

Lethal ideology

By [David Henson](#)

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A movie about a school shooting hits theaters this week, a tragically timely release.

The film documents the aftermath of a school bus shooting in which three girls were wounded and one of whom almost died.

But this crime didn't occur in the United States. It happened in Pakistan. The shooters were from the Taliban. And the girl who almost died was named Malala.

By now, you are probably familiar with the story of Malala Yousafzai, the young girl who spoke out against the Taliban's repressive regime and was targeted for assassination in retaliation. You are probably familiar with her story of recovery, her transformation into an icon and spokesperson for human rights and for women's education. You are probably familiar with her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. You might even be familiar with the angering news that most of those responsible for the attack against her have walked free.

The film, *He Named Me Malala*, retreads much of this story, but adds new dynamism to it as we watch Malala adjust to life as an exile in the United Kingdom and as she balances school work with international stardom. The documentary's greatest strength is its thoughtful, if light-handed, exploration of Malala's relationship with her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, an educator and activist in his own right. Directed by David Guggenheim, [it's a solid film that humanizes an icon](#) and is worth seeing in its own right.

But watching this new documentary in the aftermath of yet another school shooting transforms the film from an historical document into a call for introspection and action. Last week, I had an entire review of the movie, but when the tragic news broke at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, and I knew I had to scrap it. I can't write about a documentary in which a young girl is shot at school by terrorists and not see the resonances with what is happening in our own nation. While there are certainly major differences between Malala's context in the Swat Valley and our own in the United States, I can't help but feel this film has something very important to

say to Americans in the aftermath of our own violent tragedies.

The film's moral and emotional center is not Malala, but her father. A school teacher by trade, Ziauddin was outspoken against the Taliban well before his daughter became an international icon. He embodies Islam's teachings of humanity, equality, and forgiveness, rejecting the false ideology of the Taliban. But his outspokenness put him on the radar for retaliation. Yet when asked how he felt toward those who shot his daughter Malala, he responded with an arresting thought.

"It was not a person," he said. "It was an ideology."

And I think there is wisdom in his words for Americans still reeling from another school massacre of our own.

Our temptation, as always, is to blame the shooter, to pick apart his personal background, manifesto, and his motivation in an effort to understand what made this person so violently and terribly unique. That's because, in the era of suicide shooters, we believe attackers act alone. This idea of the lone-wolf shooter is both comforting and hopeless. It comforts us to think we are not under siege by an ideology, but it also makes us hopeless, as if we are powerless to stop what appear to be random massacres.

Imagine if Ziauddin had responded similarly to the school shooting in which Malala was a victim? It seems almost certain we might never have heard of Malala, we might never have rallied as a world around women's education, we might never have prayed for her recovery as a global community across religions.

What if we as Americans began to respond to our own school shootings as Ziauddin did?

What if, as with Malala's shooting, American school massacres are perpetrated not by a person, but by an ideology?

As with the attack against Malala, these U.S. massacres don't happen in isolation and rise from nowhere. They are enabled by powerful gun lobbyists like the National Rifle Association who refuse sensible gun control that will save lives and stop mass violence. Using Ziauddin's frame, the NRA is, at least, an accomplice to these shootings. They might not have armed the shooters or pulled the trigger themselves, but through legislation and millions of lobbying dollars, the NRA and its ilk have

unlocked armories, flung wide their doors, and thrown away the keys. And they have cheered as the tide of guns and violence has overwhelmed the country and destabilized it because they know with each massacre gunmaker profits skyrocket.

Suicide shooters never act alone. Their guns aren't just loaded with bullets but with the gun-worshipping ideology of the NRA.

The real killer of the students in Oregon was not a person.

It was an ideology.

A single shooter, acting at random among millions of people, can be hard to confront. But an ideology isn't. That is the hope of *He Named Me Malala* offers Americans in the wake of mass shootings. It offers us a example to fight terrorism, to fight violence, to fight the kind of ideology the prompts people to go into a school and kill students. This documentary is a startling reminder of the power of the human voice and hope over the power of violence and cynicism.

Malala and her father Ziauddin could easily have kept quiet. It would have been safer to do so.

But they chose to speak, against all odds. And they changed the conversation. I'm a cynical person, by and large, when it comes to international media figures like Malala, but even I left the theater feeling hopeful—hopeful that the world can change and we can be agents of it. It's a hope I held with me in the wake of the Oregon shooting.

"Most of the time it doesn't work, but he have to continue and to not give up," Ziauddin says, adding later, "If I didn't speak up, I would be the most guilty and sinful person in the world."

More sinful than the shooter. More guilty than the Taliban. If he didn't speak.

Surely his message is for us.

More sinful than the shooter. More guilty than the NRA. If we, too, don't speak.

Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)