

The Sense Of A Killing

By Adam Adler-Bell, *New York Magazine*, December 11th, 2024

By now, the details are familiar: Minutes before sunrise on December 4, a man fired three shots at the back of Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare. 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.” 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, 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. Macabre jokes multiplied.

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.”

Violence, we intuit, is not something that should be reasoned about. And yet, 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. Our military bureaucracies, arms industries, 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 — sometimes by ideas of safety and who deserves it; often by the aim of keeping shareholders happy. The shooter claimed this prerogative for himself without a corporate bureaucracy, an algorithm, or a system of laws to authorize the privilege.

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?