



SHELTER IN PLACE:
When a shooter began firing on Dallas police on July 7, protesters sought refuge in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial, the cenotaph designed by architect Philip Johnson and erected in 1970 in honor of the president slain a few blocks away.

Another Lone Gunman in Dallas

The anger represented by the Dallas march needs to be accounted for so that it is not equated with the violence that silenced it.

BY PETER SIMEK

How can we possibly process

and understand the calculated ambush that took place in downtown Dallas on July 7, 2016? The videos, the sounds of panic and fear, and, above all, the bodies of five slain officers—Dallas police officers Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, and Patrick Zamarripa, and DART officer Brent Thompson. It defies explanation. Dallas found itself the latest ticket holder for what feels like a never-ending carousel ride of ideologically tinged violence. Even before the attack, as outsiders looking in, we had all lived through it dozens of times as it unfolded elsewhere, and in the immediate aftermath of the Dallas attack, we could anticipate how the following days and weeks would play out. The numbing shock gave way to bewilderment and emotional fatigue.



Ten days later, three lawmen fell in Louisiana, and Baton Rouge climbed on the carousel.

Almost as soon as it happened here, the media poured into town, their round-the-clock coverage attempting to satiate an appetite for information in the face of incomprehension. Fuzzy video of the event was replayed again and again. The stories of the fallen officers were told, and images of their stricken families and comrades brought us to tears. Reporters churned through crash-course readings of recent and distant Dallas history in an attempt to connect action to cause, cause to motive. They found our familiar paradoxes: a city divided by race and poverty but united by kindness, openness, and faith. Images of peaceful protesters took the nation by surprise. As it

turned out, Dallas, once labeled the City of Hate, was a city in which Black Lives Matter protesters posed for smiling photos with police officers during their marches, and where whites marching with Confederate flags joined African-Americans protesting police violence in prayers of reconciliation in the middle of the streets of Vickery Meadow, one of the most diverse, multiethnic, and poorest ZIP codes in the country.

Dallas provided befuddling, paradoxical tableaux. The Dallas Police Department bore the heaviest loss of life in its history. The attack swirled out of the backlash to the killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Philando Castile in Minnesota, and far too many other young African-American males over the years. Yet the Dallas Police Department has led the way nationally in community policing, and in recent years it has dramatically reduced officer-involved shootings and complaints about use of excessive force. Over the past year, both Mayor Mike Rawlings and Chief David Brown have found themselves under increasing political fire, but then, thrust on the national stage, they emerged as momentary celebrities, symbols of the kind of steady-handed leadership the nation so desperately needs in the wake of such traumatic events. Speaking from the stage of the Meyerson Symphony Center, President Barack Obama lauded Brown and Rawlings, as well as Dallas as a whole, and used our city as an example to assure a shaken nation that “we are not as divided as we seem.”

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As the corteges wound through our streets, details emerged about the person who set off the shock wave. We have learned a lot about Micah Johnson, and yet it feels as if we haven't learned much at all. We know he was an Army vet living in Mesquite whose service was marred by accusations related to a relationship with a female soldier. We know he was once a "fun-loving extrovert" who, after his military service, became what friends described as a hermit, increasingly fascinated by guns, military tactics, bomb making, and ammunition. He demonstrated an interest in the Black Power movement, and he had been seen at a Malcolm X-themed film festival and photographed with a former member of the groundbreaking hip-hop group Public Enemy, two symbols of black culture much of white America has long learned to fear but never quite learned to understand. We heard from his shocked friends and relatives, who appeared as confused as the rest of us that such life experiences could somehow create a cop killer.

We discovered a narrative that may—or may not—ever adequately explain the trajectory that took a human being from his mother's arms and led him toward a concrete perch in a downtown parking garage with an assault rifle and a mind bent on murder. What made the shooter's story so frightening is that it was so utterly unremarkable. Why did this man gun down five police officers and wound nine others? Why did he tell police in the hours before he was killed by a bomb squad robot that he "did this alone"?

We've been here before.

This is not a Dallas story, just the latest episode in the ongoing saga of the contemporary American mass shooter. From Columbine to Charleston, Sandy Hook to Orlando, each time it is a story that provides little satisfying depth or meaning when considered against the stark terms of its cost. This time the target was the police. Five officers down. Families irrevocably ruptured, torn apart. A police department already afflicted with morale problems struck to its core. A city on high alert. Suspicions ignited, frustrations simmering under tightened lids. We know it is a time to mourn, but we do so with one eye open to what it may all mean and how it might affect everyone and everything around us.

We also know that this wasn't just a senseless shooting; it was a shooting that seemed intent on derailing an important public conversation—perhaps the most important conversation we can have at this moment in American history. The protesters sought to bring voice to the voiceless victims of institutionalized racism and police brutality. The protesters sought to shine a light on the uncomfortable, often shirked-off legacy of slavery in America, whose chains still wind through the American experience like the rusty wire of a cyclone fence encased in the bark of an old tree that has grown up around it.

All American cities experience this legacy in their own histories, and in Dallas it is no different. Dallas lives and



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"WE ARE NOT AS DIVIDED AS WE SEEM":

(*Opposite page*) The flags at Dallas City Hall flying at half-mast for the fallen police officers. Other tributes—blue ribbons, banners, t-shirts—appeared all over the city in the wake of the shooting. (*This page*) Jacob Flanagan hugs Dallas Assistant Chief of Police Gary Tittle outside the Jack Evans Police Headquarters building.

COME TOGETHER:

(At right) Get-well cards, thank-you notes, flowers, balloons, flags, and even stuffed animals piled up in front of DPD headquarters. It was all collected on July 19 and is being archived by the Dallas Public Library. (Below) Chief David Brown and Mayor Mike Rawlings embrace at an interfaith memorial service held at the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center a few days after the attack.

breathes segregation. Dallas political organizations were once dominated by Ku Klux Klansmen. Dallas averted the shame of protest during the civil rights movement because, still reeling from the bad publicity of the Kennedy assassination, it doubled down on marketing its way out of the nasty business of social progress. Then Dallas stole homes from its black citizens through eminent domain and paved them over with parking lots for Fair Park. Dallas ensured that low-income housing funds were steered only to ghettos. This city systematically under-invested in services in African-American neighborhoods while corrupt leaders did their part to sell out their own communities. The result is a

tale of two cities, a northern white boomtown and a southern black ghetto whose character, demographics, and economic outlook stand in stark contrast. In Dallas, in 2016, being born in the wrong part of town, to the wrong race or skin color, means you may be mauled to death by wild dogs.

The anger over this disparity still needs to be accounted for in the aftermath of the events of July 7, but not because it explains the shooter or his motivations. Rather, the anger represented by the interrupted march needs to be accounted for so that it is not equated with the violence of the shooting, which, like all mass shootings, is nothing more than an attempt to hijack the narrative and warp it into a shape that fits into the shooter's own narcissistic imagination.

In America—perhaps uniquely in America—a bullet offers a ticket into the historical record. The first in the modern era to seize that ticket were a couple of lovestruck hillbillies from West Dallas named Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, whose bank-robbing shooting spree earned them cult status in the nation's early tabloids. And there has been no bullet-inflicted twist of fate in America quite as total as the one taken after a deranged wannabe Communist demonstrated in Dealey Plaza the almost magical capacity of a single bullet to bring a nation to its knees. In Lee Harvey Oswald and Bonnie and Clyde, Dallas offers America the two perverse prototypes in which violence gives the impotent the romance of power and the purposeless the delusion of agency.

We still don't know the full story of the Dallas shooter, but we do know



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the history of shooters. We know the hollow feeling that follows the mourning and the awful confrontation with the reality that the story of mass shooters is always banal and cliché and never measures up to the weight of the loss and the suffering they inflict. We know that shooters, like the white supremacist who attacked a South Carolina church, may believe they have a purpose, but that purpose is washed out by the impotence of violence to inflict anything but pain. Mass shootings are apolitical actions, symbolic acts without signifiers, senseless aggressions that, by their own nature, point nowhere beyond the damaged mind of the shooter.

That is why shooters need media like they need oxygen. Bonnie and Clyde's newspaper clippings, Abraham Zapruder's 8-millimeter Kodachrome film, and, today, amateur video posted to Facebook—the mirror of media offers the only possible purpose for the act. Otherwise, it is only murder, merely carnage for its own sake.

The shooter took the lives of some of Dallas' bravest, police men and women who charged into the line of fire to protect those who were peacefully expressing their anger and dissatisfaction with police. As the bullets ripped through the night, protesters ran and took shelter near the bone-white concrete box of Philip Johnson's John F. Kennedy Memorial, just a few blocks from the crime scene. For me, that image is almost too much, almost too cinematic. Its meaning extends beyond the fact that downtown Dallas has not known chaos like it experienced on July 7, 2016, since that terrible day in 1963. Modern Dallas was shaped by how it reacted to the JFK assassination, and, in a similar way, this city's future will be shaped by our response to the events of July 7. It will not be enough to

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try to market ourselves out of it again, to put on our best face, to pretend this violence has no roots. Nor should we allow the shooter's actions to cloud or warp the integrity of the discontent that he had no right to claim as his own.

Rather, let's consider that the memorial to Kennedy is where we still stand today, at the foot of our history. It is blank, but it is full of mourning, mute but with a silence that shouts. It gathers us in, it shelters us, but it still leaves us exposed to the elements. In a way, it is where we have always been, the huddled masses, shadowed by the looming monolith that is the violence of American history.

To move forward together, we must press our ears to the walls of that memorial and listen hard. **D**

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