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## MISSED SIGNALS

*In hindsight everything's simple. But policing takes a lot more than hindsight.*



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. So much violence, so little time! While the (virtual) ink from “[Hidden in Plain Sight](#)” was still wet we were shaken by horrific news from Cleveland, where police were unearthing human remains at the home of registered sex offender [Anthony Sowell](#). As digging continues eleven bodies have been found, all female. So far the identities of ten are known. Ranging in age 25 to 52, most were reportedly addicts and sex workers. Sowell, who had been released in 2005 after doing fifteen years for rape, had apparently lured them in with drugs and liquor.

How was he caught? It wasn't because police and public health authorities followed up on complaints about a [horrible stench](#) emanating from the residence (they didn't).

It wasn't because [a woman accused Sowell](#) of choking and raping her last November. (Sowell was arrested but the case was dismissed, apparently because the victim didn't seem credible.)

It wasn't because [a deputy checking up on sex offenders](#) got suspicious when he stopped by to chat with Sowell last month. (The officer didn't enter the home. Maybe it smelled too bad. Anyway, there was no need, as Sowell was reporting as required. [A psychologist](#) even declared that he was unlikely to reoffend!)

It wasn't because [a woman told police](#) that shortly after the deputy left Sowell choked and raped her, then offered her money to keep quiet. (She supposedly didn't show up for an interview.)

And it wasn't because a [naked woman landed on the street](#) after "falling" from Sowell's upper-floor window. (She reportedly refused to talk to officers who went to see her at the hospital.)

In the end Sowell's September victim finally met with the cops. What she said led them to obtain [arrest and search warrants](#). Once inside the home, their noses led them to two bodies. Hmm, something suspicious here!

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Only days after the grim discovery in Cleveland another mass killing rocked the nation. This one happened all at once. On November 5, 2009 a thirty-nine year old Fort Hood psychiatrist went on a shooting spree, killing thirteen and wounding twenty-eight. [Major Nidal Malik Hasan](#) now stands charged with capital murder.

Hasan had a troubled history. According to a former classmate at the Medical University of the Armed Services, [he frequently expressed opposition](#) to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and considered himself "a Muslim first and an American second." Hasan once gave a lecture on "whether the war on terror is a war against Islam." When students challenged him about the topic's relevance (it was an environmental health course) Hasan got "sweaty and nervous and emotional."

After graduating in 2003 Hasan was an intern and resident at Walter Reed Medical Center. If anything, [his clashes with colleagues](#) got worse. Hasan seemed distracted. He was often late for work and made himself unavailable even while on call. [Co-workers](#) said that he was occasionally belligerent and belittled colleagues. [Hasan's detached attitude](#) and extremist orientation (he gave a bizarre lecture in which he remarked that "the Quran teaches that infidels should have their heads cut off and set on fire") led colleagues to worry about his mental health. Indeed, superiors considered terminating Hasan's residency, but the procedures were onerous and they were afraid he would accuse them of religious bias. In the end Hasan was dealt with in the time-tested manner: he was promoted (to Major) and transferred to Fort Hood.

While at Walter Reed [Hasan exchanged e-mails](#) with radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. Designated by the U.S. as a "global terrorist," the imam lives in Yemen, where he went after leading a Virginia mosque that Hasan attended. Picked up by routine intercepts, the e-mails were forwarded to a Joint Terrorist Task Force. Agents apparently contacted a top official at Walter Reed, who surmised that the messages were in connection with Hasan's research on post-traumatic stress. Concluding that the e-mails were innocuous, the task force closed its file. But what did they really know about Hasan? Had they been told that his PowerPoint presentation on post-traumatic stress included a slide with the purported Muslim warrior creed, "we love

death more than you love life”? Were they aware that he was trying to get an early separation because of alleged religious persecution?

Neither Walter Reed nor the task force were in a position to investigate an odd duck at Fort Hood. That was a job for Army intelligence or CID. But they weren't alerted, so the puzzle remained unassembled. Even had they looked they would have missed a key fact: [Hasan had recently purchased a handgun](#). And not just any handgun, but an unusually expensive, highly lethal, high-capacity cop killer that was never intended for civilian use. Of course, since the Feds and Texas lack centralized gun registries, there was no way to know that Hasan bought a gun short of asking him or visiting gun stores.

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Everyone (like your blogger) who's kicked off an intelligence program knows to prepare for an avalanche. Whether information arrives electronically or through word of mouth, there are hardly enough resources to examine data let alone pursue more than a tiny fraction of leads.

That embarrassment of riches affects everyone, from the pointy-heads at police HQ to the cop on the beat. Cast your net too broadly and you'll invariably commit a rash of "Type 1" errors, sending out trivial leads and squandering your credibility. Narrow your search and you'll get bit by "Type 2" errors, missing worthwhile targets like Sowell or Hasan whom any idiot should have known to investigate.

Police are expected to accomplish *something*. As [we've pointed out](#), catching real terrorists is tough, so it's not surprising that given limited resources the Feds might choose to "rope in" dummies. More generally, the tendency to reach for low-lying fruit is manifested in a preference for so-called "actionable" intelligence, meaning that the underlying offense is self-evident or nearly so. Put simply, until a victim signed on the dotted line Sowell was just another of the umpteen weasels polluting Cleveland's troubled Imperial Avenue neighborhood. Hasan? He wasn't even on radar.

It's a truism that Type 2 errors of omission usually go undetected, so the chances of being seriously embarrassed by not acting are small. Sowell and Hasan were exceptions. Their dangerousness wasn't appreciated because the default strategy is to dismiss, dismiss, dismiss. Unless there's an obvious violation, officers may go to extraordinary lengths to routinize information and interpret questionable behavior in its most favorable light. Consider for example the [Madoff scandal](#), where the Feds overlooked blatant inconsistencies and ignored detailed tips in a rush to "prove" that all was well.

Doing nothing is easy to justify. According to the spokesperson for the Cleveland sheriff, the deputy who talked with Sowell didn't go in the house because he didn't have the authority. Hasan was promoted because kicking him out might have triggered controversy. Absent an underlying crime – Sowell's murders were as yet undiscovered; Hasan's were still to be committed – neither case offered an obvious entry point or investigative path. Intending no pun, there was plenty of reason to dig, but the calculus of political, bureaucratic and individual needs mitigated against anyone picking up a shovel.

As we suggested in "[Hidden in Plain Sight](#)," disorganized, poverty-stricken neighborhoods are particularly challenging. Sowell preyed on victims who were indisposed to turn to police, and if they did, were unlikely to be believed. Citizens besieged by violence had long given up trying to wake up the city to their plight, while overburdened cops looked on even the oddest circumstances, like women tumbling from windows, as just another symptom of the miserable conditions on their beat.

In the end, it's that last observation that offers the hint of a remedy. Rare events such as mass murder are difficult to predict precisely because they *are* rare. Our best shot at preventing them lies in avoiding the urge to routinize and in paying close attention to the unusual and offbeat, like naked women falling from the sky and military officers e-mailing with terrorists.

Solving cases retrospectively is easy. Developing the ability to anticipate crime and work *prospectively* is the real trick.