

The Columbine High School massacre: American Pastoral ... American Berserk

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Columbine High School appeared to be, at least in the view of its administrators and the county school board, such a lovely place for young people to grow up and learn. In its official profile, the institution boasted of its “excellent facilities” and “long history of excellence in all areas.” Nothing seemed to be lacking--Honors and Advanced Placement classes, foreign language instruction in Spanish, French and German, and an artistic program that included ceramics, sculpture, acting, choir and no less than five bands and one ensemble. There were even “Cross-categorical programs for students with significantly limited intellectual capacity.” And, of course, there was no shortage of athletics.

“Stretch for Excellence” was the motto adopted by the school. And its mission statement--over which, one must assume, various well-meaning people labored--promised that Columbine High School “will teach, learn, and model life skills and attitudes that prepare us to: work effectively with people; show courtesy to others; prepare for change; think critically; act responsibly; and respect our surroundings.”

Columbine, with its six guidance counselors, accountability committee, dozens of peer mediators and techniques for “conflict resolution,” and an ethos of “collaborative partnership” with parents, viewed itself as a “twenty-first century high school.” The surrounding neighborhoods were prosperous, with housing from the low to high six-figures, numerous shopping malls and high-tech workplaces. But on April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School armed with assault rifles and pipe bombs. By the time their bloody rampage was over, they had killed twelve students, one teacher, and themselves.

There have been, during the past two years, other school shootings that have resulted in the death of students. But as terrible as the earlier incidents at Pearl, West Paducah, Jonesboro and Springfield, the carnage at Columbine was of a qualitatively different scope and scale.

Harris and Klebold manufactured dozens of pipe bombs, stashed explosives in the school kitchen, studied the layout and traffic pattern to insure the largest number of victims, and chose Hitler's birthday as the date for the attack, in the course of nearly a year of preparation. Their intention was to kill as many students as possible and blow up the entire school with a propane bomb. Had they had the opportunity, Harris and Klebold would have continued their rampage beyond the school. According to the diary that one of the youth left behind, they hoped to hijack an airplane and crash it into the center of New York City. Only an unexpected

encounter with a school guard and the failure of the bomb to explode thwarted their plan. Harris and Klebold then fled to the school library where they proceeded to select their victims before killing themselves.

What Harris and Klebold did on Tuesday was horrible, brutal and criminal. But these words are only descriptions of their acts, not explanations.

As usual, the media has nothing to offer by way of analysis. It is extraordinarily adept at milking the grief of the parents and community for every possible rating dollar. But those who wish to understand the underlying causes of this tragedy will find nothing of value on the network news.

After a few perfunctory tears for the victims, the media is looking for someone to blame. The parents, judging from the remarks of state officials, are being singled out as the most likely target for public vengeance. Perhaps they do bear some level of responsibility, but singling out for exemplary punishment these grief-stricken mothers and fathers--whose own lives have been utterly shattered by what their sons did last week--seems not only cruel, but deceitful and hypocritical.

After all, the parents of Klebold and Harris were not the only ones who failed to recognize and act on signs of the coming disaster. Columbine High School administrators apparently ignored repeated warnings they received about the boys' potential for violence.

This is not an individual failing, but one common to all the major institutions of American society: governments, political parties, corporations, the media, schools, churches, and trade unions. All are essentially oblivious to the mounting social tensions, until they erupt into homicidal violence at a post office, a high school, a McDonald's restaurant, a commuter railroad train, or inside the US Capitol.

Then these outbreaks are invariably treated, not as a social phenomenon, but as a police problem, to be handled by installing metal detectors, more police, more surveillance cameras, and enlisting the population as collaborators to inform on those with a supposed propensity to violence.

There's endless talk about “parents taking responsibility for their children,” and of “children taking responsibility for themselves.” But there is nothing said about the responsibility which American society has for a tragedy like that which occurred at Columbine.

It is almost grotesque to treat the Columbine HS massacre as merely the product of the breakdown of parental authority and

supervision. Neither parents nor high school guidance counselors are equipped to deal with the societal dysfunction that found such devastating expression in the rampage of Klebold and Harris.

Consider, for a moment, the social outlook of these two youth. They were admirers of Adolf Hitler, fascinated by fascism's racism, its cult of sadistic violence and death, and its general contempt for humanity. And yet, there was nothing particularly Germanic about the views of Harris and Klebold. In a statement that he posted on his web site, Harris wrote: "I am the law, if you don't like it you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die."

These sentiments, expressed with a little more polish, sum up the approach of the American government to the rest of the world. "Do what we want or we'll destroy you." As we reread the lines of Harris, in the aftermath of the Columbine massacre, we recognize the brutality of a potential killer. But what, then, are we to see in the words written last Friday by the highly paid and celebrated columnist of the *New YorkTimes*, Thomas Friedman?:

"While there are many obvious downsides to war-from-15,000 feet, it does have one great strength--its sustainability. NATO can carry on this sort of air war for a long, long time. The Serbs need to remember that....

"But if NATO's only strength is that it can bomb forever, then it has to get every ounce out of that. Let's at least have a real air war.... It should be lights out in Belgrade: every power grid, water pipe, road and war-related factory has to be targeted.

"Like it or not, we are at war with the Serbian nation (they certainly think so), and the stakes have to be very clear: Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too."

Harris and Klebold did not have to study *Mein Kampf* to find special "inspiration" for their actions. The editorials and columns that appear in American newspapers, not to mention the vicious outpourings on talk radio, would do just as well. And here we come to the crucial paradox that finds expression in their assault on Columbine High. It is likely that Harris and Klebold viewed themselves as rebels against society. In this they were quite mistaken. Certainly, the venue of their action was unconventional. But the deed itself represented an extreme application of the selfish and inhumane attitudes that are commonplace in American society today.

First, their violent outburst was not conceived of as a response to social injustice. Rather, Harris and Klebold took revenge against what they perceived as personal slights. They did not act on behalf of others, but for themselves. Further, they attacked not a symbol of oppression, but defenseless children and a well-meaning teacher. And finally, even if one were to accept that these two boys had been harassed at school, the scale of their violence was out of all proportion to the injury they had suffered. Their aim was not to right a wrong, but to create as much pain and suffering as possible.

What Harris and Klebold did was monstrous. But does it help to portray them as monsters? They were, let us not forget, only teenagers. Youth is supposedly a time of hope and idealism. How, then, was it possible that so much hate could be accumulated by these youth in so short a time? And not only hate, but utter despair

as well. In their own minds, they had many reasons to kill, but none to live.

They plotted this deed, but were they its only authors? They are, in the final analysis, the products of a particular time and place. However terrible its consequences, the mad rampage of Harris and Klebold has deep social roots. Of course, the political leaders and the media elite do not care to delve too deeply into the social pathology of this dreadful crime. It would require that they hold a mirror up to themselves.

Since the Littleton killings, the media is full of commentary from psychologists, ministers, priests, police and experts of all sorts, gravely enumerating the "warning signs" which may alert parents to the possibility that their teenage son or daughter may be a potential mass murderer: Is your child depressed, discouraged, anxious, over-stressed, uncommunicative, disinterested, addicted to computer games, subject to mood swings, getting consistently bad grades, worrying too much about maintaining consistently high grades, etc.? At least 75 percent of all American children express one if not more of these characteristics.

In reality, the concentration on individual warning signs will be of little help in preventing further tragedies. Attention should be focused, rather, on the social warning signs, that is, the indications and indices of social and political dysfunction which create the climate that produces events like the Columbine HS massacre. Vital indicators of impending disaster might include: growing polarization between wealth and poverty; atomization of working people and the suppression of their class identity; the glorification of militarism and war; the absence of serious social commentary and political debate; the debased state of popular culture; the worship of the stock exchange; the unrestrained celebration of individual success and personal wealth; the denigration of the ideals of social progress and equality.

What is happening to America's kids? This is a question posed by Philip Roth in his provocative novel *American Pastoral*, which tells the story of a family ruined by a teenage daughter's dreadful and unexpected act of violence. "Something is driving them crazy. Something has set them against everything. Something is leading them into disaster."

What is that something? Look honestly at this society--its political leaders, its religious spokesmen, its corporate CEOs, its military machine, its celebrities, its "popular" culture, and, above all, the entire economic system upon which the whole vast superstructure of violence, suffering and hypocrisy is based. It is there that the answer is to be found.



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