

Our hearts go out to shooting victims, families

THE ISSUE | Friday's shooting spree at a community center in Binghamton, during which a gunman killed 13 and critically injured four others before killing himself.

OUR OPINION | A tragedy that made headlines across the country occurred frighteningly close to home. Our thoughts are with the victims and their families.

It was startling to glance up at CNN on the newsroom television here at *The Leader* on Friday afternoon and see a BREAKING NEWS banner along with reports of a gunman on a deadly rampage and an apparent hostage situation.

It was even more chilling to see that the shooting spree had occurred so close, in the neighboring Southern Tier city of Binghamton.

The suspect, Jiverly Wong, allegedly killed 13 people and critically wounded four others before killing himself in a shooting spree at the American Civic Association in downtown Binghamton, which teaches English to immigrants and helps them prepare for citizenship tests.

Many questions remained unanswered – first and foremost, the gunman's motive, which we will probably never know with any great degree of certainty.

Reports are emerging that Wong – who immigrated from Vietnam in the early 1990's – was angry and troubled, had recently lost his job and was upset about being picked on for his limited English speaking skills. Also, he was reportedly unhappy living in his adopted homeland.

But why, exactly, would Wong launch a vicious attack on other immigrants at the center, where he had been

taking classes? Especially since his father was reportedly known in the Binghamton area for his work helping immigrants?

As authorities look for answers, we can only say that our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families, some of whom may be living half a world away.

We're relieved that 37 people trapped and hiding inside the building during the shooting spree managed to survive.

We commend the receptionist at the American Civic Association, 61-year-old Shirley DeLucia, who was the first victim during the rampage.

Shot in the abdomen and critically wounded, she crawled underneath a desk and called 911. Thanks to her, police arrived at the scene in a matter of minutes, and she stayed on the phone and fed them information.

Friday's incident was the fifth deadly mass shooting in the U.S. in the past month alone. Sadly, many people have become desensitized to such incidents, because they happen so frequently. But the Binghamton shooting was a stark reminder that the violence that pervades our society can happen anywhere, even close to home.

It's also a painful reminder of how deeply it can hurt.

COMMENTARY | RANDY JURADO ERTLL

Homeless need top priority

We need to do more to address the problem of homelessness. Homeless rates continue to rise in the United States, now more than ever, due to our severe economic crisis.

Last week, President Obama was asked about the problem at his news conference. To his credit, he gave a compassionate response.

"Part of the change in attitudes that I want to see here in Washington and all across the country," the president said, "is a belief that it is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours."

But today families make up 34 percent of the homeless population, and one in every 50 children is homeless in America, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness. The homeless are disproportionately black and brown, 43 percent black and 15 percent Hispanic, according to the center. And the faces of the homeless are getting younger, especially among the Latino community.

Many of the Latino parents who end up being homeless do not speak English and sometimes they do not know where to seek aid. Also, some organizations that work on homeless issues do not know how to reach out to them.

For all children, homelessness is especially tragic. They worry about where they're going to sleep at night. They worry about their own safety – and that of their parents.

They often feel ashamed and keep it a secret from their teachers or school administrators. Many have difficulty concentrating on their academics and cannot do their homework under a bridge or in the cramped, smelly, cheap motel rooms where illicit activities are rampant. They move from school district to school district sometimes several times a year, which makes it even harder for them to make the grade.

As taxpayers, we must demand that our government help alleviate this problem.

Instead of just bailing out and saving countless financial, automobile and insurance institutions, our government should also help the homeless children in our midst. Investing in these children would cost a mere fraction of what it's costing us to bail out corporate America. And we have a moral imperative to do so.

Insufficient funding to help homeless children must not be tolerated any longer.

Let's not ignore the homeless issue. Let's not pretend that homeless children do not exist.

They do. And it's our shame.

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ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | LEONARD PITTS JR.

On torture and fool's gold

Our story so far:

In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, hundreds of men identified as members of al-Qaida were captured and imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. There, they were subjected to sexual humiliation, sleep deprivation, dehydration, extreme temperatures, waterboarding, being chained to the floor for hours in their own waste, and other so-called "enhanced interrogation" techniques even as the president was assuring the world that we don't torture because we are America and America doesn't do that sort of thing.

The president was, of course, lying. And having thus sold our national honor, you might wonder what we received in exchange.

The answer: nothing. At least, not if the case of one Abu Zubaida is in any way representative. According to a March 29 report in the *Washington Post*, U.S. officials were convinced they had themselves a real, live al-Qaida leader in Zubaida, who was captured in Pakistan in 2002. Under pressure from the Bush White House to get something out of him, they resorted to waterboarding and other coercive measures.

Out came a flood of names and plots and details. Security was tightened, millions were spent chasing it all down and all of it was for nothing. Every investigation launched as a result of Abu Zubaida's revelations fizzled. It turned out that, far from being an al-Qaida leader, he was a mid-level associate. The *Post* says most of the information he gave that proved in any way useful came during ordinary interrogation. The things he said while being tortured by the nation that does not torture were apparently just to make the pain stop.

The *Post* report is but the latest in a litany of revelations all suggesting the same thing: that in the wake of Sept. 11, a frightened nation betrayed one of its core principles – the rule of law – for the fool's gold of security.

We tortured and then rationalized with stark illogic. Indeed, it's worth remembering that when this debate was at its zenith, proponents, including columnist Cal Thomas, Congressman Tom Tancredo and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, defended torture by pointing out how well it seems to work for counterterrorism expert Jack Bauer. One wondered sometimes if they were aware that Jack Bauer is a character on a TV show, "24."

And it occurs to me that if we're going to use TV characters to frame this debate, "M-A-S-H" might be a better choice. Our Bush-era policy on torture, after all, suggests nothing so much as a White House run by Frank Burns, the supercilious super patriot who saw enemies of America's goodness behind every mess hall and latrine and chased them with a spectacular zealotry

unimpinged by logic, common sense or simple decency.

Burns was, of course, a caricature of the Red Scare America of the 1950s where forces of paranoia and fear led by Sen. Joe McCarthy fought supposed "commie" infiltration by surveilling, blacklisting, haranguing and harassing countless innocent Americans, ruining their livelihoods and lives while doing little harm to any actual communists. And if, 20 years later, that mindset had become a recognizable comic "type" played for laughs, that doesn't mean the nation's capacity to again lose its mind to fear and paranoia had lessened in the slightest.

That is what we are learning here, as revelations of Bush-era excesses continue to drip like water upon the stone of public conscience. People came out of the McCarthy era marveling at how easily fear and paranoia had stampeded us into surrendering principles that are supposed to define us. Mark my words: We will look back on this era the same way.

Once again, we have sold our national honor for fool's gold. And once again, we will live to rue the deal, as fools usually do.

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NATIONAL VIEW | MIAMI HERALD

Federal government in driver's seat

When General Motors lobbied for a federal bailout, the company left itself open to government intervention, and that's exactly what it got this week. The administration forced the departure of CEO Rick Wagoner and gave the company a deadline to come up with an improved plan to restructure or face bankruptcy. And not a minute too soon.

Once upon a time, this level of government activity in the private sector was unheard of and unwarranted. But once upon a time no one imagined GM going broke and coming hat in hand to taxpayers for help. This is not your father's Detroit model. Now that the federal government has funneled \$17.4 billion to GM and Chrysler, President Barack Obama has a duty to protect the government's investment. He also needs to protect jobs and ensure the viability of the auto industry. Anyone who bankrolls a pri-

vate company would do the same when the company is in trouble and its future in doubt. Taxpayers should expect no less when their money is on the line.

Wagoner presided over GM at a time of massive losses, eroded shareholder value and dwindling market share. His fate was sealed the moment he asked for a bailout last year. He managed to hang on long enough to produce another restructuring plan. Unfortunately, it wasn't good enough to go forward.

Even bondholders agreed that GM's rosy scenario relied on a quick turnaround of the national economy, which is more of a hope and a prayer than a realistic plan. It is anyone's guess whether the auto industry can be put on the road to recovery, but the government has to try. It would be derelict to allow employers as important as Chrysler and GM to simply go out of business amid the biggest economic downturn since

the Depression.

Yet, as Obama said, it doesn't work to let the industry muddle through with an unending flow of taxpayer dollars, either. Now, GM and those holding its debt have some decisions to make, based on the government's ultimatum. In order to avoid Chapter 11 bankruptcy – a loser all around – bondholders and workers must make concessions. Fewer benefits for some, deeper writedowns of debt for others. Or, as Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., put it: A haircut or a bath.

Perhaps Obama should have taken this tougher approach with the banking and financial industry, where bosses of troubled firms remain at the helm and collect their bonuses. They are every bit as beholden to the taxpayers who have bailed them out as the auto companies that took government money. This week's activity sends a message to every executive suite where federal bailout money has landed: Shape up or get out.

Massa making a name for himself, but no labels, thank you

U.S. Rep. Eric Massa is beginning to make a name for himself in Washington and certainly amongst his Democratic colleagues.

Exactly what that name is may depend on who you talk to. But for argument's sake let's just say he's closer to "Maverick" than he is "Rubber Stamp."

In his first three months in office, he has caught the attention of the Democratic leadership in the House for his independent thinking.

There have been times, Massa told me recently, when senior party members have scolded him for breaking ranks on a number of important votes. But intimidation apparently hasn't worked on the retired Navy commander and cancer survivor.

Last week Massa had a brief meeting with President Obama to explain that he would vote against the president's proposed budget if farm subsidies that would impact small, local farms were to be altered. The budget provision sought to phase out subsidies for farms with more than \$500,000 in gross sales revenue.

When I questioned whether there were many farms in the 29th District of that size, Massa responded: "that's two tractors and a cow."

Massa voted for the budget Thursday after the provision was taken out and said New York Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer were working to have the subsidy retained in the Senate's version of the budget.

That's not the only time Massa has gone against the grain, so to speak, and it probably won't be the last.

Soon after arriving in Washington, Massa proved he was not a big fan of Obama's plan to use government bailouts to prevent the country from falling from a recession into a depression.

Massa opposed TARP spending, claiming there was not enough oversight of where \$350 billion of taxpayers' money was going. He was eventually proved right when it was learned that companies like AIG shelled out \$165 million in bonuses after receiving bailout money.

On March 5, he opposed rescuing the housing industry with billions of dollars, believing it would have little benefit for the 29th District. The housing bill passed, mostly along party lines, and Massa was one of only 24 Democrats to vote against the bill.

"I campaigned on a platform of standing as an independent voice and voting in the interests of my constituents, not a political party," Massa declared after the House vote.

Also on that day, the National Republican Campaign Committee went after Massa and a few other freshmen Dems for acting conservative, but not enough to be accepted as a Blue Dog Democrat. Truth be told, Massa never asked or aspired to be part of the Blue Dogs, recognized as the conservative coalition of House Democrats.

"I don't want to be a Blue Dog. I don't want the label," Massa told me days later.

But it's not like Massa isn't willing to play ball. He voted for the \$787 billion economic stimulus bill and the \$410 billion omnibus spending measure touted by Obama and the Democratic leadership as essential groundwork for a national economic recovery.

As for any future bailouts, Massa said he'll likely oppose them over reluctance to plunge the country further into debt.

So far, Massa is the antithesis of the man he replaced as our congressman, Randy Kuhl, who walked in lockstep with George Bush and was a party hardliner. Only when it was too late in his second term did Kuhl – and most others – begin to distance himself from Bush, a maneuver viewed by most as a shallow survival tactic.

Just a few months into his first term, there's no evidence of puppet strings guiding Massa's decisions.

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