

The Missing Motive

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WESTWORD

One of the most glaring deficiencies of the sheriff's report is its cursory treatment of the circumstances that led up to the attack. "While this report establishes a record of the events of April 20," it states, "it cannot answer the most fundamental question -- WHY?...The evidence provides no definitive explanation, and the question continues to haunt us all."

In the course of their nine-month probe of the killers' lives, investigators interviewed dozens of friends, relatives, classmates and teachers, and pored over journals and videotapes made by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Yet several of those interviewed say the investigators were primarily interested in the pair's movements the day of the massacre and asked few questions about their possible motivations. What might have happened at school or at home prior to April 20, the extensive plotting and preparations made during the previous year -- the report summarizes this information in a mere seven pages.

The brief excerpts of the killers' writings and videotaped statements don't do justice to the seething, malignant hatred they were nurturing, hatred that would lead Harris to conclude that killing hundreds of people was necessary because "war is war."

The report does give a passing nod to the notion that Harris and Klebold were seeking revenge, but with a novel twist. In 1998, the report notes, Klebold wrote in Harris's yearbook about "killing enemies, blowing up stuff, *killing cops*!! My wrath for January's incident will be godlike. Not to mention our revenge in the commons." It's unclear whether the emphasis on "killing cops" was added by the report's authors, who speculate that the "January incident" refers to the pair's arrest for breaking into a van on January 30, 1998. But the implication is that the killers were hoping to annihilate as many police officers as they could on April 20 -- a

plan utterly smashed, the report would seem to suggest, by the prudent response of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.

That interpretation makes no sense to Randy Brown, whose son Brooks knew the killers well. "If they wanted revenge on the police, they would have gone to a police station," he says. "Where did they go to kill people?"

Brown believes that the "January incident" was one of two events at Columbine that month rather than the van break-in. The first was an unfounded accusation that Harris and Klebold had brought marijuana to school, prompting a search of their property that enraged them. The second was even more humiliating, exactly the kind of thing that would focus their hatred on the "commons," the school cafeteria.

"People surrounded them in the commons and squirted ketchup packets all over them, laughing at them, calling them faggots," Brown says. "That happened while teachers watched. They couldn't fight back. They wore the ketchup all day and went home covered with it."

By itself, the ketchup-dousing explains little. But the report's inference that the killers had vowed revenge on the police takes the spotlight off the harassment and bullying at Columbine; it also suggests that their arrest made a bigger impression on Harris and Klebold than the record indicates. The two breezed through a diversion program for the van break-in and had no trouble with authorities thereafter -- not when they bought guns or exploded pipe bombs, not even after the Browns reported Harris for making death threats against Brooks on his Web page. The sheriff's office never contacted Harris's parents as a result of the Browns' complaints or took any action against the teen, a failure that has become a prominent claim in several of the lawsuits against the county.

The sheriff's report is quite circumspect in addressing the death threats, which occurred before Stone took office. Investigators couldn't access Harris's "alleged" cyberspace writings, the report states, neglecting to mention that the officer who took the initial complaint wrote down the wrong Web address. "Further investigation was initiated but no additional information was developed."

Are the threats still only "alleged" now that investigators have examined the contents of Harris's home computer and his America Online account? Since the detective assigned to the case has said he has no record of meeting with Randy and Judy Brown in his office in March 1998 -- a meeting the Browns recall vividly -- what did the "further investigation" consist of? The report doesn't say.

The Browns get their comeuppance in another section of the document, though. Given that the couple is leading the recall effort against Sheriff Stone, it's strange that the report would flub its one reference to the movements of Brooks Brown on April 20. But according to the Browns, the sheriff's office gets that wrong, too.

Shortly before the attack begins, the report states, "Harris speaks to one student briefly outside the west entrance of the school. According to the student, Harris tells him to leave the school because he likes him...This student is the only person Harris and Klebold direct away from the school grounds moments before the killing begins."

The student was Brooks Brown, whom Stone labeled a "possible suspect" a few weeks after the massacre. But Brooks has consistently told reporters that he met Harris by his car in the junior parking lot on the south side of the school as he was leaving to have a smoke -- which would place him further away from the action when the carnage starts. If the exchange happened on the west side, Brown could hardly have failed to notice the bombs and guns Harris was in the process of toting to the west entrance.

"It wasn't *moments* before the shooting, obviously," says an exasperated Judy Brown. "They make it sound like Eric and Dylan both talked to him. Brooks didn't even see Dylan."

It's a small point, perhaps -- unless you happen to have been vilified by law enforcement, as Brooks Brown has been, for his "suspicious" escape. The report's account also ignores the fact that Klebold and Harris deliberately, if capriciously, spared other students *after* the shooting started.