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The mass killing in Charleston, South Carolina

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The mass killing of six women and three men at an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina Wednesday evening is a horrific event that speaks to a deeply dysfunctional and diseased society.

The alleged gunman, 21-year-old Dylann Roof, of Columbia, South Carolina, was apparently motivated by racist and right-wing nationalist sentiments. He reportedly told those he was about to shoot in cold blood, “You rape our women and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go.”

On his Facebook profile page, Roof included a photograph of himself wearing a jacket with badges representing the flags of apartheid-era South Africa and Rhodesia. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the 1928 South African flag in particular has been adopted around the world in right-wing circles “as a symbol of white supremacy.”

The response of the political establishment in general has been hypocritical and empty to an obscene extent. Whatever the immediate political or psychological driving forces behind Roof’s alleged action, such a killing emerges in a specific political and social context.

The most obvious hypocrisy came from leading political figures in South Carolina. Various individuals associated with the South Carolina Republican Party have been exposed as members of the blatantly racist Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), the descendant of the old White Citizens Council, the “respectable” version of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s and 1960s.

South Carolina’s Republican Governor Nikki Haley declared Thursday that the state’s “heart and soul...was broken” by the mass killing. In 2014 she defended the flying of the Confederate flag at the statehouse on the grounds that “not a single CEO” had complained to her.

In his statement, President Barack Obama expressed on Thursday his “deep sorrow over the senseless murders” in Charleston. Obama continued, “Any death of this sort is a tragedy. Any shooting involving multiple victims is a tragedy.” The president suggested that “At some point, we as a country will have to reckon with the fact that this type of mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries.”

Yes, but at which point exactly? Obama, like his predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, has had to make this sort of ceremonial appearance following a killing rampage on numerous occasions. If the president needs reminding about what has occurred during his administration alone, one could point to the April 2009 massacre of 13 people at a civic center for immigrants in Binghamton, New York; the attempted assassination of Rep. Gabby Giffords and the killing of six other people in Tucson, Arizona in January 2011; the mass killing at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater in July 2012; the murder of six people and wounding of four others at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in August 2012 by a white supremacist; the killing of 26 people, including 20 children, in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012; and there are many more.

Following each killing, one portion of the media, looking to Scripture for its inspiration, asserts that the tragedy proves the existence of “evil” and presumably Man’s Fallen Nature; another, more officially liberal-minded, claims that gun control will somehow mysteriously solve everything; a third sighs over the “senselessness” of it all and collectively shrugs its shoulders. The cluelessness of the official punditry is one indication of the moral and political bankruptcy of the American social order.

There is, of course, an irrational element in each of these tragic episodes, including the most recent one. Roof apparently let one elderly woman live because, he told her, “I need someone to survive,” indicating that he planned to kill himself, “And you’ll be the only survivor.”

But the claim by the media that such mass killings are incomprehensible is a self-serving lie. The commentators, along with Obama and the political officialdom, cannot and will not “reckon with” the phenomenon because even to begin probing the various massacres would be to lift the lid on the reality of American life and, above all, the atmosphere of unrelenting violence and aggression that has been generated by two decades or more of almost nonstop war.

The alleged actions of Roof, who was obviously unbalanced and disoriented and came under the influence of pro-Confederate and white supremacist propaganda, have a racist coloring. But, changing what must be changed, is there much of a difference in terms of social type between the Charleston suspect and the young killers at Columbine High School in 1999; or Seung-Hui Cho,

the South Korean immigrant, who murdered 32 people and wounded 17 others on the Virginia Tech campus in April 2007; or James Eagan Holmes, the Aurora, Colorado shooter, and the various others?

What psychological and sociological features do the various perpetrators share in common? A highly advanced state of social alienation, great bitterness at other human beings, self-hatred, isolation, general despondency and the recourse to extreme violence to solve their real or imagined problems.

These tendencies recur too often and too devastatingly to be mere personal failings; they clearly come from the broader society. They reflect a terrible malaise, the mentality of individuals living perpetually under a dark cloud, who have no hope for the future, who can only imagine that things will get worse. Only look at the Facebook photograph of Dylann Roof if you want some idea of this bleakness and despondency!

The generation to which Roof belongs, unlike any other in American history, has known nothing but the combination of war and the building up of immense social inequality. If one sets aside with contempt the media's fantasy version of American life, in which things have never been better—and, after all, don't young people have Facebook, Twitter and iPhones?—no generation in modern times has experienced such harsh and discouraging circumstances. Capitalism, the subordination of every aspect of life to the drive for profit and personal wealth by the corporate elite, is at the heart of the problem.

The American ruling elite would have us believe that endless war, belligerence, aggression and threats of new, more catastrophic wars, part of the drive for US global domination, have no consequences. Violence and killing on the part of the American military or intelligence apparatus is a daily occurrence. US officials and politicians, mafia-like, blandly discuss “killing” alleged terrorists or “eliminating threats” to “America's national interests.” Murder, whether by drone or other efficient modern means, has become routinized, banal. The president, as we know, meets with his advisers every Tuesday, to go over “kill lists.”

Someone like Roof, if he turns out to be the culprit, has known nothing but this expanding and escalating violence all his life. And not only violence overseas. Police in the US have been given a green light to open fire and kill innocent civilians. Only two months ago, in North Charleston, South Carolina, less than 10 miles from the scene of Wednesday night's mass killings, a local police officer murdered Walter Scott in cold blood with five bullets in the back.

The crisis of American society is reaching a breaking point. It cannot go on like this. Roof's is the unhealthy, twisted response of an infinitesimal portion of his generation. Masses of young people and masses of working people will respond to the crisis in a rational, progressive manner, by turning against the criminals and liars in power and their rotten economic and social system.