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A Wake-Up Call for Congress on Mental-Health Reform

The incident at the Capitol involving a clearly troubled man is the latest reminder: Lawmakers need to act.



Secret Service agents search the White House grounds after Kyle Odom, a man with a history of mental illness, was arrested for throwing a letter and other items onto the grounds, March 9. *PHOTO: EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY*

By **E. FULLER TORREY**

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Another shooting at the U.S. Capitol. This time, in an incident on Monday, 66-year-old Larry Dawson, a Tennessee man known to U.S. Capitol Police for his erratic behavior, was shot and wounded by a police officer when he pulled out what sources later said was a pistol-like pellet gun.

What is going on? One possible answer was offered earlier this month by 30-year-old Kyle Odom, who was arrested March 8 after throwing a letter to President Obama over the White House fence. The letter warned the president that there are at least 50

members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, who are Martians. Then, in a 21-page manifesto released to the media, Mr. Odom provided the names of these congressional Martians and described how they live “deep underground here and inside the moon.” Law-enforcement officials say that two days before the White House incident, Mr. Odom shot and critically wounded an Idaho minister, believing that the clergyman also was a Martian.

Kyle Odom had not always believed in extraterrestrials. He served four years as a decorated Marine, graduated from the University of Idaho with honors, and was accepted into a prestigious Ph.D. program in genetics. Then he developed delusions and auditory hallucinations, classic symptoms of schizophrenia. Like many with this disease, though, he apparently has had no awareness of his own illness.

Mr. Odom joins a long line of individuals with untreated mental illness who have come to the attention of Congress. In 1998 Russell Weston, with untreated schizophrenia, shot his way into the Capitol building, killing two guards before finally being stopped as he entered the office of then-House Majority Whip Tom DeLay. In response, Congress vowed to do something about untreated mental illness but did nothing.

In 2011 Jared Loughner, with untreated schizophrenia, severely wounded then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ariz., and killed six others. In response, Congress vowed to do something but did nothing. Then in 2013 Miriam Carey, seriously mentally ill, was killed by U.S. Capitol Police on the Capitol grounds, causing a lockdown of the building. During these same years there have been at least 20 widely publicized mass shootings by individuals with serious mental illness that was not being treated.

Mr. Odom’s arrival in Washington with his list of Martian members of Congress has come at a time when there are multiple legislative proposals, in both the House and Senate, to improve the nation’s broken mental-illness treatment system. The strongest bill is from Rep. Tim Murphy (R., Pa.), the Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act (H.R. 2646), which has 135 Republican and 51 Democratic co-sponsors. It is the only proposal that would be likely to affect the actual treatment of Kyle Odom, Miriam Carey, Jared Loughner, Russell Weston and other individuals with untreated serious mental illness who, because of the effect of the disease on their brain, are unaware of their own illness and need for treatment.

Kyle Odom said it best at the beginning of his manifesto: “As you can see, I’m pretty smart. I’m also 100 percent sane, 0 percent crazy.” The provision in Rep. Murphy’s bill, which would make treatment possible, is called assisted outpatient treatment (AOT)

and requires the individual to follow a court-ordered treatment plan. In study after study, AOT has been shown to significantly reduce hospitalization, incarcerations and violent acts among individuals with serious mental illness.

A study by New York state found that, after the first six months of court-ordered treatment, “individuals in AOT showed a significant decline [44%] in the incidence of harmful behaviors,” such as threatening suicide or violence to others.

One might think that members of Congress would be interested in passing legislation that could decrease threats to themselves. But that assumes they are thinking logically. As columnist Kimberley Strassel has reported for this newspaper, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) and her cohorts have been holding up Rep. Murphy’s proposed legislation, preferring a victory against gun lobbyists over helping those with severe mental illnesses. Other impediments have been thrown up by Reps. Fred Upton (R., Mich.) and Frank Pallone (D., N.J.), the chairman and ranking member of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

There may not be any Martians in Congress, despite Kyle Odom’s claims, but if lawmakers continue to thwart this common-sense reform of mental-health policy, voters could begin to suspect that Mrs. Pelosi and her colleagues live on another planet.

Dr. Torrey is the founder of the Treatment Advocacy Center and the author of “American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment System” (Oxford University Press, 2013).

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