No Guardrails

August 1968 and the death of self-restraint.

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The gunning down of abortion doctor David Gunn in Florida last week shows us how small the barrier has become that separates civilized from uncivilized behavior in American life. In our time, the United States suffers every day of the week because there are now so many marginalized people among us who don't understand the rules, who don't think that rules of personal or civil conduct apply to them, who have no notion of self-control. We are the country that has a TV commercial on all the time that says: "Just do it." Michael Frederick Griffin just did it.

An anti-abortion protester of intense emotions, he walked around behind the Pensacola Women's Medical Services Clinic and pumped three bullets into the back of Dr. Gunn. Emptied himself, Michael Griffin then waited for the police to take him away. A remark by his father-in-law caught our eye: "Now we've got to take care of two grandchildren."

As the saying goes, there was a time. And indeed there really was a time in the United States when life seemed more settled, when emotions, both private and public, didn't seem to run so continuously at breakneck speed, splattering one ungodly tragedy after another across the evening news. How did this happen to the United States? How, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, did so many become undone?

We think it is possible to identify the date when the U.S., or more precisely when many people within it, began to tip off the emotional tracks. A lot of people won't like this date, because it makes their political culture culpable for what has happened. The date is August 1968, when the Democratic National Convention found itself sharing Chicago with the street fighters of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

The real blame here does not lie with the mobs who fought bloody battles with the hysterical Chicago police. The larger responsibility falls on the intellectuals--university professors, politicians and journalistic commentators--who said then that the acts committed by the protesters were justified or explainable. That was the beginning. After Chicago, the justifications never really stopped. America had a new culture, for political action and personal living.

With great rhetorical firepower, books, magazines, opinion columns and editorials defended each succeeding act of defiance--against the war, against university presidents, against corporate practices, against behavior codes, against dress codes, against virtually all agents of established authority.

What in the past had been simply illegal became "civil disobedience." If you could claim, and it was never too hard to claim, that your group was engaged in an act of civil disobedience--taking over a building, preventing a government official from speaking, bursting onto the grounds of a nuclear cooling station, destroying animal research, desecrating Communion hosts--the shapers of opinion would blow right past the broken rules to seek an understanding of the "dissidents" (in the '60s and '70s) and "activists" (in the '80s and now).

Concurrently, the personal virtue known as self-restraint was devalued. In the process, certain rules that for a long time had governed behavior also became devalued. Whatever else was going on here, we were repeatedly lowering the barriers of acceptable political and personal conduct.

You can argue, as many did and still do, that all this was necessary because the established order wouldn't respond or change. But then you still need to account for the nation's simultaneous dive into extensive social and personal dysfunction. You need to account for what is happening to those people within U.S. society who seem least able to navigate the political and personal torrents that they become part of, like Michael Griffin. Those torrents began with the antiwar movement in the 1960s.

Those endless demonstrations, though, were merely one part of a much deeper shift in American culture--away from community and family rules of conduct and toward more autonomy, more personal independence. As to limits, you set your own.

The people who provided the theoretical underpinnings for this shift--the intellectuals and political leaders who led the movement--did very well, or at least survived. They are born with large reservoirs of intelligence and psychological strength. The fame and celebrity help, too.

But for a lot of other people it hasn't been such an easy life to sustain. Not exceedingly sophisticated, neither thinkers nor leaders, never interviewed for their views, they're held together by faith, friends, fun and, at the margins, by fanaticism. The big political crackups make the news--a Michael Griffin or the woman on trial in Connecticut for the attempted bombing of the CEO of a surgical-device company or the '70s radicals who accidentally blew themselves up in a New York brownstone. But the personal crackups just float like flotsam through the country's hospitals and streets. You can also see some of them on daytime TV, America's medical museum of personal autonomy.

It may be true that most of the people in Hollywood who did cocaine survived it, but many of the weaker members of the community hit the wall. And most of the teenage girls in the Midwest who learn about the nuances of sex from magazines published by thirtysomething women in New York will more or less survive, but some continue to end up as prostitutes on Eighth Avenue. Everyone today seems to know someone who couldn't handle the turns and went over the side of the mountain.

These weaker or more vulnerable people, who in different ways must try to live along life's margins, are among the reasons that a society erects rules. They're guardrails. It's also true that we need to distinguish good rules from bad rules and periodically re-examine old rules. But the broad movement that gained force during the anti-war years consciously and systematically took down the guardrails. Incredibly, even judges pitched in. All of them did so to transform the country's institutions and its codes of personal behavior (abortion, for instance).

In a sense, it has been a remarkable political and social achievement for them. But let's get something straight about the consequences. If as a society we want to live under conditions of constant challenge to institutions and limits on personal life, if we are going to march and fight and litigate over every conceivable grievance, then we should stop crying over all the individual casualties, because there are going to be a lot of them.

Michael Griffin and Dr. David Gunn are merely two names on a long list of confrontations and personal catastrophe going back 25 years. That today is the status quo. The alternative is to start rethinking it.