

If You See Something, Say Something: Our writer has something to get off his chest

Last place aversion is the heuristic bias in which people support measures that ensure they don't fall to last place, even if that means acting against the greater good and their own best interests. It happens when uncomfortable is confused with unsafe. Americans' growing inability to differentiate between real danger and discomfort is an invasive cancer of contemporary American society. And when the fundamental confusion between discomfort and danger is combined with America's average of 113 guns per person, we have a nation that approaches every inconvenience like a declaration of war. Self-preservation and self-destruction look alike.

At a vigil for 15-year-old William Parsons, shot and killed on September 5, his second day of school, his fellow students said: "If you see something, say something." According to various news reports of the shooting, Parsons was not even involved in the fight concluding in one teenager firing a gun. As I write this, the cause of the fight has not been made public, but perhaps it's safe to say the dispute was not worthy of armed combat and civilian casualties. If you see something, say something, right? Let me tell you what I see.

I see it is impossible to separate guns from American society. We are willing to judge moral failure on poverty or addiction. We do not hesitate to cast blame on peripheral influences like video games or movies. And we love to condemn mental illness, the favorite tautological scapegoat for gun violence. What we are unwilling to examine is the societal nudge that leads Americans to turn to guns as a permanent solution to temporary problems.

On August 26, in Jacksonville, Florida, a man fired 11 shots at a *Madden* football video gaming tournament. For those who are not familiar, *Madden* is an NFL video game, annually updated with actual NFL players digitally depicted. There are no guns in this video game. *Madden* lets the vast majority of us born without the superhuman physical abilities of Odell Beckham Jr. or Rob Gronkowski, compete vicariously on screen. It's all the fun of football without the seven-figure contracts or the chronic traumatic encephalopathy. But, the shooter lost the game. So, he went to his vehicle and retrieved his gun. He never feared for his physical wellbeing, but his pride was wounded. Losing made him uncomfortable and his method of alleviating the discomfort was getting his gun. This person thought he could somehow balance his video game football failure by shooting other competitors.

On August 27, in Memphis, Tennessee, a man fired a warning shot into the ground when four children between the ages of 7 and 11 argued with him about playing on his lawn. He was not defending himself against a real or perceived communicated intent to commit him harm. The man felt angry and disrespected, and was showing them who the boss was. His solution was to demonstrate that he would rather face criminal charges by risking the lives of children than be perceived as weaker than them. Of what was his shot warning? *If I continue to feel like I do not have power over you, I might kill you.*

Americans have codified preservation of ego over anything else. "Stand Your Ground" laws say what matters most is your dignity, superseding even life by permitting you to use deadly force without having a duty to retreat. On August 13, 2018, a man pleaded not guilty to manslaughter for a July 13, 2018, incident in a Clearwater, Florida (I know, Florida again), store parking lot. A disagreement occurred

over a handicapped parking spot and one man shot and killed a man who shoved him. Rather than seek any number of non-lethal remedies available to him, he stood his ground and shot the source of his immediate discomfort.

Last place aversion happens when uncomfortable is confused with unsafe.

School shootings and mass shootings and mass school shootings and all manner of America's epidemic of gun violence is an issue I have for years tried to challenge from many angles. By my count, I have changed exactly zero opinions. The teams are picked and nobody is budging. An irresponsibly armed America is one of those truths we now hold to be self-evident. And, in a masterful performance of the art of self-delusion, we overwhelm our cognitive limits with too much carnage for our psyches to process. We justify the superabundance of firearms by doubling down and arguing the cure is *more* guns to counteract the *bad* guns, because *your* guns are the *good* guns, right? We interpret the security of the free state to mean whatever each individual believes it to be, as the right has been interpreted to mean the *individual* right to bear arms, regardless of the fact that the state only exists because *e pluribus unum*, and such a contradiction comes with collateral damage to the tune of about 85 bodies a day. That is 85 people per day who do not get to enjoy the Constitutionally protected security of a free state. Are they worth it? William Parsons, the 15-year-old boy who was killed by a bullet meant for someone else, in a fight that did not involve him, over something he knew nothing about, did not give his life for the noble cause of preserving the security of the free state. He was killed over someone else preserving his own ego. In America today, self-preservation and self-destruction may look alike. But they are nothing alike. If we saw that sooner, maybe a 15-year-old student would still be alive. Can we look at this problem now? Can we see the difference between what is uncomfortable and what is unsafe?

And if you see something, say something.