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When politics turns deadly: the human cost of violent dissent

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The assassination of Charlie Kirk on September 10 at Utah Valley University sent shockwaves through the nation, but it was merely the latest tragedy in an alarming pattern of political violence transcending party lines.

What we are witnessing is not fundamentally a political crisis – it is a human crisis demanding we remember the flesh-and-blood people behind the public personas.

A deadly pattern

Kirk, the 31-year-old founder of Turning Point USA, was killed by a single shot while speaking to a crowd. His assassin, 22-year-old Tyler Robinson – a seemingly ordinary man with no criminal record – now faces the death penalty. Two lives destroyed; two families shattered.

Kirk's death came just months after an equally devastating attack on Minnesota's political community. On June 14, 2025, Minnesota House Speaker Emerita Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, were gunned down in their Brooklyn Park home by Vance Boelter, who had compiled a "hit list" of 45 officials. The same morning, Boelter also shot and wounded State Senator John Hoffman and his wife.

These recent tragedies echo the 2011 Tucson shooting that killed Christina-Taylor Green, among six others, during an event where Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was meeting constituents. Christina-Taylor was there because she wanted to learn about the political process. She was nine years old.

The numbers tell a disturbing story

In 2024, the U.S. Capitol Police investigated 9,474 concerning statements and direct threats against Members of Congress, including their families and staff. According to Reuters, in the first six months of this year, the U.S. experienced about 150 politically-motivated attacks – nearly twice as many as over the same period last year.

The human cost

Political killers cut down their victims as they participate in civic life. Hortman was a lawyer and public servant. Kirk rose to prominence as a teenage activist advancing his beliefs through debate and organizing others around his causes. Christina-Taylor Green was a child eager to learn about democracy.

When attending political events means risking death, citizens withdraw. When running for office endangers families, capable leaders choose other professions.

The human cost extends far beyond immediate victims. Political violence devastates families, traumatizes communities, and erodes democratic participation.

Political violence doesn't even achieve its intended goals. Kirk's death will not diminish conservative causes – in fact, hundreds of thousands are proclaiming him a martyr. Hortman's murder did not change Minnesota's political landscape as her killer intended.

These acts create only more pain, division, and fear.

In the aftermath of Kirk's assassination, we witnessed a familiar and troubling pattern. Some actually celebrated his death. In fact, both his killer and Luigi Mangione – the United Healthcare CEO killer – have been elevated to hero status in some angry circles.

These reactions simply fuel the division and rage of the opposition. And on and on it goes.

The path forward

As we mourn all victims of political violence, let's recommit to the basic proposition that in America, we do not kill people for their beliefs.

We must teach our children to see the human being behind the political opinion; to disagree without demonizing; to never celebrate another's misfortune, much less death; and that the only reasonable weapons are the tongue and the ballot – never the bullet.