



Merchants of Death: America's Toxic Cult of Violence Turns Deadly

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"Mass shootings have become routine in the United States and speak to a society that relies on violence to feed the coffers of the merchants of death. Given the profits made by arms manufacturers, the defense industry, gun dealers and the lobbyists who represent them in Congress, it comes as no surprise that the culture of violence cannot be abstracted from either the culture of business or the corruption of politics. Violence runs through US society like an electric current offering instant pleasure from all cultural sources, whether it be the nightly news or a television series that glorifies serial killers."—Professor Henry A. Giroux

We are caught in a vicious cycle.

With alarming regularity, the nation is being subjected to a spate of violence that terrorizes the public, destabilizes the country's fragile ecosystem, and gives the government greater justifications to crack down, lock down, and institute even more authoritarian policies for the so-called sake of national security without many objections from the citizenry.

Take the school shooting that took place at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Valentine's Day: 17 people, students and teachers alike, were killed by Nikolas Cruz, a 19-year-old former student armed with a gas mask, smoke grenades, magazines of ammunition, and an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle.

This shooting, which is being chalked up to mental illness by the 19-year-old assassin, came months after a series of mass shootings in late 2017, one at a church in Texas and the other at an outdoor country music concert in Las Vegas. In both the Texas and Las Vegas attacks, the shooters were dressed like a soldier or militarized police officer and armed with military-style weapons.

As usual following one of these shootings, there is a vocal outcry for enacting more strident gun control measures, more mental health checks, and heightened school security measures.

Also as usual, in the midst of the finger-pointing, no one is pointing a finger at the American police state or the war-drenched, violence-imbued, profit-driven military industrial complex, both of which have made violence America's calling card.

Ask yourself: Why do these mass shootings keep happening? Who are these shooters modelling themselves after? Where are they finding the inspiration for their weaponry and tactics? Whose stance and techniques are they mirroring?

Mass shootings have taken place at churches, in nightclubs, on college campuses, on military bases, in elementary schools, in government offices, and at concerts. In almost every instance, you can connect the dots back to the military-industrial complex, which continues to dominate, dictate and shape almost every aspect of our lives.

We are a military culture engaged in continuous warfare.

We have been a nation at war for most of our existence.

We are a nation that makes a living from killing through defense contracts, weapons manufacturing and endless wars.

We are being fed a steady diet of violence through our entertainment, news and politics.

All of the military equipment featured in blockbuster movies is provided—at taxpayer expense—in exchange for carefully placed promotional spots.

Back when I was a boy growing up in the 1950s, almost every classic sci fi movie ended with the heroic American military saving the day, whether it was battle tanks in *Invaders from Mars* (1953) or military roadblocks in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

What I didn't know then as a schoolboy was the extent to which the Pentagon was paying to be cast as America's savior. By the time my own kids were growing up, it was Jerry Bruckheimer's blockbuster film *Top Gun*—created with Pentagon assistance and equipment—that boosted civic pride in the military.

Now it's my grandkids' turn to be awed and overwhelmed by child-focused military propaganda in the X-Men movies. Same goes for *The Avengers* and *Superman* and the *Transformers*. (Don't even get me started on the war propaganda churned out by the toymakers.)

Even reality TV shows have gotten in on the gig, with the Pentagon's entertainment office influencing "American Idol," "The X-Factor," "Masterchef," "Cupcake Wars," numerous Oprah Winfrey shows, "Ice Road Truckers," "Battlefield Priests," "America's Got Talent," "Hawaii Five-O," lots of BBC, History Channel and National Geographic documentaries, "War Dogs," and "Big Kitchens." And that's just a sampling.

It's estimated that U.S. military intelligence agencies (including the NSA) have influenced over 1,800 movies and TV shows.

And then there are the growing number of video games, a number of which are engineered by or created for the military, which have accustomed players to interactive war play through military simulations and first-person shooter scenarios.

This is how you acclimate a population to war.

This is how you cultivate loyalty to a war machine.

This is how, to borrow from the subtitle to the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, you teach a nation to "stop worrying and love the bomb."

As journalist David Sirota writes for *Salon*, “[C]ollusion between the military and Hollywood - including allowing Pentagon officials to line edit scripts - is once again on the rise, with new television programs and movies slated to celebrate the Navy SEALs....major Hollywood directors remain more than happy to ideologically slant their films in precisely the pro-war, pro-militarist direction that the Pentagon demands in exchange for taxpayer-subsidized access to military hardware.”

Why is the Pentagon (and the CIA and the government at large) so focused on using Hollywood as a propaganda machine?

To those who profit from war, it is—as Sirota recognizes—“a ‘product’ to be sold via pop culture products that sanitize war and, in the process, boost recruitment numbers....At a time when more and more Americans are questioning the fundamental tenets of militarism (i.e., budget-busting defense expenditures, never-ending wars/occupations, etc.), military officials are desperate to turn the public opinion tide back in a pro-militarist direction — and they know pop culture is the most effective tool to achieve that goal.”

The media, eager to score higher ratings, has been equally complicit in making (real) war more palatable to the public by packaging it as TV friendly.

This is what professor Roger Stahl refers to as the representation of a “clean war”: a war “without victims, without bodies, and without suffering”:

“‘Dehumanize destruction’ by extracting all human imagery from target areas ... The language used to describe the clean war is as antiseptic as the pictures. Bombings are ‘air strikes.’ A future bombsite is a ‘target of opportunity.’ Unarmed areas are ‘soft targets.’ Civilians are ‘collateral damage.’ Destruction is always ‘surgical.’ By and large, the clean war wiped the humanity of civilians from the screen ... Create conditions by which war appears short, abstract, sanitized and even aesthetically beautiful. Minimize any sense of death: of soldiers or civilians.”

This is how you sell war to a populace that may have grown weary of endless wars: sanitize the war coverage of anything graphic or discomfiting (present a clean war), gloss over the actual numbers of soldiers and civilians killed (human cost), cast the business of killing humans in a more abstract, palatable fashion (such as a hunt), demonize one’s opponents, and make the weapons of war a source of wonder and delight.

“This obsession with weapons of war has a name: technofetishism,” explains Stahl. “Weapons appear to take on a magical aura. They become centerpieces in a cult of worship.”

“Apart from gazing at the majesty of these bombs, we were also invited to step inside these high-tech machines and take them for a spin,” said Stahl. “Or if we have the means, we can purchase one of the military vehicles on the consumer market. Not only are we invited to fantasize about being in the driver’s seat, we are routinely invited to peer through the crosshairs too. These repeated modes of imaging war cultivate new modes of perception, new relationships to the tools of state violence. In other words, we become accustomed to ‘seeing’ through the machines of war.”

In order to sell war, you have to feed the public’s appetite for entertainment.

Not satisfied with peddling its war propaganda through Hollywood, reality TV shows and embedded journalists whose reports came across as glorified promotional ads for the military, the Pentagon turned to sports to further advance its agenda, “tying the symbols of sports with the symbols of war.”

The military has been firmly entrenched in the nation’s sports spectacles ever since, having co-opted football, basketball, even NASCAR.

This is how you sustain the nation’s appetite for war.

No wonder entertainment violence is the hottest selling ticket at the box office. As professor Henry Giroux points out, “Popular culture not only trades in violence as entertainment, but also it delivers violence to a society addicted to a pleasure principle steeped in graphic and extreme images of human suffering, mayhem and torture.”

No wonder the government continues to whet the nation’s appetite for violence and war through paid propaganda programs (seeded throughout sports entertainment, Hollywood blockbusters and video games)—what Stahl refers to as “militainment”—that glorify the military and serve as recruiting tools for America’s expanding military empire.

No wonder Americans from a very young age are being groomed to enlist as foot soldiers—even virtual ones—in America’s Army (coincidentally, that’s also the name of a first person shooter video game produced by the military). Explorer scouts, for example, are one of the most popular recruiting tools for the military and its civilian counterparts (law enforcement, Border Patrol, and the FBI).

Writing for *The Atlantic*, a former Explorer scout described the highlight of the program: monthly weekend maneuvers with the National Guard where scouts “got to fire live rounds from M16s, M60 machine guns, and M203 grenade launchers... we would have urban firefights (shooting blanks, of course) in Combat Town, a warren of concrete buildings designed for just that purpose. The exercise always devolved into a free-for-all, with all of us weekend warriors emptying clip after clip of blanks until we couldn’t see past the end of our rifles for all the smoke in the air.”

No wonder the United States is the number one consumer, exporter and perpetrator of violence and violent weapons in the world. Seriously, America spends more money on war than the combined military budgets of China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Germany, Italy and Brazil. America polices the globe, with 800 military bases and troops stationed in 160 countries. Moreover, the war hawks have turned the American homeland into a quasi-battlefield with military gear, weapons and tactics. In turn, domestic police forces have become roving extensions of the military—a standing army.

So when you talk about the Florida shooting, keep in mind that you’re not dealing with a single shooter scenario. Rather, you’re dealing with a sophisticated, far-reaching war machine that has woven itself into the very fabric of this nation.

You want to stop the gun violence?

Stop the worship of violence that permeates our culture.

Stop glorifying the military industrial complex with flyovers and salutes during sports spectacles.

Stop acting as if there is anything patriotic about military exercises and occupations that bomb hospitals and schools.

Stop treating guns and war as entertainment fodder in movies, music, video games, toys, amusement parks, reality TV and more.

Stop distributing weapons of war to the local police and turning them into extensions of the military—weapons that have no business being anywhere but on a battlefield.

This breakdown—triggered by polarizing circus politics, media-fed mass hysteria, militarization and militainment (the selling of war and violence as entertainment), a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in the face of growing corruption, the government’s alienation from its populace, and an economy that has much of the population struggling to get by—is manifesting itself in madness, mayhem and an utter disregard for the very principles and liberties that have kept us out of the clutches of totalitarianism for so long.

Stop falling for the military industrial complex’s psychological war games.

Niklas Cruz may have pulled the trigger that resulted in the mayhem in Parkland, Fla., but something else is driving the madness.

As Stahl concludes, “War has come to look very much like a video game. As viewers of the TV war, we are treated to endless flyovers. We are immersed in a general spirit of play. We are shown countless computer animations that contribute a sense of virtuality. We play alongside news anchors who watch on their monitors. We sit in front of the crosshairs directing missiles with a sense of interactivity. The destruction, if shown at all, seems unreal, distant. These repeated images foster habitual fantasies of crossing over.”

We’ve got to do more than react in a knee-jerk fashion.

Those who want safety at all costs will clamor for more gun control measures (if not at an outright ban on weapons for non-military, non-police personnel), widespread mental health screening of the general population and greater scrutiny of military veterans, more threat assessments and behavioral sensing warnings, more CCTV cameras with facial recognition capabilities, more “See Something, Say Something” programs aimed at turning Americans into snitches and spies, more metal detectors and whole-body imaging devices at soft targets, more roaming squads of militarized police empowered to do random bag searches, more fusion centers to centralize and disseminate information to law enforcement agencies, and more surveillance of what Americans say and do, where they go, what they buy and how they spend their time.

All of these measures play into the government’s hands.

As we have learned the hard way, the phantom promise of safety in exchange for restricted or regulated liberty is a false, misguided doctrine that has no basis in the truth.

What we need is a thoughtful, measured, apolitical response to these shootings and the violence that is plaguing our nation.

As I point out in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People*, the solution to most problems must start locally, in our homes, in our neighborhoods, and in our communities. We’ve got to de-militarize our police and lower the levels of violence here and abroad, whether it’s violence we export to other countries, violence we glorify in entertainment, or violence we revel in when it’s leveled at our so-called enemies, politically or otherwise.

Our prolonged exposure to the toxic culture of the American police state is deadly.

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