

Scott Peterson in a Space Suit

By Jeffery M. Leving and Glenn Sacks

A successful married man with young children at home pursues a romantic liaison with a co-worker. When the co-worker doesn't sufficiently reciprocate his affections, he stalks her boyfriend for two months, and devises a plan to kill him. He collects weapons, disguises himself, packs up some garbage bags to dispose of the body, and drives 900 miles to attack his rival. He launches the assault but the boyfriend manages to escape and notify the police, and the man is arrested and charged with attempted murder.

Would CBS commentator Harry Smith express sympathy for this "poor" fellow for "falling in love" and then "crash-landing"? Would Fox News commentator Steve Doocy opine that "love makes you do weird things," and claim that prosecutors were being too hard on him?

Would MSNBC describe him as a stressed out "super dad" who "snapped", ignoring that the two months of stalking and preparation sure were a long, slow "snap"? Would MSNBC have a psychologist sympathetically explain that the would-be murderer acted because he was "experiencing the fear of abandonment" that was "so terrifying" that he had to "secure the love object and eliminate the threat"? Would a reporter for a major newspaper describe the murder attempt as the man's effort to "share with someone else a bit of the pain swelling inside"?

Lisa Nowak is receiving widespread sympathy, in part because she is legitimately admired for being an astronaut. But a large share accrues because she's a woman, and our society—both men and women—views women's misdeeds more sympathetically than men's.

The media is soft-pedaling numerous aspects of the Nowak case. Practically every media outlet has explained Nowak's decision to wear astronaut diapers on

her journey to allegedly attack romantic rival Colleen Shipman as a bizarre, freakish action indicative of her mental instability. In reality, Nowak acted with logic and calculation—she did not want to stop several times on the way from Houston to Orlando and leave a trail of convenience store camera records behind her. For the same reason, when Nowak arrived in Orlando she disguised herself, checked into a hotel under a fake name and address, and paid cash.

Similarly, numerous commentators have described Nowak's equipment--a 4-inch folding knife, a steel mallet, several garbage bags, rubber tubing, a BB gun, and pepper spray--as "wacky" or "bizarre." They are nothing of the sort. Orlando police believe Nowak intended to kill Shipman, and she probably planned to utilize the garbage bags to dispose of her, perhaps in Galveston Bay. As Orlando police Sgt. Barbara Jones explained, it was a "fairly elaborate plan."

In widely-reported comments, Dr. Jon Clark, a former NASA flight surgeon, said that Nowak may have come unhinged due to the burdens of being a female astronaut. According to Clark:

"They made more sacrifices than the 'right stuff' guys. They have to balance two careers, be a mom, wife and an astronaut. You don't come home at night, like most of the male astronauts, and have everything ready for you."

Space travel is and always will be hazardous, but the astronauts of the dawn of the space age depicted in *The Right Stuff* faced far more danger and uncertainty than today's astronauts do. The assertion that astronauts today--even women astronauts with families--deal with greater stress is dubious.

One major newspaper sadly lamented Nowak's "meltdown", a term usually used to describe a performer's onstage temper tantrum, not an apparent murder attempt. One commentator labeled Nowak an "unfortunate" individual who "has been the subject of relentless news coverage...[and] hounded and beleaguered by the press," an unusually sympathetic description of the media attention

people bring upon themselves when they try to kill someone.

Nowak's neighbors have lent her their support, and both her former Naval Academy classmates and a Florida restaurateur are raising money for her legal defense. And, of course, a movie about Nowak's life is in the works.

Nowak was let out on a light \$25,500 bail and, except for those grumpy Orlando prosecutors, most are trivializing what she did. In 2002, Scott Peterson killed Laci Peterson and disposed of her body in San Francisco Bay. Except for the fact that Nowak botched the job, is her alleged crime much different?

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