PERSPECTIVE

It's up to voters to say 'enough'

"Victim" is a terrible title to bear. To be remembered solely as a victim rewrites a person's history. Millions may know their name, but only as one who suffered. Just a few will remember who they were before those last, labeling moments.

For a loved one to be reduced to a victim adds to the pain of loss. Instinctively, some compassionate souls recognize the extra layer of grief, and in kindness these people make memorials with photos and toys and flowers or supply caskets decorated to reflect what the one being buried enjoyed in life. Mourners tell their stories. The living feel the need to do something to rail against the futility of it all.

Every decent American ought to be feeling

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the same need right now, after the victimization of 10 adults at a Buffalo supermarket, 19 children and two adults in a Texas elementary school, and four people in a medical building in Tulsa. As everyone knows, they are the latest to die at the hands of heavily armed, young men intent on terrorizing and killing.

The stakes are so high that safety and law enforcement officials tell airline passengers, students and bus and train riders to say something if they see something. The logical response from authorities to someone who sees something and says something is to do something about it. Not acting to prevent potential deadly harm wastes the courage of the person who reported what they saw. It signals others not to bother.

Connecticut's U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy, who represented Newtown in Congress at the time of the Sandy Hook Elementary School killings in 2012, erupted in anger and sorrow on the Senate floor in the hours after the Uvalde attack May 24. He said what polls tell us most shocked Americans were thinking: Do something. "At least stop sending this quiet message of endorsement to these killers," said Murphy.

Three days later, no Republicans in the Senate could find it in their hearts to do something, defeating a domestic terrorism bill that had passed the House. Murphy and Sen. Richard Blumenthal are actively leading bipartisan negotiations in the hope of finding common ground on background checks and red flag processes. It's something. And as Murphy wrote in an Op Ed article for Fox News, "My Republican colleagues and I don't agree on much, but this time, I'm hopeful we can agree on this: inaction cannot be our answer."

Inaction wasn't the answer from some of those caught in the Buffalo and Uvalde episodes. In the seconds they had they refused to go quietly. They refused to be victims.

Supermarket security guard Aaron Salter Jr., a retired Buffalo police officer, confronted the gunman and fired at him, but body armor protected the shooter, who shot and killed Salter. He is hailed as a hero for his self-sacrifice.

And in an attempt that has wrenched the hearts of parents and grandparents everywhere, a girl trapped in the Robb Elementary School fourth-grade classroom with the shooter, the injured and those already dead, made repeated cell phone calls to 911, pleading "send the police now." She bravely did all she could do.

Police, as we have since learned were outside, but in spite of recognized response protocols they repeated the tactic that cost lives at Columbine High School in 1999. They waited outside. In effect, they failed to do something.

Last week the House Judiciary Committee held a hearing on a Democrat-introduced bill, Protecting Our Kids Act, that would raise the age threshhold to 21 for purchasing a semi-automatic centerfire rifle, put a federal ban on importing, manufacturing or possessing large-capacity magazines and re-enforce an executive ban on so-called ghost guns. Nineteen Republicans voted against it. A vote by the full House could come this week.

Sorrow after sorrow would be burden enough, but we have to live with repeated failure, too. Unless Congress acts, we will keep seeing multiple victims. And then it's up to voters to say "Enough" and elect representatives who will do something about it.

Lisa McGinley is a member of The Day Editorial Board.

How the AR-15 conquered America

> Nothing conveys dominance and intimidation like a loaded AR-15. It was designed to be offensive in war. It was designed to take people's lives.

By GREG SARGENT
The Washington Post

As the country continues to absorb the horror of the murder of 19 children in Texas, public attention has refocused on the role that AR-15-style weapons have played in such mass-shooting massacres.

In addition to the Uvalde killer, the young man who allegedly slaughtered 10 people in Buffalo used one. So did Kyle Rittenhouse, who killed two protesters in Wisconsin, for which he got acquitted.

But behind all these specific horrors lies an even bigger story. How did AR-15 variants come to occupy such a position of dominance in our culture — and, increasingly, in our everyday lives — in the first place?

The rise of AR-15-style weaponry, semiautomatic civilian versions of a military weapon, reflects a growing zeal, at least amid a determined minority in some parts of the country, for the introduction of overtly military-style equipment into civil society.

In that regard, Daniel Defense, the company that manufactured the weapon used in Uvalde, has really pushed the envelope. But this reflects a larger trend of "radicalization" in the industry, argues Ryan Busse, a former firearms executive.

Busse has carved out a niche arguing from inside knowledge that none of this was an accident. He says it was the result of specific choices made by the industry, combined with cultural shifts that created fertile conditions for this transformation.

The gun violence problem goes far beyond mass shootings and assault-style rifles. Right now senators are negotiating reforms that would hopefully address both mass shootings and day-to-day gun murders and suicides.

Yet those reforms will be modest and incremental at best. And given that there are hundreds of millions of guns in circulation in the United States, it's extremely sobering to consider how vast and intractable the gun violence problem is likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

I talked to Busse about all these matters. An edited and condensed version of our conversation follows.

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Sargent: Salvador Ramos was reportedly an enthusiast of the "Call of Duty" video game. Can you explain how the gun industry has used video games and other similar tactics to try to boost sales of guns like AR-15-style rifles?

Busse: Twenty years ago, everybody believed the industry was dying. Every marketing person in the industry looked around with some worry about how to reach new market shares.

Probably in the mid-to-late 2000s, you start to see the rise of first-person shooter games, following the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

There was lots of discussion in marketing-planning meetings about how you could get your gun model placed in a movie or a video game. That represented a solution to the problem, which was: How do we attract a new market segment away from this graying, older market segment that's not growing?

There was a young demographic associated with first-person video games and action movies.

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Sargent: It's interesting that you mention the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as galvanizing this new groundswell of interest in this type of weaponry. How important were the wars — the imagery of the wars coming home, the war on terror, and the Islamophobia coursing through all of this — to this cultural groundswell?

Busse: Very important. I think it seeded everything.

Prior to about 2010 or 2012 there was never a gun sold in the United States commercial market that was desert tan color. Now a significant percentage of guns are sold in desert tan color. Why? Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Sargent: The company that manufactured the shooter's weapon, Daniel Defense, is at the leading edge of this kind of aggressive marketing. How widespread is what they do in the overall industry?

Busse: The story of Daniel Defense bursting on to the market is a case study in how the gun industry has radicalized and changed. All of the AR-15s built are pretty much the same gun. About 500 companies now build them. Twenty years ago there were one or two, and they were on the fringe of the commercial market.

About 1999, in the Columbine shooting, the NRA set its political course: We're in the culture-war business.

Then you have wars happening, AR-15s, patriotism, Islamophobia — all of that happening in the culture at the same time.

The gun industry became like a badly gerrymandered congressional district. It only had incentive to go one way. Everything pulls it to the right.

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Sargent: What's intriguing to me is the intense symbolic importance these AR-15-type guns have taken on. Throughout blue America the feeling has intensified that assault-style weapons have no place in civil society.

Yet in pro-gun America that very fact — that it arouses such intense opposition — has itself become almost a point of prideful defiance.

Busse: It's a middle finger.

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Sargent: For the right, living in a society that refrains from acting collectively to limit easy accessibility of such firepower has taken on a kind of higher meaning.

Busse: I live in red America. If I drive through the streets where I am, almost all the vehicles that have the Trump message somewhere on them also have some kind of AR-15 sticker on the back.

The people who marched into the Michigan Capitol had AR-15s. On Jan. 6, there were the Trump political flags — and then there were come-and-take-it AR-15 flags.

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Sargent: This weapon has become a kind of symbolic test indicating the type of society we want. What this middle finger says is, "You can take your civil society and shove it."

Busse: Nothing conveys dominance and intimidation like a loaded AR-15. It was designed to be offensive in war. It was designed to take people's lives.

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Sargent: You're positioning the cultural mania around the AR-15 as an aberration or a malignancy, relative to what surely are millions upon millions of gun owners who have a much healthier attitude toward their hobby.

Busse: It's how people are using the rifle. It's what the rifle has become.

I think the authoritarian forces in this country view the AR-15 as a central organizing symbol.

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Sargent: You often see advocacy for the AR-15 from the same right-wing influencers — Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump Jr., Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., etc. — who regularly traffic in versions of the "great replacement theory" or relentlessly fearmonger about leftist terrorism driving the country into civil collapse.

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The DPMS Panther Arms A-15, left, is part of a family of rifles modeled after the Colt AR-15. The magazine, which can hold 30 rounds of 5.56 mm ammunition, is not shown.
U.S. BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS