

The social and historical dimensions of the Virginia on-air murders

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The fatal shooting of news reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward in Moneta, Virginia Wednesday morning on live television was a shocking and dreadful event.

Tens of thousands of viewers in the region watched the murders as they happened. Moreover, the assailant, Vester Flanagan (or Bryce Williams, his professional name), filmed the killing on his own cell phone, waiting until Ward's camera was trained on Parker (so the audience would see her) to open fire. He then uploaded the video to his social media accounts.

Flanagan was mentally deranged. As he explained in a 23-page fax he sent to ABC News the day of the killings, "I've been a human powder keg for a while ... just waiting to go BOOM!!!!," and "I'm all f----- up in the head."

An exhaustive explanation of his homicidal outburst would obviously require examining Flanagan's personal history and psychological deterioration.

Nonetheless, there are elements of the tragedy that are so striking and socially telling one would be remiss in not referring to them. Especially under conditions where the corrupt, self-interested media and political establishment is relentlessly determined to prevent anyone from drawing a single serious or critical conclusion.

Flanagan was deranged at the time of the shooting, but derangement too has its logic. It only has at its disposal "that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and by the narrower world of class society" (Trotsky). In such a case as the present one, the shooting in public of news reporters, the madness reflects—through however distorted a prism—something about social realities.

The particular lethal form in which Flanagan's insanity found expression cannot be separated out from some of the most damaging features of American social life: the culture of narcissistic self-promotion and the desire, at all costs, to be in the "spotlight;" the promotion of racial and identity politics; and, most importantly, the impact on

social psychology of the endless interventions (invasions, drone strikes, assassinations, etc.) of the American government and military all over the world, as well as the campaign of unrestrained police terror at home, which encourage a belief in violence as a means of resolving the individual's life problems.

In his fax sent to ABC (which has only released certain excerpts), Flanagan reveals a paranoid, anti-social and self-absorbed view of things. (According to Fox News, "At least nine photos taken throughout his career adorned Flanagan's fridge with another publicity shot taped to a wall beside it.")

He complains about his career in broadcasting being thwarted by a host of employers and colleagues. Flanagan sets out a long list of grievances. According to ABC News, "He says he has been attacked by black men and white females. He talks about how he was attacked for being a gay, black man. He says has suffered racial discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying at work."

Flanagan aspired to a career as a news reporter in television. Photographs of him as a jovial, smiling newsman can be found online. The sunny dispositions and frozen grins of American television news teams are entirely put on, fake. Flanagan attempted to play the part at various television stations, but for psychological reasons was unable to restrain his anger and bitterness. He could not hold himself together, and each firing or disappointment merely fueled and deepened his rage.

In his faxed suicide note, Flanagan praises the perpetrators of the 2007 Virginia Tech and 1999 Columbine High School massacres, while asserting that the murder of nine African Americans in a Charleston, South Carolina church this June by a white supremacist "sent me over the top."

"Yes, it will sound like I am angry," Flanagan writes. "I am. And I have every right to be. But when I leave this Earth, the only emotion I want to feel is peace ..."

“[I] tried to pull myself up by the bootstraps,” however, “The damage was already done and when someone gets to this point, there is nothing that can be said or done to change their sadness to happiness. It does not work that way. Meds? Nah. It’s too much.”

The response of the American media to the latest tragedy joins ignorance, self-delusion and deliberate efforts to divert public attention from the source of the problem.

The official liberal media continues to harp on the theme of gun control. Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*, one of the nation’s chief “moral leaders,” after pointing to some of the horrific statistics (guns are involved in some 33,000 deaths annually in the US), draws this “lesson”: “We should address gun deaths as a public health crisis. To protect the public, we regulate toys and mutual funds, ladders and swimming pools. Shouldn’t we regulate guns as seriously as we regulate toys?”

Kristof has played his own role in helping to create a murderous climate, with his unending support for one imperialist “human rights” intervention after another, each bloodier and more disastrous than the one before.

The editorial board of the *Washington Post* asks in a headline, “Will America finally do something to stop our gun-fueled carnage?” Needless to say, the *Post* has never asked in a headline, “Will America finally do something to stop the US military-led carnage in the Middle East?”

The newspaper’s editorial intones: “The dramatic shootings that make the news remind us that guns are not noble instruments of freedom; they are highly dangerous machines that have some legitimate uses and many illegitimate ones. Any rational government would carefully regulate them.”

The easy access to weaponry and its stockpiling by portions of the population are not signs of a healthy society, but neither the *Times* nor the *Post* has a word to say about the diseases truly eating away at America—the vast social polarization, the dominance of a financial-corporate aristocracy, the official worship of a giant military machine, a degraded and degrading popular culture, the alienation of wide layers of the population from every leading institution, the pessimism about the future felt by millions, etc. ... the diseases that lie at the heart of the poisonous atmosphere that makes possible the epidemic of mass killings.

The “tough guy” approach to the latest killing, on the other hand, offers nothing but a different set of stupidities. A right-wing opinion piece begins, “On Wednesday,

America met a deeply evil human being: Vester Lee Flanagan II, also known as reporter Bryce Williams.” Another commentator helpfully observes, “We will always have murderers, and we will always have weapons. Cain killed Abel with a rock. It’s not a gun control problem.”

As a lifeline to save themselves from their own inability to explain anything, sections of the American media have seized on a recent study by Dr. Adam Lankford, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama, “Mass Shooters, Firearms, and Social Strains: A Global Analysis of an Exceptionally American Problem.” Lankford, whose findings were presented at the American Sociological Association’s annual meeting in Chicago on Sunday, has carried out the first study of public mass shootings, from 1966 to 2012. He reports that while the US comprises just 5 percent of the global population, it has experienced 31 percent of such events.

Lankford told *Newsweek* magazine that “crime and deviance occur when there’s an unhealthy gap between people’s dreams and aspirations and their ability to reach those dreams.” The professor argues that “Our culture has people reaching for the stars and slipping and falling probably more often.”

Newsweek comments: “That school and work represent these grievances as well as the gap between one’s aspirations and ability to fulfill those dreams could explain why American mass shooters are more likely than those in other countries to target schools and workplaces.”

Lankford argues in his paper that “some mass shooters succumb to terrible delusions of grandeur, and seek fame and glory through killing. They accurately recognize that the only way they can guarantee that their names and faces adorn magazines, newspapers, and television is by slaughtering unarmed men, women, or children.”

There may well be a grain of truth to these arguments, but they fail to explain the levels of mayhem that have developed over the past several decades. For that one has to take into account concrete historical and social phenomena, above all, the essential brutality of class relations within the US and the example set by the American ruling elite’s campaign of global violence.



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