

Yo-Yo

While I was in America this summer the wall-to-wall coverage of the Olympics was interrupted to cover the massacre at the cinema in Aurora, Colorado. All agreed it was a very bad business and the infotainment industry banged on about it for a whole couple of days. And then it was back to the 'tainment.

It is customary after one of these murderous rampages for the American flag to fly at half mast. Not just in the locality immediately afflicted but also across the nation. So, as night follows day, the flags in Bethany Beach, Delaware, went into mourning for a disaster that happened on the other side of the country.

Quite how many deaths by bullet are required to trigger a national grieving is not clear. For a death toll of two or three (e.g. disgruntled employee shoots boss and some co-workers) the flag stays up. But if the toll is around nine or ten or more then the flag is lowered. This is particularly true if many of the victims are students or schoolchildren.

This is strange. The Sacred Second Amendment guarantees the right to be armed to the teeth and for millions of Americans playing with guns is as normal as driving a car. And, just as Americans accept the death toll on the highways (34,485 for 2011 according to the CDC), so they tolerate the thousands of gun-related deaths that occur every year (31,347 in 2011).

Which raises the question: Why lower the flag every time there's a mass shooting? The flags aren't lowered after there's a murderous traffic pile up.

Surely, given that unfettered gun ownership is a constitutionally-protected right, there really can't be any point to making a national drama out of every shoot up. Just as with fatal car accidents nobody beyond immediate friends and family has cause to grieve.

As I write, the latest shooting incident, this time at a school in Connecticut, is today's headline just about everywhere. The body count: Twenty six, including twenty small children. And, sure enough, the newscasts linger on the images of distraught relatives and on those Stars and Stripes flying at half mast.

But lowering the flag doesn't change a thing and next week the flags will be flapping cheerfully from the tops of their poles as if nothing had happened. And the constitutionally-protected guns and ammo will continue to pour out of the nation's weapons shops into the eager hands of would-be cowboys.

No sooner has the flag gone up than it has to come down again. If constitutional theology must always overrule common sense then Americans should at least stop pretending to care. Enough already with the flag yo-yo.