

## Quo Vadis USA? – der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

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### “Fatally Unequal – Race and Guns in America”

**Carol Anderson, Emory University**

*Anja Schüler:* Hello and welcome back to the HCA podcast, coming to you from Heidelberg University; my name is Anja Schüler. A week ago Saturday, a young white man opened fire at a grocery store in a black Buffalo neighborhood, leaving ten people dead and three more injured. The shooting was one of the deadliest in recent American history, and the suspect clearly targeted the minority group, just like the gunman who killed nine black worshippers at a church in Charleston in 2015, the perpetrator who murdered eleven Jewish worshippers at a synagogue in Pittsburg in 2018, and the gunman who killed twenty-three people, many of them Latinos, in El Paso in 2019. Once more, the HCA podcast will look at gun violence and particularly at how minority groups become the deadly target of white supremacists. My guest today is Carol Anderson. She is the Charles Howard Candler Professor of African-American Studies at Emory University, and she is the author of many books on African-American history. I would just like to name three: *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of our Nations*, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter, Oppression is Destroying Our Democracy*, and, most recently, *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America*. We will talk about how all this work really is connected, but first of all, welcome to the podcast.

*Carol Anderson:* Thank you so much for having me.

*Anja Schüler:* So, before we get started, I would also like to mention that I have this great opportunity to talk to Carol Anderson because she is currently in Heidelberg as the James C.W. Pennington Fellow of the HCA and the Faculty of Theology. As some of you might know, this award honors the African-American churchman who received an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg university in 1849. So congratulations on that award.

*Carol Anderson:* Thank you so much, and I am honored.

*Anja Schüler:* Part of this award is teaching a class at the HCA. That happened last week, and I heard it went great. But unfortunately, we have to start our conversation today on a very somber note, with a look at yet another deadly shooting in the United States, the shooting in Buffalo that I mentioned in my introduction. Attacks like that are often portrayed like random acts by lone shooters, but we know they are not. Rather, they are part of a long American history of political violence perpetrated by white supremacists against blacks and other minority groups. So can you tell us a little bit more about this history?

*Carol Anderson:* The history is a tortured history. It is a painful history. It is a history going back to the days of enslavement. I will start with Reconstruction, the era after the Civil War, when black folks are free, when they are citizens, and what you see is this massive political violence reigning down on black folks, trying to deny them their freedom, deny them their citizenship. You see it when black folks go to vote; you see it when black folks demand payment for their labor. The violence is unrelenting. There is a book by Carl Schurz, who was sent to the South as an emissary for President Andrew Johnson. The book is just a travelogue of atrocities, as he talks about African-Americans being tied to trees and being set on fire, being gunned down, the bodies piled up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, hanging from tree – men, women, and children because there was a minor dispute with whites. So the response to a minor dispute was a massacre. We see this again in the rise of Jim Crow, where you have, on average, a lynching every other day for three decades. You see this with the kind of violence that came after Red Summer. During Red Summer, for instance, the massacre at Elaine, Arkansas, that amounted to up to 800 African-Americans killed. We see this with Tulsa, where you have Black Wall Street wiped out. You see this with Rosewood. You see this with Groveland. You see this with Ocoee. All of these massacres were because black folks believed that they had the right to their labor, believed that they were citizens, believed that they had the right to vote, and the response from the white supremacists was to rain down physical violence on African-Americans who believe that they should have their rights as citizens.

*Anja Schüler:* And connecting right to that, that would also include the right to bear arms, of course. You have a new book out called *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America*, in which you contend that the second amendment of the American constitution, which grants every American citizen the right to bear arms, does not apply equally to black and white Americans. In that book, you even argue that the Second Amendment represents, and I quote from your book, a “particularly maddening set of double standards.” Please tell us something about the origins of this racial double standard in the Second Amendment.

*Carol Anderson:* So part of what you have in the second amendment, it’s got that aura now in the United States because there’s been a heavy marketing campaign that this is about the individual right to bear arms when, in fact, at its founding, the argument was about the right to a well-regulated militia. It is in that militia argument that you really see the contention. So the narrative becomes that this militia is about fighting off domestic tyranny and fighting in a foreign invasion based on the War for Independence that the U.S. waged in 1776. But in fact, that militia could not be relied upon to fight a foreign invasion, a foreign army, a professional army. So when the British were coming, that militia would show up, sometimes it would, sometimes it wouldn't, sometimes it would just take off running. George Washington was beside himself at this militia. You had this language about fighting off domestic tyranny, but right before the Constitutional Convention, you had a thing called Shays Rebellion, where you had white men angry at taxation policy, attacking the government of

Massachusetts, and heading toward the armory. The Massachusetts government couldn't get the militia to take on Shays' Rebellion. In fact, members of the Massachusetts militia joined Shays' Rebellion, and so it took Boston merchants who had to hire a mercenary army to put down Shay's Rebellion. So what is this thing about the militia? The militia was there to put down slave revolts; it was very effective at doing that. So when James Madison, who was the architect of the U.S. constitution, put control of the militia under the federal government, and then the constitution goes out for ratification by the various states. When it hit the state of Virginia, folks in Virginia, the Anti-Federalists like Patrick Henry and George Mason, went up against James Madison, saying: You put this militia under the control of the federal government.? We can't trust the federal government because of what Congress will do. Congress has folks in there from Pennsylvania and Massachusetts who are ending slavery in their lands. We can't count on them to protect us and send the militia down when the slaves have an uprising; we can't trust them, and we will be left defenseless against these black folk. So in order for us to ratify this convention, we need to have control of the militia. When you think about the U.S. bill of rights, you've got freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of association, the right not to be illegally searched and seized, the right to a speedy and fair trial, the right against cruel and unusual punishment, and then the right to a well-regulated militia for the security of a free state. That language is such an outlier, but it deals with, sitting in this bill of rights, the right to control and contain black people. That's what the second amendment does, the maddening double standard that is there.

*Anja Schüler:* At the same time, the right to bear arms didn't apply to black people; slaves were not allowed to own a weapon, right?

*Carol Anderson:* Absolutely, the slave codes were very clear that the enslaved must not have access to arms. So one of the roles of the militia and the slave patrols was to go in and search the enslaved homes on any kind of pretext – just to go in there and hunt for weapons of rebellion, that included having arms, having books, things that would lead to rebellion. Also, the slave code laws, not just the slave code laws but the laws themselves, prevented free blacks from having arms because there was the sense that free blacks were this toxin, this virus within the body politic that could enrage and inflame the enslaved to get them to rise up against the plantation owners. And so it was, how do we strip political power? How do we strip physical power from free blacks as well? So you see this coming through in the early days, and you see this as well in those moments such as in the rise of Jim Crow, and you see this when we're getting into the 1960s; you see this today. The issue of black people with guns sends a seismic psychic fear throughout the American body politic.

*Anja Schüler:* I was just going to get to that history of perceiving an armed black man, always as a perpetrator – that history really lingers, right? Your book, I must say it's, as you said, a tortured topic, but it's a great read. It demonstrates so well, I think, that throughout American history, black men with a gun are always seen as perpetrators, even if they are security guards, maybe leading mall customers to safety during a

shooting. So what do you make of this utter lack of ability to perceive black men with guns as the good guys?

*Carol Anderson:* That was one of my revelations for me when I started researching this because what started this book was the killing of Philando Castile, a black man in Minnesota who was pulled over by the police, and the police officer asked to see his ID. Philando Castile, following the National Rifle Administration's guidelines, the NRA guidelines, alerted the officer that he had a legally concealed weapon, but he was reaching for his ID. The officer hears I have a gun, and he starts shooting five bullets into Philando Castile, for having a legally possessed weapon. Because he has a gun, not that he's threatening the officer, he's not brandishing the weapon, he's not saying I'm going to shoot you, he's just saying: I have one, so that when you see my ID, you know when I'm pulling out my ID, and you see the gun, you don't think I'm reaching for the gun. The NRA, the defender of the second amendment, basically went silent, and finally, after being pushed by black NRA members, came up with this statement: we believe that everyone, regardless of race, creed, religion, ought to be able to bear arms, should have the right to bear. This is the same NRA that when white nationalists fired on federal officers and killed them, called those federal officers Jack-booted government thugs. The different responses were based on, best I could tell, race, and so people were asking: well, don't black people have the right to bear arms? That is what sent me on this hunt back into the seventeenth century. In this hunt, what became revealed to me was this incredible fear of black people, what I call anti-blackness. It's not a term that I generated; it comes from scholars who deal with Afro-pessimism, like Frank Wilderson, and Calvin Warren, and David Marriott. As they were talking about this Afro-pessimism, I saw that deep, steep anti-blackness – the refusal to recognize black people's humanity, this fear, this criminalization of black people, this definition of black people as being inherently fundamentally violent and a threat to the white community. That is why you can't have a good black guy with a gun. This is why you have a Mantic Bradford Junior, who was an Army veteran. There was a mall shooting; as an army veteran, he pulls out his weapon, and he is ushering people to safety to get them away from the gunman. Cops come in, they see him, and they immediately start firing and just killed him dead. It's what we saw in Chicago, where Jamael Roberson, who is a security guard at a club, where somebody pulls out a weapon. He gets the person down on the ground; he has his security guard uniform – it clearly says security on it. Cops come in, they don't see security, they see a black man, and they start shooting, and they kill Jamael Roberson. Or what we had St. Louis, where you have a black police officer who sees a suspect running. He tackles the suspect, the cops come up, and they start shooting this police officer because he's black – he must be the threat. So this is when black is the default threat in America. You cannot have a good black guy with a gun. It's like an oxymoron, given the depth of anti-blackness in American society.

*Anja Schüler:* Let's maybe return to the Buffalo shooting for a minute and another issue connected to that. The suspect stated online that he sought to kill black people

because he wanted to prevent white people from losing control of the country, thus subscribing to the so-called “replacement theory.” This theory, to me, seems to have made great inroads into American politics and into the media, most infamously, of course, into the Fox News show hosted by Tucker Carlson. But I will also say that some leaders of the Republican Party subscribe to it, and a recent poll found that almost half of Republican voters believe that immigrants are being brought to the United States as part of an effort to replace white America. So how powerful has the replacement theory become in American life and politics?

*Carol Anderson:* Too powerful, absolutely too powerful. So you think about a nation that calls itself a nation of immigrants. You think about a nation that just reveres the statue of Liberty. “Give me your tired, your sick, your hungry, your poor yearning to be free” – this is the same nation that says we don’t want those folks from those countries. Why aren’t they coming in from Norway? But it is the devaluation of those who aren’t white and seeing that immigrants who come in from [South America], it’s in some ways a replay of what happened in the big rush of immigration coming in from Southeastern Europe, you know from Italy, coming in from Hungary, coming in from Poland, those immigrants were seen as less than. The Irish were seen as much less than. So it was, how do they work their way into whiteness so that they become part of the white community, the white American community? Well, it is that kind of racialized vision of American citizenship that is absolutely instrumental in the great replacement theory. As they’re seeing immigrants coming in from Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, it is hate. It is this: They’re bringing in these immigrants whose culture is not like ours, whose value systems aren’t like ours, and they’re bringing them in in droves, and they’re going to overwhelm the white community. They’re going to overwhelm us and take our political power via the vote, take our social power, take our cultural power, and so we are being replaced. We have to stop this, and so what you’re hearing when they’re saying this really is a call to arms, and the Buffalo shooter was in response to that call to arms.

*Anja Schüler:* Let’s maybe talk about arms for a minute because shootings like the one in Buffalo always seem to trigger a debate on gun control, at least in the past, without much avail, I think. The number of guns manufactured and sold in the United States has been rising sharply in the last decades. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms just released a report showing that the number of firearms manufactured in America has nearly tripled, from four million in 2000 to over 11 million in 2020, and there does not seem to be a way of curbing that flood. What I thought was interesting now about the Buffalo shooting is that when President Biden visited the site, he called the domestic attack terrorism. That, I think, is a departure, and he condemned wide supremacy, but if I remember it correctly, he did not call explicitly for more gun control. What do you make of that?

*Carol Anderson:* Couple of things are going on there. During the presidency of George W. Bush, actually, gun sales had declined. When Obama became president, they skyrocketed, as did the growth of these right-wing white militia groups. Then

gun sales went down some during Trump's presidency because they didn't have to be afraid anymore. Now, during Biden's, they're skyrocketing again. Do you remember Sandy Hook? Where a gunman guns down elementary children and their teachers, twenty-three of them or so, and Obama is giving a talk about this, and he is crying. He has a tear coming down his cheek, and nothing was done. Nothing was done after Los Vegas, where five hundred are gunned down. Nothing was done after Orlando at the [night club] shooting. Nothing was done after the Tree of Life Synagogue. Nothing was done after El Paso. So you have to ask yourself why? And so what? In my work, what I've been uncovering, is that the fear of black people, the anti-blackness, is so steep that America has made a deal with itself that it is willing to have the insecurity of being in a grocery store, the insecurity of being in a church, the insecurity of being in their own schools or where they work, in order to be able to have unfettered access to guns, just in case the black folks rise up. I think about the work of Jonathan Metzel: *Dying for Whiteness*, where he did a study in Missouri with whites who had suffered gun violence in their family, this is in rural Missouri. He starts asking them about gun safety laws that could have helped prevent the killing. And what they say is: oh no, we've got to have our guns. It is the only defense we have against those folks from St. Louis coming down here and trying to take everything that we have. "Those folks in St. Louis" basically is coded language because St. Louis is over fifty per cent black. So it is the fear of black people coming to take everything that you have. It is Congresswoman Lauren Boebert giving a talk or Tweet or whatever, where she's laying out that the whole "Defund the Police" thing means that guns will no longer be readily available, and we won't be able to protect ourselves against the thugs, the gang members, and the drug dealers. Thugs, gangbangers, and drug dealers – coded language for black people. So this is what we're dealing with here – we're willing to have this flood of guns and the insecurity in our lives by saying that the most important threat in American society is black people.

*Anja Schüler:* It almost seems that the notion, maybe it's a very European notion, that gun control could be part of the solution is naive because you're telling me that there's a much bigger issue here.

*Carol Anderson:* The issue of access makes all the difference in terms of gun violence. The states in the U.S. that have more gun control regulations, more background checks, waiting periods, those sorts of things, have a lower homicide rate. The states that are basically unfettered have some of the highest homicide rates and gun violence rates.

*Anja Schüler:* So it does matter if ownership of guns increased threefold.

*Carol Anderson:* Oh yes, oh yes, we have over four hundred million guns in the United States! We have more guns than we have people, and we are not safe – we are not secure.

*Anja Schüler:* That's right. Well, I'm afraid we have to wrap this up but I could go on for a long time here, but let me ask you a last question here. When the two of us first started thinking about doing this podcast, I was wondering whether it should be on your new book on the second amendment or on your earlier work on voter suppression, and you said it all ties in together. Could you elaborate on that for us a little bit? How does it all tie in together?

*Carol Anderson:* Oh, absolutely. I think about the insurrection on January 6 that happened when the Capitol was stormed to try to stop the certification of Joe Biden's election as president of the United States. What you heard from those folks was: They stole the election from us, and they identified where that stealing happened. It happened, they say, in Atlanta. It happened in Philadelphia. It happened in Milwaukee. It happened in Detroit. So they are identifying cities that have sizable black populations as being the source of that theft, and they're willing to exact violence in order to stop that vote from having any meaning, from having any effect. Well, when you think about the Buffalo killer, what he said: I've got to kill these black folks because they're trying to take our vote, they are part of that constituency that is trying to diminish the power of white people's votes, and so I have to kill them. The violence that rains down in terms of access to the ballot box, in terms of voting rights that is, unfortunately, a long, nasty tradition in American society, and it is one that we're seeing really come to the fore again in 2022.

*Anja Schüler:* Thank you so much for this many-faceted look at gun violence in the United States. You have been listening to the HCA podcast, and I have been talking to historian Carol Anderson from Emory University about her impressive work on the many intertwined aspects of the history of gun violence in America, which often is violence against minorities and against African-Americans. I must say it has been such a privilege for me to become more acquainted with your work, and it has been a great pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking the time this morning.

*Carol Anderson:* Thank you so much.

*Anja Schüler:* I'm looking forward to next week when you will be honored with the Pennington Award for your work. Again, congratulations. This wraps up the current episode of Quo Vadis USA?; my name is Anja Schüler. Our podcast is produced at Heidelberg University with support of the Jacob Gould-Schurman Foundation. I would like to thank Eléna Brandao-Mecker and Julian Kramer for technical support, and I would like to thank you for your interest in our conversations. We will be back soon with an episode commemorating the Marshall Plan, so stay tuned, and please stay healthy.