

# Substantial Disruption



## Half-Staff Nation

By Mike Tully

Shots rang out, people hid and fled, people died and bled, sirens wailed and lights flashed, the mayor pledged the community would recover, the police chief lauded first offenders, the Governor issued a 114 word statement that included the words “horrific,” “tragic,” and “unspeakable” and offered his “deepest condolences,” and a million “thoughts and prayers” were offered up for every bullet fired in Virginia Beach on the last day of May. The next day the [President ordered](#) the American flag to be flown at half-staff through June 4<sup>th</sup>.

It is now June 5<sup>th</sup>. As Virginia Beach mourns its dead, the President and his virulent Twitter feed have gone to Europe and the condolences and prayers are fading, being replaced by the usual what-ifs and somebody-should-do-somethings. The customary debate over guns laws has been re-engaged as the public shrugs and waits for the next mass shooting. And the American flag returned to its rightful place atop the staff.

But should it? Has America earned the right to return its flag to the top of the flagpole? Or should the flag remain lowered, not only to honor the Virginia Beach victims, but all victims of America’s fixation on death by firearms? The flag returning to its customary prominence symbolizes restoration, a return to normal. But why should we celebrate a “return to normal” when abnormal has become normal? According to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), at least 25 people were killed by firearms in the United States yesterday. There are undoubtedly more, since the U.S. averages 100 gun deaths a day. More than 6,000 people have died in gun homicides so far this year. Oh say can you see the blood on the ground?

The [earliest report of a flag being lowered](#) to honor the fallen came more than a century and a half before the Declaration of Independence when James Hall, an Englishman, was killed by a spear thrown by Inuit natives in Greenland in 1612. When Hall’s small expeditionary boat returned to the main ship, Quartermaster John Gattonbe saw its flag had been lowered, which Gattonbe recognized as a “sign of death.” When Hall’s expedition returned to London nearly two months after he was killed, the ship bearing his corpse lowered its flags to half-mast. The flag has been lowered to honor the dead frequently throughout the intervening centuries, through the most recent presidential proclamation on June 1<sup>st</sup>. “The lowered flag was then, as it should be now, a symbol of shared loss,” wrote Michael E. Miller in the *Washington Post*. “something that unifies viewers in respect for the dearly departed.”

The United States honored Virginia Beach’s dearly departed and respected our shared loss from June 1<sup>st</sup> through June 4<sup>th</sup> by lowering its flag. The Virginia Beach victims deserve to be honored, as do all victims of mass gun violence. But what of the 25 who were murdered by guns yesterday? Or the 85 killed over the last 72 hours? Do you have to die in a mass shooting before the nation shows its respect for you by lowering its flag? Does that mean the other victims don’t deserve the honor? Do we lower the flag out of respect for the fallen or as a reaction to publicity?

It is an affront to victims of American gun violence to honor them selectively, depending on whether their tragic demise attracted cameras and satellite trucks. It is an affront to all Americans to return the flag to its honored full-staff position as if there were no longer a reason to mourn, while gun carnage continues unabated. It is an affront to humanity to recast abnormality as normal and to suggest that firearm violence is “[the price of freedom](#).” It is not; it is the devil’s mortgage on our national soul.

The United States should lower its flag and keep it lowered until we reverse the tidal wave of firearms violence. The unthinkable is becoming a societal norm; when passion triggers thoughts of homicide or suicide, the desperate hand will find a gun before the mind regains control. When we allow guns to flood our streets and publicize mass killers, we are normalizing firearm violence as a legitimate dispute resolution mechanism and accepting the world’s highest gun-related death and injury rate as part of our social environment. We must cure ourselves.

The National Flag Code presumes the flag will be lowered upon the death of prominent individuals, such as Presidents, Governors, Supreme Court Justices, and so on. 4 U.S. Code § 7(m). However, the President has absolute authority to deviate from the protocols suggested by the Code: *Any rule or custom pertaining to the display of the flag of the United States of America, set forth herein, may be altered, modified, or repealed, or additional rules with respect thereto may be prescribed, by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States, whenever he deems it to be appropriate or desirable; and any such alteration or additional rule shall be set forth in a proclamation.* 4 U.S. Code § 10. That was the basis of the presidential proclamation on June 1<sup>st</sup> honoring the Virginia Beach shooting victims.

The current occupant of the Oval Office would never use his power to consign the flag to half-staff until the firearms violence epidemic is brought under control. But his successor might see the wisdom of reminding the nation, through the display of its most visible and precious symbol, that we have a national sickness to heal. I would like to see the Democratic presidential candidates address whether they would keep the flag at half-staff in honor of American shooting victims until there are fewer of them left to honor.

Today, America returned its flag to full staff. We should have left it where it was, there to remain until we have healed ourselves. #HalfstaffNation.