

The anti-gay lynching in Wyoming: who is responsible?

David Walsh, Jerry White
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Matthew Shepard, the 22-year-old University of Wyoming student who was savagely beaten last week because he was a homosexual, died Monday morning in a Colorado hospital. Shepard had been tied to a fence post by two men, beaten in the head with the butt of a .357-caliber Magnum, tortured, robbed and left for dead. His mutilated and unconscious body, tied to a fence, was discovered by a passing cyclist last Thursday, who first thought it was a scarecrow.

Shepard suffered irreparable brain damage from the crushing of his skull and was comatose when he entered the hospital. There were more than a dozen lacerations, including burns, covering his head, face and neck. The young man also had hypothermia from being left out in subfreezing temperatures all night. An uncle described his injuries as 'like something you might see in war.' Shepard died while on life support at Poudre Valley Hospital.

Russell A. Henderson, 21, and Aaron J. McKinney, 22, both described as high school dropouts, have been charged with kidnapping, aggravated robbery and attempted murder. According to court papers filed last Friday, McKinney and Henderson met Shepard at the Fireside Lounge, a favorite spot for students in the college town of Laramie. When they learned Shepard was gay, McKinney and Henderson said they were gay too, in order to lure him out of the bar and into McKinney's pick-up truck.

This was not the first time Shepard had been attacked. The 5-foot 2-inch, 105-pound student had been beaten twice recently because of his sexual orientation, friends said. In the last incident, his jaw was broken.

The attack on Shepard has been met by an outpouring of protest. Hundreds of marchers in the University of Wyoming's homecoming parade Saturday, including the school's marching band, wore yellow arm bands for Shepard. Hundreds of others held a candlelight vigil Saturday night outside the hospital.

The head of Poudre Valley Hospital stated that in the space of 24 hours the hospital had received two thousand e-mail messages from every continent and hundreds of hits on its web site expressing concern and outrage over the attack.

Shepard's parents, before their son died, told the press: 'His one intolerance is when people don't accept others as they are. He has always felt that all people are the same--regardless of their sexual preference, race or religion.

'We know he believes that all of us are part of the same family called Humanity, and each and every one of us should treat all people with respect and dignity, and that each of us has the right to live a full and rewarding life. That is one lesson which we are very certain he would share with you, if he could.'

Anti-gay lynching

Any balanced person will be horrified by the attack, essentially an anti-homosexual lynching. The cowardice and brutality of the crime bring to mind the sadistic killing of James Byrd, Jr., a 49-year-old black man in Jasper, Texas in June. However, a serious response to the murder requires taking a cold, hard look at the type of environment in which such an inhuman act could take place.

The Christian fundamentalist right and their allies in the Republican Party have been waging an unceasing war against the 'homosexual lifestyle' for years. In June Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi declared homosexuality a sin and compared gays to alcoholics, sex addicts and kleptomaniacs. House Majority Leader Dick Armey chimed in with his agreement. Anti-homosexuality and other so-called cultural issues have been placed at the center of the 1998 election campaign by the Republicans.

Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed and others on the religious right have been unequivocal in their fanaticism. In June Robertson warned the city of Orlando, Florida that it risked hurricanes, earthquakes and terrorist attacks by permitting gay rights flags to be flown. 'The Apostle Paul made it abundantly clear in the book of Romans that the acceptance of homosexuality is the last step in the decline of Gentile civilization,' he remarked. In a 1994 letter Robertson declared, 'I have known few homosexuals who did not practice their tendency. Such people are sinning against God

and will lead to the destruction of the family and our nation. I am unalterably opposed to such things, and will do everything I can to restrict the freedom of these people to spread their contagious infection to the youth of our nation.'

The inflammatory statements by Lott, Robertson and others are an incitement of anti-gay hatred and can only be interpreted by the most ignorant, backward elements of the population as a green light for physical attacks.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has documented a link between increases in anti-gay violence and the escalation of rhetoric during ballot initiative campaigns. Immediately before Colorado's anti-gay rights Amendment 2 passed in 1992, Colorado activists documented a 129 percent increase in assaults. In the two months following the vote, nearly 40 percent of the annual total was reported. Hattie Mae Cohen, a lesbian, and Brian Mock, a gay man, were killed when their home in Oregon was firebombed during that state's 1992 ballot battle.

The report of the Wyoming attack comes one day after the Center for Reclaiming America and Coral Ridge Ministries held a joint press conference with the Family Research Council to announce a new series of anti-gay television advertisements, along the lines of a newspaper ad campaign they ran this summer.

As for the situation in Wyoming, home to a variety of militia-type movements, Marv Johnson, executive director of the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, told the press, 'The best way to characterize that [anti-gay atmosphere] is by a comment a legislator made a few years back, when he likened homosexuals to gay bulls as worthless and should be sent to the packing plant.' Right-wing forces in Wyoming have stymied passage of a hate crimes bill claiming it would give 'special rights' to homosexuals.

The anti-homosexual crusade is bound up with broad political issues. One of the aims of the attack on the Clinton administration is to create a political climate in which a sharp move to the right in American political life can be effected. Such a shift may very well begin over issues such as homosexuality, abortion, pornography on the Internet, and so forth. Major attacks on democratic rights will be launched behind the banner of lifting the nation's morals. The murderous attack on Shepard puts a human face on the real content of these politics.

Aside from its own bigotry and backwardness, the Republican right wing makes its appeal on cultural issues for definite political reasons. If Lott, Gingrich, Armev and company went before the American people and declared that their program comprised the destruction of social security, public education, the income tax and all restrictions on the right of the wealthy elite to enrich themselves, they would

encounter bitter opposition. Their challenge is to create a social base for unpopular policies.

Taking advantage of the prevailing political confusion, the extreme right wing seeks to build up support by playing on existing economic and social anxiety. For millions--languishing in dead-end jobs, fearing the threat of corporate downsizing, or barely holding their heads above water on near-bankrupt farms--any semblance of security has vanished. The aim of the fundamentalists and their Republican allies is to identify in the popular mind a golden age when economic security and 'Christian values' predominated. Playing on sexual insecurity and backwardness, particularly among the most psychologically vulnerable layers of semi-lumpen youth, is a perennial element of any reactionary social movement.

In responding to these dangers, not the slightest confidence can be placed in the passage of hate crimes bills, in the courts, or in the Democratic Party. To look to the party of Bill Clinton to lead the campaign in defense of democratic rights is a recipe for disaster. As they have demonstrated graphically in the Starr affair, the Democrats are prostrate before the right-wing onslaught.

The defense of the rights of gays and all minorities under attack is linked with the broader question of building a mass-based socialist movement in the working class and creating a political culture inoculated against the toxins of racism, anti-Semitism, chauvinism and anti-gay bigotry.

See Also:

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