

Posted 6/24/17

A LOST CAUSE

Legislators are ambushed. And a gun-numbed land shrugs and moves on.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “It’s going to be in my pocket from this day forward. It’s got all the punch you need.” House member Chris Collins (R-Ala.) was of course referring to a gun, specifically the 9mm. pistol [that he occasionally carries](#) in the glovebox. But the Congressman’s resolved to ramp up his game. His decision to “pack” 24-7 was prompted by [the June 14 shooting](#) at a Congressional baseball practice in Alexandria that wounded four, most seriously fellow Republican legislator Steve Scalise, the Majority Whip.

Congressman Collins isn’t the only one looking to guns as a solution for...well, guns. Reacting to the same tragedy, his Alabama GOP colleague, Rep. Mo Brooks [asked that D.C. exempt legislators](#) from laws restricting concealed carry (applicants are [presently required](#) to demonstrate a “good reason”):

Right now, when we’re in Washington, D.C., once we’re off the Capitol Hill Grounds complex, we’re still congressmen, senators — we’re still high-profile targets — but we have absolutely no way to defend ourselves because of Washington, D.C.’s rather restrictive gun laws.

Fellow GOP stalwart Rep. Chuck Fleischmann (R-Tenn.), who hit the ground to avoid the assailant’s fusillade, heartily agrees:

Put it this way: If we had had more weapons there, we’d be able to subdue the shooter more quickly. Thank God that the Capitol Police were there and were armed, because otherwise we'd have had a situation where there'd be a lot more damage.

Naturally, the Dem’s don’t see it that way. But let’s not get trapped into parsing ideological disputes. Considering what actually happened, it seems unlikely that a passel of armed citizens would have helped. [James T. Hodgkinson](#), the assailant, was in a more-or-less secluded position [about two to three house-lengths](#) away from his victims [when he began firing salvos from an SKS 7.62 cal. semi-automatic rifle](#). Consider whether a group of startled, frightened lawmakers could have even organized an effective response. Then imagine how many would have perished or accidentally plugged one another while trying.

Six and one-half years earlier [Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords \(D-Ariz.\) was fighting for her life](#) after being shot in the head during an Arizona political event. Her assailant, Jared Loughner, a 22-year old recluse was standing in a crowd when he suddenly pulled a Glock 9mm. pistol and opened fire, killing six and wounding thirteen. It could have been much worse had several citizens not tackled the gunman when he paused to reload. None of these heroes was armed. A Johnny-come-lately who [was described what nearly happened](#) when he stumbled on the scene:

As I approached the people wrestling with him [Loughner] one of the other gentlemen actually had gotten the gun away from him. And that's what I saw first was him holding the gun. And, you know, I had my hand on my pistol and I saw that the gun he was holding was locked back, and so it was empty. And I decided that instead of pulling my gun, I would try and get that gun from him. So, I ran up to him and grabbed his wrist and pushed him up against the wall. At that point, everybody around me says no, no, it's this guy, you got that wrong guy.

It's possible to conceive of circumstances that would benefit from the presence of armed citizens. Still, if everyone that wished to be armed *was*, what might the unintended consequences be? For a hint, read our [prior gun control posts](#). Here's an extract from "[Don't Blame the NRA](#)":

We've become so accustomed to gun violence that we seldom think about the gang members, "ordinary" criminals and otherwise law-abiding heads of household who commit countless mini-massacres year-in and year-out with weapons whose unthinkable lethality would have horrified the framers of the Second Amendment. That's what's really insane.

It's not simply a question of "who" carries. "What" they possess is equally crucial. Indeed, the lethality of guns commonly in use has reached levels that would have been unimaginable to the Founders. Once more, [let's self-plagiarize](#):

In December 1791, when the Second Amendment went into effect, a "handgun" wasn't a .40 caliber Glock with a fifteen-round magazine. It was a bulky, muzzle-loading single-shot flintlock that could take nearly a minute to prepare for a second round.

So what about Hodgkinson's SKS? Lacking a handgrip and other external baubles, the Eastern-block military surplus rifle [was never deemed an "assault weapon"](#) under (now-expired) Federal law. Imported in large quantities, it's widely available at moderate cost. (Four-hundred bucks can get you a nice one. We assume that's about what Hodgkinson paid when he legally bought his at a gun store.) "Assault weapon" or not, SKS rifles are

extremely effective killing machines, boasting projectiles that travel nearly twice as fast and carry more than three times the energy of the 9mm. pistol ammo that supposedly now lines Rep. Collins' pockets. (See Di Maio, "Gunshot Wounds," 2nd. ed., p. 168.) And even when its bullets don't kill [they inflict devastating wounds](#):

According to Di Maio...as these projectiles traverse tissue they create a temporary, undulating cavity that can be as much as 12.5 times the bullet diameter. "Organs struck by these bullets may undergo partial or complete disintegration. The pressures generated are sufficient to fracture bone and rupture vessels adjacent to the permanent wound track but not directly struck by the bullet." (p. 171)

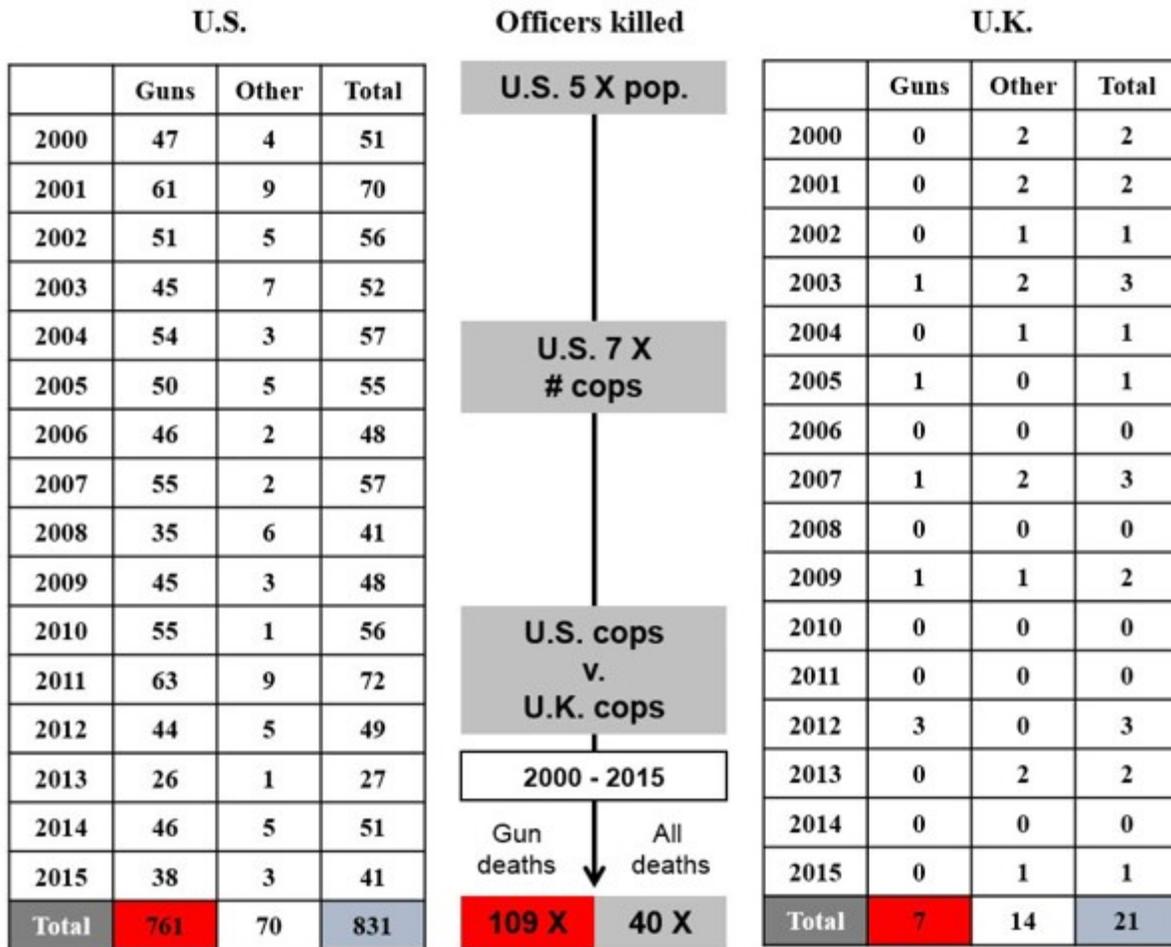
This "cavitation" is exactly what happened to Rep. Scalise, [who nearly perished from an SKS-inflicted wound to the hip](#). (Click [here](#) for a recent *New York Times* op-ed on point.) Incidentally, this lethal threat [is a risk that cops face whenever they don the badge](#):

Nye County (Nev.) sheriff's deputies responded to a call about a domestic argument with shots fired. Diverting to a nearby casino where the woman supposedly went to take refuge, they encountered her male partner in the parking lot. Without warning the man retrieved an SKS semi-automatic rifle from his vehicle and opened fire. Deputy Ian Deutch, 27, was struck and killed by a round that penetrated his body armor. A member of the National Guard, the deputy had just returned from a tour in Afghanistan.

[Table 38](#) of the UCR's latest "Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted" report quantifies the threat in stark terms. Nineteen of the 454 officers gunned down during the decade ending in 2015 were slain by projectiles that penetrated their body armor. All but one of these deaths was caused by rifle rounds. Due no doubt to their lethality and ubiquity, 7.62 X 39 caliber bullets were the most frequently responsible. Of course, cops well know that the body armor they normally wear cannot protect them from high-powered rifle rounds (armor that can be far too heavy and clumsy for daily wear.) It makes perfect sense that police have increasingly turned to armored cars. They've "militarized" because so has everyone else. And now [there's a proposal to relax the ban on silencers](#). Meaning that shooters will be more comfortable, while cops will have even less cues about the location of a lethal threat.

What could be done? In "[A Ban in Name Only](#)" we discussed the 1987 massacre in Hungerford, England, where sixteen persons were gunned down by a man wielding a handgun and two rifles. In response, Great Britain promptly enacted laws banning all semi-automatic rifles beyond .22 rimfire. Nine years later, when a handgun-toting

British subject murdered sixteen children and a teacher, our (for now, European) cousins virtually banned handguns. Not that we're suggesting cause-and-effect, but forgive us for pointing out that in 2015 murder in Great Britain [was less than one-quarter the U.S. rate](#). As for what their cops and ours face, consider that in 2015 the gunfire death rate for U.S. law enforcement officers was four per thousand, while the U.K. rate was their typical zero.



Of course, in Great Britain firearms restrictions enjoy widespread public support. But as my dear father pointed out when our ferry docked in Miami, we're in America now! So forget "could." What *can* be done? Apparently, nothing. Our highly polarized political atmosphere has shelved all thoughts of tightening gun controls. Even Bloomberg news (you know, the outfit owned by that gun-phobic gazillionaire) [considers further restrictions a lost cause](#). Here's a snippet from their interview with Senator Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), the baseball catcher who represents the liberal side of the aisle:

“I think we’re beyond the place in which Washington responds to mass shootings...After Orlando and Sandy Hook, that’s clearly not how people’s minds change here.”

What might actually propel change seems too horrific to contemplate. In the meantime, life isn’t a baseball game, and it will most likely be ordinary citizens and street cops who’ll continue to bear the costs of doing nothing.

p.s. Hodgkinson reportedly purchased both guns legally. Still, he had several past gun-related run-ins with the law, including a 2016 arrest for striking a person with the butt of a shotgun and firing a round. But the victim didn’t show up in court so charges were dropped. Although Hodgkinson retained his gun rights he was certainly a dangerous man and ripe for an intervention (click [here](#).)