



*Death on Base: The Fort Hood Massacre* by Anita Belles Porterfield and John Porterfield.

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The shootings by Army psychiatrist, Dr. Nidal Hasan, at the Fort Hood Soldier Readiness Processing Center in Killeen, Texas, on 5 November 2009 left thirteen people dead and forty-three wounded; it stoked yet again the post-9/11 national argument over the nature of terrorism in the United States. On one side are those who see Hasan's murders as another instance of specifically *Islamic* extremism. On the other are those who see the Fort Hood attack as a case of "workplace violence" and stress that irresponsible labeling risks maligning innocent people because their religion has been distorted and hijacked by a few extremists.

President Barack Obama's public statements about the Fort Hood massacre have fluctuated over time. In his memorial service remarks, he did not identify Islamic terrorism as a factor, despite FBI reports of Hasan's avowals of his Islamic beliefs and witness statements that the Palestinian-American Hasan walked through the crowded medical building shouting "Allahu Akbar!" (God is great) as he shot people trying to hide or flee. Later, in an address delivered after the mass shooting in San Bernardino on 2 December 2015, President Obama for the first time referred to the Fort Hood attack as an act of terrorism. The Pentagon, too, resisted calling the attack an act of international Islamist terrorism until Congress directed it in 2015 to define it as such.

How, then, are we to explain the Fort Hood attack and put it in its appropriate context? Can there be a national consensus on the matter? In *Death on Base*, journalists Anita Belles Porterfield and John Porterfield investigate in detail the causes and influences behind the worst ever mass shooting at a US military installation. They also compare it with other mass murders, in particular the Luby's cafeteria shootings, which also occurred in Killeen.

The authors live near Fort Hood. Anita Belles is a former director of Louisiana's state emergency medical services and John is a former specialist in financial services. In researching their book, they have drawn on an extensive array of news reports and commentaries—both in print and broadcast form; they have also tapped government reports, trial transcripts, interviews, and many secondary sources. Since the Army declined to assist them in locating witnesses and others with knowledge of the relevant events, they had to find them entirely on their own. In response to their efforts, they maintain, the Army published a warning meant to impede their work. Not surprisingly, they received little help from the family and friends of Nidal Hasan.

The book comprises twelve chapters. Chapter 1, "Station Thirteen," reconstructs the events inside the Readiness Processing Center about 1:30 p.m. on the fateful day from the perspective of survivors. Chapter 2, "King of the Hill," discusses the mass murder committed by George Hennard in Luby's cafeteria eighteen years earlier. Chapter 3, "American Dream," sketches the life of Nidal Hasan, concentrating on his time in the Army after he graduated from high school in 1988. The authors examine the e-mail exchanges between Hasan and Anwar al Awlaki, a Yemeni-American imam and terrorist recruiter. Chapter 4, "The Great Place," concerns Hasan's work and his other actions at Fort Hood, including his purchase of the handgun used in the attack.

Chapters 5, "Rage against the Machine," 6, "A Kick in the Gut," and 7, "Judgment Day," detail the final few days before Hasan opened fire, the accounts of first responders, and the commencement of investigations to discover precisely what had happened. Chapter 8, "Ticking Time Bombs," shifts to a discussion of mass murder in general, with brief accounts of those committed by Charles Whitman at the University of Texas (1 Aug. 1966), James Huberty at the San Ysidro McDonald's restaurant (18 July 1984), Patrick Sherrill at a post office in Edmund, Oklahoma (20 Aug. 1986), and George Hennard at Luby's cafeteria (16 Oct. 1991). The authors also isolate the traits common to mass murderers in a kind of descriptive profile.

Chapter 9, "Playing with Fire," explores the world of terrorism, further analyzing the career of Anwar al Awlaki and his links to several terrorists including Hasan. Chapters 10, "One Nation's Terrorist Is Another Nation's Freedom Fighter," and 11, "Hide and Seek," conclude the authors' survey of other mass killings by recounting the massacres events at Virginia Tech (16 Apr. 2007) and Sandy Hook Elementary School (14 Dec. 2012). Finally, chapter 12, "The System," covers Hasan's trial.

Obviously, this is an ambitious book. Though it revolves around the Fort Hood attack, as much or more space is devoted to a broader, synoptic consideration of mass murder, whether or not linked to a terrorist ideology. This makes the book's title somewhat misleading, but the authors succeed in setting Hasan's act in a larger context.

*Death on Base* cannot, of course, be called a joy to read, but it will engage and instruct readers seeking a good, general, politically impartial treatment of its topic. It may even encourage a salutary refocusing of the polarizing debate about the nature of terrorist acts.