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DISTURBED PERSON + GUN = KILLER
DISTURBED PERSON + ASSAULT RIFLE = MASS
MURDERER

Neither SWAT nor armed citizens are a solution to the threat posed by assault weapons



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the AK-47, the weapon designed by the famous [General Mikhail T. Kalashnikov](#) to help Communists win the struggle against Western imperialism. From the jungles of Southeast Asia to the killing fields of America's inner cities, the simple, reliable weapon became an instant hit. Now the battleground has expanded into the epicenters of capitalist consumption. We're talking, of course, about shopping malls.

It's unlikely that the 19-year old gunman who murdered five in a Nebraska mall last week knew anything about the political history of the gun in his grasp. What little is known paints him as a mentally disturbed teen playing out his demons in the established pattern: grab a gun and lots of ammo, go to a place where people gather and shoot as many innocent strangers as you can. Then reload.

What's to be done? Apparently, nothing. Thanks to permissive laws that make it virtually impossible to force anyone to accept treatment, the mentally ill are left to medicate themselves, or not, and the rest of us are left to duck and cover. (Anyone who thinks that's too harsh an assessment should go be a cop or social worker, then report back.)

If we can't do anything about individuals, what about guns? Oh, please! When a weak, loophole-ridden piece of legislation like the Federal assault weapons ban expires and even the Democrats applaud, there is absolutely no hope of regulating ourselves out of this mess. Now, it's true that a handful of States, including California,

have laws that make high-caliber, high-capacity shoulder-fired weapons less available. But since these can be legally purchased elsewhere (e.g., Arizona, Texas, Nevada, Washington, etc.), with no ID required when buying from private parties or at gun shows, the impact of localized restrictions is negligible.

Wackos and assault rifles are an impossibly lethal combination. Handguns have limited range and projectiles of moderate caliber can be defeated by quality ballistic garments. But rifle cartridges are far more powerful, imparting a velocity, hence energy, that allows most bullets beyond a .22 short to penetrate ordinary ballistic vests (those that can stop rifle rounds are far too heavy and cumbersome to wear on patrol). The large magazine capacities and high cyclic rates of civilian assault-type rifles can pin down anyone reckless enough to advance on a shooter. That's what LAPD discovered during the infamous North Hollywood shootout of February 28, 1997, when two bank robbers armed with a 9mm pistol and five semi-auto rifles (several made full auto, an illegal but often simple conversion) held off platoons of cops, wounding eight officers and five civilians.

According to the FBI, only 4% of firearms murders in the U.S. between 2002-06 were committed with rifles. But for killings of police, the figure was 18%. Why are officers disproportionately vulnerable to long gun fire? FBI data reveals relatively few through-the-vest shots. But there's something else that makes rifles so lethal. It's the ability to accurately place a shot at distance, in the most vulnerable part of the body and the one most difficult to protect: the head. Between 1997-2006, 58% of officers killed by gunfire died from head or neck wounds (gun type wasn't specified.) A tragic, well-known Southern California example is the February 1994 murder of LAPD Officer [Christy Hamilton](#), struck with a .223 caliber round fired from an AR-15 rifle. Her assailant, a 17-year old youth who murdered his father, then committed suicide.

Many police agencies shifted tactics after Columbine. It's now common for cops to carry rifles, and when there is an "active shooter" they don't necessarily wait for SWAT. But impulsively going after a madman with a rifle is incredibly dangerous. If the bad guy takes cover and simply waits a dead or wounded officer is likely. Even if the good guys ultimately triumph, by the time that police arrive or the shooter kills himself it's usually too late.

So what's the solution? Only days after Nebraska a disaffected 24-year old wielding a rifle, two handguns, a pair of smoke grenades and a backpack full of ammunition shot nine and killed four in Colorado. His spree was finally brought to an end by an armed ex-Minneapolis cop working as an armed security guard. Setting aside that it *was* a guard with police experience, the event was instantly seen as confirmation of the value of citizens carrying guns. But consider another example. In

November 2005 Brendan McKown, 38, a CCW permit holder with *no* police experience drew his pistol as Dominick Maldonado was shooting up the Tacoma Mall with an AK-47. Not wanting to kill a “kid,” McKown put his gun away and tried to talk Maldonado into giving up. Maldonado aimed the rifle. McKown went for his pistol, but before he could get it out he was shot multiple times, leaving him a paraplegic. (In all, six citizens were shot; McKown was the most seriously injured. Maldonado got a life sentence.)

In the end, neither SWAT teams nor armed citizens are a realistic solution to the threat posed by assault rifles. Thanks to our culture’s infatuation with guns and politicians’ reluctance to call a halt to the insane escalation of firepower, we’re entering an era where no one is safe from angry young men and their killing machines. Do we really want our cities to turn into Baghdads? Whatever one’s views on the Second Amendment, this cannot be what the Founding Fathers intended.