

# Texas mother drowns children: Andrea Yates and "family values"

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The tragic and shocking case of five young children in a Houston, Texas suburb drowned by their mother, Andrea Yates, has grabbed the attention of millions of people.

While other facts will no doubt emerge, those that have already come to light paint a disturbing picture of a certain kind of American life and mentality.

Until the terrible events of June 20, Russell and Andrea Yates and their five children were the kind of family that a Ronald Reagan might have pointed to as a model for America, or that might have been paraded on the platform at a Republican national convention: responsible, professional father; "stay-at-home mom" and home-school teacher; well-scrubbed, neatly dressed, smiling children—a tribute to "traditional family values," as envisioned by the Christian right.

According to a statement she gave police, Yates drowned her children one after the other in the family's bathtub. She told the authorities that she had first drowned the younger sons—John, 5, Paul, 3, Luke 2. While she was attempting to do the same to her six-month-old daughter, seven-year-old Noah walked in and asked, "What's wrong with Mary?"

Yates confessed to chasing Noah through the house and dragging him back to the bathroom. When police arrived, Yates reportedly told them, "I just killed my kids." The bodies of the four youngest were found still wet under a sheet on a bed. Noah was found in the bathtub.

To drown, in this methodical and implacable manner, five of one's own children is a horrifying act, inconceivable under normal and even most abnormal circumstances. With one exception, these were not infants. The physical strength alone required, much less the emotional desperation, suggests a state something akin to "possession." This was clearly a woman plunged into the deepest despair and madness.

Yates, 36 (she turns 37 on July 2), is currently being held in the Harris County Jail, under suicide watch, on capital murder charges. Prosecutors have not yet indicated whether they will seek the death penalty. She faces the charges in the toughest death-penalty jurisdiction in the US, and, for that matter, one of the harshest in the Western world. If Harris County were a state, its 62 executions since 1977 would put it third behind Texas and Virginia. Texas as a whole has put to death 248 people in that period.

Yates's attorney, George Parnham, has indicated that the defense will most likely plead not guilty by reason of insanity. On June 25 Parnham described Andrea Yates as being in "a very deep psychotic state," and observed that he had not yet been able to hold a rational conversation with his client.

What we know of Andrea Yates suggests that she was a loving and caring person—and not only in relation to her own children. She had worked as a nurse at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center from 1986 to 1994, one of the country's leading cancer treatment centers. Moreover, she was the one of her parents' five children who apparently spent the most time with her dying father as he struggled with Alzheimer's disease.

Yates grew up in the Houston area. Her father, a high school auto shop

teacher, had flown bombing missions over Germany in World War II; her mother was born in that country. Yates, a member of the National Honor Society and captain of the swim team, finished second in her high school graduating class of 1982. After finishing a two-year pre-nursing program at the University of Houston, Yates continued at the University of Texas School of Nursing in Houston, graduating in 1986. She then went to work at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Andrea married Russell Yates in 1993; they had known each other for four years and were both 28. Around the time that her first child, Noah, was born, ten months later, Yates gave up her job. Her state nursing license became inactive two years after that.

Yates had four more children over the next seven years. Following the birth of her fourth child, in June 1999, she tried to commit suicide. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, "the attempt took place in her parents' southeast Houston house—and she tried to kill herself with an overdose of her father's Alzheimer's medication." Despite this, Yates became pregnant again in early 2000 and gave birth to her fifth child in November. Her father died in March.

Russell Yates has said that his wife had taken four drugs for her emotional difficulties. One of them, Haldol (haloperidol) is particularly powerful, utilized, according to a mental health monograph, "in the management of manifestations of acute and chronic psychosis, including schizophrenia and manic states." Andrea started using the drug, often prescribed for people hearing voices or thinking delusionally, after the birth of her fourth child.

At the time of the June 20 tragedy she was taking Effexor and Remeron, both anti-depressants, and had been previously taking Wellbutrin, another anti-depressant, as well as Haldol. Yates told the press that his wife had been in therapy, but was not at the time of the killings. "He said they had recently talked about her going into therapy again but she had not got around to it yet," the *Houston Chronicle* reported.

Yates also explained that the birth of the couple's fifth child and the death of his wife's father had triggered another episode of extreme depression. She had become withdrawn and "robotic" in her movements in the three weeks before the children's killings, he said. Her brother has told the press that Andrea put a knife to her own throat while visiting her mother's house this spring—presumably after her father's death—and again threatened to kill herself. Cases of women undergoing post-partum depression are relatively common; post-partum psychosis of the sort Andrea Yates apparently suffered from is extremely rare.

An unidentified official, familiar with Andrea Yates's statement to police, told the *Dallas Morning News*, "She essentially said that she had realized that she was a bad mother and she felt that the children were disabled—that they were not developing normally." Yates reportedly asserted that she had been thinking about killing them for several months.

Friends and former classmates naturally expressed great shock after news of the five children's deaths. One ex-classmate, Kelly Young, told the press, "This is not the Andrea we knew. She was warm and caring.

She would not have ever hurt anything, much less a child.” A neighbor remarked about Russell and Andrea Yates, “They just looked like your all-American family.”

Yates’s history apparently made her someone prepared to submit to her husband’s wishes on every critical question. It is in this fashion that the fate of the family seems to have become bound up with the fundamentalist Christian ideology of “family values.”

There is certainly every indication that her husband was the driving force in this regard. Andrea’s former acquaintance Kelly Young told the *Chronicle*, “I would never in a million years have expected her to have five children, much less children with religious names. She never made any indication that she was really interested in having many kids.”

Russell Yates has acknowledged that he was the one in the family with “deep religious feelings.” A neighbor described him as “conservative.” Relatives told the press that the couple was not affiliated with any church, but if the site of the children’s funeral was any indication, Russell Yates has some relationship with the Church of Christ. This is one of many Protestant sects, with some two million members worldwide. According to a Church of Christ web site, “Membership of the church is heaviest in the southern states of the United States, particularly Tennessee and Texas...”

The Church of Christ, according to its own web site, considers the books of the Bible “to have been divinely inspired, by which it is meant that they are infallible and authoritative.” It subscribes, like all the fundamentalist sects, to archaic and reactionary conceptions of the family and a woman’s role in society. The following view of relations between the sexes, from another Christian web site, is probably typical: “When a man and woman marry, they take certain functional positions. Men are called to be the head of the household while women are to submit to them. The husband has the final authority, and responsibility, for what goes on in the home. He listens to his wife, then makes the decisions based on Biblical wisdom.”

Friends said Andrea Yates deferred to her husband in public “on a variety of subjects.” A neighbor commented, “He didn’t want her working at all. He wanted her staying at home.” It was also his strong desire to have a certain number of children. The same neighbor said that Russell Yates spoke of having six children. “He wanted that many kids. I don’t remember that she wanted that many.” Yates apparently missed nursing on occasion, but “accepted” her role as full-time mother.

The same individual noted, “I don’t think they ever left the kid with babysitters. They were always with the kids.” Particularly Andrea, who rarely left the house.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the situation is that Andrea Yates was not simply a “stay-at-home” mother. This woman, who had obviously suffered some kind of major breakdown after the birth of her fourth child, was also “home-school” teacher to her brood of children.

Home-schooling is a social phenomenon that emerged as a serious trend during the Reagan years. Once illegal or strongly discouraged in all but three states, home schooling, thanks to organizations like the Home Schooling Legal Defense Association—an outfit run by Christian fundamentalists—and the enthusiastic support of Republican legislators, is now legal in all fifty states. The degree of state regulation varies; Texas’s regulations are all but nonexistent.

The home-school movement with religious right connections argues that children will encounter secularism, sex education and any manner of sinful ideas in a public school, or even a private school. Worries about crime and lack of discipline in public schools are no doubt genuine, but not infrequently they are laced with racism and xenophobia.

The attempt to insulate families from a troubling, “sinful” world ultimately has social roots. The lurch to the right by the political establishment and the abandonment of previous positions by liberalism have helped create a great intellectual and moral vacuum in the US. Certain layers of the population, disoriented by economic and political

changes that are little understood, hope to find comfort and safety within a religious cocoon.

There are, unhappily, any number of communities in the US where a tragedy such as the one that befell the Yateses could have occurred. Clear Lake, Texas has a number of characteristics that made it more likely than most. The Clear Lake area is a relatively prosperous, largely white, largely Protestant, largely conservative suburb of Houston with a population of some 200,000 people. This is George W. Bush territory. Ultra-right Republican Congressman Tom Delay represents portions of the Clear Lake area.

The dominant institution in the region is the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center (originally the Manned Spacecraft Center, established in 1961) operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), where Russell Yates is employed. Aerospace, as the area’s chamber of commerce boasts, “is big business in Clear Lake.” Aviation is another major source of employment, as well as high-tech and petrochemical companies. A March 1997 study identified 9,100 engineers in the Clear Lake region working for 61 companies. The study also concluded that within a fifty-mile radius of the region there were more than 37,000 engineers.

Located in the midst of these technologically advanced facilities and a population with a high percentage of trained scientists and engineers are dozens of churches—some fifty in the Clear Lake Area—including many varieties of Protestant fundamentalist Bible-thumping. There can be few places in the world where there is such a mingling of scientific rationality and superstition.

Russell Yates works for NASA as an \$80,000-a-year computer engineer. A piece co-written by Yates appeared in Volume 81 of “Advances in the Astronautical Sciences, Guidance and Control” in 1993. He was involved some years ago, along with a Russian scientist, in an experiment—the Shuttle/Mir Alignment Stability Experiment (SMASE—whose objective was to “explore the human factor considerations of the Mir [space station] in regard to how forces exerted by normal crew activity affect the Mir crew structure and its navigational system.” This is a man trained in science who believes that Christ turned water into wine and raised Lazarus from the dead.

The details that have been made public about the few months leading up to June 20 paint a picture of an increasingly desperate Andrea Yates, subject to psychotic episodes and severe depression, struggling to live up the ideal “Christian” lifestyle, trapped with her five young children twenty-four hours a day. And instead of seeking serious professional, psychiatric help, the couple could only call on more of the same, stultifying fundamentalist dogma.

No one has suggested that Russell Yates acted maliciously. He states that he loves his wife and supports her even now. We have every reason to believe that Andrea accepted her husband’s ideas and tried to live up to them. She no doubt wanted to be a proper “Christian wife and mother.”

It is possible that the couple hoped a fifth child would help Andrea through her mental difficulties. But the depression, despite her best efforts, persisted and deepened. Perhaps she concluded that her “bad” thoughts and behavior were contaminating her children. Psychologists have defined a mental state they term “altruistic filicide” (filicide means the murder of a child by a parent), which usually involves a mother killing her children because she believes she is doing the best thing for them, that they are literally better off dead.

Andrea Yates in jail on murder charges apparently still clings to the Christian fundamentalist perspective. She told family members when they visited her June 27 that she believes she is possessed by the devil. Her brother told the *Dallas Morning News*, “She asked me and my brother, ‘How long do you think the devil’s been in me?’” he said. “I guess she’s looking for answers as to why she did what she did.”

Is it permissible to draw any wider conclusions from this tragedy about

the fundamentalist outlook and milieu?

Let's imagine for a moment that a poor, black mother in the inner city had drowned her five children. The media and right-wing politicians and think tanks would have been all over the incident. Avoiding a discussion of poverty and social inequality, they would have drawn all sorts of false and stupid conclusions about the "immorality" and "irresponsibility" produced by the welfare state, and so forth. The episode in Clear Lake involves a middle class, conservative, religious family, but no one will say anything about its broader significance.

We are far from suggesting that the Yateses should be witchhunted. On the contrary, the generally humane response within wide layers of the population to Andrea Yates's situation is a positive sign. Indeed certain elements in the right-wing media are a little alarmed. If large numbers of people began to see the perpetrators of even the most horrendous acts as human beings, perhaps as victims of social circumstances, the pro-death penalty forces would find themselves increasingly isolated and unpopular.

As a whole official society is strikingly reluctant to discuss the Yates case. Unsurprisingly, the religious right has little to say about it; Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network is virtually silent. The mainstream media will not raise the issue of the fundamentalist milieu, in part for fear of arousing the latter's wrath, but also out of larger political considerations.

After all, the entire establishment is complicit in the promotion of reactionary "family values": that has been a dominant theme of the Republican Party and the Democrats—for example, Gore and Lieberman in the 2000 elections—have thoroughly adapted themselves to it. This has been at the center of the so-called culture wars, pursued as well by the media. The "traditional" type of family—now a distinct minority in the US—has been held up by the right-wing as the antidote to the supposedly licentious lifestyle of the 1960s.

In the name of a campaign to restore traditional moral values—and in a situation of great political unclarity—layers of the American middle classes have been sold a bill of goods. Along with "family values," touted by millionaire politicians, broadcasters and preachers, has come an entire slate of political reaction: a war against social programs and democratic rights and the drive toward authoritarian forms of rule.

A serious examination of the Clear Lake tragedy threatens, in its own way, to lift the lid on aspects of this reality. The reluctance and fear of the media to approach these issues is thus understandable. In a tragic manner the Yates case has revealed something about the repression, false piety and suffocating conformism of the fundamentalist Christian outlook and, more generally, some unpleasant truths about contemporary American society.



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