15 dead in Colorado school shooting

A nation at war ... with itself

The Editorial Board
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The killing of at least fifteen high school students and teachers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado has left America stunned and sickened. Scenes of wounded and bloodied youth carried away on stretchers, images of terrified young girls describing how fellow students around them were systematically murdered in a school library -- all of this provokes horror, sadness and, yes, anger.

This is a terrible event, but it is not the first of its kind. Since 1997 a series of killings has erupted in schools, most notably in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas and Springfield, Oregon. The Littleton shooting conforms to a pattern: an apparently contented suburb--invariably described as "Anytown, USA"--suddenly rocked by fatal violence. The perpetrators are "outcasts" or "loners." School officials and local politicians are shocked; they promise to seek out and counsel troubled students and tighten security. The President appears before the cameras and deplores the violence. A commission is summoned. After a week or two, the issue of school violence is dropped by the media ... until the next murderous spree.

Can anyone with a functioning brain or eyes continue to argue at this point that these terrible incidents are not the expression of profound social tendencies? What is going on in this country?

Even before the dead have been identified and buried, the ideological cover-up has begun. The commentators know their lines. They base themselves on the same self-satisfied premise: the economy is doing well, the population is contented. These are isolated cases, essentially inexplicable. Some mutter about individual responsibility and the breakdown of the family.

Clinton set the tone in his inimitable, sanctimonious style. "Perhaps we may never fully understand" the event, he observed. Then, as usual, the authority of a biblical personage was invoked to deflect critical thought. "Saint Paul," he continued, "reminds us that we all see things in this life through a glass darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening."

This is self-serving nonsense. To understand an event one first has to look honestly at the context in which it takes place.

Indignation will greet any suggestion that there is any connection between the mayhem in Colorado and the violence that America is presently unleashing on the world. In this age of high-tech wars and precision guided munitions, the Pentagon conducts wars which allow the US military to kill thousands from afar without the loss of a single American soldier. The media packages the war as entertainment without real consequence--at least for Americans. No thought is given to the deeper links between the wars waged by the United States against more or less defenseless "enemies" overseas and the internal contradictions of the domestic social order. Nor is there any consideration of the corrosive impact on this society of the death and destruction that America visits upon people beyond its borders.

Without explanation, the American military is flinging bombs and missiles against Yugoslavia, destroying cities and towns, reducing its infrastructure to rubble. Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan have also come under attack in recent months. US forces burst into a country and start shooting it up. Each international horror resembles a crime scene in which American fingerprints are inevitably found. The media incites the public to glory in the exercise of American military might. Under these conditions, how is one to react to Clinton's statement, in the wake of the Littleton shooting, that "we must reach out to our children and

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teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons"?

The war in the Balkans is not simply the product of commercial and geopolitical strivings. It also has ideological underpinnings. This is a society without a moral compass, obsessed with the stock market, sports stars and lottery results. Elementary human solidarity has been undermined. The worst elements have risen to the top. The internal social contradictions -- papered over and ignored -- fester and turn gangrenous. The violence explodes and implodes in forms that appear irrational.

America's rulers claim, and perhaps believe themselves, that they can conduct clean, surgical wars from which US society can be insulated. They may have deluded themselves into believing that the images they manufacture comprise reality. But every objective act has objective consequences, and filthy acts have filthy consequences. There is a connection between the bombs that fall on Belgrade and the bullets that were fired into the helpless children in Littleton.

For the past two decades the political establishment and the media have cultivated militarism, chauvinism and every form of social backwardness, the breeding grounds for anti-social and fascist elements. They have produced the Timothy McVeighs and Eric Rudolphs. The dead suspects in the Littleton shooting, who turned their weapons on themselves, belonged to a group that disdained black and Hispanic students and reportedly painted swastikas on their bodies. April 20 was Adolf Hitler's birthday. Colorado, moreover, is one of the centers of ultra-right Christian fundamentalist operations.

The events in Littleton represent another serious warning. The homicidal eruptions of hatred and despair that leave schoolrooms littered with the bodies of America's youth must be made intelligible and revealed for what they are--the product of irrational social relations and reactionary policies that desensitize, debase and dehumanize.

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