

Back to School

ALAN PRENDERGAST | OCTOBER 25, 2001

WESTWORD

The Fire Last Time

They dreamed of fire.

It would be a cleansing fire, fueled by propane, gasoline, gunpowder, homemade napalm -- and their own savage hatred. Explosion after explosion, building to a conflagration that would settle all arguments and consume hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives.

At first, when the fire was just a revenge fantasy flickering in the fevered brains of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, they thought about ways they could escape retribution for the killing. There had to be some island where they could find sanctuary, a tribe somewhere that would embrace their kind. But as the plan hardened, practical considerations dictated a suicide mission. They did not want to be taken alive.

If, by some strange luck, they survived the annihilation of Columbine High School, they would take the campaign to the streets. Harris was full of notions about how to boost the body count, which he scribbled in his journal. One idea was to hijack a plane and fly to New York City.

And then crash the plane into a skyscraper.

Days after the Columbine massacre of April 20, 1999, investigators dismissed the hijacking scheme as just one more example of how unhinged the two killers were. Everybody knew that two teenagers didn't have the sophistication or the resources to engineer such an unimaginable catastrophe. No, something like that, if it was even remotely possible, would require professional terrorists, specially trained for the job.

But Harris and Klebold *were* terrorists. Amateurs, certainly, with an imperfect understanding of explosives and timers -- if the bombs they planted in the school cafeteria had worked, they could have killed more people than the Oklahoma City bombing -- but terrorists just the same. The differences between what they did and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are dramatic, but they're chiefly matters of scale and ideology. In both cases, the object was to commit not just a crime, but an act of war, a kamikaze strike that would end in the fiery deaths of the attack force and as many civilians as they could take with them.

Although it was the worst school shooting in American history, the attack on Columbine was essentially a failure. The toll was "only" fifteen dead, including the gunmen, and two dozen wounded. (Small comfort for the injured -- some of whom face a lifetime of surgeries and rehabilitation -- and the families of the dead.) Yet there is much we can learn from the failures of Harris and Klebold, just as we are beginning to learn from the hideous success of the September 11 attacks.

In recent weeks, the talking heads have saturated the airwaves with their musings on "the new face of terror." But we have seen this face before, in different guises. We've seen it in a yearbook photo taken in the suburbs, graced with an awkward, I've-got-a-secret half-smile. We've seen it in grainy surveillance video of an adolescent commando strutting through the wreckage of his high school, trying to act out the Tarantino-style shootout playing in his head. But nobody recognized that face for what it was until it was too late.

Do we recognize it now?

Pieces of Hate

The truth about Columbine has emerged slowly over the past thirty months. Much of it has been pried loose, piece by painful piece, from reluctant school and police officials, who have refused to discuss the stickier details about what their agencies knew about Harris and Klebold before the massacre or how they responded once the attack began.

The battle over information dates back to the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, when parents waited for hours -- and, in some cases, days -- for confirmation that their children had been murdered. It took Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone's office more than a year to release its official report on the shootings -- a tidy, self-serving CD-ROM package that didn't begin to address the most troubling questions about the attack ("The Lost Command," July 13, 2000).

By the second anniversary, thanks to a lawsuit filed by families of the dead and wounded, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office had been forced to release 11,000 pages of police reports and witness interviews, as well as recordings of 911 calls and school surveillance videos -- raw evidence that was considerably at odds with the official version of events presented in the sheriff's report. Last spring, *60 Minutes II* aired proof that even though the sheriff's office had more prior knowledge about Harris's bomb-making activities than the department had admitted, it had mysteriously dropped its investigation ("Lights, Camera...No Comment," April 12).

The broadcast caused a furor in local media circles and put pressure on the department to release other Columbine documents. Over the past six months, as a result of ongoing open-records requests filed on behalf of the families, CBS News and *Westword*, nearly 5,000 additional pages have been made public, including formerly "misplaced" witness interviews and some of the ballistics data that Columbine parents have been seeking for more than two years.

The most recently released documents don't answer all the questions about Columbine. Some pieces of the puzzle are still missing, lost, or locked away in the county's evidence vault. They may never become public -- except, perhaps, through the lawsuits filed against the sheriff's office and the school district by the victims' families. Those cases have been in limbo for months, awaiting a ruling by U.S. District Judge Lewis Babcock on the government's motions to dismiss.

Still, the documents reveal a great deal. We now have glimpses of the extensive planning involved in the attack and of the wide range of people who knew something about the plan -- most of whom, unfortunately, didn't believe it would

ever be carried out. We also have a more disturbing picture of the massive five-hour rescue effort that drew hundreds of cops and emergency workers to the high school. Although the law-enforcement agencies involved still aren't talking, the police actions taken that day now appear to have been even more chaotic and ineffective -- and, in some instances, more reckless -- than has previously been reported.

Harris and Klebold attracted little attention as they planned their apocalypse. Family, friends, even enemies chalked up their increasingly odd behavior as so much teenage nonsense -- a phase, a pose. Some students saw them as "living in their own world," one populated by video games and violent fantasies. Blowing up the school, crashing a plane into a building...ridiculous, no?

But it was the people around them who were dreaming. One April morning, the alarms started shrieking, and there was a sad and terrible awakening.

The No Sports

Excerpt from police interview of Columbine graduate Greg Hyde, May 4, 1999:

"Greg stated that he was the student body president so he was around the school a lot...he had been on both the golf and baseball teams, and he knew what went on with other kids in school.

"I asked Greg what that meant, and he stated that all the sports type kids referred to the Trench Coats as the 'no sports.' Greg knew that these kids got picked on all the time, and that most of it was done by the football team. He believed it was just because they were different.

"Greg then stated that he knew about Eric and Dylan talking about blowing up the school, because it was the big rumor for two years. I asked Greg if school officials knew about the threats, and he stated that he had heard that they did, but no one took it seriously."

Twelve days before the attack, custodian Jay Gallentine arrived at Columbine shortly before five in the morning, only to find that the locks of every door leading

into the high school had been glued shut. Gallentine heard voices and footsteps on the roof, then silence. He called the police and set about getting the locks replaced.

An inspection of the roof revealed that someone had spelled out the word "seniors" in duct tape across a large glass skylight. Later that same day, Jeffco sheriff's deputy Neil Gardner, the resource officer assigned to Columbine, reviewed video taken that morning by security cameras outside the school. The tape showed two male suspects in dark clothing, including gloves and masks or hoods of some kind.

The case was never solved, but odds are pretty good that the rooftop ninjas were Klebold and Harris. On his Web site, Harris boasted of how the pair executed various nocturnal "missions" around their neighborhood, vandalizing houses and detonating pipe bombs in ditches, even pouring epoxy into locks on occasion: "Anyone pisses us off, we do a little deed to their house. Eggs, teepee, superglue, busyboxes, large amounts of fireworks, you name it and we will probly or already have done it....Its sort of a night time tradition for us."

Was the roof-prowling a senior prank? A way of testing the school's security? A dry run for what was to come? It may have been all three. Klebold and Harris had been stretching their limits and refining their plan -- building bombs, acquiring guns and ammo, studying the school layout, making other preparations that often passed for more innocuous activities -- for months before the attack.

The conventional wisdom about Columbine is that the attack came out of nowhere, and thus there was no way to prevent it, no way to prepare for it. Yet at the time the planning began, nearly a year earlier, Klebold and Harris were already in a juvenile diversion program for burglarizing a van. Randy and Judy Brown had reported Harris to the police for threatening to kill their son Brooks and had provided the cops with pages of Harris's Internet rantings. A Jeff-co sheriff's bomb investigator had linked a pipe bomb found in a field with the kinds of bombs Harris described in his writings and had drafted a request for a search warrant.

The official explanation of why the Brown complaint wasn't pursued keeps changing. The sheriff's office has suggested that the detective assigned to the case

was overwhelmed with more pressing matters, including a serial ax murderer, but an official log of his investigations for that time period shows an unremarkable workload, including several fraud-by-check cases. The sheriff's office has told reporters that its computer experts couldn't access Harris's Web site, even though it was still up and running months later. (In the hours after the massacre, it was available to any curious twelve-year-old with a mouse.) The sheriff's office has also said that its investigator never met with the Browns and couldn't link the complaint to any bomb cases in the county. Both assertions are contradicted in the search-warrant affidavit -- which the agency failed to disclose until a judge ordered its release, two years after the attack ("Chronology of a Big Fat Lie," April 19). Whatever the real reasons, the case was not a priority for Jefferson County. Back in 1998, bounced checks trumped bombs. It isn't clear to what extent the sheriff's office even recognized -- or bothered to share with Deputy Gardner or officials at Columbine High -- the subtler nuances of the Harris writings ("you all better fucking hide in your houses because im comin for EVERYONE soon, and i WILL be armed to the fuckin teeth and i WILL shoot to kill and i WILL fucking KILL EVERYTHING!"). This inability to share basic information about death threats became an intelligence failure of staggering proportions.

The refusal to investigate becomes even more galling when you realize that, besides being on probation, Harris and Klebold also had an extensive disciplinary record at school. The full extent of that record has never been made public, but you catch glimpses of it in the reams of interviews police conducted after the massacre. The two were suspended, along with another student, for hacking into the school's computer system to obtain locker combinations (which were used to place a threatening note in an enemy's locker). According to their pal Nate Dykeman, they'd also been helping themselves to school computer parts from a locked room, and Klebold's father made him return one stolen laptop.

They got into fights with classmates; Klebold was known to swear at teachers, struck a female supervisor at work and may have threatened one developmentally disabled student. A dean of students who'd had them in his office several times told

police "that he was not totally shocked that Dylan and Eric did this because in his dealings with them he saw the potential for an 'evil side'...that there was a violent, angry streak in these kids and they tried to make a statement and to bring down [Columbine] because they wanted the rules their way."

Read a few dozen of these interviews, and you get the impression that everyone was holding their breath, waiting for these potential evils to graduate. But in the larger scheme of things, the pair's transgressions weren't that notable. Columbine was no blackboard jungle, yet it was hardly the peaches-and-cream suburban refuge it's been made out to be in countless articles about the massacre. Like any large high school, it had bigger crime problems than locker-number thieves. During the year leading up to the massacre, the place drew dozens of police calls, for everything from burglary and underage drinking to narcotics and sexual assault. Ninjas on the roof may have seemed like the least of their worries.

Still. If folks in the sheriff's office or the school had bothered to track down the correct Web address for the Harris site, then poked around the site itself, they might have come across a document titled "The Book." First disclosed in *Westword* two years ago, its authenticity since verified through the release of other documents, the three-page account vividly describes Harris's experiments with different types of bombs, shrapnel and napalm. It also makes references to the "pre-war era" and the impending apocalypse, also known as "NBK" -- short for *Natural Born Killers*, a movie that Harris and Klebold had practically memorized.

The authorities might have read the treatise and wondered what war the writer was preparing for. They might have taken the masked pranksters on the roof more seriously. But it didn't happen that way, of course.

Klebold and Harris wore masks on many occasions. They revealed themselves only when it no longer mattered.

When the shooting started, many students thought they were witnessing a senior prank. Some even described the gunmen as masked. Those accounts were later discounted because of the many other descriptions of two bare-faced killers.

But those witnesses didn't imagine things. Found outside the school's west entrance, next to Eric Harris's trenchcoat, which he shed as he started shooting students: a green knit ski mask and gloves.

Why So Blunt?

Handwritten statement provided to police by Columbine student Eric Veik, April 22, 1999: "I met Eric & Dillon 1st semester of my junior year (August 98). Eric was a part of my video productions class...

"Dillon & Eric needed a business video for another class. They created this idea and asked me to film it. It was 'Hitmen for Hire.' Dillon & Eric were the hitmen, I was the victim & [another student] was the jock harassing me. They used replicas of guns & spoke of killing in the video. I never heard if this video was successful...

"I was learning about videos fast and was able to help them on one last video...Filming got started, and I noticed they put more on this video than I thought they would. They were swearing, smoking, and more serious about it. I played along. When I asked 'Why so blunt,' they said, 'Who cares, [the video class teacher is] the only person that is going to see it and he won't care...'

"We were a small group of people going from town to town stopping radioactive clothing from taking over the world. They were very serious about this. Eric was using military strategy in parts of this...The movie ends with a very large explosion from a house that was put in using editing technology. No explosives or live ammunition were used."

Hiding in Plain Sight

Sometimes they wore masks. But they were also advertising their intentions by every means possible: Internet, school assignments and videos, yearbook inscriptions, good old word of mouth.

Lots of people knew, for example, that Harris and Klebold had a passion for explosives. They blew up fireworks behind the pizza parlor where they worked, and Harris once brought one of his pipe bombs to show other employees. To his

closest friends, such as Nate Dykeman, he confided that his parents had found one of his bombs and taken it away from him.

Several students had also heard of the enemy lists Harris and Klebold were compiling. In the fall of 1998, Harris wrote notes to a girl in his German class, informing her that her boyfriend was near the top of his "hit list": "I just don't want the little fuck going to [administrators] or the cops and start whining that we are threatening him or intimidating him, because if I get in ANY more trouble with the cops I will fucking lose it."

At the end of his junior year, Harris wrote a long, Nietzschean epistle in the same girl's yearbook: "Anyone who shows more thoughts or emotion than the norm is said to be so weird or crazy, wrong! They are just more in touch with their humanity...People are funny, they want to be accepted. Don't be afraid to judge people."

At the bottom, next to a drawing of a machine-gun-toting commando, he added a portentous postscript: "If anything ever happens to me, publish this page!!"

Klebold wrote an admiring essay about Charles Manson for one class, comparing him to the Woody Harrelson character in *Natural Born Killers*. ("The question of whether or not he is insane is a question of opinion, which cannot have a 'true' right answer.") A few weeks before the attack, he wrote another school paper about a trenchcoated avenger who guns, knives and blows up a group of mocking "preps": "The man smiled, and in that instant...I understood his actions."

His teacher was so appalled at the cruelty of the story that she spoke to his parents about it. "They did not seem worried, and made a comment about trying to understand kids today," she reported to the police after the shootings.

For the same creative-writing class, Harris wrote an essay from the point of view of a bullet fired from a gun. In psychology class, invited to submit dreams for analysis, he told classmates that he dreamed about shooting people.

School officials have maintained that all of these "warning signs" seem sinister only with the advantage of hindsight, that there was no way to put together the random clues Klebold and Harris were doling out to various teachers and friends. After all, plenty of adolescents write gory stories. Some think it's hilarious to pose as if aiming a gun at the camera, as Klebold and Harris encouraged several of their pals to do for a yearbook class photo. But the record they left behind -- filled with "a lot of foreshadowing and dramatic irony," Harris noted in one videotape -- was more extensive and less ambiguous than authorities have acknowledged.

The videos they edited in the school lab, in full view of other students and possibly the instructor, included not only the "Hitmen for Hire" commercial, but several others involving simulated explosions and weapons. One was a home movie of the two teens in the mountains, blasting away with their sawed-off shotguns.

According to a police report, computers seized from the school after the shootings contained "several graphics files that appear to be bomb-making plans," as well as "several dozen student video projects, many of which appeared to depict violence or guns."

Friends bought their guns for them. Mark Manes, who sold Klebold a TEC-9 semiautomatic pistol and went with the pair to the mountains for target practice, couldn't help but notice that their shotguns were "way, way too short." Honor student Robyn Anderson fronted for them on the shotgun purchases and later boasted to a male friend of landing Klebold as a prom date: "I convinced my friend Dylan, who hates dances, jocks and has never had a date let alone a girlfriend to go with me! I am either really cute or just really persuasive!"

Posters around the school announcing the prom consisted of a cryptic message, designed to intrigue: "It's coming! 4/17/99." On several posters someone crossed out the number 17 and replaced it with a 20.

In videos Harris and Klebold made and intended to be discovered after their deaths, the so-called basement tapes, they show off their arsenal and discuss their plans. They make farewell speeches and thank their friends, as if they're attending an

awards ceremony. They lash out at their parents, the cop who arrested them in the van break-in and various "bitches" who didn't return their phone calls, as if Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are the real victims of the atrocity they are about to commit. Harris manages to squeeze out a few tears. (The role of self-pity in acts of mass murder has, perhaps, been grossly overlooked.)

Leaked to *Time* and then screened for local media on only one occasion, the basement tapes are only part of the goodbye-cruel-world messages the gunmen left for the cops. Harris's journal and other writings and recordings -- including an audiotape found at Harris's house featuring the voices of the killers talking about the "day that will be remembered forever" -- have never been released.

The day before the shootings, three students from the video production class were filming in a hallway at Columbine. They came across Harris, who was sitting outside the west doors -- the same spot where the killing would begin 26 hours later. He was writing or drawing something on white sheets of paper. They asked him what he was doing.

"Planning for tomorrow," he said.

One of the video crew laughed. "Well," he said, "if the school blows up, we'll know who did it."

Eric Harris? Never Heard of Him

Excerpt from Critical Incident Team interview of Deputy Neil Gardner, school resource officer, by Arvada police detective Russ Boat-right, April 20, 1999, 5:35 p.m.:

RB: Okay. The suspect that you saw that you exchanged gunfire with, was he Dylan?

NG: I believed him to be Dylan...He was more in stature of Dylan 'cause Dylan's a lot taller than Eric Harris.

RB: But you wouldn't know Eric Harris, correct?

NG: I didn't know till I saw a picture of him.

RB: Okay. Did you recognize him from the photo, then?

NG: No.

RB: Okay, so you really don't know this kid at all.

NG: I had never dealt with Eric Harris.

Oh, Wait. *That* Eric Harris...

Excerpt from a press release issued by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, April 30, 1999, regarding actions taken by the agency in response to the 1998 report of Eric Harris's death threats and bomb-making activities:

"School Resource Officer Deputy Neil Gardner was briefed as to the information [in the Brown complaint] by Investigator Mike Guerra. Deputy Gardner with this knowledge occasionally engaged Harris and Klebold, along with several of their friends and associates, in light conversation. Deputy Gardner made no observations of inappropriate behavior and has stated that both Harris and Klebold treated him with appropriate respect."

Outgunned

In the aftermath of the attack, investigators promised to assemble a "minute-by-minute" account of the massacre and the police response. They reviewed 911 and dispatch tapes, fire alarm data, the cafeteria surveillance video and other electronic sources and compared them with the recollections of hundreds of witnesses.

The official timeline, presented in the sheriff's report a year later, has been disputed by several Columbine families. They charge that the timeline leaves out important events, including the arrival of three Denver SWAT officers on the west side of the school in time to engage one of the shooters in a brief gun battle. They also point out that the timeline is contradicted by material in the dispatch tapes, accounts of responding officers and other evidence, such as a computerized log of purchases recorded by the cafeteria cash register. (According to the register's receipts, adjusted ten minutes by investigators to reflect the "real" time, student Rachel Scott bought her lunch three minutes *after* the timeline says she was shot and killed by

the gunmen outside. Jefferson County officials say the cash register readout was never properly synchronized with the dispatch time.)

Even if you accept the official timeline as gospel, the picture that emerges of law enforcement in action that day is a dismal one. Match up the timeline with the reports of officers arriving on scene, and the picture grows ever blacker:

11:19 a.m. Attack on Columbine begins. Reports of shooting outside the school and an explosion in a field nearby. Two students are killed in the first few minutes of the attack and seven others wounded. Number of police officers on scene: 0.

11:26 a.m. Deputy Gardner pulls into the south parking lot and reports shooting in the building. Number of officers on scene: 1.

11:29 a.m. After exchanging shots with Gardner outside, Harris retreats into the building. He and Klebold head for the library, where teacher Patty Nielson, wounded at the west doors, is already on the phone with a 911 dispatcher. Number of officers on scene: 7.

11:37 a.m. Klebold and Harris exit the library, leaving behind ten dead and twelve wounded, and start shooting up the halls. Number of officers on scene: 20.

11:45 a.m. A fire breaks out in the cafeteria as the gunmen attempt to set off their propane bombs. Hundreds of students and teachers are still trapped in the building. The number of officers on scene is now at least 50.

12:01 p.m. From the windows of the library, the gunmen fire on police and rescue workers outside. Police return fire. There are now more than 75 officers on scene.

12:08 p.m. Harris and Klebold kill themselves in the library, moments after the first SWAT team enters the opposite side of the school. Police will not discover the killers' bodies for more than three hours.

1:09 p.m. A second SWAT team enters on the west side of the school.

2:38 p.m. Wounded student Patrick Ireland crawls out a library window and is caught by SWAT officers on top of an armored car.

2:41 p.m. Responding to phone calls for medical aid that began three hours earlier, the second SWAT team finally locates wounded teacher Dave Sanders and numerous students and teachers in an upstairs science room. Sanders dies before a paramedic can be brought to the room.

3:22 p.m. SWAT officers enter the library, the last room to be reached. There are now more than 350 police officers on scene.

Asked by reporters why the first responding officers didn't pursue the shooters into the school, why they waited for a SWAT operation that took hours to stage, Sheriff Stone explained that the situation was just too dangerous.

"We were way outgunned," he said.

The Bullet in the Backpack

Police officers didn't enter the school for nearly an hour after the attack started. But their bullets did.

According to the sheriff's report, twelve officers fired a total of 141 times at Columbine that day. Three Denver SWAT veterans fired 105 of those rounds. Most of the police gunfire was in response to shooting by the gunmen from the west doors or the library windows. None of the shots hit Klebold or Harris.

Whether one of those bullets might have found another target is the central question behind the lawsuit filed by the parents of Daniel Rohrbough, who was killed outside in the early stages of the attack. Brian Rohrbough, Danny's father, contends that his son, already wounded by Klebold and Harris, was fleeing the gunmen when the fatal bullet was fired from the front by a police officer. Stone's office has denied the allegation, insisting that no police were even on the scene at the time Danny was slain.

The bullet was never recovered, and the question may ultimately be settled in a courtroom, where a jury will have to sort through testimony from dueling ballistics experts and the conflicting memories of eyewitnesses. Recently released documents show that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation was unable to establish through

forensic tests that Klebold shot Rohrbough at close range, as the sheriff's report claims. The records also contradict the sheriff's office claim that numerous bullet fragments were found in the vicinity of Rohrbough's body; only one fragment, consistent with Harris's carbine, was collected by the evidence team.

But the Rohrbough case isn't the only murky ballistics puzzle to emerge from the Columbine investigation. The evidence teams collected a nine-millimeter shell casing from the east side of Columbine that doesn't match up with any police or suspect firearms in the case. Dismissing the discovery as irrelevant, a sheriff's office press release flatly declares, "There are no witnesses to anyone shooting on the east side of the school."

Actually, at least five students interviewed by police told similar stories of fleeing out the east doors, running to the park across the street and then seeing a figure in dark clothing emerge from the doors and fire in their direction. The shell casing may have nothing to do with the attack, but in defending its position, the sheriff's office has once again distorted the record compiled by its own investigators.

A more disturbing ballistics trail was assembled by the evidence-collection teams assigned to the battle-scarred school library. In addition to the carnage wreaked by Harris and Klebold, the area was riddled with dozens of police bullets. Several were found in the ceiling or the west window frames, indicative of officers outside firing from below at the gunmen in the windows. But at least fifteen bullets came from SWAT officers laying down cover fire outside the library as they checked on two students at the upper west doors -- one wounded, one dead.

That rescue operation took place forty minutes after Harris and Klebold committed suicide. The cops weren't firing at anything or anyone in particular -- although Terry Manwaring, the Jefferson County SWAT commander, thought he'd seen "a bad guy," or at least a reflection of some kind, before squeezing off three rounds. Police bullets went whizzing through an emergency exit at the school's northwest corner and into the library and adjacent rooms, not far from where several survivors of the massacre were still hiding or lying wounded, awaiting rescue.

There is no evidence that the police cover fire struck anyone. However, months after the shootings, investigators found a new piece of evidence in Corey DePooter's backpack, and their handling of that evidence is far from reassuring.

DePooter was the last victim killed in the library. According to police records, he was shot once by Klebold, two or three times by Harris. Only two bullets were recovered, both from Harris's gun. Despite noting a bullet hole in Corey's backpack, investigators apparently didn't inspect the pack closely until August 1999, when they found a bullet lodged in a notebook inside. They didn't inform his parents, Neal and Patty DePooter, of the find until months later, when the DePooters asked if Corey's backpack could be returned to them.

Circumstance would suggest that the bullet was one of the through-and-through rounds fired by Harris or Klebold, and that was the impression the police gave the DePooters. But there's no record that the bullet was ever tested against the gunmen's weapons for positive identification. Instead, investigators asked the CBI to compare the bullet to test-fired bullets from four police weapons of various calibers. The bullet did not match any of the four weapons.

Why was the bullet never tested against the Harris and Klebold firearms? Was there something about it that told investigators that it came from a police weapon? If so, why were only four cop guns tested? Why not the six other non-shotgun firearms discharged by police that day -- including several weapons used by officers firing into the library area?

The sheriff's office and the Jefferson County attorney declined to answer questions about the bullet in the backpack. The DePooters are not parties to any of the nine lawsuits filed by Columbine families against the sheriff's office, but they say they're frustrated with the lack of information they've received from the county.

"I gave up on getting a straight story from them," Patty DePooter says. "It changed every time we talked to them."

Brian Rohrbough knows the feeling. "I have said over and over that we would drop the lawsuit," he says, "if they would show me evidence that proves no police officer shot Dan. They don't have it. It looks like going to court is the only way we're going to find out what happened."

The Fire Next Time

So it begins again. The funerals. The grief counselors. The ribbons. The fundraisers. The signs and the vows. *Never forget. Never again.*

But we do forget. Tragedies mount. Compassion fatigue sets in. The world changes, and yesterday's horror can't compete.

Two years ago we were told to beware the terror next door: the overlooked teenage malcontent, armed to the teeth, who dreams of going out in a blaze of glory. Now it's the terror from across the world, global yet intimate, invading our skies, our offices, our homes.

The families who are still grieving over Columbine, still battling in a courtroom to find out what happened, are told to "get over it." But there are compelling reasons to remember the attack and to continue to ask questions about it. Just as the attacks of September 11 have changed the world of air travel, Columbine changed the world of high school -- in some ways, for the better.

The shootings sparked a wave of outreach efforts and "bullyproofing" programs designed to make school more tolerable for the most disaffected students. Both the FBI and the Secret Service published extensive studies of school shooting incidents in a quest to build safer schools. From Florida to California, several copycat plots have been foiled -- and lives saved -- by alert teachers, by students who have learned not to keep silent about troubled classmates, and by quick police work.

The Columbine investigative files themselves offer countless examples of the heightened vigilance about school violence. Police spent hundreds of hours running down possible threats that surfaced in the wake of the shootings, scrutinizing anonymous Internet chatter and tracking offhand rumors that somebody knew somebody whose girlfriend's ex-boyfriend used to hang out with the Trenchcoat

Mafia. One ex-girlfriend of Harris's, who at one point was investigated for making threats in a chat room, had a seeming fleet of FBI agents at her disposal when she reported a threat against her life. If a fraction of the resources devoted to her complaint had been used to investigate the Browns' 1998 report on Eric Harris's cyberspace spewings, the entire tragedy might well have been averted.

Everything has changed. Across the country, police agencies are training patrol officers in rapid-deployment techniques so that they can respond quickly to "active shooter" situations like Columbine rather than wait for the SWAT team. More schools are implementing the kind of threat-assessment policies that the Jefferson County School District was supposed to have in place in 1999 but which the administration at Columbine all but ignored, according to former school district security officials interviewed on *60 Minutes II*.

Everything has changed. But the change may be less noticeable in Colorado than elsewhere. To admit change is to admit the old ways *failed*, and lawyers might take that as an admission of liability. So while the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office quietly trains in rapid deployment methods, preparing for the next unthinkable event, the shift in priorities isn't reflected in the office's operating manual, which still instructs patrol officers to set up a perimeter and wait for SWAT. The rules for stopping a shooting rampage inside a large, suburban high school have been rewritten everywhere but in Sheriff Stone's book.

Over at the Jefferson County School District, administrators continue to wrestle with the threat-assessment question. Bomb threats are rarely reported in the media or even to oblivious parents and students, since to do so might encourage copycats. The district is, however, spending \$10,000 to make an instructional video encouraging parents to stay away from school the next time a real crisis hits, in order to avoid getting in the way of rescue efforts.

The idea of such a video incenses Randy Brown. He says the most bitter lesson he's learned from Columbine -- from the day he contacted the sheriff's office about Eric Harris to the bungled police operation during the attack a year later -- is that

parents shouldn't naively rely on law enforcement, school officials and other professionals to protect their children.

"They don't want parents involved in threat assessment, and that's a big mistake," Brown says. "Parents are the only ones who care about their children. These other people are paid to do a job, and what they care about is their jobs. They're still lying to us about what happened and withholding information."

Brown no longer has any children at Columbine. (This year's senior class will be the last to have any firsthand memories of the attack.) But he continues to press county officials to release more information about the case. He's convinced that true domestic security begins at home -- and at school.

Two weeks ago, as a result of Brown's persistent inquiries, the Arvada Police Department released 660 pages of records related to the Columbine investigation. Arvada officials say they turned over these records to Jefferson County investigators years ago. But among the materials are dozens of pages of interviews and police reports that Jefferson County had failed to release to the public, despite several court orders and open-records requests. The new releases include the first police interview with shooting victim Mark Taylor and a report by a police officer who found a bullet on Pierce Street, east of the school -- where, according to the official version of events from the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, no shooting occurred.

Another newly discovered document is a report by an Arvada detective assigned to interview neighbors of one of the gunmen's trenchcoat-wearing associates. The neighbors had generally good things to say about the teen; one woman even told the officer how the boy put plastic bunny ornaments on her tree every Easter, to the delight of her young daughter, and retrieved her cat whenever it strayed.

After the killings, police questioned the associate closely. Because of his physical resemblance to Dylan Klebold, several witnesses claimed that he was one of the gunmen. But he had a solid alibi, and there was no evidence to link him to the

crime in any way. Two of his friends conspired to bring about one of the darkest days this state has ever seen, but he was innocent.

Yet even innocent people may know more about terror than they realize. According to another student who met up with the associate in the pandemonium following the attack, he was "quite angry" that day and said to her: "This has got to be Eric Harris's doing."

She told police that the associate went on to explain "that Eric Harris had told him that he was planning on doing something like this...he told her that he wished he had killed Eric before he did something like this."

Perhaps, like so many others, the associate didn't see how such a monstrous plan could ever be more than mere talk. "Evil is unspectacular and always human," W.H. Auden wrote, "and shares our bed and eats at our own table."

All it asks is that we pay it no mind.