

Political issues behind the murder in New York's City Hall

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The July 23 killing of a New York City councilman marked the first time that a murder had taken place inside the nearly 200-year-old seat of city government. James E. Davis was gunned down in the City Council chambers on the second floor of City Hall, just across the hall from the office of Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Davis, 41-years-old and in his first term on the Council, was shot to death by Othniel Askew, 31, a man who was described as a political rival. Davis had brought him to City Hall. He had been able to bring a gun into the building because Davis described him as a friend, thus allowing them both to bypass the metal detectors.

Upon entering, Davis and Askew went up to the balcony of the Council chambers. A little more than 20 minutes later, as Davis prepared to descend to the Council meeting, Askew took out a pistol and fired repeatedly at the councilman. Within moments, a police officer on duty fired from the floor of the Council chamber at the shooter in the balcony. Both Davis and Askew died almost immediately, although it was hours before it became clear that the second fatality was the man who had killed the councilman.

Media coverage, while providing many factual details about the shooting, focused almost exclusively on the issue of City Hall security. Mayor Bloomberg said that from now on everyone entering the building, including himself and all public officials, would have to walk through the metal detectors. He was also at pains to reassure the public, and especially the members of the Republican National Committee who arrived in the city less than a day after the killing, that it was not an act of terrorism. The Republicans came to plan the 2004 convention. New York has been chosen as site for the renomination of George W. Bush, with the events of September 11, 2001, as a superpatriotic backdrop.

As some observers pointed out, metal detectors could hardly be installed in every public building in the city,

including the many district offices of City Council members, for instance. In any event, there are some political issues raised by the murder of Davis that have been studiously avoided in the media and in official circles.

Davis, a former police officer, was known as a political insurgent who had repeatedly challenged what remains of the Democratic Party machine in Brooklyn. In 1998, he nearly defeated the incumbent New York State assemblyman, Clarence Norman, Jr., who is also the Brooklyn Democratic chairman. Three years later, as the city's new term limits law led to a virtually complete turnover in the membership of the City Council, Davis ran and won the race to represent the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Fort Greene, Clinton Hill and Prospect Heights.

The councilman quickly set himself apart from the leadership on various issues. He was one of only three members of the Council who voted recently against an 18.5 percent increase in property taxes to deal with the city's massive budget gap.

However, Davis in no way challenged the basic corruption and decay of the existing political institutions. He established himself as an extremely ambitious political operative inside the Council. Davis developed a reputation, not unlike that of many of his colleagues, for politically threatening potential rivals or attempting to buy them off with the promise of jobs or other assistance if they did not run against him. While actively courting local constituents with the kind of services local officials usually provide, Davis advanced no alternative program to the big business policies pursued by the Democratic Party at the federal, state and local levels.

In Othniel Askew, Davis apparently met a potential rival who did not respond as expected. Askew, who moved only recently to the Fort Greene neighborhood, was born in Brooklyn but grew up in suburban Long

Island. He graduated from college, served in the Air Force, and had held a series of office jobs and worked as an accountant. Most recently, he described himself as a real estate developer, and soon after his arrival in the neighborhood made plans to run against Davis in this year's election.

Askew was apparently angered when his nominating petitions were not accepted because they had not been filed in time. He then began appearing regularly at Davis's office, making persistent requests for assistance, asking the councilman to provide him with a letter of recommendation, indicating that he was now a supporter of Davis, but at the same time suggesting to others that he still wanted to get back into the race.

Askew's obsession with Davis and the forthcoming election led to a number of bizarre developments in the days before the shooting. He repeatedly asked another candidate to drop out of the race in his favor, even though he had not been able to file for ballot status. He asked this same candidate, "Are you willing to die for this race, because I am." At the same time, Askew asked Davis to agree that he would take his seat should "something happen" to Davis.

In addition to this obviously unbalanced behavior, Askew made a call to the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the morning of the shooting, complaining of intimidation by Davis. Some of his complaints, as they have been reported in the press, sound plausible. According to these accounts, Davis offered Askew a job if he dropped out of the Council election. Davis also reportedly threatened to expose the fact that Askew was gay.

There seems little doubt that Askew was deranged, and on one level the killing seems to be a particularly prominent example of workplace violence. Ironically, one of the items of business due to be taken up by the City Council on the day of the shooting was a resolution of concern on this subject.

This incident is significant as an example of the kind of social-psychological dysfunction that has erupted repeatedly in the form of shootings in schools and workplaces around the country. There is an additional element, however, that bears some serious consideration: the picture of political chaos and decay that emerges.

As if to underscore the fact that the City Hall shooting was not simply a fluke, only two days after the shooting, a campaign volunteer for a City Council candidate was arrested and charged with threatening to shoot another incumbent councilman and two of his aides. The

volunteer, Julio Abreu, accused Councilman Hiram Monserrate of Queens and several of his assistants of harassing the backers of a rival candidate, Luis Jimenez. Interestingly, Monserrate, who was close to James Davis, is also a former police officer.

The old political machines that existed in New York City have been decaying for decades. The days of political bosses doling out patronage and pulling strings have disappeared. Moreover, none of the political parties have any serious mass base, either in New York or in any other urban center. The Republicans are virtually nonexistent in New York, regularly polling perhaps 20 percent of the vote in presidential elections, yet they have occupied the mayoralty for the past 10 years. The Democrats continue to hold sway in other local offices, but the vast majority of the population pays absolutely no attention to what passes for politics. Voter turnout often does not reach 30 percent, and is even less in the poorest neighborhoods. With the Democratic politicians indifferent to the concerns of the working class and increasingly utilizing various forms of racial politics to solidify a base of support, Republican candidates have won the mayor's office in every election since 1989.

The legislation of term limits several years ago introduced a new and major destabilizing element into this overall picture of political decay. The great majority of the Council is now made up of newly elected members. However, in the absence of any party representing the working class, or of any perspective and leadership for working people, the turnover in Council membership has little to do with democracy. A new layer of highly ambitious politicians has seen an opportunity to cash in by running for the vacant Council seats. These individuals present no ideas and avoid any serious discussion of political issues, but are determined to do whatever is necessary to win the plum of political office.

We cannot be positive about the specific causes of the City Hall killing, but it certainly does raise important issues about the decay of political institutions and the increasingly hollow claims that they represent vehicles for the exercise of the will of the majority.



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