

Gunman murders Arkansas Democratic Party chairman

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The Arkansas state chairman of the Democratic Party was shot to death Wednesday by a gunman who was himself killed in a later exchange of gunfire with police. Bill Gwatney, 48, was murdered in his office in Little Rock. While little evidence has yet been released to the public, it is already clear that he was deliberately targeted by his attacker.

The gunman, Timothy Dale Johnson, entered the premises pretending to be interested in volunteering, then pushed past several staff members to reach the chairman's office. He introduced himself to Gwatney and they shook hands, whereupon he pulled out a handgun and opened fire, hitting the Democratic Party official four times, including once in the head. Gwatney died four hours later.

Johnson fled the scene, and six blocks away pointed a gun at a security guard at the offices of the Arkansas Baptist Convention, but did not open fire. He told the guard, "I lost my job." He then drove south from the Arkansas state capital with sheriff's deputies in pursuit, finally hitting a police roadblock near Sheridan, about 30 miles away, where he got out of his truck, fired at police, and was shot to death himself.

Gwatney was the son of a wealthy automobile dealer who became prominent in state politics before he was 35. He served as a state senator before giving up his position because of term limits. He was the finance chairman for Mike Beebe, the successful Democratic candidate for governor in 2006, and Beebe named him state Democratic Party chairman after that campaign.

Like most Arkansas Democratic politicians, Gwatney was a supporter of the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, whose husband was a five-term governor of the state. He was a superdelegate to the Democratic National Convention being held in Denver later this month.

The incident that apparently served as the trigger for the violence came early Wednesday morning, as Johnson was working the midnight shift at a Target warehouse in Conway, about 30 miles north of Little Rock. Johnson became angry at his supervisors and wrote on a store wall, "Target is run by dumb jocks and sorority bitches."

A Target spokesman said that when his manager called him in to discuss the incident, Johnson turned in his employee badge and stormed out. Until then his work record was good, the spokesman said. He added, "This was different behavior for him ... When he left yesterday, he voluntarily left. We asked him 'What's going on? Do you want to talk about something?' It was, 'Let's talk.' It was not about termination."

While the specific motivation for the shooting remains unknown, Johnson sought out Gwatney and was not merely shooting randomly after losing his job. He left the Target warehouse about 8 a.m. and drove into the city, stopping at the state Democratic Party headquarters and ignoring several other potential victims as he searched for the party chairman.

Police found Gwatney's name written on a Post-It in Johnson's home in Searcy, northeast of Little Rock, when they searched it after the shooting, together with a phone number. Investigators would not reveal whether the phone number was Gwatney's, either at his Democratic Party office or at the family-owned auto dealership in the Little Rock suburb of Jacksonville.

A state police spokesman said that Johnson also had the keys to two vehicles from Gwatney family car lots, but that he was not a former employee of the family or its chain of dealerships. The police also found a will at Johnson's home, as well as a laptop computer which they have begun searching.

The Little Rock murder is the fourth recent incident

in the South of violence or threatened violence against groups or individuals demonized by the ultra-right.

On July 27, Jim Adkisson, 58, walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church near Knoxville, Tennessee and opened fire with a semiautomatic shotgun on the audience attending a children's play, killing two members of the church, Greg McKendry, age 60, and Linda Kraeger, age 61, and wounding six others. He subsequently killed himself, leaving a suicide note in which he stated "his hatred for the liberal movement," particularly the church's openness to gays.

On August 2, 22-year-old Raymond Hunter Geisel was arrested in Miami and charged with making death threats against Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. Police found weapons, body armor and other military gear in his car and hotel room. Geisel made the threats against Obama, including a reference to the candidate with a racial epithet, during a training session he was undertaking to become a bail bondsman. Others in the class reported him to the police. He faces federal charges.

On August 8, 48-year-old Jerry M. Blanchard was arrested in North Carolina for making similar threats to kill Obama. A Secret Service agent claimed that Blanchard may have mental health issues due to a recent head injury, and Blanchard has denied threatening the Democratic presidential candidate.

Johnson fits the social profile of these cases. He was white, middle-aged and under considerable economic stress. He was socially isolated, living alone in the home he had shared with his parents until his father's death in 2006. He owned a small arsenal of weapons—14 guns in the house, two more in the truck in which he died—and took regular practice at a local shooting club.

He was undoubtedly conservative in his political views, and had voted in Republican primaries for most of the past decade, except in 2006 when he voted in a Democratic primary. He voted in the Republican presidential primary February 5, which was won by the former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee.



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