

No evidence to press murder charges vs. John Mark Karr

Media frenzy over JonBenet “killer” ends in fiasco

David Walsh
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The Boulder, Colorado district attorney’s office dropped all charges Monday against John Mark Karr for the 1996 murder of six-year-old child beauty pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey, after DNA test results proved that he could not have been the killer. The collapse of the case against Karr is one more fiasco for the utterly unscrupulous, venal and ignorant American media.

There was never any evidence against Karr except his own clearly disoriented public confession, made in Bangkok, Thailand earlier this month.

In a motion to dismiss the arrest warrant against Karr, Boulder County District Attorney Mary T. Lacy wrote, “No evidence has developed, other than his own repeated admissions, to place Mr. Karr at the scene of the crime.”

Karr’s attorney, Seth Temin, sharply criticized the district attorney’s office, telling the Associated Press, “We’re deeply distressed by the fact that they took this man and dragged him here from Bangkok, Thailand, with no forensic evidence confirming the allegations against him and no independent factors leading to a presumption he did anything wrong.”

As dubious as were the actions of the Boulder authorities, for sheer hysteria, prurience and irresponsibility they were eclipsed by the antics of the American media. For twelve days, the largest media apparatus in the world focused its attention, 24 hours a day, on the Karr-Ramsey case. The television networks and cable channels called upon every variety of “expert” to add new bits of gossip to the rumor mill, without ever making a critical appraisal of the evidence, or lack thereof, against the alleged killer.

The news media seized on the Karr arrest eagerly and made it “the story” for several reasons. First, it provided a welcome diversion from events of real consequence that the government was eager to banish from the headlines: the political debacle for the US and Israel in Lebanon, the ongoing disaster in Iraq, the impending one-year anniversary of the Katrina catastrophe.

Second, it provided yet another opportunity to debase public consciousness with a sensationalist admixture of sex, violence and gossip about the “rich and famous.”

Finally, the highly-paid ignoramuses who populate the mainstream media—the right-wing news anchors, talk show hosts and pundits—are themselves obsessed with such gory trivia, a fixation that borders on the pathological.

The all-news cable channels have mastered the art of filling time with the verbal equivalent of cotton candy. At the end of an evening, hours have passed and the viewer scratches his or her head, unable to recall a single insightful comment.

A low point came in the media coverage of Karr’s flight from Thailand to the US. Drew Griffin, CNN “investigative correspondent,” for example, described the journey on August 21 as follows: “Secretly, a Thai Airways flight attendant would admit to a CNN photographer she is scared, especially when she has to serve the suspect the three meals he would have during this flight. Thai Airways would not allow handcuffs... Three times during the flight, John Karr would go to the bathroom. Each time, officers would lead the way, stand outside the small lavatory, and one would place his foot in the door. The shy John Karr could use the bathroom, but only with the door open.”

This kind of ludicrous coverage continued for days after it had become obvious that there was no case against Karr. Family members were prepared to swear that Karr was nowhere near Boulder on the day of the murder, Christmas Day 1996. Various claims he made about the events surrounding the killing did not jibe with the established facts. Above all, his own peculiar behavior placed in doubt his “confession.”

The media was momentarily disconcerted August 17-18 by the contradictions, but then proceeded to promote the case with renewed vigor. Some indication of the circus atmosphere can be gleaned from District Attorney Lacy’s comment this week that she had been “overwhelmed” at a

previous press conference by the “screaming” of the media.

Whether Karr was guilty or not clearly did not interest the media outlets. The tabloids jumped in with both feet. The *New York Post* referred to Karr in one headline as a “Prissy Perv”; “‘Wolf’ Likes Little Boys Too,” declared another. After Karr’s flight, the *Post* front page screamed, “Snake on a Plane.” The “authoritative” *Washington Post* and *New York Times* gave front-page coverage to the story.

Now the case that never was has ignominiously fallen apart. One knows without having to investigate too deeply that none of the newspaper editors or news anchors will offer any explanation for their conduct.

The *Denver Post*, whose headline 12 days ago boldly claimed, “Family’s Years of Fear, Anger Come to an End,” was discreet Tuesday about its previous treatment of the case. Its headline simply read, “DNA Test Clears Karr.” The article blamed the Boulder authorities for “igniting worldwide publicity,” but made no mention of participating in the frenzy.

The *New York Daily News*, which had run the infamous “Solved” on its front page August 17, on Tuesday turned venomously on Karr. “Liar Found Out,” it headlined its story on the end of the legal case. “The creep who convinced Colorado prosecutors he might be JonBenet Ramsey’s killer was unmasked as a liar yesterday after his DNA failed to match genetic material on the slain 6-year-old’s body,” the piece began.

The *Boston Herald*, whose editorial at the time of Karr’s arrest in Bangkok confidently declared, “A tragedy nears an end,” responded in a similar manner, demonizing the obviously unstable man. “It’s Official: He’s Kar-razy,” ran its headline.

On August 17, CNN’s anchor Miles O’Brien began the early morning news program by telling his viewers, “A stunning turn in a decade-old mystery. A 41-year-old school teacher, John Mark Karr, an American, arrested in Thailand just a few hours ago, admitting he killed JonBenet Ramsey.” He went on, taking Karr’s guilt for granted, to ask a correspondent, “And we don’t know, based on all of that, how he came to know or see JonBenet Ramsey at a pageant or whatever?”

Tuesday, without a word of explanation, O’Brien made the briefest reference to the Ramsey case, only the fifth item in the news report, explaining: “John Mark Karr no longer a suspect in the JonBenet Ramsey murder case, but not out of trouble. He faces an extradition hearing today on child pornography charges in California. Authorities say there was no DNA match linking him to the killing of 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey ten years ago.”

By 11 a.m., the American media, predictably, had a new case to stick its filthy snout into, the arrest of wanted

polygamist Warren Jeffs near Las Vegas. CNN’s Daryn Kagan breathlessly explained, “This developing story. The FBI has one of its ten most wanted in custody this hour. ... And with more on that, on the significance on what this man is accused of doing and why it’s just so incredible, how this Nevada state trooper caught him, let’s go to our Kelli Arena, our justice correspondent, with more on that—Kelli.” Turning on a dime once again, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and the rest of the media were off and running.

The entire sordid Karr affair has revealed the American media, more than ever, to be engaged in one conscious, ceaseless effort to pollute public sensibilities. It deliberately appeals to and encourages the worst instincts in the population.

In obsessively covering stories like the JonBenet Ramsey murder, the media personalities are not, in any sense, betraying themselves. Wealthy, narcissistic, self-involved and uninformed, they tend to be fascinated by the prurient and salacious. This is their ‘meat,’ this is what gets them going, and they assume the same holds true for the general public.

The American political establishment, more broadly, increasingly feels called upon to feed the population stimulants—scandals, sex crimes, celebrities on trial and, of course, terror scares—on a daily basis. As the glue that tenuously holds the Bush administration and the two-party system together—the prosecution of the “global war on terror,” the supposed success of “free-market” policies—threatens to give way, the ruling elite turns ever more hysterically to the politics of diversion and debasement.

This need for artificial excitation is a symptom of a sick social organism. The media hysteria surrounding the Karr arrest and extradition indicate the onset of a new stage in the disease.



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