

School Shooters and Drones: Linking Gun Violence at Home to America's Wars Abroad

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In the wake of the February 14, 2018, mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 students and staff members, a teacher [said](#) the school looked “like a war zone.” And to many young Americans, that’s exactly what it felt like. But this shooting was different. Refusing to be victims, Parkland survivors disrupted the “[thoughts and prayers](#)” cycle by immediately rallying student activists and adults across the country, mobilizing them around such tragedies and the [weapons of war](#) that often facilitate them.

[Recent history](#) suggested that such a movement, sure to be unable to keep the public’s attention or exert significant pressure on lawmakers, would collapse almost instantly. Yet, miraculously enough, the same fear — of their school being next — that had kept young Americans paralyzed for almost 20 years was what drove these newly impassioned activists not to back down.

Let me say that, much as I admire them, I look at their remarkable movement from an odd perspective. You see, I grew up in the “school-shooting era” and now work for a non-profit called [ReThink Media](#) tracking coverage of the American drone war that has been going on for 17 years.

To me, the U.S. military and CIA drones that hover [constantly](#) over eight countries across the Greater Middle East and Africa, and regularly [terrorize](#), [maim](#), and [kill](#) civilians, including [children](#), are the equivalents of the disturbed shooters in American schools. But that story is hard to find anywhere in this country. What reports Americans do read about those drone strikes usually focus on successes (a major terrorist taken out in a distant land), not the “collateral damage.”

With that in mind, let me return to those teenage activists against gun violence who quickly grasped three crucial things. The first was that such violence can’t be dealt with by focusing on gun control alone. You also have to confront the other [endemic problems](#) exacerbating the gun violence epidemic, including inadequate mental health resources, systemic racism and police brutality, and the depth of economic inequality. As Parkland teen organizer [Edna Chavez](#) explained,

“Instead of police officers we should have a department specializing in restorative justice. We need to tackle the root causes of the issues we face and come to an understanding of how to resolve them.”

The second was that, no matter how much you shouted, you had to be aware of the

privilege of being heard. In other words, when you shouted, you had to do so not just for yourself but for all those voices so regularly drowned out in this country. After all, black Americans represent the [majority](#) of gun homicide victims. Black children are [10](#) times as likely to die by gun and yet their activism on the subject has been largely [demonized](#) or overlooked even as support for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students rolled in.



Image on the right: Cruz, Parkland school shooting perpetrator, during his arrest

The third was that apathy is the enemy of progress, which means that to make change you have to give people a sense of engagement and empowerment. As one of the Parkland students, [Emma Gonzalez](#), put it:

“What matters is that the majority of American people have become complacent in a senseless injustice that occurs all around them.”

Washington’s Expanding Drone Wars

Here’s the irony, though: while those teenagers continue to talk about the repeated killing of innocents in this country, their broader [message](#) could easily be applied to another type of violence that, in all these years, Americans have paid next to no attention to: the U.S. drone war.

Unlike school shootings, drone strikes killing civilians in distant lands rarely make the news here, much less the headlines. Most of us at least now know what it means to live in a country where school shootings are an almost weekly news story. Drones are another matter entirely, and beyond the innocents they so regularly slaughter, there are long-term effects on the communities they are attacking.

As [Veterans for Peace](#) put it,

“Here at home, deaths of students and others killed in mass shootings and gun violence, including suicide gun deaths, are said to be the price of freedom to bear arms. Civilian casualties in war are written off as ‘collateral damage,’ the price of freedom and U.S. security.”

And yet, after 17 years, three presidents, and little transparency, America’s drone wars have never truly made it into the national conversation. Regularly marketed over those years as “precise” and “surgical,” drones have always been seen by lawmakers as a “[sexy](#),” casualty-free solution to fighting the bad guys, while protecting American blood and

treasure.

According to reports, President Trump actually [expanded](#) the U.S. global drone war, while [removing](#) the last shreds of transparency about what those drones are doing — and even who's launching them. One of his first orders on entering the Oval Office was to [secretly reinstate](#) the CIA's ability to launch drone strikes that are, in most cases, not even officially acknowledged. And since then, it's only gotten worse. Just last week, he revoked an Obama-era executive order that [required](#) the director of national intelligence to release an annual report on civilian and combatant casualties caused by CIA drones and other lethal operations. Now, not only are the rules of engagement — whom you can strike and under what circumstances — secret, but the Pentagon no longer even reveals when drones have been used, no less when civilians die from them. Because of this purposeful opaqueness, even an estimate of the drone death toll no longer exists.

Still, in the data available on all U.S. airstrikes since Trump was elected, an alarming trend is discernible: there are more of them, more casualties from them, and ever less accountability about them. In Iraq and Syria alone, the monitoring group [Airwars](#) believes that the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS is responsible for between 7,468 and 11,841 civilian deaths, around 2,000 of whom were children. (The U.S.-led coalition, however, only admits to killing 1,139 civilians.)



In [Afghanistan](#), the U.N. recently found that U.S. airstrikes (including drone strikes) had killed approximately the same number of Afghan civilians in 2018 as in the previous three years put together. In response to this report, the U.S.-led NATO mission there claimed that “all feasible precautions” were being taken to limit civilian casualties and that it investigates all allegations of their occurrence. According to such NATO investigations, airstrikes by foreign forces caused 117 civilian casualties last year, including 62 deaths — about a fifth of the U.N. tally.

And those are only the numbers for places where Washington is officially at war. In Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Libya, even less information is available on the [number](#) of civilians the U.S. has killed. [Experts](#) who track drone strikes in such gray areas of conflict, however, place that number in the thousands, though there is no way to confirm them, as even our military acknowledges. U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Veale, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, [put it](#) this way last year:

“As far as how do we know how many civilians were killed, I am just being honest, no one will ever know. Anyone who claims they will know is lying, and there's no possible way.”

After a U.S. strike killed or injured an entire Afghan family, the trauma surgeon treating a

four-year-old survivor told [NBC](#),

“I am sad. A young boy with such big injuries. No eyes, brain out. What will be his future?”

In other words, while America’s teenagers fight in the most public way possible for their right to live, a world away [Afghanistan’s](#) teenagers are [marching](#) for the same thing — except instead of gun control, in that heavily armed land, they want peace.

Trauma Is Trauma Is Trauma

Gun violence — and school shootings in particular — have become the preeminent fear of American teenagers. A [Pew poll](#) taken last year found that 57% of teens are worried about a shooting at their school. (One in four are “very worried.”) This is even truer of nonwhite teens, with roughly two-thirds of them expressing such fear.

As one student told [Teen Vogue](#):

“How could you not feel a little bit terrified knowing that it happens so randomly and so often?”

And she’s not exaggerating. More than 150,000 students in the U.S have experienced a shooting on campus since the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, considered the first modern mass school shooting.

And in such anticipatory anxiety, American students have much in common with victims of drone warfare. Speaking to researchers from Stanford University, [Haroon Quddoos](#), a Pakistani taxi driver who survived two U.S. drone strikes, explained it this way:

“No matter what we are doing, that fear is always inculcated in us. Because whether we are driving a car, or we are working on a farm, or we are sitting home playing... cards — no matter what we are doing, we are always thinking the drone will strike us. So we are scared to do anything, no matter what.”

Similar symptoms of post-traumatic stress, trauma, and anxiety are commonplace emotions in countries where U.S. drones are active, just as in American communities like Parkland that have lived through a mass shooting. Visiting communities in Yemen that experienced drone strikes, forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld [found](#) that 92% of their inhabitants were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with children the most significantly affected. Psychologists have [come up with](#) similar figures when studying both survivors of school shootings and children who have been psychologically affected by school-lockdown drills, by the media’s focus on violence, and by the culture of fear that has developed in response to mass shootings.

The Voices Left Out of the Conversation

The Parkland students have created a coherent movement that brings together an incredibly diverse group united around a common goal and a belief that all gun violence victims, not just those who have experienced a mass shooting, need to be heard. As one

Parkland survivor and leader of the March For Our Lives movement, [David Hogg](#), put it, the goal isn't to talk for different communities, but to let them "speak for themselves and ask them how we can help."

The Parkland survivors have essentially created an echo chamber, amplifying the previously unheard voices of young African-Americans and Latinos in particular. At last year's March For Our Lives, for instance, 11-year-old [Naomi Wadler](#) started her speech this way:

"I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African-American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don't lead the evening news."

In 2016, there were nearly 39,000 gun deaths, more than 14,000 of them homicides and almost 23,000 suicides. Such routine gun violence [disproportionately](#) affects black Americans. Mass shootings accounted for only about 1.2% of all gun deaths that year. Yet the Parkland students made headlines and gained praise for their activism — [Oprah Winfrey](#) even donated \$500,000 to the movement — while black communities that had been fighting gun violence for years never received anything similar.



As someone who spends a lot of her time engrossed in the undercovered news of drone strikes, I can't help but notice the parallels. Stories about U.S. drone strikes taking out dangerous terrorists proliferate, while reports on U.S.-caused civilian casualties disappear into the void. For example, in January, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command [claimed](#) that a precision drone strike finally killed Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Badawi (image on the right), the alleged mastermind behind the deadly October 2000 suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen. Within a day, more than 24 media outlets had covered the story.

Few, however, focused on the fact that the U.S. command only claimed al-Badawi's death was "likely," despite similar reports about such terrorists that have [repeatedly](#) been proven wrong. The British human rights group Reprieve [found](#) back in 2014 that even when drone operators end up successfully targeting specific individuals like al-Badawi, they regularly kill vastly more people than their chosen targets. Attempts to kill 41 terror figures, Reprieve reported, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,147 people. That was five years ago, but there's no reason to believe anything has changed.

In contrast, when a U.S. airstrike — it's not clear whether it was a drone or a manned aircraft — [killed](#) at least 20 civilians in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in December, 2018,

only four American media outlets ([Reuters](#), [the Associated Press](#), [Voice of America](#), and the [New York Times](#)) covered the story and none followed up with a report on those civilians and their families. That has largely been the norm since the war on terror began with the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. In the Trump years so far, while headlines scream about mass school shootings and other slaughters of civilians here, the civilian casualties of America's wars and the drone strikes that often go with them are, if anything, even more strikingly missing in action in the media.

When Safa al-Ahmad, a journalist for PBS's [Frontline](#), was asked why she thought it was important to hear from Yemenis experiencing American drone strikes, she responded:

"I think if you're going to talk about people, you should go talk to them. It's just basic respect for other human beings. It really bothered me that everyone was just talking about the Americans... The other civilians, they weren't given any names, they weren't given any details. It was like an aside to the story... This is part of the struggle when you construct stories on foreign countries, when it comes to the American public. I think we've done [Americans] a disservice, by not doing more of this... We impact the world, we should understand it. An informed public is the only way there can be a functioning democracy. That is our duty as a democracy, to be informed."

This one-sided view of America's never-ending air wars fails everyone, from the people being asked to carry out Washington's decisions in those lands to ordinary Americans who have little idea what's being done in their name to the many people living under those drones. Americans should know that, to them, it's we who seem like the school shooters of the planet.

Waking Up An Apathetic Nation

For the better part of two decades, young Americans have been trapped in a cycle of violence at home and abroad with little way to speak out. Gun violence in this country was a headline-grabbing given. School shootings, like so many other mass killings here, were deemed "tragic" and worthy of thoughts, prayers, and much fervid media attention, but little else.

Until [Parkland](#).

What changed? Well, a new cohort, Generation Z, came on the scene and, unlike their millennial predecessors, many of them are refusing to accept the status quo, [especially](#) when it comes to issues like gun violence.

Every time there was a mass shooting, millennials would hold their breath, wondering if today would be the day the country finally woke up. After Newtown. After San Bernadino. After Las Vegas. And each time, it wasn't. Parkland could have been the same, if it hadn't been for those meddling kids. Having witnessed the dangers of apathy, Gen-Z seems [increasingly](#) to be about movement and action. In fact, in a [Vice](#) youth survey, 71% of respondents reported feeling "capable" of enacting change around global warming and 85% felt the same about social problems. And that's new.

For so long, gun violence seemed like an unstoppable, incurable plague. Fed up with the "adults in the room," however, these young activists have begun to take matters into their own hands, giving those particularly at risk of gun violence, [children](#), a sense of newfound

power — the power to determine their own futures. Whether it's [testifying](#) in front of Congress in the first hearing on gun violence since 2011, [protesting](#) at the stores and offices of gun manufacturers, or participating in "[die-ins](#)," these kids are making their voices heard.

Since the Parkland massacre, there has been actual [movement](#) on gun control, something that America has not seen for a long time. Under pressure, the Justice Department moved to [ban](#) the bump stocks that can make semi-automatic weapons fire almost like machine guns, Florida [signed](#) a \$400 million bill to tighten the state's gun laws, companies began to [cut](#) ties with the National Rifle Association, and public support [grew](#) for stricter gun control laws.

Although the new Gen Z activists have focused on issues close to home, sooner or later they may start to look beyond the water's edge and find themselves in touch with their [counterparts](#) across the globe, who are showing every day how dedicated they are to changing the world they live in, with or without anyone's help. And if they do, they will find that, in its endless wars, America has been the true school shooter on this planet, terrorizing the global classroom with a remarkable lack of consequences.

In March 2018, [according to](#) Human Rights Watch, American planes bombed a school that housed displaced people in Syria, killing dozens of them, including children. Similarly, in Yemen that August, a Saudi plane, using a [Pentagon-supplied](#) laser-guided bomb, blew away a school bus, killing 40 schoolchildren. Just as at home, it's not only about the weaponry like those planes or drones. Activists will find that they have to focus their attention as well on the root causes of such violence and the scars they leave behind in the communities of survivors.

More tolerant, more [diverse](#), less trustful of major institutions and less inclined to believe in American exceptionalism than any generation before them, Generation Z may be primed to care about what their country is doing in their name from Afghanistan to Syria, Yemen to Libya. But first they have to know it's happening.

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