

The brutal society: A police manhunt in Pittsburgh

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In an example of the way in which society is being brutalized—and repression and force used as the solution to all problems—a massive 20-hour manhunt conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania ended when the suspect, Francis Paul Weber, 49, took his own life.

In the early morning hours of May 14, Francis Weber shot and killed his wife, Amy Lynn Beardsley, and set their home ablaze. He then drove to the home of his ex-wife, where he shot at police who were waiting for him and fled on foot into the wooded and hilly neighborhood.

What followed was one of the largest manhunts in Pittsburgh history. Hundreds of local and state police, along with ATF and FBI agents, cordoned off the entire neighborhood. Police with high-powered rifles and shotguns were stationed 100 yards apart. Local schools were closed along with many businesses. Residents were warned to stay in their homes and keep their doors locked as helicopters circled overhead and police dogs tried to pick up Weber's scent.

Weber avoided capture by breaking into vacant homes and hiding out. In one home he left a suicide note, apologizing for what he had done and blaming the courts for barring him from seeing his children. Weber was discovered in the evening at another nearby vacant home after a real estate agent telephoned police after she found the suicide note at the first home.

Holed up inside, Weber asked about the state of his wife. When told by police that she had died, Weber yelled out, "I messed up. I'm sorry." Moments later two shots were heard. Police fired 32 rounds of teargas and stun grenades into the house before entering and finding him dead.

Throughout the day there was no attempt made to end the search other than violently. No serious effort was made to convince Weber to surrender; no hotline was

set up, no crisis or hostage negotiator was brought in. When he was trapped, police had already found his suicide note and crisis negotiation procedure would have been to lie to him, to tell him that Ms. Beardsley was hurt but alive. By telling him instead that she was dead, police in effect told Weber he had no choice: either kill yourself or the state will execute you.

For its part, the media worked to convince the public that the death of Weber was the best and only outcome expected. It is hard to convey the atmosphere created by the local media in regard to the day's developments. They presented the manhunt as a virtual sporting event. It was as if viewers were being offered a live gladiator contest, or a prisoner being fed to the lions, with the outcome, while unstated, just as certain. At any moment viewers were expecting to hear that Weber had stormed a classroom, library or restaurant and had killed more people and taken hostages.

Talk radio went even further, with many hosts stating, not even debating, that it would be best for the police to kill Weber when he was found in order to save taxpayers the time and expense of a trial, imprisonment, appeals and probable execution.

Not to be scooped by TV, local newspapers committed more than two dozen journalists, photographers, editors and staff to provide massive coverage of the day's events.

All of the extended coverage had one purpose—to dehumanize Weber, depict him as nothing better than a rabid dog and convince the public that the only expected outcome was also the most advantageous.

The media coverage appeared to have its intended impact. In discussing the events with a friend of mine a few days later, he told me that one of his co-workers had telephoned his nine-year-old son at home to ask if Weber had been killed yet, expressing the hope that he

would be shot before 4 p.m. so as not to upset the family's nightly routine of soccer games, baseball practice and music lessons.

Weber was no stranger to domestic violence. He had been arrested several times on weapons charges and his ex-wife had obtained three protection-from-abuse orders to keep him away from her and their children, and to some extent the concern and fear could be justified. Yet in all the media coverage during and after the event there has been no analysis or exploration of the very serious and complicated problem of domestic violence.

The US has the highest rates of domestic violence of any of the industrialized countries. More than 60 percent of victims of violent crimes know their attacker—most are family members or a close personal relation. Nearly one-third of women murdered are killed by the person with whom they are having an intimate relationship.

Nowhere in the coverage were the questions posed: Why does the US have such high rates of domestic violence? What is behind domestic violence? What causes a partner in a relationship, mostly men, to violently attack the person they love? Why do women stay in abusive relationships? What has been the impact of the cuts in social programs in the reduction of resources and shelters for women suffering from abuse? To what extent does the prevailing ideology—in which an individual seeking psychological help of any kind is viewed as a personal failure—prevent people from seeking assistance?

In Weber's case it should be asked: why was he never required to attend a counseling program on abuse? In a study on Pittsburgh courts by the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute, it was found that men who complete counseling programs are re-arrested only 8 percent of the time, 50 percent less than those who don't complete or never take the course. Even more telling, the study found that between 1995 and 1997 the number of cases referred to counseling programs fell from over 1,000 to fewer than 400, with two-fifths of city magistrates refusing to refer cases.

However, in dealing with Francis Weber the methods of the state were predictable—a resort to force and repression. The only surprise in this case was that Weber shot himself, instead of being killed by the police. The media, moreover, played a key role in

desensitizing people and conditioning them to accept the brutal methods used in the Pittsburgh manhunt.



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