

US Current Affairs: What killed Charlie Kirk?

The question we ask is ‘what’ not ‘who’ was responsible for the death of the American right-wing, Christian National activist who was shot dead on a Utah university campus on 10 September 2025. But in fact, **both** questions deserve scrutiny because their straightforward answers conceal more complex, hidden issues. The obvious ‘who’ appears to be Tyler Robinson, a 22-year-old college drop-out from a Mormon family in Utah with a knowledge of guns and gaming culture. He is charged with pulling the trigger and faces the death penalty. The less obvious ‘who’ involves speculating about motive. US Attorney General, Pam Bondi, a MAGA hardliner, has her theory:

"Who killed Charlie? Left-wing radicals, and they will be held accountable," Bondi told ABC News on Monday 15 September.

Likewise, the obvious ‘what’ is a single bullet from a rifle owned by Robinson’s grandfather. The bullet casing was marked “Notices Buldge OWO what’s this?” presumably by the shooter’s own hand, referencing somewhat obscure online gaming language. But the less obvious ‘what’ connects this event to the approximately 47,000 violent gun deaths recorded each year in the US (half suicide, half homicide). Guns are the largest cause of death among young people in America, outpacing traffic fatalities. Every day, guns kill 125 people.

Whatever else the Kirk shooting reveals, two things are already clear. First, the event is being exploited for political gain by a variety of groups, not least the Trump administration. The political ramifications include consideration of free speech and hate speech and necessarily involve the **First Amendment**. Second, the opportunity to enact gun control measures or, at least, debate how to reduce political violence has not been taken. This takes us back to the **Second Amendment**.

Before we get into all that, let’s pause for a moment on the word ‘assassination’. This was the word used by the right-wing media to describe the killing. What does it actually mean? When does a killing become an assassination? There is no clear answer. It appears that an assassination involves the (deliberate) killing of a targeted individual; in other words, random shooting to kill at a football game would not qualify. It also seems that the target should be a prominent person, often killed for political reasons. The US has seen four assassinations of a sitting president: Abraham Lincoln (1865), James Garfield (1881), William McKinley (1901) and John Kennedy (1963). Ronald Reagan was wounded but survived an assassination attempt in 1981. Several other US presidents have been shot at during their presidency. All told, there have been at least 20 known attempts on an American president’s life. With four fatalities out of a total of 45 incumbents there is a clear risk in taking on the job.

Charlie Kirk and The First Amendment

Here is the text of the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

This short text does many things. We are interested here in the right to free speech and to a free press in line 2. (To abridge = *réduire, abréger*.) The Supreme Court has been asked repeatedly to define the limits of protected free speech: it has responded by saying that speech which incites imminent lawless action is NOT protected. But hate speech which does not incite imminent lawless action will generally qualify for First Amendment protection. This throws the door (wide) open to speech which is ‘awful but lawful’. It has frequently been noted that America has a far higher tolerance than Europe in this regard.

Charlie Kirk was certainly no stranger to controversy. His huge online audience was built on taking strong right-wing positions (against abortion, vaccination, civil rights legislation, women’s rights). He invited debate (see the accompanying *thème* from *Le Monde*) which he would film and edit selectively to produce viral moments of ‘owning the libs’. It was therefore ironic to hear the Attorney General (the senior lawyer in the Trump Administration) say on X that “there’s free speech and then there’s hate speech”. That’s just plain, 100% wrong. Hate speech may be awful but it is (save the above exceptions) lawful.

The attempt by the Trump administration to crack down on voices which criticise Charlie Kirk will probably be thrown out by the Supreme Court. But Trump has many ways to apply pressure even if the law will not help him. The most recent examples involve attempts to get two big TV companies to fire comedians who made fun of Trump, failing which the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) would not give those companies permission to merge with or take over rivals.

Charlie Kirk and The Second Amendment

Here is the text of the Second Amendment:

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

This is again a 1791 text, drafted at a time when the United States did not have a regular, standing army. (The army had been disbanded after the end of the War of Independence against England.) Letting citizens have guns probably seemed quite a sensible security measure just 10 years after the war with the English. When the Supreme Court has been asked to interpret this sentence, it has traditionally emphasised the first four, underlined words (a military force helps protect a free state). The big legal change occurred with the Supreme Court landmark case of *District of Columbia v Heller* [2008], known simply as *Heller*. This narrow 5-4 decision found an unrestricted right to own and have guns – including handguns – inside the home, unconnected with any military necessity. It was a massive victory for the gun lobby.

Today, 70% of Americans do NOT own guns whereas 30% do. The 70% would like stronger gun control laws but the 30% have been very successful in blocking any legislation on the subject. The ways in which 30% can frustrate 70% politically are dealt with in the summer manual (pp 51-52). Effective lobbying by the National Rifle Association – the NRA – (paying politicians to promote its cause) has also been a factor. Over 400 million guns are held by less than one third of the population.

One of these rural, religious, gun-loving families is the Robinsons in Utah who posted many pictures of their arsenal. Since the shooting, there have been demands to ‘cancel’ comedians and left-wing commentators but there has been no suggestion by the Trump administration that anything could or should be done about gun ownership. The classic ingredients of shootings in the US – a young, white, male with mental health problems and easy access to guns – are present here. The classic aggravating factor of online radicalisation seems to be present too (but we should await the trial where we might learn more about the shooter’s motivation).

The Charlie Kirk shooting has added fuel to the political fire in the US. Far from bringing the country together it has further polarised it. His political obituary should at least point out his undoubted success in persuading a large group of young college-age voters to support Trump in 2024. His right-wing activism attracted some but repulsed others. A very contemporary American tragedy.

Ce dossier est préparé par The Exam Lab, centre de formation linguistique en distanciel créé par Henry et Simon Taylor-Gill. The Exam Lab accompagne les candidats en classes prépa qui passent les concours d’entrée aux grandes écoles scientifiques et commerciales. Plusieurs formules d’accompagnement en ligne sont proposées - du stage ponctuel au suivi annuel à l’optimisation de l’oral après les écrits. Quelle que soit la formule retenue, le stagiaire retrouvera chez nous le même souci d’efficacité, le même engagement – et le même sourire. Pour plus d’informations sur nos prestations, rendez-vous sur notre site <https://www.prepa.theexamlab.com>