

The Washington sniper and the undercurrent of rage in American society

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The arrest of two men at a Maryland rest stop early October 24 apparently brought to an end the killing spree that has been terrorizing the Washington, D.C. area and neighboring Maryland and Virginia for the past three weeks. The random shootings, carried out with a sniper rifle, left ten people dead and three seriously wounded.

The denouement of this latest symptom of profound social dysfunction has been greeted with the sensationalism, banality and ignorance that one has come to expect of the US mass media. The media has switched from lurid descriptions of the killing of innocent victims to morbid speculation as to which of the competing jurisdictions will have the opportunity to press for the death penalty against the alleged gunmen, John Allen Muhammad, 41, and John Lee Malvo, 17.

Maryland authorities plan to charge each with six counts of first-degree murder. They will seek the death penalty for Muhammad, but not Malvo, a juvenile, whereas officials in Virginia and Alabama (where Muhammad and Malvo allegedly carried out a robbery and murder on September 21) have promised to press for death for both men. The police chief of Montgomery, Alabama declared, "We want to send a very strong message ... that this is not the kind of conduct, this is not what we expect of civilized society. We're going to make an example of somebody." Alabama is a well-known center of "civilized society."

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, in editorials with similar headlines, "The Terror Ends" and "The Nightmare Ends," respectively, summoned up the unctuous self-satisfaction in which they specialize on such occasions. *The Times*: "For all the talk of the sniper's desire to control the news media and the authorities, the authorities say they now control the probable sniper, which is just how it should be." *The Post*: "It looks as if this is a story in which the good guys have won in the end." Under the tragic circumstances, with ten lying dead and dozens of lives destroyed, this Panglossian "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" is at the very least unseemly.

The *Detroit Free Press* managed to make reference to the context of the serial murders in Maryland and Virginia, noting somewhat anxiously that in this "Post-9/11, post-Columbine, post-Oklahoma City" day and age, "Another crisis always seems right around the corner."

Indeed one of the few certainties about American life at the beginning of the 21st century is that, unhappily, one will not have to wait long for another act of social or individual madness.

In all the extensive and noisy coverage of the news media one small item is missing: a single serious effort to explain the terrible events in Maryland and Virginia. "How and why could such a thing happen in contemporary America?" is a question that by some unspoken, yet absolutely-binding agreement in official circles cannot be posed.

It is necessary to underline "serious effort." Naturally, the rabid right-wing has jumped on the alleged lead perpetrator's religious conversion to see in the recent tragedy a new wave of "terrorist" attacks by "radical Islam." This element is attempting to dredge up "anti-American" remarks uttered by John Allen Muhammad, although without success so far. In

fact, various sources indicate that Muhammad liked to boast about his service in the army and claimed to be working for the CIA and FBI.

Moreover, Muhammad converted to Islam in 1985, around the time he joined the US army, and later served without incident in the Gulf War, a war prosecuted against a primarily Moslem country. The reference to "radicalism" entails a misunderstanding of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, a reactionary separatist organization, which serves as a pressure group for a section of black petty bourgeois or aspiring petty bourgeois. It is worth noting that Muhammad volunteered as a security guard at the so-called "Million Man March," organized by Farrakhan in Washington in October 1995.

In any event, far from making political demands, the sniper killer, in his rambling note left for authorities, demanded \$10 million, giving the account and PIN number for a stolen credit card.

Nonetheless, if sections of the media have their way, the serial killings in the Washington area, as nearly every other world event at present, will be pressed into the service of justifying the drive toward a new predatory invasion of the Middle East.

The general public is not likely to be convinced by the logic of these strained and self-serving arguments. On the one hand, there is too much suspicion of the Bush administration and the warmongering media. On the other, there is a certain resigned popular understanding that American society is *all too* capable of producing this sort of tragedy. Masses of people were horrified by the deadly shootings, but undoubtedly a far smaller number were astonished that such an event could occur. While Muhammad's ethnicity came as something of a surprise, one felt that the general reaction to the details of his life—long-time military service, failed businesses, failed marriages—was, "Yes, that was more or less what we expected."

MSNBC's web site introduced its account of the alleged gunman's past with the remark that "There were few clues in the unremarkable life of John Allen Muhammad to suggest that he could have orchestrated one of the most terrifying killing sprees in recent American history." The authors of the piece, one can be sure, are unaware that this observation is extraordinarily damning.

In fact, Muhammad has a *curriculum vitae* that is shared, in its general outlines, by millions in the US. The following is based on the information currently available. It is entirely possible that surprises may be in store.

Raised in Louisiana, Muhammad (then John Allen Williams) joined the Army National Guard of Louisiana right out of high school. He served in the National Guard from 1978 to 1985, facing disciplinary charges on two occasions and ultimately receiving a dishonorable discharge. Muhammad enlisted in the US army in 1985 and stayed in the military for nearly a decade, participating in the Gulf War as a combat engineer, his top rank being sergeant. Although he never underwent training as a sniper, Muhammad did receive a Marksmanship Badge with expert rating in the use of the M-16 rifle, a civilian version of which he allegedly used in his recent murderous rampage.

Muhammad's life after his discharge from the military is a record of a slow descent, with occasional upturns, into poverty and ultimately mental and moral disintegration. After the break-up of his first marriage, the ex-soldier became involved in an acrimonious custody dispute with his former wife. According to an *Associated Press* account, "In 1994, the son visited Muhammad in Washington state for the summer, but failed to return until his mother got a court order ... When he returned ... the boy had lost 20 pounds. She [Muhammad's sister-in-law] said he described being subjected to a military-like routine of exercise and a strict diet."

With the help of his second wife, Mildred, Muhammad started an auto repair business in Tacoma, Washington (he had served at nearby Fort Lewis while in the military). Apparently an expert mechanic, but a poor businessman, he ran into financial difficulties in the late 1990s. His attempts at partnership in a karate school also came to nothing when he had a falling out with his associate. They ended up feuding and in debt.

When Muhammad's second wife filed for divorce, he was essentially without a place to live. He thereupon took off with his children to Antigua (his mother's homeland) and elsewhere, without his ex-wife's consent, for nearly a year. In July 2000, while applying at a government office on the Caribbean island, Muhammad claimed to have attended "Special Forces/Sniper School" in the US military and to have "taught urban warfare."

Mildred Muhammad petitioned for a restraining order against her husband in March 2000, stating: "I am afraid of John. He was a demolition expert in the military. He is behaving very, very irrational. Whenever he does talk with me he always says that he's going to destroy my life and I hang up the phone." A month earlier she had told police, "John came over to inform me that he will not let me raise our children. His demeanor is such that he's a threat to me. ... John came over at 7:00 am to inform me he had tapped the phone lines. He said the information he had would destroy me."

By 2001 Muhammad's life had descended into homelessness and theft. He was living in a shelter and was arrested for shoplifting steaks at a Tacoma grocery store. He apparently met his alleged accomplice, John Lee Malvo, through a relationship which he had with the youth's mother.

Malvo's own story is a sad one. He and his mother entered the US illegally from Jamaica. By 2001, he also was homeless and living in Bellingham, Washington. How and why he took up with Muhammad, at a Bellingham homeless shelter, is not fully known.

By the summer of 2002 Muhammad and Malvo were traveling together. An old friend in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where the pair stopped, told the *New York Times* that Muhammad could not afford a meal: "I suspected he was hitting rock bottom. I felt like he was going through some hard times." Muhammad told his nephew "a dubious story about working for the Central Intelligence Agency." He and Malvo were traveling by bus and intended to sleep in the station, until a friend offered a place to stay. In September the two were in Trenton, New Jersey, where they reportedly purchased for \$250 the Chevrolet Caprice authorities claim was used in the Washington-area shootings.

The precise mechanism by which psychological (and perhaps physiological) predisposition and increasingly intolerable pressures combine to propel an individual toward psychotic behavior is extraordinarily complex. There is a specific and individual element in this tragedy that will probably never be known to us. And one can be certain that official America, in its bloodthirsty rush for vengeance against Muhammad and the accompanying effort to obscure the wider implications of his alleged actions, will have no interest in making sense of his economic and mental collapse. "A killer is a killer is a killer" is the watchword of American prosecutors and politicians. The establishment closes ranks at such moments to ensure that nothing is learned from the experience.

Nonetheless, as the number of school and workplace shootings, serial

killings and other atrocities mounts, it becomes obvious to anyone who thinks seriously about the matter, that this is principally a social, not an individual, phenomenon. What is it about American society, what is the social sickness that systematically produces this kind of anti-social violence?

After all, the sniper killings were only the most publicized killings that took place in the US in the first three weeks of October. Homicides take place every day, just as tragic, which never make the headlines of the national media. On October 21, for example, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, "A man dressed in camouflage fatigues walked into a tool and die shop in Arlington Heights [Illinois] Monday morning and opened fire, shooting a longtime acquaintance and injuring another man." In the immediate aftermath of the sniper killings, an 18-year-old in eastern Oklahoma allegedly went on a rampage over a 30-mile area, killing two and wounding at least seven more.

Millions of people are walking around in America in a rage. The past decades have seen a vast growth of social inequality and economic insecurity, and the build-up of a mass of social grievances. The political establishment in the US and the media, which respond directly to the needs of the corporate and financial elite, are nearly impervious to the interests and concerns of the mass of the American people. The latter's growing economic and moral distress is not officially recognized or registered. For all intents and purposes, it does not exist.

But still it does exist, and great numbers of people, politically disenfranchised, socially alienated and increasingly impoverished, seethe with anger and feel, with some legitimacy, that they could sink into an abyss without attracting any notice from the powers that be. There is no institution, no major party, no official outlet where the accumulated discontent can find healthy, legitimate political expression. This explosive discontent at this point finds largely personal and anti-social forms.

The strong undercurrent of pent-up rage and bitterness in American society is all the more powerful because it goes unmentioned and unattended. This is how acquaintances described John Muhammad, the 17-year military veteran, failed businessman, failed father and husband. His former business partner commented, "You know, it seems like I can remember him being bitter, just bitter about life."

Muhammad's ties to the Nation of Islam could only nourish such bitterness. With its own misanthropic and racist view of American society, the group headed by Minister Louis Farrakhan contends that blacks and whites can never live together in harmony—although it should be noted that many of Muhammad's alleged victims were black.

And then, more significantly, one comes to the role of the US military, which almost inevitably turns up at some point or another in these tragic tales. The military connection often provides the spark that transforms "ordinary, everyday" anger into a violent, life-threatening outburst.

Since the end of the draft the US military has become a haven for confused and alienated individuals, many of whom were on the verge of being pushed into the lumpenproletariat. An army of "volunteers" is far more removed from society than one composed of conscripts. The recruits come under the influence of a fundamentally undemocratic institution, which, moreover, in the case of the American armed forces in the recent period, has been transformed into a global killing machine.

And when such individuals are released into the general population? They are even less prepared for everyday life. What will be the consequences for American society, for example, of the demobilization of the forces responsible for a new and bloody invasion and occupation of Iraq? We have already seen the killings at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, a major base for US Special Forces. Four career soldiers killed their wives in the space of six weeks this past summer, three of them shortly after returning from missions in Afghanistan.

The media expresses its outrage that the serial sniper could treat human life with such callous disregard. But from what source did Muhammad

absorb such an attitude? An individual hoping to maintain his sanity and humanity could hardly do worse than participate in one of America's colonial adventures, such as the Gulf War, in which Iraqis were slaughtered indiscriminately as "ragheads." Another notorious killer, Timothy McVeigh, was also a Gulf War veteran. This is the conflict whose lesson, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, was that "force works."

All of this, into which one must add the easy availability of deadly weapons, makes up a lethal witches' brew of rage, confusion and hopelessness. A few of the most susceptible fall prey to a murderous psychosis. Tragic and disastrous as such psychosis is, however, it is the fate of only a tiny percentage of the population. The same conditions must compel wide layers of the population to look for answers of a broader social and political character.



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