

Hostage siege in Baltimore--another American nightmare

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The bloody events of the past several weeks in a working class neighborhood on the east side of Baltimore raise important social issues. After an initial murderous rampage in which Joseph Palczynski kidnapped his ex-girlfriend and killed four people, the 31-year-old former mental patient took his girlfriend's mother and two other people hostage and held off Baltimore police for 97 hours, until police stormed the row house and killed him in a barrage of machinegun fire.

Baltimore police have so far refused to release many critical details about the final shootout, except to confirm that Palczynski had fallen asleep on a couch after he was surreptitiously given the sedative Xanax in his dinner by Lynn Whitehead, the mother of his ex-girlfriend Tracy. Hours later, as Palczynski slept, first Lynn Whitehead and then her boyfriend Anthony McCord escaped the house by climbing out of a first-floor window. They had to leave their son, Bradley McCord, age 12, behind, as he had also fallen asleep and they feared that waking him would also awaken Palczynski.

A heavily armed Baltimore anti-terrorist unit then stormed the house, with several cops shooting their way in through the back door with shotguns while others opened fire on the sleeping kidnapper from outside the house with HP5 machineguns. According to web postings and local radio reports, Palczynski was hit at least 39 times. One source reported that Baltimore police had openly boasted of the number of hits and compared them to the 41 bullets fired by New York City police at an innocent and unarmed immigrant worker, Amadou Diallo, last summer. Baltimore authorities have refused to reveal how many bullets hit Palczynski, citing the need for confidentiality pending a routine use-of-force investigation by the police department.

Palczynski's biography is typical of someone with a severe mental illness in late twentieth century America. He grew up in Essex, Maryland, an east Baltimore suburb, near the huge Bethlehem Steel Sparrows Point works. His parents first had contact with the mental health system when their son, then 14 years old, began to act in a bizarre fashion after he suffered a head injury in a school bus accident. He told his stepfather, "I'm the devil, and I'm going to kill you," and was briefly hospitalized at Taylor Manor in Ellicott City, where he received at least four different diagnoses of mental illness.

Subsequent contacts with the mental health and criminal justice systems generally revolved around a turn to violence in his relationships with a series of girlfriends. At various times

Palczynski was diagnosed as manic/depressive, as schizophrenic or as disturbed but not insane; as violent and dangerous or as no threat to anyone; as a man with a gloomy prognosis of lifelong severe mental disease, or as someone for whom the prospects were bright. These conflicting characterizations are at least partly explained by the fact that Palczynski almost never saw the same mental health professional twice, while being examined by prison psychiatrists in Maryland, Virginia, Missouri and Minnesota.

While still in high school, he was convicted of battery after an altercation and was sentenced to two years of supervised probation. In 1989 he was sentenced to prison for assaulting a 16-year-old girl. In 1991 he was charged with assault, trespassing on school grounds and harassment after he attacked a former girlfriend in an Essex high school hallway, and threatened to kill her and her family.

He went back to prison, where his behavior was so unstable that he was taken to Spring Grove Hospital, a state mental facility in Catonsville, Maryland. He escaped from the hospital and turned up two months later in Gooding, Idaho, where another girlfriend went to police with an assault complaint. When police sought to arrest him, Palczynski barricaded himself in an apartment, holding off a SWAT team for 16 hours before he was driven out by teargas and surrendered.

The next day federal marshals brought him back to Baltimore, where he pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. Within two years the charges had been dismissed. A year later, he was back in court, this time for assaulting the father of a girlfriend, inflicting four broken ribs. He pled not guilty by reason of insanity, and received a 10-year suspended sentence and probation.

His probation included a requirement that he take medication for mental illness, said a spokesman for the Maryland Division of Parole and Probation. But within a year of his release, probation agents were told by a mental health center that Palczynski no longer needed medication.

Even if a different diagnosis had been reported, there were no means to monitor it. Last year a state task force studied the question of compulsory medication of outpatients but decided against it, not so much because of concerns over the repressive aspects of such a system, but because it would cost too much money.

In 1998 Palczynski began a relationship with Tracy Whitehead, which the young woman ended earlier this month, moving out of their home and filing charges of assault against her ex-boyfriend.

Palczynski was arrested, released on \$7,500 bond, and on March 7 kidnapped Whitehead from the apartment of a couple—one of them a co-worker— where she had taken refuge. He killed the man and woman who had given his girlfriend shelter, as well as a third man who tried to intervene. The next day he shot to death a 37-year-old woman in an unsuccessful effort to steal her car.

During a dozen years of instability and a growing propensity for violence, there is no indication that Palczynski ever received meaningful treatment for his mental illness. In Maryland, as in most states over the past three decades, hospital-based treatment of mental illness has virtually ceased, with the mentally ill turned out into the community and expected to monitor their own treatment and self-medication. A huge number of the homeless population of the United States are victims of mental illness, as well as a significant proportion of the two million in prison.

Within a day after her kidnapping, Tracy Whitehead escaped from Palczynski at a Baltimore-area motel. She immediately went to the police and described, among other things, how Palczynski had threatened her mother and other members of her family. Baltimore County police urged the family to go into hiding and they did so, while the manhunt went on without results.

By Thursday, March 16, the Whitehead family had been in hiding in Essex for a week and wanted to return home to Dundalk, another working class suburb. Lynn Whitehead wanted to return to her cashier's job at the Dollar Tree store at a local mall, while her younger daughter Laura, age 18, needed to get back to classes at Dundalk High School. There were few reported sightings of Palczynski, none of them substantiated, and all the Whiteheads, except Tracy, who remained in protective custody, moved back to their home on Lange Street.

The police opposed this action, but agreed to provide protection. Instead, both family and neighbors agree, the Whiteheads were left essentially unguarded, even though their home was considered by the police as a potential target. The family saw policemen only twice during the 36 hours between their return to their home and Palczynski's arrival, guns blazing. Laura Whitehead told local reporters, "We felt we would be safe, we felt there would be police protection. We should have been able to go home. He should have never been able to get there."

The *Washington Post* commented, "Unresolved is how Palczynski, the object of a two-week manhunt, could get to a house in the middle of the search area and take his girlfriend's mother, the mother's boyfriend and the boyfriend's 12-year-old son hostage."

Baltimore County authorities have refused to comment on how the target of a manhunt involving hundreds of police was able to enter the Whiteheads' home unmolested. Instead, police officials launched a slander campaign against the family, claimed they had refused protection. Donna Collins, sister-in-law of Lynn Whitehead, called the statements by police "lies."

At best, the treatment of the Whiteheads by the police would seem to be a demonstration of gross incompetence—one that has a social dimension as well. It is difficult to believe that the police would have been so indifferent and unresponsive if those in need of protection had been the family of a corporate executive instead of a shopping mall clerk.

The actual killing of Palczynski is one of the most chilling aspects of this whole affair. Press accounts of the final seconds, all based on accounts of the members of the anti-terrorist squad which stormed the house, agree on two facts: First, Palczynski was either asleep or groggy when the police broke in—one account describes police opening fire "before Palczynski could get his bearings," another says police "killed Palczynski as he allegedly stirred."

Secondly, the kidnapper was not holding a weapon when he was shot. Terrence B. Sheridan, Baltimore County police chief, said at a news conference, "Palczynski was rising up with his arms extended. Within reach were three firearms." Other accounts refer to Palczynski raising his arms when police burst into the room, and to weapons lying on the floor as he sat up on the couch. Dozens of bullets were fired by the police, but there have been no claims that Palczynski fired even one shot, or even touched a weapon, during the final confrontation.

The description of the final assault given in one press account does little to disguise the firing-squad-style execution of the wanted man: "With a muffled crack, one of the officers blew open the front door with a special device that looks like a shotgun. With that explosion, officers perched on stepladders outside the windows opened fire on Palczynski, who lay sleeping on the living room couch after his captives drugged his iced tea."

The county's SWAT team commander said Palczynski was "neutralized" by a spray of 9 mm bullets from MP5 automatic weapons. A preliminary autopsy report showed he died of gunshot wounds to the upper body and head, police said. Lt. Mel Blizzard Jr., head of the county hostage negotiations team, said, "We felt all along the ultimate goal was suicide by cop." The police, of course, were happy to oblige.

It has been widely reported since then that Baltimore police were seething over the 97-hour standoff, in which Palczynski taunted them and fired over 100 shots at police department vehicles, while his besiegers were barred from returning fire because of risk to the hostages. They wanted to finish off the gunman as quickly as possible.

One local Baltimore newspaper columnist revealed that the press too had been recruited to assist in creating the conditions for the administration of immediate "street justice" in the Palczynski case. When Palczynski telephoned WJZ television during the siege and discussed his terms for freeing the hostages, police asked the station not to air the tape until after the crisis was over. According to the journalist, the main concern of the police was not operational security, but the impact of the tape on the listening audience: "The sound of his apparent reasonableness might sway public opinion and make a tough police job even worse."



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