

Case 70: Sullivan

John Mueller

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Shy and socially awkward, Justin Sullivan moved to Morganton, North Carolina, in 2012 when he was 16. His parents, a retired Marine Captain and his Filipino wife, hoped the new locale would help. The boy had often avoided school by hiding out in a nearby woods when he was in grade school in Michigan, and he had been suspended from high school when they had moved to Delaware. The new move didn't work. As his lawyer later put it, "Morganton is a nice place unless you're a half-Asian kid in high school."¹

Spending his time alone in his room with his computer and phone, Sullivan discovered the Islamic State or ISIS around September 2014 when it seemed to be very much on the rise in the Middle East, and that led the 18-year-old to Islam. As he recalled later, "I liked IS from the beginning then I started thinking about death and stuff so I became a Muslim."² He was especially drawn to ISIS videos featuring immolations and beheadings.³

The thoughts about death continued. On December 17, when his parents were away, Sullivan stole a .22 caliber rifle from his father's locked gun cabinet, and, masked, went to the nearby home of John Bailey Clark, a disabled 74-year-old, a "harmless recluse" according to the neighbors. Clark was aided by relatives who would deliver food and water while managing his small disability income. Sullivan picked the lock and killed the sleeping man—who he said was a "hermit, he was nobody, he was nothing"—with three bullets to the head. He then dragged the body outside, stripped it naked, and buried it in a shallow grave.⁴

Sullivan may have killed the old man for money which he later tried to use to purchase a rifle. After his arrest he said that the \$689 in his possession had come from Clark.⁵ But Clark was scarcely the obvious target if money was the motive. Sullivan also said the murder was done "as practice for killing his father" because his father had called the police on him.⁶ However, that episode didn't happen until after the murder of Clark.

In fact, the call came the following April after Sullivan had gone on destructive rampages in the home. In his father's words, "I don't know if it is ISIS or what, but he is destroying Buddhas, and figurines, and stuff," this time pouring gasoline on some of them to aid the process: "I mean, we are scared to leave the house." In the background, Sullivan can be heard pointing out that he had destroyed non-religious items as well, and repeatedly saying "why are you trying to say I am a terrorist?" asserting that "they" were going to put him "in jail my whole life" or "they are going to kill me."⁷

¹ Michael Gordon, "Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS. But the question remains, why?" *miamiherald.com*, February 24, 2017.

² United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Bill of Indictment, January 20, 2016, 2.

³ Michael Gordon, "Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS."

⁴ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, November 14, 2016, 2.

⁵ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Bill of Indictment, 3.

⁶ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 20.

⁷ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Criminal Complaint, June 22, 2015, 4.

Sullivan was soon being watched by the FBI online, and, as part of the process, an operative, posing as a potential recruit to Sullivan's cause, got in touch with him in early June 2015, and worked his way into the young man's confidence. Unlike many other ISIS enthusiasts in the United States, Sullivan never seemed to want to join the group abroad. Instead, he harbored a grandiose scheme to set up "The Islamic State of North America," or ISNA. By joining, the operative would have doubled the group's membership. Sullivan was also in contact with encouraging and supportive "cybercoaches" working for ISIS in the Middle East, in particular Junaid Hussain. Over the course of the month, Sullivan discussed various plans for committing a terrorist attack in the United States with both the FBI contact and with his distant cybercoaches.⁸

He soon settled on an operation. It was motivated by his outrage at "satanic" American airstrikes at his beloved ISIS in the Middle East: "18 airstrikes today It makes me so angry." By killing thousands of unbelievers in a series of attacks and thereby "destroying the country," he would be sending a signal: "we will tell the world that this will continue unless they stop."⁹ Presumably accompanied by his American online co-conspirator, he planned to shoot up a nightclub or a concert with an assault rifle sometime between June 21 and 23 when his parents were out of town in Georgia at the home of an "atheist Buddhist."¹⁰ The plan was to kill perhaps 500 and "then leave," committing bigger operations in the future. Later he lowered the prospective body count: "I'll probably get 25-50 people in total."¹¹ Perhaps reflecting his experience with the Clark murder, Sullivan thought that such things can be accomplished rather easily: "people kill people all the time and get away with it...just shoot...wear a mask and do it at night."¹²

There was something of a problem with logistics, however: he didn't have either the rifle or the ammunition. He wanted to use "split core ammo" because it is more "deadly," he said. However, it is also pricey at \$1 a bullet.¹³ He reckoned he would need to buy about 20 of these expensive bullets to kill off his estimated 25 to 50 victims.¹⁴ To increase lethality, he also considered coating the bullet with cyanide. In that case, "even if we get someone in the arm they'll still die of the poison...its vengeance." There was also discussion about setting off "a gas bomb" which he deemed "easy to make."¹⁵ When Sullivan tried to get the desired ammunition at a local gun shop on June 18, however, they did not have it in stock. He then decided he would buy the gun, and presumably the ammunition, at a gun show to be held in nearby Hickory, NC, on June 20 and 21.¹⁶ He downloaded a

⁸ Gordon, "Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS."

⁹ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 9.

¹⁰ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 12-14. United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Criminal Complaint, 11.

¹¹ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 11.

¹² United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 8.

¹³ Gordon, "Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS."

¹⁴ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 11.

¹⁵ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Criminal Complaint, 7.

¹⁶ Gordon, "Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS."

discount ticket for admission and, for the purchase, withdrew money from his savings account—some, or all, of it possibly looted from Clark.

Sullivan also decided, rather oddly, that he needed a silencer or sound suppressor for the rifle. Although it was hardly a comparable situation, he may have been alarmed by the loud sounds made when he murdered Clark. Accordingly, he prevailed upon his FBI correspondent to make one using instructions available on YouTube and to mail it to him at his home addressed to “Gus Gus” with the salutation, “happy birthday,” written on the mailing container. This task was dutifully carried out by FBI machinists.¹⁷

When the strange package arrived, however, it was opened by his mother. When his parents demanded an explanation Sullivan became “aggressive,” and they again called 911.¹⁸

Later in the day, Sullivan calmly contacted his FBI friend and urged him to kill his parents—or as he put it, “the people I live with”—because “Can’t have people calling the police on me.” He offered “compensation” to do so, and explained that a “perfect” time would be when they were visiting the “atheist Buddhist.” He added that he had actually been planning to kill his parents himself for weeks.¹⁹

At some point, Sullivan also texted Junaid Hussain, his ISIS cybercoach in Syria, saying “I have good news.” He would “very soon” be “carrying out 1st operation of Islamic State of North America,” although the actual authorship of the attack would be announced later, after the deed had been accomplished. Hussain responded, “Can u make a video first?” and, when Sullivan mentioned that “another mujahid” would be part of the venture, Hussain asked perhaps a bit warily, “Can I contact him?” Sullivan did not provide that information, but said he would not do the video because this was not a suicide mission, but only the opening salvo for his extremely small group: “For major attack we will film, not this.” He concluded the exchange with “Very soon” and Hussain rang off with “Ok.”²⁰ Judging from information available, this may be just about the only “coaching” Sullivan’s distant cyber contact ever did.

Triggered by Sullivan’s parental death threats as communicated to his other cyber collaborator, the FBI arrested the 18-year-old before he could get to the gun show or to his still-to-be-determined terrorism target. When the agents arrived, Sullivan tried to delete conversations with his two terrorism contacts from his phone.²¹

His defense attorney suggests that, though “smart, polite, and well-mannered,” Sullivan had been suffering for years from depression and other emotional problems, and had potentially been suicidal, conditions that had largely gone untreated. However, in prison, where he will likely spend the rest of his life, he has actually been making friends. He plays chess and watches television with his peers, and his parents visit him regularly. She concludes that “Jail has been the

¹⁷ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 8-9, 11.

¹⁸ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 12.

¹⁹ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 12.

²⁰ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 15-16.

²¹ United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, 13.

most positive group setting for him since he was a little boy,” and adds, “Isn’t that bizarre?”²²

Some two months after Sullivan’s arrest, his ISIS confidant, Junaid Hussein, was killed in one of those “satanic” airstrikes that so outraged Sullivan, this one on Raqqa, Syria, ISIS’s capital.²³ It appears that Sullivan and his other virtual confidant, the one from the FBI, never actually met or saw each other face-to-face.²⁴

On the cybercoaching issue more generally, see John Mueller, “The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?” *CTC Sentinel* 10(9), October 2017, 29-35. [pdf](#)

²² Gordon, “Teen talked of killing in the name of ISIS.”

²³ *United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis*, 5.

²⁴ Personal communication with Michael Gordon, May 11, 2017.