

Violent eruptions in Wisconsin and Georgia: the pathology of a society in crisis

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16 March 2005

The bloody incidents last Friday and Saturday in Atlanta, Georgia and Brookfield, Wisconsin have dominated the American media for the past week. And with reason: the killing of seven people at a Wisconsin church service and four people in and around an Atlanta courtroom are the latest expressions of an increasingly common and troubling phenomenon in America: eruptions of apparently random and self-destructive violence.

The media coverage provides no understanding of the social meaning of these events. On the contrary, it obscures it, treating the two gunmen, Brian Nichols in Atlanta and Terry Ratzmann in Wisconsin, as isolated cases, individuals driven solely by their own pathologies rather than products of a society that is increasingly dysfunctional, crisis-stricken and brutal.

In the Wisconsin case, there were initial reports that suggested the trigger for Ratzmann's attack might have been financial—he was about to be laid off from his job as a computer technician—or that he was suffering from depression. Subsequent accounts suggest that Ratzmann was merely completing a job assignment at the labor-hire firm for which he worked, and could expect another placement, and that he was not depressed in a clinical sense.

Instead, attention was drawn to the peculiar religious beliefs of the church Ratzmann attended, where he opened fire with a .22 caliber semi-automatic handgun, killing six people and then himself.

In Atlanta, the media focus has been on the evident failure of courthouse security. Nichols, a 210-pound former athlete, was able to overpower a female sheriff's deputy, take her gun, kill three people, and then escape from the Fulton County Courthouse, where he was on trial for rape, facing life in prison if convicted. He later killed a fourth person and took his car, before surrendering to police.

There were reports suggesting gross negligence: the attack on the deputy was visible on a surveillance camera, but no one was watching the monitor. Surveillance tapes also showed Nichols escaping on foot, but police nonetheless issued an alert for the green Honda whose driver Nichols allegedly pistol-whipped in the courthouse garage. But the car never left the garage.

The Atlanta case follows last month's double murder in Chicago, in which the husband and mother of a federal judge were killed. While a white supremacist group that had targeted the judge was originally suspected, that crime now appears to be the act of a failed litigant in the judge's court, Bart Ross. A former cancer patient who had unsuccessfully sued his doctors for malpractice, Ross shot himself to death March 9 near Milwaukee, leaving a detailed confession.

The Ross case, like that of Nichols, involves an individual who snapped under enormous stress—in this case, the suffering caused initially by cancer, then by the radiation treatment and surgery which

saved his life but left him disfigured and in continual pain. Accounts by neighbors and acquaintances painted a picture of a man gradually driven mad as he pursued court case after court case against his alleged maltreatment by doctors, hospitals, lawyers and judges.

Ross owed over \$18,000 in unpaid credit card debts. He was forced to sell his home and rent it back, then was evicted and lived in his minivan during the last weeks of his life. Judge Joan Lefkow ruled last year that his claims "lack any possible merit," but she expressed personal sympathy toward the victim of a disease that had "left him physically disfigured, in incessant severe pain and unemployed." Ross nonetheless focused his rage on her, located her home in Chicago's north side, went there and hid himself, then killed her husband and mother when they discovered him.

The Atlanta and Chicago events have led to entirely predictable calls for a further buildup in security measures for judges and courtrooms. As always in America, the response of the political establishment and the media to any violent tragedy is to call for more police and more repressive measures, continuing the steady erosion of democratic rights. (Specifically, the Atlanta incident has led to demands for an end to the local practice of unshackling prisoners before they are brought into the courtroom for trial, a humane policy established to avoid prejudicing the jury against defendants.)

It seems indisputable that Ratzmann's actions were linked to his religious beliefs. He was a member of the Living Church of God, an offshoot, via several schisms over the past two decades, of the Worldwide Church of God, founded by the late Herbert W. Armstrong in Pasadena, California, and influential in evangelical circles through its magazine, *Plain Truth*, and Armstrong's television broadcasts, "The World Tomorrow."

After Armstrong's death, his church gradually abandoned his emphasis on preparing for an imminent end of the world, moving towards more conventional evangelical positions. The split-offs from the church, including the Living Church of God, sought to retain the focus on the impending "end-time" and the separation of the church membership from the rest of humanity, who were viewed as doomed in the coming "Great Tribulation."

The church regards people of northwest European ancestry as the descendants of the Biblical ten lost tribes of Israel—a theological conception that, in a more extreme form, is incorporated in the racist outlook of white supremacist groups such as the Aryan Nations.

Ratzmann reportedly was upset by a recent church service, in February, which included a tape-recorded sermon from the church's leader, Roderick C. Meredith, warning that events foreshadowing the end of the world were "beginning to occur with increasing frequency." He urged his followers to pay off their credit-card debts

and put aside enough cash for at least 60 days' living expenses, "in case of a sudden breakdown of the banking system or a similar emergency." One church member told police that Ratzmann walked out of that service, "sort of in a huff."

Eyewitness and medical accounts suggest that Ratzmann singled out the pastor of his church, Randy L. Gregory, 51, a former IBM engineer, and his 17-year-old son James, executing them with a single shot apiece before he opened fire more generally on the crowd of church members. He continued shooting methodically, even pausing once to reload a magazine, until he was down to a few bullets. He then took his own life.

As for the Atlanta gunman, his sister-in-law described Brian Nichols as "a good person." She added, "He didn't come from a broken home. He's not a person who hung out in the streets and was always in jail. He came up living a good life." Raised in a comfortable middle-class black family, Nichols attended two different colleges but dropped out of both, in one case after facing charges of assault and battery, in the other after he was dismissed from the football team for theft.

Nichols had lived in the Atlanta area since 1995 and most recently worked as a computer technician at a subsidiary of United Parcel Service. He lost that job last September, when he was arrested and charged with rape. His ex-girlfriend alleged that he invaded her home, binding her with duct tape and sexually assaulting her over three days, while armed with a loaded machine gun. He was held in Fulton County Jail for the past six months, but his first trial on the charges ended last week in a mistrial. The retrial—with a life sentence likely upon conviction—was to begin the day Nichols overpowered the sheriff's deputy and took her gun.

While Nichols did not kill himself, as Ratzmann did, self-destruction certainly seems to have been his goal. He marched into the courtroom that was to hear his case and deliberately shot to death the judge and court reporter. After that, he could have had little hope of escaping from the Fulton County Courthouse alive. When he nevertheless made a clean getaway, he made little effort to escape the massive police dragnet throughout northern Georgia. He told the woman he took hostage, as he watched television news reports of the manhunt, "Look at my eyes, I'm already dead."

Nichols' treatment of Ashley Smith, the woman he held captive for several hours, showed a much different side of his personality than the killing spree at the courthouse. He reportedly engaged in long discussions with Smith, responded sympathetically to her account of herself as a young widow with a small child—her husband had been stabbed to death several years earlier—and eventually allowed her to go, knowing she would call the police. When they came, he waved some white clothing and surrendered peacefully.

One can, of course, enumerate many superficial differences between the homicidal outbursts in Georgia and Wisconsin. One took place in a southern city, the other in a northern suburb. One gunman was black, the other white. One targeted the representatives of state authority—a judge, a court reporter, a sheriff's deputy, a Customs officer—the other directed his rage against members of his own church. One killed himself at the scene of his violent rampage, the other fled, took a hostage, then gave himself up without incident.

The two men were both computer technicians, but otherwise had quite different social histories.

Nichols had the more comfortable upbringing, his father a businessman and his mother an Internal Revenue Service employee. He attended private schools and several years of college. Ratzmann was struggling economically. Nichols had a record of previous

violence and was in jail facing a charge of sexual assault against his ex-girlfriend. Ratzmann, unmarried and sharing a home with his mother and adult sister, had never had contact with the law.

Mediated through such typical accidents of personal biography and circumstance, what is expressed here is a social tendency. What made the most recent events exceptional was not their bloody character, but the large number of casualties. If Ratzmann and Nichols had killed "only" one victim and then themselves, their actions would have drawn scarcely any notice. Such tragedies take place on a daily basis in the United States. (See "An epidemic of murder-suicide in US") Far from being isolated events, the killings in Georgia and Wisconsin highlight a pattern of behavior which must have deeper social roots.

The tensions within American society—compounded of problems with finances, family relationships, health, even the search for meaning in life—find no positive or progressive outlet today. There is no great social or political movement which gives hope or positive perspective to the vast majority of the American people who are not rich and who find themselves in an increasingly difficult struggle year by year.

The ruling elite is systematically shutting down all avenues for the expression of these social tensions within the existing political and economic system. The two official political parties express only the interests of rival factions within the financial oligarchy. The organizations such as unions and civil rights groups, which once provided an avenue, however limited, for the assertion of the interests of the oppressed, have been completely neutered.

The legal system, the last resort of desperate men like Bart Ross, is being closed off as well. The current Congress has already adopted legislation shutting off most class-action lawsuits, and is on the verge of passing a bankruptcy bill that will remove that traditional remedy for failed small businessmen and growing numbers of working and middle-class people. Next on the agenda is "malpractice reform," to prevent victims of medical errors or malfeasance from having their day in court.

One by one, safety valves are being shut off. But the underlying social tensions continue to build, fueled by the central fact of American life: the enormous and ever-increasing social polarization—the heaping up of vast wealth for a tiny minority and the increasingly strained circumstances of tens of millions of working people. At present, this social crisis is revealed largely in the actions of the more unstable individuals, where questions of temperament, mental illness or religious delusion play an important role. Ultimately, however, these social tensions must find wider—and politically conscious—expression. This requires the building of a mass political movement from below, one that will break through the prevailing atmosphere of political and cultural reaction and challenge the diseased and dehumanizing capitalist order.



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