

Empty moralizing and tougher juvenile laws follow latest school shooting

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This time the school was in suburban Atlanta; the assailant, a 15-year-old sophomore reportedly distraught over breaking up with his girlfriend. Thursday morning he calmly walked into Heritage High School and shot six of his classmates before putting a pistol in his mouth. A school official convinced the youth to put the gun down, and as he did, the boy cried, “Oh, my God. I’m so scared, I’m so scared.”

Many of the elements of the shooting—the sixth such incident at a US school in the last 20 months—are familiar. Conyers, Georgia is a comfortable middle class suburb. Heritage High is a well-rated school where test scores are above average and over half of the senior class has already been accepted to college. Parents are heavily involved in the school’s academic and athletic programs and school pride is said to be high.

School officials said there were no warning signs that TJ Solomon was capable of such violence. Though he was reportedly fascinated with his stepfather’s gun collection, Solomon was described by friends as an average sophomore with no outward signs of emotional distress. He played county league baseball, was active in church and was a member of the boy scouts. He lived in an upscale subdivision with his stepfather, a trucking company executive, and his mother and younger sister.

By now it must be clear the source of these eruptions cannot be found in the mundane details of whether there was a lock on the gun rack or not, or what particular music or computer games the youth liked before he blew up. The high school shootings are a symptom of a deep crisis of the whole of society that cannot be concealed behind the record stock market levels and the rising incomes in communities like Conyers and Littleton, Colorado, the models of

American prosperity and success.

But the political officials and news commentators, who have spent endless hours discussing gun control, movie violence and parental responsibility, cannot and will not admit that something is profoundly wrong with American society.

The Georgia shooting occurred on the same morning President Clinton was addressing survivors of last month’s massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The students might have expected the President of the United States to provide some insight into the causes of these tragedies and how to prevent them in the future. But Clinton seemed to be the most bewildered of all. The president invoked the Scriptures to suggest that these tragedies were incomprehensible to all except God. “None of this can be fully, satisfactorily explained to any of you,” Clinton said, “but you cannot lose your faith.”

The “dark forces that take over people and make them murder,” he said, “are the extreme manifestation of fear and rage with which every human being has to do combat.” Finally, the president urged students to participate in building a future where society better guards children against violent influences “that can break the dam of decency and humanity in the most vulnerable of children.”

A great deal of damage has indeed been done to the psyche of today’s youth. But the source of the distress and alienation is not mysterious “dark forces,” but the reactionary social, political and cultural climate that Clinton and other establishment spokesman have promoted for decades.

What are the social mores of today’s politicians, corporate executives and multimillionaire celebrities? Individualism, ruthlessness and greed are the key to success; human compassion and empathy are a liability.

Only last week Clinton and his officials gave retiring US Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin a sports jersey numbered "11000" in honor of the record highs on Wall Street. Rubin and Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan are treated as geniuses although their economic policies have led to the destruction of millions of workers' jobs and the greatest inequality in America since the 1920s. It might be considered heresy to ask, but is there any relationship between the policies that have produced the bull market and the pervasiveness of despair and despondency among today's youth?

Young people, particularly adolescents, are among the most vulnerable in society. They are the most sharply affected by the hypocrisy of official society, the daily dehumanization of the populace.

The pressures of life are exacerbated in a social and political climate in which they are told to view all difficulties as purely individual problems and to reject any notion that they can and should strive to make the world they live in more just and humane.

It is chilling that such a degree of alienation and lack of empathy has been produced that some youth can disregard the terrible impact of their actions. Not every youth shoots his fellow students, but many, many more turn to other forms of destructive and self-destructive behavior like drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide.

When Clinton and others bemoan the culture of violence, they speak only about the images of violence on movie and computer screens, not the most pervasive source of violence: the US government. This from a government that has carried out 48 different military deployments in the last six years, and which is carrying out a brutal war against the people of Yugoslavia.

As Clinton told the Columbine students they should help build a society that "guards children against violent influences," US-NATO warplanes were bombing hospitals and other civilian targets in Belgrade. Is there any doubt that US school children are also part of the "collateral damage" caused by such wars and the promotion of militarism over the last two decades?

In the US politicians have responded to the intractable social problems by criminalizing the poor, packing the jails and sending hundreds to the death chamber. Therefore it is no surprise that the response of the authorities to the school shootings has been ever-

greater police repression.

After the shooting in Georgia, the Rockdale County district attorney announced that he intended to charge 15-year-old TJ Solomon as an adult. This followed a Michigan judge's decision earlier in the week to hold middle school students accused of planning a massacre at their Port Huron school on bond for \$100,000 each.

Meanwhile the US Congress is moving towards the passage of a "juvenile justice bill" that will sanction the prosecution of 14-year-olds as adults and impose stiffer sentences on youthful offenders. During the debate, Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott summed up the outlook of many in official Washington, saying, "Guns don't cause people to do these things. Something in their beings is doing it. When do we put the responsibility on the individuals?"

Democratic House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt added, "We have lost more American children in our schools than American soldiers in Kosovo. This is a national-security crisis which requires the same kind of mobilization that we apply to any military threat abroad."

These representatives of the ruling class act like people who, confronted with a boiling kettle, call for a bigger and tighter lid while they turn up the heat. These repressive measures will not only fail to prevent future high school shootings, they are an important element in the creation of the reactionary social milieu which produces such tragedies. The eruption of school violence is not a "criminal" problem but the manifestation of a deep social disorder.



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