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## **The Campus Mass Shooting that Barely Made the News**

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

May 2, 2019

On the evening of Tuesday, April 30, a former student, 22 year old Trystan Terrell, walked into a class at the University of North Carolina's Charlotte campus and opened fire with a handgun, killing two students and wounding four others. According to first hand reports, one of the students who was killed in the attack, Riley Howell, was fatally wounded as he tackled Terrell, pinning him to the floor to prevent him from shooting other students.<sup>1</sup> Police reported that Terrell had no criminal record and had legally purchased the handgun he used in the shooting after passing state and federal background checks.<sup>2</sup>

Our Sacramento newspaper devoted just nine very short paragraphs to the shooting on page 7,<sup>3</sup> borrowed from a longer story in the Charlotte Observer.<sup>4</sup> The front page stories that took precedence over the UNC Charlotte mass shooting in the Sacramento Bee included coverage of U.S. Attorney General William Barr's refusal to testify before the House Judiciary Committee, a story about an unexpectedly high rate of growth in our city's population, and a story about police clearing out a local homeless encampment.<sup>5</sup>

The May 1 edition of the PBS News Hour devoted a total of 20 seconds to the shooting, followed by an uncritical 23 second report concerning a bill just passed by the Florida State Legislature to allow Florida teachers to carry handguns. The PBS report indicated that the bill to arm teachers was passed in response to the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, in which 17 students and staff were killed and 17 others were wounded. There was no subsequent coverage of the UNC Charlotte mass shooting on the PBS News Hour.

I'm on the email list of several other gun violence prevention organizations, but I didn't receive any messages from them about the shooting or any of the usual requests I get from them for me to sign-on to a petition or make a donation. Former U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was herself critically wounded in a mass shooting in 2011 in which 6 other people, including a 9 year

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old girl, were killed and 12 other people wounded,<sup>6</sup> reportedly “tweeted” after the UNC Charlotte mass shooting:

I am so sorry for these young people and their families. We fail as a nation when we fail to protect our children. You deserve better.<sup>7</sup>

I couldn't agree more. But it's difficult to understand why, after the mass shooting at UNC Charlotte, after the innumerable other mass shootings that have preceded it - most of which have been committed with handguns, including the shooting that left Gabrielle Giffords partially paralyzed on one side of her body and with markedly impaired ability to speak<sup>8</sup> – and after it has been repeatedly shown that handguns are used in approximately 80% of all gun homicides,<sup>9</sup> the gun violence prevention organization that bears Giffords' name doesn't advocate stringent restrictions on civilian handgun ownership. On the contrary, in the book, *Enough*,<sup>10</sup> which lists Gabrielle Giffords and her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, as authors, but which is written in the first person in Kelly's voice, and which heralds the founding of “Americans for Responsible Solutions,” later renamed, “Giffords,” Kelly writes proudly of the fact that the last social outing that his wife held for her DC congressional office staff before getting shot was “a great time at target practice,” firing handguns at the shooting range in the basement of the NRA office building in Fairfax, Virginia;<sup>11</sup> that shortly after he married Giffords in 2007, he bought her mother “a .357 Smith and Wesson revolver for her protection;”<sup>12</sup> that two and a half years after his wife was shot, leaving her unable to use her previously dominant right hand, he took her to a shooting range where she learned to shoot a handgun with her left hand;<sup>13</sup> and that he and his wife “wholeheartedly agree with the NRA's belief that ‘guns don't kill people – people kill people;”<sup>14</sup>

In the book, *Enough*, Kelly also writes proudly of the fact that while she was a Congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords signed on to an *amicus* brief supporting the Supreme Court's 2008 *Heller* decision,<sup>15</sup> in which a narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court reversed 217 years of legal precedent, including four prior Supreme Court decisions,<sup>16</sup> in ruling that Washington DC's partial ban on handgun ownership violated the Second Amendment.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the book, *Enough*, Kelly repeatedly makes statements to the effect that he and his wife “wholeheartedly embrace” the “right to bear arms;”<sup>18</sup> “honor the Second Amendment;”<sup>19</sup> “protect the Second Amendment;”<sup>20</sup> “are strong supporters of the Second Amendment;”<sup>21</sup> believe “wholly and completely in the Second Amendment;”<sup>22</sup> and, on the last page of the book, “are proud gun owners and protectors of the Second Amendment's right to bear arms.”<sup>23</sup> At no point in the book, however, does Kelly specify to which version of the Second Amendment he is referring – the original version, which begins with the phrase, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state,” or the NRA rewrite, endorsed by the narrow 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court in the 2008 *Heller* decision, which effectively deletes that phrase from the U.S. Constitution, and which endorses an interpretation of the Second Amendment that the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called “one of the greatest pieces of fraud – I repeat the word ‘fraud’ – on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”

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The most likely reason why I didn't hear after the UNC Charlotte shooting from the Giffords organization or any of the other national gun violence prevention organizations that usually send me messages following mass shootings is that these organizations know that none of the measures they support – not expanding background checks to cover most gun purchases, not banning assault rifles, not changing the design of handguns to make them “safer,” not funding more research on gun violence – would have prevented the UNC Charlotte mass shooting, or for that matter, the mass shooting in which Congresswoman Giffords was critically wounded, or even many of the more than 100 gun related deaths that occur on a daily basis in the United States,<sup>24</sup> most of which are committed with handguns.

And the reason that the shooting on the UNC Charlotte campus received little media attention outside of the Charlotte area is that such shootings have become the “new norm” in the United States. It is also the new norm that after such shootings that the issue of gun control as a means of preventing them is mentioned rarely, if at all. The UNC mass shooting was a “little one,” by US standards. The heroism of Riley Howell, the student who sacrificed his own life to protect the lives of his fellow students, was the most newsworthy aspect of the story in the eyes of the mainstream US media. From my point of view, Mr. Riley's courage stands in stark contrast to the lack of political courage of most of the rest of our country, including most elected officials, most of the mainstream media, and even most other gun violence prevention organizations, who are too timid to even discuss the kinds of stringent gun control measures that are necessary to prevent such tragedies and to stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our country once and for all.

Like other gun violence prevention organizations, Americans Against Gun Violence supports “common sense firearm regulations.” We believe, however, that common sense dictates that in order to prevent tragedies like the one that occurred on the campus of UNC Charlotte on April 30, to prevent other mass shootings, and to reduce rates of gun violence in the United States to levels comparable to other high income democratic countries, we must adopt comparably stringent gun control laws – laws that go far beyond the limited measures currently being advocated by other U.S. gun violence prevention organizations. Specifically, we believe that we should follow the examples of Australia, the United Kingdom, and most recently, New Zealand, all of which reacted swiftly and definitively following mass shootings in their countries, by banning civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, as in the case of Australia<sup>25</sup> and New Zealand,<sup>26</sup> and by banning civilian ownership of all handguns, as in the case of the United Kingdom.<sup>27</sup> We also believe that we should follow the example of every other high income democratic country in requiring registration of all firearms and licensing of all firearm owners.<sup>28</sup> Finally, we believe that in the United States, as in all other economically advanced democratic countries, the burden of proof should be on any person seeking to acquire a gun to show convincing evidence that he or she needs one and can handle one safely, not on society to show evidence that he or she should not have a gun.<sup>29</sup> And given the large body of evidence showing that

there is no net protective value from owning or carrying a gun,<sup>30</sup> “self defense” should not be automatically accepted as a reason for owning a gun in the United States, just as it is not accepted in most other high income democratic countries.<sup>31</sup>

In order to adopt stringent gun control regulations in the United States comparable to those in other high income democratic countries, we must first overturn the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision. Americans Against Gun Violence is the only national US gun violence prevention organization that openly advocates overturning *Heller* in the short term and adopting a new constitutional amendment in the long term that clarifies the Second Amendment in a manner consistent with the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun’s majority opinion in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*:

The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have “some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.”<sup>32</sup>

We are confident that one day, the United States will adopt stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in every other high income democratic country of the world. The only question is how many more innocent Americans will be killed and injured by guns before that day arrives. I hope that you’ll join us in our mission to make that day come sooner rather than later.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD  
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician and a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, decorated for courage under fire during the Vietnam War.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> David Perlmutter and Julie Turkewitz, “U.N.C. Charlotte Student Couldn’t Run, So He Tackled the Gunman,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/us/unc-charlotte-shooting.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Perlmutter and Turkewitz.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Henderson, Jane Wester, and Alexander Ames, “Heroism Saved Lives on NC Campus,” *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 2019, sec. A.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Henderson, Jane Wester, and Alexander Ames, “Heroes and a Question Emerge from UNC Charlotte Shooting: Why Did Attacker Open Fire?,” *charlotteobserver*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article229891334.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Sacramento Bee Front Page,” *Sacramento Bee*, April 2, 2019, sec. A.

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<sup>6</sup> Marc Lacey and David M. Herszenhorn, “Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 18 Shot Near Tucson,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/us/politics/09giffords.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Faith Karimi, “‘Why UNC Charlotte? Why My Classroom?’: All-Too-Familiar Shooting Scene Plays out on Last Day of Classes,” CNN, May 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/01/us/university-of-north-carolina-charlotte-shooting-wednesday/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Giffords and Mark Kelly, *Enough: Our Fight to Keep America Safe from Gun Violence* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 78–79.

<sup>9</sup> “Statistics on the Dangers of Handguns,” *Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence* (blog), January 1, 2012, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/the-dangers-of-handguns-statistics/>.

<sup>10</sup> Giffords and Kelly, *Enough*.

<sup>11</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 4–5, 229–30.

<sup>14</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 237.

<sup>15</sup> *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 US (Supreme Court 2008).

<sup>16</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).

<sup>17</sup> Giffords and Kelly, *Enough*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 116.

<sup>22</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 202.

<sup>23</sup> Giffords and Kelly, 238.

<sup>24</sup> “Fatal Injury Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 11, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Alpers, “The Big Melt: How One Democracy Changed after Scrapping a Third of Its Firearms,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 205–11; Rebecca Peters, “Rational Firearm Regulation: Evidence-Based Gun Laws in Australia,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 195–204.

<sup>26</sup> Josh Hafner, “Gun Control Bill in New Zealand Passes in Early Vote Following Attacks,” USA Today, April 2, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/04/02/gun-control-bill-new-zealand-vote-parliament-mosque-attacks/3341240002/>.

<sup>27</sup> Michael J. North, “Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 185–93.

<sup>28</sup> “Gun Law and Policy: Firearms and Armed Violence, Country by Country,” GunPolicy.org, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://www.gunpolicy.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Gun Law and Policy: Firearms and Armed Violence, Country by Country.”

<sup>30</sup> Some examples include: Arthur L. Kellermann and Donald T. Reay, “Protection or Peril?,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 314, no. 24 (June 12, 1986): 1557–60, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM198606123142406>; Arthur L. Kellermann et al., “Injuries and Deaths Due to Firearms in the Home,” *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* 45, no. 2 (1998): 263–67; Arthur L. Kellermann et al., “Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 329, no. 15 (1993): 1084–1091; David A. Brent et al., “Risk Factors for Adolescent Suicide,” *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 45, no. 6 (1988): 581–588; Michael R. Rand, “Guns and Crime: Handgun Victimization, Firearm Self-Defense, and Firearm Theft,” Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief (U.S. Department of Justice, April 1994); Charles C. Branas et al., “Investigating the Link Between Gun Possession and Gun Assault,” *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 11 (November 1, 2009): 2034–40, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.143099> See the post, “Should law-abiding people own guns for self-protection, on the Facts and FAQ’s page for additional discussion and references on this point.

<sup>31</sup> “Gun Law and Policy: Firearms and Armed Violence, Country by Country”; Rebecca Peters, “Welcome, Americans Against Gun Violence: A Message from Australian Human Rights Medal Winner Rebecca Peters,” *Americans Against Gun Violence* (blog), June 12, 2016, <http://aagunv.org/welcome-americans-against-gun-violence-a-message-from-australian-human-rights-medal-winner-rebecca-peters/>.

<sup>32</sup> *Lewis*, 445.