

The Atlanta murders: road rage on the information superhighway

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Day trading really does suck you in. . . . It's like video games or gambling, only you have more control this way.

—Anonymous day trader at the Falls Church, Virginia office of All-Tech, speaking to the Washington Post's Steve Mufson, May 16, 1999

On July 29, Mark O. Barton grabbed headlines worldwide, by slaughtering nine people at two day trading firms in Atlanta's trendy Buckhead section. A dozen other people were seriously injured in his shooting spree. Hours after his killing rampage, Barton took his own life, after police cornered him at a nearby gas station.

Like the Littleton, Colorado school murders on April 20, the Barton killing spree momentarily shocked the nation and the world. Beyond the particulars of the killings, Barton served as a metaphor for a culture-gone-greedy. And, just as Littleton served as a grim message that something has gone horribly wrong with our educational system, our mass-culture, and the way that children are being raised in America today, as potential desensitized "unnatural born killers," so Mark Barton's "fifteen minutes in the sun" delivered a similar warning: The "my money" culture has gone so out of control in America, that human time-bombs can be detonated by the fluctuations in the stock market.

Barton's "road rage on the information superhighway" can not be easily passed off as an isolated case of a demented man, despite the fact that Barton was certainly demented. The fact is, he was drawn to the "get rich quick" lure of day trading, the latest Wall Street fad, *because* he was obsessed with money, and addicted to the idea of making loads of it without working for it. As is often the case with such individuals, the end-result is tragedy. Unfortunately, in Barton's case, the tragedy extended beyond his own personal life.

The day trader psychotic life

Day trading is a fast-growing stock market "get rich quick" scheme, an offspring of the "Black Monday" stock market crash of 1987, and the advent of super-fast, affordable personal computers, tied to high-speed telephone lines, capable of bringing "real-time" trading to millions of average Americans, bypassing the relative regulation of the major trading floors.

Some of the pioneers of day trading present themselves as the Jacobin revolutionaries of Wall Street. All-Tech Investment Group's chief executive officer, Harvey Houtkin, in an advertisement posted on the firm's website, boasts, "Finally the barriers are coming down. For decades the brokerage community created innumerable obstacles, making it impossible for the general public to compete effectively with the market-making pro. After eight years of intensive fighting, All-Tech was instrumental in bringing down many of these barriers."

In his self-promotional book, *The SOES Bandits' Guide*, Houtkin proselytized, "With greater numbers of Electronic Day Traders, there is strength. New Electronic Day Trading is shaping the future of the financial markets for the better." In effect, Houtkin is telling the Mark Bartons of the world: "Join the 'my money' revolution."

For the managers of the day trading salons, it's clearly a good deal. Investors are required to plop down, at minimum, \$25-50,000 to open an account. They rent the use of the computers. They pay brokerage fees that could go as high as \$25 per transaction. On average, full-time day traders carry out 500 transactions per day, bringing in thousands of dollars in fees and commissions to "the house," according to a recent *New York Times* profile. Like all good gambling establishments, the day trading firms never lose money, regardless of what happens to their customers.

A May 16 *Washington Post Magazine* cover story, "Outrageous Fortune: The Day Trader Versus the Stock Market," by Steven Mufson, lionized the day trading fad, highlighting the \$100,000-a-day life of an Alexandria, Virginia, Generation X'er, Lawrence Black, who boasts that he never held a full-time job in his life, lives at his parents' home, and is independently wealthy, through his high-speed, do-it-yourself stock trading.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LAUNCHED!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

www.larouchecampaign.org

Paid for by LaRouche's Committee for a New Bretton Woods.

Reality is a little harsher, as the *Post* did manage to note, in passing. The vast majority of day traders lose all their money, usually within weeks or months at the most. Beyond the Barton incident, there has been a small, but growing number of instances of suicides and outbursts of violent paranoia by full-time day traders. Gamblers Anonymous and other hotline services dealing with people addicted to various forms of gambling, say that there is a meteoric rise in the number of day traders calling in to their toll-free numbers.

‘Mark, we hardly knew you’

With the exception of a handful of people who knew Barton intimately, the majority of his friends and neighbors thought of him as the paragon of American middle-class virtue. He was a Boy Scout master, active in his church. Fred Herder, who was Barton’s partner in day trading at the Buckshead offices of All-Tech Investment, told *Newsweek* that Barton “was one of the nicest guys you ever met. He was religious, and he was on the phone with his kids all the time.”

That, at any rate, was Herder’s view until 3:00 p.m. on July 29, when Barton opened fire on the All-Tech trading floor, killing or injuring a dozen of his “friends.” Herder was shot in the back as he dove under his desk. He survived the shooting, but will likely be paralyzed for life.

Subsequently, police determined that Barton had shown up at All-Tech with his own personal “hit list”: fellow traders and office managers, whom he thought had conspired against him. In growing numbers, day traders are “going paranoid,” accusing fellow traders of sabotaging their computers or spying on them. It is the each-against-all Hobbesian world gone mad.

Over a several-month period in the spring of 1999, Barton lost \$400,000 at All-Tech, conducting lightning-speed day trades. In April, the manager of the All-Tech Atlanta office cut off Barton’s trading privileges, because he had run up a serious back debt to the firm, borrowing “on margin” to place his stock bets. Barton sold off almost all his personal belongings and those of his family. His second wife, who had moved out of their house and filed divorce papers, due to Barton’s addiction to day trading, agreed to take Barton and his two children from a first marriage into her apartment.

Leigh Ann Vandiver Barton’s father, E.J. Vandiver, was skeptical. He was firmly convinced that Barton had murdered his first wife, Debra, and his mother-in-law, Eloise Spivey, in September 1993. The two women had been found hacked to death in a trailer near an Alabama lake. Just prior to the double homicide, Barton had taken out a \$600,000 life insurance policy on his wife. The insurance company tried to contest the payout, knowing that police considered Barton to be the only suspect in the grisly murders. Barton claimed he had been at home with his children when the murders occurred; there were no other witnesses to his being at home, and he refused to submit to a lie-detector test. But he was never prosecuted.

Ultimately, Barton got his hands on somewhere between \$300,000 and \$450,000 of the insurance settlement, with the balance going into a trust fund for the couple’s two children.

A year later, shortly before Barton married Leigh Ann Vandiver, with whom he had been having an affair while married to Debra, a daycare worker filed a complaint with Georgia authorities that Barton’s daughter, Mychelle, had described an incident in which Barton had sexually molested her. A psychiatric evaluation of Mychelle discounted the sexual abuse charges, but concluded that she had been traumatized by the death of her mother and the suspicion that her father was responsible for the killing. The report included a prescient warning: Barton “was capable of homicidal acts and thought,” according to an account in the Aug. 9 *Newsweek*.

The insurance payout enabled Barton to “get his life in order,” at least on the surface. He married Leigh Ann Vandiver in 1995; he started up a cleaning products business (he had earned a degree in chemistry), and rented a small house in an up-scale, middle-class suburb of Atlanta. However, he soon abandoned his business to the lure of quick bucks through full-time day trading. By October 1998, things had gotten so money-stressful at the Barton home, that Leigh Ann moved out and took an apartment in a nearby town. By January 1999, according to *Newsweek*, Barton had posted an America Online biographical sketch, proclaiming that his hobbies were “guns and day trading.”

On June 10, 1999, Barton wrote a check for \$87,500 to Momentum Securities, another day trading firm, with offices across the street from All-Tech. In a matter of days, Barton’s \$87,500 was gone, and he had borrowed another \$100,000 from Momentum to keep “in the game.” The practice of borrowing money to invest in the market is referred to as margin trading.

On July 27, the manager of Momentum informed Barton that his margin debt had been called in. Once again, Barton’s trading privileges were suspended. On the spot, Barton wrote out a check to Momentum for \$50,000, retiring enough of his margin debt to have his trading account reopened.

That afternoon, Barton took his son Matthew, age 12, to his regular Boy Scout troop meeting. Late that night, Barton bludgeoned his wife to death, and hid her body in a closet so that the children would not know what had just happened within a few feet of their bedroom. On July 28, Barton returned to Momentum, only to be told that his check had bounced, and that his trading account was, once again, closed. That night, Barton murdered his two children, as they were sleeping.

The next day, Barton went to his attorney’s office, to remove his wife’s name from his will. She had already been dead for 36 hours. From there, he launched his rampage, which ended shortly after 8:00 p.m., when he put one of his guns to his temple and pulled the trigger.