 4 grandparents (most of them still living), so that’s almost 200,000 grandparents hearing the news and going into shock. Most MSU students have siblings, so kick in another 100,000 people who knew exactly what it felt like because this is the Columbine Generation and they’ve known nothing but “Active Shooter Drills” they’ve been forced to participate in since they were in daycare. So, counting just the immediate family members who were affected by the terror at MSU that night, it had to total nearly a half-million people. And as I thought of what they were all going through... in that moment all I could do was cry. No one should have to experience the trauma and terror of that night in a free country.

96 years ago this May 18th, in 1927, my grandfather, who was the village doctor in Hadley, Michigan, received an urgent phone call, one of many that were being made to all doctors within a 40-mile radius. My grandfather was a Canadian immigrant who was a farmer who became a teacher who decided he wanted to be a doctor but there was no medical school nearby in 1890s Ontario. It was closer to go to the one in Saginaw, Michigan, and back then you could teach students everything that was known about medicine in about one year. Once he graduated, he decided to stay in Michigan.

On that day in 1927, the caller said there had been an accident. A building had collapsed, or perhaps a gas leak had caused an explosion. There were many casualties and doctors were needed. Pronto. My grandfather grabbed his medical bag and drove 40 miles to Bath, a village located just a few miles from Michigan State University. When he arrived it was a sight he had never witnessed before. Dead bodies everywhere, mostly children. It was a new school — built 5 years earlier for the children of Bath and the surrounding farmland. The school board’s treasurer was angry that his property taxes had been raised to pay for the building. He was also upset that he, a Michigan State graduate, had lost the recent election to become township clerk. So he decided to blow up the Bath school. He planted dynamite under the floor and in the basement and attached the wires to an alarm clock that was set to go off 15 minutes after class started. The explosion killed 45 people, nearly 40 of them schoolchildren. Two teachers and the superintendent were also killed. Another 58 lay injured and were treated by the doctors like my grandfather who had shown up. Those still alive were then taken to Lansing’s Sparrow Hospital, a hospital that had been funded by the uncle of the killer’s wife, the top General Motors executive who ran Oldsmobile in nearby Lansing. Sparrow Hospital was where the eight MSU students shot on campus last month were taken in an attempt to save their lives. Three, sadly, were dead on arrival.

The Bath, Michigan Schoolhouse Massacre was, and remains to this day, the largest school massacre in American history.

We are a violent people, but the majority of us have had enough. What will we do? Get rid of the guns? Get rid of our dark side? Stop sending weapons around the world without the requirement that peace negotiations must commence. Force the warring parties to the table! Insist that each of us remove the fear and the hate that surrounds us, the hate that forces those to pick up and use a gun. Yes, I’m talking about the police. But I’m talking about your uncle, your brother. I’m talking about any of you who are depressed and have thought about killing yourself. Call for help (9-8-8). Think of me and know that I care and I love you. There is a different way. There has to be.

This is not a drill.
