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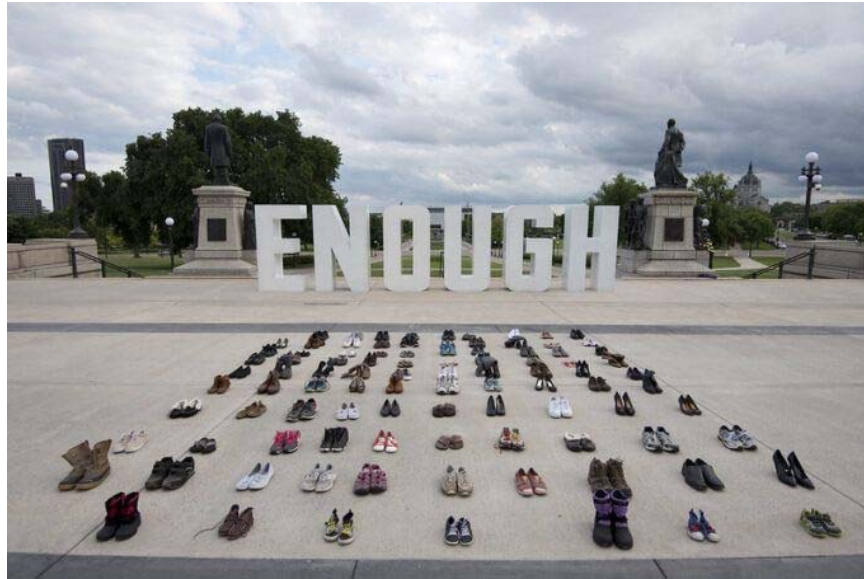
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BY ANTHONY DIMAGGIO

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Yeah, It's Fascism: Connecting the Dots Between the GOP, Mass Shootings, and Terrorism



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News reports on the mass shooter who murdered 8 people and injured 7 more at a shopping mall in Allen, Texas are now documenting his ties to rightwing extremism. *NBC News* reports that the killer “was a 33-year-old suspected neo-Nazi sympathizer named Mauricio Garcia,” who was “armed with an “AR-15 style assault weapon,” while *The Washington Post* reports that he had a patch that said “RWDS” – an acronym for “right wing death squad” – a term that’s adopted by white supremacists. *NBC* reports that Garcia had a history of posting on social media various “rants against Jews, women, and racial minorities” and posted content on “extremist online forums, such as *4chan*, and content from white nationalists, including Nick Fuentes, an antisemitic white nationalist provocateur.”

You heard that right. Nick Fuentes. The guy who dined, along with antisemitic entertainer Kanye West (Ye), with Donald Trump. Fuentes reportedly described Trump as “my hero,” while Ye reflected that the former president was “really impressed with Nick Fuentes.” This is part of a larger pattern, of course, of the leader of the Republican Party canoodling with fascists, including identifying with violent J6 insurrectionists, embracing QAnon and its supporters, and expressing sympathy for the Charlottesville white supremacists.

As a dissident scholar who has been writing about rising fascism for years, I’m familiar with various claims for why we shouldn’t be all that concerned about the rise of mass shootings and the prospect of fascism in America. The excuses I hear include the following claims like these:

* There isn’t “really” a fascist threat because there aren’t enough of these shooters to rival the hundreds of thousands of black shirts and brown shirts of fascist Italy and Germany in the interwar years under Hitler and Mussolini.

* These are isolated “lone wolf” shooters who are deeply alienated from mainstream politics and society, so their actions, while tragic, are not indicative of a broader societal trend of embracing fascism.

* And finally, the business class will never allow fascism in America because fascism was a response *by* the business class to the rise of socialist and radical unionist politics nearly a century ago, and since there’s no serious socialist threat to capitalism today, there can be no fascism.

Let’s dispense with these denials outright. The rightwing Americans committing these heinous mass shootings are fascists. These are people who hold reactionary political views and are acting on them. They see premeditated violence and mass murder, via the use of handguns and assault weapons, as a legitimate tool for expressing themselves politically and furthering their white supremacist and fascist political beliefs. Perhaps most disturbing, their actions have become normalized in a country that scarcely stops to think much about these shootings, which are here today, gone tomorrow, in the public mind. This means that there’s been little effort to consider how fascist politics have solidified under our noses. Americans by and large have failed to recognize the ties between mass shootings, rightwing media, the GOP, and fascism.

Think about this statistic for a moment – from January through April of 2023, there were more than 200 mass shootings in the United States. Criminology professor James Alan Fox, who tracks mass shootings for a living, concludes that 2023 (so far) “is the deadliest year yet” in the last four decades. Mass shootings are now a daily phenomenon in America. That is a horrific reality, one in which much of the public seems not terribly concerned. Only about four in ten Americans think it is somewhat or more likely that “they will personally be a victim of gun violence,” while just one percent of Americans cite gun violence as the nation’s “most important problem.”

For those who refuse to connect the dots between these mass shootings and a rising fascist movement in America, it takes only a little digging to find that these events are hardly random. As *The New York Times* reports, the Anti-Defamation League concludes that, of 450 U.S. murders committed by political extremists in the last decade, 75 percent were by rightwing extremists, compared to just 4 percent from leftwing extremists, and 20 percent from Islamic fundamentalists. *The New York Times* also reports that “white supremacists and other like-minded groups” committed “a majority of the terrorist attacks in the United States” by the early 2020s according to data collected by *The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, and corroborating concerns expressed by the Department of Homeland Security about the threat of rising rightwing violence. Other research finds that all of the U.S. mass killing events in 2022 were linked to rightwing political actors.

Terrorism is the appropriate description for what’s happening in America today. These are fascists who commit horrific acts of mass murder, with the express intent of intimidating and terrorizing the population. Much of the population – at least the 40 percent that recognize there is a threat to their safety – live in fear of the next daily mass shooting, dreading the possibility of becoming the next victim. As Steven Spainhouer, one of the survivors of the Allen shooting, reflects:

“When the multiple shots happened, my heart just dropped. I was on the phone with 911 and I was telling them we have a mass casualty incident. I never imagined in 100 years I would be thrust into the position of being the first first responder on the site to take care of people. The first girl I walked up to was crouched down covering her head in the bushes, so I felt for a pulse, pulled her head to the side and she had no face.”

Speaking of another child he found covered in blood after his mother had been shot, Spainhouer recounts:

“When I rolled the mother over, he came out. I asked him if he was OK and he said, ‘My mom is hurt, my mom is hurt.’ So rather than traumatize him, I pulled him around the corner sat him down and he was covered from head to toe...like somebody poured blood on him.”

Spainhouer says of the trauma: “No one can see what we saw today and not be affected by it. It’s not a situation I would wish upon anybody, it’s just unfathomable to see carnage.”

This is the brutal insanity of rising street fascism. These are acts of terror designed to intimidate. This is not simply about the number of people killed. Counting the number of deaths from mass shootings, the totals ranged from a low of 336 to a high of 690 murdered each year from 2016 through 2022, with a grand total of 3,431 deaths. This represents just .00005 percent of the U.S. population of more than 330 million people. But downplaying these deaths by looking at absolute numbers is no different than downplaying the significance of other traumatic terrorist events like 9/11, which resulted in a comparable number of deaths (2,996). The point is that terrorism is not simply about the number of people killed. It’s about spectacular acts of violence, which serve as symbols that generate fear in the population at

large. The point is that no one's safe. These attacks can happen anywhere, at any time, and in a second's notice. It's the *fear* of becoming the next victim a mass shooting that resonates with a public that's held hostage by a small number of fascists who keep the population in a perpetual state of insecurity and terror.

To give just one example of what I'm talking about, I would draw attention to a very recent mass shooting hoax on my own campus at Lehigh University. On May 7 of this year, Lehigh students, faculty, staff, and other Lehigh community members were informed by email of an "active shooter situation" on campus. We were advised to shelter, flee, or fight if no other option was available, due to a report that a mass shooter was active on campus. After investigating the matter, we received numerous updates, first questioning whether a shooting was happening, and then suggesting there was no mass shooter but to remain indoors, and finally announcing that the mass shooter report was a hoax. As Lehigh University Police Chief Jason Schiffer explained, the entire incident was "traumatizing for our community, and particularly for our students, some who had to be evacuated from buildings as they were studying for final exams. In addition to the disruption, it caused real fear and anxiety." Tragically, this is the new "normal" in the era of mass shootings. And Lehigh wasn't even an exceptional case, as a number of these fake mass shooter events have been called in at various schools throughout the Lehigh valley in recent months. Sadly, Lehigh and other cases in the valley could be considered "lucky" cases because we avoided the mass shootings.

Terrorism is a political weapon. It's being used by the American right to promote authoritarian and fascist politics via the specter of mass shootings, which are increasingly normalized by rightwing media pundits and GOP officials. These leaders spend much of their time, instead of asking what can be done to combat gun violence, encouraging mass outrage over phantom threats of democratic elections under assault, and who tell their followers to "fight like hell" against the radical Marxists out to destroy the country and take away their democracy. This violence is stoked by officials who warn of racial and ethnic demographic change in America, with Caucasian-whites told they are being "replaced" by immigrants of color, and that if they don't fight back, they will become a minority in their own country. This violence is encouraged by officials and pundits who propagandize their supporters in apocalyptic ways about the looming collapse of America, as they warn about a flood of immigrants responsible for rampant and rising crime in U.S. cities that undermines the American way of life.

The reality is that it's the far right that's driving rising insecurity via their efforts to further a fascist race war. One of the great tragedies today is that rightwing pundits and officials stoke mass fear and anger about America's decline and collapse, fueling rising violence, while maintaining plausible deniability about their role in the rise of domestic extremism, mass shootings, and terrorism. These rightwing provocateurs believe that because they do not pull the trigger or explicitly tell their followers to kill, that they have nothing to do with this

violence. The reality is that this violence is coming disproportionately from one part of the political spectrum – the far right. I document in my book, *Rising Fascism in America*, how Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to agree that “targeting and killing civilians can be justified in order to further a political, social, or religious cause,” with 10 percent of Democrats agreeing with this sentiment, compared to 20 percent of Republicans. This is the very definition of terrorism, with a fifth of Republicans now expressing sympathy toward such attacks. It doesn’t matter if the vast majority of these people are unwilling to commit the violence themselves. This is a large number of people who are willing to normalize terrorist violence, and it is a horrific precedent to set when it realistically means lending credence to and normalizing daily mass shootings in America. And beyond the crisis of normalization, I would point out that all it takes is *one* person in each major city to engage in – or call in a fake shooter report – to create mass panic and terror. We’re talking about hundreds of mass shootings each year, occurring daily, and killing thousands of Americans within a few years’ time. When such a large number of Republicans are sympathetic to these actions, it suggests there is a critical mass within the party that’s willing to normalize terrorism in America.

This is an overwhelmingly partisan crisis, with an origin tracing back to Republican partisanship and socialization. This is a bitter pill to swallow for much of the population – particularly those who identify with and vote for the Republican Party and who normalize its incendiary rhetoric in the era of Trumpism. Exposing the problem of GOP extremism also poses a serious challenge for the academy, the media, and the political system, since it requires these institutions and those within them to recognize that one of the two major parties is at the center of this political rot. The time is long past for an honest, sober assessment of the intensifying threat of rightwing extremism. Without coming to terms with the role the GOP is playing in stoking the crisis of mass terrorism, there’s little reason to think much will change in the future.

Anthony DiMaggio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Lehigh University. He is the author of Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here (Routledge, 2022), in addition to Rebellion in America (Routledge, 2020), and Unequal America (Routledge, 2021). He can be reached at: anthonydimaggio612@gmail.com. A digital copy of Rebellion in America can be read for free here.

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