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The Day Will Come When Parents Show Their Dead Children to America — and Nothing Will Ever Be the Same

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Fri, Aug 29, 2025 at 6:54 AM

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The Day Will Come When Parents Show Their Dead Children to America — and Nothing Will Ever Be the Same

Mamie Till did it in 1955. One grieving mother will do it again, and the gun industry will never recover...

THOM HARTMANN

AUG 29





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Yesterday was the 70th anniversary of the brutal murder of Emmett Till. The day also brought us another mass school shooting, this time in Minneapolis with two children dead and 17 others in the hospital.

There are lessons we must learn from both, as I'll lay out in a moment.

Immediately following the Minneapolis shooting, another pathetic Republican congressman claimed that the slaughter wasn't facilitated by guns but by "mental illness, including radical gender ideology."

A community is grieving, school kids across America are terrified, and after 339 mass shootings since the start of this year you'd think average Americans would finally understand that the horrors of this gun violence have been intentionally inflicted on us by Republicans in Congress and on the Supreme Court in exchange for cash from the NRA and Russia.

This is a phenomenon as systemic and unique to the United States today as Jim Crow was in the 1950s. The gun control movement needs to learn from the Civil Rights movement.

Back in 1955, young Black people like 14-year-old Emmett Till were routinely murdered by white people all over America, usually with no consequence whatsoever.

Emmett Till was kidnapped by two Mississippi white men on August 28, 1955, brutally tortured, murdered, and his mangled body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River. (And the white men who did it, and the white woman who set it off with a lie, never suffered any meaningful consequence.)

His mother, Mamie Bradley, made the extraordinarily brave decision to show her child's mutilated face with an open-coffin funeral in their hometown of Chicago.

Jet magazine [ran a picture you can see here of](#) Emmett, which went viral, invigorating the Civil Rights movement as it horrified the nation. As President Biden [said](#) two years ago, honoring the release of the new movie [Till](#):

“JET magazine, the *Chicago Defender* and other Black newspapers were unflinching and brave in sharing the story of Emmett Till and searing it into the nation's consciousness.”

That picture made real the horrors of white violence against Black people in America for those who were unfamiliar, or just unwilling, to confront it.

We've all *heard* about Newtown and Stoneman Douglas and Las Vegas, but have you ever *seen* pictures of the bodies mutilated by the .223 caliber bullets that semi-automatic assault weapons like the AR15 fire?

The odds are pretty close to zero; most Americans have no idea the kind of damage such weapons of war can do to people, particularly children.

But we need to learn. Because pictures really work when it comes to changing public opinion.

In the 1980s, egged on by partisans in the Reagan administration, America's anti-abortion movement began the practice of holding up graphic, bloody pictures of aborted fetuses as part of their demonstrations and vigils.

Their literature and magazines, and even some of their advertisements, still often carry or allude to these graphic images.

Those in the movement will tell you that the decision in the 1990s to use these kinds of pictures was a turning point, when “abortion became real” for many Americans, and even advocates of a woman's right to choose an abortion started using phrases like “legal, safe, and *rare*.”

Similarly, when the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of 9-year-old “Napalm Girl” Phan Thị Kim Phúc running naked down a rural Vietnamese road after napalm caught her clothes on fire was published in 1972, it helped finally turned the tide on the Vietnam War.

Showing pictures in American media of the result of a mass shooter's slaughter would be a controversial challenge.

There are legitimate concerns about sensationalizing violence, about morbid curiosity, about warping young minds and triggering PTSD for survivors of violence.

And yet, pictures convey reality in a way that words cannot. One of these days, the parents of children murdered in a school shooting may make the same decision Mamie Till did in 1955.

America's era of mass shootings kicked off on August 1, 1966 when Charles Whitman murdered his mother and then climbed to the top of the clock tower at the University of Texas and begin shooting.

The vast majority of our mass killings, however, began during the Reagan/Bush administrations following the 1984 San Ysidro, California McDonald's massacre, the Edmond, Oklahoma Post Office shooting of 1986, and the Luby's Cafeteria massacre in Killeen, Texas in 1991.

Ronald Reagan's embrace of the gun lobby, his repeal of modest restrictions like the Brady Bill waiting period, and his rhetoric casting firearms as symbols of "freedom" helped unleash a flood of guns into American society, fueling the explosion of both gun ownership and gun violence that has scarred the nation ever since.

We've become familiar with the names of the places, and sometimes the dates, but the horror and pain of the torn and exploded bodies has escaped us.

It's time for America to confront the reality of gun violence. And all my years working in the senior levels of the advertising industry tell me that a graphic portrayal of the consequences of their products is the greatest fear of America's weapons manufacturers and the NRA.

We did it with tobacco and drunk driving back in the day, showing pictures of people missing half their jaw or mangled and bloody car wreckage, and it worked.

And now there's a student-led movement asking states to put a check-box on driver's licenses with the line:

"In the event that I die from gun violence please publicize the photo of my death. #MyLastShot."

This isn't, however, something that should just be tossed off, or thrown up on a webpage.

Leadership from multiple venues in American journalism — print, television, web-based publications — should get together and decide what photos to release with parental permission, how to release them, and under what circumstances it could be done to provide maximum impact and minimum trauma.

But Americans *must* understand what's really going on.

A decade ago, President Obama put then-VP Joe Biden in charge of his gun task force, and Joe Biden saw the pictures from school shootings back then.

Here's how The New York Times quoted then-Vice President Biden:

“Jill and I are devastated. The feeling — I just can’t imagine how the families are feeling,’ he said, at times struggling to find the right words.”

Obama himself, after seeing the photos, broke into tears on national television.

And we appear to be tiptoeing up to the edge of doing exactly this. *The Washington Post* featured an article about what happens when people are shot by assault weapons and included this commentary:

“A Texas Ranger speaks of bullets that ‘disintegrated’ a toddler’s skull.

“This explains the lead poisoning that plagues survivors of the shooting in Sutherland Springs, Tex.; David Colbath, 61, can scarcely stand or use his hands without pain, and 25-year-old Morgan Workman probably can’t have a baby. It explains the evisceration of small bodies such as that of Noah Pozner, 6, murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary, and Peter Wang, 15, killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

“The Post examined the way bullets broke inside of them — obliterating Noah’s jaw and Peter’s skull, filling their chests with blood and leaving behind gaping exit wounds.”

But we need to go the next step and show the actual pictures for this truth about the horror of gun violence to become widely known. Doing this will take leadership.

And, of course, there must be a Mamie Bradley: a parent, spouse or other relation willing to allow the photos of their loved one to be used in this way.

In 1996 there was a horrific slaughter in Tasmania, Australia, by a shooter using an AR15-style weapon, culminating a series of mass shootings that had plagued that nation for over a decade.

While the mainstream Australian media generally didn’t publish the photos, they were widely circulated.

As a result the Australian public was so repulsed that within a year semi-automatic weapons in civilian hands were outlawed altogether, strict gun control measures were put into place, and a gun-buyback

program went into effect that voluntarily took over 700,000 weapons out of circulation.

And that was with John Howard as Prime Minister — a conservative who was as hard-right as Ronald Reagan!

In the first years after the laws took place, firearms-related deaths in Australia fell by well over 40%, with suicides dropping by 77%. There have only been two mass killings in the 29 years since then.

The year 1996 was Australia's Emmett Till moment.

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