
Book Review

The Beltway Snipers: The Jury Is Still Out

by Donald Phau

Sniper: Inside the Hunt for the Killers Who Terrorized the Nation

by Sari Horwitz, Michael E. Ruane
New York: Random House, 2003
250 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

During October 2002, much of the population on the East Coast of the United States was thrown into a state of terror. The authors of *Sniper* write: “For three weeks in the Fall of 2002, the prospect of sudden death haunted millions of Americans across a stretch of mid-Atlantic and upper South, from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas. With good reason. Between Oct. 2 and Oct. 22, thirteen people were selected and shot, investigators believe, by two drifters with an old car and a military-style rifle. Ten people died. . . . The victims were chosen at random as they were going about the daily chores of life.”

The book by *Washington Post* reporters Sari Horowitz and Michael Ruane, based on *Post* coverage at the time, was rushed into print while the memory of the snipers was still fresh. During those weeks in 2002, in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., schools were closed, children were kept indoors, highways were cordoned off, and gas stations surrounded by tarpaulins to hide the customers as they pumped gas, in fear of being shot.

Sniper is useful in that it attempts to bring together the story, shedding some light on the backgrounds of the two people who have been convicted as the killers, 42-year-old John Muhammad and 17-year-old Lee Malvo.

Was Muhammed a protected intelligence asset, in a circumstance in which the Ashcroft Justice Department was gunning for police-state measures against “terrorism”? Horwitz and Ruane don’t say he was, but they do point to Muhammad as a “mysterious man,” whom some people called “the Chameleon.” Muhammed had been in the Army and the National Guard for 17 years and had received intensive weapons training. The authors note numerous instances which suggest that Muhammad was not the “drifter” that he appeared to be. The book reports a number of highly suspi-

rious incidents. Even at the height of the police search in the Washington, D.C. area, for example, Muhammed’s car was stopped and he was questioned, but let go. At least a half a dozen times, the license plates on his car were checked by police computer.

Here are some of the other anomalies reported in the book:

March 11, 2000: Muhammad was arrested in Antigua airport for having a forged Washington State driver’s license and Florida birth certificate. Two days later, an Antiguan government report said that he had escaped—he “walked out” of the police station..

March 28, 2000: Muhammad arrived in Antigua again with three children, all traveling under false names. He had fake Wyoming identification. Since the mid-1990s Muhammad, the authors write, “had over a dozen aliases, an altered birth certificate, an illicit passport, numerous driver licenses and identity cards.”

April 14, 2001: Muhammad was stopped by police at the Miami Airport with two Jamaican women and a little girl. They were detained; the women were deported for having forged documents. Muhammad is released immediately.

May 20, 2001: Muhammad returned to Antigua with a new driver’s license under a new name. Despite no apparent source of income, he stayed at a luxury hotel.

Nov. 28, 2001: Muhammad was in Tacoma, Washington, where a former girlfriend took him to a gunsmith, whom he asked to cut down a rifle barrel so it could be carried in a small case. The gunsmith told him it was illegal. The ex-girlfriend became scared and called the police, FBI, the U.S. Border Patrol, the ATF. There was no response.

Muhammad and Malvo were finally captured on Oct. 23, 2002. Though they were arrested in Maryland, scene of 11 of the 23 shootings, Attorney General John Ashcroft had them moved to be tried in Virginia, where only five of the shootings occurred. Maryland had suspended its death penalty and forbids execution of children under 18, whereas Virginia is number two in the nation in executions and has no law preventing executions of youth.

Horwitz and Ruane say that the Justice Department claimed it conducted a “deliberative” review before the trial was shifted to Virginia. Ashcroft however, bluntly stated the real reason: “We believe that the first prosecutions should occur in those jurisdictions that provide the best law, the best facts, and the best range of available penalties.” And what is the “best law”? Ashcroft adds: “Innocent victims . . . have paid the ultimate price. It is appropriate; it is imperative, that the ultimate sanction be available for those who have committed these crimes.”

Muhammad and Malvo were tried and found guilty. Muhammad has been sentenced to death and Malvo, because of his age, was sentenced to life in prison. Ashcroft now wants to retry them in order to get verdicts where both can be quickly executed. Dead men, after all, tell no tales. The real story of what lay behind the “Beltway Sniper” killings has yet to come out, despite books like *Sniper*.