

The Capitol shooting as the symptom of a social crisis

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The gun battle inside the US Capitol July 24, which left two Capitol Police officers dead and the shooting suspect, Russell Weston Jr., seriously wounded, is the latest in a series of shooting sprees in the US. Dozens have been killed in schools, work places, restaurants and now government buildings. Only one day earlier a newspaper truck driver allegedly killed the paper's circulation director with a pump-action shotgun in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. There have been seven shootings at auto plants and two at post offices in that state alone since 1991. After each such shooting the American media reassure themselves and the public that the person responsible and the incident itself are individual cases, isolated and inexplicable.

In the wake of the latest episode the media and the politicians have expended a great deal of time and energy discussing security inside the Capitol building, extolling the policemen who died and pontificating about the need to maintain free access to the 'people's House,' in President Clinton's words. Very little light has been shed on the circumstances that produce such incidents.

The media portrays the 41-year-old Weston simply as a deeply disturbed individual, living on disability in a shack in Montana, prey to paranoia and schizophrenia. *USA Today* has invented a new category of threat to public order, 'the lone attacker, often mentally deranged and spurred on by a silent grudge or searing hatred,' more dangerous than 'underground militias, violent hate groups and shadowy terrorist cells.'

But giving something a name is not an explanation. Why are there 'thousands like him' in law enforcement agency files? What is it about our society and our day that have produced so many such individuals?

There are different sides to this question. Emotional collapse is a complex matter. Many factors may drive someone to an irrational act. But in the case of the Capitol shooting we are confronted with the confluence of emotional collapse and social processes. Weston opened fire in the seat of the US government, after a morning apparently spent ranting about the president in a park across the street from the White House. His mental breakdown thus became a public act.

There seems little question that Weston suffered from a serious psychosis, including paranoid delusions. He believed that a neighbor's satellite dish was being used to spy on him and insisted that a light from a neighboring farm near his family's home in Illinois was coming from a Navy Seal hired by the president to kill him. Weston apparently always sat in a rocking chair because he

did not want to make an easy target for a sniper. He told his family that the fillings in his teeth were radio transmitters and that he was receiving messages from the government. He believed that the government had landmined his property, that atomic bombs were buried near his Montana cabin. His mother told reporters that he thought 'he was a general in the Army. He thought they were spying on him from a satellite, that the satellites were watching him.' He warned his sister, 'the government will give you a drug that will make you forget your real life.'

Weston, in other words, conjured up many things that were not there. But isn't there some significance to what he imagined?

Or, to put it another way, Weston was finally driven over the edge apparently by an argument with his father about his shooting of some cats on the family's property. He was told to move out. If he then drove his pick-up truck directly to Washington, DC, a distance of 700 miles, and entered the Capitol building with a loaded revolver, can anyone seriously suggest that this was simply the result of a personal difficulty?

The circumstances of Weston's early life are not so untypical for members of his generation, coming of age in a period of economic decline and lowered expectations. After high school in Valmeyer, Illinois he drifted west to Montana. There he worked as a hospital janitor and a motorcycle mechanic. He fixed broken machines for friends and neighbors, did other odd jobs and panned for gold.

In his early twenties he began to show signs of mental difficulty. At no time over the next two decades did he receive systematic psychiatric care, although he was diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' in the mid-1980s and began to receive disability payments at this time. (His only treatment came during a 53-day involuntary stay in a Montana mental institution in 1996.) His family helped him as best they could, but as far as official society was concerned he was simply left on his own, increasingly disoriented and delusional.

Weston split his time in recent years between his family's home in Valmeyer, Illinois and a cabin in Rimini, Montana, an old mining community and a virtual ghost town.

Valmeyer is a village of less than a thousand people on the Mississippi River in southern Illinois, 20 miles south of St. Louis. As one news account pointed out, the last time helicopters whirled overhead and the media descended on the town was in 1993 when the Mississippi River overflowed, producing one of the great floods of the century. Valmeyer lay under 20 feet of water. 'The entire town was relocated into trailers at first, a community derisorily christened 'Femaville' after FEMA, the Federal

Emergency Management Agency, which promised--but failed--to help them. Hating the government was second nature to the people of Femaville.'

One flood analysis painted this picture: 'Ironically, these river communities, surrounded by water, found themselves without drinking water as well as without water for cleaning, cooking, and sanitation. Wells were polluted, and septic and sewage systems backed up creating major health problems.... Streets and buildings [in Des Moines, Iowa] were laminated with a brown stew consisting of raw sewage, industrial waste, and agricultural pesticides, an excellent environment for bacteria.'

Many in the region have never recovered from the flood. Nor have they forgotten that while they were struggling to save their families, property and belongings, Clinton and Congress haggled over the amount to go toward relieving farmers. Indeed the first flood relief bill was defeated because Republican and Democratic House members had tacked on an amendment to the bill mandating that any federal aid would be offset by matching cuts from other areas of social spending. As the scale of the disaster mounted, the House reversed itself and narrowly passed a flood aid bill without spending cuts, committing the federal government to reimburse only about one-third of the \$12 billion in estimated losses.

Of course, hatred of the federal government did not originate in 1993. Populism would have strong roots in the region and, more recently, hostility to Washington, Wall Street and the agricultural giants has been rekindled by economic conditions faced by small farmers and small businesses.

A reporter from the *Miami Herald* asked Weston's father whether his son bore 'a grudge against Washington, or people in Congress.' Weston Sr. replied, significantly: 'No more than anybody else, I guess.'

Montana, where Weston spent summers, is the home of some of the most active right-wing militia groups, including the Militia of Montana, who have published detailed instructions on bomb-making, and the Freemen, who staged a confrontation with FBI and police in 1995.

This is the atmosphere within which Weston's psychoses flowered. Does anyone suppose that he is alone in 'imagining' that the government is out to get him? It takes a deranged form in his case, but it is the sentiment that he would have heard expressed much of his life. Rage against the federal government, against Congress, against Clinton is not, as the media would like to suggest, an aberration. *USA Today* quotes a sociological study of individuals such as Weston to the effect that 'the common thread that emerges is the government as the enemy. It is indeed a sobering and serious phenomenon that we are seeing in this country.' Only three and a half years ago, another 'loner,' Timothy McVeigh, influenced by extreme right thinkers, blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 169 people.

Tens of millions have experienced lowered living standards, downsizing, the destruction of communities--rural and urban; they have experienced the indifference, cynicism and corruption of government officials; they have observed the vast sums made on Wall Street and in corporate boardrooms. Up to this point, due to the impotence of the labor movement and the absence of any mass-

based socialist movement, right-wing populist movements have taken advantage of the anger to develop a following.

That Weston sought to solve his emotional disturbance and place his stamp upon events by pulling out a .38-caliber handgun and opening fire is also not accidental. The notion that individual violence is the solution to difficult problems is widespread in America. It is consistently reinforced by the media, whether in the campaign to wage war against Iraq, or the latest Hollywood action film. It is also the creed of the militia-type movements. Again, the psychosis is only a distorted reflection of sentiments circulating in the social atmosphere.

The puzzlement exhibited by journalists and television broadcasters over the Capitol shooting is largely self-serving. Those in the employ of the large media conglomerates have no interest in examining the crisis of American society and, as they are doing very well, see no need to. They respond with hostility to any suggestion that the Capitol shooting has any wider significance. A team of *Washington Post* journalists, for example, wrote disdainfully of European press reports 'concluding that the tragedy confirms the stereotype of the United States as a violent, gun-crazed society,' and commented favorably on coverage in Mexico, 'where there were no lectures about the defects of American society.'

The shooting in the Capitol building is symptomatic of a social, not an individual crisis. Disaffection and alienation from the political process are as deep-going in the US as anywhere in the world, the American media notwithstanding. At this point, because millions find no healthy and progressive means with which to articulate their feelings and because the social pressures have their direst effect on the most vulnerable, this reality is more often than not glimpsed in crazed, anti-social acts such as Weston's. In its own way, the shooting is yet another sign of the enormous gap between official media and political circles and the essential reality of American life.

See Also:

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