

When Mental Health Matters: Massacre at Sutherland Springs, Texas

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The massacre at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs was, to put it simply, effective and spectacular. It also had the resonances of the primeval, ignoring the sanctity of the church in favour of murder within it. The alleged assailant managed to do less God's work than his own, slaughtering 26 and injuring 20 others.

The regularity of these mass killings is become less jaw dropping than wearisome. With each incident, the forensic eye is deployed and duly adjusted. A form of profiling is triggered. Was the person of colour? Possess a beard? Use a rental truck? In this case, the implicating signifiers were not present: "Witnesses and authorities described the shooter as a white male in his 20s wearing all black clothing and a tactical vest." [1]

The late suspect, Devin P. Kelley, proceeded to slaughter a good number of the population of Sutherland Springs, Texas. On Monday, special agent Christopher Combs of the San Antonio division of the FBI dismissed suggestions that a terrorism investigation was underway.

As with previous killings, law codes and statute books are consulted, leaving the categorisers empty and scratching. The US Code of Federal Regulation is certainly more specific than some on the topic of what might constitute terrorism, "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." [2]

Behind such meanings, however, come cultural and institutional qualifications. FBI director Christopher Wray, in a Senate hearing in September, was surprisingly illuminating on this point.

"There is not a domestic terrorism crime as such."

The implication is clear: terrorism is generally presumed to be foreign, external, a profanity of the outer world. This leads to a surprising and questionable implication: terrorism cannot be personal, an incident of mental disruption.

Such an application is uneven. Earlier this year, James Jackson was accused of stabbing a black man to death in New York, a point that convinced the Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance that terrorism was involved. Jackson was a professed white supremacist accused of travelling to New York City for the express purpose of killing and stirring the full pot of racial

hatred.

According to Vance, he “prowled the streets of New York for three days in search of a black person to assassinate in order to launch a campaign of terrorism against our Manhattan community and the values we celebrate.”[3]

In Kelley’s case, the procedural book of confusion and interpretation again came into play. He was white, a pasty picture of ugliness and self-defeat. For that very reason, he seemed to defy the category of terrorist from the start, which is, once admitted by the authorities, filled with earth moving gravitas and, importantly, patriotic consequence. A terrorist, once labelled, demands a different, and even convenient form of treatment.

The US President has duly taken his cue to avoid using the word altogether. Illness has been suggested, which naturally takes the person in question beyond the fringes of dull law and necessary evaluation.

Importantly, it has enabled Trump to disassociate the issue of the user of the gun from the gun itself, an inanimate object that merely found itself being used. “I think that mental health is a problem here. Based on preliminary reports, this was a very deranged individual with a lot of problems over a very long period of time.”

Trump’s description was a jotting on the mental health of the US, alluding to the Republic as one grand mental facility.

“We have a lot of mental health problems in our country, as do other countries, but this isn’t a guns situation... we could go into it but it’s a little bit soon to go into it.”

In a nod and wink to the necessity for guns, Trump claimed it fortunate that “somebody else had a gun that was shooting in the opposite direction, otherwise it wouldn’t have been as bad as it was, it would have been much worse.”

As more digging took place on Kelley, the Washington Post suggested that his “young life was riddled with warning signs, mounting during and after his time in the Air Force”.[4] What followed was a veritable smorgasbord of potential risk factors. He received a conviction for beating his then-wife and stepson. There were charges of animal cruelty. Mental stability was questioned.

He also managed to escape a “behavioural facility”, was “considered a danger to himself and others” and “was also facing military criminal charges”. What also followed was a slip on the part of the US Air Force. His domestic violence conviction was never entered into the National Criminal Information Center database, a bureaucratic error that effectively freed him up to purchase firearms.

To top the grim accounting of Kelley’s alleged exploits, speculative articles also began filtering through about who this man might really be. An atheist who took to guns? Perhaps a radical left winger with a penchant for spraying bullets? In such an information environment, anything goes. What mattered most was the means and the execution, the terrifying rendered banal.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge and

lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/05/reports-multiple-people-shot-at-texas-church/?utm_term=.c177c4c3344a

[2] <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2016-title28-vol1/pdf/CFR-2016-title28-vol1-sec0-85.pdf>

[3] <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/terrorism-charges-white-man-accused-hunting-down-black-men-n739146>

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/07/as-texas-town-mourns-details-emerge-on-gunmans-methodical-tactics-in-church-massacre/?utm_term=.705136884ed7

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Kampmark](#)

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