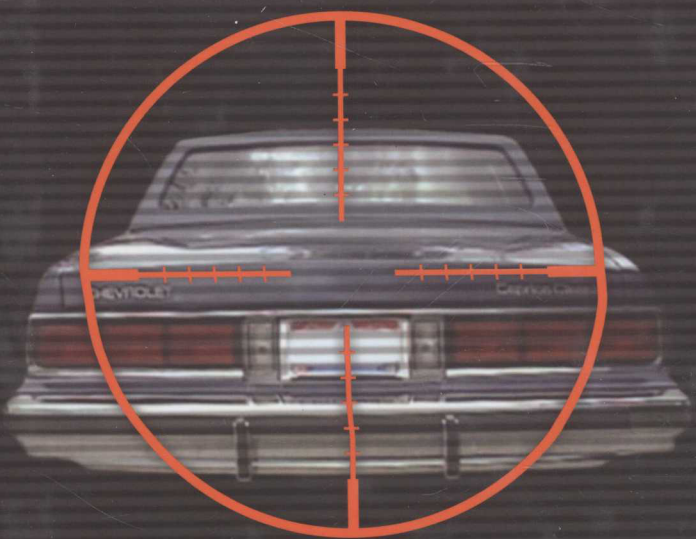
ON THE TRAIL OF THE D.C. SNIPER

Fear and the Media



Jack R. Censer

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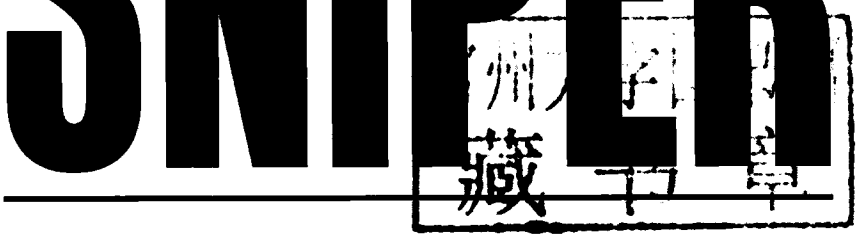

Fear and the Media

JACK R. CENSER *with the assistance of William Miller*

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Acknowledgments

Following the reporting of the Washington D.C. area sniper, first as a resident and then as a scholar, has been as engrossing as any of my other scholarly projects. The event, which occurred in October 2002, rattled the region and set off reverberations far beyond it. This drew me to the story, but I wanted to tell it as scrupulously and fairly as possible. While I hope this work contributes to important scholarly debates in its framing and conclusion, the narrative forms the emotional core of the book.

My first thanks must go to my colleagues and students at George Mason University. Although I have heretofore published in the area of the French Revolution, I have taught the history of the press to history and communications students for many years. This book was written at the intersection of the two disciplines, and I hold an appointment in both. The opportunity to work with creative scholars, to teach demanding students, and to read the engaging communications scholarship about the press has enabled me to write this book. However, it is important to add that on the base level–both theoretically and for scholarly example–I am deeply indebted to historians.

Michael Schudson and Robert Snyder, the readers of my manuscript for the University of Virginia Press, responded with interesting and challenging questions that forced me to think harder about what I wanted the book to accomplish. Lenard Berlanstein, J. William Harris, and Peter Stearns also assisted me by reading the manuscript and providing useful feedback. Likewise, Frank Sesno, Peter Slevin, and Lenny Steinhorn gave very useful advice. I thank them and others too numerous to name for their invaluable assistance. I appreciate the kindness and generosity of the Shadow TV staff who helped me gain access to local and national television coverage as well.

Many respondents both in the schools and in the media gave freely of their time in the many interviews conducted for this study. In particular, I want to thank a few who not only spoke with me but also facilitated connections to others and/or who took repeated questions. They include Jeremy Redmon, Tom Kapsedelis, Tom Bettag, Gail Pennybacker, Sari Horwitz, Michael Ruane, Peter Slevin, and Mike McMearty. Jerry Weast and Brian Porter of the Montgomery County Public Schools gave generously of their time and provided access to the excellent records of the central administration during the sniper incident. No one spent more time with me than journalist Jamie Stockwell, then of the *Washington Post,* who assiduously guided me through her three weeks with the sniper case.

Writing a book while serving as an administrator provided a much different experience. The constraints on my time required me to rely upon others much more than before. Most important, Professor William Miller, the Director of Mason's Creative Writing Program, wrote drafts of the chronological narrative in the introduction and provided significant copyediting to a late draft of the work. I am deeply grateful for his conscientious, thoughtful, and capable assistance in all matters. I enjoyed the assistance of three research assistants: Ben Huggins, Tom Cogliano, and Lynn Price, all of whom were critical to this project. Additional thanks go to Lynn Price who authored the footnoted biographies of journalists and other actors in this book. Kathleen Curtis provided considerable assistance in the closing stages of work. Marjorie Censer did excellent work locating on-line many of the media sources I used here. Her organizing skills were invaluable. Katie Clare, my administrative assistant over the last several years, put much energy into the project–some during work and some outside of it. It would be hard to overestimate how much she helped, not only in the support of the project, but also as a friend and colleague.

Finally, my family forms the base of what I am able to do as a professional. Joel and Marjorie have lived through many of my projects, but they were older, more interested, and more informed for this one. It has been a joy to talk with them about the book and hear their ideas. Even more important than their direct assistance, however, are the love and pleasure that they bring into my life, which underpin productivity of every kind. My greatest debt goes to Jane Turner Censer, fellow historian, who has discussed the project with me and read drafts at every stage. Her good sense and emotional support have provided the platform for this and most everything else I try to do.

Introduction

The murder of James D. Martin in the late afternoon of October 2, 2002, at a grocery story parking lot in Montgomery County, Maryland, and an errant shot through the window of a neighboring store minutes earlier, went largely unremarked in the media. However, the gunning down nearby of four more people the following morning soon attracted attention. By the time a fifth person was shot on October 3, near the border between Maryland and the District of Columbia, police resources had been focused–an effort that only increased during the next twenty-one days, before the capture of the culprits less than fifty miles northwest of the original shooting.

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When the snipers assailed Washington, the events made a story that was told all over the globe, although with more intensity by the media outlets between Baltimore, Maryland, and Richmond, Virginia. A number of reasons suggest the importance of studying the press during this particular time, not the least of which is the understanding that can be gained through a carefully focused case study that allows a very detailed understanding of the press in action.

Most scholars of the recent press have opted for a more thematic approach that covers a wider territory than will this present study.[1] And even though library shelves already groan with historical case studies of the media, highly focused endeavors to comprehend the press's very recent history have been mainly limited to scholars who gained access

1. See, e.g., Stuart Taylor and K. C. Johnson, *Until Proven Innocent: Political Correctness and the Shameful Injustices of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case* (New York: St. Martins, 2007).

for specific periods of time and then reported their observations.[2] Although this approach allows the scholar the ability to gather information, ask pointed questions, and avoid the dimming of memory with the passage of time, such studies depend on the events that occur within the selected time period, whether those events are coincidental or major. This study, however, examines a critical period when the press intensified its usual efforts, methodologies, patterns, and practices, and, at least in some ways, the effects of its work. Further, this exploration depicts the press after the events of September 11, 2001, at a time when the American public had grown enormously fearful. To be certain, there have been many other periods when American citizens have been fearful, whether such anxieties have been justified or not. But there can be little doubt that following the buoyant years at the end of the Cold War and accompanying the economic growth that characterized the last decade of the millennium, the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington and on New York's World Trade Center towers shocked most every American. Further, a spate of anthrax poisonings, focused in the Washington area several months before the sniper incident, had served to greatly re-arouse the jitters of area residents, if not a larger segment of the American populace. Thus, a study of the press in the Washington area during October 2002, can help us to understand America's anxieties in the early twenty-first century, and to examine the relationships between those heightened anxieties, public events, and the news media's coverage of those events.[3]

While the fearful politics of the particular period in question have resonance deep in the American past, as well as more recently,[4] the situation of Washington, D.C., in 2002, was less deeply rooted. At the time of the shootings, the capital region was very far away from its situation as a relatively small population and media center. In the half-century since World War II, Washington had come to rival New York as a base for news reporters. These circumstances meant that while a

2. For an extraordinary example that has influenced others, see Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). Any study of the recent press must also begin with Michael Schudson's *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). See also Phyllis Kaniss, *The Media and the Mayor's Race: The Failure of Urban Political Reporting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

3. See Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (New York: Roultedge, 2006).

4. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). For the origins of the term terror, see Robert R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

relatively similar shooting in Ohio might go ignored by most national reporters and be carried by their news outlets in a national wrap-up, the story of the Washington snipers was carefully watched in the District and broadcast across the world.

Technologically, the period also proved quite distinct. Radio and television had challenged print media for many years, but the preceding decade had seen evolve three full-fledged, cable-based, twenty-four-hour news networks–CNN, FOX News, and MSNBC–as well as a business network, CNBC. For our purposes, this produced two very significant changes: the news cycle accelerated greatly as these cable networks showed their insatiable appetite for new information, and the press relied increasingly on images instead of words.

Together, these changes vastly altered the situation that had prevailed just a few years before, at the close of the twentieth century. The use of images put a premium on emotion that words would find hard to match. Secondly, cable news, to keep its viewers, had to make its fare constantly newsworthy. This encouraged more scoops, as people in the news business call the situation when one reporter or news outlet has a story before others do. But the situation also led to more hyping of the available news when what legitimately might be called a scoop was not available. Together, these tendencies raised the tempo and tenor of reporting. Yet even this situation would not remain stable in the period after 2002, as Internet-distributed news became independent of the established print and electronic news outlets. In 2002, blogging was still in its infancy and most news reported live on the Internet was simply an accelerated version of material already or soon to be in print or on television. The opinions of ordinary individuals were not regarded as news. Within two years, even what constituted "the media" had evolved to include an unfettered, vast element of Web-based self-expression, much of which was not at all vetted by editors and publishers. Even the outpouring by self-appointed purveyors of information and opinion was coming to be considered news. Though keyed much more to the word than to the image, this new world allowed a wider array of publications, both creative and histrionic. And even though back in October 2002, these changes still were somewhere in the future, it nevertheless was the case that the media world of that date was more emotional and competitive than it had been before, and the effect was to discourage restraint much more so than when print and television networks dominated news delivery.

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While analysts from many disciplines and backgrounds have examined the press for its political bias (as detailed extensively in the bibliographical essay of this book), many media scholars in the academy have systematically broadened the discussion by mapping a broad network of assumptions that have shaped the press, and have developed the notion of "framing" stories. In this version of bias, "framing" is not deliberate but rather results from other tendencies, like reporters' growing professionalism, an event orientation that characterizes most news reports, a reliance by reporters on official sources for the bulk of their information, and much more.[5] Thus, media experts veer away from seeing political bias as a primary motivation for the workaday members of the press. Furthermore, while the experts admit that framing can yield a political point of view, or slant, they see it as a values inclination rather than the partisan content that so many in the public sphere despise—a perhaps subtle but nevertheless real difference, since one has to do with effects and the other with motivations. Thus, neither the motivations of the press nor its contents can generally be reduced to an expression of "politics" in the narrow, partisan sense of the term.

This study attempts to go beyond the usual scholarly efforts to comprehend journalistic framing by examining the coverage of an event that produced very little evidence of conscious politics as an influence on reporting. In fact, there was universal condemnation across the spectrum of these acts. A few commentators who wished to interpret these attacks as Muslim-inspired inserted a political coloration, but no one suggested that the media was sympathetic to these shootings. Thus, the efforts going into this study will deepen our understanding of the nonpolitical assumptions that operate to produce the reporting that exists. Nevertheless, despite this study's looking at the media in this apolitical atmosphere, a frame does emerge. Do the values here still produce, however unintended, a partisan edge? Even if not, the frame will contribute to our understanding of politics, as this coverage took place little more than a year after the cataclysmic political change ushered in by the bombings in New York and Washington. Inevitably, it mixes into political developments.

But why look for an apolitical set of assumptions at all? It seems worth pointing out a few of the characteristics that do grace the many memoirs produced by journalists. Such self-descriptions include many

5. See Schudson, *Sociology of News*, 33-63.

apolitical motivations. Journalists want to know what is happening and why, and what someone is going to do about it. Most reporters report that they are pumped up by having their curiosities satisfied. Further, they hope what they're curious about lands their words on page one or at the top of the broadcast.

Memoirs show that when chasing a big story, reporters fall back on a mix of the routine and the abnormal to do their work. The routine is just that–it's the routine, the series of things a reporter does when there isn't a story working and he or she is just nosing for news. Such things as visiting the police station one more time to leaf through the offense reports when there hasn't been anything there the previous six times he or she has looked. So in times like these, the reporter will go back and leaf through the offense reports to see if there is anything there that the police or authorities themselves might have missed, such as someone's seeing a car or a white van sitting outside a certain building, arousing suspicions, when later, someone else was shot at that same building and the police who checked out the car reported that it didn't seem like anything–but the reporter, piecing together some other fragmentary bit of information, hopes to find out that it was something after all.

Aside from being curious, journalists describe themselves as competitive, and that they're in the news business. Reporters want to be the first to report a story, to get the scoop on everyone else, because it puts them on the front page or at least the local section front, and that means they've done well–for today, anyway. Tomorrow is a different day. Their editors want them to get the scoop because they know they will have a better issue of the paper that day, which means they've done well that day, too. And the publishers of the paper want a better paper every day because it means they have done well–yes, they can sell more ads at good rates because circulation is good, but in the larger sense, the community's general interest in what's in the paper every day is running solid and strong, and that makes everyone at the paper feel he or she has done well.

Recollections of news gathering contest the dominant and opposite view of political bias and do encourage study of journalists' potential for apolitical reporting and attitudes. As the following chapters make clear, this study investigates the reporting and assumptions of the journalistic community in a case study, important and interesting in its own right, but also in a circumstance in which the apolitical views of this commu-

nity might come to the fore. Moreover, this study endeavors to go beyond political bias to see other interests at work; as will become quite clear, even apolitical does not mean a lack of viewpoint.

In sum, this book seeks its niche and its value by providing a closely defined case study of the recent past, a critical period because in part we still live within its politics. Understanding the media and how they worked during such a critical period can allow contemporaries to grasp the present and perhaps improve the future at a time when the United States is conflicted about its own direction. Ironically, choosing a nonpolitical topic in these politicized times gives even greater insights into the fundamental assumptions of the press. Eliminating political motives leaves, I assert, a layer of uncontested frames of thinking that underlie all reporting.

To evaluate the material in the media assumes that the media are not simply a mirror of events. Despite the oft-stated and yet abstract goal of journalism to record simply the facts, such is patently impossible given that a news story must be extracted from and yet constructed with the multitude of facts available. But this study delves deeper to inquire about patterns of information that the press was able to extract from the events.[6]

Here the issue becomes thorny. Customarily, what historians have done is to examine the press coverage of a particular event, or series of events, and compare it to a "true" narrative that has been constructed with the benefit of hindsight. Thus, scholars may designate the press as accurate or sensationalistic, or they may deliver some similar assessment. The problem here is that an objective account is impossible. While it is always a problem to divine the most accurate account, this case was particularly difficult because the press could ascertain little or no accurate information. With no evidence about the shooters, the press had little choice but to speculate or rely on others who speculated about the possibilities. And the other aspect of the story, the public reaction, cannot provide a measurable baseline because historians' main access to the wide public is through the press itself. Thus, it becomes very difficult to characterize reporting using the traditional

6. Determining the meanings of the content of the media, grouped or individually, requires attention and assessment. However, the media itself provides cues: placement of the story, headlines and banners, labeling or placement of clear editorials, among many others. In trying to comprehend the messages communicated, I included these indicators in my general understanding of the story and its importance in shaping the ideas that emanated.

approach, even if that approach might be meaningful in other circumstances. To avoid the role of a critic operating from his own assumptions, I turned to the collective response of another social organization, the elementary and secondary schools, and compared their views with those that emerged in the press. In this way, a comparison to a contemporary group whose knowledge roughly equaled that shown in the press, allows some evaluation of the media.

As we shall see, the main variable in the press coverage was the degree of fear portrayed–from pandemonium to indifference. Few occupied the latter ground, while there were varying degrees of the former. Although a rich literature exists in many fields on the subject of fear, historians and students of communication have generally approached it in a pragmatic manner, even eschewing the rather impressionistic categories like those employed here.[7] Following the sources–that is, the media–proves difficult to do otherwise. Sorting the evidence into theoretical descriptions of psychological prototypes proved rather difficult, so I have developed working definitions of two intermediate groups of reactions that I have used throughout this volume.[8] Less complacent than those articles that were indifferent to danger or found the odds of catastrophe very low were those that evinced the view that while perils were present, with precautions, life could continue much as

7. Two of the best studies do not define any states of fear, but rather use the term "fear" in various circumstances as needed (see Joel Best, *Random Violence: How We Talk about New Crimes and New Victims* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999]; and Stearns, *American Fear*). This lacuna may result from the fact that such scholars are more interested in the context that produces fear than in the emotion itself.

8. Certainly, psychologists have spent a lot of time discussing fear, but their focus generally is on interiority of the experience and often concerns the rather specific psychological phenomena that produce dread. Even when they use more general categories, the focus on mental state means that these categories are not that helpful in assessing how the media project fear as they do through descriptions of individual, societal, and political responses. The categories developed here help add up different reported behaviors much more than the successive mental states that process them and constitute the main focus of psychology. For two compilations of studies of fear by psychologists, see Paul L. Gower, ed., *Psychology of Fear* (Hauppage, N.Y.: Nova Science Publishers, 2004); and Paul L. Gower, ed., *New Research on the Psychology of Fear* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2005). Other useful studies by psychologists include Isaac M. Marks, *Living with Fear: Understanding and Coping with Anxiety* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Shlomo Breznitz, *Cry Wolf: The Psychology of False Alarms* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984); and Michael Lewis and Leonard A. Rosenblum, eds., *The Origins of Fear* (New York: Wiley, 1974).

usual. On the more anxious side were those articles that, while emphasizing fear, suggested the necessity of living life even as doom threatened. Still, these generated less anxiety than did accounts of those who hunkered down at home or who took precautions so severe as to magnify the threat far more than the ability to cope.

Evidently, these are loose, pragmatic descriptions. I have used them to underpin my analysis, but I did not let these ideational devices rigidly limit the sources. Clearly, at times the sources straddled categories, or even combined disparate ones. But these working definitions allowed a somewhat systematic approach to the news.

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Chapters 1 through 3 analyze the press and reveal the way that a high level of fear dominated the press. Short of pandemonium, the press most often combined coping and doom in its reporting. Because the *Washington Post* put far more resources into covering this event than did any other outlet, and thus led the others in coverage, the paper deserves to be treated first and by itself, in chapter 1. The *Post* published hundreds of thousands of words in the twenty-three days of the event and developed a richly textured view of the fear permeating the region. At times, the *Post*'s articles conjured a commentary about social cohesion to resist the panic gripping the area, but more often than not, the coverage treated the snipers as pure evil and as capable of inflicting great harm. Overall, readers would have been little reassured.

Yet another medium that informed many people about this event was the continuous television coverage to which local channels and cable networks frequently resorted. Chapter 2 takes up a selection of this coverage. This chapter breaks new ground because of the general difficulty that scholars have found in obtaining access to this sort of television. As far as I am aware, this is the first study of this kind of treatment, often called "wall-to-wall" coverage. Most important for the substantive argument developed here, this non-stop reporting had little reserve and, though not deliberately, greatly deepened the *Post*'s emphasis on fear. Ominous in tone at every minute, these broadcasts spread fear widely.

More news reporters than police were assigned to the sniper case. Because the journalists from many, many outlets were already stationed in Washington, original reporting turned up all over the world. Chapter 3 samples this vast landscape of news articles, ranging from the local press that itself ranged from Baltimore to Richmond and included television, radio, and newspapers, to the national press, including news-

papers, evening television news, and cable talk shows. A sample of foreign newspapers was also consulted. Only a representative group of this vast outpouring could be read. Interestingly, these papers added little that differed from the coverage of the *Post,* except that they omitted any sense of community, leaving only fear–ranging from high to enormous anxiety–to dominate. Contrary to this general approach were some notable exceptions, which the chapter considers. Some periodicals even saw an internal battle over how to treat this event.

Chapter 4 contextualizes this reporting by providing a narrative of the journalistic response, from the first shooting in the area to the capture of the two suspects. Thanks to the cooperation of numerous journalists, this section of the book permits insights into the drama as well as the boredom felt by the reporters. Also, the book shows how representatives of the press extracted information from authorities. Furthermore, the false leads, the chase, and the fear felt by the journalists themselves all play a role in this chapter, as they played a role in coverage of the events at the time.

Chapter 5 takes us to how another important social organization–the schools–also had to deal with the snipers. Three school districts–Prince George's and Montgomery counties in Maryland, and Fairfax County in Virginia–provide the focus. These locales were selected because of their enormous size, collectively. They include over 500,000 students and employees, and they encircle the city of Washington. Each was the scene of at least one shooting, and the focus on the sniper began after five shootings in Montgomery County. In deciding whether to remain open, how to provide security, and whether to hold scheduled athletic contests, these county systems also produced, at least implicitly, their own depictions of the danger posed by the sniper. In this way, the schools provide a reference point to evaluate a wider range of perspectives on the sniper. Interestingly, in contrast to the press, they all generally agreed, in part because their leaders regularly communicated with each other, but also because they all concluded that the best place for students during these trying situations was in school. I maintain that the schools constructed an image of a less-threatening sniper than was constructed for the general public by news accounts.

Perhaps the most controversial part of this study is the decision to use the school districts as a point of comparison instead of simply evaluating the press coverage. The majority of people who lived through these events still strongly believe that fear was justified and completely understandable, given the circumstances and the timing.

Furthermore, seconding this view has been the subsequent testimony at the trials, particularly that of Malvo, who described plots for more outlandish crimes than those the snipers actually committed.[9] But the media did not know the information that would be disclosed at the trials. In fact, no one could reasonably assess the threat the snipers actually posed. Consequently, this study requires using some contemporaneous marker, rather than interposing my individual standards. Unfortunately, no efforts were taken at the time of the events to gauge scientifically the views of the population. Reliance on another measure is absolutely necessary, then, in order to evaluate press coverage along some sort of reasonable spectrum. Evidently, the schools and the press diverged. How they did and why they did are key for this book.

The conclusion pulls together all the materials in order to speculate about why the press covered the sniper event as it did. The testimony and actions of the reporters prove significant, as does the comparison with the schools. Finally, a discussion on the state of the press and the possibilities for its reform and improvement concludes this volume. Though this study emerges from the notion of "framing" largely to fill a gap in the study of political events, still other elements of the historical and communications literature can aid in our understanding of the press actions in October 2002. Although the historical study of fear still leaves many gaps, the few studies available can cast light on this incident. And from this discussion can emerge comments on broader issues, including the power of the press as well as the politics of the Bush and subsequent administrations.

9. See the *Washington Post* editions for May 22 and May 26, 2006.

Contents

PROLOGUE

It was Wednesday, October 2, 2002, just after 6 p.m., and James D. Martin was on his way home from his job with the federal government. He worked as a program analyst at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, and lived in Wheaton, places located about ten miles apart in the closer-in suburbs of Washington, D.C. Five miles from home, Martin stopped at a Shoppers Food Warehouse in Glenmont to pick up a few things. His wife, Billie, and eleven-year-old son, Ben, waited for him at their house.[1]

Martin parked his 1990 Mazda pickup in a slot a few spaces from the store entrance–he waited for another vehicle to move first. The truck bore an American flag on its antenna, and it had a camper shell closing off its back. Martin himself was fifty-five, balding, and dressed in a suit and tie. He was a churchgoing man, and he worked with the youth group there. He was stopping to pick up items for his family's dinner that night, as well as some bargain-priced supplies for the church group. He had the list in his coat pocket. He had chosen this particular store for its prices; there were other stores he could have gone to.

Those who watched Martin make his way toward the store entrance would have seen only the bespectacled man and would not have known that Martin had served in the military during Vietnam and then worked his way through college. Would not have known that, having lived in

1. The following account is drawn primarily from Sari Horwitz and Michael E. Ruane, *Sniper: Inside the Hunt for the Killers Who Terrorized the Nation,* rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 2004). See also Angie Cannon, *23 Days of Terror: The Compelling True Story of the Hunt and Capture of the Beltway Snipers* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003); and Charles A. Moose and Charles Fleming, *Three Weeks in October: The Manhunt for the Serial Sniper* (New York: Dutton, 2003).