

Dylann Roof convicted on all counts in Charleston church massacre

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16 December 2016

After a week-long trial in which evidence of his guilt was undisputed, white supremacist Dylann Roof was convicted of all charges in his federal murder and hate crimes trial. A jury of nine whites and three blacks took only two hours to approve 33 counts against him, 18 of which carry the death penalty.

Family members of the victims sat in the courtroom holding hands as the verdicts were read out, with “guilty” sounded after every one. There had been little doubt about the verdicts, since video footage of Roof confessing to the massacre was played to the jury, and even his own attorneys did not suggest he was innocent.

The defense did not call a single witness, but was entirely focused on laying the groundwork for the sentencing phase, in which Roof declared he intended to represent himself. Federal prosecutors have said they will seek a death sentence. The sentence will be decided by the same jurors who heard the evidence in the trial, and that phase of the proceeding will begin on January 3.

The trial included not only Roof’s videotaped confession, but graphic testimony from the three survivors of the massacre, in which Rev. Clementa Walker and eight parishioners, all African-Americans, were slaughtered, as well as excerpts from Roof’s journal, including a list of churches he was considering as possible targets, and an online manifesto he posted, declaring his desire to trigger a race war.

On the second day of the trial, Roof’s mother Amelia Cowles suffered a heart attack after saying “sorry” out loud several times. She was hospitalized and survived. The 22-year-old defendant’s grandmother also attended the trial.

Defense attorney David Bruck, who specializes in death-penalty cases, told the jury in his closing

argument that even though Roof was clearly motivated by racial hatred, he was also mentally ill. He called his client an immature young man who embraced the “mad idea that he can make things better by executing those kind, virtuous people.”

Roof apparently planned to kill himself or force police to shoot him to death in a final confrontation after the massacre, and he left one elderly black woman in the church alive, telling her that he needed her to be the only witness to his murders. In the event, however, he was taken without resistance the next day, after police pulled his vehicle over in Shelby, North Carolina, more than 200 miles from Charleston.

Media coverage of the trial has been completely superficial, repeatedly characterizing Roof as “evil,” without attempting to explain the deeper social roots of his terrible crime. The bloodbath in Charleston is only one of a seemingly endless series of such violent mass killings, many of them motivated by confused right-wing and racist sentiments, others without any discernible rationale except despair and alienation from society.

There has been zero mention in current media reports about the trial of Roof’s connections to ultra-right political circles in South Carolina, a hotbed of what is now termed the “alt-right,” or his “white nationalist” sentiments. Roof cited the web site of the Council of Conservative Citizens as crucial to his own development as a white supremacist.

The president of the Council of Conservative Citizens, which calls for opposition to “all efforts to mix the races of mankind,” gave \$65,000 to Republican campaigns over the past few years, including the presidential candidates Ted Cruz, Rand Paul and Rick Santorum.

Roof cited the group’s web site as a source of his

becoming “truly awakened” about racial tensions in the United States, particularly its commentaries on “brutal black on white murders,” justifying the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black youth killed by vigilante gunman George Zimmerman.

The Council of Conservative Citizens has high-level connections in the Republican Party. One of its members, Roan Quintana, was a co-chair in the 2014 re-election campaign of South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley—chosen by Donald Trump to be his ambassador to the United Nations.

Worse than that, Steven Bannon, former head of the ultra-right Breitbart News, has been named by Trump as his senior policy adviser at the White House, co-equal with chief of staff Reince Priebus in the inner workings of the new administration.

Breitbart, considered a major forum for the alt-right, went on the warpath after the Charleston massacre to defend the Confederate flag, after Haley and other Republican politicians decided that the emblem of the old slavocracy had to be removed from the state capitol in Columbia in the wake of Roof’s racist massacre.

Two weeks after the massacre, Breitbart carried a commentary headlined, “Hoist It High And Proud: The Confederate Flag Proclaims A Glorious Heritage,” effectively declaring its solidarity with the racist murderer.

Beyond the overt white racist motivation of the massacre, the killings in Charleston followed in a long line of such atrocities, most involving young, alienated and deeply troubled young men.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, “What psychological and sociological features do the various perpetrators share in common? A highly advanced state of social alienation, great bitterness at other human beings, self-hatred, isolation, general despondency and the recourse to extreme violence to solve their real or imagined problems.

“These tendencies recur too often and too devastatingly to be mere personal failings; they clearly come from the broader society. They reflect a terrible malaise, the mentality of individuals living perpetually under a dark cloud, who have no hope for the future, who can only imagine that things will get worse. Only look at the Facebook photograph of Dylann Roof if you want some idea of this bleakness and despondency!”

The militarism, bullying and celebration of wealth

and privilege that characterize the incoming Trump administration will only insure that such tragedies occur with even greater frequency and ferocity.



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