



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

## A deadly brotherly bond

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 25, 2013 10:00 AM

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By all accounts, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the younger of two brothers suspected of having perpetrated the Boston Marathon bombings, was a good kid, a bright young man and hardly the type of angry malcontent you'd expect of a terrorist. He graduated from the prestigious Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, where he starred on the varsity wrestling team; was named student-athlete of the month in his senior year; and earned a \$2,500 scholarship from the city of Cambridge toward his tuition at University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.

Dzhokhar's older brother, Tamerlan, seems to have had a far less glowing past. The 26-year-old community college dropout had been arrested on charges of domestic violence. In recent years, according to relatives, he had grown increasingly religious, drawn to a more observant Islam and possibly anti-American ideology. By his own account, Tamerlan had felt friendless here in America. Despite all this, Tamerlan showed little indication of having the potential or the desire to commit an extreme act of mass violence, and was cleared in an FBI investigation two years ago. Friends and neighbors were unconcerned.

Given their fairly unremarkable lifestyles and reputations, why would the Tsarnaev brothers have allegedly engaged in such diabolical crimes? How could these young men have heartlessly murdered and maimed spectators at the Boston Marathon and days later fatally shot an MIT police officer?

The key to motivation could lie not just in some anti-American sentiment but also in the brotherly bond itself. Individually, neither might have been prone to murder, but in partnership they brought out the very worst in each other, both in ideology and behavior. Living together for years, they would have reinforced whatever negative beliefs they had about the American way of life.

Arguably, these crimes would not have taken place were it not for the close brotherly connection. Indeed, it is far easier to do despicable things when others join in. No matter how deeply committed each is to the cause, participation in itself helps support and justify the mission.

Tamerlan may have been emboldened by the admiration of his protégé. For his part, Dzhokhar may have found inspiration in the praise and approval of his mentor. Whatever the motive for murder, each would benefit psychologically from the sense of camaraderie and solidarity.

It is very easy to describe the marathon bombers as monsters, and unquestionably their deadly deeds were monstrous. Although many people with good reason have referred to the suspects as "animals," understanding (without justifying) the brothers' motivation requires us to examine basic human needs for belonging and respect that are sometimes fed through criminal partnerships.