

The Washington Navy Yard shooting

By [David Walsh](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, September 22, 2013

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Something is terribly wrong in America. Everyone knows this, except the corporate executives and bankers and media personalities, who are profiting enormously from the present conditions. And perhaps some of them know it too, but are faring too well to desire a serious examination of the reasons for the social malaise.

Last Monday, 34-year-old civilian contractor Aaron Alexis entered the headquarters of the Naval Sea Systems Command in the Washington Navy Yard armed with a disassembled shotgun in a bag slung over his shoulder. After putting the weapon together in a bathroom, he emerged and opened fire, apparently randomly, on people entering a cafeteria. Alexis killed twelve people, all civilian employees or contractors, and wounded a number of others. A gun battle with police ensued, lasting more than half an hour, at the end of which Alexis was fatally shot. Alexis, "a computer specialist who led an itinerant life, traveling to naval installations around the country to service their systems," according to the New York Times, was clearly suffering from severe mental problems.

In early August, "Alexis told police in Newport, Rhode Island that he was hearing voices and was convinced that someone was using a 'microwave machine' to send vibrations into his body to keep him awake, according to an incident report." (CNN) He went to the emergency room at the VA Medical Center in Providence, Rhode Island on August 23, and to another VA emergency room in Washington, DC on August 28. He was given medication to help him sleep in both cases.

Alexis also told Newport police that he believed he was being followed by three people who had been sent after him by someone with whom he had quarreled, according to a police report.

Alexis was honorably discharged from the Navy in 2010 for a series of minor episodes, including insubordination, unauthorized absence and drunkenness. He had also had a few scrapes with the law.

There were apparently more tangible grievances in the recent period as well, which undoubtedly worsened his mental state. A former housemate, Kristi Suthamtewakul, explained to CNN that Alexis was "frustrated about pay and benefits issues after a one-month contracting stint in Japan last year. ... 'He got back and he felt very slighted about his benefits at the time,' she said. 'Financial issues. He wasn't getting paid on time, he wasn't getting paid what he was supposed to be getting paid.'

"'That's when I first started hearing statements about how he wanted to move out of America,' Suthamtewakul said. 'He was very frustrated with the government and how, as a veteran, he didn't feel like he was getting treated right or fairly.'"

Whatever the immediate facts of the latest case, we know all too well by now that the immense pressures exerted by an unequal, violent, alienating and indifferent social order can overwhelm the weakest, most susceptible personalities and lead to implosions and explosions. This has occurred time and time again, over the past two decades in particular, in every part of the US—in workplaces, schools and public venues of every type. And following each tragedy, the media and politicians combine superficiality and banality in an effort to conceal the central fact of the society's deep sickness.

In Alexis' case, there is also the specific issue of his service in the Navy, followed by years in the Navy Reserve and his choice of the Washington Navy Yard to carry out his attack. The American media would like everyone to forget that this man's entire adulthood has taken place against the backdrop of non-stop military interventions, the last dozen years dominated by the global "war on terror," in which the US authorities have given themselves permission to bomb and invade any nation that stands in their way and murder any individual whom they consider a thorn in their side.

One doesn't know whether to laugh or cry when a CNN correspondent asks, with a straight face, "How did a man with a violent past get security clearance into such a sensitive military site?" Yes, how out of place such an individual would be in one of the planning centers for American global aggression and homicidal mayhem!

In any event, the differing responses to this latest mass shooting reveal a good deal about the individuals and social layers in question and the polarized state of social relations in America more generally.

The moving televised comments made the day of the shooting by Dr. Janis M. Orlowski, chief operating officer and chief medical officer at MedStar Washington Hospital Center, where the injured were brought, struck a deep chord with the public.

Dr. Orlowski explained that her hospital saw a great deal of trauma, some of it the result of accidents. She went on, "And then you see what I call senseless trauma. And there is... there's something evil in our society that we as Americans have to work to try and eradicate. ... There's something wrong here when we have these multiple shootings, these multiple injuries.

"I would like you to put my trauma center out of business. I really would. I would like to not be an expert on gunshots and not to be an expert on this. ... Because we just cannot have ... one more shooting with ... so many people killed."

Later that evening, in an interview with MSNBC, Dr. Orlowski spoke about the need to take care of those suffering from mental illness. Just as you would come to the assistance of someone bleeding on the street, she said, we ought to be able "to identify and help those individuals who suffer other illnesses that make them act in this way." This reaction is probably typical of how millions feel in the US: perplexed, sad and troubled, and genuinely concerned about preventing any more such social atrocities.

Understandably, those who preside over this dysfunctional and decaying society, who ought to suffer from a guilty conscience but probably don't, speak along quite different and brutal lines. It never enters into their thinking or pronouncements that the causes of the tragedies should be examined and solutions to the problems sought.

President Barack Obama initially expressed outrage September 16 at “a shooting that targeted our military and civilian personnel.” Taking a further opportunity later in the day to flatter the military, the president said, “These are men and women who were going to work doing their jobs and protecting all of us. They’re patriots. They know the dangers of serving abroad, but today they faced the unimaginable violence that they wouldn’t have expected here at home.”

Speaking like a national chief of police, Obama continued, “I have made it clear to my team that I want the investigation to be seamless, so that local and federal authorities are working together. And as this investigation moves forward, we will do everything in our power to make sure whoever carried out this cowardly act is held responsible.”

The man who has approved drone strikes that have killed thousands of civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere, who still hopes to see deadly missiles raining down on Damascus, preaches to the American public about “unimaginable violence” and “cowardly acts.”

The general response of American government and military officials to the Washington Navy Yard shooting has been to demand more vetting, more invasions of privacy, tighter security and increased repression.

The Associated Press reported September 19 that the Defense Department had ordered a series of reviews of military security clearance procedures in the wake of the Washington Navy Yard shooting, “acknowledging that warning signs may have been missed in the background of the shooter.”

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel promised a crackdown. “Where there are gaps, we will close them. Where there are inadequacies, we will address them. And where there are failures, we will correct them,” he said.

A happy by-product of the Washington Navy Yard affair, as far as the American media is concerned, is an opportunity to smear NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden by associating his name with that of Alexis. The Washington Post reported Thursday that USIS, the government contractor that handled the background check for Snowden, “said Thursday that it also vetted Navy Yard shooter Aaron Alexis for his secret-level clearance in 2007.”

Of course, an issue involved here is the massive, almost uncontrollable growth of the military-intelligence apparatus. The Post notes, “Federal officials are trying to implement a system that would continuously evaluate personnel with classified security clearance. But with nearly 5 million federal workers holding secret or top-secret security clearance, government officials say they are struggling to keep track of all their cases.”

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