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HOUSTON, WE HAVE (ANOTHER) PROBLEM

Fueled by assault rifles, “senseless” murders plague the land



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. As our more “senior” readers know, the “problem” we’re appropriating for our own, selfish purposes reared its ugly head fifty-four years ago. On April 14, 1970, [an American mission to the moon](#) was aborted mid-flight when an oxygen tank blew up. Happily, the orbiter landed safely (on Earth) and no one got hurt.

Like all such missions, Apollo 13 launched from Florida’s Cape Kennedy. It then came under the control of “Mission Control” at Johnson Space Center, a vast “\$1.5 billion complex” near downtown Houston. That’s Houston, Texas. Our government’s most sophisticated, science-based enterprise is based in a decidedly “Red” State. Texas also happens to be a “[Stand Your Ground](#)” State. Meaning, among other things, that it encourages private gun ownership. And, apparently, gun use. For example, its denizens are under no obligation to retreat before using force, including deadly force, in self-defense (Texas Penal Code [sec. 9.31e](#)).



Our focus here, though, isn’t on simple errors in judgment, no matter how tragic their consequences. After all, even the best-intentioned humans (and here we include most cops) occasionally fall prey to the chaos and uncertainty that suffuse everyday life. It’s about “senseless” behavior, meaning without any rational basis. And there are few better examples than what happened in Houston during the afternoon hours of Sunday, February 11. That’s when a local resident, 36-year old Genesse Ivonne Moreno, [burst into a church between services](#). Accompanied by her 7-year old son, Moreno was attired in a

trench coat and carried two rifles, a .22 caliber weapon and an AR-15. She quickly opened fire with the latter in a hallway. Two off-duty police officers working security promptly fired back, killing her. During the exchange Moreno’s son was critically hurt, and a middle-aged parishioner sustained non-life threatening wounds to his leg. (Just whose bullets struck them is yet to be revealed.)

What drove Moreno to act as she did? Her rifle bore a “Palestine” sticker, and she had reportedly made “anti-Semitic” writings. But the church was a Christian congregation. Motives aside, what is known paints a highly disturbing picture of a highly disturbed soul. While Moreno identified as a woman, she had a substantial criminal record in Houston under a male alias. Here’s a summary from our inquiry of the [Harris County Court](#):

| ESCALANTE MORENO, JEFFREY | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------------|----------|-------------|--------------|
| Arrest Date | Agency | Charge | Fel/Misd | Disposition | Sentence |
| 10/22/2005 | Houston PD | Hit-run | M | Guilty | 20 days |
| 8/6/2009 | Houston SO | Assault w/injury | F | Convicted M | 180 days |
| 3/8/2010 | Houston SO | Forgery | F | Convicted M | 2 days, fine |
| 11/2/2010 | Houston SO | Poss Marijuana | M | Guilty | 30 days |
| 12/4/2010 | Houston SO | Evade arrest | M | Guilty | 75 days |
| 4/2/2022 | Katy PD | Illegal wpn carry | M | Convicted | 2 days |

Moreno supposedly purchased the AR-15 in December 2023. How, and from whom, hasn’t been revealed. She has no known felony convictions, which would have barred her from buying a gun from a dealer. Family members and police said that Moreno suffered from long-standing mental problems; police officers placed her under “emergency mental detention” in 2016. However, Texas doesn’t have a “[Red Flag](#)” law, so there was no ready way to keep her from buying a gun in a store. Neither does it require background checks for gun transfers [between private parties](#). So Moreno could have easily acquired a firearm even if her mental problems were of record.

Moreno hasn’t been the Lone Star State’s only “senseless” killer. Consider the [May 6, 2023 massacre in Allen, a Dallas exurb](#). Attired in tactical gear and wearing an “RWDS” (Right-Wing Death Squad) patch on his chest, Mauricio Garcia, 36, jumped out of his car and began “indiscriminately” firing an AR-15 in the parking lot of a large mall. He then charged into a building and continued the fusillade. Garcia killed eight and



wounded seven before a security guard shot him dead.

Garcia (photo from OK.ru) brought along an arsenal. In addition to the AR-15 he carried two handguns on his person and had five more guns in his car. All were legally bought. Garcia, a security guard, had a clean criminal record. But there *was* a “glitch”. Garcia enlisted in the U.S. Army when he was eighteen. But only three months later concerns about his mental health and an “adjustment disorder” [led to his discharge](#). Unfortunately, the Army didn’t pass that on to the FBI, which runs the nation’s [“Insta-Check” gun purchase system](#). So he remained free to buy guns from retail dealers to his wicked heart’s delight.



We’re not done with Texas. Four days preceding Garcia’s foul deed a tactical unit comprised of Feds and State troopers [arrested Francisco Oropeza](#) in the small town of Cut and Shoot, about 40 miles north of Houston. Oropeza was on the run after murdering four adults and a 9-year old in the nearby town of Cleveland, where he lived, because they had the temerity to demand [that he stop shooting his AR-15](#) in his yard. One of his victims had just called 9-1-1 about his gunfire. And this wasn’t the first time.

Oropeza was an illegal immigrant with four prior deportations. That’s important to know because it [legally excluded him from having guns](#). Prosecutors are [seeking the death penalty](#). Sadly, that’s already been imposed.

“We can’t get inside his head. We just don’t have any clue as to why he did what he did.” [Joliet Police Chief Bill Evans’s comments](#) reflect the perplexing nature of the January 21, 2024 spree by our fourth killer, twenty-three year old Romeo Nance. He was ultimately cornered – and committed suicide – in Texas. But his appalling handiwork took place in Joliet, Illinois, the community where he grew up. [And its toll was grim](#). Nance murdered his mother, three sisters, a brother, and an uncle and aunt. While fleeing he also shot and killed a 28-year old pedestrian carrying groceries and wounded a middle-aged man whom he happened to encounter.



Nance’s explosive temper was well known to police, [who were frequently summoned to his residence](#). Leaving out numerous traffic infractions, here’s a summary of his adult

criminal record from the [Will County Court](#):

| NANCE, ROMEO A. | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------|----------|-------------|------------|
| Crime Date | Agency | Charge | Fel/Misd | Disposition | Sentence |
| 2/15/2023 | Will County | Dmg Gov Prop | F | Open case | N/A |
| 2/8/2023 | Will County | Battery w/inj | M | Open case | N/A |
| 1/26/2023 | Will County | Obstruct ofcr | M | Open case | N/A |
| 1/26/2023 | Will County | Firearm w/o lic | M | Open case | N/A |
| 1/3/2023 | Will County | Shoot at occ veh | F | Open case | N/A |
| 1/3/2023 | Will County | Shoot at veh | F | Open case | N/A |
| 1/3/2023 | Will County | Unlic gun, aggr | F | Open case | N/A |
| 1/3/2023 | Will County | Reck disch gun | F | Open case | N/A |
| 10/22/2019 | Will County | Robbery | F | Pled to M | Prob, fine |
| 10/22/2019 | Will County | Robbery | F | Pled to M | Prob, fine |
| 10/22/2019 | Will County | Theft person | F | Pled to M | Prob, fine |
| 10/22/2019 | Will County | Theft fm person | F | Pled to M | Prob, fine |
| 10/22/2019 | Will County | Poss marijuana | F | Pled to M | Prob, fine |

Soon after turning eighteen Nance was arrested for a robbery that involved “pressing a knife against [his victim’s] chest”. He got a break, and the case was settled with his plea to a misdemeanor marijuana charge. Nance completed a probationary term, by all appearances successfully. But his conduct eventually tanked. In January 2023 he shot at a female motorist during a traffic encounter. Police seized an unlicensed handgun and “two cartons of ammunition” from his backpack. Nance went on to assault an officer and soon collected additional charges.

Nance perpetrated his massacre using an “AR-15 style” rifle [that was recovered from his car](#). He also used a handgun. How he obtained these weapons hasn’t been revealed. His previous tangles made him ineligible to receive an [Illinois firearm owner’s ID card](#), which the State requires of all gun owners. So he probably acquired his guns through private transactions.



Shift to Minnesota. Prohibited or not, emotionally-troubled men – and it’s almost always a male – find it easy to get high-powered firearms. On February 18, 2024, after a prolonged negotiation session during which he denied being armed, Shannon Gooden (Facebook photo on left) [unleashed a barrage of “more than 100” rifle rounds](#), killing two Burnsville police officers and a paramedic who had responded to a call about a sexual assault. Despite a 2007 felony assault conviction and [a judge’s 2020 refusal to reinstate his gun rights](#), Gooden had multiple firearms and a copious amount of ammunition. He committed suicide



Switch to Maine. U.S. Army reservist Robert Card’s mounting “anger and paranoia” deeply troubled an Army chum. So much so, that in September 2023 [he warned their superior](#) that Card was going “to snap and do a mass shooting.” And on October 25 that’s exactly what he did, [unleashing back-to-back barrages](#) in a Lewiston bowling alley and a restaurant (surveillance photo on right) that killed eighteen persons and injured thirteen. Card had a troubled mental history. It included a two-week 2023 stint in an Army psychiatric ward that followed his mentions of “hearing voices” about “hurting other soldiers”. But the Army, which barred him from handling guns, apparently didn’t consider his treatment to be a [mental “commitment”](#) that required it inform the Insta-Check system. Ergo, Card remained able to buy guns to his wicked heart’s delight. Including the [Ruger SFAR semi-auto rifle](#) he used in the massacre . And yes, he bought it in a gun store. *Ten days earlier*. Card committed suicide as police closed in.

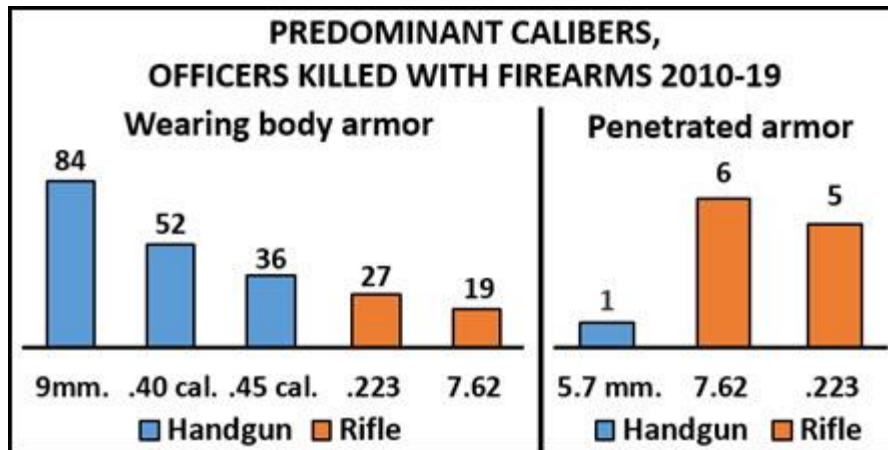


We began our post by declaring a focus on “senselessness”. Alas, irrational behavior is not uncommon. And in our gun-infused society, it all-too-often leads to gunplay. Most, though, involves handguns. As we pointed out in [“Going Ballistic,”](#) their lethality is far, far outstripped by the killing power of the military-style rifles that have become immensely popular among enthusiasts. And mass murderers. Let’s self-plagiarize from [our 2015 op-ed in the Washington Post](#):

One assumes that assault rifles were picked on [by the Federal ban] because they are particularly lethal. Key attributes that make them so include accuracy at range, rapid-fire capability and, most importantly, fearsome ballistics. In their most common calibers – 7.62 and .223 – these weapons discharge bullets whose

extreme energy and velocity readily pierce protective garments commonly worn by police, opening cavities in flesh many times the diameter of the projectile and causing devastating wounds.

All this is well known to law enforcement. Between 2010-2019 (the last year with complete [LEOKA](#) data) 471 law enforcement officers [were feloniously slain by gunfire](#). Of these, [339 were wearing body armor](#). And 21 were slain by rounds [that penetrated their armor](#). This graph depicts the most frequent culprits, gun-wise:



Ballistics definitely “count”. [According to a March 2023 article](#) in the Texas Tribune, that vulnerability was apparently very much on the minds of the officers who responded to the May 2022 massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. During “previously unreleased interviews” they said they backed off and waited for SWAT because they lacked the weapons and protective gear to confront the shooter’s “battle rifle”. Here’s its image when seized:



Several non-SWAT officers did try to make a prompt approach. As they went down the hallway the gunman opened fire through a door. Two officers got grazed:

The gunman had an AR-15...Its bullets flew toward the officers at three times the speed of sound and could have pierced their body armor like a hole punch through paper. They grazed two officers in the head, and the group retreated.

According to a police sergeant, “You knew that it was definitely an AR. There was no way of going in.”

When it came time to review the police response, political correctness took hold. Official assessments (click [here](#) for DOJ’s report) repeatedly blasted the (again, non-SWAT) cops for not promptly charging in . No mention was made of the exceptionally lethal nature of Ramos’ gun, whose projectiles would readily defeat “ordinary” ballistic vests commonly worn on patrol. Of course, Texas is a place that embraces guns. Suggesting that so-called “assault rifles” are simply *too* lethal would have stirred a hornet’s nest. Far better (and safer) to blame it on the cops, and *only* the cops.

Then came the Allen massacre. Attention turned to a [Texas House bill](#), backed by the families of Uvalde’s victims, that would have increased the minimum age for buying semi-auto rifles from 18 to 21 (Uvalde’s gunman was 18 when he bought his two AR-15 style rifles from a dealer.) That seems hardly controversial. Even so, gunplay had abated, [and the proposal quickly died in committee](#). Really, in Texas it simply can't be about the gun. Here’s what the legal counsel for [Texas Gun Rights](#) told the Washington Post [about the massacre in Cleveland, Texas](#):

It’s a tragedy but we need to get away from blaming guns which only answers the question of how and start asking the question why these shootings take place, why people feel the need to settle differences with violence and murder...

But didn’t Francisco Oropeza’s AR-15 style weapon pose a special threat? Absolutely not, the lawyer replied. Its presence was “meaningless.” After all, Oropeza “could have killed those people just as easily with a handgun.”

[In a recent interview](#), ATF Director Steven Dettelbach suggested that the unending stream of mass killings may be numbing Americans to the effects of gun violence. At a meet with families of the Lewiston massacre, he emphasized that speaking out was crucial. “Your voices are very important...It really makes a difference.” Dettelbach later told reporters that it was “too easy” for unstable persons to get firearms.

As a (long retired) ATF agent, we second the current boss’s views. Still, guns have suffused the land. They’re so easy to acquire from private sources that trying to control *who* gets them can seem hopeless. Perhaps a highly focused approach on the most lethal weapons – say, an outright prohibition on assault rifles – could help. After all, these instruments of war weren't in play when they penned the Second Amendment. Indeed, we urged that “solution” six years ago in “[Ban the Damned Things!](#)” Mind you, it

would have to be a *real* ban, *sans* the exceptions and workarounds that characterize so-called “assault weapons bans” in so-called “strong law” States like our own California.

But for that, check out “[A Ban in Name Only](#)”. Meanwhile, does anything here resonate? If so, pass it on!