

The San Bernardino Massacre: Perceptions, Propaganda, And Blowback

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The reaction to the San Bernardino shooting in which 14 people were killed and several more wounded is a textbook case of confirmation bias. The first reactions came from the liberal wing of the Twittersphere, heavily represented by “mainstream” journalists, who immediately took the incident to be a classic “mass shooting” of the Sandy Hook-Columbine variety, and it didn’t take long for the [finger-wagging](#) to begin.

At once pro-gun control and anti-religious, the [meme](#) went out into cyberspace: “thoughts and prayers” aren’t enough, we need to crack down on gun ownership in this country. The [front page](#) of the New York Daily News expressed the left-liberal party line: “GOD ISN’T FIXING THIS: As latest batch of innocent Americans are left lying in pools of blood, cowards who could truly end gun scourge continue to hide behind meaningless platitudes.”

As it turned out, however, the guns used by Syed Farook and Tashveen Malik, the two perpetrators, were bought legally – and their weaponry consisted of a lot more than mere guns. The editors of the *Daily News* didn’t wait for the facts because they didn’t care about the facts. They just wanted to make a point – one which turned out to be not only wrong but also completely beside the point.

In the same city, in the offices of a very similar – if ideologically opposite – tabloid, the editors of the *New York Post* were jumping the gun in an entirely different direction. As the ethnicity and religious affiliation of the attackers came out, they ran with a simple two-word headline: “MUSLIM KILLERS,” with a modifying qualifier: “Terror eyed as couple slaughters 14 in Calif.” As more information came out, however, the editors pulled back, and the final edition was quite different: “MURDER MISSION,” read the headline, with a neutral supplementary: “Shooters slaughter 14 in Calif.” **These two editions were published hours after the incident, and only a few hours apart - a testament to the dangers of jumping to conclusions.**



This reversal is explained by the subsequent release of yet more information about the perpetrators: Syed Farook worked at the San Bernardino Department of Public Health, which had rented a room at the facility where the massacre took place. The event was a holiday party, which Farook attended, but left early after a reported altercation of some kind. He returned with Malik, his wife, armed to the teeth, and the slaughter commenced.

These facts would appear to point in a different direction entirely from the scenario painted by the *Post's* initial edition, and so the imagery conjured by the new headline went from that of the rampaging “Muslim Killers” to the “Murder Mission” of what appeared to be a case of workplace violence.

That’s what I thought around midnight last night, when I tweeted my [tentative opinion](#) that the [workplace violence](#) scenario seemed to be the most likely. **My main reason was the nature of the target: why, I asked, would terrorists choose the Christmas party of the San Bernardino Public Health Department as the latest object of their wrath?** In addition, reports of a dispute at the event involving Farook seemed to indicate that scenario: he got angry, came back, and started shooting. There were also reports of “[turmoil](#)” inside the department where he worked; several people had left amid rumors of disputes with management, and the fact that Farooq and his accomplice were targeting a very specific group of people – and not, say, a military facility, or even a soft target like a mall – *seemed* to corroborate this conclusion.

However, as more facts came out, this explanation began to make less sense. To begin with, a bomb – actually, three bombs taped together – had been left behind at the scene of the shooting. The bomb was linked to a device found in Farook’s rental car – rented three days prior – that was very similar to the jury-rigged remote-controlled IEDs [recommended by al-Qaeda’s Inspire magazine](#), which detailed how to make an explosive device with readily available materials. We don’t yet know why the bomb failed to go off,.

Although reports that the couple came into the venue wearing body armor and Go-Pro body cameras turned out to be false, they were wearing “tactical” clothing, i.e. vests that enabled them to carry large amounts of ammunition. And indeed they were carrying huge amounts, enough to let them reload on the scene, and continue firing up to seventy-five rounds for over 30 seconds. This accounts for the large number of casualties.

Furthermore, the discovery of twelve “pipe-bomb type” devices, hundreds of tools for making more, and “thousands” of rounds of ammunition in the Redlands home rented by Farooq and his wife eliminates the workplace violence scenario. This was, in effect, a bomb-making factory, and neighbors indicate that a number of people were involved: packages were received throughout the day, and activity was observed into the night. One of these neighbors [claims](#) they were ready to contact law enforcement but hesitated to do so for fear of being accused of “racial profiling.” Both Farooq and his bride were of Pakistani extraction.

Two factors indicating that this was indeed a terrorist cell carrying out a pre-planned operation, and not a disgruntled employee intent on revenge against his co-workers, are plain enough: 1) The couple [dropped off their child](#) at a relative’s house the day before the attack, claiming to have a doctor’s appointment, and 2) The tactics utilized in the shooting of the victims and the gunfight with the police — which included throwing a fake pipe bomb out of their car as the cops pursued them — are evidence of some kind of military training. Such training could have occurred during Farooq’s trips to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

And we are beginning to hear evidence of international contacts with “[more than one](#)” terrorist suspect under surveillance by law enforcement. All that’s missing — as of this writing — is a claim of responsibility by some overseas terrorist outfit.

Yet questions remain: again, the target — a holiday party in a small city — hardly seems like the sort ISIS or al-Qaeda would zero in on. Clearly the couple were planning on a much larger operation, but this plan was changed by something that triggered Farooq to act sooner. And we still don’t have the whole picture: there could conceivably be some new information that could alter our whole perception of what motivated Farooq and Malik.

Which brings me to my point: ***our perception of the facts is shaped — and altered — by our preconceptions. In short, people believe what they want to believe — and the facts be damned. In this case, major media organizations didn’t wait for the facts to come in before they pronounced judgment. They simply rushed into print with what were little more than editorials, bereft of any responsibility to their readers or the truth.***

This is why those who proclaim that bias is inherent in all journalism, and that there’s no such thing as objective reporting, are dangerously wrong. Yes, we’re all human; yes, everyone has opinions. But some people wait for the facts to come in before giving vent to those opinions, while others don’t bother with such niceties.

The reality, as I see it, and given what we know now, is this: San Bernardino was an act of terrorism that may or may not have been directed from overseas. The implications of that are very grave for those of us who oppose our crazed foreign policy of perpetual war, and the relentless assault on our civil liberties on the home front.

The pressure to “destroy them over there before they strike us over here” is going to increase a hundred-fold. The advocates of universal surveillance are going to be empowered as never before. That these tactics haven’t worked in the past — and, indeed, have backfired badly — won’t deter the usual suspects from insisting that war and repression are the answers to the problem of terrorism.

Our answer to the War Party must be that their strategy has failed: ***the terrorists couldn't recruit anyone if we weren't over there bombing what remains of their cities and seeking to impose our will on a populace that will never accept our domination, no matter how many soldiers we send and bombing sorties we launch.***

As for the authoritarians who want to use incidents like the San Bernardino attack as a pretext to abolish the Constitution and institute a regime of total surveillance and outright repression: **where was their vaunted surveillance system in this case?**

We didn't detect this plot - and perhaps that's because watching everyone, and collecting everyone's information, blinds us to the real villains hiding in our midst. Then again, perhaps ferreting out villains isn't the real purpose of government spying.

After the 9/11 attacks, the nation was swept by a wave of war hysteria, and concern for basic civil liberties went right out the window: we will doubtless experience a similar phenomenon in the days and months to come. Yet we are confident that when the history of our era is written, the advocates of peace and liberty will be vindicated, while the War Party will be discredited and disdained by future generations. We must live in the future, in a sense, in order to fight for the future - if there is to be one, that is.

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