

Guns are Americans' golden calf

What began as respect for the Second Amendment has morphed into a colossal idolatry of lethal weapons.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



Ancient Assyrian mosaic (Thinkstock)

The death-by-gun crisis in America is not just a political issue. It's a spiritual issue of the highest order. Having all but enshrined the divinity of guns, our culture has created an elaborate public liturgy for every mass shooting. Flags go to half-staff. Counselors turn out. Thoughts and prayers pour forth. We continue to make a sorry mess of the distinction between loving God and being charmed by idols that seek to thwart the glory of God. Our national infatuation with firearms has reached crisis

proportions that should trouble every believer.

All of us get sad, of course, when bullets eviscerate the joy in innocent victims' families. If our eyes don't water up when a tearful dad on the evening news alternately weeps and screams because a gunman senselessly mowed down his kid, some serious compassion is missing from the empathy chamber of our hearts.

I have a new sadness these days. It's focused on the legislators who cannot bring themselves to vote for even the most modest gun legislation. I've moved from anger to sadness, deciding that many of them are simply trapped. They're beholden to powers they're not even fully aware of. What started for many of them as a respectful decision to cherish one understanding of Second Amendment rights has morphed into a colossal idolatry of lethal weapons, including rapid-fire assault rifles.

Many of these decision makers are people of faith who are stuck bowing at an altar they never intended to reverence, at least not with ultimate allegiance. I'm positive they don't like what assault rifles do when in the hands of neighborhood killers. There's no way these senators and representatives rationally believe that it should be harder to obtain a passport or buy pseudoephedrine than to purchase an AR-15 magazine-fed rifle. But when you are in the thrall of the National Rifle Association and gun rights absolutists, what are your choices?

In the case of my own senator, Joni Ernst, to whom the NRA has contributed more than \$3.1 million, you tweet gratitude for the first responders. If you're Marco Rubio, senator in the home state of the Parkland, Florida, school massacre, and you've received in excess of \$3.3 million from the NRA, you offer thoughts and prayers. You definitely can't call for meaningful measures of gun legislation.

We're in golden calf country here, elevating a loyalty to the gun over a fidelity to God's desire for abundant life. More than a hunting or safety device, the gun has become an object of reverence. We bow in devotion at its altar. "Sacred stuff resides in that wooden stock and blued steel," onetime NRA president Charlton Heston said. And when a gun becomes an idol, it demands loyalty even if it regularly disappoints. Like other small g gods that offer false consolation, a gun's guarantee of ultimate safety and security is a myth.

The Lord said to Moses, "they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it . . . [and] the Lord sent a plague upon the people, because they made the calf."

We're living our own modern plague: 15,592 gun-related deaths last year alone. And it's a plague of our own making.

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