

A DANGEROUS era

History has shown that violence is nothing new

Jonathan McKinney *staff writer*

These are troubled times.

The idea that the world is going to heck in a hand basket, so to speak, has been around for a while now. Decades before alt-rock band REM sang, "It's the end of the world as we know it," authors like George Orwell and Aldous Huxley were predicting frightening fates for humanity. And for as long as they have existed, every good superhero movie has involved some good guys doing some heroics to fight off some guys who are bent on, yes, ending the world as we know it. And today, with terrorists and the Rocket Man abroad and mass shooters and bad race relations back home, Americans have got plenty to be gloomy about.

So these are troubled times. But perhaps it's time to take a step back and ask: just how troubled are these times? Compared with other times and other places, how bad is it really?

Not too bad. Today, Americans face the threat of terrorism, the specter of mass shootings and the ever-present headache of politics. But it could be worse. Americans do not face state-supported genocide, mass starvation or revolution, civil war and anarchy.

Despite today's mass shootings, everyday life in the modern era is notably less violent than it has been historically -- according to Dr. Catherine Grenier, a history professor at The Citadel. "A lot of historians would argue that in the 19th century... civilization kind of moved away from violence," Grenier said. "It [became] not cool to just punch a guy because you're mad... you have to restrain yourself."

"Capital punishment takes place behind closed doors. If

you live in a city, you don't see animals slaughtered," she added. "There's this sense that civilization -- modern progress -- means moving away from violence."

The result of this, she said, is that when something like a shooting, or even a murder, does happen, it sticks out.

"Some of these mass shootings are really shocking to us because we expect to be safe, and we see violence as something that is out of the ordinary," she said. "In history, that has not always been the case."

Although what Grenier calls "personal" violence may have decreased, large-scale violence does not seem to have followed suit -- especially in the last century. Just 50 years ago, America was fighting the Vietnam War, where, according to AP US History teacher George Gray, "over 58,000 Americans were killed." Around the same time, Americans were all too aware that the Soviets had, according to Gray, "the capability of literally destroying the world" -- and that nuclear apocalypse could come at any time.

Domestic unrest, too, has long been a fact of life for America. The Vietnam War, for example, was accompanied by not only war protests but also protests for civil rights. Many of these protests became violent, Gray said.

Going back farther, the Jim Crow South saw domestic terror in the form of the KKK.

"Nearly 4,000 African-Americans were lynched in the period between 1877-1950," Grenier said. "So if you're African-American in that period, your life was really at risk, and you could be lynched... for something that seems fairly insignificant."

And in the mid-19th century there was the Civil War, with much discord and chaos leading up to and following that bloody conflict.

Things have been "bad" here for a while.

The rest of the world hasn't fared much better, historically speaking. "[During] the era of the French Revolution," Grenier said, "there was constant upheaval in France as people who didn't like the political system took to the streets to try and change it by force."

"That's a recurrent thing in Europe for much of the next century, really," she said.

Moving into the modern era, Europe had to deal with two world wars, which wreaked havoc on the continent. "Millions of people [were] killed -- and that's a war that very much [involved] the civilian population," Grenier said.

At the same time, the Holocaust was being carried out across Europe. "Six million Jews," Grenier said, "were torn out of their homes and executed in terrible ways."

Compared with some of these troubles, the modern day seems almost peaceful. Yet one of the biggest problems today is not violence but a lack of faith in leadership.

"A lot of people would argue that the United States has more political upheavals at the moment -- politics seems so uncertain; there's a lot of strong language in politics," Grenier said. But she finds hope in the fact that politics remain, for the most part, peaceful. "At the moment at least, we still trust our system to work."

This isn't the case everywhere. "There's fears in parts of Africa of people not accepting election results; there's fears of potential revolutions in Venezuela right now, where there's concern about a government that's not really looking after its people," Grenier said. "There's lots of places where people are not sure they trust their government, and they feel like they may have to resort to force to try to change things."

So what is it about the modern day that leads so many Americans to despair?

In addition to expectation of safety, there is ample media coverage to make people more worried. "Technology has literally allowed it to come into our homes and bedrooms," Gray said. "Because we're able to learn more about it; because it can be front and center on our TV screens or laptop computers... there's that perception that things are much more violent."

"But that's not to lighten it," he added. "We do live in unbelievably dangerous times."

Five years later, the shock still lingers



Ananda Kobierski
Column

It's like asking someone where they were when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, or where they were on Sept. 11.

I remember exactly where I was. I was 45 minutes from Sandy Hook Elementary School on Dec. 14, 2012. I lived in Wallingford, Conn. for 14 years of my life. It was a super small town, a town that if you drove 15 minutes from New Haven, you would miss. Nothing ever happened.

Until that day. Until the shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. It was one of the hardest days of my life.

This is the main part of middle school I remember. It had a huge impact. The whole state was impacted. The whole nation was impacted. Twenty children and six adults were killed that day -- excluding the shooter and his mother he had killed earlier.

It's not something you forget.

That day in December, I had gone home early sick. So I was home alone when I heard the news.

My mom has been a fifth grade teacher since I can remember. It could have been her, if the location had been 45 minutes closer.

My younger sister was in elementary school in lock down for three and a half hours. It could have been her if this shooter came to Wallingford.

All my friends were in lock down as well for three and a half hours. It could have been any of us.

But instead, it was the 26 people including school children, first grade students, teachers, and administrators, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

The part that really hit me was being old enough to sit and think about what this meant. I was wondering why our world was so cruel and how this could even happen.

It was hard to imagine the parents who sent their kids to school that day who were never going to see them again. They would not get their Christmas presents that year -- or any other year.

It was hard to think about all of the elementary school children who were in lock down for so long, crying hysterically because they had no idea what was going on.

It was hard to think about the teachers and staff members that protected their students, and essentially saved their lives.

But, it was all real. Tragically real.

I watched the news for weeks after that, and checked social media frequently to stay updated, and hope that there would be a better end to this story. I talked to my parents and tried to pretend that I wasn't scared to go back to school everyday.

I remember one day at school we made cards and art to hang in Sandy Hook's new elementary school. We just wanted to decorate their halls and brighten their day, and make something unhappy better again.

It affected all of Connecticut, and it was really hard.

Candles at Christmas time mean something different to me. Lock downs at school are more serious to me. I have my opinions about gun laws because of this.

As hard as this was for me, it was nothing compared to the parents and families of the people lost that day. I will never forget what happened on Dec. 14, 2012.