



# Commei

## Unknowns and knowns

Another 17-year-old got his hands on a gun this weekend, other young people are dead as a result, and the rest of us are left to mourn and wonder why.

Why — it's always the most elusive question in episodes such as these. Why did some kid allegedly murder two brothers, ages 20 and 17, in cold blood? What was the motive? As so often happens after violent, senseless deaths, we can only speculate about what may have driven someone to take the lives of others and throw his or her own life away in so doing.

It is generally a good idea to avoid jumping to conclusions in a crime where so much information has yet to be revealed. But one conclusion can safely be made: this sort of thing has happened before, and it will happen again.

And shame on the rest of us if we don't make some effort to save lives that otherwise may be sacrificed in the future.

The crime described above happened in the Town of South Boston this weekend, when a 17-year-old male allegedly pulled up to a vape shop in front of WalMart early Saturday evening and gunned down two brothers on the sidewalk outside. The motivations of the suspect, who has not been identified due to his juvenile status, remain a mystery. The two young men who were slain, Tavonte Powell, age 20, and brother Tevin, 17, were beloved by family and friends. Their fate is sadly familiar.

That's because Mecklenburg County witnessed an eerily similar tragedy this summer when a 17-year-old allegedly shot dead 20-year-old Anthony Raekwon Roberts of Clarksville. The juvenile suspect, Damian James Ashworth of Buffalo Junction, will be tried as an adult on a charge of second degree murder. An alleged accomplice, Hayleigh Hylton, 20, of Brodnax, has been charged as an accessory after the fact.

Two separate crimes, four young people charged with grave offenses — a second teenager, 18-year-old Andrew Harlow of Halifax, has been charged as an accessory to murder in the South Boston slayings — and vastly different circumstances each time. There's no clear sense yet of the motive in these and many other fatal shootings. There is only one known common denominator: easily obtainable guns.

Last week, this space delved into the public outcry throughout rural Virginia in response to the likelihood of new gun legislation passing in the next session of the General Assembly. This week, it was the turn of the Mecklenburg County Board of Supervisors to declare the county a "Second Amendment Sanctuary," a symbolic but not unimportant statement in opposition to proposed new gun laws.

As I wrote last week, the self-proclaimed 2A Sanctuary movement will head to Richmond next month with gale-force winds blowing in its face. The obvious problem — and the catalyst of 2A Sanctuary resolutions around the state — is the political shakeup at the Capital, with Democrats taking control of the House of Delegates and State Senate, to go along with a Democratic governor who has made gun safety laws a core priority of his time in office. That's a massive political challenge for Virginia's Second Amendment absolutists. An even more massive problem can be expressed in a single word: democracy.

In an election where gun rights were a top-shelf issue, with two parties espousing diametrically opposed priorities and solutions, Republicans got their heads handed to them by voters — and it requires willful obliviousness to insist otherwise. People are sick of waking up and going to bed bombarded with headlines of mass shootings which occur everywhere in America with alarming frequency. We had our own scare hereabouts with the recent lockdowns at Park View High School and Middle School and South Hill Elementary, all on the suspicion that someone with a rifle posed a threat to schoolchildren in South Hill. Thankfully, nothing came of the incident, but it's hard to seriously argue in this day and age that school officials and law enforcement overreacted. If mass shootings can happen anywhere in America, they sure as heck can happen here.

But pro-gun advocates will protest: New gun laws won't stop mass shootings. You know what? Nine times out of ten, they're probably right about this. (Republicans' preferred response to mass shoot-



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ings — advocating stronger programs for mental health treatment, notwithstanding their cruel opposition to Medicaid expansion which pays for a huge share of mental health services in our area — is guaranteed to fail 99 times out of a hundred.) America is too awash with guns to offer much hope that a deranged killer with mass murder in his heart and mind won't be able to secure the weapon of his choosing. Dialing down the lethality of firearms that hit the market could help, but that's probably a secondary reform to pursue if the sole aim is to tamp down mass shootings. Red flag laws, which allow a court and law enforcement to take guns out of the hands of potentially dangerous persons, offer a more promising solution. That's what Florida's GOP-controlled legislature did (with the signature of the Republican governor) after the deadly high school shooting in Parkland, Fla. three years ago.

None of this is to suggest that more garden-variety measures — beefed up background checks, tighter control over gun transfers, even after-the-fact penalties for gun owners who allow their weapons to fall in the hands of shooters and killers — wouldn't make a difference. Actually, the U.S. suffers from a deficit of research on which gun measures work best — again, thanks in large part to Republican efforts to quash research by entities such as the Centers for Disease Control, which have well-established expertise in the realm of public safety. One thing we probably can surmise is that while a committed shooter is hard to stop, the same may not be true for a less determined offender.

The power of weak disincentives in discouraging bad behavior should not be underestimated. There is evidence that tighter gun laws lead to fewer gun crimes — states with more restrictions experience fewer shootings, although the evidence is not completely conclusive, as other factors separate Rhode Island, say, from Alabama, in this matter. One of the maddening aspects of our national gun debate is the plain fact that most of the laws suggested by gun control advocates are in fact rather weak — a far, far cry from the confiscatory fantasies spun by the loudest voices of the Second Amendment sanctuary movement. No one is coming to take away your guns. If you suddenly experience an episode of delirium and decide you're going to go out and kill someone, having a wait three days for a background check before you can purchase a gun might just be the thing to snap you out of the madness. We don't know, but we sure can try.

The ensuing inconvenience for the vast majority of gun owners who are responsible individuals and maintain proper control of their firearms is not nothing, but neither is waiting in line at the DMV. (It will come as no surprise if gun licensing comes up for debate in the legislature in 2020.) Gun owners who are willing to dispense with inflammatory rhetoric may find that their opinions count in the debates ahead, as long as everyone can work towards the common goal of reducing gun violence. That means dropping the knee-jerk opposition to all new laws whatsoever, and even reemphasizing the historic mission of organizations such as the National Rifle Association, with its laudable commitment to gun safety and youth sporting education. It also means renouncing the baleful political orientation of the NRA, a group so corrupted on the national level that it receives massive funding from Russian influence peddlers and suffers from rank self-dealing in the executive leadership ranks. Yeah, I know. Good luck convincing the NRA to do a 180-degree turn and join gun safety advocates in developing new legislation. When pigs fly.

It's largely because of this political stalemate that we haven't made better progress in keeping guns out of the hands of people who mean to do harm to others. Virginia is about to enter an experimental phase whereby the state attempts to do something to stop random shootings and wanton loss of life. It may not work. Then again, it may. If you are heartbroken by the deaths of innocents from the scourge of gun violence, you really owe it to yourself and others to embrace the challenge of finding real solutions rather than falling back on the tired nostrum that guns don't kill people, people kill people. What happens too much of the time is that people with guns kill people. If you're upset by this fact and want to see something happen, then this present moment in Virginia political history is for you.



# Commonwealth

## Target practice

The response to the Second Amendment Sanctuary movement that has taken rural Virginia by storm is truly impressive from a political point of view — massive turnouts at local meetings, virtually unanimous support among local officials, a string of formal declarations by county governments, and a fast-paced reddening of the state map.

Compared to what’s ahead, however, the work being done at the grassroots level is the easy part.

Getting Richmond to listen during the upcoming General Assembly session will be a whole lot tougher.

And you know what? As much as the optics of the moment may say otherwise, the 2A Sanctuary crusade has a bigger problem than simply too many Democrats in Richmond. Outside of rural areas, the movement is operating at a distinct disadvantage in the court of public opinion.

When seeking an accurate assessment of the current state of the public mood, a great place to turn is the Pew Research Center, which operates free of the headline-grabbing demands that weigh on a lot of polling outfits. Pew Research data is the industry gold standard. Here’s what Pew researchers have found on the question of public support for gun control legislation:

“Around nine-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (92%) and Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (91%) say they favor preventing people with mental illnesses from buying guns. And large majorities of both Democrats (93%) and Republicans (82%) favor background checks for private gun sales and sales at gun shows.

“Other proposals bring out stark partisan rifts. Democrats, for example, are much more likely than Republicans to favor banning assault-style weapons (88% vs. 50%) and high-capacity magazines (87% vs. 54%).” (These passages are lifted from “7 facts about guns in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 22, 2019.)

Let’s stop there for a moment: one of the flash-points in the sudden rush of Second Amendment Sanctuary resolutions is the widespread fear among gun owners that Virginia Democrats may vote to ban assault-style weapons. Yet consider that a step viewed as obscenely radical by lots of folks hereabouts is supported by roughly half of Republicans, the party that allegedly has sworn never to let guns be wrested away from their rightful owners. Half of Republicans support an assault weapons ban in the Pew polling! If you want to know why gun rights absolutists are in for a rough go in Richmond come January, you can start right there.

You can also roll back the clock to late May, when a crazed shooter with no previous discernible mental health issues gunned down 12 city workers in Virginia Beach, or go back in time to 2007 when 32 innocents were slaughtered on the campus of Virginia Tech. Or you can skip around the timeline and put your finger on the deaths of 58 people and the wounding of 413 others at an outdoor country music event in Las Vegas — again, by a perpetrator with no known mental health issues. Or you can simply cite any one of the more than 380 mass shootings that have occurred in the U.S. so far this year.

The time for new gun laws has clearly arrived — in Virginia today, other states tomorrow. The question to ask isn’t whether rural Virginia has a voice in this matter. Obviously it does, as expressed by wave after wave of local boards that have adopted sanctuary language. The question is whether the elected majority in Richmond will listen — or more accurately, whether it feels like it needs to listen.

To get the attention of Virginia Democrats, gun owners would do well to be judicious in their arguments — and to be clear, they have some strong ones to make. But before we arrive at that point in the discussion, let’s consider the claims that are guaranteed to get eye-rolled out of a General Assembly hearing room near you:

» *The right to bear arms is essential to hold government tyranny at bay.* This, you may have heard, is a favorite line of the pro-gun community’s militia-adjacent membership. Um, guys? If you want to get a fair hearing in the days ahead,



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it would be a really, really good idea to leave this line back at the hotel. It’s a guaranteed loser because it is wholly unsupported by the law of the land and represents the sort of provocative nonsense that just makes otherwise sober-minded people mad. Don’t do it.

» *To stop someone with a gun, you need people with more guns.* Another weak sauce argument — I couldn’t begin to list all the incidents where a shooter intent on slaughter overpowered everyone in sight, including military and law enforcement personnel trained in the use of fire-

arms. The element of surprise is just too great to overcome in situations where a demented killer with a plan confronts someone who is forced to assess the threat, reach for a weapon and aim all in a split second. Are mass shooters ever brought down by a “good guy with a gun”? Occasionally, but not often — not often enough to build support for the idea of making guns more ubiquitous, rather than less.

» *Second Amendment Sanctuary counties should be exempt from gun restrictions that Virginia Democrats place on the rest of the Commonwealth.* I bring this one up because it’s the idea behind legislation that GOP Delegate James Edmunds (R-Halifax) plans to introduce in the upcoming Assembly session. Don’t look now, but for once State Senator Frank Ruff gets it right; in our front-page piece today, Ruff told The Sun that he doubts lawmakers “would pass restrictive legislation [and] then allow legislation that would exempt a major part of the state from that restrictive legislation.” On other words, no one is going to pass laws that apply to some folks and not others. Ruff says he has doubts, which is not the word I’d use, but hey: stop the world, we both basically agree.

I could go on, but instead let’s focus on arguments that are much likelier to carry weight in the deliberations to come. The best arguments are the simple and genuine ones — such as, hunting is a proud part of the fabric of rural Virginia, and guns are obviously a big part of that. Plus, people have an understandable and completely defensible desire to possess guns for self-defense. (That said, one of the most upsetting passages of Pew’s “7 facts about guns in the U.S.” is the dramatically elevated risk of suicide deaths in households where firearms are present.) None of these basic arguments in favor of gun ownership are particularly controversial, but in the rush to shut down any movement whatsoever towards gun reform — an effort that is destined to fail, it cannot be said enough — the commonsense sentiment of the countryside is at risk of being overwhelmed by extremist-sounding nonsense from folks who watch too much NRA-TV.

It’s admirable whenever people turn out to speak their minds at local government meetings. We could stand to turbocharge the democratic processes at every turn. But 5,000 people could turn out for a county board of supervisors meeting and it wouldn’t do a thing to overturn the will of millions of voters statewide who elected Democratic candidates openly running on gun control platforms. Now that Virginia Dems are in charge, the more fruitful approach is pointing out the inconsistencies and flaws of their proposed bills — and the environment is target-rich in certain areas. Senator Richard Saslaw, who will become one of the two most powerful figures in the General Assembly beginning in January, has a bill in the hopper that would ban possession of assault-style weapons in Virginia — an idea, whatever you may think of the merits, that is wholly unworkable in practice. Banning the sale of assault weapons is one thing. Banning simple possession, especially for those who already own such guns, is another. Point is, it’s early in the bill-drafting process, and December is when you see all kinds of sloppy work at the Capital. January and February is when the real business gets done. But if well-meaning gun owners hope to be successful in brushing away the slop, they would do well to leave their own rhetorical excess outside of the hearing rooms.



## Naming rights

So Phoenix it is.

The Great Mascot Debate of 2019 has come to a close with a decision to go with America’s most boring city as the avatar for future generations of Mecklenburg County students. I visited Phoenix once (flew in for a Cactus League weekend) and couldn’t wait to hit the highway out of town for MLB spring training ballparks, most of which are situated in small Arizona cities that circle the mothership. Seriously, Phoenix is blazing hot, flat as C-SPAN public affairs programming, and the cityscape has all the pizzazz of muffled elevator music. Bleech.

On the other hand, democracy is a precious thing (also, seriously) and Phoenix was the people’s choice in public surveys to identify a mascot for the county’s new secondary school. Those who vote get to decide, and those who don’t get to whine about it. So let’s give members of the School Board props for heeding public sentiment, light though the participation in the surveys proved to be. In retrospect, it would have been nice for the School Board to set one ground rule for the mascot-naming contest: all entries must’ve had some identifiable connection to Mecklenburg County. (Mudcats was the only finalist that might have met this standard. Plus “Mecklenburg Muddies” would make for great headlines.) But you know what? Captain Hindsight is a South Park character, not a flesh-and-blood advisor to the Mecklenburg County School Board. So Phoenix wins out.

It’s times like these when it’s a good idea to examine one’s own presumptions and biases, and ask the simple question: Who am I to talk? Longer ago than I care to admit, I graduated from Halifax County High School in South Boston. Our school mascot? Comets. Who in the heck resembles a Comet? A frozen climber hurtling off the side of a Himalayan mountain, leaving a icy contrail behind while plunging to certain death, that’s who. Did we care? No.

Then and now, Blue Comets always struck me as a terrific team nickname. Why? Because that’s the way things were supposed to be and who asked you to argue the point anyway?!? Obviously of course, claiming Comet pride as part of one’s existence in vaguely ridiculous, but yet because it was always so, so far as we knew (this is my inner 16-year-old speaking), the righteousness of being a member of the Blue Comets was not to be questioned by outsiders. After all, the Comets almost won the state championship in basketball two years in a row! (Sheriff Hawkins was a starting forward on one of those teams, if you can look at him now and believe that. Hey Bobby, I’m kidding! Please put away the gun.) Point is, the amber effect of old age makes every aspect of *Stranger Things*-adjacent culture look wonderful and true, while the new stuff sucks. Barons and Dragons are fine choices for a mascot. The Phoenix needs to get off my lawn.

After high school, I went off to college. Once there, I experienced a different side to the whole rah-rah school spirit business (which, to be clear, is a wonderful thing in moderation.) The university I attended made a huge deal of the sanctity of its hallowed traditions, except when the powers-that-be decided that said traditions were stupid, counterproductive, dangerous or all three rolled into one (a.k.a. the best parties). So one quickly got used to one of the great oddities of academia: “New traditions.” Huh? I’m pretty sure none of us students would have been admitted in the first place if we had dropped that phrase on our SATs.

“New traditions” took the place of old traditions that were deemed problematic by the administration, and although we snickered at the idea that the tradition business could be as flimsy as all that, we were also gone in four years (or so), to be replaced by younglings who knew no different. We were soon to be yesterday’s news, in other words. It’s hard for a person to accept one’s own irrelevancy, which is why folks can argue about mascots all day and never tire of the fight. So, just to finish the story here, apparently, the kids liked the idea of Phoenix for a mascot. Kids these days also seem to think Toto is the only band from the 1980s that matters (just judging from the number of times I’ve seen my daughter and her friends grooving to the strains of “Africa”) and my constant objection that Toto was one of the suckiest bands ever to exist gets no further than the distance between my mouth and two deaf ears. The moral of the story is that mascots belong to an ever-changing community, and the advent of Mecklenburg’s new school is a milestone moment that should be appreciated for what it is — an apex of positive change and community revitalization. Which, by the way, is sorta the symbolism inherent in the idea of the Phoenix.

But still: bleech.



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