

An attack on the World Socialist Web Site in the Boston Globe

US media hides behind the Virginia Tech tragedy

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In an op-ed piece in Sunday's *Boston Globe*, columnist Jeff Jacoby took to task numerous individuals and organizations whom he claimed were exploiting last week's Virginia Tech massacre for political purposes, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The conceit of Jacoby's piece is that he is dispatching evenhanded justice, criticizing right and left, the media and politicians alike. He first accuses political forces in favor of stricter gun control of making supposedly illegitimate use of the "terrible news" to press their political agenda. He then turns his attention to the pro-gun lobby. After that, ABC News is chastised for putting an interactive poll on its web site—on the theme of gun control legislation—"within hours of the slaughter."

Finally, the columnist focuses on left critics of American society and foreign policy. He censures *Daily Kos* blogger L.C. Johnson for "noting smugly" that the deaths in Blacksburg, Virginia "gives us an idea of what it is like to live just one day in Iraq."

Jacoby continues: "An anti-American diatribe on the World Socialist Web Site blamed the killings on a culture in which 'the lesson taught by the ruling elite is clear: in achieving one's aims, any sort of ruthlessness is legitimate.'" Jacoby is quoting from a WSWS article posted April 18, "The Virginia Tech massacre—social roots of another American tragedy".

He writes: "Ugh. There is a time for everything, and the immediate aftermath of a ghastly mass murder is a time for tears and silence and prayer—not for exploiting the dead to advance a political agenda."

Jacoby, an extreme right-winger, has jumbled a great many issues and political elements together, but the political sensitivity of the columnist to the question is telling.

His reprimands of those "who rushed to make political hay of the bloodshed at Virginia Tech" need to be dismissed first of all as hypocritical and dishonest. Jacoby is a rabid pro-Zionist who has used Palestinian attacks on Israelis, "whose victims" also "weren't yet cold," on countless occasions to advance his support for the suppression of any resistance to Zionist rule. In July 2001, he made "political hay" out of the death of a Boston cabdriver to stigmatize poverty stricken neighborhoods.

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Jacoby was one of those in the political and media establishment "who couldn't wait to exploit the awful news ... for political purposes," i.e., war to conquer oil reserves in the Middle East and a war against democratic rights at home.

Two days after the attacks in 2001 Jacoby called for blood: "Now that it has happened to us, the White House is not calling for 'restraint.' The State Department is not concerned about 'escalating the cycle of violence.' There are no editorials imploring the parties to conduct a 'peace process' and 'sit down at the negotiating table.' Now that it has happened to us, the TV anchors are calling them terrorists, not 'militants' or 'activists.' Washington is not being warned to avoid a 'provocative'

response, or cautioned against retaliation that is 'excessive and disproportionate.' Now that it has happened to us, our eyes have finally opened. Now at last we understand that there is a war underway—and we are in it."

Jacoby objects to a political discussion in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings because he doesn't like the conclusions that any objective commentator would be likely to draw—that this act of madness had deep social roots. He is acting in defense of the existing social order and concealing its ills.

To feel horror over the crime and grief for the victims of last Monday's shooting does not relieve one of the responsibility of determining what caused the tragedy. On the contrary, those who seriously want to see that this kind of mad act is not repeated have an obligation to examine unflinchingly why it took place.

If the Virginia Tech episode were an isolated one, one might be more hesitant about offering a sociological analysis. However, it is not. Shootings or near-shootings have occurred at high schools and colleges from one coast of the United States to the other in the past decade and a half. To make the point, here is a partial list of such incidents over the past five years alone:

January 16, 2002: Grundy, Virginia: Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

October 28, 2002: Tucson, Arizona: Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

May 9, 2003: Cleveland, Ohio: A 62-year-old alumnus of Case Western Reserve University, Biswanath Halder, killed one student and injured two others. He surrendered to authorities after a seven-hour standoff.

March 21, 2005: Red Lake, Minnesota: Jeff Weise, 16, kills his grandfather and companion, and then arrives at school where he kills a teacher, a security guard, five students, and finally himself, leaving a total of 10 dead.

August 25, 2006: Essex, Vermont: A gunman looking for an old girlfriend bursts into a Vermont elementary school and kills a teacher.

September 2, 2006: Shepherdstown, West Virginia: Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University.

September 25, 2006: Las Vegas, Nevada: A bus driver pulls over to drop off students. One student gets off the bus and then shoots at it. Three

bullets hit the back of the bus, but none of the 34 students on board are injured.

September 27, 2006: Bailey, Colorado: An adult male sexual offender enters a school, sexually assaults six female students, kills a fleeing girl, and then kills himself.

October 2, 2006: Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania: An adult male sexual offender enters a one-room Amish School and kills six female students and himself.

(Source: Associated Press and the School Violence Resource Center and The Chronicle of Higher Education)

In the days following the Virginia Tech massacre, dozens of schools, including universities and colleges, were closed down or alerted in response to the possibility of additional shootings. The nervousness of the authorities, whether it proved an overreaction or not, is in part a tacit recognition that the tensions that produced the Virginia shootings exist everywhere in the nation.

And this is to say nothing of the dozens of workplace acts of violence that have occurred in recent years. Only on Friday a NASA contract worker at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, after apparently receiving a poor job review, smuggled a handgun into an office building and fatally shot a man before killing himself. A second hostage escaped with minor injuries. One week before the Virginia Tech tragedy, a former employee walked into an accounting firm in Troy, Michigan, in suburban Detroit, and opened fire, killing a woman and wounding two other employees.

Are these social problems or are they not?

Jeff Jacoby is seeking in a cowardly fashion to close down the discussion about Virginia Tech. This horrific event has taken place, the latest in a series of similar episodes, and no one in the media wants to talk about it. Jacoby and the overwhelming majority of his confreres in the media, conservative and liberal alike, are intellectual bankrupts, hiding behind the tragedy, unwilling and incapable of taking an honest look at American reality.

Jacoby is not alone in hollering “Shut up!” in the direction of would-be commentators. The *Washington Post*’s Charles Krauthammer, another inveterate reactionary, began his piece Friday like this: “What can be said about the Virginia Tech massacre? Very little. What should be said? Even less. The lives of 32 innocents, chosen randomly and without purpose, are extinguished most brutally by a deeply disturbed gunman. With an event such as this, consisting of nothing but suffering and tragedy, the only important questions are those of theodicy, of divine justice.” This didn’t prevent the columnist from carrying on in his habitually unpleasant and misanthropic style for another 725 words.

The accusation of “anti-Americanism” leveled against the WSWS is the default setting of the McCarthyite witch-hunter. The more background material that emerges, the more it becomes clear that Cho Seung-Hui, the gunman in Virginia, was affected by social inequality and the generally grotesque state of social relations in America.

The *New York Times* reported Sunday that after Cho’s parents arrived in the US in 1992 with their two children, “They found jobs in dry-cleaning business and worked the longest of hours.... The goal, of course, was to own one’s own business. But it did not happen for Seung-Tae Cho. He began as a presser—an 8 a.m.-to-10 p.m. job—and that is what he is today. His wife worked in the same capacity until a few years ago, when she accepted a job in a high school cafeteria so the family could have medical insurance. They lived in a nondescript row house in a modest section of town [Centreville, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC], friendly but not overly sociable.”

The article continued: “The Korean community of Centreville is a high-aspiring one, and nothing matters more than bright futures for its children. The area is speckled with tutoring academies—‘Believe & Achieve,’ ‘Ivy Academy’—high SAT scores and road maps to elite colleges. The local Korean papers publish lists of students admitted to Ivy League

institutions. Mr. Cho’s older sister, Sun-Kyung Cho, went to Princeton and made the lists, but not him.”

Cho had his own personal torments, some of them perhaps physiologically based, but the manner in which his paranoia and sense of injustice emerged has everything to do with the character of present-day life in America. What does a young person, even the most mentally stable, confront today in the US?

A nation in which one’s accumulation of wealth is the measure of all things; in which, yes, the ruling elite demonstrates every day by word and deed all over the globe that “in achieving one’s aims, any sort of ruthlessness is legitimate”; in which cutthroat competition in schools and the workplace prevails, where anyone who falls behind a step is left to his own devices; in which no helping hand for the weak or defenseless is ever extended; in which official culture and the media attempts relentlessly to dehumanize and brutalize its consumers; in which college campuses are sharply divided between haves and have-nots, with the former lording it over the latter.

Recent research suggests compellingly complex links between social inequality and mental health problems. For example, in a 2002 issue of *Psychiatric Services*, a journal of the American Psychiatric Association, Dr. Carl I. Cohen, professor of psychiatry at the State University of New York (SUNY) Health Science Center in Brooklyn, concludes, “Regardless of causality, studies have consistently shown that socioeconomic factors affect the course and outcome of mental disorders.”

An article in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 2001, based on work carried out at the Division of Psychiatry, University of Bristol, concluded that “Indicators of social inequality at birth are associated with increased risk of adult-onset schizophrenia, suggesting that environmental factors are important determinants of schizophrenic disorders.”

An international study summarized in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, “Socioeconomic Inequalities in Depression: A Meta-Analysis,” in 2003, observed “Socioeconomic inequality in depression is heterogeneous and varies according to the way psychiatric disorder is measured, to the definition and measurement of SES [socioeconomic status], and to contextual features such as region and time. Nonetheless, the authors found compelling evidence for socioeconomic inequality in depression. Strategies for tackling inequality in depression are needed, especially in relation to the course of the disorder.”

Contrary to Jacoby, a discussion on the roots of the Virginia Tech mass killings, including the growth of social inequality, is vital. The coverage of this event on the WSWS has generated a considerable response from readers, including young people. As part of the effort to create a different social climate in the US, we will pursue this issue.



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