

The Virginia Tech massacre—social roots of another American tragedy

David Walsh
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A day after the mass killing at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, along with grief and dismay, some reflections on life in the US are clearly in order. The event was horrifying, but no one who has followed the evolution of American society over the past quarter-century will be entirely shocked. Such psychopathic episodes, including dozens of multiple killings or attempted killings in workplaces and schools, have occurred with disturbing regularity, particularly since the mid-1980s. A timeline assembled by the *Associated Press* and the School Violence Resource Center lists some 30 school and college shootings alone since 1991.

Official reaction to the Blacksburg deaths, one feels safe in predicting, will be as superficial and irrelevant as it has been in every previous case.

The appearance of George W. Bush at the convocation held on the Virginia Tech campus Tuesday afternoon was especially inappropriate. Here is a man who embodies the worst in America, its wealthy and corrupt ruling elite. As governor of Texas, Bush presided over the executions of 152 human beings; as president, he has the blood of thousands of Americans, tens of thousands of Afghans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis on his hands. His administration has made unrelenting violence the foundation of its global policies, justifying assassination, secret imprisonment and torture.

Speaking of the Blacksburg killings, Bush commented: “Those whose lives were taken did nothing to deserve their fate. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now they’re gone—and they leave behind grieving families, and grieving classmates, and a grieving nation.” If he and his cronies were not entirely immune to the consequences of their own policies, it might strike them that they could be speaking about the masses of the dead in Iraq, who have also done “nothing to deserve their fate.”

The president, in his perfunctory remarks, appeared anxious, above all, to put the events behind him. Bush’s comment that “It’s impossible to make sense of such violence and suffering” comes as no surprise. He recognizes instinctively, or his speechwriters do, that considering the “violence and suffering” in a serious manner would raise troubling questions, and even more troubling answers. When the president concluded, “And on this terrible day of mourning, it’s hard to imagine that a time will come when life at Virginia Tech will return to normal,” he said more than he perhaps wanted to. This is an admission that something has gone terribly wrong at Virginia Tech—and in this regard the university is a microcosm of the larger social reality—and will not easily be put right.

In general, those speaking at the gathering—school officials, politicians and clergy—seemed in haste to get past the event. In some cases, this may stem from a sincere desire to console and to lift the

community’s collective spirits. However, a major tragedy, with broad social implications, has taken place and it needs to be considered.

The events at Virginia Tech follow almost eight years to the day the mass killing at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in which 15 people died. At the time, the media and politicians performed a ritual breast-beating, with Bill Clinton in the lead. Much was made of the need for new gun controls, increased security in the schools and the need to counsel troubled students. Then, as now, official American public opinion refused to recognize the killings as a social disorder.

What has occurred in the intervening years? Can anyone argue that American society has developed since 1999 in such a manner as to make tragedies similar to Columbine less likely?

Everyday life in America has continued to have a violent, remorseless backdrop. In April 1999 US and NATO forces were launching cruise missile after cruise missile against the former Yugoslavia and inflicting lethal sanctions and periodic bombing raids on Iraq. Somalia and Afghanistan had also already come in for punishment from the Clinton administration.

American militarism, however, has truly flourished in the present decade. The US has been occupying portions of Central Asia or the Middle East for most of the eight years since Columbine. Following a hijacked election and making use of the terrorist attacks on September 11, the Bush-Cheney regime launched a war based on lies. The lesson taught by the ruling elite is clear: in achieving one’s aims, any sort of ruthlessness is legitimate.

At the same time, the social gap in America has widened in the past decade. By 2005 the top one-tenth of 1 percent of the US population earned nearly as much income as the bottom 150 million Americans. Those 300,000 wealthy individuals each received 440 times as much income as the average person in the poorest half of the population, nearly doubling the divide from 1980. The rich lord it over everyone else, piling up fortunes that come directly at the expense of wide layers of working people. Society is divided starkly into “winners” and “losers.” For the latter, the future is bleak.

The decay of social solidarity, the domination of the political process by cash, the erosion of democratic rights, the transformation of the media into more or less a propaganda arm of the government and the Pentagon—all of these processes, under way in 1999, have now attained a far more finished state.

More generally, the past twenty-five years have witnessed a sharp lurch to the right by the American political and media establishment, driven by its relative economic decline, and an accompanying coarsening and degeneration of the social atmosphere. Brutality in language and action is now the preferred policy of the powers that be.

The proliferation of violence, the continuous appeals to fear, the incitement of paranoia—all of this has consequences, it creates a certain type of climate. American society has for so long tried to cover up or ignore its most pressing problems. What are the official responses? Punishment first, then the invocation of the deity. The suppression of contradictions, however, doesn't make them disappear.

The culture as a whole has suffered. Without giving any ground to the right-wing morality police, the prevalence of video games, popular music and films that celebrate rape and killing can hardly be taken as a sign of social well-being. Every effort has been made to atomize people, to render them callous and inured to the suffering of others. Human life has been devalued and often held in contempt.

Clearly, there have been consequences. The ability to kill one's fellow students methodically in cold blood reveals a terrible level of social anomie. A doctor at Montgomery Regional Hospital, where the injured were treated, commented: "The injuries were amazing. This man was brutal. There wasn't a shooting victim that didn't have less than three bullet wounds in him."

The gunman in Blacksburg, a 23-year-old Korean-American, Cho Seung-Hui, is one of those forlorn individuals who inevitably figure in such tragedies. He was a "loner," says one college official. His roommates describe him as "weird," a young man who ate by himself, refused to engage in conversation, appeared to have no friends or girlfriends and who sat at his computer for hours or simply sat "staring at his desk, just staring at nothing."

Cho's English professor indicated that there "were signs he was troubled," based on his work in a creative writing course and directed him to counseling. One of his fellow students in a playwriting class described his work as "really morbid and grotesque." She remembered one of his plays: "It was about a son who hated his stepfather. In the play the boy threw a chainsaw around, and hammers at him. But the play ended with the boy violently suffocating the father with a Rice Krispy treat." It's unpleasant to have to acknowledge, but would such a scenario be unthinkable in the contemporary American film industry?

Cho, who came to the US as a child and attended high school in Fairfax County, Virginia, in suburban Washington, DC, left behind a note, in which he reportedly ranted against "rich kids," "debauchery" and "deceitful charlatans." He also wrote, "You caused me to do this." According to school authorities, the young man posted a warning on a school online forum, "im going to kill people at vtech today."

This was a troubled person, but nothing was done. He fell through the cracks, like so many. There are plenty of well-meaning individuals in America, more than willing to lend a hand, but as a society it is uncaring. Many obstacles—institutional, financial—block the way of truly helping people, and all of this takes place in unyieldingly competitive conditions.

The incident in Blacksburg, dreadful as it is, is not unique or isolated. One day after the mass shooting in Virginia, university administrators in Texas, Oklahoma and Tennessee locked down or evacuated campuses, along with officials at two public schools in Louisiana. In Hollywood Hills, Florida, a high school was closed after a student sent a picture of a gun over his cell phone and threatened to kill himself. In Iowa, Rapid City's Central High School was also locked down after a report of someone on the school grounds carrying a gun.

What has been learned since Columbine about the source of this social alienation? A perusal of the editorials in the nation's major

newspapers would inevitably draw one to the conclusion ... essentially nothing.

The editors of the *New York Times* lament the fact that Americans face some of the gravest dangers "from killers at home armed with guns that are frighteningly easy to obtain." They also remind their readers that after Columbine "public school administrators focused heavily on spotting warning signs early enough to head off tragedy."

Hundreds of millions of guns circulate in the US, and they are no doubt too easy to get one's hands on. However, this is largely beside the point. Such arguments do nothing to explain the regularity with which sociopathic behavior manifests itself in American life. As for keeping one's eyes open for "warning signs," this may well be good advice, but it is hardly an answer either.

Editorials in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, *USA Today* and *Detroit Free Press* do no more to shed light on the situation. Respectively, they raise questions ("Should metal detectors be ubiquitous in American classrooms and universities?"), abstain from commenting ("We should remember that there are times when silence is the best response"), express astonishment ("It is hard to imagine how anyone could annihilate so many fellow humans, so senselessly") and anger ("Today, however, the focus should properly be on revulsion at what the gunman wrought and heartache for his victims") or moralize (perhaps the violence is "a symptom of a society with loose moral footing").

In the absence of serious discussion or commentary, the 24-hour coverage of a tragedy like this one on the cable television networks begins to take on the character of exploitation.

Virtually no portion of the media coverage is devoted to the social causes of the events. The political and media establishment responds to the Virginia Tech massacre as it does to every significant indication of social malaise, with a combination of denial and self-delusion. In deluding themselves that the epidemic of shootings can be treated by increased vigilance or the transformation of campuses into fortresses, the politicians and editorialists demonstrate how far from reality they are.

Such events bring home how necessary it is for another way to be found, for more sensitive answers, real answers to problems. This, in turn, raises the need for a different social orientation, which calls into question the present foundations of American society. And such searching critiques should not be reserved only for moments of national calamity.



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