

## **The Crisis That No One Wants To See**

The places change, the victims change, but the tragedy keeps repeating. This time, it's a church in Fort Worth. A month ago, it was Buford Furrow shooting kids in Los Angeles. Last year, Russell Weston Jr. murdered two police officers at the U.S. Capitol. There's a common element to all these tragedies – and many more over the last two decades – and none of the politicians or pundits seem to care. A small group of fanatics is holding our society hostage to an absurd idea.

No, I'm not talking about opponents of gun control. I'm talking about the judges and legislators who refuse to face up to the horrible mistake we made in the 1960s and 1970s. Our society deinstitutionalized the mentally ill. Three recent high-profile cases draw the picture in blood.

Furrow was arrested by Washington State police in 1998. He told the court about his fantasies of mass murder of minorities. He had an extensive history of violence – and instead of sending Furrow to a mental hospital, Washington State gave him six months in jail, then let him out to carry out his hate crime.

Russell Weston Jr. was obviously mentally ill: a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions about a computer hidden inside the Capitol that would resurrect him after death. He was arrested for making threats against the President, held briefly in a mental hospital in Montana – and released.

The latest act in this public policy tragedy involved Larry Gene Ashbrook. His brother described Ashbrook as a paranoid schizophrenic – and one scary enough that he once had to drive Ashbrook away with a shotgun. According to news accounts in the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, Ashbrook was regarded by neighbors as dangerous and disturbed –

but they were afraid to call the police for fear of retaliation. And why not be afraid? Fort Worth mental health outreach nurse Barbara Murphy described the situation under Texas law: "The bottom line is the police cannot do anything and we cannot do anything except listen to them and try to get them into help."

There are way too many of these incidents happening, and for an obvious reason. A mentally ill person has to kill someone, or get very close to it, before he will be institutionalized for anything more than a short period of observation. A generation of judges, lawyers, legislators, and self-styled "patient advocates" grew up thinking that the movie *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* accurately described mental illness. So they look for excuses to release crazy people back into society. (At least in a mental hospital, crazy people don't buy guns and commit murder.)

Unfortunately, this romanticized notion of psychotics remains very strong in some circles. Instead of doing what we did 35 years ago, and locking up the *clearly* insane, they propose to put the *whole society* under an insane asylum's gun control laws. Laws stringent enough to actually disarm any significant number of loose psychotics – especially psychotics like Furrow with neo-Nazi friends – are simply not going to be passed; at least 25% of Americans simply won't put up with gun control laws that strong.

On the other hand, it is practical to change our mental illness commitment laws so that psychotics don't wander the streets, a hazard to themselves and others. A couple of years ago, the pastor of the church I was attending in Rohnert Park asked me to talk to a homeless man who was showing up for services. Within ten minutes, it was obvious that his mind was deeply disordered.

He complained about the courts taking away his children. To show me the unfairness of it, he handed me some of his legal paperwork – and it showed that the courts took away his children because he was molesting them. For no apparent reason, he was never tried, and now he lived on a mental illness disability check. He still wanders around Rohnert Park, still obviously crazy.

There are hundreds of thousands of people like him loose in America. Every month, men like him get a disability check big enough to buy a gun, or a beat-up car, or enough gasoline to make a few hundred Molotov cocktails. Which would make us more safe? Taking away guns from every law-abiding adult? Or hospitalizing psychotics until they are well?

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