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Viewpoints: Monument needed for lives lost to killings by law enforcement

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The unending succession of civilian deaths from lethal action by law-enforcement agents has created a national wound that seemingly cannot heal. Black males are obviously at particular risk, but homeless people, the mentally ill and targets of “no-knock” raids also appear particularly vulnerable.

In many of these cases, an impartial investigation could show that circumstances warranted deadly force. But in many others, there is no such justification. And the circumstances of the deaths and the auspices of any subsequent investigation often make it hard for the public to discover who was or was not responsible.

The politically charged nature of these events, and the difficulty of ascertaining the facts after the event, encourage scapegoating and distortion. Those who identify with the slain are quick to assume that any new tragedy must amount to manslaughter by law enforcement agents, or worse. Those who identify with the authorities are predictably inclined to believe that there must have been extenuating circumstances for any particular death.

Both responses miss the most crucial point, one that everyone should be able to agree on: There are vastly too many such deaths. In aggregate, it is simply not credible that all these losses reflect proper law enforcement conduct. In our heavily armed and violence-prone society, we have grown inured to a horrendous yearly toll of innocent lives through actions animated by racism, bad judgment or overly nonchalant attitudes toward violent repression.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult for anyone to feel closure. Many who identify with the victims see the frequent failure of legal remedies as evidence that no one cares about their sufferings. Many others despair of a trustworthy judicial process that would identify and act upon evident cases of wrongful death. Without more conclusive mechanisms to investigate and prosecute those responsible for needless deaths, professions of concern may merely appear as nothing more than fruitless hand-wringing.

But Americans could make one collective gesture that would go a long way toward focusing national attention where it belongs – on the urgent need to reduce the rate of unwarranted law-

enforcement killings. A broad coalition of civic-minded parties should call for creation of a national monument to those slain without justification by those entrusted with upholding the law. Both public and private funding should be sought for this effort.

Such a monument, on the Washington Mall or some equally prominent site, would name no names and cite no specific instances. It would take no stand on the rights and wrongs of any particular death. It would not identify the victims with any particular racial or other social category. Instead, it would commemorate a vast (and unfortunately ongoing) loss – one that is entirely preventable. It would be a somber and sobering statement of the tragic gap between our professed ideals and the day-to-day realities of American life. It would, one would hope, foster renewed determination to end this mayhem.

Of course, any effort to create such a monument will be controversial. Such controversy would itself represent a salient benefit of the project. All those concerned about this national scourge would be able to participate in a national gesture of solidarity with those who have lost children, fathers, mothers and other loved ones in this way. They would be able to do this without passing judgment on any particular loss, any specific law enforcement officer or agency.

Those who resist creating a public shrine to these losses – perhaps holding the idea divisive, or disparaging to law enforcement – would have the opportunity to explain themselves at length to their fellow Americans.

Why should acknowledging a preventable tragedy of this magnitude be held divisive? On the contrary, such a measure could and should be recognized as a first step toward combating the tragedy. And why should efforts to overcome deficiencies in law enforcement practice be seen as prejudicial toward the many experienced professionals who succeed in keeping the peace without excessive force?

It's all but certain that this succession of tragedies will not stop anytime soon. The social ingredients of the mayhem are too deeply ingrained in American life to be swept away overnight. But by memorializing the victims, and acknowledging the tragic character of the loss, Americans could go a long way to driving out the complacency that sustains this dark side of our civic life