

The Worcester fire and the social crisis in America

By David Walsh
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The tragic deaths of six firefighters in Worcester, Massachusetts December 3 has saddened and disturbed great numbers of people. Tens of thousands of people paid tribute to the dead men—Paul Brotherton, James Lyons, Jeremiah Lucey, Thomas Spencer, Joseph McGuirk and Timothy Jackson—in ceremonies held in the central Massachusetts city December 9. Thirty thousand firefighters from across the US and other countries marched through the city's streets. A crowd of 15,000 later filled the Worcester Centrum for a memorial service. A variety of politicians, including Bill Clinton, was on hand.

The tragedy in Worcester is made up of different elements, some of which may only be half-consciously grasped by those who have been so moved by the incident.

In the first instance, there is the personal tragedy for the families of those who died. Their feelings can only be imagined. The dead firefighters, ages 34 to 51, left behind 17 children. The men included a Vietnam veteran, the son of a teacher, the father of six boys, and a member of a family with more than 200 years of service fighting fires.

It should not be forgotten, moreover, that the six died trying to save the lives of other human beings. This is not a small matter. In America today political and financial affairs are guided by selfishness and the worship of individual achievement and status. Among themselves the people who run the country scorn nobility and self-sacrifice as qualities akin to madness. However, for the purposes of duping the population and ensuring that there are people to fight fires (and fight wars), political leaders extol these same qualities in public ceremonies.

The fact that the men died trying to rescue homeless people, furthermore, has undoubtedly touched many. Any objective observer would get the impression, following the mass media, that the only people who amount to anything in the US are those with large bank accounts. Such people would *expect* to be rescued. They are *used to* people making sacrifices for them. The homeless, in the eyes of official society, count for nothing, they are among the “losers” in this supposedly happy and contented land. Why should anyone risk his neck for them?

When something like the response of the Worcester firefighters demonstrates that, in fact, basic human decency has not disappeared—despite the best efforts of the political and media establishment—people feel simultaneously great sadness and a sense of relief.

While one finds by and large this instinctive decency and sense of fair play in the general public, government and law enforcement officials exhibit, with the rarest of exceptions, ignorance, vindictiveness and hypocrisy.

Several days after the fire authorities arrested and charged Thomas

S. Levesque, 37, and Julie Ann S. Barnes, 19 and three months pregnant, with manslaughter in the deaths of the firefighters, a crime that carries a penalty of up to 20 years in prison. Levesque and Barnes had apparently been living on the second floor of the abandoned warehouse for several months. They had recently split up. Allegedly, after a quarrel, a candle used for lighting was knocked over. The couple apparently tried to put out the flames. After failing to rescue their dog and cat, they fled the building.

No social tragedy in America is complete unless some poor soul is put behind bars for a long time. This is often described as “closure.”

District Attorney John J. Conte told reporters that he went immediately from the arraignment of Levesque and Barnes to the warehouse and informed relatives of the six firefighters that charges had been laid. According to the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, Conte “said he believed the word may have brought a certain sense of closure to some members of the victims' families.”

Perhaps in the emotion of the moment, some of the family members did respond as Conte hoped they would. Reporters noted, however, that there was no great enthusiasm in the general public last Thursday for the district attorney's action, and CNN reported this response from one family member: “Joan McGuirk, the sister of Joseph T. McGuirk, one of the six firefighters who died, wept as she talked of the two suspects. ‘Those people didn't do the right thing, but by God, they didn't do it intentionally,’ she said.”

Even Worcester fire officials echoed this view. Deputy Fire Chief Ralph Lombardi told the *Boston Globe*, “They [Levesque and Barnes] probably didn't realize what they were doing. They had no idea what was going to happen. We expect people to be responsible of course. Evidently, they didn't know.” Lombardi noted that there had been numerous fires in the back of the warehouse and that homeless people who live there use candlelight because there is no electricity in the building.

It is remarkable that the Worcester fire speaks directly to social conditions in the US and yet no one in the media will address the obvious. Why, in a country undergoing an unprecedented business and profit boom, are there homeless people living in every urban center?

Worcester is a city of 170,000, 40 miles west of Boston. According to the *Globe*, “Worcester is a city dotted with red brick warehouses, bound to its manufacturing past, but aching to reap the economic benefit of a modern economy.... And it is a city that is changing, as medical centers fill old warehouses, construction sites spring up around the downtown streets, and the suburbs swell with young families.”

A Framingham, Massachusetts developer Ding On “Tony” Kwan

owned the warehouse and a number of other properties in the area. He apparently envisioned constructing a medical-science park that “would become home to medical device research and development companies and laboratories. It also would be a center for light manufacturing of medical devices and other items” (*Worcester Telegram & Gazette*). It is unknown whether plans for the multimillion dollar project will go ahead.

These “economic benefits of a modern economy” are accruing, however, only to some. Worcester, like every American community of any size, is afflicted by a widening gap between those benefiting from the rise in share values and high-tech growth and wide layers of the working population.

Here are some of the facts:

- Between 1990 and 1997, that is, under George Bush and Clinton, family homelessness in Massachusetts increased 100 percent, from 5,000 to 10,000. Families with children now make up two-thirds of the homeless population in the state. In addition, there are approximately 6,000 homeless individuals across the state. Of the 108,000 families in Massachusetts with children living at or beneath the poverty line, 93.2 percent include at least one family member who is working. Between 1993 and 1997, the number of evictions for nonpayment of rent increased by 64 percent (Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless).

- In 1997 nearly half of Worcester's renters could not afford a two bedroom apartment without sacrificing other basic necessities such as food, clothing and healthcare. Thirty-eight percent of people living in Worcester below the poverty line are children. The waiting list for federal and state public housing in the city was 2,348 in October 1997. The average annual gross income of families living in public housing in 1997 was \$8,400. The combined waiting list for two of Worcester's largest privately owned subsidized housing developments was 2,000; those waiting lists were closed.

- More than 780 homeless men, women and children slept in one of Worcester's 26 emergency or transitional homeless shelters on any given night in 1997. More than 5,000 different people spend a night in one of these shelters each year. Nearly half of the students in 14 Worcester public schools cannot complete one school year at the same school due to residential instability. Worcester low-income students receiving free and reduced lunch rose from 40 percent in 1988 to more than 50 percent in 1997 (Citizens' Housing and Planning Association).

In response to fears about a backlash against the homeless, advocates pointed to overflowing shelters and the traumas of life on the street. “They can't panhandle, they can't loiter, we don't have enough shelter beds, so when they go into abandoned buildings, it's trespassing,” said Nicole Witherbee, policy coordinator for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, cited by CNN. “So where is it they're supposed to be?”

As for Levesque and Barnes as individuals, unhappily, there is nothing unusual about their sad lives. The son of one of Levesque's former girlfriends described how Levesque and his mother “roamed the streets of Fitchburg [Massachusetts] in the summer of 1998 before moving into a lot filled with abandoned trailers at the bottom of Grafton Street in Worcester, a stone's throw from the fatal fire.”

The man told the *Telegram & Gazette*: “He was good to my mom.... He always looked after her and knew where to find places to sleep. I

just want to stress that he is not an evil guy. He wasn't into drugs or anything like that.” He noted that Levesque “has the mentality of a 13-year-old kid.” Levesque apparently survived by doing odd jobs, roofing and painting houses.

Levesque's mother told the press: “I'm so sorry for the firemen and their families. If I had six lives to give to them, I would.”

Julie Barnes and her sister spent their early childhood with their mother. After reports of sexual abuse and neglect, according to their father, Kevin A. Castonguay, the Department of Social Services intervened. Castonguay, a cab driver, assumed full custody for the girls in 1992. Julie was apparently a loner at school, without friends. She left her father's house at 18. Her acquaintances described her to reporters as “slow.” She loved pets. She had been seeing Levesque for several months. Her court-appointed lawyer said she had recently attended Wachusett Regional High School in Holden, before dropping out.

For some people in America there is everything; for some, there is nothing. It's the working population and the poor who pay and pay for the social crisis. Inherent in any of the tragedies that occur in the US on a nearly weekly basis is the possibility that this reality will dawn on large numbers of people. The job of the Democratic and Republican politicians is to throw dust in the eyes of the public and divert attention from the social issues. Everything must done to obscure the fact that these events take place because something is fundamentally wrong with the social organism.

The Worcester tragedy prompted the inevitable visit of Bill Clinton. And not only Clinton, a whole panoply of big business politicians, including Vice President Al Gore, Massachusetts senators John F. Kerry and Edward M. Kennedy, Governor Paul Cellucci and Congressman James P. McGovern.

The gravity of the situation and the heartfelt feeling of ordinary people make the performances of these cynical political operators all the more repugnant. To listen to Clinton, the deaths of the six firefighters took place in a timeless realm where homelessness, urban decay and cuts in social spending do not exist. He cited the Old Testament to that effect: “In the book of Isaiah, God asks, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And Isaiah says, ‘Here I am. Send me.’”

At one point during the ceremony Clinton had a difficult time holding back his tears. There is no reason to believe this was mere show. It probably does not occur to this extremely limited man that he is “sharing the pain” of those who are the victims of his own administration's policies.

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