After Gun Violence

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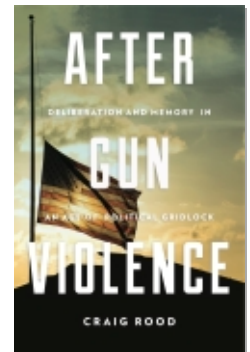
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I

DELIBERATION AND MEMORY

For at least fifty years, the word that has regularly come to mind to describe mass shootings is *senseless*. On July 12, 2016, President Barack Obama spoke at a memorial service in Dallas, Texas, for five police officers who had been murdered. He remarked that his responses to mass shootings had become routine and that "too many families" have "lost a loved one to senseless violence."[1] But the routine was not unique to Obama. On August 2, 1966, President Lyndon Johnson issued a statement about a mass shooting that had happened the day before at the University of Texas at Austin. Again, the word that came to mind was *senseless*: "The shocking tragedy of yesterday's event in Austin is heightened because it was so senseless." The word *senseless* highlights that such violence was unjustified—that it was unnecessary and cruel. But it would be wrong to conclude that this violence was without meaning. Johnson continued, "While senseless, however, what happened is not without a lesson: that we must press urgently for the legislation now pending in Congress to help prevent the wrong persons from obtaining firearms."[2] Obama drew a similar lesson about the need to reform gun laws. The important point, however, is that both presidents made sense out of seemingly senseless violence. Indeed, this is something that we all do.

On its own, a violent act does not communicate meaning or offer lessons. Humans impose meaning and lessons, often pretending to extract or stumble upon such lessons. Collectively and individually, we decide which violent events justify our attention, concern, and response—and at least implicitly, which violent events do not. This is a thoroughly social process. As individuals, we can be more or less active, though never completely in control: we draw attention, and our attention is drawn. When we focus on a specific act of gun violence, we cannot possibly know all the details about the shooting and its social context. But even if we could know everything, our need for judgment remains. Since there is an overwhelming abundance of information that is at least potentially relevant, we need to decide which

details are most important—and at least implicitly, which ones are of less or no importance. For instance, we might choose to focus on a conversation that the shooter had with a friend three days before the shooting rather than the conversation that happened four days before, or we might decide that these recent conversations are less important than what happened in the shooter's childhood, or we might decide that the shooter's personal life is less important than the fact that this shooting happened in a particular place. We might decide that all of this is relevant or that none of it is.

Once we have selected which details to focus on, our work continues; after all, details do not speak for themselves. We must decide how to interpret those details. A conversation happened—what, if anything, is to be made of that? The shooter wore a trench coat—what, if anything, is to be made of that? The shooting happened in a particular place—what, if anything, is to be made of that? The shooter used a semiautomatic rifle—what, if anything, is to be made of that? Sometimes we weigh evidence before drawing conclusions, but sometimes reasoning works the other way: we have our conclusion and simply seek out evidence that supports it and ignore what does not.[3]

We can be more or less thoughtful and rigorous when interpreting and deliberating about gun violence. But we—both collectively and individually—cannot escape our own role in the process of meaning making, no matter how hard we try. The concept of public memory can help illuminate this process of meaning making by highlighting what we bring to—and what we take from—debates about gun violence and gun policy.

This chapter proceeds in four steps. In the first section, I make two basic claims: deliberation shapes memory, and memory shapes deliberation. The rest of the chapter then illustrates and extends these two claims by focusing on deliberation about gun violence and gun policy. The second section examines how rhetors use particular public memories to interpret and argue about the source of and solutions to mass gun violence. In the third section, I discuss potential consequences of public deliberation in the aftermath of mass gun violence, even in the absence of policy talk. Specifically, I consider how the purported lessons drawn from and remembered about specific acts of gun violence can shape daily living, distort how mental illness and the mentally ill are perceived, and influence copycats. Finally, I shift my emphasis from gun violence to gun policy. I urge rhetors to reengage in public deliberation by breaking the mold of routine policy arguments; at the same time, I use the concept of public memory to point out why breaking the mold is often so difficult.

Deliberation ← → Memory

The study of public memory—what some prefer to call collective memory—is undertaken from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including history, philosophy, rhetoric, and sociology.[4] What unites these scholars across their disciplinary divides is the belief that what people remember about the past is never neutral. Since we cannot remember everything, then what we choose to remember—and what we choose or allow ourselves to forget—can be significant and consequential. Sometimes we explicitly deliberate about how or even whether to remember the past, and at other times, we simply assert a particular representation of the past as a direct, obvious, and unvarnished truth. In any case, what and how a public remembers often says as much about their present needs and goals as it does about the past and what "really happened." As Stephen H. Browne puts it, public memories are "formed in the crucible of ideology and the politics of identity."[5] And since public memory is "partial, partisan, and thus often contested," public-memory scholars are interested in which accounts of the past get highlighted (and which get downplayed or forgotten), why, and to what effect.[6]

Memory lives in individual minds and bodies, but it also dwells publicly in monuments, books, news reports, myths, speeches, stories, and so on. In a sense, all memory is public because individuals remember even the most personal of experiences within social contexts, including socially constructed narratives, genres, words, and feelings. Yet as Edward Casey explains, scholars tend to use the phrase *public memory* "to contrast such memory with anything that takes place privately—that is to say, offstage, in the *idios cosmos* [private world] of one's home or club, or indeed just by oneself (whether physically sequestered or not). 'Public' signifies out in the open, in the *koinos cosmos* [shared world] where discussion with others is possible."[7] As Browne explains, public memory can be provisionally understood as "a shared sense of the past, fashioned from the symbolic resources of community and subject to its particular history, hierarchies, and aspirations."[8]

In subsequent chapters, I explore several distinct relationships between public memory and public deliberation. But let me start with two basic relationships. First, public deliberation shapes public memory; in other words, we deliberate about how to remember. What, for instance, is the legacy of the Second Amendment today? What lessons, if any, should we remember from the Columbine shooting? Second, public memory shapes public deliberation. Put simply, our deliberations about gun violence and gun policy are influenced by memory—by the purported lessons we remember

from previous acts of gun violence as well as by basic assumptions about violence, human motives, and responsibility. Public memory shapes what we see (and do not see) when interpreting violence as well as what we say (and do not say) when debating how, if at all, guns contributed to that violence. Taking these two claims together, we can see that the relationships are often reciprocal: we draw from memory when deliberating, and when we deliberate, we repeat or refashion memory, thus offering a potential resource for subsequent deliberation.

Public-memory scholars tend to focus on that first relationship—we deliberate about what and how to remember. But I want to focus here on the second relationship—how public memory shapes and misshapes deliberation—because it is key for understanding public deliberation and why it is so often dysfunctional. Classical rhetoricians offer a useful starting place.

Within classical rhetoric, memory is one of the five canons of rhetoric—it is one step in the process of preparing and delivering a speech. In public-speaking classrooms today, the five canons are often taught as a linear sequence: first, find or create arguments (invention); second, organize that material effectively (arrangement); third, choose words carefully, using metaphors and other devices to make a speech appealing (style); fourth, use mnemonic devices and practice to remember one's speech (memory); and fifth, use the voice and body to communicate effectively (delivery). Yet this contemporary sequence oversimplifies the five canons, particularly that of memory. Mary Carruthers reminds us that in Greek legend, "memory, or Mnemosyne, is the mother of the Muses. That story places memory at the beginning, as the matrix of invention for all human arts, of all human making, including the making of ideas."[9] Rather than seeing memory simply as rehearsing one's already crafted speech, then, classical rhetorical theorists saw a relationship between memory and invention. "Memory was not only a system of recollection," Sharon Crowley explains, but it was also "a means of invention."[10] According to Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford, memory serves as a kind of storehouse for arguments that, when tapped, "ignites the process of invention."[11] And as Mark T. Williams and Theresa Enos point out, a "rhetor sorts knowledge into places of the mind and draws on this information when the occasion demands."[12]

Contemporary speakers are perhaps less disciplined about training and organizing their memories than speakers in ancient Rome were, but the important point is that all speakers rely on memory to interpret, argue, and deliberate.[13] And so do audiences. Aristotle teaches that speakers do not need to state all their premises or claims outright. If the speaker and audience

share a premise in common, then audience members will be able to supply this missing premise in their own minds as they listen. Aristotle calls this an *enthymeme*—an abbreviated form of reasoning that counts on knowledge shared between a speaker and an audience. In formal logic, one might reason, "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal." Yet since audiences will already know and accept the major premise that "all humans are mortal," a speaker can simply state, "Socrates is human and is therefore mortal." And if an audience knows that Socrates is a man rather than a rock, then a speaker could simply state, "Socrates is mortal."[14] Memory, then, is the means by which missing premises are supplied. As David Zarefsky explains, memory refers to the "storehouse of common knowledge and beliefs about history that forms the premises for arguments and appeals."[15]

Of course, public deliberation typically centers on more controversial matters than whether humans are mortal. But the same process is at work when we deliberate about probable matters, in which the best option is uncertain, and there are both benefits and drawbacks. For instance, should a city raise taxes to build a new school? A person might try to convince a friend that the current school should be remodeled because that is the cheapest option. The unstated assumption, then, is that the cheapest option is the best one. If the friend shares this assumption (and determines that that assumption fits this particular situation), then she might support plans to remodel the school or respond that another plan is cheaper. If the assumption is not shared, the friends will need to address the assumption directly by negotiating what qualities are most important for addressing the problem (e.g., the best learning environment), or they will risk talking past one another.

Although memory can be a helpful resource, it can also get us into trouble. We do not want to be continually surprised by the world, with everything appearing new and incomprehensible. Beliefs and values already accepted and held in common—what classical thinkers called *sensus communis*, or what we might call common sense—are necessary for getting on with life. These beliefs and values facilitate judgment and argument. Most of us do not want to listen to a drawn-out speech for hours upon hours, especially if what the speaker says is obvious. But common sense can also lead us astray, particularly if the premises that rhetors draw from and audiences supply are untrue or if what appears to be meaning shared in common is actually not. At times, then, we should pause to reflect on the relationship between public memory and public deliberation. Doing so is particularly urgent for our contemporary gun debate.

When interpreting, arguing, and deliberating, there is no beginning point or space of pure neutrality. We are always in the middle, always *after* gun violence. "In the case of memory," Casey explains, "we are always already in the thick of things." He continues, "Memory itself is already in the advance position. Not only because remembering is at all times presupposed, but also because it is always at work."[16] And to greater or lesser degrees, rhetorical invention depends on the memory of what has come prior. Debra Hawhee's phrase "invention-in-the-middle" clarifies memory's relationship with invention and deliberation: "This mode of invention is not a beginning, as the first canon is often articulated, but a middle, an in-between, a simultaneously interruptive and connective hooking-in to circulating discourses."[17] Even if we are young or new to politics, we inherit language that predates us and that works to do our thinking for us. This is generally true of all language use, but it is particularly urgent for trying to understand debates about gun violence and gun policy. To disrupt this cycle, we need to understand it.

Using Memory to Interpret Gun Violence

The resources of public memory are nearly limitless. Because of this, a comprehensive analysis is impossible, and I will not even attempt it. Instead, I make two general claims about how we use public memories to interpret gun violence: First, we interpret acts of gun violence by relying on the purported lessons drawn and remembered from some previous acts of gun violence. Second, we interpret acts of gun violence by relying on a broader set of beliefs, narratives, and values. In making these claims, I hope to illustrate the broader point that we rely on a range of public memories to interpret and deliberate about the sources of and solutions to gun violence.

Lessons Learned from Previous Shootings

The blaming that happens after mass shootings can serve as a resource and a constraint for interpreting and deliberating about subsequent mass shootings. Blaming the "culture of violence" after the Columbine shooting included blaming movies and video games because the shooters had enjoyed movies focused on violence and played first-person shooter games, such as *Doom*.[18] To be clear, anxiety about video games ran much wider and deeper than the Columbine shooting. But Columbine helped make blaming video

games a default response. That purported lesson from Columbine resur-
faced again on April 16, 2007, as people tried to make sense of the mass
shooting at Virginia Tech. MSNBC host Chris Matthews conducted a live
interview with Virginia Tech student Karan Grewal. Although Grewal was not
friends with the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, he shared a dorm suite with him
and therefore had unique access to Cho's habits and personality. Matthews
asked about the shooter's media consumption: "What did he watch?" Accord-
ing to Grewal, Cho watched professional wrestling and game shows. This
answer did not fit the narrative that Matthews expected, so he went to his
next question: "Let me get into the video game thing. Do you know any-
thing about *Counter-Strike*, as a video game?" Grewal said that he was per-
sonally familiar with the game but that he never saw Cho playing that game
or any video game. Instead, he was usually watching television or typing into
a Word document on his laptop. Matthews returned to the topic a few ques-
tions later, asking if there was a subculture of video games at Virginia Tech.[19]
Given that Grewal had just stated that he never saw Cho play video games,
asking if there was a subculture of video games at Virginia Tech seemed an
irrelevant and forced question. Matthews's failure to listen makes the inter-
view painful to watch.

My point, however, is not simply to critique Matthews. The script that
Matthews relied on was a cultural one, a script existing in public memory
that was used even when the evidence did not support its use.[20] Drawing
from the past can lead us astray, as it did in Matthews's case, or it can be an
asset to make sense of the world. For good or ill, we all regularly draw from
the past, even if implicitly. Public memory shapes how we understand gun
violence. Public memory shapes which questions are asked (and not), what
evidence is considered relevant (and not), and which explanations are offered
(and not).

A Broader Set of Beliefs, Narratives, and Values

The resources of public memory are not limited to the purported lessons
from previous mass shootings. When interpreting gun violence, people also
draw from a broader set of beliefs, narratives, and values. Public memory is
"activated by concerns, issues, or anxieties of the present," and in turn, par-
ticular public memories are selected and marshaled to address concerns,
issues, and anxieties of the present.[21] For some—but not all—audiences,
the violence at Columbine represented the absence of religion in American
life, including prayer in schools. One narrative suggested that the shooters

sought to persecute Christian students; a related narrative suggested that the violence represented Christianity's absence and the need for its presence in American life. Both narratives depended on audiences' preexisting beliefs, narratives, and values.

The narrative of religious persecution was not new. But the fact that the Columbine shooting happened in Littleton and at the end of the 1990s—a decade marked by culture war—gave this narrative added force and, in turn, shaped how the violence in Columbine was understood. Ralph W. Larkin suggests that responses to the Columbine shooting cannot adequately be understood apart from the "political and cultural conservatism of Southern Jefferson County." He claimed that "Columbine became a battleground in the American culture wars as the religious and cultural right defined the massacre as the outcome of a liberal, crime-tolerating, secular, anti-Christian society that fails to teach the children right from wrong, prevents children from praying in school, and refuses to display the Ten Commandments in public schools."[22] Some audiences, then, were primed to focus on religion. For evangelicals and culture warriors, among others, the existence of an evil act was a sign of Christianity's absence and the need for its presence.

Early news reports claimed that before Eric Harris killed seventeen-year-old student Cassie Bernall, he looked under the table where she was hiding and asked her a question: "Do you believe in God?" Her response was an unequivocal yes. Whether this exchange actually happened has been highly disputed, with the strongest evidence suggesting that it was in fact another student, Valeen Schnurr, who was asked the question, answered yes, and yet was not killed. Regardless of what happened, the story became a powerful one for Christian proselytizing.[23] Bruce Porter, a Littleton evangelical minister, captures this view most concisely: "It matters little in the end whether or not Cassie was quoted correctly in this circumstance. The fact that so many who knew her instantly accepted the initial reports that she said 'yes' is a clear indication that, without any doubt whatsoever, she would have said it!"[24] The story was used not only to illustrate religious courage in the face of evil; it was used to ascribe a motive to the killers and a mission for the living: the killers' immoral rampage was a consequence of a religious vacuum; they were waging a war against Christianity; to restore order and goodness required embracing Christianity.

This example highlights that the details of the case were in some sense less important than those who interpreted them. The (apocryphal) story about Cassie Bernall's martyrdom did not speak on its own. To amplify or downplay that story was a choice shaped by the beliefs, narratives, and values of some

interpreters and audiences. Erika Doss points out that Bernall became "Columbine's most visible martyr" because of her "recent conversion to evangelical Christianity, by the bestselling book her mother wrote shortly after her death (*She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*), by the many references to her in Columbine's temporary memorial, and by the comments of her pastor at her funeral service." The pastor declared that "Cassie died a martyr's death. She went to the martyr's hall of fame."[25]

The narrative of religion's absence became a lens for seeing the Columbine shooting. The lens magnified data that reinforced the narrative. But that lens also minimized, hid, or discounted data that did not match the narrative. For example, the parents of another victim, Rachel Scott, claimed that the "ultimate issue" was the "ongoing battle between the forces of good and evil."[26] They claimed, "We must recapture our nation's great spiritual inheritance of Judeo-Christian values."[27] Given this narrative, policy solutions like gun control were viewed as distractions—mere "legislative Band-Aids on our country's gaping social and spiritual wounds."[28]

The Hold of Memory

Dave Cullen reported on the Columbine shooting in 1999, and he spent the next ten years researching and writing his book *Columbine*. Shortly after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, Cullen appeared on *CBS This Morning*. He noted that reporters covering Columbine had depicted the shooters as loners who were part of the trench-coat mafia and engaged in destruction to retaliate against jocks who had bullied them. None of this was true, Cullen claimed. Yet those interpretations still stuck because they were the immediate ones offered. Since the media spotlight will always fade—even from the most horrific tragedy—and turn to the next big story, these immediate interpretations are most often the ones that constitute public memory. In his *CBS This Morning* appearance, Cullen's warning was simple: "This week, whatever we leave the public with, is going to be with them forever."[29]

Cullen overstates his point. Indeed, his very attempt to correct how we remember the Columbine shooting highlights that public memory is not necessarily static. But he also gets at an important truth: how we talk about mass shootings matters, even in the absence of policy change or talk. Since I will focus on policy talk in subsequent chapters, it is worthwhile here to describe some of the other ways that public deliberation and public memory can be consequential. Specifically, I examine how the purported lessons that

are drawn and remembered from high-profile acts of gun violence can shape daily living, distort how mental illness and the mentally ill are perceived, and influence copycats. This list is by no means exhaustive, yet it helps us see the broader potential consequences of public deliberation and public memory.

Deliberation and Memory Shape Daily Living

The purported lessons drawn from acts of gun violence can influence how people perceive, feel, interpret, think, talk, and act. For example, after the Columbine shooting, the Clinton administration urged Americans to remake U.S. culture—in Vice President Al Gore's words, to "replace a culture of violence with one of values and meaning." On April 25, 1999, Gore traveled to Colorado to speak at a memorial service. He insisted that laws could make it more difficult for "a young child to get a gun" but that we must also change a culture that constantly exposes children to "lessons in how to use one." Changing the culture required "more discipline and character in our schools, and more alternatives to crime and drugs." It required looking out for children who show the "earliest signs of trouble" and teaching them to "resolve their differences with reason and conscience, not with flashes of passion." Most generally, it required living up to the promise of America by creating "a community of goodness, of reason, of moral strength." In Gore's telling, the culture of violence—and thus the Columbine massacre—resulted from the failure to care for one another and the lack of moral guidance and discipline. According to Gore, the Columbine shooting illustrated a cultural problem; in turn, "all adults in this nation must take on the challenge of creating in all of God's children a clean heart, and a right spirit within."[30]

On May 20, 1999, President Clinton, along with First Lady Hillary Clinton, traveled to Colorado to speak at a relatively small, indoor gathering of Columbine students, parents, and community members. It was now a month after the tragedy and just two days before graduation. Like Gore had done, the Clintons claimed that this violence represented larger spiritual, moral, and civic challenges. Bill Clinton imagined a future "where parents and children are more fully involved in each other's lives," "where students respect each other even if they all belong to different groups," "where schools and houses of worship and communities are literally connected to all our children," and "where society guards our children better against violent influences and weapons that can break the dam of decency." This future of engagement, respect, and goodness could only be brought about if individuals changed their attitudes and practices. It was a large responsibility—potentially empowering

and potentially overwhelming and unfocused. Yet it was a responsibility that depended on each individual's daily acts, not government action. Following a series of "you" and beginning a series of "you can," Clinton explained, "You can give us a culture of values instead of a culture of violence."[31]

Blame of the culture of violence seemed to indict a variety of institutions—schools, local communities, the entertainment industry, and so on—yet it also suggests that some battles were to be won or lost in the home. In her April 29, 1999, press conference, Hillary Clinton claimed that "everybody has to search his or her heart about how we take care of children." She asked, "What kind of time do you spend with your kids? How much do we really listen to them?" And she claimed that parents needed to "really get back into our children's lives" even if it required rearranging schedules or foregoing "some material possessions."[32] If the conclusion that we draw and remember from a specific shooting is that it could have been prevented if parents had only searched their child's room, then that lesson can serve as justification for other parents to monitor their children.

Of course, these suggestions did not emerge from nowhere. During the 1990s, crime prevention was a national priority. Concern about youth violence coexisted with long-standing anxieties about media consumption, parenting, and the status of the family. Hillary Clinton's 1996 book *It Takes a Village* invoked an African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child."[33] The very phrase *culture of violence* had long been in use. For instance, in 1988, as part of her larger push to get music and movie producers to provide warning labels on their products, Tipper Gore claimed that America's entertainment industry celebrated "the most gruesome violence," arguing that we must "protect children from the culture of violence."[34] Although these concerns about media consumption and family life were not new, expressing them after the Columbine shooting was nonetheless significant because doing so represented attempts to explain why gun violence happens and to recommend daily actions that were allegedly necessary to prevent future acts of gun violence.

Drawing lessons for daily living can be empowering and, in some cases, might help prevent gun violence. But these lessons also come with potential dangers. First, our daily actions might actually cause harm. Monitoring one's children can be valuable but not if it violates their privacy and breeds mistrust. Second, isolated actions might be insufficient. Although not writing specifically about responses to gun violence, Dana L. Cloud critiques talk that locates responsibility for social change solely in the individual, as well as talk

that emphasizes "individual adaptation rather than social change." Isolated actions might make individuals feel good, but according to Cloud, the danger of such feel-good politics is that there is little hope of redressing underlying social problems without "structural critique and collective action."[35]

Deliberation and Memory Distort How Mental Illness Is Perceived

Perpetrators of mass gun violence are regularly described as lone wolves, deranged, or simply evil. It is worth asking what such labels accomplish.[36] Michel Foucault's work on the historical construction of "madness"[37] and Kenneth Burke's work on the rhetorics of identification and division[38] help formulate several key questions: What does labeling individuals as mentally ill do? What does it do to "them," and what does it do for those who are purportedly divided from "them"? How do such labels shape how we understand gun violence? And how do such labels shape how we understand mental illness? To help answer these questions, I briefly examine responses to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and the 2011 Tucson shooting.

On April 16, 2007, reporters gathered in the White House for their daily press briefing. News of the Virginia Tech shooting was still unfolding, but reporters wanted to know whether President Bush and his administration intended to do anything to prevent future tragedies. A reporter asked, "What more does this White House think needs to be done as it relates to gun issues?" Dana Perino, the acting White House press secretary, responded, "The President believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed."[39] Another reporter pushed back, implying that current policies were not working: "Columbine, Amish school shooting, now this, and a whole host of other gun issues brought into schools—that's not including guns on the streets in many urban areas and rural areas. Does there need to be some more restrictions? Does there need to be gun control in this country?"[40] Perino responded that she would update the press if the administration's policy changed. For now, however, their policy consisted of "enforcing all of the gun laws that we have on the books and making sure that they're prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."[41]

On April 17, 2007, President Bush spoke at a memorial service in Blacksburg, Virginia. Bush's speech focused on individual and communal grief rather than national policy. He claimed that "it's impossible to make sense of such violence and suffering." Those who died "were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time." Addressing the "grieving families, and grieving

classmates, and a grieving nation," he suggested that the first priority during this difficult time was to "look for sources of strength to sustain us," including prayer and the support of loved ones.[42]

In subsequent days, Bush and Perino veered from the claim that it is "impossible to make sense of such violence" by directing blame solely to the shooter. They referred to the shooter as evil and mentally ill, and at times, these two descriptors became synonymous. When the press gathered on April 18, 2007, reporters again asked about gun policy, including the president's stance on weapons-free school zones. Perino shifted her attention to the shooter's mental state as a way to deflect blame from guns. A reporter asked about gun policy, and Perino responded, "I'm not going to comment about—obviously, the investigation is ongoing on Virginia Tech." Asked again, she responded, "I think that what the President thinks is that, in this time of mourning and grieving and thinking about the aftermath of one individual's actions, that it's only natural that you think about what led to such a tragedy and how to prevent one in the future." The phrase "in this time of mourning and grieving" appealed to a sense of decorum and suggested that deliberation about policy questions should be deferred to a more appropriate time. By characterizing the tragedy as "one individual's actions" rather than as representative of a larger trend in gun violence, she localized blame, suggesting that the shooter at Virginia Tech was an outlier and that federal policy should not be based on outliers. When asked about guns yet a third time in the same briefing, Perino further displaced blame from guns to the shooter:

> As I said yesterday, I think that there's going to be a debate. The President said there's going to be a debate, and it's one that we have in our country about the right to bear arms, as well as gun control policies. In addition to that, I think one of the things that we're learning out of this investigation, as we have from many of the others, is that there *are some individuals who are disaffected in society*, *lonely*, and we have to figure out as a society how to identify those individuals and get them help prior to them having—going on a rampage and killing all this innocent life.[43]

Even though Perino had refrained from commenting about guns and said that she did so because the investigation was ongoing, she did not refrain from commenting on the shooter's mental state and social status, of which little information was known at the time. In addition to shifting blame away from guns to the shooter, Perino shifted blame away from society to the individual by relying on rhetorics of identification and division. The shooter was

"disaffected in society" and "lonely." He was apart from us—those who were presumably not disaffected in society and lonely—so there was no reason for us to change. Since he was "other," he—and he alone—was to blame.

By April 19, 2007, no reporters in the briefing room asked questions about guns. They had turned to the topic of mental illness—partly because the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, had mailed a package to NBC with "pictures of himself holding weapons, an 1,800-word rambling diatribe, and video clips in which he expresses rage, resentment, and a desire to get even with his oppressors."[44] NBC decided to broadcast these materials. In his diatribe, Cho claimed that his peers were immoral and oppressive and that they deserved his destruction: "You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option."[45] His specific claims, however, became less important than what his texts seemed to reveal about his mental state.

Asked about the materials that NBC had broadcast, Perino said that she did not know if the president had seen them, but she offered her own reaction on his behalf. She began by reiterating that the investigation was ongoing, and she ended by acknowledging the families who "are having a very difficult time in the days following this event." Yet between making these two points, she discussed the shooter's mental state: "There was, unfortunately, a very disturbed and deranged individual who was a loner on campus and who needed help for his own mental health, and that did not happen in time to prevent a tragedy." In fact, the shooter had repeatedly sought help for his own mental health but did not receive adequate care—a fact that was not yet public knowledge. So in the press briefing, Perino suggested that "as a society, we're going to have to continue to think about . . . how do you recognize the signs of somebody who is so disturbed that they would take 32 innocent lives, and then take their own?"[46] Perino's characterization of the shooter as "a very disturbed and deranged individual" rightly indicated that his actions were horrific. Yet this characterization also undermined her call to deliberate about mental health and how to recognize the warning signs of mental illness. Her very language—"disturbed," "deranged," "loner"—worked to stigmatize mental illness and further ostracize those who have a mental illness.

On April 20, 2007, Bush spoke about mental illness in his weekly radio address. He acknowledged, "We can never fully understand what would cause a student to take the lives of 32 innocent people." He continued, "What we do know is that this was a deeply troubled young man—and there were many warning signs. Our society continues to wrestle with the question of how to handle individuals whose mental health problems can make them a

danger to themselves and to others." Bush began with a call for inquiry and a debate about "questions of how to handle individuals whose mental health problems can make them a danger to themselves and to others." However, by the time he had concluded his address, he had implied that mental illness was synonymous with evil. For example, Bush approvingly cited a letter written by a Virginia Tech graduate: "Evil can never succeed, not while there are . . . men and women like the people of Virginia Tech who reach every day for success, and endeavor for the improvement of the human condition across the planet."[47]

Calling a shooter evil might make us feel better and work to restore our sense of moral order, but as Rosa A. Eberly explains, the use of the word *evil* often has "dysfunctional consequences for deliberative discourse" because "such claims conceal causes and obscure possible solutions."[48] Moreover, the slippage between using the word *evil* and using the words *mental illness* or *mentally ill* has significant implications that extend far beyond our understanding of a single shooting.

On January 8, 2011, U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords organized a Congress on Your Corner event in the parking lot of a Tucson supermarket. Jared Lee Loughner showed up and started shooting. Giffords survived but suffered brain damage as a result of the shooting. Six others died. In the aftermath, the debate about blame for the shooting focused on two main topics: divisive political rhetoric and mental illness.

Some commentators suggested that political rhetoric—among other forces—created a context that enabled violent acts such as the one in Tucson. In a nationally televised news conference, Pima County Sheriff Clarence W. Dupnik railed against divisive political rhetoric. Commenting on Dupnik's speech, Jeremy Engels writes, "For Dupnik, the angry, polarizing, take-no-prisoners, violent talk of the Republican Right—its 'vitriolic rhetoric'—was the primary cause of the shooting. Americans searching for an explanation for Loughner's act needed to look no further than talk radio, Fox News, campaign ads decorated with gun sights, and warlike speeches."[49] As Dupnik stated, "To try to inflame the public on a daily basis, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has impact on people, especially those who are unbalanced personalities to begin with." He continued, "It's time that this country take a little introspective look at the crap that comes out on radio and TV."[50]

Sarah Palin—former Alaska governor and 2008 vice presidential candidate—had been singled out for her over-the-top rhetoric. For example, during the 2010 midterm elections, "one of her slogans was 'Don't Retreat, Reload'; another urged supporters to 'Take Up Arms,' and she posted a

now-infamous map on her PAC website that marked seventeen winnable congressional districts held by Democrats with gun sights—including Giffords's district in Arizona."[51] After the Tucson shooting, the map was removed, and Palin released a video-recorded speech on her Facebook page. In opposition to Dupnik and others who had blamed political rhetoric for the violence in Tucson, Palin claimed that no rhetoric—not hers or anyone else's—bore any responsibility for the shooting. To help make her case, she quoted Ronald Reagan:

> President Reagan said, "We must reject the idea that every time a law's broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions." Acts of monstrous criminality stand on their own. They begin and end with the criminals who commit them, not collectively with the citizens of the state, not with those who listen to talk radio, not with maps of swing districts used by both sides of the aisle, not with law-abiding citizens who respectfully exercise their First Amendment rights at campaign rallies, not with those who proudly voted in the last election.[52]

Palin thus engaged in localized blame, arguing that blame should be placed on the shooter and only the shooter. She reasoned that blaming political rhetoric or society or anything other than the shooter misdiagnoses the source of violence and that expansive blame punishes the innocent (including herself) and excuses the guilty (the shooter).

Whether it was sincere, strategic, or a bit of both, blaming the shooter became politically useful. Blaming the shooter—especially his mental state—attempted to rebut critics who charged that divisive rhetoric from Palin and others might have in some way encouraged the shooter in Tucson. Such blaming also suggested that the government could do little to address the problem of gun violence. Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan observed that Palin, among numerous other conservative commentators after the Tucson shooting, engaged in "an almost surgical isolation or localization of blame" that reduced the act to a "single event." Localizing blame disconnected the Tucson shooting from others and thus separated it from any larger problem. And by depicting the shooter as "deranged," commentators were suggesting that "we could not and should not attempt to make sense of his motives," that the shooter's "motivations were either unknowable or inscrutable."[53] Similarly, Jeremy Engels highlights that Palin's speech

after Tucson suggests that "violence is not social or political but instead solely the product of deranged individuals." He reads this localized blame as representing and perpetuating neoliberal politics: "Palin models the neoliberal privatization of responsibility by denying this particular act had any context outside of Loughner's evil mind."[54] Such localized blame fails to acknowledge the relationship between violent events that happen again and again. Moreover, such blame fails to acknowledge the large and complex forces that sustain gun violence, including the "lack of mental health care," "deregulation of the gun market," and "violent political rhetoric that frames politics as 'war' and talks about 'targeting' rival politicians."[55]

Not only does blame focused on the shooter's mental state impoverish our understanding of gun violence and thus thwart productive action; it can also harm innocent Americans. Some public responses to the Tucson shooting depicted mental illness and the mentally ill in general as dangerous. Katie Rose Guest Pryal claimed that "news reports and opinion pieces create an in-group of the 'sane' and then divide the 'insane.'" She acknowledges that mass shooters such as the one in Tucson are "guilty of horrible crimes and deserve to be punished," yet she urges us to consider the additional harm caused by how we talk about gun violence and its perpetrators: "The public rhetoric surrounding these events shifts focus from the *crimes* of a single perpetrator to focus on the *mental illness* of the perpetrator, and, from there, the mental illness of *anyone* with a psychiatric disability."[56] In turn, "this division allows for rhetorical aggression"[57] toward anyone with a mental illness yet assuages "popular guilt over the lack of care our society provides to the mentally ill."[58] If we conclude—as the NRA's executive vice president Wayne LaPierre did after the Sandy Hook shooting—that the perpetrators of violence are "so deranged, so evil, so possessed by voices and driven by demons that no sane person can possibly ever comprehend them,"[59] then we might wrongly conclude that everyone who is violent is mentally ill or that everyone who is mentally ill is violent. Such misjudgment distorts our understanding of mental illness and stigmatizes the mentally ill.

There is a mental health crisis in the United States. And if we are sincerely concerned with this crisis, then we need to make sure that we understand it and act in ways that will address it. The crisis, in short, is that people are not getting the help that they need to live good lives. The crisis pertains to stigma about mental illness and inadequate resources for mental health. Furthermore, the crisis pertains to America putting the severely mentally ill in jails and prisons rather than providing actual treatment.[60]

Although mental illness is repeatedly blamed for gun homicides, little evidence backs up that claim. (Though I should add this caution: *clinical* diagnosis of a mental illness is by no means simple or neutral. And as I will describe in chapter 4, *public* diagnosis of a mental illness is a complex rhetorical act shaped by implicit and explicit racism, among other factors.) The shooters in some high-profile mass shootings were severely mentally ill, but these high-profile mass shootings are not representative of all mass shootings, much less gun violence in general. Jonathan M. Metzl and Kenneth T. MacLeish point out that "fewer than 5% of the 120,000 gun-related killings in the United States between 2001 and 2010 were perpetrated by people diagnosed with mental illness" and that "the percentage of crimes that involve guns are lower [for the mentally ill] than the national average for persons not diagnosed with mental illness."[61] Cook and Goss highlight that while mentally ill people rarely commit acts of violence, they are "disproportionately likely to be victims of violent death." Furthermore, the greater danger is not that a mentally ill person with a gun will harm others—but that they will harm themselves. Cook and Goss remind us that "suicides in the United States outnumber homicides by more than two to one, with depression, substance abuse, or other psychiatric disorders estimated to be a factor in some 80% to 90% of self-inflicted death."[62]

The most prominent responses to the Virginia Tech and Tucson shootings—similar to the responses to other shootings—included no such careful discussion of America's mental health crisis.[63] Mental illness had become something to blame and then move on from rather than to study and address. Indeed, "mental illness" was functionally equivalent to "evil." Demonizing the mentally ill and mental illness is a common response, but it does not help us reduce gun violence. In fact, it only seems to ensure that those who might benefit from treatment will be more afraid to seek help—and that for those who do seek help, there will be fewer systems of support. We must do better. We ought to cultivate public deliberation about mental illness that does not stigmatize mental illness and scapegoat the mentally ill but instead seeks the best ways to support Americans in living openly and effectively with mental illness.

Deliberation and Memory Influence Copycats

After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, investigators searched Adam Lanza's computer and found "a list of mass murders broken down

into categories by number of victims killed."[64] They also found a chart in his room. Matthew Lysiak explained that "the seven-by-four-foot-long chart discovered in Adam's room that listed the names, numbers of kills, and weapons used by the most brutal mass killers throughout history was likely a scorecard that he was hoping to top with his name."[65] Mary Ellen O'Toole, a criminal profiler for the FBI, claimed that "Adam was on almost a military-like mission to kill as many people as possible." According to this interpretation, Lanza seemed to target an elementary school because young children were especially vulnerable and defenseless. As O'Toole puts it, "Killing one or two people doesn't get you the attention anymore. He chose something as terrible and awful as possible to ensure he would get maximum publicity."[66]

Lanza amassed a large number of kills in a perverse attempt to "top" previous mass shootings. But he was also interested in details about previous mass shootings and shooters. Lysiak notes that "between August 2009 and February 2010, Adam spent hours poring over entries about mass killers on Wikipedia. . . . Adam went into the communal encyclopedia, obsessively correcting small details of the killers' lives."[67] He was especially interested in the Columbine shooting. Investigators found "hundreds of documents, images, videos pertaining to the Columbine H.S. massacre including what appears to be a complete copy of the investigation."[68]

Lanza was not the first shooter to identify with the Columbine shooters. The Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, was in eighth grade when the Columbine shooting happened. In his school writing assignments shortly after, he "expressed generalized thoughts of suicide and homicide, indicating that 'he wanted to repeat Columbine.'"[69] His parents were informed, and he was sent to a psychiatrist. But his interest in Columbine continued. In the diatribe that he sent to NBC, Cho threatens, "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us."[70] His use of the word *martyr* indicates that he interpreted the destruction at Columbine as noble, while his use of *we* indicates that he identified with the Columbine killers. There are numerous problems with how Cho remembers Columbine. He identified with the killers and assumed a special bond with them even though this bond had no basis in reality. More important, Cho remembered Harris and Klebold as the downtrodden rising up against their oppressors, but in truth, they were cruel killers, not martyrs or heroes.

But no matter how wrong Cho was, he took inspiration from the Columbine shooting. In addition to referencing the shooting, he also followed the Columbine killers' lead by leaving behind writings, images of himself

with guns, and recording a video of himself for reporters and investigators to puzzle through. Cho was not alone in taking inspiration from Columbine. Ralph W. Larkin notes that of the "12 documented school rampage shootings in the United States between Columbine in 1999 and the end of 2007, eight (66.7%) of the rampagers directly referred to Columbine."[71]

Columbine shooters Harris and Klebold, however, claimed not to have been influenced by other mass shootings (although that very claim suggests otherwise). In one of their home-recorded videos, Harris says, "Do not think we're trying to copy anyone." He distinguishes between their planned shooting and the recent shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, where the shooters were "only trying to be accepted by others."[72] Harris and Klebold instead saw their destruction in the tradition of the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing. Indeed, the date they selected for their attack marked the four-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing (and that bombing, in turn, marked the two-year anniversary of law enforcement sieging the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas). They also saw their destruction in the tradition of Nazi genocide; April 20 was Adolf Hitler's birthday.

The Columbine shooters, then, had learned an unfortunate lesson from recent history, a lesson made all the more true by the logic of commercial mass media: to get noticed, their destruction had to be large scale. Although their plan to bomb their high school and shoot their peers two weeks before graduation was enough to capture the nation's attention, the killers wanted to make sure that attention was sustained even if they would not live to enjoy the fame. "Directors will be fighting over this story," Klebold said. Together they considered whether Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino should direct the script.[73] Having lived in an age of relentless news coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial, the search to find the killer of child beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey, and so on, Harris and Klebold knew of America's obsession with violence and the media's ability to glorify it.

The Columbine killers wanted their destruction "to create flashbacks" and "drive [survivors] insane," and the Virginia Tech killer predicted that survivors would always live in fear: "You will never be able to go to school or work or rest or sleep. Your heart will always pound nonstop." In short, they wanted reports and images from the day of the shooting to be etched into public memory and to have ongoing influence. With the help of the media, this fear has become a reality. And this fear extends beyond the communities that mass shooters directly targeted. According to one poll, becoming a victim of a mass or random shooting is now among Americans' top-five fears.[74]

When the shooters leave behind images and videos of themselves, journals, and other materials, then reporters and investigators latch on to these materials. The information seems key to understanding the shooters' motives and to preventing future mass shootings. But it is also a trap. The search to understand why offers seemingly endless answers—which means continued attention on the killers.

Implications

Given that media coverage of mass shootings often exacerbates fears of violence without helping reduce them, distorts the public understanding of mental illness and the mentally ill, and inspires copycats, I sometimes wonder if we would be better off without even paying attention to mass shootings. What if a mass shooting happened and it was met with utter silence rather than a swarm of cameras and commentators? What if we did not show the faces or say the names of shooters? What if we did not tally up the dead?

But silence will not make the problem go away. Given the magnitude of mass gun violence and that mass gun violence often reveals much deeper problems in American life, it seems both unlikely and unwise that mass gun violence can be ignored. Another option, then, is to encourage more careful coverage and thoughtful deliberation. How do media organizations cover this violence, and how do politicians, opinion leaders, and everyday citizens talk about it? How does this violence get represented in social media feeds? Do our representations of the killers grant them rhetorical power? Are our discussions about the sources and potential solutions to violence accurate and helpful? What are the potential implications of our talk? When we attempt to make sense of violence, what public memories are we relying on, and which ones are we perpetuating or refashioning?

Part of the challenge in improving our talk is that the aftermath of gun violence seems to require two levels of commentary and analysis—specificity and generality. These two levels can be either complementary or at odds. For survivors, families, and the community directly affected by gun violence, the specific act of gun violence, not gun violence in general, has upturned their lives and is probably what matters most. Moreover, jumping to conclusions too quickly can also lead us to ignore important details that might make a specific case different from others. But there are also dangers in focusing on a specific shooting or shooter. For survivors, families, and the community directly affected by gun violence, obsessive media coverage can prolong trauma and interrupt the grieving process. Moreover, such a narrow

focus on a specific shooting can inspire copycats and keep the American public from acting to reduce violence. Charles W. Collier ridicules journalists who obsess over the details and potential motives of specific shooters. He claims that the journalistic genre of "gun-murder reportage has evolved" so that the "suspect's life history is studiously explored, as if it held clues to a solemn mystery."[75] Collier insists that this "individualist paradigm" blinds us from understanding the broader pattern of gun violence.[76] And the search for a motive may ultimately be futile: there might be nothing deeper and more illuminating than the brutal fact that a gunman wanted to kill as many unknown people as possible and that he had the means of doing so.

Since April 20, 1999, Sue Klebold has sought to understand why her son Dylan did what he did. "When tragedies like Columbine or Virginia Tech or Sandy Hook happen," she writes, "the first question everyone asks is always 'Why?' Perhaps this is the wrong question. I have come to believe the better question is 'How?'" She continues, "Asking 'how' instead of 'why' allows us to frame the descent into self-destructive behavior as the process that it is. How does someone progress along a path toward hurting oneself or others?"[77] The question "Why?" often focuses on specific shooters and wrongly assumes that by trying to get into their heads or into their pasts, we will uncover satisfying answers. By instead asking "How?" or "What made this violence possible?" we can gain more resources for understanding and potentially reducing gun violence.

Routine Policy Arguments

I have made the case that deliberation matters, even apart from policy talk. But let me now focus on policy. Here too we can see public memory at work. At times, Americans are too reliant on memory: we recite clichés, fall back into familiar grooves, and talk past one another. Such routines signal a need to reengage. Those committed to creating more honest and productive deliberation need to forge new patterns of public talk. Yet the concept of public memory also highlights why it can be so difficult to break old argumentative routines.

Debates about gun policy have routinely centered on this question: To what extent, if any, are guns responsible for gun violence? For decades, gun-rights advocates have insisted that guns don't kill people, people do. This argument has a commonsense appeal because millions of Americans own guns, yet most do not use them to harm themselves or others. But this

argument wrongly forces an either-or choice: either individuals are wholly to blame or guns are. Our debates about gun violence and gun policy can improve if we abandon this false dichotomy—a dichotomy that caricatures both the gun-control and gun-rights positions while it undermines the possibility for advocates on either side to talk with rather than just past each other.

Guns, of course, do not crawl out of a drawer, load themselves, and then start attacking people. At the same time, individuals who intend to cause havoc are powerless if they do not have some means to undertake violence. While guns are not the only means of undertaking violence, they are a particularly convenient and powerful means. Gun-rights advocates will sometimes extend their argument that "guns don't kill people, people do" by claiming that guns are neutral tools that can be used for good or bad. They say that a person set to do harm will find a way to do so, even without a gun. Yet research on gun violence offers a more complicated picture. While more guns do not equal more crime, more guns do increase the chances that the crime that does happen will be deadly. Moreover, having a gun in the home increases the chances that suicide attempts and domestic abuse will end in death.[78] Guns are not autonomous or independent agents, of course, but that does not mean that they do not possess some agency. In fact, they confer enormous power. After all, that's why gun-control advocates want restrictions and why gun owners and gun-rights advocates want guns for hunting and self-defense. It is why someone who is hunting a bear or a moose brings a rifle, not a stick or a hammer.

To ask "Are guns to blame or are people?" is the wrong question. As Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss point out, gun violence depends on two factors: guns and someone who uses them to undertake violence.[79] It is possible to hold both accountable. Individuals who undertake gun violence should be held responsible, but that does not mean that the search for responsibility should necessarily end there. Put differently, to consider how guns enable gun violence does not mean that individual actors should not also be held accountable.

A more productive starting point, then, is to focus on the substantive disagreement: What, if anything, should we do about the fact that guns give people such enormous power to undertake deadly violence? As a country, we have already established restrictions on certain types of people (e.g., felons cannot own guns) and on certain types of weapons (e.g., machine guns). But what more, if anything, should we do? Nothing is one answer. Greater gun access is another. Greater restrictions are a third answer. A hybrid approach—greater gun access for the majority of Americans, with

greater restrictions on certain people or weapons or spaces—is also possible. Whatever answer wins out, the debate will be more honest if all sides in the debate acknowledge that agency or power does not rest wholly in individuals or guns; it rests between and beyond them (e.g., specific contexts can make committing gun violence easier or more difficult).

The concept of public memory helps us understand not only why Americans regularly fall into old argumentative grooves but also why they find it so difficult to get out of these grooves. Arguments get recycled because they seem effective or seem to reveal something of value. Moreover, how one ascribes responsibility for gun violence is hardly a simple matter. Since our judgments rely on memory, trying to change our minds or someone else's can be incredibly difficult. If you are asking people to reassess their experiences, narratives, and values, you might be asking them to risk their senses of order and their very senses of self. Such a transformation cannot be expected to happen quickly or easily.

Although we regularly draw from memory when interpreting gun violence and deliberating gun policy, I should be clear: memory is not destiny, nor are all memories equally embedded in one's sense of self. Individually and collectively, we have at least some freedom to choose which memories to activate and which to ignore. While individuals might have preexisting beliefs about the sources of violence and the role of government, these beliefs coexist with their other beliefs and desires, as well as the beliefs and desires expressed by other people. Depending on the situation, beliefs about the cause of violence, for instance, might be amplified, downplayed, or ignored outright. Moreover, commitment to consistent beliefs about what or who is to blame for gun violence can be less important than doing what seems necessary to win. For example, if individuals worry about impending gun restrictions, they might shift blame to the individual act by dismissing the shooter as evil; if they worry about terrorism, they might shift blame from the individual act to some broader aspect of society, such as an entire religion (which happened after the 2015 shooting in San Bernardino). Assigning blame relies on previous forms of blaming stored in memory, but like all rhetorical acts, blaming is a complex and malleable process.

Gun-rights advocates regularly claim that guns are not to blame for gun violence; indeed, they argue that a heavily armed citizenry is the best way to prevent such violence. But the debate over gun policy extends far beyond the topic of blame. For some gun-rights advocates, assigning blame does not ultimately matter, nor does the cost-benefit analysis of various policies. Instead, the standard is whether or not we honor our constitutionally protected

right to keep and bear arms. The next chapter therefore turns to the Second Amendment. By continuing to focus on the relationship between public deliberation and public memory, we can see that how the Second Amendment gets imagined and invoked is by no means simple or unproblematic.

The Relationship Between Memory and Deliberation

In the chapters ahead, I further theorize the interplay of deliberation and memory by focusing on three relationships: the relationship between memory and the weight of the past (chapter 2), the fleeting past (chapter 3), and the implicit past (chapter 4). Chapter 2 illustrates the weight of the past by examining the relationship between memory and the Second Amendment. Contemporary debates about the Second Amendment are not reducible to the twenty-seven words ratified in 1791. Instead, the meanings of the Second Amendment have been subject to over 225 years of history, culture, and politics. To understand current debates about the Second Amendment and why it is so difficult to argue productively requires considering these broader accumulated meanings. Although advocates of gun rights invoke the Founding Fathers to establish a sense of immediacy with them, thereby instilling a patriotic obligation to defend and preserve tradition, their assumption of immediacy is problematic. I claim that the Second Amendment has been made to matter in distinct ways throughout its use in public deliberation. It bears the weight of its rhetorical history—of its use and repurposing across time. To support this claim, I focus on the NRA's rhetoric, particularly over the last forty years. In particular, I trace how the Second Amendment became symbolically intertwined with absolutism and cultural war.

Chapter 3 illustrates the fleeting past by examining the relationship between memory and our purported obligations to the dead. Whereas gun-rights advocates make their case by appealing to rights (i.e., the Second Amendment), gun-control advocates increasingly make their case by appealing to responsibility (i.e., our purported obligation to honor the dead victims of gun violence). Yet leaders in the gun-control movement have also identified a challenge within their own ranks: feeling moved and then moving on.[80] The fleeting past and fleeting engagement reinforce one another. To address this problem, they have attempted to extend, expand, and intensify memories of gun-violence victims and thus develop a sustained commitment to gun control. Gun-rights advocates, in turn, charge that any talk of gun policy in the aftermath of a national tragedy is manipulative. Both sides, then, disagree

about our obligations to the dead and how best to honor their memory. To illustrate these claims, I focus on responses to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, particularly President Obama's rhetoric.

Chapter 4 illustrates the implicit past by examining the relationship between memory and racism. The conjunction of racism and gun violence in the 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, illuminates the much larger role that racism has implicitly—and often explicitly—played in debates about gun violence and policy throughout U.S. history. America's history of white supremacy functions as a lens or filter that sorts and distorts interpretation and deliberation as well as perception (including what is and is not seen and heard). Since America's founding, racist fears have been activated and exacerbated by those arguing for and against gun control. Today, racist assumptions continue to shape who can and who cannot freely exercise their Second Amendment right, with people of color (especially black men) often rendered a threat. Moreover, racist assumptions shape which victims of gun violence are perceived as innocent and which are not, as well as which victims and forms of violence warrant pushes in federal policy. To understand—let alone change—public debates about gun violence and gun policy, we need to acknowledge and then challenge the ideology of white supremacy. In fundamental ways, the problems of racism and gun violence are inseparable.

As the next chapters will demonstrate, the interplay of memory and deliberation is neither simply a passive process nor a deterministic one in which we are doomed to repeat what was previously said. Seeing the canons of invention and memory together can help us recognize that while we draw from memory when interpreting and deliberating, we are not required to accept or perpetuate past ways of seeing and arguing. We have the capacity for rhetorical invention—to pursue different ways of seeing and talking and perhaps even create new ones. We have at least some agency to change the conversation, and that is why critical analysis and reflection are so important. The ways that we interpret gun violence and deliberate about its sources and solutions could be different—which means that they could be better. In that basic truth, there is hope.