The murder of Dr. Slepian

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The assassination last Friday of Dr. Barnett Slepian, an Amherst, New York gynecologist and obstetrician, is a chilling and tragic event that highlights the dangerous activities of ultra-right forces in the US and Canada. The 52-year-old Slepian, a well-known defender of abortion rights in the Buffalo area, was at home with his wife and four children when he was shot in the back by a sniper's bullet that pierced both his lungs.

Slepian was a high-profile target of anti-abortion groups. There were more than 200 protests in the last four years at the Buffalo GYN Women's Services clinic, where he worked, or at the office of his private practice in suburban Amherst.

Some in the anti-abortion right-wing gloated over Dr. Slepian's murder. A Christian fundamentalist web site which lists the names and addresses of abortion doctors crossed out Slepian's name on Saturday morning, within hours of the shooting. The web site's heading said that a line through a name represents a 'fatality.'

The founder of Pro-Life Virginia, Rev. Donald Spitz, called Slepian's killer 'a hero' who had stopped a 'serial murderer.' Spitz declared, 'We as Christians have a responsibility to protect the innocent from being murdered, the same way we would want someone to protect us. Whoever shot the shot protected the children.'

In 1996, the latest year for which figures are available, one third of all US abortion clinics reported violent attacks such as bombings, arson or vandalism. In 1997 there were 17 attacks on abortion clinics classified as 'very serious,' including one in which the clinic, in Greensboro, North Carolina, was burned down, and another, in Atlanta, Georgia, where two bombs were set off.

Dr. Slepian is the seventh person killed by anti-abortion terrorists in the past five years, since the shooting of Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola, Florida by a member of the Rescue America group. In 1994 there were four such killings: Dr. Baynard Britton and his escort, James Barrett, in Pensacola, and two receptionists, Lee Ann Nichols and Shannon Lowney, at a clinic in Brookline, Massachusetts.

The premeditated murder of Dr. Slepian is the latest in a series of incidents that shed light on a political fact that is generally ignored by the mass media--the close links between fascistic elements and the Republican Party.

An anti-homosexual hate campaign run by Christian fundamentalist groups contributed to the climate in which Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten to death two weeks ago. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott solidarized himself with this campaign in June, calling homosexuality a sin and comparing gays to alcoholics and kleptomaniacs.

On October 9, a Republican candidate for the Montana State Legislature, Bob Davies, told a Republican candidates' forum that Bill Clinton 'should be shot.' Davies compared Clinton to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed during the McCarthyite witch-hunt as spies for the Soviet Union.

Ten days later in Tennessee, a Republican candidate for the state senate, Byron Looper, apparently murdered his Democratic opponent.

The media has for the most part portrayed the remarks of Davies as an aberration, and the Republican candidate has dismissed his statements as a 'joke.' Byron Looper is generally being treated as a 'kook.'

The facts suggest otherwise. Among those in attendance at the Montana forum where Davies offered the execution of Clinton as a preferable alternative to impeachment was Governor Marc Racicot. Neither Racicot nor any other Republican official stopped Davies from speaking or dissociated himself from Davies' inflamatory (and, under federal law, illegal)

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remarks. Davies was a member of the ultra-right John Birch Society in the 1970s.

Looper is another figure with ties to the extreme right. When he lived in Georgia he worked as a legislative aide for a relative, Max Looper, described as an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. Looper, who recently changed his middle name to 'Low Tax,' won election as tax assessor of Putnam County, Tennessee in 1996, with the support of the local Republican Party.

Tennessee Republican Party officials initially indicated they would urge a write-in vote for the widow of the murdered state senator. But Republican Governor Don Sundquist has backed away from this position, saying that he would make no endorsement in the race, in effect favoring Looper, since his name is the only one remaining on the ballot.

These episodes are part of a political pattern. The Republican Party has cultivated and increasingly based itself on ultra-right elements. These relationships came to the surface in the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. A considerable number of Republican members of Congress have close ties to militia-type movements, the religious right, or both. They identify themselves with extreme chauvinism, anti-Semitism, racism and anti-gay bigotry. The party as a whole, including its leadership, is largely beholden to Christian fundamentalist demagogues such as Pat Robertson and the political agenda--anti-tax, law-and-order, anti-gay, anti-pornography fanaticism--of the ultra-right.

This connection is one of the 'dirty secrets' of American politics which the mass media refuse to discuss. The fascistic bent of these forces, often given the antiseptic designation 'Republican base,' is covered over. The religious fanatics are called 'Christian groups.' The militia groups are misleadingly described as 'anti-government.'

The *New York Times*, which has long identified itself with the defense of abortion rights, buried its first article on the murder of Dr. Slepian on the last page of its Sunday front section. When it got around to editorializing about the killing on Monday, the *Times* made no mention of the relationship between the anti-abortion groups and the Republican right-wing. It criticized 'conservatives in Congress and in state legislatures ... working to dismantle reproductive rights,' but was content to describe this as 'the normal give and take of political and judicial struggle in a democracy.'

The *Times* editors chose to blind themselves to the fact that many of those they describe as 'conservatives' are not politicians in the mold of Everett Dirksen or even Barry Goldwater, but right-wing radicals with links to fascistic layers. These politicians provide the extreme right with a gloss of legitimacy, thereby encouraging the growth of terrorist elements.

See Also:
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