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## **Responding to the Pittsburgh Synagogue Mass Shooting: Condemning Anti-Semitism is Not Enough**

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence  
October 29, 2018

On Saturday, October 27, a gunman armed with an AR-15 assault rifle and three handguns entered a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during worship services and killed 11 people and wounded at least six others before being shot by police and taken into custody. The gunman, 46 year old Robert Bowers, had posted rabidly anti-Semitic rhetoric on social media prior to the shooting and repeated it during and after the shooting.<sup>1</sup>

Leaders across the country were quick to condemn the anti-Semitic hatred that motivated the mass shooting. Donald Trump said, "It's a terrible, terrible thing what's going on with hate in our country and frankly, all over the world, and something has to be done."<sup>2</sup> Attorney General Jeff Sessions said, "Hatred and violence on the basis of religion can have no place in our society."<sup>3</sup> Pittsburgh FBI agent Robert Jones said the victims were "brutally murdered by a gunman targeting them simply because of their faith," and Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania said, "We simply cannot accept this violence as a normal part of American life."<sup>4</sup> On the other side of the country, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg said, "As a member of the Jewish community and the mayor of our city, I cannot adequately express the sadness and anger I feel when another despicable act like this rips through our country."<sup>5</sup>

But few leaders made even oblique references to a need for stronger gun control laws. On the contrary, Trump told reporters that lax gun control "has little to do with it, if you take a look," and implied that the synagogue should have had armed security guards present during worship services.<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of the Pittsburgh synagogue mass shooting, it's certainly appropriate to condemn violence motivated by anti-Semitism, just as it was appropriate to condemn the 2012 mass shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Cree, Wisconsin, motivated by religious and ethnic hatred; the 2015 mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, motivated by racial hatred; the 2015 mass shooting at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado motivated by anti-abortion extremism; the 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida motivated by anti-

gay hatred; the 2017 mass shooting at a baseball field in Alexandria, Virginia, motivated by political extremism; and all the other mass shootings in our country for which there was no clear-cut motivation. It's also appropriate to condemn the hate speech that fuels the religious, ethnic, racial, social, and political extremism that can lead to acts of violence, including the hateful rhetoric of a U.S. president who, as a candidate, called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States;"<sup>7</sup> and who publicly uses terms such as "horse face" to refer to women,<sup>8</sup> "s--t h--e countries" to refer to Haiti and African nations,<sup>9</sup> and "hardened criminals" to refer to refugees fleeing violence in Central America.<sup>10</sup>

It's shameful, though, to continue to ignore the fact that mass shootings like the one that occurred at the Pittsburgh synagogue on October 27 don't happen on a regular basis in any income democratic country of the world other than the United States;<sup>11</sup> that the rate of gun homicide in the United States is 25 times higher than in other developed countries;<sup>12</sup> and that the extraordinarily high number of guns in circulation in our country and our extraordinarily lax gun control laws<sup>13</sup> - not higher rates of anti-Semitism and other religious intolerance,<sup>14</sup> higher rates of mental illness and substance abuse,<sup>15</sup> or a more violent culture in general<sup>16</sup> - are what account for the difference.

It's also shameful that we fail to follow the examples of other high income democratic countries that have acted swiftly and definitively after mass shootings to prevent them from recurring in the future. Such countries include the United Kingdom, which banned all handguns within two years after a mass shooting in an elementary school in Dunblane Scotland in 1996;<sup>17</sup> and Australia, which banned all semi-automatic and automatic rifles within 13 days after a mass shooting in 1996 in the resort town of Port Arthur.<sup>18</sup>

And it's shameful to use the Second Amendment as an excuse for not taking definitive action to stop the epidemic of gun violence in our country. There was no "Second Amendment right" for any individual person to own a gun in our country before the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision,<sup>19</sup> a decision in which a narrow 5-4 majority of the Court reversed over 200 years of legal precedent and four prior Supreme Court decisions<sup>20</sup> in becoming a party to what the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called "one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American people" that he had seen in his lifetime.<sup>21</sup> At best, the Second Amendment was included in the U.S. Constitution by the founders of our country as a chimerical attempt to substitute a volunteer, "well regulated militia" for a professional army.<sup>22</sup> More likely, it was included to induce the southern slave owning colonies to join the Union by assuring them that they could keep their armed slave patrols.<sup>23</sup> In the short term, the *Heller* decision should be overturned. In the long term, the Second Amendment should be repealed, just as the other three sections of the U.S. Constitution that were indisputably included to preserve the institution of slavery were repealed over 150 ago.<sup>24</sup>

Americans Against Gun Violence condemns the Pittsburgh synagogue mass shooting and the anti-Semitism that motivated it in the strongest terms – but we don't stop there. Please join us in calling for the urgent adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in every other high income democratic country of the world – countries in which mass shootings are rare or non-existent, and in which the average rate of gun homicide is 25 times lower than in our own country. Until we adopt such laws, we shouldn't be satisfied with condemning the motivation behind horrific mass shootings. Rather, we should ask ourselves why we don't take the obvious steps necessary to prevent them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill".

Bill Durston, MD  
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board-certified emergency physician, a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, and a combat veteran of the Vietnam War, decorated for “courage and composure under fire.”

## References

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- <sup>5</sup> Darrell Steinberg, "Let Hate Be a Stranger, in Sacramento and the Nation," *The Sacramento Bee*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article220750300.html>.
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<sup>19</sup> *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 US (Supreme Court 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 US (Supreme Court 1876); *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 US (Supreme Court 1886); *U.S. v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939) (n.d.); *Lewis v. United States*, No. 55 (U.S. 1980).

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<sup>22</sup> John Paul Stevens, "Opinion | John Paul Stevens: Repeal the Second Amendment," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/opinion/john-paul-stevens-repeal-second-amendment.html>.

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<sup>24</sup> Article I, Section 2; Article I, Section 9; and Article IV, Section 2: "The United States Constitution," 1791.