

Military-style killer on the loose near US capital

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A serial killer using a sniper rifle to target random individuals has terrorized the Washington, DC metropolitan area for nearly two weeks, killing eight people and wounding two, while eluding capture and leaving practically no evidence to identify or locate him.

To the extent that media commentators have even attempted to provide an explanation for this outburst of deadly and sadistic violence, their remarks have fallen generally into two equally vacuous categories: the events are “inexplicable,” or they are yet another manifestation of “evil” in the world.

President Bush on Monday called the attacks “cold-blooded” and added, “The idea of moms taking their kids to school and sheltering them from a potential sniper attack is not the America that I know.”

Considering the source, Bush’s remarks do not come as a surprise. But they nevertheless reveal a remarkable obtuseness, given the role he and his administration have played in promoting an ethos of violence, brutality and fear.

Indeed, only one day before the first killing in suburban Washington, Bush’s press secretary, Ari Fleischer, remarked to reporters in the White House briefing room that “the cost of one bullet” was much preferable to war against Iraq, openly calling for the assassination of Saddam Hussein.

Fleischer’s remarks were widely reported in the media, with many right-wing commentators hailing his open contempt for what remains official government policy, embodied in a decades-old executive order prohibiting the CIA and other US agencies from engaging in political assassinations.

Barely 24 hours later, a sociopath with a sniper rifle began to demonstrate the power of “one bullet” with a series of single-shot murders.

This is more than just a macabre coincidence. The moral climate created by the Bush administration is one that glorifies violence and presents the elimination of targeted individuals as the solution to pressing problems. This atmosphere acts upon the sickest and most deranged elements, especially those drawn from the milieu of ex-military and paramilitary men who live in disproportionate numbers in the Washington DC suburbs.

The connection between militarism abroad and homicide at home has already been demonstrated in the series of brutal murders this past summer at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, a major base for US Special Forces operating in Afghanistan. Four career soldiers killed their wives in the space of six weeks, three of them shortly after their return from search-and-destroy missions in the occupied Central Asian country.

There are a number of factors that suggest the Washington sniper may be an active or retired Special Forces operative, a discharged or failed serviceman, or perhaps an individual who aspired to belong to the elite killer unit and studied its methods.

First, there is the technique employed by the killer, firing a single shot from ambush with a high-powered rifle using .223 caliber ammunition. The weapon itself is significant, according to one expert, former FBI profiler Robert Ressler. “It’s a macho, civilian version of the military M-16,” he told the media. “It appeals to the gun nuts and the paramilitary types, a favored symbolic expression of the authority and power these people are trying to obtain.”

The painstaking execution of the attacks also suggests military or paramilitary training. Each victim was hit with a single shot to the head or torso. The attacker lay in wait for people who would be alone and exposed in well-lighted public places, such as parking lots, gas

stations and bus stops. Exits and escape routes were carefully planned. Another former FBI profiler, Clifford Van Zandt, said, “Whoever it is, they’ve spent a lot of time looking down the sights of a rifle.”

It is possible, of course, that the killer is a devotee of the military rather than an actual veteran of the Special Forces. According to Tom Diaz, an analyst at the Violence Policy Center, a gun control group, the “one shot, one kill” technique is a favorite subject of a “sniper culture” of books and videos that has emerged in recent years.

The message “I am God,” scrawled on a tarot card left after the seventh attack—on a junior high school student in Bowie, Maryland—may also refer to a military connection. The 1990 film “Navy Seals,” which glorifies a US military Special Forces unit that engages in assassination, includes a sniper character who uses “God” as his code name.

A Pentagon official revealed October 13 that the Army’s Criminal Investigation Command had been asked to search records of personnel discharges for possible leads.

Recent US history suggests that if the Washington killer or killers do have political links, they are with the extreme right—the milieu that has spawned nearly every act of domestic terrorism over the past decade. Among the precedents:

* Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, a former Gulf War veteran and would-be Special Forces soldier who was linked to right-wing racist and militia groups.

* Eric Rudolph, John Salvi and James Kopp, among others, arrested or wanted for their role in assassinating abortion doctors—frequently by sniper attack—or killing workers at abortion clinics.

* Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who killed three people and wounded nearly a dozen in attacks spanning 18 years, in pursuit of a fascistic outlook centered on opposition to modern technology and economic development.

* Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, an Illinois college student affiliated with the white supremacist World Church of the Creator, who shot ten people, killing two, in a rampage over the July 4, 1999 weekend that targeted blacks, Jews and Asians.

* Luke John Helder, a 21-year-old Minnesota college student who planted 18 pipebombs in mailboxes in

several midwestern states last May, espousing a vague anti-government and anti-Semitic ideology.

* The anthrax terrorist, who targeted two top Democratic leaders in the US Senate, still unidentified but believed to be a former Pentagon biological warfare specialist.

At least one newspaper, the *Raleigh News & Observer*, has reported that police are seeking a man “affiliated with militia and white supremacist groups” for questioning. But the media as a whole has been virtually silent over this aspect of the investigation.

Both Timothy McVeigh and the Pentagon referred to the slaughter of civilians as “collateral damage.” Whatever the political agenda of the Washington-area sniper, he shares this callous inhumanity towards innocent lives. His actions can only be understood in the context of the bloodlust that grips the American government.



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