

Society, politics and the school shooting in Littleton

David North
23 April 1999

This following was written in response to a reader who objected to the relationship drawn by the WSWS between Tuesday's school shooting in Littleton, Colorado and the policies of the US government, the bombing of Yugoslavia, and the general political environment in the United States. As the reader put it: "They [the students who carried out the shootings] weren't yelling about bombs falling in Belgrade. So stop blaming the government." The full text of the reader's letter is linked following the conclusion of David North's reply.

You are, of course, entitled to disagree with our assessment of the tragedy in Littleton. But your explanation offers little more than a denunciation of the individuals you hold responsible for the killings--the kids who did the shooting, their parents, and an unnamed "network of supporters." You dismiss the possibility that "what is going on inside a high school kid's head" has anything to do with the political climate and social relations that prevail in the United States. "These aren't killing machines manufactured through reactionary policies," you declare. "They are kids with different kinds of things in their heads than most of us give thought to."

With this sort of analysis, it is hardly surprising that you are resigned to the inevitability of more killings like that which occurred at Columbine High. As you put it: "We all know there's more out there just like them."

Your analysis ends where it really should begin. The repetition of these awful events in different parts of the country requires a social rather than purely individual explanation. Why do youth like Harris and Klebold turn up with increasing frequency in the high schools of the United States? What is it in the culture of this country that produces an audience among young people for the

most depraved and anti-social conceptions? What is the source of the despair and alienation that leads American teenagers to kill each other and themselves?

You are very anxious to absolve the political system of any responsibility, and deny that there exists a link between government policies and the violence in Littleton. Harris and Klebold, you argue, "weren't yelling about bombs falling in Belgrade."

It doesn't seem to occur to you that what appear to be irrational eruptions of violence are far more likely in a country where people view their problems in a largely individual, rather than social and political context. It is hardly likely that a conscious opposition to the bombing of Belgrade would express itself in a homicidal attack upon fellow students.

Indeed, the very absence of political consciousness among teachers and administrators, to say nothing of the students, facilitated the disaster. It seems that no one at Columbine High was sensitive to the possibility that the swastikas with which Harris and Klebold adorned themselves might be an indication of a looming danger.

At the end of your letter, you make vague and fleeting references to an "insensitive world" and its "dehumanizing input" into youth. It was precisely these background elements of the killings to which we pointed in our editorial statement. Were you to explore these social themes in greater depth, I think it would lead you to a more profound appreciation of the causes and significance of the Littleton tragedy.

Your sincerely,

David North

WSWS Editorial Board

Full text of letter on the Colorado school shooting



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