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“BUMP STOCKS” AREN'T THE (REAL) PROBLEM

Outlawing them is a good idea. But it's hardly the solution.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On October 1 a middle-aged man with no criminal record became the most prolific mass killer in American history, [slaughtering 58 persons and wounding 489](#) as they enjoyed an outdoor concert on the Las Vegas strip. As a stunned land reels from the carnage, one thing seems certain: the willingness of “ordinary” citizens to put guns to unimaginably evil use has made a mockery of the meager legal constraints that America has imposed on the right to bear arms.

To be sure, minors, convicted felons and adjudicated mental defectives – the “who” – are prohibited from acquiring guns. But Stephen Paddock didn't fit into any of these categories. He and his evil counterpart [James T. Hodgkinson](#), who wounded four members of Congress in June, were by all appearances law-abiding citizens who acquired their guns legally, in Paddock's case through repeat purchases at local gun stores.

And “what” they legally got is appalling. Lying in ambush at a Virginia baseball field, Hodgkinson unleashed repeated salvos from a 7.62 mm semi-automatic rifle, a derivative of the lethally efficient AK-47. Paddock stocked his 32nd. floor Las Vegas hotel room with nearly two dozen assault-style rifles, apparently all in the 5.56 mm caliber made wildly popular by the Colt AR-15.

Why did their guns prove so lethal? [It's largely a matter of ballistics.](#) Projectiles fired by civilian versions of the AK-47 and AR-15 travel twice as fast and carry three times the energy of even the more powerful pistol cartridges. When these bullets pierce flesh they create large, undulating cavities many times their diameter, pulverizing organs, shattering nearby bones and rupturing nearby blood vessels. According to the FBI, [454 law enforcement officers were feloniously shot and killed](#) during 2006-2015. [Of the nineteen killed by rounds that penetrated their ballistic vests](#), eighteen fell to rifle fire, with the 7.62 and 5.56 mm. calibers figuring prominently.

Of course, it's precisely that killing power that America sought when it commissioned the AR-15 and deployed it in Vietnam, and what its North Vietnamese and Viet Cong opponents sought when they armed their troops with the AK-47. What Uncle Sam may not have expected was that Colt would capitalize on the military AR-15's devastating reputation by cranking out a civilian version. Differing only in being semi-automatic,

meaning that the trigger must be squeezed for each shot, the near-identical twin proved an instant hit.

Concerns about the increasingly destructive quality of firearms in civilian hands led to the enactment of [the 1994 Assault Weapons Act](#), which banned the wildly popular AR-15 by name. Ignoring the Act's avowed social purpose, Colt quickly rebranded their highly profitable prodigy the "Sporter," and as the law required stripped it of external baubles such as a flash suppressor and limited its magazine capacity to ten rounds. [With the law \(cynically?\) silent about ballistics](#), the gun industry quickly went back to making the powerful and highly profitable weapons that enthusiasts like best. And when the clearly toothless statute ultimately lapsed into the Sunset, hardly anyone noticed.

"Bump" stocks use recoil to bounce weapons against the user's trigger finger. This increases the rate of fire to levels approaching that of machineguns, which can fire fully automatically, discharging a barrage with a single pull of the trigger. When the objective is to kill as many persons as possible and pinpoint accuracy is not required, a densely-packed venue such as an outdoor concert offers the ideal setting for their use. Mechanical issues and ammunition capacity preclude prolonged "fully automatic" fire, so Paddock's decision to deploy multiple bump-stock equipped rifles made (twisted) sense.

Still, as prior mass shootings demonstrate, semi-automatic assault-type rifles can easily produce deplorable body counts. (Ordinary combat troops generally leave their rifles on semi-automatic mode, whose cyclic rate usually suffices to get the job done.) Bottom line: neither a real machinegun nor a "bump stock" are required to generate a bloodbath. On December 2, 2015 a self-styled terrorist couple used two semi-automatic AR-15 type rifles [to kill fourteen and wound twenty-two at a workplace party in San Bernardino, California](#). Both died in a vicious shootout with local police, who were forced to deploy an armored car.

Military-style weapons place cops at grave risk every day. On July 7, 2016 a deeply troubled 25-year old reservist [opened fire on officers monitoring a protest march](#). His imported semi-automatic variant of the AK-47 proved highly lethal, and soon five Dallas officers lay dead (seven others were wounded.) Police eventually killed the assailant with an improvised bomb delivered by a robot.

Three months later two police officers stood outside a residence in easy-going Palm Springs, California. Gunfire from inside the home suddenly pierced the front door, [fatally wounding officers Lesley Zerebny and Jose "Gil" Vega](#), who had arrived in response to a "simple family disturbance." (Another officer was wounded but recovered). Their assailant, a deeply troubled twenty-six year old ex-con, used a semi-

automatic AR-15 type rifle and readily available “armor piercing ammunition,” which can supposedly defeat the armor plate in ballistic vests.

Decades ago, before citizens were armed with what amounts to weapons of war, few incidents called for anything more than a patrol car or two. But the proliferation of lethal firearms [has forced the police to militarize](#) with SWAT teams, armored vehicles and robots that can deliver as well as retrieve bombs. And now we have to worry about “bump” stocks as well.

What’s to be done? Would banishing these newfangled gadgets, as even Republicans seem ready to do, be enough? Hardly. Any effective response has to address the factors that brought gun lethality to such unthinkable levels. Perhaps [a scoring system could be devised](#) that takes key variables such as ballistics, rapid-fire capability, lack of recoil, accuracy and portability into account.

Then an even greater difficulty becomes apparent. One year after a British subject massacred sixteen persons with a handgun and two semi-automatic rifles, Great Britain enacted the “[Firearms \(Amendment\) Act 1988](#).” Among other things, it prohibits semi-automatic rifles chambered for ammunition more powerful than .22 rimfire. A decade later Great Britain [responded to a school massacre by essentially banning handguns](#). And yes, people actually gave them up.

But we’re not Great Britain, where (at least until Brexit) the social contract has apparently prevailed. In our commercialized, ideologically polarized culture any proposal to effectively reduce gun lethality would provoke a vicious struggle between unyielding interests. And should reason overcome egoism and self-indulgence, and a rule not hopelessly watered down by commercial, enthusiast and ideological interests is actually produced, how would one implement it? Could millions of murderous weapons be peacefully removed from circulation?

But we’re probably ahead of ourselves. Perhaps the best place to start isn’t with lawmaking but with [\(as we previously suggested\)](#) a national conversation about guns and the meanings we attach to their possession and use. What needs do firearms fulfill? How would massively “thinning the herd” affect everyday life? Our values? Our relationships? Our sense of self? Perhaps once we understand and acknowledge the “why’s,” devising and implementing the “how’s” can come more easily.

Hopefully it’s not too late to start.