

What If We Had Taken Columbine Seriously?

The political discourse since the killings last year has been foolish, escapist, and cowardly.

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Columbine may matter a lot politically, as attested to by the frenzy to exploit the anniversary of that day when two students slaughtered 12 classmates and a teacher, injuring 23 others. Yet the real lesson of Columbine is that very few people care enough about the horrible events of April 20, 1999, to try to prevent their recurrence. Proposals that are manifestly irrelevant--such as more police in the schools, or special restrictions on gun shows--are touted, while proposals that could really make a difference--such as banning all guns, or arming teachers--are shunned. That the year after Columbine has been spent on trivial and irrelevant debates--instead of on serious proposals to save lives--is a sign of the degeneracy of our political culture. Let's consider the favorite palliatives for preventing future Columbines.

At the time of the attack, Columbine High School had a full-time "school resource officer," i.e., a sheriff's deputy. The officer engaged in a brief gunfight with the two murderers, at the start of their rampage near an entrance to the school. Neither the deputy nor the killers scored any hits. The deputy stayed outside the building to care for a wounded student. His brief gunfight probably saved two lives, by distracting one of the killers from a student and teacher he was about to murder. The gunfight also gave other students a few extra seconds in which to flee the building.

Having shot their way past the guard, the killers entered Columbine High School, and began looking for people to kill. Although police officers, sheriff's deputies, and SWAT team members began arriving at the school quickly, none of them entered the building for 20 minutes.

The killers (let's omit their names, to deny them some small measure of the notoriety they craved) had planned to detonate bombs inside the building, and then shoot down the fleeing survivors. The plan was probably derived from the Jonesboro, Arkansas, middle school shooting of March 24, 1998, in

which two boys set off a fire alarm and then shot and killed a teacher and four students as they fled.

When the bombs failed to detonate according to plan, the Columbine killers began shooting students face-to-face, most of them in the library, near the building entrance where the murderers had their gunfight with the deputy. Teacher Patti Nielson was in the library along with many students. Nielson immediately called 911 from a library phone. She followed the 911 operator's instructions to keep the students inside the library and wait for the police to arrive. That turned out to be a death sentence for 10 students. The two killers entered the library and began taunting the students, then killing them one by one. Through the open 911 line, the police dispatcher could hear the students being gunned down.

Columbine High School sits on sloping land, so even though the library is on the second story, the library is accessible from the ground. The library door opens to a hallway, and is only 15 steps away from an exit door. While one murder after another was being perpetrated in the library, a dozen police officers were stationed near this exit. These officers made no attempt to enter the building, walk 15 steps, and confront the murderers, who gunned down their classmates with impunity. According to police officers speaking on condition of anonymity, one Denver SWAT officer did begin to enter but was immediately "ordered down" by commanders.

Twenty minutes after the rampage began, three SWAT officers were finally sent into the building--on the first floor. Finding students rushing out of the building, they decided to escort students out, rather than track down the killers. This was the beginning of a police program to "contain the perimeter." Officers went from classroom to classroom, frisking students, searching closets, and taking students out of the building. These procedures were followed in case there were more than two gunmen in the building, or in case one or more of the killers was trying to blend in with other students.

The perimeter containment program began on the first floor, on the side of the building furthest from where the library killings were in progress. The two murderers eventually tired of the library killings, and went downstairs to the cafeteria. A surveillance tape in the cafeteria captures their dejection at failing to kill hundreds of people, as they had planned.

Near the cafeteria, more students were hiding in a room, with the door locked. The two murderers attempted to shoot off the lock, and enter that room, so as to kill more victims. Students in the room had called 911 and the line was open, so again the killers' location was known. Many police officers were massed near the cafeteria door. They knew where the

murderers were. They knew that the murderers were attempting to get into a room to kill more people. The police stood idle.

Failing to shoot their way into the room near the cafeteria, the murderers returned to the library upstairs. The students were still there, some dead, some wounded, waiting for the police to come. But instead of resuming their spree, the two murderers killed themselves.

The police, meanwhile, continued "containing the perimeter" one room at a time, working from the end of the building where the killers weren't. It took hours for them to get to the library. In another second-story room, science teacher Dave Sanders bled to death. He might have been saved by faster action--as was every wounded student who received prompt medical attention.

The national media ignored the police inaction. The Colorado media covered almost every aspect of Columbine intensively. For weeks afterward, Columbine was the lead story on local television and in the state's two major papers, the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News. But except for KOA radio hosts Dan Caplis and Mike Rosen, hardly anyone said anything about the deadly over-caution of the police. Partly, there was a commendable reluctance by the media to shift any blame away from the two murderers themselves. And partly, too, there was a widespread feeling that it would be ignoble to question the work of the police in hindsight, given the chaos of that day.

But the police themselves are not so confident that their tactics were above reproach. Many of the SWAT officers on the scene that day were brave men who were horrified that their commanders had forbidden them to assault the killers. The Jefferson County Sheriff's office felt vulnerable enough to second-guessing that it asked members of the infamous Los Angeles Police Department SWAT team to analyze the police response at Columbine. The LAPD officers concluded that the SWAT teams on the Columbine scene had followed standard procedures.

Indeed, they had. "Officer safety" is the mantra of police tactics. About 90 percent of SWAT team call-outs are no-knock break-ins of the homes of suspected drug dealers. There is no earthly reason why a police officer should die just to arrest a drug dealer. Much less frequently, a SWAT team may respond to a hostage situation, such as a bungled bank robbery, in which the robber is holding bank patrons at gunpoint.

Columbine, however, was different. Children were being murdered. Nevertheless, the officer-safety rule prevailed. Very simply, the police

commanders decided that protecting officers from a risk to their lives was more important than attempting to stop the murder of student after student after student after student after student after student after student. Based on the police inaction when the murderers were attempting to break into the room near the cafeteria, and further inaction when the murderers returned to the library where they had already killed 10 students, it is clear that no matter how many students were going to be killed, not one officer's life would be risked.

If the teacher in the library had led the students out of the building in a mad dash, some would probably have been shot as they ran. Still, many lives would have been saved, since it's much harder to hit a moving target than it is to hit someone at point-blank range who is begging for her life. Instead, the teacher waited, as the 911 operator following proper procedure told her to do. And the students followed their teacher's order. Thus, the killers had their way for 40 minutes--it could have been much longer if they had not then killed themselves--to gun down one person after another. And the police secured the perimeter.

There have been several school shootings in recent years, and not one has been stopped by the police. Whatever the other benefits police provide to society, stopping a school shooting in progress is not one of them. There are plenty of courageous men in police uniform: When will one of them summon the moral seriousness to insist that "procedures" be suspended if, God forbid, another school shooting occurs?

"How do I feel? Like banning all guns," wrote Molly Ivins immediately after the Columbine massacre. Of all the gun control proposals discussed after Columbine, this is the only one which plausibly could have stopped the murders.

It is true that murderers can use many different tools to accomplish their objective. The largest school murder in American history, perpetrated by a Michigan school board member in 1927, used explosives. But the weapon of choice in modern school killings has been a gun. The Columbine killers had planted propane bombs all over the school. None of these killed anyone, although some people were seriously injured with shrapnel. Killing people with bombs is difficult for amateurs, even with instructions from the Internet. Guns, on the other hand, are easy to use. They allow even a weak person to project potentially deadly force. This very quality, which makes guns so handy on defense, also allowed a couple of punks to become mass killers at Columbine.

Accordingly, if all guns vanished, crimes like the Columbine massacre would be much less likely to occur. It's true, of course, that criminals would be freer in general to go marauding, with greater assurance that their victims would not resist. This is what has happened in Britain and Australia, as those nations have outlawed defensive gun ownership and confiscated many (but not all) guns. But we are concerned here with policies that would prevent future Columbines, not with gun policy in general.

A second objection is that gun prohibition would devastate civil liberties, and be a miserable failure besides--just as alcohol prohibition in the 1920s and drug prohibition today have failed to prevent the black market from supplying the prohibited goods. True enough. But this objection relates only to the feasibility of the proposal, and does not undercut the fact that effective gun prohibition would probably have prevented Columbine.

And while the curtailing of civil liberties might cause people who venerate the Constitution to recoil, it is not a meaningful objection to anti-gun groups. They push for prohibition all the time, for various classes of guns--automatic machine guns, semi-automatic "assault weapons," small, inexpensive handguns, or all handguns, or .50 caliber rifles, or "sniper rifles."

They also insist that gun owners are too incompetent and emotionally unstable to use guns defensively, and are more likely to kill or maim family members than criminals, so the groups are obviously not inhibited by fear that gun prohibition would empower criminals. No, given their belief in the efficacy of prohibition of certain types of guns, their failure to push for total gun prohibition is a failure of nerve and seriousness.

Several months before the Columbine massacre, the killers obtained firearms from two suppliers. The first was a 22-year-old Columbine graduate named Mark Manes (ironically, the son of a longtime Handgun Control, Inc., activist). Manes bought a pistol at a gun show and gave it to the two killers (who were under 18 at the time). Colorado law prohibits giving handguns to juveniles, with certain exceptions, and Manes is currently serving time for this offense in a Colorado prison. The second supplier was an 18-year-old fellow student at Columbine, Robyn Anderson, who bought three long guns for the killers at a Denver-area gun show in December 1998.

When guns are bought from firearms dealers, federal law requires that the sale be approved by the FBI, via the National Instant Check System. Both Manes and Anderson were lawful gun purchasers and could legally have bought the guns from a firearms dealer at a gun store, a gun show, or anywhere else.

In Colorado (as in most other states), when guns are bought from a private individual who is not--as the federal statute says, "engaged in the business" of selling firearms--the National Instant Check System (NICS) and associated paperwork are not involved. If a gun collector sells a pistol to a neighbor or rents a table at a gun show and sells a pair of shotguns one weekend, no FBI permission is required.

Both Manes and Anderson bought guns from collectors at gun shows and thus were not subject to the NICS check, although if they had been, they would have been approved.

The laws described above are exactly the same wherever the firearms transaction takes place. Sales by gun dealers need NICS permission no matter where the sales take place, and sales by private collectors do not.

Nevertheless, shortly after the Columbine killings, the various gun prohibition groups began putting out press releases about the "gun show loophole." This is an audacious lie, since there is no "loophole" involving gun shows. The law at gun shows is exactly the same as it is everywhere else.

Mark Manes committed a felony by obtaining a handgun for the young killers. He has never claimed that the existence of another law, regarding gun show sales, would have deterred him.

What about Robyn Anderson?

On June 4, 1999, *Good Morning America* presented a "kids and guns" program. Anderson was flown to Washington for the segment. The first part of the program discussed various proposals, including background checks on private sales at gun shows. Immediately after the introductory segment, Diane Sawyer introduced Robyn Anderson and asked:

"Anything you hear this morning [that would] have stopped you from accompanying them and help[ing] them buy the guns?" Anderson replied: "I guess if it had been illegal, if I had known that it was illegal, I wouldn't have gone." On January 26, 2000, Anderson began claiming that even if the purchase were legal, but there had been a background check of her entirely clean record, she would not have purchased the guns.

Whichever version is true, the facts show that Anderson was not afraid to divulge her identity when buying a gun for her wicked friends. When *Good Morning America* asked, "And they actually paid for the guns, or did you?" Anderson replied: "It was their money, yes. All I did was show a driver's license." (The private collectors asked to see a driver's license to verify that she was over 18, even though there was no legal requirement that they do

so.) Since Anderson did not mind revealing her identity to three separate sellers, is it realistic to believe that revealing her identity for an instant check would have stopped her? The Colorado instant background check does not keep permanent records on gun buyers, so even with background checks on private sales at gun shows, there would have been no permanent record of Anderson's purchase. And Anderson's new and improved talking points claim only that the prospect of a permanent record would have deterred her.

Putting aside Anderson's shifting stories, she is plainly an irresponsible, self-centered person. After the murders took place, she refused to come forward and help the police investigation. It took an anonymous tip for the police to find out about her. And in marked contrast to Mark Manes, Anderson has never apologized for her role in the Columbine murders.

Even if you accept the version of Robyn Anderson's stories that is most supportive of gun control, no gun-show crackdown would have prevented Columbine. The older of the two killers could have bought his own guns in a store legally. Indeed, in a videotape made before the killings, the murderers said that if they had not obtained their guns the way they did, they would have found other ways. There is no reason to disbelieve them on this point.

The only law that would have some effect on Robyn Anderson and similar gun molls was introduced in the Colorado legislature this year by Don Lee, a staunchly pro-Second Amendment state representative whose district includes Columbine. His "Robyn Anderson Bill," which will become law within a few weeks, makes it a crime to give a long gun to a juvenile without the consent of his parents. This law covers Anderson's first version of her story, in which she told *Good Morning America* that the only deterrent for her would have been a law making her conduct illegal.

Whatever the other merits of proposals to impose special restrictions on gun shows, these would not have prevented Columbine, and it is cynical for their proponents to use Columbine as a pretext.

National Rifle Association executive vice president Wayne LaPierre--speaking at the NRA's annual meeting in Denver just after the Columbine massacre--said that America's schools should be as gun-free as America's airports.

In contrast, Yale Law professor John Lott has argued forcefully that allowing teachers to possess firearms at school would help prevent, or reduce the fatalities from, school mass murders. Other small gun groups have made arguments similar to Lott's--pointing out, for instance, that Israel abruptly ended terrorist kidnappings of schoolchildren by arming teachers and other responsible adults.

While no American school massacre has ever been stopped by the police, two have been stopped by armed citizens. In 1997 in Pearl, Mississippi, a 16-year-old Satanist murdered his ex-girlfriend and her friend and wounded seven other students at his high school. As he was preparing to leave the high school and kill children at a nearby junior high school, assistant principal Joel Myrick got his .45 handgun from his car, put it to the killer's head, and held him at bay until the police arrived five minutes later.

Not long after, in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, a school rampage abruptly ended when local merchant James Strand used a shotgun to convince the teenage killer to surrender. The teenager had killed one teacher and wounded one teacher and two classmates.

The objections to encouraging teachers to protect themselves and their students are vacuous. First, there is the complaint that armed teachers would send the message that it's okay to possess guns. True enough, although this same message is also sent by the presence of armed police officers in school. In any case, we expect schools to be able to explain the distinction between adults doing something and children doing it.

Some critics worry that allowing teachers to have firearms would lead to accidents. But there has been no increase in gun accidents in the 31 states where adults are allowed to carry handguns for protection in public. Moreover, accident concerns could be addressed by specially stringent rules about gun storage, locking, or concealment. And it would take a lot of accidents to exceed the death toll inflicted by current policy, which guarantees that mass killers at school face no effective resistance.

One teacher in the Jefferson County School District, which includes Columbine, has written a detailed proposal for arming 10 percent of school staffs, with only the principal knowing which teachers and other staff members have firearms. Most teachers would not want to be armed, but as long as some are, students would be protected by guardians with the highest possible motivation. No one has a stronger motivation to save a victim's life than does the victim himself. In contrast to police officers who are safe as long as they stay outside a school where murders are in progress, teachers inside the building are already in danger and well motivated to stop a killer. Moreover, most teachers also have great personal affection for the students in their care.

Curt Lavarello, executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers (whose members have never stopped a single school shooting), contends that teacher firearms training would cost millions of dollars.

Well, training teachers in order to prevent teachers and students from being killed seems rather a good use of millions of dollars. Besides, there are tens of thousands of certified firearms instructors in the United States who would gladly donate time to instruct teachers for free. Six days of training (a pair of long weekends) will give a teacher more firearms training than is required for active-duty police officers in many jurisdictions. You might think one of the major gun groups would speak in support of such a proposal, but they have turned out to be not as tough as their reputations.

If Columbine really mattered, this past year would have been spent in a passionate and edifying debate on total gun prohibition versus guns as lifesaving tools to protect schoolchildren. Instead, we have had a ridiculous debate about 72-hour "instant" background checks on private sales at gun shows versus 24-hour checks. The year could have been spent discussing the need for new police protocols in Columbine-like situations, or serious self-defense measures like the arming of teachers. Instead, we have seen the police posing in heroic pictures for *Time* magazine with the killers' guns, as if they had been seized in combat, not picked up after the killers' suicides.

What Columbine reveals about us is that America, in the words of Jeffrey Snyder's 1993 essay in the *Public Interest*, has become to a remarkable degree "A Nation of Cowards."

Consider: Heavily armored police with machine guns protected themselves, instead of rescuing teenagers who were being murdered a few yards away. Except for two talk show hosts, the Colorado and national media virtually ignored this reprehensible failure to act.

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The major pro-gun groups failed to push for the one item in their arsenal that could have prevented Columbine.

And the worst of it is this: The leaders of these groups flinched not out of personal weakness but because both were pandering to congressmen who themselves lacked the nerve to take Columbine seriously. And these members of Congress were chosen in free elections by the American people, whose own lack of seriousness they well represent.

The pro- and anti-gun groups failed to push for serious anti-Columbine laws because their polling told them that the vast majority of the American public could not bear to hear such proposals.

And so, if there are two more people in America with hearts as depraved and souls as evil as the Columbine killers, your children and mine are just as much at risk as they were the day before Columbine.