

## Rampage Killers

26<sup>th</sup> March 2012

On 19<sup>th</sup> of March Mohammed Merah killed a rabbi and 3 children in Toulouse, France. Four days earlier he killed three Muslim paratroopers. Robert Bales, a US Army staff sergeant is charged with killing on 11<sup>th</sup> March 17 Afghan civilians, including 9 children. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July last year Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway, mainly teenagers. We have not been immune to such killings. The worst occurred on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1996 when Martin Bryant shot 36 people in Port Arthur.

Rampage or spree killings, as such events are called, evoke world-wide revulsion and anger.

Some spontaneous judgements exclude the killers from ordinary humanity. They are *evil*, they must be *mad*, run the arguments.

Other judgements blame society. The *cycle of violence* argument says that bad things must have happened to the perpetrators. *We are all guilty*, is another line. It is our culture that provides guns, a pornography of violence, xenophobia, and wars.

All these arguments, I believe, have validity but they don't ignite the final mix. Yes, Breivik was diagnosed schizophrenic by one psychiatrist, though another disagreed. Bales might have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (*BBC News Service*, 19/3). Martin Bryant definitely had low intelligence. But the mentally ill are no more violent than the rest of society.

Again, though Breivik had nasty racist ideas, Bales had defrauded an elderly couple of their savings and had to take an anger management course after an assault, and Merah had been a petty criminal, most criminals don't indulge in rampage killings. Neither do most from deprived backgrounds.

There is, however, I believe, a common denominator that rampage killers share. Frank Vitkovic, who killed eight people at the Queen Street Australia Post building in 1987 gave a clue in his diary: "Look for people with a history of rejection, loneliness and ill treatment who also have a fascination for guns and you won't go wrong." (*The Age*, 29<sup>th</sup> Oct 1988).

Indeed, rampage killers see themselves on the losing side of the divide between the powerful and powerless. They complain of being threatened, hated, bullied, treated unjustly, humiliated, alienated, and unrecognised.

The gun see-saws them into power. "I am the law, judge and executioner. There is no higher authority than me," declared Auvinen who in 2007 in Finland killed 8 people, on the internet,

The killings also provide notoriety, personal recognition, and respect. "I want to leave a lasting impression on the world," wrote the bullied Eric Harris who with Klebold shot 13 people at Columbine High School in 1999.

Killings can be twisted by the alienated into meaning and purpose, often with ideological or religious overtones. Cho Seung-Hui who killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007 said on a video, "Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated..for your amusement?..I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenceless

people.” Some, like Merah, join violent organisations that confirm their significance and belonging.

The sense of impotence and nothingness can stem from purely personal issues as in the case of Bryant, or be a compound as with Bales of personal failures and impotence against exploding grenades that blew off a buddy’s leg.

When governments feel threatened their potential to evoke rampage killings is multiplied. Gibbons (*The Guardian* 19/3) suggested that when Sarkozy “lurched his party wildly to the right” in an attempt to win the next election, xenophobia had come home to roost in the Jewish school atrocity.

How can we minimise rampage killings? Denying perpetrators notoriety by withholding their names is one way. Strict gun control is another.

But alertness, monitoring, and listening are arguably the most important preventive mechanisms. Bryant was not monitored or heard as he fell through the cracks of the Tasmanian mental health service. Bales was ignored when he wanted a less arduous fourth tour of duty. We must listen and help rejected, lonely, and abused individuals especially young males with violent fantasies.

Rampage killers often warn of their intent on social media and in personal activities. Merah was reported to the police because he had forced a teenager to watch videos of al-Qaeda beheadings, but no action was taken (*Le Télégramme* 21/3). Closer and more serious monitoring of violent web sites must occur, and violent cues must be taken seriously.

Lastly, we must be alert to and monitor stirrings of societal xenophobia and scapegoating.

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