

Eight dead in Texas church shooting—the latest eruption of social tensions in America

By Kate Randall
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Just before 7 p.m. on Wednesday evening Larry Ashbrook walked into the Wedgwood Baptist Church in a middle-class neighborhood on the southwestern edge of Fort Worth, Texas and began shooting. He unloaded three magazines of bullets from a nine-millimeter semi-automatic handgun before turning the weapon on himself.

Three teenagers and three adults were killed at the church and a fourth teenager died later at the hospital. Seven others were being treated at area hospitals.

The incident was the latest in a series of multiple shootings which have become almost common events in the US. There have been the more openly politically motivated acts of terror, carried out by right-wing and racist elements, and those of individuals whose mental and moral collapse have taken the form of homicidal/suicidal shooting rampages.

By all accounts the forty seven-year-old gunman in Fort Worth was a deeply disturbed individual. He lived in squalid conditions in a house in the Fort Worth suburb of Forest Hill. Police searching his house after Wednesday's shooting found boxes of ammunition, bomb-making paraphernalia, hacked-up family photographs and overturned furniture. Neighbors described him as a recluse, one commenting that he "has been strange as long as I can remember." A former high school classmate referred to him as a harmless eccentric. But no one thought him capable of the kind of violence he unleashed on Wednesday night.

The immediate motives for this latest shooting are unclear. Ashbrook reportedly shouted out anti-religious statements before he opened fire, and police found both religious and anti-religious literature in his home. Local authorities at this point are saying that he apparently selected the target for his attack at random.

With each report of a mass killing such as the latest

tragedy in Texas, the belief is growing that an eruption of pathological violence could happen anywhere in America, and nobody is excluded from the possibility of becoming the latest victim.

Eruptions of anti-social violence have become a permanent feature of American life, with incidents occurring on at least a monthly basis, if not more often. Even as the US is held up internationally as a model of economic success, and politicians in other countries look to America for guidance on how to slash social spending and restructure their economies in the interest of the market, people the world over look with horror and disbelief at the brutality and violence of American life. It is hard to make sense of a society so dominated by disregard for human life.

It is significant that the media has chosen to downplay somewhat this latest killing spree. Reports of the shootings were relegated to the second item on Thursday evening's network new programs, and newspapers carried rather routine stories, especially when compared to the massive coverage of the Columbine High School massacre earlier this year.

One had the sense that the networks were more than happy to give Hurricane Floyd top billing and relegate the Texas massacre story to a distant second place. This is not hard to fathom, since each successive outburst of deadly violence makes more obvious the banality of the media commentary on the phenomenon, and the inability of the political establishment to offer any serious explanation, let alone prescription for dealing with the spread of such incidents.

To begin to understand why these events are taking place at such an alarming rate means probing the deep-seated, disturbing problems that have come to dominate American life, something neither the media nor the politicians are able or willing to do.

The usual prescriptions to stop violence—gun control, law and order, beefed-up school security, religion, censorship—appear increasingly ineffective. Political leaders are left virtually speechless. President Clinton said on Thursday, “We know we have to redouble our efforts to protect our children.” Texas Governor and Republican presidential frontrunner George W. Bush commented, “I don't know the law, the governmental law, that will put love in people's hearts.” This from a man who has overseen 100 executions in his term as governor of Texas.

From the standpoint of the naked exercise of class rule and the pursuit of private profit, no other industrialized country operates with such ruthlessness as the United States. Social relations in America are imbued with an explosive charge that could perhaps be compared to the buildup of subterranean tensions that sooner or later erupt in the form of an earthquake.

Social reforms, liberal political ideologies and groupings and other instrumentalities that in the past served as a buffer have been stripped away. Corporate downsizing, the criminalization of the poor, assembly line state executions are the new reality. American society is more and more divided between a small layer of the wealthy, with an insatiable appetite for consumption, and the vast majority of working people who have seen their standard of living and social conditions continually deteriorate in recent years.

Under these conditions, a build-up of social tensions is inevitable. But in a society so shamelessly dominated by a corrupt and right-wing political establishment, supported uncritically by a thoroughly unscrupulous media, there is no way for discontent, frustration, social anger to find a rational, articulate expression. Immense social antagonisms will inevitably result in giant class upheavals. But in the present political environment, they tend to find a perverse expression in sporadic eruptions of individual violence.

It is ironic that the victims of the latest shooting were assembled in church for a religious function. Religion—so often touted as the moral ingredient needed to tie the nation together—was of little use to the 150 youth who became the latest target of a deranged killer.

The Fort Worth church's pastor, in one of the few remarks that evinced some insight, said the latest shooting was indicative of “a society that is falling

apart.” Indeed, the emergence of socio-pathological violence—of both the fascist terrorist and deranged individual sort—as a permanent feature of life in America signals a very advanced stage of disease in the body politic.

Nobody believes that the Fort Worth shooting will be the last of its kind. While the media and political establishment may seek to evade the underlying reasons for such incidents, the mass of working people cannot afford to put off considering the nature of a social system that produces such horrors.

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