

Battleground USA: The San Bernardino Shootings and Militia Mentalities

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Spectacular violence has again made its reaping appearance, a brutal but sure sign that the distinction between militia and civilian has ceased having any value in the US context. The militarisation of the society has become the most vigorous of diseases, whose greatest symptom is not so much gun ownership as the culture behind access and use.

Even as the blood of Paris seemed to be making its gruesome presence across US television screens, the fear that an ISIS-like attack might eventuate on local soil did circulate through the networks last month. Such violence did manifest itself, and, like so many ideological appropriations, it seemed inane. It was yet another addition to this *annus horribilis* of mass shootings – 353 in all.[1]

Fourteen people were massacred in San Bernardino's Inland Regional Centre on December 2 by another military-styled operation that seemed chillingly reminiscent to the attacks that took place in Paris in January on Charlie Hebdo's headquarters. There were also 21 injured. The scale was roughly equivalent; the individuals had worn masks and body armour. It was the deadliest since the Sandy Hook bloodbath of 2012.

As information trickles through, suggestions are that the couple suspected as being involved in the shootings, Tashfeen Malik and husband Syed Rizwan Farook, were "ISIS supporters," which is hardly the same as a direct, solid link. (Not even ISIS has claimed membership for the two.) As the assailants were killed in the subsequent police chase, much of this is academic.

US investigators have tentatively suggested that one of the suspects had professed loyalty to the organisation, a morsel that terrorist experts are bound to digest with ravenous enthusiasm. Facebook, as ever, has provided the lead, with Malik posting his public declaration to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi prior to the rampage.

There is little doubt that the organisation and its various affiliates were having a gloat at the home-soil misery inflicted at San Bernardino, a point made from its Iraq-based station, al-Bayan Radio, which prayed "to God to accept them as martyrs". At this point, ISIS is pleased to vicariously reap any reward it can get. But suggestions that radical Islam is about to unleash itself in the suburbs are, at best, fanciful.

Even retired Air Force Lt. Colonel Rick Francona, who was being happily milked for all he was worth on CNN, suggested that, "What they're calling these two are supporters, which is kind of a lesser level." [2] The White House has also suggested that there was "no indication that the killers were part of an organized group or broader terrorist cell."

The violence of guns has become its own pious affirmation of a lifestyle. It is the ultimate expression of grievance and affirmation. Forget the social worker – the gun will vocalise grievance. In the San Bernardino killings, Farook’s co-workers for the environmental health department in the town were the victims.

Even as the US leads the remote bombing charge on the forces of Islamic State, it is waging a failing battle at home on the containment of a contagion that is proving antediluvian in nature. The militia mentality presumes that someone is going to nick your land, your spouse, and your belongings at any given moment. Any breach of security must therefore be countered by an exaggerated display of force, or at the very least the means to use it.

Pro-gun advocates have decided to excoriate the White House for stealing a march on the National Rifle Association. A feverishly indignant Chris Cox, executive director of the NRA’s Institute for Legislative Action, observed that, “President Obama used it not as a moment to inform or calm the American people; rather, he exploited it to push his gun control agenda.” His point: California had already embraced the gun control list he had demanded: universal background checks, weapon registration, waiting periods, gun and magazine bans and broader gun categories.[3]

What then, to do? Cox sounds sensible on pointing out that Obama’s foreign policy might well have made the US less safe, but the angle taken here is more slanted. “Unlike the president, regular citizens are not surrounded by armed secret service agents wherever they go.”

Cox’s own suggestion is typical of the self-contained logic of gun ownership in the US. Gun ecology is an ecosystem: If you perish because of it, it is probably because you were not adequately armed. If a school gets shot up, arm it. If a centre holding a function gets riddled with bullets, then maybe those in attendance should have had their guns handy. “The responsibility is ours and ours alone.” Battleground USA has its own supreme, if impenetrable reasoning.

Such a train of thought is encouraged by the extravagant availability of high grade military weapons, including the legally acquired .223 calibre assault rifles, with the near 1,400 rounds of ammunition, along with semiautomatic handguns found on the two assailants. In the true nature of gun ownership ideology, even those on terrorist watch lists can purchase guns. From 2004 to 2014, the Government Accountability Office noted that over 2,000 suspects on the FBI’s own terrorism watch list were successful in their gun purchases, a success rate hovering around 90 percent.[4]

The culprit behind limiting such access? The NRA, who was also instrumental in making sure Congress got clay feet in renewing the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban. In the sobering words of the GAO, “membership in a terrorist organization does not prohibit a person from possessing firearms under current federal law.”

In the pseudo-pioneer rhetoric of the NRA, sanctity of person is not assured by any central government but by private, and sometimes murderous, enterprise. The Indians are still circulating the wagon trains. People must be ready.

The problem with this assumption is that it also takes away from the state another sacred monopoly – that of using violence. Fittingly, Obama may direct the US armed forces to target positions in a distant country in an adventurist enterprise he falsely claims he is

winning; he is incapable of directing his own citizens to restrain themselves in resolving disputes in a mass murderous fashion at home.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

- [1] <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/2015-the-year-in-mass-shootings-20151203>
- [2] <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/05/us/san-bernardino-shooting/index.html>
- [3] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/12/03/no-mr-president-nra-not-blame-san-bernardino-column/76748608/>
- [4] <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-guns-from-the-san-bernardino-shooting-we-re-legal-thanks-to-the-nra-20151203>

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