

America, how long will you sacrifice your children on the altar of gun worship?

This devotion to the right to bear arms is horrifyingly outdated. It brought terror to Texas – and it will happen again and again



'There have been more mass shootings in the US in 2022 than days of the year.' People mourn victims of the Robb elementary school mass shooting, in Uvalde, Texas, 26 May 2022.

By Jonathan Freedland
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America's great appeal to the world was its promise of possibility. It presented itself as virgin territory, a tabula rasa where a society could form anew, free of the past, and where individuals might do the same, reinventing themselves, renewing themselves, starting over. It was a myth, of course: it took no account of those people who were already there, and whose lives and lands were taken, or of those who had been brought to America in shackles. But it was a powerful myth all the same, one whose grip on the global imagination lives on: witness the success of the stage show *Hamilton* in seducing yet another generation into the romance of a new world and its revolutionary creation.

But now we see something else: a country uniquely burdened with the dead weight of its past, and therefore powerless either to deal with a danger in its present or to make a better future. The land of possibility stands paralysed, apparently unable to make even the smallest change that might save the lives of its young.

The evidence came again this week in the Texan town of Uvalde, where an 18-year-old walked into an elementary school and killed 19 children, aged between eight and

10, and two of their teachers. It was the 27th school shooting in the US this year, and it's not yet June.

There are so many stats like that. In the US, 109 people die of gun violence every day. There have been more mass shootings in the US in 2022 than days of the year. There are more guns in America than there are people. It was Uvalde this week, but last week it was Buffalo, where another 18-year-old walked into a supermarket and killed 10: his animus was directed at black people rather than children, but his method was the same.

Each time, the satirists at the Onion bring out the same headline: “No way to prevent this,’ says only nation where this regularly happens”. The joke gets at something critical and curiously un-American: a debilitating form of fatalism.

After Uvalde, I spoke to several seasoned Washington hands, asking if the horror of this latest massacre might at last prompt action. No, was the reply. Of course, each side makes the same ritual moves. Democrats deliver stirring, even heartbreaking speeches. Republicans then accuse Democrats of “politicising” tragedy, preferring instead to offer “thoughts and prayers” to the victims, before suggesting every possible remedy except the obvious one: this week we had Republican senator Ted Cruz of Texas demand an end to the menace of unlocked back doors in schools. Not one of them will so much as entertain the idea of, you know, making it a tiny bit harder for a disturbed teenager to get hold of a military grade assault weapon.

The easy explanation for this refusal to act is money, specifically the cash put in the hands of pro-gun politicians by the National Rifle Association (whose annual convention, addressed by Donald Trump, is going ahead this weekend in Houston, Texas, with the massacre in Uvalde deemed no reason to reschedule). But that is too pat. The NRA has been weakened by a slew of recent scandals, yet Republican politicians still refuse to pass even the mildest gun safety measures. The glum truth is that it's not a lobby organisation that has a hold on them so much as pro-gun voters, who have concluded that if a politician dares suggest, say, the massively popular move of requiring universal background checks – looking for a record of instability or past violence – before selling someone an AR-15, they have taken the first step towards government confiscation of citizens' guns.

That, of course, is seen as an unconscionable violation of the constitution's second amendment, which enshrines the right to bear arms. Never mind that no Democrat is advocating anything like the action Britain or Australia took after mass shootings, all but banning guns, and never mind that it's hard to believe that the framers of the constitution were intent on allowing unhinged teenagers access to weapons that could kill en masse and in seconds. That slippery slope argument, combined with the sacred status accorded to the second amendment and the constitution itself, has immobilised Republican politicians.

Their opposition matters because they have far more say than the number of votes that they win might suggest. Under the US system, every state gets two senators, no matter how many or how few people live in that state. It means mainly white, mainly rural states with few voters – but strong views on guns – exercise an effective veto on more populous, more diverse, more urban states, whose tens of millions of voters are desperate for gun safety measures. That's why even the modest proposals that

followed the Sandy Hook school massacre of 2012 died in the Senate. And that's why so many feel fatalistic about the prospects of change, resigning themselves to another massacre and then another.

Some try to keep the fatalism at bay, insisting that with the NRA weak, now is the time to strike. They propose a march on Washington of a million parents and their children. Or a consumer push to demand the Republicans' corporate donors withhold their cash until the party acts on guns. Or maybe even international pressure, with foreign leaders raising gun violence with their US counterparts the way they'd raise human rights abuses when meeting representatives of China. The US Senate banned assault weapons back in 1994 (before allowing the ban to expire a decade later): if they did it once, they can do it again.

But those defiant voices are in the minority. Most believe that the state of America's politics has condemned the US to suffer a fate the rest of the democratic world has avoided. Beyond the mortal threat that represents to Americans, that despair, that sense that political effort is futile and that change is impossible, endangers US democracy and the country's very sense of self.

That it arises out of the constitution – its second amendment and its design of the Senate – is a bitter irony. The whole point of the American revolution enshrined in that document was to forge a society that could make the world anew, able to adapt to the present unbound by the strictures of the past. In the words of the great English-born revolutionary Thomas Paine, who argued that circumstances always changed from one generation to the next: "As government is for the living, and not for the dead, it is the living only that has any right in it." Today's America is sacrificing the living in the name of the dead of two centuries ago. It is betraying its founding ideal. It is offering up its young to placate ghosts from a time long gone.

- *Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist*