

# Gauging the Violent 'Fox Effect'

The mainstream U.S. media has two standards for describing the motives for mass killings depending on whether the killer is a Muslim or a white man, with “terrorism” usually ascribed to the former and some personality disorder explaining the latter – rather than noting, say, an affinity for watching Fox News, says Mike Lofgren.

By Mike Lofgren

When John Russell “Rusty” Houser killed two people and wounded nine at a movie theater in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on July 23, the response was predictable. Governor Piyush “Bobby” Jindal rushed to the scene and pronounced his sorrowful and complete bafflement and a rote “in our thoughts and prayers” homily in lieu of any concrete policy proposal.

“Now is not the time” for such a policy discussion, [said Jindal](#), as if there were ever a good time for craven politicians actually to do their job. Louisiana’s two senators, David Vitter and Bill Cassidy, released statements announcing that they were praying for the victims. Media editorials offered their standard quota of “something must be done” arm waving, knowing full well that if a couple of dozen massacred elementary school kids at Sandy Hook can’t distract Washington’s political class from its 24/7 fundraising and assiduous non-coordinating with super PACs, nothing will.

Within hours of the shooting a meme flew around, probably started by the police investigating the crime. Houser was a “deranged drifter,” and the media [dutifully parroted the phrase](#). “Drifter” is a fairly rare term these days; we last recall it in common discourse during the 1970s, approximately the same time hitchhiking transformed from penniless young people seeing the country to something dangerous and creepy.

The term was resurrected for the Houser case. A deranged person who commits murder may have a motive, but it is likely to be a senseless one about which no larger social lessons can be drawn; a drifter is by definition adrift from society and its norms. We can only give a collective shrug.

Contrast that with any such incident involving Muslims as perpetrators and concrete ideological motives are instantly ascribed, usually accompanied by calls for increased vigilance, stepped up internal surveillance, and, from

some quarters, demands that a foreign country be bombed. Such crimes are invariably described as terrorism. Terrorism, which has an official [government definition](#), was not the word authorities used in describing the Houser case.

The media did not give us the full story. The *Washington Post* [did a piece on Houser](#) which certainly pegged him as a highly unpleasant nut case, but aside from a couple of brief references to his extreme political views, the reader would likely come away with a sense of wonderment that an unstable and vitriolic kook with a felony record managed to pass a firearms background check. The full story is more alarming and more instructive.

The Southern Poverty Law Center [researched Houser's online activity](#) and other details of his life and concluded that he was quite active in expressing extreme right-wing views. His online fingerprints revealed a political profile firmly anchored in every imagined grievance Fox News and right-wing talk radios have tried to cultivate for decades: dislike of foreigners, blacks, Obama, liberals, abortion, the government, government spending, the welfare state, and so on. As is common among right-wingers, he expressed a liking for That Old Time Religion as practiced by America's most obnoxious religious nuts.

A Tweet of his said the following: "The Westboro Baptist Church may be the last real church in America [members not brainwashed]." Houser reportedly may have attacked the theater [because the movie presented feminist themes and its writer, who was also its lead actress, was Jewish](#).

Further, Houser posted on the comments page of the website of Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-Nazi political party. He also espoused an admiration for Hitler: "Hitler accomplished far more than any other," he commented on [usmessageboard.com](#).

And he was not just a drifter all his adult life who was merely given to angry rants on message boards. He once attended law school (although he did not graduate), and even was a substitute host on a Columbus, Georgia television talk show, where he advocated violence against abortion providers.

Houser had definitely washed up on the farthest shore of politics. But surely none of this has anything to do with "responsible" conservatism, or even self-described "hard-core conservatives," right? Just read the message boards at some of the "hard-core conservative" web sites, though, and you will see similar stuff. Get a few beers into a hard-core conservative, and once in a

while what he says about Hitler will surprise you.

Fundamentalist Christian web sites are full of commenters advocating violence against doctors who provide abortions. Donald Trump, presently leading the Republican presidential candidate polls, does not say anything about immigration that Houser could not have said. Houser also favorably mentioned "The Bell Curve," a book on race and IQ by the conservative author Charles Murray, an American Enterprise Institute "scholar" and [sometime contributor](#) to foxnews.com.

Moving from crazy political views to violence is, of course, a huge step. But the Fox News Effect has already been shown to have done its job in converting the nonpolitical to rabid, obsessed partisans.

I have talked with [documentary filmmaker Jen Senko](#), the subject of a 2013 article, "[Fox News and Talk Radio Brainwashed My Dad](#)." She told me that she had interviewed numerous people lamenting that once their father (it's frequently elderly or near-elderly fathers) started watching Fox News or listening to talk radio, they became seething cauldrons of grievances who in some cases ended up hating their own children and grandchildren. These were previously normal, well-adjusted adults who might have been apolitical or held politically moderate views.

What about society's misfits, people who *already* started out perpetually belligerent, resentful, and borderline mentally ill? Fifty years ago, they might have gotten into loud and pointless arguments in bars over whether the Packers or the Cowboys were the better team. In the larger society, they were isolated and written off as kooks.

But now, with 30 years of operant conditioning by the right-wing media-entertainment complex, their inchoate anger has been focused, honed, and brought to a fever pitch. Those voices in their heads aren't paranoid delusions because, after all, Glenn Beck and Michael Savage and everybody else they listen to on radio and TV say the same thing!

And since the propagandists of the media-entertainment complex tell them not to trust any other sources of news, the constant reinforcement and self-isolation push them to further and further extremes. If the [Stanford Prison Experiment](#) can turn ostensibly ordinary people into torturers, it is hardly implausible that a 24/7 propaganda barrage by professional fear-mongers could drive psychically fragile cranks over the edge.

As everyone knows, the Fox News demographic [skews old](#), and it is the same with audiences of right-wing radio bloviators. Is it significant that while the great majority of mass killers are young males, some [barely out of their teens](#), Houser was 59?

[Walter Eugene Litteral](#), the accused ringleader of a bizarre plot to mass murder American soldiers, is 50 (Litteral and his accomplices were believers in “black helicopter” conspiracies, a lunacy that is assiduously fostered by right-wing media personalities like Alex Jones and reported by Fox News in a [faux even-handed manner as something that might possibly true](#)).

[James von Brunn](#), the white supremacist who perpetrated a politically motivated killing in Washington, D.C., in 2009, was 88! We have uncovered only episodic examples here, but there would seem to be an opportunity for further research into whether violent right-wing offenders in this country skew older than perpetrators of similar, nonpolitical crimes, and how much the culprits were influenced by the Fox News Effect.

In 1944, Vice President Henry A. Wallace was quoted in the New York Times as saying: “The American fascist would prefer not to use violence. His method is to poison the channels of public information.”

So is Roger Ailes, Fox News’ longtime president, an accessory to Houser’s murders? No. But given that Ailes and his right-wing media allies have [hijacked the ideology of one of our two major parties](#), and that Fox News [is attempting to pre-select the field of Republican candidates](#) in a format reminiscent of Jerry Springer, Ailes’s malign influence should not be underestimated.

As someone who has been poisoning the well of public discourse going back more than 45 years to his early days as [Richard Nixon’s media dirty trickster](#), Ailes cannot stand around acting like an innocent when some of those who have drunk the water he has tainted go crazy.

**Mike Lofgren is a former congressional staff member who served on both the House and Senate budget committees. His book about Congress, [The Party is Over: How Republicans Went Crazy, Democrats Became Useless, and the Middle Class Got Shafted](#), appeared in paperback on August 27, 2013. His new book, [The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government](#), will be published in January 2016.**