

The Panama City, Florida school board tragedy and American social reality

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A mentally ill man held a Florida community's school board hostage December 14, before firing a number of shots that hit no one, exchanging gunfire with a security guard, and eventually turning the weapon on himself. He left behind a Facebook page that excoriated the wealthy who "manipulate, use, abuse, and economically enslave 95 percent of the population."

The incident—entirely captured on video—began shortly after 2 pm on Tuesday, when Clay Duke, 56, approached the podium during a routine Bay District School Board meeting in Panama City, Florida. He mumbled something incoherent, then spray painted a red circle with a V in the middle of it, a reference to the graphic novel and film, *V for Vendetta*, about a lone vigilante-freedom fighter who violently takes on the establishment in a future dictatorial Britain.

Duke proceeded to pull out a 9 millimeter pistol and point it at the school board. He told the members of the public present and the women on the board they could leave. One of the female members of the board, Ginger Littleton, returned surreptitiously and attempted unsuccessfully to knock the gun out of Duke's hand with her handbag. He knocked Littleton down, but allowed her to leave the room unharmed.

As he trained the gun on the male board members, Duke spoke about his wife having been fired by the Panama City school system. A board member promised Duke the woman would get her job back, but he only shook his head. Duke eventually fired several errant shots at school superintendent Bill Husfelt. In turn, security guard Mike Jones opened fire at the gunman, striking him. The distraught man then took his own life with a shot to the head.

It should be noted that Husfelt showed remarkable coolness and courage in the incident. With a gun pointed directly at him, he urged Duke to permit the other members of the board to quit the room, asserting that he was the one responsible for the woman's firing. "Let them go. I'm the one that did it," Husfelt said. "I don't want anybody to get hurt."

In general, the board members, along with Jones, the

security guard, acquitted themselves remarkably well. They demonstrated a good deal of personal courage during the incident and demonstrated a considerable degree of sympathy in its aftermath. Much to the surprise of the media, "Husfelt even had kind words for the family of the man who shot at him. 'My heart goes out to his family,' he said. 'He had made up his mind that he was going to die today.'"

Jones spoke along the same lines, explaining, "I just want to let the Duke family know that my heart goes out to you."

The lack of rancor speaks to a certain shift in public mood, as increasing numbers of ordinary Americans fathom the toll the economic devastation is taking.

Duke suffered from mental illness. In 1999, according to the *Panama City News Herald*, he was convicted of stalking his ex-wife, shooting into a vehicle and wearing a bulletproof vest. He served some four years in prison. His lawyer at the time, Ben Bollinger, told the media this week, "The guy was like, just out there. ... He had some bad problems."

In January 2009, Duke wrote a letter to a judge, stating that he had come before her in 1999 and 2000, "as a mentally ill man who had committed crimes. ... While in prison I was diagnosed as 'adult-onset bipolar condition' and given proper therapy. With that therapy and good behavior, I was released from prison after serving 85 percent of my sentence."

Duke's current wife, Rebecca, was reportedly hired by the school district in question as a primary school teacher for students with special needs in September 2009. After a three-month probationary period, she was terminated. Her unemployment benefits later ran out.

Rebecca Duke said Wednesday that her dead husband had been an excellent shot and if he missed the board members, he had done so purposely. She described him as a "gentle giant." She also told the media, "He didn't want anyone to get hurt but himself," adding, "The economy and the world just got the better of him."

Another American tragedy. Not the first, and certainly not the last. "The economy and the world just got the better of

him.” Of how many could that be said at present?

Amanda Crowder, Rebecca Duke’s niece, told the *News Herald*, speaking of her aunt and uncle, “All I know is they were broke. ... He [Clay Duke] loved his wife so much he couldn’t rationalize what was going on [i.e., her termination] in his head.” The newspaper continued, “It’s been almost a year since Rebecca Duke was fired, and since then Clay Duke’s anger and alienation ‘rumbled and grumbled inside of him until he just couldn’t take it anymore,’ Crowder said.”

On his Facebook page, Duke made his concerns quite explicit: “My Testament: Some people (the government sponsored media) will say I was evil, a monster (V)... no... I was just born poor in a country where the Wealthy manipulate, use, abuse, and economically enslave 95% of the population. Rich Republicans, Rich Democrats... same-same... rich... they take turns fleecing us... our few dollars... pyramiding the wealth for themselves. The 95%... the us, in US of A, are the neo slaves of the Global South. Our Masters, the Wealthy, do, as they like to us...”

Duke then noted the comment of billionaire Warren Buffet, “There’s class warfare, all right, but its my class, the rich class that’s making war and we’re winning.” He concluded with the famous final, insurrectionary stanza of Percy Shelley’s “The Mask of Anarchy,” written in response to the Peterloo Massacre carried out against workers by the British military in Manchester, in August 1819:

“Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number.
Shake your chains to earth like dew.
Which in sleep has fallen on you.
Ye are many—they are few.”

Duke’s actions were mad, but some of his words and thoughts were not. He recognized what wider and wider layers of the US population understand, or partly understand, that America in 2010 is presided over by an utterly ruthless financial-corporate aristocracy, which grabs everything for itself.

The terrible social crisis takes a different toll on different personalities. The most vulnerable and unstable, like the weakest points in a dike, give way first and may even collapse internally. But as Trotsky pointed out—in a passage we have had occasion to cite, alas, more than once—even at a time of unparalleled crisis, suicides constitute an insignificant percentage. “Peoples,” he noted, “never resort to suicide. When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution.”

Conditions of life continue to worsen for millions of Americans, whose suffering is a matter of complete indifference to President Barack Obama, and the filthy

crowd of reprobates from both parties in Congress.

Only the day before Duke’s explosion, the *Panama City News Herald* reported that “Thousands of unemployed residents of Bay County have lost the possibility of extending unemployment benefit payments.” What are these people to do, according to the brilliant and farsighted figures who guide American society? Starve? Rot?

The same day as the shooting, the Rockefeller Foundation released a report, “Standing on Shaky Ground: Americans’ Experiences with Economic Insecurity,” which indicates that, according to a press release, “in the 18 months preceding the fall of 2009, fully 93 percent of [US] households experienced at least one substantial economic shock. Data presented in “Shaky Ground” suggests that economic insecurity has become the rule, not the exception, for many Americans...”

The press release continues: ““This new report shows the extent to which American families have been rocked by economic shocks whose consequences include not just worry but also real economic hardship,” said Jacob Hacker, Stanley B. Resor Professor of Political Science at Yale University. “This report dashes the notion that economic disruption is limited to lower-income families by revealing that many middle-class and even upper-middle-class families are unable to meet basic economic needs.””

This is the driving force of American reality at present, all the lies and stupidity of the media notwithstanding. It will inevitably generate social upheaval.

The author also recommends:

The Austin airplane suicide and the political crisis in the US

[20 February 2009]



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