

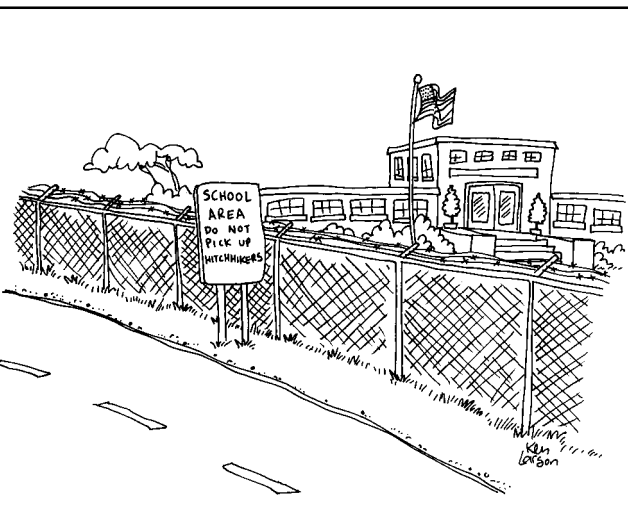
The Columbine Shootings

-by Thom

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"Columbine" has entered the special lexicon of words associated with our peculiarly American penchant for mass and serial murders. It joins other place names like Stockton, Killeen, Paducah, Pearl and Jonesboro, the sites of other mass murders. The name will evoke angst among Americans for awhile, even as other words in our lexicon of violence fade. Most people have already forgotten the carnage at the schoolyard in Stockton, CA and at a Killeen TX restaurant only 10 years ago.

Most multiple homicides never achieve national fame, of course. There are frequent killings of three or more people in De-



troit, for example, that are barely mentioned outside of the state. Similar explosions of deadly violence regularly occur in towns and cities across our nation and are covered only in regional media.

A period of national soul-searching often follows those that do grab the nation's headlines for a week or two. The pattern features hand wringing and finger pointing as we express grief for the victims and survivors, and try to find who or what is to blame.

The list of "causes" for "youth violence" is long and varied. Lack of parental supervision is a popular one lately. Others rant that kids who are "bad seed," or who watch too many bloody video games cause violence. Permissive schools, Marilyn Manson, black trench coats, or brain damage caused by mothers smoking during pregnancy also appear on blame lists. Too many guns is a sentimental liberal favorite, but is canceled out by the "there would be less crime if there were more guns" crowd. Legislators in at least two states opined that incidents of school violence would end if teachers carried concealed weapons, while others were content to advocate merely increased police presence and surveillance at schools.

The Radical Religious Right weighs in by blaming lack of prayer in school. Some even blame acceptance of abortion and the teaching of evolution as evidence of how little we value life. Many conservatives claim that youth violence will end only when schools post the Ten Commandments, perhaps displayed as held in one arm of a statue of Charleton Heston, which cradles an AK-47 in the other.

There is a fundamental flaw in nearly all analyses of the Columbine killings and other incidents of violence in America. Nearly all the causes and solutions advanced assume that such acts of violence are The Problem. They are not. In fact, our nation's high rates of murder, aggravated assault, and suicide are symptoms of a far more profound problem.

The true problem is that America itself is steeped in violence and always has been. We recoil in horror when two young men decide to rid their school of people they don't like, and ask, "Why would they do that? How could they do that?" Yet, our nation was established through genocidal wars and pogroms against the people who were here first. We wanted their land, so we slaugh-

tered them. Historian David E. Stannard calls it the "American Holocaust."

It was actually only the first American Holocaust. The second was the Holocaust of Africans during the slavery and Jim Crow eras. We wonder how Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold could so cold-bloodedly threaten, shoot and kill fellow human beings. However, for centuries hundreds of thousands of white Americans engaged in a perfectly legal slave system in which they routinely committed atrocities against their fellow human beings. And although slave labor created a large chunk of this nation's vast wealth, most white folks cold-bloodedly scoff at the idea of paying reparations to the descendants of those whom slavery brutalized.

Some pundits blame the popular violent video games Eric and Dylan—and other child killers—played, pointing out that such games result in "emotional numbing." This psychological process allows an individual to view other people as unimportant or, even, as sub-human. The individual is numb to the legitimate feelings, needs and rights of others.

Emotional numbing was certainly a crucial factor in the killing of people at Columbine High School. But it is also a factor in plant closings and "downsizings," which disrupt the lives of hundreds of thousands of people each year, sometimes with disastrous effects. The perpetrators of all that human misery, however, are not arrested or pilloried in the press, but rewarded. Certainly, the purveyors of products with great potential to harm people, like cigarettes, guns, violent movies, and gambling, are as psychologically crippled as Eric and Dylan, but are also rewarded.

We wonder how the Columbine killers could have so methodically planned and executed their attack on innocent people with almost military efficiency. If they had waited and been recruited into the armed services, they could have killed innocent people without being pilloried as evil misfits. They could have been part of the American embargo of Iraq, for example, which results in the death of at least 150 children—10 Columbine death tolls—every day. In his important book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman demonstrates that the same factors which combined to make Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold into a killing machine are used to train young men and women in uniform to kill ruthlessly and effectively.

If Eric and Dylan showed total disregard for the lives and rights of others, they only showed themselves to be true Americans. Our nation has spent trillions of dollars to develop nuclear weapons capable of destroying all human life, the Ultimate Holocaust.

An AP news story on the morning of the shootings in Littleton reported, "The Energy Department ignored many warnings about security risks at nuclear weapons labs over decades." The nuclear security risks under review here are only the "risk" that other nations will get nuclear secrets—they do not even mention the fundamental nuclear risk, that America will destroy the human species with these hate-filled weapons.

If Americans want to make a significant response to the causes of violence, they should begin by addressing the 50-year history of our culture's embrace of ultimate violence in nuclear weapons. The belief in the moral legitimacy of nuclear weapons has sown the seeds of violence deep and wide in the subconscious our entire society. Foolishly, and in vain, we imagine that this has not affected or polluted the minds and souls of our youth. Nevertheless, it has affected them with profound despair, and it has polluted them with vast scenarios of legitimated homicide.

It has been said that our children won't do much at all of what we say, but they will do everything that we do. That's why President Clinton's words after Columbine were obscene. After bombing four nations in less than a year, he self-righteously said that we should solve our conflicts with words, not weapons. Where does youth violence come from? It comes from the models that their elders provide them. ☑