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FROM WITCHCRAFT TO WATERBOARDING: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF FALSE CONFESSIONS

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Advances in forensic science have increased awareness that false confessions can and do happen. Juries tend to give a great deal of weight to confessions and are reluctant to believe that individuals (particularly those facing the death penalty or long imprisonment) would be willing to admit to committing crimes they never committed. Nonetheless, innocent people have been convicted of crimes they did not commit on the basis of false confessions. A look at some of the best-known instances of false confessions, from the witches of Salem to the Central Park Five, provides insights into why innocent people sometimes confess to crimes. An examination of common methods of interviewing criminal suspects addresses questions about whether such methods may increase the likelihood of false confessions and, if so, what reforms would reduce that likelihood.

THE “LONE WOLF” TERRORIST AND RADICALIZATION: THE ROLE OF FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

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On November 5, 2009 there was a mass shooting at the Fort Hood military base near Killeen, Texas. While mass shootings are not a completely unfamiliar occurrence in the United States, what set this shooting apart from others is that the perpetrator was a U.S. Army psychiatrist: Major Nidal Hasan, M.D. The shooting left 13 dead with more than 30 injured and ended when Hasan was shot and paralyzed.

A forensic psychologist may evaluate the details of Nidal Hasan’s life, behavior, and actions to speculate about whether he was more suicidal than homicidal when he carried out the attack. Based on his mental status, was he competent to stand trial? His lawyer initially wanted to enter a not guilty by reason of insanity plea. Would any forensic psychologist agree with this based on Hasan’s presentation? Were his actions secondary to his radicalization, or did mental illness play a role in his case? And what is in the mind of a suicide warrior?

The purpose of this article is to tease out the details that made Nidal Hasan susceptible to radicalization and highlight how this phenomenon affects people from diverse demographics and ethnicities.