

Alabama standoff ends with death of hostage-taker

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5 February 2013

The standoff between authorities and an Alabama man who allegedly shot a school bus driver and then abducted a five-year-old boy ended Monday afternoon on its seventh day. FBI agents entered the underground bunker belonging to Jimmy Lee Dykes, a 65-year-old Vietnam War veteran, outside the small town of Midland City, in southeastern Alabama. The child was freed and Dykes killed in the raid. A stun or flash grenade was set off as part of the operation.

According to authorities, Dykes boarded a school bus last Tuesday afternoon and demanded that the driver, Charles Poland Jr., hand over two children. Poland refused and opened the rear emergency exit door, allowing some 21 children to escape. Dykes then allegedly shot the driver four times, killing him, and seized the five-year-old, known only as “Ethan.” Fourteen-year-old Tarrica Singletary told ABC News, “He said he was going to kill us, going to kill us all.”

The incident has not surprisingly traumatized the town’s population and struck a chord with many across the country, coming only seven weeks after the shooting deaths of 20 children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

A memorial service for the 66-year-old Poland held in the hamlet of Ozark, Alabama, on Sunday attracted hundreds of attendees. Dale County school superintendent Donny Bynum read out several letters from children who rode on Poland’s bus. “Being on your bus has been some of the best times of my life,” said one letter. “I will miss your big, smiling face,” read another.

Two dozen school bus drivers from Escambia County, Florida, drove to the event. Driver Darlene Hart told the *Pensacola News-Journal*, “When we found out this guy was doing the same thing that we’re doing, we felt like we had to go out and show our support,” she said. “Bus drivers are just caring people. We feel like the children are our children too. I think that any one of these drivers would have done the same thing.”

Born in Idaho, Poland joined the military in the 1960s and resided in Alabama from then on. His sister, Vicki Upchurch, told NBC News that Poland “retired as a diesel

mechanic in 2009 and had been driving a school bus to help support his wife until she was able to retire.” Poland’s son, Aaron, explained that when a child climbed on board his father’s bus, “they were no longer their parents’ [children], they were his.... And I know that’s the reason why my dad took those shots. It was for his children, just like he would do for me and my sister.”

The incident in Midland City is tragic from every point of view.

One of the children on the bus, nine-year-old (nine-year-old!) Jennifer Hyde told CNN that what happened was the end of her childhood. “You couldn’t just go on and have a normal childhood when you faced a life threatening situation like that. You just can’t go on and be carefree,” she said.

The response of the US media to each new violent and shocking incident like the one in Alabama, which run the risk of generating disturbing or critical thoughts in the population, is a combination of shallowness, bewilderment and efforts at damage control. Above all, no one is to conclude that there is a link between such tragedies and the overall economic and moral state of American society.

In this particular instance, the media has chosen to reduce the complexity of the situation—and avoid its wider implications—by contrasting the two central figures in the drama, counterposing the heroic Poland to the malevolent Dykes.

The *New York Times* chose to conclude its piece on Poland’s memorial service with the ignorant comments of the Rev. Ray Layton, who suggested that the violence in Midland City was caused by “a nationwide movement away from God and prayer.... When Mr. Dykes confronted Mr. Poland, Mr. Layton said, some may think that the Devil won. ‘But,’ he added, ‘I’m here to tell you the Devil picked on the wrong person this time.’ ”

As noted above, Poland, by all accounts, was a decent and caring individual. But it is doing his memory no disservice to suggest that he could not have been a saint. Millions of people who make a living in social services, hospitals, offices and factories demonstrate the same essential

generosity and decency on a daily basis. Their kindness and patience, of course, tends to amaze well-heeled media commentators and politicians, surrounded as they are by a very different human type.

But there is no value either in demonizing Jimmy Lee Dykes. As far as his apparently misanthropic view of the world is concerned, the former truck driver and Vietnam veteran was a product of circumstances and history, especially the economic deterioration of American life in recent decades and the official promotion of militarism, religious backwardness, xenophobia, in part to divert attention from the worsening conditions.

Dykes, according to neighbors, was “a loner who railed against the government.” An acquaintance of Dykes’s told the media that the 65-year-old, who lived up a dirt road, kept to himself and listened “to a lot of” right-wing talk radio. Michael Creel said that Dykes was “very into what’s going on with the nation and the politics and all the laws being made. The things he didn’t agree with, he would ventilate.” The police chief of a neighboring town told the Associated Press, “He’s against the government, starting with [Barack] Obama on down.”

Hatred of the authorities is entirely understandable and, whether various police chiefs or the mainstream media care to recognize it, masses of Americans are “anti-government.” However, this term has generally been reserved by the media in recent decades for what are, in fact, ultra-right and even fascistic elements, the unhealthiest consequence of American social decay.

How many Jimmy Lee Dykeses are there in the US, more often than not, like Timothy McVeigh and the Beltway Sniper, John Allen Muhammad, graduates of the US military?

Not very many, but they do speak to a wider portion of the population who do not commit homicides—deeply isolated and alienated people (Dykes was apparently estranged from both a daughter and his siblings, some of whom he had told “to go to hell,” according to a childhood friend), individuals for whom society has no use (and, thus, who have no use for society), struggling financially in many cases, bitter, disoriented, more often than not attracted to the phony populism and paranoia of the ultra-right media.

With such people, the anger is genuine, and almost always misdirected. Neighbors told the Associated Press that Dykes “once beat a dog to death with a lead pipe and threatened to shoot children for setting foot on his property.”

One might also ask, how many Midland City, Alabamas are there in the United States? In this town of 2,300 people, the median income in 2010 was \$20,000 and the median income for a family was \$24,474. Some 26 percent of families and 31 percent of the population were surviving

below the official poverty line, including 44.1 percent of those under age 18 and 22.2 percent of those age 65 or over.

Looming large in Dale County, Alabama, is Fort Rucker, a US Army post and home to the US Army Aviation Center for Excellence (USAACE). In 2000, more than 6,000 people lived on the base. According to its web site, “Fort Rucker is the largest helicopter training installation in the world. As the United States Army Aviation Center of Excellence and the home of the Aviation Branch, Fort Rucker is charged with producing Aviation Soldiers for the world’s premier aviation force.”

Fort Rucker has played a major role in training helicopter pilots for the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As of 2009, it was training 1,200 such pilots a year.

Jimmy Lee Dykes, reports AP, was trained in aviation maintenance, and it seems reasonable to assume that Fort Rucker figured somehow in that training. The Pentagon, as it always does when its human products commit acts of mayhem, is maintaining a discreet silence.

In what one might consider a related incident, 25-year-old Iraq War veteran Eddie Ray Routh has been charged in the fatal shooting of celebrated former Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle. Kyle claimed that he had killed more than 150 Iraqis during four tours of duty and was treated by the American media and the extreme right as a hero.

He ran a program devoted to assisting other veterans to reorient themselves, and Routh was one of his charges. While at a gun range southwest of Fort Worth, Texas, Routh, a former Marine, allegedly turned his semi-automatic handgun on Kyle and the latter’s friend, Chad Littlefield, and killed them both.

Erath County (Texas) sheriff Tommy Bryant told the media that Routh was unemployed and “may have been suffering from some type of mental illness from being in the military himself.”



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