

Fort Worth, Texas gunman linked to fascist group

Martin McLaughlin
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The gunman who murdered seven people at a Fort Worth church September 15 had ties to extreme-right-wing groups in Texas, according to reports first published in the *Houston Chronicle*. Larry Ashbrook, 47, killed four teenagers and three adults before taking his own life.

Writer John Craig is co-author of a 1997 book, *Soldiers of God*, which examines white supremacist and Christian fascist organizations in America. He told the newspaper that he had spoken to Ashbrook in 1997 while interviewing members of the Ku Klux Klan for the book. Ashbrook told him he was a member of the "Phineas Priests," one of the far-right tendencies which are collectively known as "Christian Identity."

The Phineas sect is named after a Biblical high priest who murdered a Jewish prince for taking a non-Jewish lover. Its membership consists of self-appointed "race warriors" who pledge to kill Jews, racial minorities, gays, abortion providers and whites who marry across racial or religious lines. The fascist gunman Buford Furrow, who attacked a Jewish community center in Los Angeles last month and later murdered an Asian-American postal worker, was also associated with the Phineas Priests.

Craig suggested that Ashbrook may have targeted the Wedgwood Baptist Church for violence because the Southern Baptist Convention, to which Wedgwood is affiliated, recently announced a campaign to convert Jews to Christianity. While this campaign was criticized by Jewish groups, the announcement was denounced by violent anti-Semitic elements as well. "To a Phineas priest or white supremacist that is the ultimate blasphemy," Craig said, "because they believe that they are the children of Israel."

According to the Klanwatch Project, which monitors ultra-right-wing activity, the Phineas Priests are not so

much an organized group as a title assumed by individual terrorists who operate like the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, or Benjamin Smith, who went on a shooting rampage against Jews, blacks and Asians in Illinois and Indiana over the July 4 weekend. "To become a Phineas Priest means to commit armed robbery, arson, sabotage, kidnapping and murder," a spokesman for Klanwatch said. "It is a commitment to a holy war."

In 1997 four men calling themselves Phineas Priests were convicted in Spokane, Washington of a series of bombings and bank robberies during the previous year, including bomb attacks on the offices of Planned Parenthood and the *Spokesman-Review*, the Spokane daily newspaper. Three were sentenced to life in prison and one to a term of 55 years.

Craig said he had notified the FBI after his interview with Ashbrook and other supporters of right-wing terrorism in 1997, and that he called the Fort Worth police department "repeatedly" in the days after the Wedgwood killings, but neither agency has shown any interest in evidence that right-wing politics may underlie the massacre.

FBI officials said they had no plans to pursue Craig's story and Fort Worth police spokesman David Ellis was unaware Craig had even called the department. Another city spokesman dismissed interest in this aspect of the case, indicating that with Ashbrook's suicide, there was no point in looking into his background. "We're not doing a biography on this subject," he said.

There is no question that Ashbrook was a deeply disturbed individual, likely a schizophrenic, from descriptions of his behavior by neighbors. The unemployed Navy veteran lived at home with his elderly parents and was socially isolated after their deaths—his mother in 1990, his father two months ago.

His conduct was increasingly erratic, and included agitated letters to the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, and even a visit to the newspaper's office, where he met the city editor, as well as a telephone conversation with a writer at the alternative *FW Weekly* in which he claimed, "My life has been destroyed by these people—Air Force personnel, Tarrant County sheriff's deputies, the Klan."

The fact of his derangement does not, however, render irrelevant the political connections which he seems to have formed during the last years of his life, and which certainly contributed to the homicidal form of his mental breakdown.

Despite the report in the *Houston Chronicle*, later amplified by the *Los Angeles Times* and Reuters news agency, the fascist connections of the Fort Worth gunman have been generally ignored by the mass media, including the television networks and the *New York Times*. Instead, there has been an effort to utilize the Fort Worth tragedy to win sympathy for Christian fundamentalist groups and portray them as the target of hate crimes—the slant taken by both weekly newsmagazines *Time* and *Newsweek*.

While *Time* quotes the Reverend Jerry Falwell declaring that Christian fundamentalists are under siege in America, it appears that the deranged gunman was motivated by a more extreme version of Falwell's own ultra-right ideology.



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