

The Aurora Massacre: Once again, evasions rather than explanations

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President Barack Obama touched down in the Denver, Colorado area Sunday afternoon to meet with the families of the victims of the Aurora movie theatre massacre. Afterwards he made a brief public appearance, in which he declared:

“Although the perpetrator of this evil act has received a lot of attention over the past couple of days, that attention will fade away. In the end, after he has felt the full force of our justice system, what will be remembered are the good people who were impacted by this tragedy.”

This statement is both thoughtless and cynical. As a matter of fact, very little is known about James Holmes, the alleged gunman responsible for the killing of 12 people and the wounding of scores more. It is fortunate that this individual did not take his own life at the conclusion of his homicidal rampage. The fact that Holmes is still alive at least provides the possibility that the deeper psychological causes of this and other episodes of mass killing will be found.

Hopefully, doctors will make a serious effort to discover the neurological and psychological processes that led a young man to commit such a heinous crime. As this is the third major incident of mass killing to take place during his presidency, one would imagine that Obama would also recognize the importance of such an investigation. But this president, it seems, can think only of revenge. He believes that the troubling issues raised by this latest tragedy will be settled when Holmes is subjected to “the full force of our justice system.”

And as for the victims of the shooting, they and their terribly bereaved families will soon be forgotten by the political establishment and the media. Do the politicians and the media still remember the victims of the massacres at Columbine, Virginia Tech and Tucson? As in the past, the families of the deceased and injured will be left to

suffer the unending pain on their own. American society, as it is presently constituted, does not believe that it owes the victims anything, least of all an explanation.

An examination of the psychological background of this crime is essential, but that can only provide a part of the explanation for the Aurora killings. Holmes is a very sick person. And yet the cause of this crime cannot be explained solely, or even primarily, by investigating the psychology of the shooter. Holmes’ homicidal rampage, like those of other mass killers, occurs in a definite social context. We must understand not only the pathology of the individual, but also that of the society from which he emerged.

More than 13 years have passed since the United States and the world were stunned by the killings of students at Columbine. That event was followed by meaningless denunciations of “evil” and perfunctory and soon forgotten declarations of solidarity with the victims and their families. But the politicians and the media moved on, and other disasters followed. Who can claim that anything was learned from that tragedy?

One must also ask: Have any of the deeper causes of the Columbine killings been identified and addressed? Is the United States less or more socially dysfunctional than it was in 1999? Is America less unjust and unequal? Is the social fabric less strained? Has anything happened during the past 13 years that would tend to make America a less violent and more caring society? Is there any reason for young Americans to be more hopeful about the future than those who came of age one or two decades earlier?

James Holmes was born in December 1987. What are the events and circumstances that shaped his conscious life? He was only 11 years old when the Columbine killings took place. The events of 9/11, which set into motion the “War on Terror,” occurred when he was 13. Since the years of his adolescence, Holmes has lived in a society whose political leaders encourage and promote a

form of social paranoia, in which the population is called upon to be “on the alert” for “suspicious” individuals and unknown threats. Danger, the people are told, lurks everywhere. And the sole defense against this unknown but supposedly ever-present threat is violence, which is practiced by the country’s leaders on a gigantic scale. Every day, in one part of the world or another, America is killing “enemies.”

This is the environment of violence, compounded by the social pressures of years of economic crisis, that acted on the mind of James Holmes. The most striking feature of Holmes’ crime is the randomness of the killings. He entered a darkened theater, massively armed, and began firing into the seated audience. He did not know the people he was shooting. He could hardly see their faces. They existed for him only as targets for his weapons.

But this form of depersonalized killing appears as a reproduction of methods used by the United States in its deployment of drones. It has been acknowledged that many of those hit by missiles have been killed solely because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The “technicians” manipulating the drones from thousands of miles away do not know the identities of those they are killing. They are, in their own minds, merely eliminating the depersonalized representatives of some abstract threat. Such actions, ordered by President Obama, are based on carefully developed plans and calculations.

The “rational” killings by the state trigger irrationality within society. The routinizing and depersonalizing of killing, carried out on a mass scale by the government, and justified by the mass media, must have tragic consequences for American society. One of those consequences, one can legitimately argue, is the bloodshed in Aurora.

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