

Social breakdown and the American police mentality

Fourteen-year-olds charged as adults in school shooting plot

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A judge ordered two 14-year-old boys to stand trial as adults Tuesday in Port Huron, Michigan, 60 miles northeast of Detroit, on charges that could bring them automatic sentences of life in prison without parole. The teenagers are accused, along with two 13-year-olds, of plotting to murder fellow students at Holland Woods Middle School.

Other students allegedly overheard Jedaiah Zinzo and Justin Schnepf discuss plans to rob a gun store, then seize the school office, assemble the students in the gym and massacre them. The father of a friend of Zinzo also secretly tape-recorded a phone conversation in which such plans were allegedly discussed. The prosecution claims that the pair planned to “kill more people than Columbine,” referring to the Colorado school shooting in April.

A number of witnesses have been unable to say for certain which youth said what, and others have indicated that they did not think the boys were going to do anything violent. No one has claimed to have seen either with a weapon or explosive material.

St. Clair County District Judge David Nicholson ordered Zinzo and Schnepf to stand trial on charges of conspiracy to commit first-degree murder. Nicholson said he had no choice under a 1998 change in juvenile waiver laws in Michigan, which mandates adult sentences for individuals 14 years and older tried in the adult court system. The two 13-year-olds, Daniel Fick and Jonathan McDonald, are being tried as adults in Family Court. If they are convicted, a judge would have the option of sending them to prison for up to life, juvenile detention, or both.

Nicholson commented that the issue of whether it was appropriate for prosecutors to decide which juveniles to

charge as adults would be decided by higher courts. Three similar cases are currently before the Michigan Court of Appeals.

The decision of the St. Clair County prosecutor's office to pursue life in prison without parole for two 14-year-old boys is entirely predictable. Under present conditions it would have been astonishing if the authorities had chosen any other course of action—one, let us say, guided by elementary humanity. It is excluded that anyone in a position of authority would suggest psychiatric treatment, for example, or any genuine attempt to help the troubled youths.

Since the Columbine shooting April 20 hundreds, if not thousands, of bomb threats have been called in to American schools. In late May the National School Safety Center in Los Angeles already reported 200 cases of classes being canceled across the US, in virtually every state. In Michigan's Oakland County alone at least a dozen students have been charged with making false bomb threats.

The Port Huron case raises a number of issues. Whether or not the youths actually intended to carry out the crimes with which they are being charged is really of no interest to the authorities. Guided by both social backwardness and political opportunism, local prosecutors are determined to prove their toughness on crime. Put children away in prison for life? They don't hesitate for an instant. And those charged *are* children. Calling a group of 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds “adults,” trying them in “adult” courts, sending them away for “adult” sentences does not change reality, it is simply an act of deception and perhaps self-deception.

Whether or not the youths intended to carry out mass murder, it is telling that no one, despite the lack of

physical proof, doubts that such a massacre could take place. After fatal shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas; Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; and Springfield, Oregon, voices were still heard, including President Clinton's, claiming that these were isolated incidents, with no general significance. Would anyone make that assertion today, after dozens of shootings or potential shootings? Clearly, the extraordinary level of tension, resentment and seething anger that exists within wide layers of the school population and younger generation generally is an enormous social problem.

No one in authority, more bewildered than anything else by the school shootings, has an answer for this. Wealthy, ignorant and indifferent, the political and media establishment always responds with the same general solution: more laws, more police, more prisons. In a promising development, the Secret Service has now been mobilized to look into the “motives and behavior” behind school shootings! According to the *New York Times*, forensic psychologist Robert A. Fein and Secret Service Agent Bryan Vossekuil have been visiting prisons, talking with students who have committed violent acts. Fein and Vossekuil helped prepare a handbook in 1995 on so-called targeted violence, i.e., stalking, workplace violence and attacks on public and prominent officials. The Secret Service is apparently planning a conference later this month to discuss their research. One awaits anxiously to see what the bureaucratic-police mind will come up with.

Meanwhile life goes on, and so will the violence in the schools. The wave of incidents is one expression of the failure of American society. To take a gun and shoot a group of your fellow students, or even to plan it, is a profoundly anti-social act, an act of desperation. It is a kind of self-killing. A young person must have been driven over the edge by a whole series of events even to consider such a thing. In the face of one incident of this character, any humane or rational authority would launch an immediate investigation into the circumstances that provoked such a mad act.

But when there are five or ten, or more, and in every region ... ? Then the authorities are obliged to act as they have in the US—to demonize the individuals responsible, to step up repression, to deflect all blame from themselves—because it is obvious the entire social and economic situation is rotten and untenable, and that

fact must be covered up at all costs. Anyone seriously looking into such a pattern of behavior would draw up an indictment of a society that is driving its young people crazy.



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