

What the “Not Guilty” Verdict of Kyle Rittenhouse Teaches Us

A 17-year-old boy, armed with an AR-15 style rifle, shot three men on the night of August 25th, 2020 - killing two of them. This boy, Kyle Rittenhouse, had traveled from his home in Illinois, 22 miles away, to the town of Kenosha, Wisconsin under the auspices of attending an event being held to protest racism and police brutality following the shooting of yet another black man – Jacob Blake.

Blake had been shot 7 times by a Kenosha police officer. The officer said “he feared for his safety” when a pocketknife fell out of Blake’s pocket as they attempted to arrest him for an outstanding warrant. Blake is now paralyzed, and the officer who shot him was cleared of all wrongdoing.

Rittenhouse says he attended the protest over Blake’s shooting, not to lodge his concern over the police’s actions, but instead to “protect property and act as a medic”. The same Kenosha police force that had shot Jacob Blake over a pocketknife made no attempt to detain Kyle Rittenhouse, who – along with multiple others - boldly walked the streets brandishing an automatic weapon.



As it turns out, Rittenhouse shot and killed a man who suffered from significant mental illness “because he frightened him”, then shot two more men who had identified Rittenhouse as an active shooter and tried to stop him. One of these two men died; the other was severely wounded. Despite his claim of coming to the protest, in part, to act as a medic, Rittenhouse did not offer any first aid to the people he shot. Instead, he took his assault rifle, went home, and went to bed.

Later identified and charged with homicide, attempted homicide, reckless homicide, reckless endangerment, possession of a dangerous weapon under the age of 18, and violating the State curfew law, Rittenhouse was declared “not guilty” on all charges – but it is evident to anyone paying attention that being found legally “not guilty” and being “innocent” are clearly not the same thing.

And so the question comes to the forefront once again: How have we evolved to create a legal system that views minors carrying mass-murder weaponry into a political fray as being not only normal but expected?

Make no mistake: The gun manufacturers – who raked in \$63.49 *billion* dollars in 2020 alone - capitalize on fear: They are “selling” that the only way to escape a tense situation is apparently by shooting your way out. And with organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA) spending more than \$10 million dollars annually to curtail gun reform, buy political influence,

and push the envelope on expanding what's covered under the Second Amendment, we may soon find ourselves facing ownership of shoulder-mounted missile launchers as just another "right" of every American.

As Paulo Coelho said, "If you want to control someone, all you have to do is to make them feel afraid." THAT is what the gun manufacturers, right-wing politicians, and the NRA are – literally – capitalizing on. The power of fear.

How do we dismantle this pernicious presentiment, which actively permeates our culture and communities? By recognizing that our dreaded fear of each other is, by and large, a **lie**. That overwhelmingly, most people want only good things not only for themselves, their families, and their communities, but also for the world. That by learning how to diffuse situations *before* they get out of hand, by studying the tools of communication and negotiation, by being willing to take the time to truly listen to each other, and to guarantee that everyone gets a voice in the decisions that affect us all, we are actively ensuring that the things that can so easily escalate to violence are derailed.

We need to insist on a justice system that evolves into a place of "reformatory" (as was its initial intent), instead of a place to warehouse human beings, perpetuating their anger, frustration, defeat, and alienation. Demand that we reinstitute the funding needed for preventative programs and that we ensure assistance for those grappling with mental health issues.

"If you tell a big enough lie, and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed", said Adolf Hitler. And we have all started to believe that lie: That we are all living precariously because there isn't enough food, housing, opportunities, or jobs to go around. But there is. What it will take is compassion and courage to look beyond the lie and actively live this way. It is the way of both truth and emancipation. It means seeing each other as "family" instead of the divisive Us and Them. It means demanding more of our government than it currently yields, so that the "pursuit of happiness" assured us in the Constitution can indeed be animated and cultivated.

In the final analysis, it comes down to deciding whether the lie of "everyone is out to get you" is the kind of perspective we will choose to pass along to our children and their children, or if we will work on rebuilding the conviction that we are all in this together; that it is our interdependence and compassion for each other that will carry us into a successful future, and that we are going to actively choose a legacy of love to be our heirlooms....The greatest inheritance we can offer them.

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