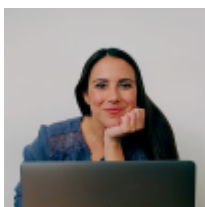




A person walks by a growing memorial at Utah Valley University after Turning Point USA CEO and co-founder Charlie Kirk was shot and killed Sept. 13, 2025, in Orem, Utah. (AP photo/Lindsey Wasson)



by Kat Armas

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On Sept. 10, right-wing provocateur Charlie Kirk was shot and killed at Utah Valley University in what [authorities believe](#) is a politically motivated attack. Since then, the internet has buzzed with speculation about the shooter's identity and motives. Engravings on bullet casings suggest ties to fringe meme culture, often layered with meta-irony that makes interpretation difficult.

The attack comes just months after Democratic former Minnesota Speaker of the House Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed. [Gov. Tim Walz called the killing](#) "a politically motivated assassination." According to the Associated Press, the man accused of assassinating Hortman, Vance Boelter, "held deeply religious and politically conservative views."

Unlike Kirk, Hortman — an elected political official — received no presidential eulogy, no flags at half-staff. President Donald Trump didn't attend her funeral, nor did he call her family or Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz to offer his condolences. "I could be nice and call, but why waste time?" he [said](#).

For some, Kirk's death symbolizes martyrdom; for others it highlights the urgency of gun reform, especially as it occurred on the same day as the 47th school shooting of the year. Utah Gov. Spencer Cox called the shooting a watershed moment in American history: "Is this the end of a dark chapter in our history, or the beginning of a darker chapter in our history?" he asked. It's a question that lingers heavily at this moment.



Sophie Hortman and Colin Hortman stand behind the caskets of their parents, Melissa and Mark Hortman, alongside Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, during their funeral Mass at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis June 28, 2025. Melissa Hortman, a Minnesota state representative, and her husband were shot and killed early June 14, in what appeared to be a targeted attack against state lawmakers. (OSV News/Reuters/Alex Kormann)

The politically motivated killings of recent months are no isolated incidents. In addition to Hortman and Kirk, the CEO of UnitedHealth Group was gunned down in New York City, Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro's house was set on fire in Pennsylvania and there have been two separate attempts made on Donald Trump's life in just over a year. [According to](#) Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative, more than 250 threat and harassment incidents targeting local officials were recorded across multiple states during the first half of 2025, an uptick from the same period the year before. The surge in political violence reveals a dangerous reality: Violence itself is becoming an accepted form of political participation.

According to political scientist Barbara F. Walter, bestselling author of [*How Civil Wars Start*](#), political violence rises when democracy declines, identity divides harden, leaders legitimize violence, and when weapons are easily accessible. In such conditions, grievance and hopelessness converge; these are forces that are present and intensifying in the United States today.

Grievance is fueling anger across the political spectrum. Many conservatives see immigration, evolving gender norms and diversity initiatives as proof that the nation they once knew is slipping away, a perception magnified by far-right media. A 2023 [survey](#) found that one-third of Republicans believe violence may be necessary to save the country.



Police munition cause an explosion at the U.S. Capitol in Washington while supporters of then-President Donald Trump breach the building Jan. 6, 2021. (OSV News/Reuters/Leah Millis)

Progressives see a system collapsing under inequality, climate inaction and corruption: Corporate gains rise as wages stand still, Trump returned to office despite multiple criminal indictments, and his first move was to pardon violent Jan. 6 rioters. When people believe peaceful reform is impossible, violence starts to look like the only option.

Opportunity magnifies the danger. The U.S. has [more guns than people](#), making it the most heavily armed civilian population in the world. And access to these weapons is relatively easy, with regulations and loopholes that allow firearms to circulate widely. When political leaders signal impunity, the threat tied to this reality only grows. This is the message that the Jan. 6 pardons send: Violence is not only justified, but goes unpunished.

After Kirk's shooting, Trump's message to his base has remained consistent: fight. He [pointed to](#) society's tendency to demonize opponents as the cause of violence, even as his own rhetoric has consistently dehumanized critics, branding them "vermin," "scum" and "enemies from within." A UCLA study [found](#) Trump's use of violent language has not only increased over the past decade, but now surpasses nearly all of his peers. Experts warn this language normalizes extremism and stokes political violence.



U.S. President Donald Trump signs documents in the Oval Office at the White House on Inauguration Day in Washington Jan. 20, 2025. He signed a series of executive orders, including an order granting about 1,500 pardons for those charged in connection with the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Barria)

[NPR reported that Boelter](#), the man charged with killing Hottel and her husband, previously spoke against abortion and was "connected to a once-fringe religious movement that is now growing quickly, and which uses inflammatory anti-abortion rhetoric." According to NPR, a federal complaint filed against Boelter said that hours after the shootings, he sent a text to his family that said "Dad went to war last night."

The danger is clear: Countries where politicians use hate speech see an [increase in domestic terrorist attacks](#). Political scientists caution that leaders' framing of violent attacks determines whether it escalates or subsides; retaliation narratives [spark](#) cycles of violence that are nearly impossible to stop.

Hopelessness emerges when people believe peaceful avenues no longer matter. With trust in government at or near historic lows and threats driving public servants from office, many Americans see a system that is broken beyond repair. For those on the outer edges, despair becomes fuel; whether through attacks on officials, clinics, synagogues or street confrontations. Unless these root causes are addressed, political violence will continue to deepen into the pattern of American politics.

History reminds us this isn't new. Historians speaking to PolitiFact [point](#) to the time around Jim Crow as the closest parallel to today's surge in political violence when ordinary citizens — especially Black Americans — were regularly lynched, and national figures like President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated. The difference today is the normalization of violent rhetoric through social media combined with the unprecedented accessibility of guns.



A U.S. flag-themed handgun is displayed for sale at the Des Moines Fairgrounds Gun Show at the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines March 11, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

The danger of our current moment is stark, revealed in the rise of political violence in a post-Jan. 6 America, a day that shifted something fundamental. While Americans often speak of a long tradition of democracy, the right to vote has always been contested: denied to Black people, women and countless others throughout history. Even so, Walter says in her book that the U.S. has long maintained a fairly high Polity Score, classifying it as a full democracy, though that standing faltered during the Civil Rights era.

But by the end of 2020, the U.S. had slipped into what researchers call an [anocracy](#), a "hybrid regime" that wears the clothes of democracy while concentrating power in authoritarian hands. It's part democracy, part dictatorship: checks and balances erode, opposition is silenced and authoritarian overreach takes root. Jan. 6, 2021, and much else has occurred since then. [Walter said this June that](#) "We are fully ensconced in an anocracy."

And we don't have to look far-off to see what this drift to anocracy looks like in practice. In the wake of Kirk's assassination, a wave of firings has targeted those who spoke publicly about it — including professors, a Washington Post columnist and even a Secret Service agent. Most prominently, late-night host Jimmy Kimmel's show was suspended "indefinitely" after remarks he made on air, a move widely seen as a response to pressure from the Trump administration.



Jimmy Kimmel, pictured in June 2022 (Official White House Photo/Erin Scott)

Federal Communications Commission chair [Brendan Carr reportedly said](#), "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," prompting ABC to act within hours. This decision has raised serious First Amendment concerns, especially given the GOP's constant critiques of "cancel culture" and supposed defense of free speech.

Kimmel's case is part of a broader pattern: Trump has [targeted the press](#), including suing ABC — settled for \$16 million — and recently filing a defamation suit against The New York Times and several of its reporters.

This is how nations unravel; quietly at first, then all at once. And we'd be fooled to think we're not on this trajectory.

Anocratic regimes are among the most unstable forms of government. They record the highest levels of human rights violations and — most troubling in the context of rising political violence — are far more [likely to descend into civil war](#). The closer a nation drifts toward this middle ground between democracy and autocracy, experts have [found](#), the closer it moves toward further instability and bloodshed.

Both history and research show that one of the surest markers of democratic decline is the rise of a party organized around race, ethnicity or religion. Such parties often [draw support](#) from groups that were once politically or economically dominant but now fear losing power, and whose privilege gives them the resources to act.

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Are we nearer to the brink than we realize? How imminent is the threat of civil war? Americans have assumed the U.S. to be invincible against collapse, yet history is clear: No nation is immune. Even the strongest can fall, and the U.S. stands in a precarious place. Grievances burn on every side, opportunity abounds in a nation flooded with weapons and impunity and hopelessness convinces many that peaceful reform is beyond reach. Together, these forces make fracture not only possible, but perilously near.

Still, despair is not the only path. History reminds us that ordinary people, when organized with vision and persistence, have secured democratic reforms against impossible odds. During the Civil Rights Movement, sustained nonviolent action forced open the doors of justice and expanded freedom, even in the face of brutality and entrenched resistance. That legacy isn't just past tense; we can continue it now.

Political scientist [Erica Chenoweth](#)'s research shows that no political regime has survived a nonviolent movement sustained by just 3.5% of the population. The question is not whether change is possible, but whether we will rise to the challenge of it, collectively choosing the costly and disciplined work of peace in a culture that glorifies violence.

Advertisement

This story appears in the [Charlie Kirk murder news and commentary](#) and [Trump's Second Term](#) feature series.

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