

US: Software engineer crashes plane into IRS office

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On Thursday, 53-year-old software engineer Andrew Joseph Stack III flew his private airplane into a seven-story Austin, Texas building. The building houses the local offices of the federal tax agency, the Internal Revenue Service, staffed by 200 employees. The crash and subsequent fire killed Stack and a 67-year-old IRS employee and injured more than a dozen others.

Before crashing his plane into the building, Stack set fire to his home.

According to accounts in a local newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesman*, as an avocation Stack played in local alt-country bands. He had recently remarried and lived with his wife, a pianist in the graduate music program at the University of Texas, and her 12-year-old daughter.

Friends said that they had a hard time reconciling Stack's homicidal actions with their knowledge of him, with one calling the event "damn strange."

The US is a country where individual acts of violence are a frequent occurrence. Hardly a week goes by without a school or workplace shooting, or an incident involving the killing of a spouse. It is not uncommon for individuals to snap.

In the background to these events there are often economic and social pressures, and grievances that are broadly felt. Absent any progressive outlet for social opposition, these sentiments can lead to mental breakdown or desperate and disoriented acts of individual violence. This certainly appears to have been the case with Stack.

A suicide note posted by Stack on the Internet reveals an individual consumed by hatred for big business and the government. His rage is directed in particular at the IRS, with which he had a series of disputes as a small businessman over the course of decades. Stack

denounced the tax agency as part of a government that serves only the rich and powerful. "There are two 'interpretations' for every law; one for the very rich, and one for the rest of us," he wrote.

There has been little serious media commentary on Stack's letter, which was quickly taken offline at the request of the FBI. There was, perhaps, some nervousness that his statements would strike a broader chord.

Stack was particularly enraged by the contrast between the experiences of individuals such as himself and the treatment by the government of the giant corporations and banks in the wake of the economic crisis. He denounced the "gluttony and overwhelming stupidity" of GM executives; the drug and insurance companies, which he said "are murdering tens of thousands of people a year and stealing from the corpses and victims they cripple"; and the Wall Street banks.

The bailout of the banks was an attempt, Stack said, to "steal from the middle class (who doesn't have any say in it, elections are a joke) to cover their asses and it's 'business-as-usual.'"

The letter expresses the impotent rage of an individual who evidently felt the corruption and brutality of the capitalist system and the two political parties, while at the same time seeing no way to oppose it. At one point, he referred to the general population as "zombies" who he hoped would be awakened to revolt by his actions.

Significantly, Stack, who grew up in Pennsylvania, reflected the widespread disillusionment with the trade unions, which he denounced for abandoning steelworkers and their families in the mid-1970s. He recalled in his Internet posting meeting a widow of a steelworker who had been promised a pension and

health care, but instead got nothing “because the incompetent mill management and corrupt union (not to mention the government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement.”

Based on his anti-IRS advocacy, media commentators quickly associated Stack with right-wing Tea Party organizations. While there is no evidence as of yet that Stack had any particular political associations, the combination of hatred of government (especially the IRS) and big business with deep disorientation is a common feature of members of these groups, which direct such sentiments along extreme right-wing channels.

However, Stack also expressed contempt for the government as a whole, saying the eight years of George Bush “reinforced for all of us that this criticism rings equally true for all of the government,” not just the IRS.

As recounted in his letter, Stack responded to the social devastation that afflicted wide sections of the Midwest during the 1970s and 1980s by seeking to become an independent businessman. His efforts toward that end were repeatedly frustrated, which he blamed on the IRS and US tax code.

Stack wrote that after going through a divorce and struggling over years to get his business back on its feet, he saw his plans once again upended by the bursting of the dot.com bubble and the events of 9/11. Upon moving to Austin, he found that there was little work, and what there was paid only a third of what he had been making. His savings and retirement nest egg were soon exhausted, and, after another conflict with the IRS, he was hit with a \$10,000 penalty.

The suicide attack on Thursday was evidently the product of having been driven to despair by these frustrations, combined with whatever personal or psychological problems Stack may have had.



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