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Red Confetti

By Mike Tully

Parents line up inside a civic center in a small Texas hill town. One by one, they silently provide DNA samples to help identify the victims of a shooting a few blocks away. Nobody speaks of the reason DNA samples were needed, although the truth hung in the air like a thundercloud. The victims were unidentifiable.

In an elementary school a few blocks from the civic center, crime scene experts – forensic examiners from state, local and federal agencies – somberly comb through a classroom. Nineteen small children and two teachers were slaughtered inside that classroom by a madman equipped with an AR-15 – a weapon designed for the battlefield. Many, if not all, of the victims are still inside that classroom as I write this. It’s not the kind of crime scene depicted by movies and television shows, where bodies are scattered randomly within the debris.

There are few, if any, recognizable bodies. The room is filled with red confetti. That is the horror found inside that room, glistening red confetti marinating in a bright scarlet puddle. Death is not always the color of black crepe. Sometimes it’s bright red.

Years ago, I chatted with a good friend from high school who had seen combat in Vietnam. His description of battle’s consequence was simple and concise. “Very bloody,” he said. “And very gooey.” That is what a battlefield looks like in the wake of killing. Bloody, red, and gooey. Weapons designed for war leave red confetti on a battlefield. And in a classroom.

As I write this, the governor of Texas is conducting a news conference. His Lieutenant Governor is seated next to him. The Governor blamed the shooting on a “serious mental health crisis” in Uvalde, Texas. Nothing about the easy access to weapons of war. Nothing about the proliferation of guns in our country, especially guns designed for use on the battlefield.

Earth to Governor Abbott: other countries have people dealing with mental health issues as well. Unlike the United States, they don’t arm them with military grade weaponry. The United States has four percent of the world’s population, but 42 percent of the guns. We lead in another statistic as well: gun homicides per capita. We are the land of the brave, the free, and the shredded.

Beto O’Rourke had enough. He strode up to Governor Abbott, confronted him, pointed at him and told him, “You have done nothing.” “Sir, you’re out of line,” sputtered Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick. O’Rourke gave him the attention he deserved: none. O’Rourke made a few more brief statements and stormed out of the news conference, followed by members of the news media. Meanwhile, Abbot and Patrick droned on, blathering about mental illness and “evil” but not whispering a word about guns.

Abbott and his supporters will dismiss O'Rourke's appearance as a political stunt, noting that he's running to unseat Abbott. Perhaps it was. But they can't dismiss history. Abbott has done everything in his power to increase the number and availability of firearms in Texas. "I'm EMBARRASSED," he tweeted during the gubernatorial campaign in 2015. "Texas #2 in nation for new gun purchases, behind CALIFORNIA." He added, "Let's pick up the pace Texas."

California has nearly 40 million residents. Texas has under 29 million. It would take a remarkable buying spree for Texas to catch its much larger fellow state in anything, much less gun ownership. But Abbot has done everything he can while in office to bring his gun-fever dream to reality.

Texas may not lead the nation in gun ownership, but it's number one in production of red confetti. Since Abbott first ran for Governor in 2015, Texas has seen an epidemic of mass shootings. From Waco to El Paso to Sutherland Springs to Uvalde, the number grows like a flood after a storm.

The National Rifle Association has scheduled its annual meeting in Texas for this coming weekend. Abbott is scheduled to address the conference, as well as Senator Ted Cruz and former President Trump. Nobody will say anything critical about firearms, most notably weapons of war. No, they will talk about mental illness. The news conference is still underway and Abbott just brought up mental illness for the third time.

Again: other nations have people with mental health issues. But they aren't swimming in privately-owned weaponry. They don't allow private citizens to purchase military grade weaponry.

And they sure as hell don't lead the world in the production of red confetti. That "honor" belongs to us, and us alone.