

The execution of John Muhammad: another gruesome moment in America

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The execution Tuesday evening of John Allen Muhammad, 48, known as the “Beltway Sniper” for the series of killings he allegedly masterminded in the Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia area in October 2002, was another grisly episode in American social life.

The US Supreme Court declined to intervene Monday, although three justices complained about the haste with which the process was proceeding, and Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, a Democrat, refused to grant a clemency request Tuesday morning, which made Muhammad’s death by lethal injection at 9 p.m. Eastern Time inevitable. Kaine describes himself as an opponent of the death penalty but has only halted the execution of one death row prisoner during his time in office, while allowing nine to go ahead.

Muhammad faced the death penalty Tuesday because the US Attorney General in 2002, John Ashcroft, assigned him to be tried in Virginia—which has the second-busiest assembly line of death after Texas—as opposed to neighboring Maryland (the locale of the majority of the murders), where capital punishment was under judicial review. Muhammad was eventually tried, and condemned to death, for the murder of Dean H. Meyers, 53, gunned down in a gas station in Manassas, Virginia, on October 9, 2002.

Muhammad’s lawyers, Jon Sheldon and James G. Connell III, asked Kaine to spare their client’s life on the grounds that he was too mentally ill to be executed. They compiled a 40-minute video that included interviews with attorneys, mental health experts, and witnesses to underscore Muhammad’s disordered psychological condition.

According to a summary posted on their law firm’s web site, Sheldon and Connell pointed to Muhammad’s “severe mental illness as illustrated by brain damage, brain dysfunction, neurological deficits as well as his psychotic and delusional behavior.” His legal team argued that these conditions were exacerbated by Gulf War syndrome he suffered as a first sergeant in the 1991 war. The summary noted that one of the jurors in the case had declared that she would not have sentenced Muhammad to death if she had known of his severe mental illness.

The US cable channels, which provided semi-hysterical 24-hour-a-day coverage of the “sniper” killings in 2002, had no

intention of missing the boat as Muhammad met his end. A ghoulish blurb for Tuesday’s “Larry King Live” on CNN read: “The Execution of the ‘DC Sniper’: His 2002 shooting spree left at least ten dead and shocked a nation. We’re live at the prison with eye-witness accounts from the victims’ families.”

The Associated Press reported in late October that the syndicated “infotainment” program “Inside Edition” had offered to pay an Idaho man’s expenses for a four-day trip to Virginia to watch the execution of Muhammad, who allegedly killed his daughter. The American media, as is its wont, encourages the worst instincts in the population.

The state-sanctioned murder in Virginia aroused revulsion in many parts of the globe. At least one of the victims’ relatives, Dean Meyers’s brother Robert, found the experience “surreal.” He told CNN’s King, “Watching the life be sapped out of someone intentionally was very different and an experience I had never had. I watched my mother die of natural causes. But that was very different. ... I would say that [any “relief or closure”] pretty much was overcome just by the sadness that the whole situation generates in my heart. You know, that he would get to the place where he did what he did. And that it had to come to this.”

Muhammad and his accomplice, Lee Boyd Malvo (or John Lee Malvo), 17 at the time, allegedly shot and killed 10 men and women in cold blood, seriously wounding three more, from October 2 to October 22, 2002. They are also believed to be responsible for several earlier deaths in Louisiana, Arizona and Alabama. The victims were going about their daily lives—pumping gas, shopping, waiting for a bus—when bullets fired from the trunk of a car cut them down.

Without minimizing the horror and tragedy of the deaths and their consequences for a great number of people, it is necessary to point out that putting Muhammad to death (Malvo is serving life in prison without parole) could not bring “closure” for anyone involved. On the contrary, the bloodthirsty, vindictive act by the state will only intensify and further pollute the violent social atmosphere that helped give rise to the crimes in the first place.

It is bitterly ironic that Muhammad, a Gulf War veteran and a longtime member of the US military, was executed in the immediate aftermath of the Fort Hood mass shooting, bound up

with the prosecution of American imperialism's next assault on Iraq, from 2003 to the present day. The brutal application of military might to subjugate various peoples in the interests of the US corporate elite has all sorts of unforeseen consequences, not the least of which is the indelible lessons it teaches certain deranged members of the American military itself that "force works" in their own circumstances, too.

Another veteran of the Gulf War, right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh (executed in 2001), was responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995, which killed 168 people and injured more than 680. The current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have unleashed a wave of violence by returning veterans, including numerous cases of murder, robbery, assault, rape, and spousal abuse, as well as an alarming increase in suicides.

Muhammad's life story makes for unhappy recounting. As we noted in 2002, "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."

Both of Muhammad's marriages ended acrimoniously. His second wife, Mildred Muhammad, petitioned for a restraining order in 2000, telling the court, "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."

Interviewed in the media recently, Ms. Muhammad, who has written a book about her life with the future "sniper," claims that her ex-husband underwent a dramatic change in behavior as a result of his Gulf War experiences. She told a National Public Radio interviewer October 6, for example, that Muhammad "was a totally different person" after his return from the conflict.

"When he came back he was very reserved, he sat in the corner, pondering what happened to him in Saudi [Arabia]. I don't believe that I will ever know exactly what happened to him there, but whatever it was, it shook his foundation and changed him completely from the person that I knew before he left."

Her husband told her that "soldiers were not being treated fairly based upon race. There was a smoke grenade that was thrown into the tent, and the officials in their investigation

decided that John was trying to commit suicide. So they took him from his unit, they hogtied him and put him in a dungeon-like place with this head to the floor and left him there. And he said, do you know what they were trying to do? They were trying to kill me. Why would anybody want to do that? All I wanted to do was to be a good soldier. That is what changed him.... He said you [his wife] have become my enemy, and as my enemy, I will kill you. I didn't feel I needed to wait around for that to happen."

(Apparently referring to Muhammad's account of his war experiences, attorney Sheldon told the media that he "is delusional, paranoid and incompetent. He was angry at the government after he came back from the Gulf War. And he has delusions of racist conspiracies.")

Absurd claims were made by the Bush administration and the ultra-right in 2002 to the effect that Muhammad was a domestic "terrorist." A one-time member of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, the reactionary separatist organization, and a volunteer security guard at the so-called "Million Man March" organized in Washington in October 1995, Muhammad's mental universe was terribly confused. He parroted black nationalist rhetoric and could praise Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, but also claimed at times to be working for the CIA and FBI. In July 2000, while applying at a government office on the Caribbean island of Antigua, Muhammad claimed to have attended "Special Forces/Sniper School" in the US military and to have "taught urban warfare."

All of this ideological mishmash was overshadowed by an obvious mental disorder. Malvo, at Muhammad's trial in 2006, claimed that the killings were part of a plan to kidnap young people, extort \$10 million from the American government, and set up training camps in Canada from which children could be dispatched to the US to carry out terrorist acts.

In the final analysis, American authorities resort to the barbarism of the death penalty in dealing with psychopathic behavior because they have no rational or progressive solutions to any of the country's pressing problems.

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