

The Sense of a Killing

What does it mean for Americans to welcome the murder of Brian Thompson?

Sam Adler-Bell, *New York Magazine*, December 2024.

Minutes before sunrise on December 4, a man wearing a hooded jacket, a gray backpack, and a mask over the bottom half of his face fired three shots from a silenced pistol at the back of Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare, outside the Hilton Hotel on West 54th Street. The gunman escaped through Central Park, possibly by bike; Thompson was pronounced dead at 7:12 a.m. The NYPD recovered shell casings at the scene imprinted with the words “DENY,” “DELAY,” and “DEPOSE” — references, it seemed, to the tactics insurers use to avoid paying medical claims.

Homicides in America are often described as “senseless.” As in, a senseless killing; a senseless act of violence. In general, we prefer it that way. After a mass shooting, we quietly hope to find out the killer was mentally unwell, deprived of his senses. In the days since Brian Thompson’s murder, we have seen, by contrast, a surfeit of sense-making from across the political spectrum. Almost immediately, the “brazen, targeted attack,” as the NYPD termed it, was interpreted as an act of retribution against the for-profit health-care industry, of which Thompson — who had raised UHC’s profits from \$12 billion to \$16 billion since 2021, earning \$10 million in 2023 for his trouble — was a prominent beneficiary and potent symbol. Vitriol against the insurance industry, and UnitedHealthcare in particular, flooded social media. The shooter was celebrated as a folk hero. In response to one New York Times story headlined, “A Torrent of Hate for Health Insurance Industry Follows CEO’s Killing,” reader comments teemed with health-insurance horror stories: denied claims, byzantine appeals processes, bankruptcy, misery, death. As one Times reader put it, “You get what you pay for ... or in this case, what you don’t.”

In the meantime, the question remains: what to make of the public’s initial response. Anger, cynicism, bloodlust — what does it say about our country that a murderous spectacle was greeted this way? It is a rare thing for an American CEO or other public figure to be targeted in this manner. But the structure of feeling it unleashed did not seem novel to me. Americans have a great deal of recent experience assessing the worthiness of strangers for execution. It’s one of the things we do together online: when someone is killed by a cop or vigilante; when a protester is mowed down by a car; when a Palestinian child is killed by an Israeli sniper or an Israeli civilian by Hamas. Arguing about whose lives are expendable is one of America’s favorite pastimes.

What about our bloodlust? Should we be concerned that Americans have betrayed an appetite for political violence? Perhaps. But the flip side of appetite is metabolism: not what we want, but how we bear what we are given. Americans, we might say, have a prodigious capacity for metabolizing brutality and death — we have been conditioned for it. As the writer and gun-violence expert Patrick Blanchfield put it to me, “This event gives us something fairly rare: a situation where a person victimized by a distinctively American system of normalized human liquidation — i.e., gun homicide — is also representative of that other distinctively American institution for disposing of human life, our for-profit health-care system, a key function of which is determining how much individual human lives are worth, and enforcing those assessments with ruthlessly incentivized efficiency.” For Blanchfield, Thompson’s murder, and the system of mechanized cruelty from which he profited, are part of the same regime of “human disposability” — a system in which human life, instead of being precious and priceless, is “a fungible commodity like anything else.”

I sense the reader’s trepidation: Does acknowledging this link implicitly ratify the killer’s logic? Violence, we intuit, is not something that should be reasoned about. To tolerate — let alone celebrate — the elimination of one life for the sake of a political message feels like a perilous surrender, a step on a path toward routinized horror. Humans are too fragile and various to be reduced to such ruthless arithmetic.

But why should our moral intuitions stop there? Ruthless arithmetic already governs our world. We are always subject to a regime that reduces people to numbers, and disposes of them as means to ends. In the larger social order, death and reason are wed. Our military bureaucracies, arms industries, police departments, hospital systems, and, yes, private insurers, agree: The expendability of human lives can and must be rationally decided. Every day, powerful individuals make calculations about who should live and who should die, guided by assessments of relative value.

The shooter claimed this prerogative for himself without a corporate bureaucracy, an algorithm, or a system of laws to authorize the privilege. It is a terrible thing to destroy a human life for the sake of propaganda, and a terrible thing to do so for the sake of profit. (There is hubris in both.) We will not be able to disrupt our metabolism for social suffering by indulging our appetite for political violence; we can't kill our way out of a society premised on human disposability. But it must be said that violence finds more purchase, seduces more persuasively, in the absence of other obvious and meaningful pathways for registering discontent. Americans are dying, going bankrupt, and wallowing in despair under a health-care system that prioritizes the profits of some over the basic needs of others: Where should they turn? Who is listening?