“Eyes wide shut”: The reopening of Columbine High School

David Walsh
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The ceremony marking the reopening of Columbine High School in Littteton, Colorado, the scene of a horrifying mass shooting and double suicide April 20, was a travesty. Revealed in the event was the inability and unwillingness of any element within official American society to confront the sources of the violence that has erupted in schools and elsewhere.

School administrators decided to hold a “pep rally,” the sort of event organized to encourage a football team, to mark the occasion. According to one press report, “The mood was upbeat, with cheerleaders in the front rows screaming and waving pompoms and officials leading cheers.”

Principal Frank DeAngelis told the nearly 2,000 assembled students at the “Take Back the School” rally, “I have waited for months to say this, and I say this with great pride: Columbine, we are back!” He remarked that some students “may be feeling a little anxious,” and urged them to seek help. “You need to know you are not in this alone.”

DeAngelis made only oblique reference to the mass killing and the teenage gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. “At Columbine High School,” he said, “we will have zero tolerance for cruelty, harassment, excessive hazing, discrimination, violence and intimidation. At Columbine High School, we can no longer state that we were only kidding when we made inappropriate comments or exhibited inappropriate behavior.”

Almost incredibly, no reference was made at the rally to the victims of the shooting. No moment of silence, nothing. School administrator Barb Monsea justified this on the grounds that officials wanted to create a “positive atmosphere” for the students on the opening day. The imperative, inevitably obeyed in American official circles, to be “positive” and “move forward” after every unexplained disaster, resulted on this occasion in an act smacking of indifference, even cruelty.

Some of the parents of the victims were understandably angered. Rich Petrone, whose stepson Dan Rohrbough died in the attack, told the press: “It was ‘Rah-rah. Let's forget about the kids who died.... Let's forget what happened.' I think that's wrong.” Rohrbough's father, Brian, said: “You can't move forward without acknowledging what happened. I'm very disappointed in the school board and with Frank DeAngelis.... My only child was murdered here. I am very fearful that what happened here will happen again.” Phyllis Valasquez, whose son Kyle died in the attack, noted, “If it wasn't for the murdered kids and the injured kids, they wouldn't be having a rally.”

A number of students suffered devastating injuries in the April 20 killing spree. Richard Castaldo, 17, remains in Craig Hospital; he was shot eight times and a spinal cord injury has left him with no feeling from the waist down. Anne Marie Hochhalter, 17, was just released from Craig; she is also paralyzed from the waist down. Sean Graves, 15, suffered a spinal cord injury, and can only walk with the help of a walker and a therapist. Patrick Ireland, 17, is undergoing daily outpatient treatment. He was shot twice in the head and suffered a brain injury. Lance Kirklin, 16, returned to school Monday. A shotgun blast tore away much of the left side of his face. He faces reconstructive surgery at least four more times. None of these students were mentioned, even though Ireland and Kirklin were in attendance.

It only needed the discovery of three swastikas—etched on a girls' bathroom and a retaining wall at the school's entrance—the day of the school's reopening to bring home the reality that pep rallies and platitudes will have no impact on the deep-seated problems that exploded to the surface last April. DeAngelis told reporters Tuesday that he was “disappointed that my message of tolerance and respect” was lost on the party responsible for the defacing of school property.

It is not a matter of singling out for blame the Columbine students, parents or teachers, or even school administrators per se. But what one draws, above all, from Monday's unreal and hollow event is the extent to which official America and a large part of the population are truly in the dark about the nature of their own society and its deep discontents.

DeAngelis's remark about “inappropriate behavior” going ignored seems so out of proportion to the seriousness of the April 20 massacre as to appear ludicrous. Let's recall that Harris and Klebold manufactured dozens of bombs, studied the layout of the school and its traffic patterns to insure the greatest number of casualties and hoped to kill as many as 500 people with a propane bomb, before hijacking an airplane and crashing it into New York City. Moreover, they chose Hitler's birthday as the date of their attack, identifying themselves with one of the greatest mass murderers of all time. In a statement that he posted on his web site, Harris wrote: “I am the law, if you don't

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like it you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die."

Nothing that has been written in the media or appeared in statements by school officials indicates that the slightest consideration has been given to the *social conditions* that produce this sort of behavior. This, in spite of continuing school and workplace killings, new racist and anti-Semitic attacks.

Blame is pointed in a number of directions: at the youths' parents, at lax school security, at the weakening of society's moral fiber, at the inability to read "warning signs," etc. Republicans in Congress, with political links to the forces promoting right-wing terrorism, propose to hang the Ten Commandments in every school. No one greets this with the derision that it deserves.

Insofar as there is agreement among the "experts," it is on the need to beef up security. Many schools are already prison-like, with metal detectors at the doors, fences with controlled entries, uniformed police on guard, and so forth. New proposals include random searches or searches of backpacks, the introduction of see-through bags, the elimination of lockers, etc. How an atmosphere of fear and repression is supposed to encourage tolerance and understanding is anyone's guess.

A recent report on CNN cited the comment of Dave Klinger, a University of Missouri professor who oversees a federally-funded study of the use of force by SWAT teams. "Columbine was a big wake-up call for a lot of people," he said. "It is no longer unpredictable that some school, somewhere is going to be assaulted by some sort of lunatic, so you'd better prepare for it."

CNN reported that participants at a recent four-day police seminar in Palm Beach, Florida reenacted the Columbine tragedy, "using fake blood, screaming students, screeching fire alarms and paint-ball guns. In Austin, Texas, the police department recently started a program called Homicide in Progress for officers who are among the first to respond, said Paul Ford, a senior police officer and SWAT team member. 'It teaches them to recognize situations like Columbine, and give the officers some options on what they can do ... whether it is rescuing victims or going directly to the source of the threat,' he said. 'We don't want to wait until it happens here to start training. We're trying be proactive.'"

The reopening of Columbine could not be allowed to pass without the intervention of Bill Clinton. Heaping insult on injury, Clinton noted that it was important to tell children "that the chances of a tragedy happening are small, less than they used to be, less than one in a million." This certainly offers some measure of consolation to the students and parents at Columbine. And to the rest of the country's school children, to know that they only run a relatively small risk of being slaughtered in their classrooms! There are nations—not generally considered to be heaven on earth either—where such risks are essentially unknown.

Clinton will himself appear in television spots urging parents and children to talk about the problem of school violence. "Will this public service ad get every parent in America and every child to talk about every dangerous thing that happens at every school? No. But it will have a huge impact," Clinton said. If a pious message from Bill Clinton were to have *any* discernible impact on America's parents and children, or anyone else for that matter, it would be cause for astonishment and perhaps alarm.

Everything is being done except the critical thing: to make an analysis of the social situation in the US. Politicians and media pundits offer differing shallow conclusions, but they all agree on one thing: the killings have nothing to do with the basis of the social order. *That* they spring to defend. In any event, one is hardly expecting from official America a searching self-criticism, but the policy of sweeping major problems under the rug will inevitably have disastrous results. In considering the official response to events such as Columbine, it is difficult sometimes to calculate precisely where reaction ends and ignorance, hand in hand with wishful thinking, begins.

Notwithstanding the rising stock market indices, which help to delude those enriching themselves that things have "never been better," America is a deeply disturbed country, beset by enormous social and moral problems. The signs are there for those who care to read them: the widening gap between wealth and poverty; the alienation of the majority of the population from an increasingly discredited political establishment; the disaffection of the youth in particular; the growth of neo-fascist elements; the glorification of war and violence; the worship of wealth. The events at Columbine, no matter how indirectly or contradictorily, flow from these social circumstances. Predictably the political and media elite closes its eyes to this reality; it would be perilous for the general population to do so.

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