**We Kill People, Too**

[Harlan Ullman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/harlan-ullman/)

September 4, 2023

On several occasions, Donald Trump has uttered one of the few truthful statements he probably has ever made. When asked about the murderous sides of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Trump growled, “We kill people too.” But as we will see, once again, the Donald was misguided.

Last week’s dramatic assassination of Wagner chief Yvgenny Prigozhin followed a long Russian and Soviet tradition of exterminating dissidents. Ivan the Terrible, who ruled Russia in the 16th century, established the first secret police or oprichniki. The brutality of the political system after the Soviet Union was established in 1921 was defined by Lenin’s declaration of “who-whom,” meaning who wins power does so by any means.

Pursuit of power followed that maxim after Lenin died in 1924. Lenin’s successors heavily relied on reigns of terror since, culminating with Stalin’s infamous purges and the Gulag that killed and imprisoned millions in the 1930s. In a second assassination attempt, Stalin had Leon Trotsky, a co-founder of the USSR, killed by an axe in 1940 in Mexico. Moscow denied the assassination.

After Stalin died in March 1953, the Politburo had secret police head Lavrenti Beria killed as a threat to all. When Nikita Khrushchev was relieved of duty in 1964; Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991; and Boris Yeltsin in 1999, each was allowed to retire peacefully. Putin has returned to Stalinist form.

The US needs gun control that ensures gun users are qualified, sane, trained and licensed and that access is limited to those who are not.

Putin’s list of enemies killed or poisoned is well-known. Alexander Litvinenko died from polonium-laced tea in London in 2006. Boris Nemtsov was gunned down in 2015 in front of the Kremlin. Then Prigozhin and six of his key Wagner team became the latest casualties.

Trump was referring to US foreign policy actions to eliminate enemies using the CIA term of exercising “extreme prejudice,” or kill. During the Vietnam War, Operation Phoenix was designed to eradicate the Viet Cong operating in the Republic of Vietnam. Nearly 90,000 Vietnamese were detained. About 1/3 were killed without due process.

After September 11th, the US killed or captured many members of al Qaeda, ISIS and other Islamic insurgents, often ex-judicially, in the War on Terror. The death of Osama bin Laden was the most significant, probably at a cost of several trillion dollars considering what was spent on the war on terror. In 2015, the US also killed a US-born citizen designated an enemy, Anwar al-Awlaki, without due process. And Trump accounted for Iranian Quds commander, General Mohammed Soleimani with a drone strike inside Iraq in 2020 violating international law.

While the US uses human rights to underscore Chinese and Russian abuses and atrocities such as the treatment of minorities and war crimes committed in Ukraine, US critics have more fertile grounds by citing gun violence in America. With Prigozhin and his team as exceptions, Russians and Chinese on balance are much more secure from being killed by fellow citizens than are Americans. Of course, those who defy the authorities are not without risk.

The shootings in Jacksonville, Florida last weekend were the latest tragic example of Americans killing Americans in mass shootings. A mass shooting is when three or more people die. Trump should have been referring to mass shootings in his assertion that we “we kill people too.” He was not.

Mass shootings are on the rise in America along with gun deaths. So far this year, according to the BBC, nearly 500 mass shootings occurred in America. Enemies of the state killed each year in China and Russia are far less than American gun deaths. Both Russian and Soviet law authorized the state to bring to justice enemies of the state, regardless of geographic location.

Trump never appreciated or even considered where “we kill people too” was relevant. Trump cited equivalence with autocracies in his extraordinary defence of Putin. Ironically, in the war on terror, US actions probably created more terrorists than they eliminated through the unintended consequences of killing fathers, sons, friends and husbands.

Americans killing Americans is outrageous. Yet, the sensible approach is not the realistic one. The US needs gun control that ensures gun users are qualified, sane, trained and licensed and that access is limited to those who are not. Unfortunately, that will not happen.

As long as the Second Amendment resists effective limits on its application, increases in gun murders are inevitable. Americans will continue to kill Americans. That is unconscionable. But Trump is right: mass shootings are part of America.

*He writer is a senior advisor at Washington, DC’s Atlantic Council and a published author.*