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The 9/11 Killer

It was the kind of violent crime spree that many New Yorkers thought was a thing of the past: over seven weeks, in Brooklyn and Queens, four men were killed and another seriously wounded by a lone gunman. All the murdered men had been hard-working shopkeepers, holding down tough jobs on the night shift -- one at a laundry, another at a deli, two at small grocery stores. All were family men and immigrants -- from Russia, Guyana, India, and Yemen. Photos of grieving family members filled the newspapers, along with murky photos of the killer, wearing a baseball cap. The fact that the killer took little or no money simply added senselessness to the brutality of the crimes.

Now the police have a suspect, a 30-year-old Brooklyn man, Larme Price, who walked into the 77th Precinct station house in Brooklyn on a Friday night, offering to help find the killer. The following day Detective Tony Viggiani, a seasoned hostage negotiator, called him on his cell phone, asking for help. According to the New York Times , Price broke down, saying "I'm the guy you're looking for." Detective Viggiani kept talking while he and another detective jumped in a car and drove to the apartment on Eastern Parkway where Price's parents lived. Still on the phone, Price said that he had killed the four men in revenge for the World Trade Center attacks on September 11. He was looking for men of "Arabic descent." As it turns out, only one of the four was of Middle Eastern extraction.

This tragically nonsensical story seemed to deepen as his mother, Leatha Price, said her son had a history of drug abuse and mental health problems, exacerbated by September 11. The family's ongoing attempts to get him treatment were rebuffed repeatedly. On March 9, 2003, he had been seen and released by Woodhull Medical and Mental Health Center. On March 10, say police, he killed Albert Kotlyar, who had asked him to leave the Laundry King Superstore in Bedford-Stuyvesant since he was not doing any wash. Price told police he had been disrespected.

Price had eight prior arrests going back to 1989 for burglary, robbery, and assault. He has been charged with four counts of murder and two counts of attempted murder.

The Daily News pointed out that this is simply the latest in a long series of cases to raise questions about whether hospitals are properly handling dangerous, mentally ill people. Andrew Goldstein, for example, was shuffled through at least six mental health facilities before he pushed Kendra Webdale to her death in front of a subway train in 1999, the News recalled. Larry Hogue, the Wild Man of 96th Street, was finally institutionalized in 1997 after his one-man reign of terror on the Upper West Side.

When asked about Price, Roger Klingman, a spokesman for the state Office of Mental Health, said, "We are aware of the story, and we are looking into it."

HEARINGS ON TERRORISM BEGIN AT LAST

New Yorkers are finally getting their hearings. Nearly 19 months after the bombing of the World Trade Center, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks began public hearings downtown on March 31. As the New York Times had pointed out on the first anniversary of 9/11, the government's failure to investigate was unprecedented for a disaster of this magnitude. A public inquiry into the sinking of the Titanic began the morning after the survivors arrived in New York City. "No inquiry remotely similar in scope, energy or transparency has examined the attacks of last Sept. 11," wrote the Times. "One year later, the public knows less about the circumstances of 2,801 deaths at the foot of Manhattan in broad daylight than people in 1912 knew within weeks about the Titanic, which sank in the middle of the ocean in the dead of night."

Similarly, the Warren Commission felt compelled to report its findings by the first anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination. Serious investigations were conducted into the military failure at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the explosion that destroyed the Challenger space shuttle, and airline disasters, such as the 1996 downing of the TWA Flight 800.

The Bush administration successfully blocked congressional hearings on 9/11 for six months, and repelled calls for a special commission of inquiry. While congressional hearings were eventually held behind closed doors, the promised public hearings were postponed time and again. Now they have begun at the Custom House, with public testimony that includes bitter but cogent censure of the government's ineptitude in the face of the many warnings it received that a violent attack was coming.

Mindy Kleinberg , for example, who lost her 39-year-old husband, asked, "Where was our government, its agencies, and institutions prior to and on the morning of September 11th?" She cited the clichĂ© that intelligence agencies have to be right 100 percent of the time and the terrorists only have to get lucky once. But this is wrong on its face, she argued, because the 9/11 terrorists were not just lucky once: they were lucky over and over again. Her most startling accusation in her list of government blunders was that the Securities and Exchange Commission and American intelligence agencies failed to investigate the huge number of put options that were bought on American and United Airlines, the two airlines involved in the attacks, in the week before the attack. Speculators, who were gambling that in the short term the stock prices of both airlines would plummet, netted a profit of at least $5 million. The money remains unclaimed in the Chicago Exchange account. Why, she asks, were these aberrant trades not discovered prior to 9/11? Who placed these trades? Have they been investigated?

Mary Fetchet , another witness, lost her 24-year-old son Brad, who worked as an equity trader on the 89th floor of Tower 2. He called his father after the attack on tower one, shaken, but said that the Port Authority had told them to stay put in their office, "that the building is safe and secure." She notes that Rick Rescorla, Director of Security for Morgan Stanley told their employees to leave the building - to disregard the Port Authority's commands to evacuees to "return up to their offices." What were the failures, she asks, and who is accountable?

Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation argued that we have to "accept that we will live with some level of risk for years." Terrorists are planning further attacks, and the government cannot eliminate all sources of terrorist danger. But because intelligence is the first line of defense against terrorism, the New York Police Department in particular should be rebuilding its institutional intelligence capabilities. He argues that the rules put in place in the mid-1970s to correct the abuses of the 1960s impaired collection of intelligence by the early 1980s. By the 1990s, there was increased concern about terrorism, but police "collection capabilities remained low." Building more effective local intelligence-collection might be better than creating another federal entity since "local police know their territory" and local forces better reflect local populations.

Noting that New York had received only $11 million of the $556 million allocated for homeland security, Mayor Bloomberg urged that funds be distributed according to risk and threat analysis. If we distributed money for the military in the same way domestic security money has been allocated, said the mayor, "our troops in Iraq would have bows and arrows."

The commission was surprised by the low turnout of 60 or so people, which was far smaller than the 250 or more anticipated. But then the commission did not make it easy for people to come. Audience members were told to arrive at least 60 minutes before the start of the hearings, and that seating would be on a first-come, first-served basis. Members of the press, who were required to register three days in advance, were told to arrive at least 90 minutes early.

NEW YORK'S SENATOR MOYNIHAN DIES

Even as public hearings on terrorism finally began, New York's most relentless opponent of government secrecy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

In Secrecy: The American Experience, he wrote that "government secrecy in its essence" produced its own pathology: "Departments and agencies hoard information, and the government becomes a kind of market. Secrets become organizational assets, never to be shared save in exchange for another organization's assets. Sometimes the exchange is in kind: I exchange my secret for your secret. Sometimes the exchange resembles barter: I trade my willingness to share certain secrets for your help in accomplishing my purposes. But whatever the coinage, the system costs can be enormous. In the void created by absent or withheld information, decisions are either made poorly or not made at all." This, of course, describes precisely the bureaucratic rivalries among the many agencies charged with protecting New York.

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