

Perpetrators of public violence challenge U.S.

by Josh Getlin
Los Angeles Times

NEW YORK -- A church. A high school. A daycare center. A hospital. A stock brokerage office. If there is any thread linking the recent wave of mass shootings in America, it is that they have all taken place in public spaces, areas long thought to be immune from the violence that typically erupts behind closed doors, or at least out of public view.

The most recent horror, this week's shooting of seven people at a Baptist prayer service for teenagers in Fort Worth, Texas, illuminated once again the dark side of a culture that has spawned such violations of public space. Ideally, the common areas in which Americans come and go are the physical embodiment of an open society. But the sense of security which millions take for granted has been compromised by a wave of senseless shootings, one more horrific than the next.

"It's become a hideous intrusion, a violation of the most fundamental guarantee we have in a democracy," said Jean Bethke Elshstain, a professor of Ethics at the University of Chicago's Divinity School. "You think you've heard the worst possible story and then another shooting happens. Finally, all you can do is shake your head and ask yourself: Why?"

The level of public violence seen today has been relatively rare in American history, according to historians. While there were bombings of black churches during the civil rights years, those attacks had a clearly defined political agenda, said Melissa Greene, who wrote a book about the 1958 bombing of an Atlanta synagogue. "They weren't prompted by the blind rage you see today, when you don't know why

people are crazy."

Struggling to make sense of this phenomenon, historians, religious leaders and social scientists offer layers of explanation. Some talk of a generalized war between the forces of "community" and isolation, while others focus on a highly marginalized group of outcasts, many of them white American males who are utterly estranged from mainstream society and loathe most symbols of modern-day authority.

Some observers suggest that the desecration of public spaces is a problem that goes beyond a lunatic fringe and highlights a declining sense of civility in the broadest sense of the word. It begins, they say, with routine, daily transgressions, like rudeness in a movie theater, and culminate at the highest levels of government, with presidential peccadillos in the Oval Office a prime example.

Whatever the root cause, however, the bottom line is that no government on earth can stop a random act of public violence if it's carried out by an obsessed criminal, said Robert Castelli, professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "Decent people are shocked by these attacks," he added. "But the best we can do is find the true reasons for them and then try to protect our public spaces as best we can."

It's not the first time America has been shattered by such savagery. On the morning after the Fort Worth massacre, the University of Texas at Austin finally reopened the campus Tower from which gunman Charles Whitman methodically killed 14 people in August, 1966. Yet Whitman's rampage was an isolated, freakish event at the time, and a far cry from the numbingly familiar acts of rage that explode with disturbing regularity today.

For Richard Rodriguez, a San

Francisco essayist, the defiling of common areas by a wave of gunmen reflects a clash between the forces of "community" and an alienated class of Americans who feel threatened by symbols of "belonging," most powerfully represented by organized religion. This rage, he suggests, "is directed at institutions ... it's a hatred of people who gather under any kind of organizational umbrella. We have people who are very angry in their isolation, and who strike back very publicly. There is something quite loose in the world."

Others see even darker forces at work, noting that a number of the recent killings were not simply the work of dysfunctional individuals, but purposeful attacks against American society carried out by members of shadowy hate groups.

"There are quite a few people today, many of them white males, who are literally at war with this country," said Richard Slotkin, author of "Gunfighter Nation," a detailed examination of American violence. "For them, going into a public place with a gun is the ultimate symbol of defiance. And this, more than inner-city gang violence or anything else, has become the characteristic 'Big Crime' of the late 1990s."

Not surprisingly, there is sharp division on how to prevent or limit such violence, with some observers calling for stricter gun controls and greater attention to the desperate problems of the untreated mentally ill. Others say the decline of respect for public symbols of authority contributes to a reckless sense of "anything goes" in a violent society.

"I would never analogize the two situations, but just as we are horrified over the defilement of churches and schools by violence,

we should be angered by authority figures who demean their offices and the public space they occupy," said Elshstain. "When we fail to get indignant over these things, it begins to suggest that the boundary between good and bad behavior in public areas no longer really exists for us."

Even worse, she and others said, is the probability that this kind of violence will cause Americans to become even more isolated than they are, refusing to get involved in any kind of civic life.

"What's happening now creates the kind of fear and horror that terrorism creates," said Columbia historian Alan Brinkley. "It happens in places where anyone can imagine themselves being, and even though there's less violence today than there was five years ago, it's hard to imagine a more outrageous and shocking violation of space than shooting young people in a church."

Even now, government social scientists are trying to get a handle on the scourge of shootings. While homicides are declining, America has concurrently experienced a rise in the number of multiple shootings where the victims are mainly young people, according to Dr. Rodney Hammond, a psychologist who directs the Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

The CDC will soon publish a report documenting the problem, he added, but it's evident that the traditional approaches to controlling crime -- like tougher laws or adding more police protection -- may no longer be sufficient. "It's a very disturbing trend," Hammond said, "because we don't really know why this has been happening, or what we can do to stop it in the future."

DEVASTATION OF FLOYD



PHOTO BY JENNIFER ROTENIZER (CPE)

The Cribb family surveys damage to their South Carolina home Saturday after their neighborhood was flooded by the Waccamaw River due to heavy rains from Hurricane Floyd.

Second man convicted in dragging death

TMS Campus

BRYAN, Texas (TMS) -- A second man was convicted Monday for his role in the grisly death of a black man who was chained by his ankles to the back of a pickup truck and dragged to his death.

Lawrence Russell Brewer, 32, could get the death penalty for murdering James Byrd Jr. in the small town of Jasper, Texas, last year. Jurors returned a verdict only four hours after the start of their deliberations. Brewer, standing next to his attorneys, had no visible reaction.

Jurors immediately began to hear testimony about whether Brewer should be sentenced to death or life in prison, but recessed for the evening. As early as Tuesday Brewer will find out whether he will join John William King, 24, who has been on death row since February for his role in Byrd's

slaying. A third man, Shawn Allen Berry, also 24, faces trial late next month.

Prosecutors said they believed the three men killed Byrd to promote their white supremacist organization -- the Confederate Knights of America -- and to initiate Berry into the group.

Brewer testified that he urged his companions to release Byrd after Berry slashed Byrd's throat and chained him to the back of the truck.

Brewer also said he was convinced Byrd was dead after Berry slashed his throat with a knife. But a pathologist testified that there was no evidence of a knife wound on Byrd's remains and that authorities found no knife. Byrd, the doctor testified, was alive until his head was torn off when it slammed into a culvert. DNA evidence showed Byrd's blood on the shoes of all three men, he added.

Bradley, Gore virtually even in New Hampshire polling

by Dan Balz
The Washington Post

CONCORD, N.H. -- Five months before the nation's first primary, former New Jersey Sen. Bill Bradley has virtually pulled even with Al Gore in New Hampshire, turning a once lopsided advantage for the Vice President into a fiercely competitive contest.

Three recent polls confirm how much gloomier things are for Gore today, with Bradley closing to within 4 to 7 percentage points of the front-runner. What has happened in New Hampshire is, in microcosm, the story of how the former basketball star has turned the competition for the Democratic nomination into a fight to the finish.

When the presidential campaign began last winter, Gore seemed to have most of the advantages here. He had the power of incumbency and the support of a president who, however controversial, was popular among Democratic activists and had an extensive network already in place here. Gore's New Democrat credentials, meanwhile, offered him the opportunity to bid for support of the "New Economy voters" and political independents, who often play a crucial role in this idiosyncratic state.

But over time those seeming advantages have been eroded, as Gore has struggled to capitalize on the institutional Democratic Party support available to him, while Bradley has had success reaching directly to rank-and-file Democrats and especially to independents.

Much can change between now and February, but this is not the campaign the Vice President had hoped for. "They wanted a coronation rather than a fight," Andrew E. Smith, Director of the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, said of the Gore campaign. "Now they've got a

fight."

A Bradley victory in New Hampshire would severely wound the Vice President and set up crucial contests a month later in New York, where a new poll to be released Sunday shows a dead-even race, and in California, where Gore enjoys a larger lead. Even if Gore survives, his supporters fear he would be weakened in the general election.

If there is any silver lining in all this for the Vice President, it may be that the element of surprise has been eliminated from Bradley's strategy here. The former New Jersey senator, running an insurgent's campaign, will not be able to sneak up on Gore in the final week of the New Hampshire contest, as Gary Hart did against Walter F. Mondale in 1984. That also means more scrutiny of Bradley from voters and the news media -- both on what he says he would do as president and on his record in the Senate.

But that may be the only good news the Vice President and his campaign team can draw from the unexpectedly early narrowing of the Democratic nomination fight in New Hampshire. "The dynamics of this race are such that Bradley's in extraordinarily good shape," said one New Hampshire Democrat who is supporting Gore and who asked not to be identified.

"This is a wake-up call for the entire campaign," a senior Gore adviser conceded. "That's the positive thing. You'll see us getting into high gear in New Hampshire. We'll be fighting it house by house, block by block."

The sharpened lines in New Hampshire have forced a change in the Gore strategy. Up to now, the vice president's campaign has attempted to ignore Bradley and to draw contrasts with Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the GOP front-runner. That is no longer the case.

"We believe Bradley has had a bit

of a free ride with the media and that it's time to start to point out the differences," said Joe Keefe, a former New Hampshire Democratic Party chairman and a Gore supporter. "We also think Bradley is trying to run to Gore's left and reinvent himself a bit to appeal to the liberal, insurgency bias among New Hampshire voters."

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"Voters know little about him," a top Gore official said. "When the inconsistencies are pointed out, it will be uncomfortable for him."

A week ago, Gore surrogates criticized Bradley for supporting school vouchers as a senator, forcing Bradley to say he did not believe vouchers represented a national solution to the problems of public schools. More attacks are likely.

Gore supporters in New Hampshire appear defensive, protective of their candidate and anxious to point out the disadvantages of campaigning as a sitting vice president. Over time, they say, Gore will begin to connect with the demanding voters of New Hampshire.

"It's very hard when you're vice president to run a grass-roots cam-

aign," said Bill Verge, the Rockingham County Democratic chairman and a Gore supporter. "He's done a better job than I expected him to -- better than anyone has in the past."

Gore has a clear advantage in endorsements and resources. Gore, for instance, has a strong relation-

ship with Democratic Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, the most popular politician in the state, and, in the absence of an outright endorsement from the governor (which most Democrats expect will come later), Gore signed up her husband, Bill Shaheen, as his state campaign chairman.

On issues, Gore also has the right kind of record support for labor and civil rights issues and background -- a keen interest in the environment and in technology issues to appeal to traditional Democrats and to the New Economy voters in New Hampshire.

But over time, none of those advantages have done much to stall Bradley's progress, both with Democrats and with the increasingly important independent block

of voters.

"We always felt that Bill would do well here," said Mark Longabaugh, Bradley's New Hampshire coordinator. "But because the establishment was with Gore, we [decided we] would go straight to the voters."

In July, the Bradley campaign devoted a week to canvassing Democratic and independent voters in New Hampshire. The Bradley volunteers knocked on 35,000 doors in 22 towns and cities and distributed 100,000 pieces of literature. Even Gore supporters say the canvassing was effective. "People came to my doorstep a couple of times," Keefe said. "I don't think they singled me out. I think it was real. They've impressed me so far."

Over time, Gore's establishment-driven campaign has come to appear too top-heavy to his supporters in New Hampshire, and they see Bradley's ability to move without a big entourage as a huge advantage in a state where face-to-face contact with voters is crucial.

"Bradley's campaign has a lot of young people, and Gore's campaign is Washington," Verge said. And Gore's association with President Clinton has become a burden as well as a boost. "It's a real dilemma," said one Gore loyalist. "So many people are so sick of Clinton, so embarrassed by him."

Among Democrats who admire Clinton, Gore runs strong; but among those who do not, Bradley is the favorite. The latest WMUR-TV poll showed that among voters age 65 and older -- a group with a less favorable view of Clinton -- Bradley has a substantial lead over Gore.

Bradley also appears to have an edge among independent voters, although two recent polls vary significantly on just how much of an advantage he has. A Boston Globe poll showed independents supporting Bra-

dley 51 percent to 31 percent. The WMUR poll showed Bradley's lead, within the margin of error, 44 percent to 42 percent.

The sharp narrowing of Gore's overall lead in New Hampshire foreshadows a long and difficult fight for both campaigns.

Gore's New Hampshire organizers say the new polls, while not helpful, may spur greater intensity among their supporters. "It gets our supporters up and active," said Nick Baldick, the Vice President's New Hampshire coordinator. "We've gotten going."

Gore supporters also said that Bradley will fare worse the more voters compare the two candidates. "Once it becomes a one-on-one contest, where these two are compared on their ideas and their performances, that will favor the Vice President. Anyone who watched Bill Bradley play in the NBA recalls that he was never a very good one-on-one player," said a Gore adviser.

Bradley supporters acknowledge that their candidate faces a difficult period in the next few months as he begins to lay out his policy prescriptions and attempts to parry the vice president's attacks. "How he handles this is important," said John Rauh, who along with his wife, Mary, a former Democratic candidate for Congress in New Hampshire, is among Bradley's most prominent supporters here.

But Sue Calgary, a top Bradley organizer and a veteran of Hart's 1984 campaign, said the change in the polls will not change the character of Bradley's campaign. "We still are the insurgent candidacy," she said, "when you consider the vast resources of the vice presidency. It didn't change anything for us when we saw those polls."