

# The murder of James Byrd, Jr: Racial violence and the social forces in America that fuel it

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The sadistic murder of a middle-aged black man in Texas last week is an indication of the savagery which lies just beneath the surface of American life. James Byrd, Jr., 49, was beaten unconscious, chained to the back of a pickup truck and dragged for miles over rural roads outside the town of Jasper.

Three white men, John William King, 23, Shawn Berry 23, and Lawrence Brewer Jr., 31, have been arrested. Berry has already given a confession that implicates the other two as the principal assailants. Both King and Brewer had links to white supremacist groups while serving terms in state prison. In the course of the killing King reportedly made a reference to the "Turner Diaries," a fascistic novel which was in the possession of Timothy McVeigh when he was arrested for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing.

The official commentaries on this atrocity—from the media, the Democratic and Republican politicians and the civil rights establishment—have not gone beyond the horror of the killing and its racist motives to begin a more searching examination of its social roots.

The black mayor of Jasper said race relations in the town were good: "Here you have a hospital administrator who is black, the executive director of the East Texas Council of Government is black, the president of the chamber of commerce is black, the past president of the school board is black and the mayor and two councilmen are black."

Precisely! The mayor's statement quite unintentionally highlights how limited in many respects and how fragile is the social progress made since the days of Jim Crow. A handful of middle class blacks may hold privileged positions, and legal segregation may be banned, but it is still the case that a black man

is in danger of being beaten and murdered because of the color of his skin.

Today the killers are arrested and jailed, rather than being patted on the back by the local authorities, but that will not bring back James Byrd Jr., or prevent the next such attack.

## Racism and politics

Race hatred did not spring fully-grown from the hearts and minds of King, Brewer and Berry. It is a product of the broader social environment. East Texas was a center of Ku Klux Klan activity during the heyday of lynching, from 1889 to 1918. These traditions live on, especially in the activities and attitudes of the local police.

There have been a series of police killings and jailhouse deaths of black men in recent years in nearby areas of east Texas. In Hemphill, Texas, in neighboring Sabine County, on the Texas-Louisiana border, a young father of six, Loyal Garner, was arrested on a phony drunk driving charge, taken to the county jail and beaten to death in 1987. Another young black man, arrested for the theft of a fountain pen, died in a jail cell in 1988 after a police beating. In Vidor, near Beaumont, Texas, Ku Klux Klan members staged armed patrols in 1994 in an effort to prevent the integration of a local housing project.

Added to this is the open encouragement given to the activities of extreme-right groups by leading elements in the Republican Party. Many of the freshmen

Republicans elected in 1994 had significant backing from militia groups and echoed their views. After the Oklahoma City bombing, they pressed for congressional hearings, not into the fascist milieu which produced Timothy McVeigh, but into the Ruby Ridge incident, the Waco massacre, and other *cause célèbres* of the militia groups.

One such congressman, Steve Stockman, represents the congressional district just south of Jasper County. He sent a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno on behalf of the militia groups only six weeks before the Oklahoma City bombing. On the day of the bombing he received a fax from a fascist radio commentator in Michigan updating him on the investigation of the blast.

It is noteworthy that Texas Governor George W. Bush, after a perfunctory condemnation of the murder of Byrd, declined an invitation to come to Jasper personally to show his outrage over the racial killing. The son of the former president does not want to weaken his standing with the Christian Coalition and other ultra-right groups, which he banks on to propel him to the Republican presidential nomination in 2000.

## The social roots

What are the social conditions which made this tragedy possible?

Jasper County is part of rural east Texas, one of the poorest and most backward regions of the United States. US census figures give the following profile:

The county's population of 31,148 is 80 percent white, 18 percent black, 2 percent other. The number of college graduates, 1,649, is exceeded by the number of people who dropped out of school in the ninth grade or earlier, 2,816. Barely half the adult population are high school graduates.

The unemployment rate is well above the state and national average. Most of those who work are employed in low-wage jobs in retail sales, light manufacturing, lumber and construction.

The median household income is \$20,451, considerably below the US average, while the poverty rate is 20 percent. One out of every ten households is

on welfare, and one out of three have no wage or salary income at all. In a largely rural area, 10 percent of households have no car and five percent have no phone.

These figures suggest the social context in which the murder of James Byrd took place. The conditions in Jasper County are the worst for younger sections of the working class, especially those who are high school dropouts, sinking into a life of petty crime, drunkenness or drug addiction.

The mounting social tensions in America are the product of poverty, the decay of basic services like education and health care, and the increasing polarization of society between a fabulously wealthy elite and the vast majority who must struggle to make ends meet. In the absence of a politically conscious workers movement, with political life and public discourse entirely monopolized by the privileged 10 percent at the top, these tensions do not as yet find any progressive outlet.

Instead of being directed into a political struggle against the economic system which is responsible for growing social misery, the anger over deteriorating conditions festers and is subject to be diverted into reactionary channels. It finds expression in the outbreaks of individual violence which now take place almost on a weekly basis in America—workplace rampages, school shootings, murder-suicides. This increasing brutalization of American society is the background to the murder of James Byrd.



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