

Robert Butler, Jr.: A Case History

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Robert Butler, Jr., wanted to be a police officer, following in the footsteps of his father. Robert Butler, Sr., after serving in the navy, became a detective in the Omaha police department.¹ Butler, Jr., and his friend Mustafa Attaie, planned to go to college together and then join the police force. This was their dream. Instead, Butler became a murderer. What happened?

Butler's friends described him as fun, outgoing, energetic, and a jokester.² He apparently was a class clown who disrupted class, but was so charming that "even teachers couldn't stay mad at him."³ He reportedly had occasional moments of frustration or anger, but these didn't last long. People saw no rage, no suicidal depression, and no risk of violence. One friend

said he liked Butler, and described him as a boy with a lot of energy, a big smile and a mischievous gleam in his eye. "That's why most of the people who knew him thought maybe he could get into trouble but, my goodness, this type of behavior didn't seem to fit with the kind of kid he was."⁴

Butler apparently liked to bend the rules, be a daredevil, or show off. At a swimming pool with a waterslide, the rule was that you had to go down feet first, "but Butler often got the life-guard's whistle because he liked to do twists and flips that put him the water head first."⁵ This was not serious misconduct. There were, however, other problems.

Unfortunately, many aspects of Butler's life are elusive, with multiple hints of troubles along the way, but details are missing or people have been unwilling to disclose what they know. Butler's parents reportedly never married, though they lived together on and off for the first four years of his life. After that, he grew up with his mother in Lincoln, Nebraska. In October 2010, however, he moved to Omaha to live with his father. (Butler, Sr., had a son from his first marriage and a daughter

from another marriage.) What prompted Butler, Jr.'s move from Lincoln to Omaha isn't clear.

A pastor noted there had been "troubles," but wouldn't say more. The Omaha Police Chief mentioned disciplinary problems such as tardiness and not listening to his mother. Butler reportedly got into a few fights, but may not have started them. He had some unknown legal problems in 2009 or 2010; it wasn't enough to show up in a police record, but he had to do community service. Attaie said that Butler's mother caught him doing something, but wouldn't disclose what this was. Another friend said the reasons for the move were a delicate topic. Butler himself "just said it was trouble ... He seemed to get really tense when I brought it up."⁶

Butler seemed to adjust to his new home and school, though friends said it had been hard for him.⁷ There was vague talk

ROBERT BUTLER, JR.

Date: **5 January 2011**
School: **Millard South High School**
Location: **Omaha, NE**
Age: **17**
Killed: **1**
Wounded: **2**
Outcome: **Suicide**
Shooter population: **Secondary school**
Psychological type: **Psychopathic**
Attack type: **Targeted**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

that he endured racial taunts, having a black father and a white mother, but apparently no one had any actual evidence of this. He got a job and was said to be outgoing at work. He may have been frustrated by his father's strictness in not letting him play the video games he was used to playing at his mother's home. For some reason, he reportedly posted online that he hated living in Omaha.⁸ Despite this, he was said to have friends who saw him as a happy, fun person.⁹ In fact, the night before his attack, he was online with friends – “he seemed fine and everything. He seemed happy.”¹⁰

The next day, however, he committed his attack. Why? The trigger was related to an incident on New Year's Day. Butler went joyriding on the school's football field, “spinning and fishtailing his car.”¹¹ His joy was presumably cut short when he was caught by the police and charged with criminal trespassing. His father “locked up” Butler's car as a consequence. Then, on 5 January, the first day back at school after New Year's, Butler was called into the office of Vicki Kaspar, the vice principal, where he was told he had a 19-day suspension as a result of his behavior with the car.

Butler apparently took the news well, and was escorted out of school by a security guard without exhibiting signs of anger or agitation.¹² He went home and talked to his father about what happened. According to the police chief, “All indicators were that he was acting normal . . . He was disappointed about the discipline, but he was not acting in any kind of manner that he was upset, acting frustrated or angry or anything like that.”¹³

When his father went out, Butler took Butler, Sr.'s Glock .40 semiautomatic handgun, broke into the garage, got his car, and returned to school.¹⁴ He did not storm the building, but rather walked in calmly, signed in at the reception desk, and asked to see Vicki Kaspar. Again, Butler reportedly showed no signs of agitation. He met with Kaspar for approximately four minutes, then shot her; she died of her wounds. He left her office and shot the principal, Curtis Case, wounding him. He pointed his gun at a security officer who ducked out of sight before Butler could shoot. Butler then shot at a custodian; he missed, but hit a wall, wounding a school nurse with debris. Butler got into his car, drove a short distance, and then shot himself. He was found 35 minutes later – dead.¹⁵

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Why did a fun-loving young man who apparently was well-liked decide to end his life in a murderous outburst? Some people wondered if the attack was drug-induced: toxicology tests found k2, a synthetic form of marijuana, in Butler's body.¹⁶ The attack, however, was not impulsive, manic, or uncontrolled – just the opposite. Butler was calm, cool, and methodical. There was no indication that he was hallucinating, delusional, or otherwise impaired. In addition, he had a history of acting out, though what exactly he did to have to perform community service and to be moved from Lincoln to Omaha remains a mystery.

When we have nothing but straws to grasp, it makes sense to grasp all we can and see if we can weave something meaningful

out of them – keeping in mind that more complete information might completely alter our conclusions. First, it should be noted that there is no indication that Butler had a history of abuse or trauma. Nor is there evidence of schizophrenia or any other severe mental illness.

Based on the little we know, my hypothesis is that Butler had elements of a psychopathic personality. The daredevil, class clown persona suggests both thrill-seeking (which implies fearlessness and a strong need for stimulation) and a desire to be the center of attention (which implies narcissism). His ability to charm the teachers whose classes he disrupted suggests the suave demeanor of a con artist. This is known as impression management, the ability to charm or impress people even as you take advantage of them or deceive them. He demonstrated impression management during his first meeting with Vicki Kaspar, with the security guard who escorted him out of the building, with his father, and with school staff when he returned to the building. Throughout all of this, whatever rage or homicidal thoughts were coursing through his mind were hidden behind a façade of calm acceptance and mild-mannered behavior. Though he was a troublemaker with a mischievous grin, his friends were shocked at his attack;¹⁷ clearly, he did a good job of hiding his dark side.

In addition, the problems with his mother and with the police in Lincoln suggest a disregard for rules and laws, and possible hostility toward authority figures. These features are common among psychopaths.

The most telling fact is that Butler shot people who disciplined him. Psychopaths are notorious for not accepting responsibility for their actions. Even when they admit to their crimes, they often see themselves as innocent victims and blame their behavior on those they victimized. This was the case with Robert Steinhäuser, a psychopathic shooter in Germany who shot teachers and administrators after he had been expelled for forging an absence note.

Butler may have been unhappy about his move to Omaha, but he didn't kill his parents. He also didn't go on a wild rampage, shooting random people. He had a clear plan – to kill the people responsible for his suspension. What is remarkable is the triviality of the triggering event. High school kids are suspended routinely without committing murder. Psychopaths, however, often kill over the most mundane or trivial issues, believing themselves justified in doing so.

A couple of facts about Butler are interesting in light of other school shooters. First, like virtually every secondary school psychopathic shooter, Butler grew up in a family where firearms had a prominent place and were used legally (many traumatized shooters came from families where firearms were used illegally). Like Butler, many shooters of all types had parents or other relatives who served in the military and/or law enforcement, perhaps serving as role models for masculinity.

Second, Butler had aspirations to become a police officer. Many shooters had aspirations to join the military. In most cases, their dreams of being a soldier were thwarted, sometimes

triggering their attacks, or at least contributing to their rage. I wonder if Butler feared that his arrest would prevent him from fulfilling his dream of joining the police department. Even if this was on his mind, why kill the administrators who suspended him rather than the officers who caught him? Perhaps because the incident occurred on school property, he blamed the school for what happened. Or perhaps Butler was simply full of rage at being given consequences he thought were unfair, and was willing to kill and to die rather than bear his punishment and fulfill his dream of being an officer.

NOTES

- 1 Leslie Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles," *Omaha World Herald*, 31 January 2011.
- 2 Josh Funk (Associated Press), "School Gunman's Actions in Nebraska Conflict with Fellow Students' Memories of Him," *Cleveland.com*, 6 January 2011.
- 3 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."

- 4 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 5 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 6 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 7 Henry J. Cordes and John Ferak, "Millard South Shooting: Suspension Ignited Fury," *Omaha World Herald*, 6 January 2011.
- 8 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 9 Josh Funk (Associated Press), "Friends Say Omaha School Gunman Was Fun, Outgoing," *Forbes*, 6 January 2011.
- 10 Funk, "Gunman Was Fun."
- 11 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 12 Robyn Murray, "Millard Shooting: Police Describe Events of Deadly Day; Suspect's Actions Called Out of Character," *KVNO News*, 6 January 2011.
- 13 Chris Welch, "Slain Assistant Principal Sent Student Home Because of Trespass Charge," *CNN*, 6 January 2011.
- 14 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 15 Murray, "Police Describe Events of Deadly Day."
- 16 Reed, "Drugs Part of Shooter's Troubles."
- 17 Funk, "Gunman Was Fun."