
The Children Strike Back

DAVE SHIFLETT

Littleton has drawn vast attention from press and experts. Their explanations of the killings are inadequate—and none has captured the author's former home.



*Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
Don't criticize what you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging.
—Bob Dylan*

You can say that again, Bob. Live in a nice house in the suburbs; buy your kid a BMW and the other trimmings of the prosperous life; teach him tolerance and medicate his demons—and he still turns into a storm trooper who

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SAM WARD

happily slaughters schoolmates and hopes to land a hijacked jetliner in the Trump Tower.

Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, whose kill rate (13 deaths, not including their own) bested the Manson family (7), Richard Speck (8), and the perpetrators of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre (7), not only pierced the heart of America on April 20th, as First Lady Hillary Clinton said. They also unleashed a series of events making it clear that some of the nation's children are taking mom and pop's old "Question Authority" bumperstickers a bit too seriously. Within a month,

220 schools had been closed by bomb threats, according to one tally. Students were arrested in Port Huron, Michigan, in an alleged plot in which they hoped to beat the Littleton body count. Near my home in central Virginia, two students were arrested and accused of plotting to blow up a middle school. One month after Littleton, a student opened fire in a suburban Georgia school, wounding six and inspiring House Majority Whip Tom DeLay to observe that "We are in a national crisis when we have children all over the country shooting each other."

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of weapons and drugs, and run anti-

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math of the Colorado shootings.

DeLay should know better. School violence has been decreasing and the number of perpetrators is but a handful of the 53 million of America's school-aged population. But he did give air to a common fear: There may be lots of Klebolds and Harris out there. Which raised a couple of panicky questions: How did we get here? And how the hell do we get out?

LITTLETON DID WE KNOW

Like a bright meteor in the ancient sky, Columbine has elicited diverse interpretations. Many commentators have sucked the marrow from their thumbs describing the alleged problems of suburban life: alienation among the youthful cohorts, the hellishness of life on a cul de sac, the absence of children playing in the streets, neighbors who don't know one another. Such arguments seem to me wrong on every count.

My family lived in Littleton between 1989 and 1995. Columbine was our neighborhood high school; my eldest son would have been a junior the day Harris and Klebold opened fire. Two boys from the old neighborhood were in the cafeteria when a fellow student stumbled in and screamed that he had been shot. One had played on a ball team with Dylan Klebold. He hid in a teachers' lounge while the other made tracks down a hallway through a fusillade of lead, bodies falling around him. A neighborhood girl was wounded. It was a good day not to be living in Littleton.

But the days we lived there were very good indeed. The Littleton we knew was immensely different from the one presented by many commentators. Driving in those kid-choked neighborhoods was like driving through wildebeest herds. Children were in the streets and at the door at all hours. Neighbors were

always dropping by or entertaining. We had large block parties, burning open fires and drinking like Vikings. Huge numbers of children participated in sports and attended the rapidly expanding churches that would later host the funerals of the Columbine dead. I told my wife on several occasions that we should never live in such a place again, because it was too friendly. A suburb like Littleton is not the best place for those of us with the habits of hermits to pitch a tent.

Around my house, we haven't been putting the onus on suburban life. Nor have we put much stock in many of the other Columbine-stirred certainties, especially the insistence that suburbs are under siege by bloodthirsty teenagers—a group Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.) has now famously described as "the most violent criminals on the face of the Earth."

VIOLENCE—WHAT VIOLENCE?

Like McCollum, politician after politician, commentator after commentator, talk-show host after talk-show host insisted on a societal meltdown. The therapy industry called for more counselors and insisted that there aren't enough anti-violence programs. Andrew Greeley, famed priest, best-selling novelist, and sociologist at the University of Chicago, summed up much of the indictment in a syndicated column. "For all practical purposes there is no such thing as discipline. The school does not dare to expel a student or even to impose anything more than the most general rules of civilized behavior, and for all practical purposes, teachers and administrators are peripheral if not irrelevant to the school's social order. The animals run the zoo."

This was news around our house, where our middle school child has served detention for chewing gum, not to mention talking in class and giving a teacher lip. Meanwhile, school shootings have been decreasing. There is more crime in urban schools, but things are improving there, too. Anti-violence programs are numerous and well-attended.

Schools are certainly more violent than one would like. According to the Center for Education Statistics, one in ten reported at least one serious violent crime during the 1996-97 school year (murder, rape, or other type of sexual battery, suicide, physical attack, or fight with a weapon, or robbery). But according to the Centers for Disease Control, less than one percent of all homicides among school-aged children (5-19 years of age) occur in or around school grounds or on the way to and from school. School killings have decreased steadily since the 1992-1993 school year, the CDC also says, though the total of multiple-victim shootings has increased.

And there is also a great deal of disciplining going on, at least of a certain type. The CES asked principals whether their school had "zero-tolerance" policies; 79 to 94 percent said they did on activities ranging from violence to tobacco, alcohol, and various weapons, including guns. As for the lack of anti-violence programs: Seventy-eight percent of schools reported having some type of formal violence-prevention or violence reduction program or effort, and 50 percent of public schools with violence-prevention programs indicated that all or almost all of their students participated in these programs.

Yet statistics make for a thin blanket in the chilling aftermath

of Columbine, and they don't tell the full story of what is happening in schools, at least according to various experts interviewed for this story. The problem, as they see it, is that kids are being raised and schooled in an environment that reflects their parents' values.

RAISING KILLER KIDS

Dan Quayle jumped back before the spotlight with his post-Columbine critique that a "legal aristocracy" has inserted barriers between children and authority figures. Parents may no longer raise their own kids, Quayle claimed, since that job has been taken over by the social engineers at the ACLU.

Dr. Helen Smith, a forensic psychologist who works with homicidal children and adults in Knoxville, Tennessee, and who calls herself a "social liberal," is in some agreement with Quayle, but she believes those barriers between kids and parents reflect generalized Boomer attitudes about authority, egalitarianism, and self-expression.

"There are a lot of killer kids out there," she warns. "The ones in urban schools usually have one target, and the fight is often over something very specific, often a girlfriend. Nobody cares about them—and that is wrong. The killers in the middle-class suburbs are often suicidal narcissists, and they want to take a lot of people out with them, because that gets a lot of attention.... These kids are narcissists, and their narcissism is made much worse by a lack of coherent and consistent guidelines and discipline."

The federal government has played a role in creating this environment, claims Smith. The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, she says, allows for no more than a 10-day suspension should a "special-ed" student punch a teacher. Many teachers, she adds, are afraid to respond to unruly kids because they fear getting sued. "Here in Knoxville we had a kid who beat up a 65-year-old principal, then turned around and threatened to sue the principal for sexual harassment because he had laid a hand on him. This is the attitude a lot of kids have: 'In the end, nobody can really do anything to me.'" Similarly, parents who still believe in the benevolent results of taking junior to the woodshed refrain from fear of a knock on the door from the social services department. "Kids know they can't really be disciplined," says Smith. "That puts them in charge, and that is disastrous."

Smith's words bring back a personal parenting memory from Littleton. The place was Clement Park, now famous as site of that huge memorial to the shooting victims. Our second-grade son was being hustled to the car on a minor infraction when he turned and warned that if an untoward hand was laid on him, he would dial 911. Where did he get such an idea, he was asked. His teacher told him, came the response.

Teachers weren't the only ones conveying this message. Colorado parents knew the real possibility of being hauled into court should they cuff an upstart child. In one well-publicized local case, a father was called to school after his charge showed persistent unruliness. The father took the boy into a school bathroom and whipped him, after which the child's behavior showed a marked improvement. The father, however, was convicted of child abuse, and his fate stood as a warning to all other parents.

Yet Coloradans are in no hurry to change this arrangement. Many modern parents, as Smith says, believe a belting constitutes child abuse, and Coloradans are no different, having defeated a "parents' rights" ballot measure that would have given parents the right "to direct and control the upbringing, education, values and discipline of their children." Though initially enjoying strong backing, critics convinced voters that, in the words of the local ACLU chieftain, "It really denies the rights of the child. It makes them the property of parents and gives parents a license to abuse them in any way those parents might wish." Since 1994, the *New York Times* has reported, nearly 30 states have considered similar legislation, but none have approved an amendment.

Smith believes the rules currently governing the young are basically popular. "We really hate to make distinctions which say that one kid is really worse than any other. You see this reflected in school rules. In many schools, if a student brings a butter knife he gets the same punishment as if he had brought in a gun. Or, if a girl gives a friend a Midol, or an Alka-Seltzer, it's as if she had given away a controlled substance. If a special-ed kid beats up the principal, his punishment is about the same." Kids hardly can be expected to look up to the adults responsible for such stupidity, she says. The only people benefiting are the unhinged. This is a good time to be a "wacko" she says, because wackos are treated like everyone else, and vice versa.

Another critic of the Boomer Way is Carl Raschke, professor of religious studies at the University of Denver and author of a book on youth subcultures. The difference between the pro-

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

fessor and Thor is that the latter couldn't hurl thunderbolts quite so fast. But it seems that fellows like Raschke are enjoying a wider audience in the days since Columbine, which he calls “a watershed event whose true epochal nature is not being properly understood.”

“We've gravitated to mindless questions about after-school recreation and locks on guns,” says Raschke. “We still don't get it. This is a crisis for the baby boom generation—my generation—which has to repent of its past moral transgressions and come to terms with its own failures.”

Proceed, doctor.

“We live in a culture which values diversity so much it cannot draw distinctions. We still cling to the 60's idea that behavior once considered antisocial is instead revolutionary and liberating. And so, if one takes a stand against evil, one is either paranoid, moralistic, uptight, or irrational. We don't recognize evil as evil, can't say dark is dark. We still think we're living in a New Age utopia. But that utopia is an illusion. Littleton should be a loud wake-up call to every social engineer in the country: You have failed.”

That message will no doubt be well received. On a more practical plane, what should be done?

“American politicians need to stop saying ‘I didn't inhale,’” he advises. “Adults need to stop saying ‘I was responsible when I was young.’ We weren't. We hope to create an illusion kids aren't buying. If we said yes, we did take drugs, but it was wrong—that's one thing. But kids know we did these things and are lying about it, and so they'll do the same.... My generation has to admit that there is such a thing as sin, and

we need to repent. We have to take responsibility for the moral mess we've created.”

Raschke is none too optimistic. “As long as there are pied pipers to shift the blame to some bogey—CNN, makers of handguns—many of us will avoid looking at ourselves and realize we've met the enemy and it's us.” He holds up as Exhibit A *Time* magazine's “Monsters next door” cover story. “If we want to say that adolescent boys are the monster next door, we should also admit that we've been making those monsters in our own basements.”

Finding someone optimistic that positive changes are afoot is not easy these days, yet there is hope among those who hold the popular culture largely to blame for the ill-tempered nature of modern youth and the extreme violence some of them practice. None is more hopeful than Miami Attorney Jack Thompson. “Columbine was the culture war's Pearl Harbor,” he declares. “America's parents have finally figured out that Hollywood and these game manufacturers have been targeting their children. America's parents are ready to shoot back.”

CULTURAL MEATHEADS

It is now much more respectable to draw a link between violent entertainment and violent acts, Thompson believes. Hillary Clinton and Al Gore, for example, have stressed the culture's culpability. Thompson recently debated actor-producer Rob Reiner—whom he calls “the Meathead” after Reiner's role in “All in the Family”—who insisted this is no time to be judgmental. “Wrong,” says Thompson. “This is exactly the time we need to be pointing fingers.”

Thompson is doing more than that. He is one of two lawyers suing video-game manufacturers on behalf of three families who lost children in the 1997 school shootings in Paducah, Kentucky. Video games, which Thompson calls murder simulators, “trained the murderer, Michael Carneal, how to kill and to enjoy killing,” he argues. Thompson, while admitting his case faces sizable obstacles, is very much enjoying what he sees as a shift against the violence industry.

Some of this joy is vengeful in origin. “If Time Warner does not stop distributing to America's youth entertainment that glorifies violence,” Thompson warned a 1992 Time Warner stockholder meeting, “then eventually parents whose children are harmed thereby will sue you for damages.” This elicited much laughter, he recalls, “but they're not laughing now.”

The United States Supreme Court has given the green light to a suit that alleges the movie *Natural Born Killers* was partly responsible for a string of killings. Thompson—who alleges that the film *The Basketball Diaries* contributed to the Paducah killings—is buoyed by the court decision. Even Bill Clinton has given the conservative Thompson reason to believe that his time has come. In his weekly radio address on April 24, Clinton praised the work former Lt. Col. David Grossman, a psychologist who has argued that violent video games “teach young people to kill with all the precision of a military training program, but none of the character training that goes along with it.” It was Grossman who initially convinced Thompson that there is a causal link between violent video games and the Paducah killing.

"The murderer had never shot a handgun in his life," Thompson says. "Yet, as a fourteen-year-old obsessed with point-and-shoot video games, Michael Carneal walked into his school and opened fire. He fired eight shots; all shots found their mark. Five were head shots, the other three were upper torso shots. This is phenomenal marksmanship."

Carneal used a shooting technique "that is totally unnatural and counter-intuitive," Thompson added. "He pulled the trigger at one target, only once, and then moved to the next target, pulled the trigger instantly, and moved on to the next target. The natural, untrained instinct is to unload one's gun into a target until it hits the ground."

Thompson says he recently discovered that representatives of companies that market the point and shoot games were providing free samples to schools. "Lamar Alexander put the issue pretty well," he later said, "when he suggested that teacher pension funds should divest themselves of stock in these companies, because otherwise they are subsidizing their own targeting."

Since filing the suit, Thompson has appeared on the Discovery Channel, "60 Minutes," NBC's "Today" (twice), CNN, ABC's "World News Tonight," and "NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw," among others. "Many of these media people have become advocates for our position," he says. "They too have been unnerved by Littleton."

Which may explain why the WB network yanked the season finale of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" because of a violent scene (albeit with a monster) at a high school graduation. As chief executive Jamie Kellner noted, "Our decision is also born out of a deep sense of responsibility to the WB's loyal young audience." The episode was replaced by one called "Band Candy," which was described by a television writer as one "in which all the parents start acting like kids and the kids like parents."

GONE TO A BETTER PLACE

Will Columbine change America? Maybe so—though the most significant changes may be inspired by the example of three girls, two of whom are dead.

Cassie Bernal was asked if she believed in God, and after an affirmative answer was shot in the temple. Valeen Schnurr, having witnessed that shooting, was asked the same question. Already seriously wounded, she too answered in the affirmative, yet escaped with her life. Rachel Scott, according to recent press reports, had been shot in the leg. When asked if she believed in God, she answered that she did, and was shot through the head. Cassie Bernal's story made its way around the world, and she quickly became a martyr. The stories of the other girls are catching up.

I called the Rev. Bill Oudemolen, senior pastor at the Foothills Baptist Church (membership: 2,500), to see how the killings had affected his world. He had buried student John Tomblin. He had seen how students had reacted to Cassie, Valeen, and Rachel. He had also spent time with reporters and had heard the word "evil" raised from its slumber, a word falling from many tongues since Columbine, including Vice President Al Gore's.

Oudemolen, it should be said, is not a man to water down his Christianity. A few years ago I went to a funeral service at his church for a family friend, a mid-thirties mother of three, at which Oudemolen preached that the deceased would not come back even if she could, because she was in a better place. "I made the same point as the funeral for John," he says. "I was criticized, but that's what the family wanted. They're very evangelical. That's the kind of people we are. The title of my sermon the Sunday after the killings was 'Satan planned April 20. So did God.' Good and evil—we believe in both."

Oudemolen says he took some flack from a *Salon* magazine correspondent for saying that the shooters "were gripped by the power of Satan," but overall he noted a "surprising sensitivity" and "respectfulness" on the part of the press. "I know it sounds odd, but when they were broadcasting the funeral I felt like we were a team. Some of these people were crying. This really struck home."

There was a surge in church-going after the killings. "Kids were going from one service to the next." Cassie Bernal's case has caused much soul-searching, not only by the young. "What these girls did was pose the most penetrating questions a person can pose: What do you really believe in? Do you believe in anything so strongly that you would die for it?"

As of now, few have dared to call these three girls religious fanatics, though the brand of religion they practiced is typically denounced as fanatical and a threat to the highest current virtue: Tolerance. Yet one assumes that their heroism for principle, and especially the inspirational effect it has had on youthful religious believers, will not be forgiven in all quarters. We live in a different world after Columbine, but not that different. ❁

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