SOCIAL DRAMA, CRISIS, AND THE COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

The shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 constitute what Victor Turner classified as a social drama. The shootings were intended to resolve a power struggle within the Columbine High School community, and the shooters clearly intended to influence a national audience as well. The struggle over interpretation of the event on the national level, and the subsequent power that comes with success in this struggle, is the focus of this dissertation. Members of the community, media commentators, legislators, school board members, federal bureaucrats, and independent experts mutually agreed that the Columbine shootings were a sign of a larger, continuing crisis, and the aforementioned groups used the sense of urgency following the shootings as a means of advancing a wide range of pre-existing solutions for the crisis. Some experts, however, attempted to undermine the widely accepted notion of the school shooting crisis, using an analysis of Columbine to refocus the public's attention on what these experts argued were the real problems posing the greatest danger to society. Although school shooting events continued to occur into 2003 and are likely to reoccur in the future, the school shooting crisis is over; it has been overwhelmed by the war on terror following the September 11 attacks.

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CHAPTER ONE

COLUMBINE AND SOCIAL DRAMA

> On a sunny spring day in April 1999, a suburban high school in Jefferson County, Colorado, found itself under attack by two of its own. In less than fifteen minutes of the first-lunch period on that Tuesday, two student gunmen killed 13 and wounded 21 before they turned the guns on themselves – the most devastating school shooting in U.S. history (Sheriff).

This is the first paragraph of the introduction of the Jefferson County Sheriff's report

regarding the thirteen murders and two suicides that occurred on April 20, 1999 at

Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado. It paints a picture that is emblematic of

many of the representations of that violent series of events: a "sunny spring day" that

starts like any other is shattered by an act of completely unexpected violence, an act

declared in retrospect to be "the most devastating school shooting in U.S. history."

The assertion that the Columbine shootings were the "most devastating" of all

acts dubbed school shootings is open to a certain level of debate; there is no set of

reliable criteria or a devastation meter like the Richter scale that one can consult to settle

the issue. The body count at Columbine was the certainly the highest claimed by recent

acts of school violence, but measuring trauma in terms of the number of dead is not at all

reliable. Ask people at the tail end of Generation X where they were when TWA Flight

800 went down off the American east coast, and you'll likely get blank stares; ask those

same people what they were doing when they heard about the Challenger disaster and, in

most cases, a full story will follow. While TWA Flight 800 was the subject of numerous

conspiracy theories and an extensive investigation, the visceral shock of losing a trusted

symbol of American scientific know-how during the school day, accompanied by the loss

of a much-publicized civilian crew member who was a teacher, makes the Challenger

disaster far more traumatic and memorable. The loss of the Challenger disrupted two

powerful and reliable symbols: the American space program and the safe, yet boring

routine of the school day. It was also televised as it was occurring, allowing millions to

witness the loss.

Narratives like the sheriff's report do not tell us in any kind of quantifiable

manner just how traumatic the Columbine shootings were. They do tell us, however, that

the Columbine school shooting event was traumatic enough to demand a nationally

released statement from a local law enforcement agency. Christopher Smit, following the

work of Umberto Eco, describes Columbine as an example of "hyperreality," a feeling of

involvement in the event created through the artifice of the media. Smit argues that the

breaking news coverage of Columbine communicated "the jolting urgency of chaos,"

which "foregrounds the reality of the viewer, and forces, in the moments immediately

after the tragedy, the viewer to contemplate his or her vulnerability" (Smit 93). The

Columbine attack, as a televised disaster which featured an attack on a supposedly safe

place, against children, mounted by children, was no longer just a local occurrence of

crime; it was a national disaster, felt viscerally by witnesses around the country.

The disruption of everyday life presented by Columbine is a very specific type of

disruption: a social drama. Victor Turner defines the term "social drama" in his book

From Ritual to Theatre as follows:

> . . . a social drama first manifests itself as the breach of a norm, the
> infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette in some public
> arena. This breach may be deliberately, even calculatedly, contrived by a
> person or party disposed to demonstrate or challenge entrenched authority
> – for example, the Boston Tea Party – or it may emerge from a scene of
> heated feelings. Once visible, it can hardly be revoked. Whatever the
> case, a mounting crisis follows, a momentous juncture or turning point in
> the relations between components of a social field – at which seeming
> peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible
> (Turner, *Ritual* 70).

Turner goes on to explain the stakes involved in such a challenge to the community

norm:

> Social dramas are in large measure political processes, that is, they invoke
> competition for scarce ends – power, dignity, prestige, honor, purity – by
> particular means and by the utilization of resources that are also scarce –
> goods, territory, money, men and women. Ends, means, and resources are
> caught up in an interdependent feedback process. Some kinds of
> resources, for example, land, money, may be converted into others, for
> instance, honor and prestige (which are simultaneously the needs sought).
> Or they may be employed to stigmatize rivals and deny them these ends
> (Turner, *Ritual* 71-72).

The disruption posed by social drama is thus a means to facilitate the accumulation and

exercise of power in a community.

In his book *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Turner observes that social drama

occurs in four phases. First there is a "Breach of regular, norm-governed social

relations" which

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occurs between persons or groups within the same system of social relations, be it a village, chiefdom, office, factory, political party or ward, church, university department, or any other perduring system or set or field of social interaction. Such a breach is signalized by the public, overt breach or deliberate nonfulfillment of some crucial norm regulating the intercourse of the parties (Turner, *Dramas* 38).

Following this breach, there is "a phase of mounting crisis,"

during which, unless the breach can be sealed off quickly within a limited area of social interaction, there is a tendency for the breach to widen and extend until it becomes coextensive with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the conflicting or antagonistic parties belong (Turner, *Dramas* 38).

As the crisis intensifies, the third phase occurs, where "certain adjustive and redressive 'mechanisms," informal or formal, institutionalized or ad hoc, are brought into action:

They may range from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual (Turner, *Dramas* 39).

Finally, the success or failure of the redressive phase results in either "the reintegration of the disturbed social group" or "the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties" (Turner, *Dramas* 41). This point marks the close of the social drama; the results of the drama might be quickly forgotten, but on the other hand they might fundamentally change the structure of the society in question.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici maintains, in her book *The Moro Morality Play*, that the strength of Turner's system lies in its understanding of how those involved in social drama self-consciously attempt to craft a response to the event:

The great advance of Turner's scheme of the social drama is that not only does it. . . assert and employ a posteriori the narrative analysis of events but it also regards the social actors *themselves* as proceeding through and attempting to direct certain events with, among other kinds of

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consciousness and motives (e.g., political, moral, economic), a theatrical
self-consciousness. The protagonists of the "social drama" respond to and
clothe themselves in their culture's stock of sedimented symbols,
archetypical characters, and rhetorical appeals (Wagner-Pacifici, *Moro* 7).

As Wagner-Pacifici points out, the actors in a social drama have a field of action, defined

by symbols, characters, and appeals, opened to them, and it is a field of action that allows

their emergence into social power, even if it is limited by the duration of the social crisis.

However, it is important to note that the field of action has a powerful determining logic

of its own; those who engage in its use can become locked into this internal logic, losing

their ability to act according to their own individual wishes. Turner notes that

> I tried to show in *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors* how Thomas Becket,
> after his antagonistic confrontation with both Henry II and the bench of
> Bishops at the Council of Northampton, seemed to have been almost
> "taken over," "possessed" by the action-paradigm provided by the *Via
> Crucis* in Christian belief and ritual, sealing his love-hate relationship with
> Henry in the conjoined image of martyr and martyrizer – and giving rise to
> a subsequent host of narratives and aesthetic dramas. . . Paradigms of this
> type, cultural root paradigms, so to speak, reach down to irreducible life
> stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary
> hold on what they sense to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life and
> death (Turner, *Ritual* 73).

Although the influence of these fields of action is powerful, actors in a social drama can

and often do exert a substantial level of creativity and innovation while working from the

base material provided by legend, as we will see with the Columbine shootings. These

innovations might in turn become part of the narrative/ action relationship, influencing

future actions, or they might be forgotten.

The Columbine Social Drama on the Local Level

The school shooting crisis, of which the Columbine High School shooting event became the most infamous manifestation, is usually portrayed as beginning in Pearl, Mississippi in 1997. On October 1, 1997, Luke Woodham killed his mother at home, then went to school, where he killed two students and wounded seven others. There are four additional shooting events generally cited as pre-Columbine school shootings. The Pearl shooting was followed by the Paducah, Kentucky shooting on December 2, 1997, when Michael Carneal killed three and wounded wounded five. On March 24, 1998, middle school students Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson killed five and wounded ten in Jonesboro Arkansas. Andrew Wurst killed a teacher, then wounded another teacher and two students on April 24, 1998 in Edinboro, Pennsylvania. Finally, Kip Kinkle killed his parents, then killed a student and wounded twenty-one others in Springfield, Oregon on March 21, 1998 (National School Safety Center 17-20).

It is important to note, however, that the symbolic background of the school shooting was established long before Luke Woodham's attack in Pearl. The schoolyard has long been associated with mundane acts of violence, especially schoolyard fights and encounters with bullies. School is also symbolically the target of acts of retributive violence; parodies of songs from my youth in northwest Ohio, for example, often targeted the school building (as in "Deck the halls with gasoline," the opening line of a parody of "Deck the Halls") or teachers (as in "Glory, Glory Hallelujah/ Teacher hit me with a ruler/ Hid behind the door with a loaded .44/ And the teacher don't live anymore," a

verse from a parody of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic") for acts of transgressive

student revenge. Works of fiction had also featured revenge-driven school shootings:

Stephen King's 1977 book *Rage*, for example, written under his Richard Bachman

pseudonym, and the 1995 film *The Basketball Diaries*. Reports of gang-related shootings

in inner-city schools were widely circulated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and adults had

committed schoolyard murders as well, exemplified by 26-year-old Patrick Purdy's 1989

assault rifle attack on an elementary school playground in California.

Through this combination of stories and actions, the concept of school shootings

was already firmly established by the time that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold embarked

on their murderous rampage on April 20, 1999. On the surface, Klebold and Harris's

killing spree appear to fit into the model of copycat crime developed by Linda Degh and

Andrew Vazsonyi, who wrote that

> People who imitate others and commit rationally unjustifiable and deviant
> deeds are known as copycats. The expression "copycat" (or perhaps
> "copycat-like behavior") occurs more frequently nowadays than ever
> before. As a lexical term, copycat is "one who slavishly imitates or adopts
> the practice of another," and it recently became a household term with
> news reporters and even with small-town sheriff deputies. . . Fashion acts
> not only as stimulant but also acts as simultaneous permission and
> absolution. Contagious violence, for example, in many cases may be
> connected with "inhibition reduction," which means that the model's
> aggression weakens the observer's inhibition against aggression – a very
> important phenomenon, valid also in other behaviors. When deeds sink to
> the level of banality, when a kind of "behavioral indifference" sets in, a
> moment of danger has indeed been reached (Degh and Vazsonyi 13-14).

This theory implies that copycat murder becomes denied meaning over time, that it

becomes merely rote repetition, a reflex action; greater separation from the original

source material for the legend, that is, the original script, results in this loss of meaning.

This theory does not, however, properly account for the Columbine shooting. Klebold and Harris were inspired and influenced by other shootings, but they still intended to send a message, or series of messages, with their shooting; as such, while we observers might not share the killers' reasoning process, Columbine is not actually "rationally unjustifiable"; it follows the logic of the social drama.

The local events preceding and following the Columbine shooting can be best understood as three interlocking social dramas; this section will discuss the first drama, which begins with the perception of Klebold and Harris as outsiders by their peers and ends with the shooting as the ultimate expression of schism. The following accounts of the events leading up to and following the shooting are drawn from newspaper reports, the aforementioned sheriff's report, and from the report generated by a state commission created by Colorado's governor. The exact origins of the Columbine shooting are matter of intense debate; a wide range of amateur and professional commentators have tried to blame the shooting on a variety of factors, from over-prescription of psychiatric drugs to the decline of public Christianity in the United States. The social drama model, however, leads us towards a study of the structure of the event and away from attempts to create an all-encompassing explanation.

The breach that marks the first phase of the Columbine social drama cannot be reduced to a single, obvious trigger event, unlike most of the social dramas studied by folklorists and other culture scholars. It appears that the "regular, norm-governed social relations" referred to by Turner were disrupted in a series of lesser breaches, none of which were serious enough to trigger the event were they to have occurred alone. Many

sources interviewed after the shooting by journalists maintain that the breach phase was the perception that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were weird or different; Klebold and Harris were perceived as deviants, either as outcasts, or homosexuals, or both, and this allegedly lead to them becoming targets for bullies. A post-shooting statement attributed to Evan Todd, a football player wounded in the shooting, nebulously referring to either Klebold and Harris or their supposed friends in the "Trenchcoat Mafia" clique, seems to confirm this:

> Columbine is a good, clean place except for those rejects. . . Most kids didn't want them there. They were into witchcraft. They were into voodoo dolls. Sure, we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each other's private parts. If you want to get rid of somebody, usually you tease them. So the whole school would call them homos, and when they did something sick, we'd tell them, "You're sick and that's wrong" (Gibbs and Roche 50-51).

Exactly how much of this applies to Klebold and Harris in particular and how much of it is inflated by the retroactive anger of being made a target is unclear. In any event, whether or not these accounts of bullying and teasing are objectively true is immaterial at this point; what is important, however, is that Klebold and Harris perceived a lack of the social respect or status that they felt was due to them. In the video tape the two made prior to the attack, Harris comments, "Isn't it fun to get the respect that we're going to deserve?" and laments that "People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts" (Gibbs and Roche 44). Harris's web site was filled with vicious assaults on people he sees as falsely claiming elevated social status, proclaiming that he loves it when a "rich ass stuck up piece of shit white trash person" crashes an expensive automobile and denouncing his sometimes-friend Brooks Brown as a pathological liar who specifically

tells elaborate lies to impress other people. Regardless of how this attitude developed for Klebold and Harris, the desire for increased social status was evident in many of their statements and actions.

The crisis/ escalation phase of the pre-attack social drama manifests in a variety of actions undertaken by the two boys, but a few of these actions stick out for their relationship to the later shooting spree. Harris and Klebold allegedly made a video for a class the previous autumn in which they pretended to kill students at the school. A student in the class claimed that the video "represented what happened . . . they had their friends pretend to be the jocks, and they pretended to be the gunmen shooting them. It was disturbing to everyone who saw it" (Lindsay and Scanlon). Apparently they had wanted to show the film beyond the class, but weren't allowed due to the film's violent content. The second point of escalation came with Harris's AOL web site; it served as a semi-public outlet for a series of rants arranged under the title of "YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE!!?" among other displays of anger. He makes multiple references to his readiness to commit violence and clearly indicates his possession of explosives. A third incident occurred when Harris threatened the aforementioned Brooks Brown and told him to read his web site. Brown and his parents went to the sheriff to complain, maintaining that Brown's life was in danger. The sheriff's office mounted some level of investigation as a result, but clearly wasn't overly involved in the case (Gibbs and Roche 46). A psychologist would likely classify these acts as histrionic behavior, behavior specifically designed to grab attention; in any case, these acts constitute the attempts made by Klebold and Harris to make their feelings of anger and dispossession known.

The Browns' consultation with the sheriff's office was one of a series of

redressive measures invoked to control the situation, although it was of limited

effectiveness. A similar legal inquiry was undertaken when Klebold and Harris were

caught breaking into an automobile and stealing tools in 1998; the juvenile authorities

involved in investigating the case, however, saw the boys as intelligent and possessing

great potential, much to the dismay of journalists covering the Columbine shooting a year

later (Imse, Bartels, and Foster). Legal redressive measures were not the only attempts

made to resolve the mounting crisis; Harris also made an attempt to join the Marine

Corps only a few weeks before the shooting. Originally it was reported that Harris's

rejection from the Marines was a factor in the shooting; it turns out, however, that he

never found out about his ineligibility for enlistment (Commission 18). Why Harris went

ahead with the shooting before hearing from the Marines is an open question, but the fact

that he went to the trouble of trying to enlist in the first place indicates that it was an

alternative option to which he was giving at least some consideration.

The fourth phase in this initial social drama is a phase finalizing schism and the

disintegration of social ties. When Klebold and Harris started killing their classmates,

there was no return to the world of ordinary social relations. In the video the two filmed

before the shooting, they emphasize that they planned their attack to be as disruptive and

traumatic as possible, envisioning that it will be the start of a "revolution" and that it will

give those who survive "flashbacks" (Gibbs and Roche 42). Not only did they plan to

destroy the current system of social relations of Columbine and the local community,

they planned to destroy themselves in the process; the video tape, made five days before

the shooting, is a suicide note, an attempt to explain their actions made with the full

knowledge that they wouldn't be alive to explain first-hand. A more complete way of

separating from a particular social world would be difficult to imagine.

The Columbine Social Drama on the Community and State Level

The end of the first drama, however, marks the beginning of a second social

drama. The shooting, as intended, marks a spectacular breach of normative behavior.

The "sunny spring day" referred to by the sheriff's report is clearly not expected by

anyone to become a bloodbath. In fact, the sheriff's report goes to great lengths to

explain that some of the victims didn't even realize that the shooting was a breach until

well after it had already begun:

> It is also critical to note that when many of the Columbine students heard
> what sounded like pop guns coming from outside the cafeteria during the
> first lunch period, they thought that senior prank day had come. School-
> wide pranks initiated by graduating seniors are a tradition throughout the
> United States, and up to that point Columbine's seniors, ready to graduate
> in just four weeks, had not participated in any such activity. It seemed
> right to students who heard the first few shots that, as it was toward the
> end of the school year, prank day was finally upon them. But it wasn't a
> prank. Not when two hate-filled students, heavily armed with firearms
> and bombs, chose April 20, 1999, as the day to attack and kill students and
> faculty at their school (Sheriff).

The report makes it clear, and even makes it a "critical" point, that Klebold and Harris

have not only violated the usual school day and the lives of their victims, but they have

also violated a traditional, safe activity of high school students. In fact, the students'

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expectation of "senior prank day" is implied to have made the students even more

susceptible to the attack. The mention that Klebold and Harris were "hate-filled" that day

is also designed to distance them from the harmless prank tradition; if ordinary pranks are

motivated out of a sense of community and celebration, then Klebold and Harris's

"prank" is motivated out of a hatred of that community. Again, the violation of ordinary

expectations and behaviors is the focus.

The crisis phase occurred in the immediate reaction to the Columbine shooting;

the police, SWAT teams, firefighters, rescue workers, journalists, and parents swarmed to

the scene to deal with the violent breach of norms perpetrated by Klebold and Harris.

The sheriff's department had to evaluate the situation and determine how best to contain

it. This is the point at which the Columbine attack becomes a news event and a national

social drama, but this increasing complexity will be the subject matter of the rest of my

dissertation. In any event, the school becomes the focus of a makeshift camp of a variety

of cultural authorities dedicated to dealing with the aftermath of the shooting, and the

camp remains for days afterward as these authorities attempt to explain what transpired.

The redressive phase in this case consists of a series of attempts to bring about

explanation or healing that occurred in the year following the shooting. The media camp

formed around Columbine was a major initial part of this phase, putting out a tremendous

volume of news stories dealing with the Columbine shooting from a variety of angles.

News articles argued the killers' motivation, the events that transpired in the school

during the shooting, and the amount of blame for the event that should be attributed to the

killers' parents, the school administration, the student body, the sheriff's department, or

American culture in general. The sheriff's department occasionally announced its latest

findings as well, providing more ammunition for the articles. Local churches also held

services to help in the healing process. Perhaps the most controversial redressive act that

occurred, and one that perhaps predicted how difficult this event was going to be to

overcome, was the display of fifteen crosses on a hill near Columbine a week after the

shooting. The crosses represented twelve students, one teacher, and Klebold and Harris.

The crosses for the shooters proved quite controversial; in fact, on April 30th, Brian

Rohrbough, the father of one of the murdered students, cut down the crosses representing

Klebold and Harris, declaring that "I don't think any thinking person in this country is

going to going to disagree with me. . . We never ever honor a murderer in the same place

as the memorial for his victims" (Bartels and Bunn). The insistence that Klebold and

Harris be kept separate from their victims even after death reinforces the schism that they

actively sought, yet also adds another level of conflict to the post-shooting environment;

what was intended as a marker of healing becomes another contested site.

The resolution stage of this second social drama is perhaps the trickiest of the

phases to discuss and analyze; the post-shooting drama has yet to reach either a decisive

resolution or a schism point, unlike the drama which spawned it. The first attempt at a

public resolution ceremony took place on the first day of school for Columbine High

School in August 1999. Columbine held a "Take Back Our School" rally; the students

wore shirts displaying the slogan "We Are Columbine" and a group of parents and other

locals formed a human chain around the school. As a symbol that the mourning period

for the tragedy had ended, the school's flag was hoisted from its half-mast position

(where it had been since April 20th) to the top of the mast (Scanlon). Video clips of the

rally show on the evening news displayed a rally that looked and sounded like any other

school's pre-homecoming pep rally; the school's "We Are Columbine" chant is identical

to the "We Are Maumee" chant encouraged at my own high school to raise spirit for

sporting events. *The Rocky Mountain News* noted that at least one local family opposed

the tone of the rally: the Rohrbough family which previously attracted public attention

when Brian Rohrbough cut down the memorial crosses for Klebold and Harris. The

News article states that

> Dan Rohrbough's father, mother and stepfather all said they were incensed
> that school officials did nothing to pay homage to the 13 murder victims
> of gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. "Today, when they had this
> rally, they didn't even mention these kids," said Rich Petrone, the step-
> father of Rohrbough. "That's a slap in the face" (Vaughan).

While a spokesperson for the school district is quoted as saying that "Today, the focus

was on getting back to school" and claims that other events would be held to honor the

shooting victims later in the year, the Rohrboughs saw the omission of the victims from

the ceremony as an attempt to "sweep [the shooting] under the rug." Brian Rohrbough is

quoted as saying, "My only child was murdered here. . . I'm very worried that what

happened here is going to happen again. I hope I'm wrong" (Vaughan). Rohrbough's

doubts indicate a deep level of distrust of these community healing efforts, a level of

distrust that continues even three years after the shooting.

One notable dynamic visible in the "Take Back Our School" rally was the

repeated exorcism of Klebold and Harris from the Columbine community: a notable feat,

considering the fact that the shootings or the perpetrators were never mentioned.

Columbine was their school as well, but it becomes transformed into "Our School," turning what was once an inside threat into an outside threat. The survivors are the true Columbine, in this view. *The Rocky Mountain News* article covering the rally, however, includes a few voices of dissent. One Jade Gagne is quoted as saying, regarding the school's new security system, "It feels like a prison in there. . . I think it's stupid -- a waste of taxpayers' money. Eric and Dylan had IDs last year. They could have gotten in." Another student, Gary Morris, states that "I admit I'm shell shocked . . . Now, I wonder if the kid next to me is capable of this, shooting people" (Scanlon). These quotes indicate that the attempt to externalize the threat wasn't completely successful; the fear is that the new, improved Columbine is still capable of creating monsters.

The Franklin County sheriff's office made the next major attempt at bringing closure to the shootings when it issued its report on the event in May 2000. The introductory letter to the report states that

> Because the shootings ravaged many lives, we feel an obligation, in the interest of public safety, to document the final moments of the deceased and provide the public with a shared understanding of that day. This report explains how the crime was planned and committed. It also describes the work of those who answered the call for help (Sheriff).

The report makes it clear that it is an attempt to produce a master narrative of the shooting (that is, produce a "shared understanding"); the report was produced in a chaotic legal environment, with a series of lawsuits filed by the parents and families of those killed and injured in the shootings directed at the parents of Klebold and Harris, the school system, and the sheriff's department itself for a variety of reasons. The report acknowledges that although the investigation "approached conclusion in January 2000,

the case remains 'open' in the event new information comes to light" (Sheriff); this is an interesting rhetorical move, allowing the appearance of acknowledging the possibility of other narratives of the shooting while still asserting the power and accuracy of the report being presented. The sheriff's report denies many of the rumors floating through the community following the shooting, asserting that Klebold and Harris were the only two shooters involved (dispelling rumors of a third shooter), that all of the victims were shot by Klebold and Harris (denying the belief that Daniel Rohrbough was killed by police bullets), and that the popularly believed narrative of Cassie Bernall's martyrdom never happened (more on this later in the dissertation). The report sparked protest from some of the victim's families and attorneys; one attorney, Jim Rouse, observed that

> I think it's a slick Madison Avenue promotional campaign for the sheriff's department. . . Obviously, they're trying to make it look as difficult as possible, and themselves as heroic as possible. I think it's interesting what's not in the report (Vaughan and Massaro).

Critics of the report note that it omits the Browns' complaint to the sheriff's office and office's lack of response to that complaint, arguably tainting the report's claim to explain "how the crime was planned." The sheriff's report has remained a site of controversy since its release, especially, and not surprisingly, in the lawsuits targeting the sheriff's department over various claims of incompetence and cover-up.

A second attempt at an authoritative report was issued by the Columbine Review Commission created by Colorado governor Bill Owens a year later in May 2001. The state-backed commission issued its report with a focus on investigating the law enforcement and rescue team responses to the shooting and recommending future improvements:

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> Since the Columbine High School event left so many important questions to be answered, questions that would not be answered if the Columbine tragedy were simply relegated to the archives of history, Governor Owens entrusted the Commission with the responsibility to identify the lessons that Columbine taught. It could not bring back to life or physical wholeness any of the victims of Klebold's and Harris's depredations. But the Commission's efforts and the disbursement of state funds would be well expended if even one life could be saved by effective law enforcement and rescue responses to a future emergency like Columbine (Commission iv).

The commission reaches beyond the limits of an explanatory model (like the sheriff's report) and attempts to bring closure by suggesting measures to prevent loss of life in subsequent crisis events. It does, however, note that Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone had refused to produce key evidence for the commission, leaving the door open for further action against the Jefferson County authorities.

More recently, in March of 2002, the Colorado state legislature turned down a request for another state-funded inquiry into the Jefferson County Sheriff's emergency response to the crime scene and conduct during the Columbine investigation. According to the *Denver Post*,

> "I'm not going to turn my back on the Columbine community," said Rep. Don Lee, R-Littleton, whose district includes Columbine High School. "I'm going to go at it even harder." Lee and family members of the victims wanted to launch a commission with subpoena power to look into a possible coverup by law enforcement authorities during their investigation of the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history (Seibert).

The article notes that Lee is planning another attempt to propose a state investigation into the killings. Another representative from the Littleton area, John Stengel, is quoted as opposing the proposed investigation, saying that "[The families] want answers to why their kids were killed. . . I don't know. Will there ever be an answer to that question?

Why is there evil in the world? This is not the body to answer that" (Seibert). This response to the call for a new investigation is an interesting strategy. The families calling for the investigation are justifying this call by invoking the specter of a "coverup" on the part of the sheriff's department; Stengel deflects this claim by declaring that a new state investigation would only be discussing the motivation of Klebold and Harris and the nebulous question of why school shootings occur. This statement implies that the only reason for the continued public attention to Sheriff Stone and his investigation is an irrational desire on the part of the opposing parties to get answers to an unanswerable, metaphysical question. In any event, the conflict within the Littleton area continues; even five years after the shooting there is no sign of an ultimate end to the fighting within the community, and each report that attempts to be the last word on the shooting only seems to stir up more trouble.

This ongoing local and state social drama is only a part of the legacy of the Columbine school shooting, however. When news organizations started broadcasting the news about the attack on the school, a national crisis began to be unfolded in which the actual events at Columbine became important not so much on the material level as on the symbolic level. While the Littleton community still shows its own rifts and schisms over the event, the study of the reactions of a large, heterogeneous national public culture to the news of the shootings launches us into a whole new series of conflicting meanings and narratives**.**

The Columbine Social Drama on the National Level

It is the third social drama generated by the Columbine shootings that will be the focus of the rest of this dissertation. Although Turner originally conceived of the social drama as an event in relatively small communities, many scholars have explored the applicability of the social drama to conflicts in industrial, Western societies, especially to conflicts marked by spectacular violence. Robin Wagner-Pacifici applies the social drama model to the terrorist kidnapping of Italian politician Aldo Moro in 1978 (Wagner-Pacifici 1), and Dorothy Noyes uses social drama to frame the suicide of French politician Pierre Beregovoy in 1993 (Noyes 210). In both of these events, the actors in the social drama were performing for a national audience, and this is certainly true of Klebold and Harris, whose pre-shooting video indicates that they had considered the national effects of their activities; Harris claims that, through the attack, "We're going to start a revolution," and Klebold predicts that "Directors will be fighting over this story" (Gibbs and Roche 42). It is important to note, however, that the shooters' motivations were not known to the public until the release of the pre-shooting tape in December 1999; in the long delay between the shooting and the release of the tape, the shooters' intentions are lost, and the shootings themselves become a great unknown, inviting a wide range of competing explanatory attempts.

The Columbine shootings challenged the widely held belief that schools in America were safe places immune to spectacular acts of murder; this violation formed the breach phase of the national social drama. The national social drama, however, differs

from the local and state Columbine social dramas in that a substantial number of its participants, ordinary citizens, media representatives, politicians, and bureaucrats, sought to indefinitely extend the crisis period of the social drama. The key to understanding this strategy is Turner's conception of liminality in conjunction with social drama.

Liminality is what Turner calls the special period of time during a social drama when ordinary time is suspended:

> This term, literally "being-on-a-threshold," means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status. Since liminal time is not controlled by the clock it is a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen (Turner, "Frame" 33).

The liminal period that the social drama creates is considered by Turner's model to be relatively short-lived and temporary, ending in a new normal period defined either by schism or reconciliation. The national public, governmental, and media reaction to Columbine, however, presents an alternate interpretation of social drama and liminality. It was the goal of many of the interpreters of Columbine to extend the crisis feeling generated by Columbine as long as possible. Instead of a bounded event, Columbine became just one symbolic part of a wider crisis of school shootings; the crisis didn't end with the discovery of the deaths of Klebold and Harris, the beginning of the new Columbine school year, the issuing of the Jefferson County sheriff's report, the publication of the findings of the Colorado governor's commission, or any other acts that, for those more directly involved in the shooting, were intended to produce authoritative accounts of what happened on April 20, 1999. The crisis continued with the Santee shooting and even with the reports of foiled school shootings plots around the country.

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The feeling of crisis and opened possibilities during this liminal period was used as a rhetorical device to encourage a wide range of possible solutions to the ultimate, real cause of the shooting, thus serving a wide range of motives in the hands of various advocates: the longer the liminal period, the wider the range of solutions that could attempt to secure a lasting role in the post-liminal period and the more support that those suggested solutions could muster in order to become a part of the post-social drama new conception of normalcy.

This project will primarily discuss the various ways that the Columbine shootings were portrayed as an ongoing crisis and the various proposed solutions that were advanced in this crisis period. In particular, this project will examine various individuals and organizations that attempted to attain or expand status as experts through their simultaneous expansion of and engagement with the post-Columbine school shooting crisis.

Discussion of Documents Used as Initial Source Material

In my attempts to reconstruct the events of the Columbine shootings in order to study them as a social drama, I consulted two different types of documents. Most of the information I gathered was collected from corporate print media sources (available both in print and online), but I also consulted official government documents: the sheriff's report (on the county level) and the Colorado governor's commission report (on the state level). Here I will discuss each of these two classes of documents and the differing

perspectives that these document types represent; more types of documents will be featured later in this study, but these two types currently warrant special attention, as their differences present an epistemological problem that threatens the social drama narrative I have constructed, or for that matter any other narrative constructed attempting to authoritatively explain the events that led up to and transpired during the attack on Columbine High School.

In much the same way that I used these documents to assemble a history of the Columbine shooting, many of the documents consulted also attempt to establish a history of the event. Some of the attempts at history creation are less authoritative than others; for example, the initial news reports of the killings were highly speculative and acknowledged their lack of definitive knowledge, while the sheriff's report claimed to be the definitive account of what happened, assembled carefully after weighing the likeliness of multiple eye-witness accounts. As time passes and more information about the shootings becomes available, the accounts become more and more assertive in their attempts to establish themselves as the history of the event. There is a point at which information about the event stops being produced, and then the existing information begins to recede and become harder to access; at this point, history becomes even more important as the authoritative account of what happened.

My use of the term "history" here is derived from Lynch and Bogen's study of the Iran-Contra hearings, *The Spectacle of History*. They define "conventional historical writing" as

> the routine, rather plain organization that forms the basis of most histories;
> an organization of dates, times, and ordinary methods of reasoning and

> writing about past events that is at best indifferent to debates and differences among professional historians. . . the narrative is written in an anonymous voice. It is stated as a factual account, without the disclaimers, qualifications, and partial recollections that are characteristic of particular witnesses' testimonies. It provides a linear chronology of events, and – unlike testimony – no explicit standpoint is mentioned from which the narrator came to see or know about the described events (Lynch and Bogen 58-9).

While the various, and very controversial, explanatory narratives created regarding the shooting will become the focus of this project later, right now we are looking at attempts to establish the "facts" of the case, the bare-bones chronology of what happened and in what order. This history is, of course, a construction; while the voice adopted in conventional historical writing attempts to appear objective and definitive, it is important to note that, as Lynch and Bogen discovered in their investigation, this voice is vulnerable to attack and can be successfully challenged. We can see such challenges, some deliberate and some not, in the differences found between the historical accounts discussed below.

The print media accounts I consulted could be grouped into local (or at least in-state) sources and national sources. The local news sources were the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post*; although both are available to the rest of the country (and to me, based in Ohio) via the magic of the World Wide Web, they are products primarily designed to serve the needs of a specific region, Denver and its surroundings, and in this they are like any other regional newspapers in the country. Both of these papers were honored with Pulitzer Prizes for their coverage of the Columbine shootings, the *News* for its photojournalism and the *Post* for its breaking news coverage. The fact that both publications received Pulitzers indicates the degree to which these local publications

affected the media coverage that the rest of the country gave to the shootings. Both

magazines also currently maintain archives of their articles covering the shootings

(available on their respective websites), and both have continued covering new

developments in the legal and legislative investigations of the shootings, the ongoing

recovery of the victims and their families, and the never-ending legal struggles of all

parties involved. A few seconds of link-following on the Internet also revealed to me that

the two publications are owned by the same parent company, the Denver Newspaper

Agency.

The national publication that I consulted for information for the social drama

argument was the news magazine *Time*. It does not significantly differ from the accounts

offered by the Denver area media except in the length and intensity of its coverage; the

Denver papers dedicated more articles to the event and have continued following the

story to the present, while *Time* covered the shooting for a while after it initially

occurred, then returned to the issue with the article discussing the release of the Klebold

and Harris video tapes over a year later.

The media attempts to establish the events of the day range from loose attempts to

relate that a shooting occurring, that it happened at Columbine High School, and that

there were X many killed and Y many injured to elaborate maps and timelines that try to

account for every significant event of the shooting spree. The timelines are a very

interesting rhetorical move, as they avoid the possible pitfalls of a written historical

account and attempt to use the persuasive power of the list and the itinerary; they remove

all external, subjective-sounding verbal fluff and literally reduce the account to a list of

unassailable-sounding "facts." They also add an aura of accuracy and precision to the account, listing events minute by minute. The map uses the immutable fact of the school's spatial layout as a backdrop; the otherwise abstract-seeming conjectures are tied to specific, concrete points on the map, giving them added substance.

The second group of documents I used consisted of the two government documents, the sheriff's report and the governor's commission report. These documents, issued in May 2000 and May 2001 respectively, have the advantage of distance over the journalistic documents discussed previously. Their claims to authority also benefit from being the result of investigations by government agencies; the sheriff's report is the product of a law enforcement investigation, and the governor's report is the product of a legislative investigation. That said, both have been subject to attack on the grounds that the histories they present are covering up the incompetence of various Littleton authorities (especially the Jefferson County sheriff's office).

The government reports rely on some of the same persuasive techniques that the media accounts of the shootings used to establish their histories as authentic and trustworthy; the sheriff's report in particular relies heavily on the most detailed timeline created to date and a series of elaborate, color maps purporting to detail the exact location of the shooters and victims to present its version of events, much as the print media sources did earlier. The reports make no references to individual witnesses or to the clues that led them to their histories; they state the events without reference to how the fact was established for the investigators, as is common in history-establishing writing as discussed by Lynch and Bogen.

There are discrepancies between the histories created by media documents and the

histories created by government documents. An excellent example of one of these

discrepancies is the account of Cassie Bernall's death; Bernall was one of the students

killed by Klebold and Harris in Columbine High School's library. The following excerpt,

drawn from a *Rocky Mountain News* article written by Carla Crowder, is a typical media

account of Bernall's murder, printed on April 23, 1999:

> A Columbine killer pointed his gun at Cassie Bernall and asked her the
> life-or-death question: "Do you believe in God?" She paused. The gun
> was still there. "Yes, I believe in God," she said. That was the last thing
> this 17-year-old Christian would ever say. The gunmen asked her "Why?"
> She had no time to answer before she was shot to death (Crowder).

While more obviously value-laden than stripped-down timelines or general descriptions

detailing the events of the shootings, this account still has the feel of history to it. When

witnesses are talked to later in the article, they are quoted regarding their reactions to

Bernall's action, not quoted to document their testimony of what they did, in fact,

witness. The above account is treated as a certain, accurate version of what transpired

before Bernall was killed; the only uncertainty is in exactly who her murderer was, but

the label "a Columbine killer" compensates for that uncertainty well enough.

Versions of this story became the accepted media version of Cassie Bernall's

death. The veracity of the story was not questioned by any major news organization;

only *Salon*, an online magazine, printed any challenge to the basic facts of this account,

pointing out that no witnesses had actually seen Cassie say anything of the sort, and also

pointing out that one of the survivors of the library, Valeen Schnurr, claimed to be the

one who had been asked the "Do you believe" question (Cullen). This lack of major

news attention to challenges of the Bernall martyr narrative continued, in spite of the fact

that the family of Rachel Scott, one of the other murdered students, claimed that she had

also been presented with the "Do you believe" question and had been martyred as the

result of her answer.

This changed with the release of the sheriff's report in May 2000. The sheriff's

report's account of Cassie Bernall's death is very short and mentions nothing resembling

the vivid picture established by the martyrdom history:

> Harris walked over to table 19 where he bent down and saw two
> frightened girls. He slapped the table twice, said "Peek-a-boo," and fired,
> killing Cassie Bernall. After shooting Cassie, Harris made a comment
> about hitting himself in the face. Investigators believe Harris broke his
> nose as a result of the "kick" from the shotgun when he bent to fire under
> the table (Sheriff).

As much space is dedicated to accounting for Harris's comparatively-unimportant broken

nose as is taken up by the account of Bernall's death. Bernall's martyrdom story is not

directly acknowledged, but it is dismissed by omission. This omission is deliberate; the

report later describes Valeen Schnurr's shooting, paying special attention to the "Do you

believe" exchange: "Valeen, who was critically hurt, began to cry, "Oh God, help me."

Klebold, who had shot her, came back and taunted her about her belief in God. He then

walked away" (Sheriff). The report also specifically fixes the identities of Bernall's killer

(Harris) and Schnurr's assailant (Klebold); this level of detail is an important part of the

report's assertion of its own version of history, as it fills in the gaps that the previous

media accounts couldn't or didn't fill in.   The report goes so far in its attempts to

solidify its narrative as the authoritative story of what happened as to include a section

discussing the "common perceptions and misperceptions" of the witnesses to the

shootings, noting the various inconsistencies in witness accounts and going so far as to

directly discount media accounts of the shootings and witnesses who agreed with the

media versions of events, observing that

> It was evident that the media had an impact on witness' (sic) statements.
> Students who would watch or read coverage of the Columbine shootings
> and make conclusions based on some of the impressions presented by the
> media rather than from their own perceptions. Those problems usually
> were rectified during the interviews (Sheriff).

In spite of this last assurance that these problems "were rectified during the interviews,"

the report, written as history, omits this process of comparison, contrast, and truth-finding

and only presents the results of the process. Although this might have been done as an

attempt to make the report sound unassailable and to stop the belief in alternate versions

of the events, it might very well have contributed to the doubts of the opponents of the

report.

While the sheriff's report was crafted as a counter-history to the history

established by the news media, in many ways the governor's commission report is a

counter-history to the sheriff's report. In fact, the commission ultimately portrays Sheriff

John Stone's Jefferson County Sheriff's Office as the absence of history, a conscious

attempt to resist the creation of an authoritative history to put the questions of the

Columbine shootings to rest. The commission's report appears to be exceptionally

meticulous; this perception is aided by the numerous footnotes appearing throughout the

narrative, documenting sources of information and even discussing some of the

controversies of the record in depth. In spite of this, the report interrupts its own story to

point out the non-compliance of Sheriff Stone at several points. In the introduction to the

document, the commission observes that it "was denied the privilege of interviewing

Sheriff Stone and his deputies, even though Sheriff Stone had agreed to appear before the

Commission on three separate occasions" (Commission viii). This relatively benign

statement gives way to a much more forceful accusation against the sheriff later on in the

report:

> Throughout the course of the Commission's work, Sheriff Stone and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office have been singularly uncooperative in assisting the Commission in obtaining the factual information it required, and thereby forced the Commission to acquire its facts through a series of hearings and in the course of a lengthy investigation. In short, the Commission has been unable to garner significant testimony and other relevant data from Sheriff Stone and the Sheriff's Office, the principal law enforcement agency in Jefferson County. When the Governor assigned the Commission its duties, he did not anticipate that information would be withheld which would assist the Commission in completing an accurate and analytical review of the events at Columbine on April 20, 1999, so that the requested recommendations could be made to the Governor (Commission 7-8).

The sheriff's refusal to cooperate is thus framed as an attack on history itself; without the

sheriff's info, the commission claimed to be severely hampered. The "accurate and

analytical review" promised by the commission, the history that all parties could agree to

as a basis for future action, was put at risk, and as the report repeatedly mentions the

sheriff's absence from the record, it is clear that this was a major frustration for the

commission members.

The sheriff's refusal to cooperate with the commission is damaging to far more

than the specific history that the commission wanted to assemble; it marks a movement

that makes the assembly of conventional historical narrative next to impossible. This

becomes apparent in the commission's explanation for the sheriff's non-cooperation:

Although data bearing on the assaults perpetrated by Klebold and Harris at Columbine High School, including the pre-massacre tapes obtained by the Sheriff's Office during its later investigations, were made available to TIME Magazine, local news media and other groups and individuals, Sheriff John Stone repeatedly denied the Commission access to those materials, on the ground that civil litigation was pending against the sheriff and other Jefferson County officials, commenced by the victims and their families; it has been asserted that several of the defendants would be prejudiced in the course of that litigation were they to provide the data sought by the Commission (Commission 7).

The ultimate threat to history assembly in this case is litigation; the multiple lawsuits filed against Stone and his office forced his refusal to cooperate with the commission, on the grounds that information shared with the Commission would weaken their subsequent court cases.

It is in this never ending sea of lawsuits and counter-lawsuits that all attempts to establish the events that happened at Columbine end. The ideal state of the historian, access to all available information to create a binding, accurate master narrative, is a condition that cannot be reached in this event, if it can even be reached in less volatile environments. This leaves the academic or scientific study of Columbine in an epistemological bind; one is either left with information filtered by potentially suspect sources or left with no information at all. A greater epistemological problem is presented by the fact that the primary investigating body, the agency responsible for the collection and examination of physical evidence and eye-witness testimony, is itself under fire for being evasive, or even more damaging, for being incompetent. This is the problem posed by the defense in the O. J. Simpson trial or the widespread legal criticism of crime lab testimony in the late 1990s; if the primary source of information is incompetent or corrupt, how can the rest of us determine what is really true? The sheriff report makes

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this even more destructive by criticizing the accuracy of witness testimony – for the people who were there and survived, even their own perceptions of the event can't be trusted.

It is for this reason that I now turn from the study of the events that occurred at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 and focus exclusively on the cultural reaction to these events. We might be incapable of reaching truly final conclusions as to who killed whom and for precisely what reasons, but the arguments raging over the events are very enlightening; they reveal some of the discourses combining and colliding in people's attempts to explain what happened and use the shootings as a means of extending social power and cultural authority.

Chapter Two will examine the lay and media reaction to the Columbine shootings, specifically focusing on the various explanatory theories that were advanced in following. These theories created the field of action that guided the actions both advocated and eventually taken as solutions to the school shooting problem.

Chapter Three will examine the use of the Columbine shootings as a symbol to support policy change in legislative bodies and school boards. Some proposed solutions succeeded in becoming the basis of new legislation and school board policy, while others made only limited ideological gains that did not translate into real action; the theory of agenda-setting will be used to help explain this process.

Chapter Four will focus on the changes that government organizations, specifically the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, and the Department of Education, made in order to promote themselves and their analytical frameworks as

solutions to the school shooting crisis. Each organization adapted existing analytical

tools and discourses to address this crisis, and each attempted to establish itself as an

authoritative voice to guide the reactions of local communities.

Chapter Five will discuss three specific non-government experts who adapted pre-

Columbine theories and arguments to the post-Columbine situation. Each portrays school

shootings as being the result of a malignant counterculture, and each subsequently calls

for a return to certain core cultural values in order to bring the crisis to close.

Chapter Six will discuss three more experts, each of whom attempts to reframe

the post-Columbine problem. Instead of focusing on the risk of future school shootings

as a pressing, all-important problem, these experts portray the public's overreaction to

school shootings as the real crisis.

Chapter Seven will present the argument that the school shooting crisis is at an

end. Although school shootings and school violence have continued to occur, a new

crisis has surpassed the rhetorical power of the school shooting: the post-September 11,

2001 war on terror.

Conclusion

Like many of the experts and commentators I discuss in this work, I, too, have a

stake involved in the discussion of Columbine. As a longtime player of the fantasy role-

playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* and a relatively new member of the goth scene (in 1999), many of the arguments put forward to explain why the Columbine shootings occurred struck me as ludicrous at best and dangerous at their worst. Inspired by my experience with *D&D*, I had previously written a paper about police cult experts and their performance and utilization of beliefs about Satanism in order to advance their arguments and careers; concerned that the misconceptions of the past were returning, I decided to apply the same analytical framework to the then-burgeoning expert culture forming to shape and control the public's perceptions of the Columbine shootings.

This project relies on a unique perspective that combines my first-hand experience of stigmatized youth culture with my academic training as a cultural studies scholar and folklorist. As such, it is not an attempt to advocate yet another causal narrative that attempts to explain why Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold decided to kill thirteen people and themselves at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. I maintain instead that causal narratives of the shootings are inevitably rooted in power, and I examine how the shootings were portrayed and how these portrayals were subsequently used as a means for expanding and exerting political and social influence. Post-Columbine, school shootings became regarded as a symbol of the normal state of education in the United States, a sign of impending decay and doom for all of the nation's children, in spite of being incredibly rare events occurring in the midst of a general decline in school violence. The study of the wide variety of means by which the deaths of fifteen people were transformed into a national prophecy holds far wider importance

than attempts to account for and solve the supposed school shooting crisis; it provides an

important window into how Americans interpret and react to their world.

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CHAPTER TWO

CAUSAL THEORIES OF COLUMBINE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Participants in a social drama manipulate a field of preexisting cultural images, beliefs, and characterization, sometimes staying within the restricting confines of this field, sometimes using this field as a groundwork to support innovation, as discussed by Turner and Wagner-Pacifici. The national social drama created by Columbine consisted of a struggle to explain Columbine and, through this explanation, generate, advocate, and implement various means of preventing expected future school shootings. This chapter will examine the various causal theories attempting to account for the Columbine shootings that were reported in the media and posited by private citizens; these theories serve as the field of action influencing and in turn being influenced the later groups, policy-makers, government organizations, and private experts, discussed in this project.

Since events like the Columbine shootings enter into the media experience, memory, and everyday lives of ordinary citizens, citizens adopt or develop a wide variety of opinions about such events, determining causality, assigning blame, and calling for

future action. Some of these opinions are inspired by the media; others are influenced by government statements; others are shaped by religious and cultural belief; most are shaped by some combination of these factors.

I am not using the term "theory" in its usual humanities-centered academic sense, that is, as a unified set of common interests, inquiries, and approached to a problem or test, generally advocated and applied by specialized experts. A theory for the purposes of my argument here consists of a proposition or series of propositions of causality that are expressed verbally or in writing. The verbally expressed theories dealt with here have been filtered though media reporting; while I heard many verbally-expressed theories first-hand in the year or so following the shooting, these have become progressively harder to collect with any regularity as the passions regarding Columbine have gradually been redirected to other important issues. The written theories sampled here include both products of edited publications and self-published internet writings. Many of these writings were produced in the first push of concern immediately after Columbine, serving effectively as a time capsule of an opinion held at the time of writing. Some of the theories are exceptionally detailed and developed; many fit the shootings into a detailed narrative linking even larger issues to the school shooting crisis. Others, however, are direct, relatively unembellished statements. All varieties of theory, whether developed into narratives or not, are equally important to my arguments.

In their study of causal explanations of the Challenger disaster, Denis Hilton, Rainer Mathes, and Thomas Trabasso identify three different types of causal reasoning. The first type is "assessment of consequences," which "involves forward chaining from

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the target event to determine what further events it, in turn, causes." The next type, "generation of causal explanations," "involves backward chaining from the event in question to determine which events caused it." The third type, "responsibility attribution," attempts to determine "who should be held responsible for the problem, blamed, and punished" (Hilton et al. 44).

The first category of causal reasoning, "assessment of consequences," is particularly interesting in regards to the Columbine shootings in that, with the exception of the experts discussed in Chapter Six, all commentators on Columbine agreed that that the Columbine shootings were indicators of a school shooting crisis, one which would certainly manifest in shootings at other schools if one or more of the root causes of the shootings remained unaddressed. In other words, the shooting event at Columbine High School was generally regarded to be part of a "crime wave," as discussed by Mark Fishman in his piece "Crime Waves as Ideology." Fishman explains that

> When we speak of a crime wave, we are talking about a kind of social awareness of crime, crime brought to public consciousness. It is something to be remarked upon at the corner grocery store, complained about in a community meeting, and denounced at the mayor's press conference. One cannot be mugged by a crime wave, but one can be scared. And one can put more police on the streets and enact new laws on the basis of fear. Crime waves may be "things of the mind," but they have real consequences (Fishman 53).

A crime wave is thus not a real, objective event; it is a means of framing and presenting individual events as a unified threat. The crime wave's persuasive power, however, relies on masking its constructed nature; it must become the real threat, replacing the original event, in order to create a feeling of crisis, which will in turn widen and strengthen the field of actions available to decision-makers.

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Fishman argues that crime waves are primarily created through media organization of individual occurrences of crime into "themes," collections of occurrences into stories and clusters of news stories which are the basis of creating "newsworthiness." As such, Fishman tends to emphasize the top-down nature crime waves; it is the media working from police wires, not the public, that shapes the conception of the crime wave. Ultimately, where the concerns about media events originate is not important of my argument here. Instead, I am examining various accounts of what caused Columbine as a field of action setting up the conflict over possible solutions; the actions subsequently taken by to argue for and apply these solutions affect lay and media responses to the shootings in return. The origin of items in the field is unimportant; I will be focusing on the use of said items. This is necessary to examine the national cultural reactions to Columbine as a social drama.

In order to support my project's focus, this chapter will be focused on the other two types of causal reasoning identified by Hilton, Mathes, and Trabasso, "generation of causal explanations" and "responsibility attribution." In the crisis atmosphere of the post-Columbine debate, each of these types of reasoning became completely interconnected and entangled; it was impossible, given the stakes involved, for commentators to posit a causal explanation without simultaneously attempting to assign blame, and attempts to assign blame must be accompanied by at least some variety of causal explanation to be convincing.

Although I divide up the causal theories discussed here in order to better discuss each theory, it is important to note that these theories are not always treated as being

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exclusive. Just because a person claims that the goth youth culture was responsible for inspiring Klebold and Harris to kill does not mean that this person could not simultaneously argue that psychiatric medicine or godlessness also played a role in their rampage. I discuss some connections between the theories below, but as human beings exhibit a wide variety ways of making sense of the world, there are theories proposed that combine any combination of the arguments I isolate here in ways that don't always follow the logical patterns that I am portraying. This chapter represents the trends followed in the field of widely circulating Columbine causal theories well, but there are always exceptions to attempts to impose analytical order on the wider world of social interaction.

Goths

One of the first forces blamed for Columbine was the goth youth culture that had recently emerged into the public's consciousness after a decade of waxing and waning contact with the mainstream culture industry. Goth is an outgrowth of punk, gaining initial popularity in the early 1980s, then surviving as an underground movement until the MTV-fueled popularity of Marilyn Manson in the mid-1990s popularized both the aesthetic and the label once again. Goths listen to gloomy music, favor black clothing, often have tattoos and body piercings, and are generally fans of the macabre and strange, especially movies and fiction of the horror genre.

Goth was dragged into the Columbine debate primarily because of the black

trenchcoats the killers were said to wear and their apparent involvement in the so-called

"Trenchcoat Mafia" clique at Columbine High School. The day after the shooting, the

Washington Post ran an article titled "'Trench Coat' Mafia Spun Dark Fantasy," written

by Marc Fisher. In the article, Fisher asserts that

> Black trench coats are a consistent theme in the Gothic subculture that has
> attracted many teenagers to the poetry, music, and costumes of a scene
> that ranges from benign fantasy to violent reality. Inspired by fantasy
> games such as Dungeons and Dragons, Gothic has become a fascination of
> many American high schoolers, some of whom simply dress and paint
> their fingernails black while others immerse themselves in a pseudo-
> medieval world of dark images (Fisher 1).

The key assertion here is that an unspecified number of goths have a difficult time telling

fantasy from reality. The mention of the table top role-playing game *Dungeons and*

Dragons in this context is not surprising; although *D&D* players are not typically goths

and only some goths play games like *D&D*, many anti-*D&D* groups in the 1980s claimed

that the game destroyed its players' sense of reality. Stories of players committing

suicide after the in-game death of a favorite character or of healthy Christians turning into

murderous Satanists under *D&D*'s occult influence were very commonly circulated as

proof for this claim. The theory that Klebold and Harris were fantasy-prone is also the

basis of the much more popular theory that their homicidal prowess was encouraged by

their love for violent video games (to be returned to later in this chapter and in Chapter

Five).

A *20/20* TV segment a day later continued the goth-based explanation for the

shootings. This segment heavily featured a police official from the Denver Police

Department named Steve Rickard. The segment introduced Rickard as follows:

> . . . for the last seven years, Steve Rickard of the Denver Police
> Department gang unit has been trying to spread the word of how the so-
> called Gothic Movement has helped fuel a new kind of teenage gang –
> white suburban gangs built around a fascination with the grotesque and
> with death (Ross 1).

Brian Ross, the article's author, claims that "There have been a series of violent episodes

around the country linked to teenagers who call themselves Goths" (Ross 5). Ross and

Rickard portray goths as a new, even scarier form of gang:

> With traditional gangs, their enemies are pretty well-defined. With
> suburban groups, their enemies are not defined. I think everybody is their
> enemy. . . anybody who would get in their way, I think they would
> potentially kill (Ross 5).

In this scheme, goths are even scarier than the usual (non-white) gang member in that

they could attack and kill anyone, presumably even white, suburban children. Goths

become a phantom empire menacing everyone; anyone wearing black and looking

strange is a potential thrill-killer.

Accounting for the reports that Klebold and Harris idolized the Nazis, Ross and

Rickard also portray goths as being motivated by racial hatred. Followers of the band

Marilyn Manson (equated with goths by these commentators) are described as

"disaffected, alienated white teenagers," and a goth teenager accused of planning to

commit murder is quoted as saying that his planned targets were "Wigger wannabe kids,

you know, they are upper class, middle class, you know, white kids in small-town

Wisconsin. 'Yo, what's up?' You know, white chocolate" (Ross 5). "Wigger" is a word

meaning "white nigger"; as such, although it refers to behavior of whites, it negatively judges that behavior by comparing it to behavior attributed to blacks. Sometimes the application of the word is used to criticize whites for attempting to shallowly emulate what is portrayed as being the positive attribute of a superior people; in other cases, the word is used to attack whites who are acting below what is perceived as their proper social station. In any event, "wigger" is a racially-charged insult, and its appearance in Ross and Rickard's article heightens the perception that goths are a racist group. Fisher's article, on the other hand, associates goths with neo-Nazis, noting that "Yesterday [April 20th, the day of the shootings] was Hitler's birthday, an occasion for demonstrations, mock funerals, and other macabre celebrations among both neo-Nazis and parts of the Gothic scene" (Fisher 1-2). This last accusation, that some goths celebrate Hitler's birthday, is completely unsubstantiated by either the academic or the goth-produced bodies of literature regarding goth culture.

Although the goth theory was initially persuasive enough to generate a great deal of anti-goth sentiment (Marilyn Manson was forced to cancel a concert, goth businesses received death threats, and anecdotal evidence indicates that high school goths were insulted and beat up at an increased rate), it has fallen out of favor, partially due to the refusal of most mental health, law enforcement, and school officials to include "dresses in black" or any other personal style-based factors in their warning sign lists and their repeated insistence on finding "real" causes of the shootings. For example, the one of the Secret Service reports on school shootings, "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools" states that

> Decision makers who rely on characteristics that appear to be more typical
> or representative of the category, to determine whether an object belongs
> in that category, may inadvertently render faulty decisions. . . For
> example, a school administrator who believes she should be concerned
> about a particular student because the student wears a black trench coat
> similar to the ones worn by the shooters at Columbine High School would
> be relying inappropriately on such information to determine risk (Reddy,
> et al. 163).

Nevertheless, a morbid interest in "dark" texts of various sorts remains as a warning sign

in all three of the government reports discussed in the previous chapter, and various dress

codes banning trench coats and even, in one case, hair dyed unnatural colors have been

enacted by schools around the country. The goth remains a potent visual sign of

psychological and social deviance, as demonstrated by an April 2001 AP article by Dan

Elliott, "Columbine Killers Icons to Some." Although most of the article discusses

Klebold and Harris's appeal to generic "angry, disaffected youth," James Garbarino,

author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* is quoted

as saying,

> Thirty-five years ago, if a kid walked into your school with body piercing
> and black makeup, almost certainly somebody would say, "We've got to
> find out what's troubling this kid. . . Adolescent culture has taken on this
> foray into the dark side. For troubled kids, this feeds their trouble
> (Elliott).

Even though neither Klebold or Harris, or any other school shooter to date, fit the

description above, the personal style of the goth is still specifically invoked as a symbol

of sociological and psychological dysfunction and, simultaneously, as a sort of

supernatural evil, as using the phrase "the dark side" inevitably conjures up both Darth

Vader of the Star Wars trilogy and legends of satanic worship. Some have argued that

the goth is the latest incarnation of the evils posed by rock n' roll music, and others argue

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that this point indicates that anti-goth panic is no more valid than the concern raised by

Elvis Presley's hip gyrations; there is a further discussion of this issue in Chapters Five

and Six.

Video Games

A second posited cause of Columbine is violent video games. Since video games

themselves are a relatively recent innovation, only existing since the late 1970s and only

attaining their current level of graphic sophistication since the 1990s, they are particularly

suited to being portrayed as a cause of the Columbine shootings; the rise to prominence

of graphically violent video games seems to occur at the same time as the school shooting

crisis.

The major concern regarding video games is a fear of mimesis. The argument

against violent entertainment of all types, drama, films, television, music, and comic

books, has always been that life imitates art: if one views or listens to violent

entertainment enough, then one will become violent. As stated in Chapter Three, the

interactive nature of video games is what makes them the ultimate target of such mimetic

theories. Michael Rich, a pediatrician, articulates this mimetic concern as follows:

> Television and movies are passively received. Video games, by virtue of
> being immersive, interactive, and enhanced with sensorimotor activity,
> represent a distinctly different medium, and may have an even more
> powerful influence on violent attitudes and behaviors. Think back to those
> excerpts from what are known as "first-person shooter" video games. You
> are moving through a virtual world, your weapon extended in front of you,
> racking up points for wasting as many other beings as you can. You are
> subjected to all of the most potent elements of media violence – realistic

portrayals of mayhem, the adrenaline rush of fear, the need to "get them before they get me" and positive reinforcement for the killing as quickly and efficiently as possible (Rich).

Rich primarily discusses the reported effect of these games on children, but the extensive use of second person in this account not only represents the "first person" perspective of the games; it also forces Rich's audience into the role of the player, suggesting that the games could affect even their mature minds in an adverse way.

In the case of Klebold and Harris, much has been made of their intense involvement in the video game *Doom*. Typical of the media's representation of this involvement is this excerpt from a *Washington Post* article:

> Away from school, in the private world they shared online, Harris and Klebold lived in a dark, dangerous place. A fan of the original shoot-em-up game Doom, Harris was not merely a player. Using special software, he created new levels filled with monsters for players to blast their way through. He distributed his new Doom worlds on the Internet using an AOL Web site that has since been turned off. In one level, called "U. A. C. LABS," he describes an all-out war between humans and demons on the planet Phobos. The goal of the game, he says, is for the player – a lone U. S. Marine – to blast his way to the planet's teleporter. "The platoon guarding the teleporter out is VERY large, so beware," Harris wrote. "Good luck marine, and don't forget, KILL 'EM AAAAALLLL!!!!!" (Duggan, Shear, and Fisher A1)

This description heightens the mimesis argument, suggesting that Harris was even more immersed in video games than most players, "using special software" (which, the article fails to note, is available to and used by quite a few avid players of *Doom* and other first person shooter games) to design the game to match his own fantasies.

There is also a firm belief expressed by many that video game performance not only makes a person more willing to kill, but it actually makes the player better at it. Dave Grossman is the primary claims-maker on this issue, but his statements will be

covered later in Chapter Five. The *Time* article discussing the release of the killers' video

tapes to the press claims, as if it is a proposition automatically confirmed by common

sense, that "a video game joystick turned Harris into a better marksman, like a golfer who

watches Tiger Woods videos"(Gibbs and Roche 44). Gun owner Chris Cooney also

maintains this link between video game competence and real world marksmanship in a

section of his personal web site:

> A final word. In case this makes any difference, I'm not some ultra-non-violence type -- just see my firearms section. One gun that I own is in so many games and movies I have a page just to list them all, the SPAS-12 shotgun. I have a real SPAS-12 accessible if something goes bump in the night, or someone is ripping off my car. While I am very comfortable with the gun itself, when I pick it up I always want to be a bit uncomfortable -- a bit not-relaxed. It is a loaded gun and the slightest screw-up can change my whole life. And I can tell you, the very last thing on earth I'd want to do is run several hundred hours of a VR simulation game shooting an exact copy SPAS-12 shotgun at everything that moves, training myself till it was fun, comfortable, just a game. It isn't (Cooney).

The claim that a computer model of a shotgun is an "exact copy" of a real-life shotgun

again reveals the concern about mimesis: the playing of the video game dramatically

changes the way that a person, even an adult, carries out a task, even to the point of

overriding real firearms training (or partially replacing it, as we'll see with Dave

Grossman's arguments regarding military use of computer games presented in Chapter

Five).

The Internet

A related factor, although it seldom is identified as a sole cause of the shootings, is the internet. Harris used America Online to distribute his *Doom* creations, as the *Post* article above mentions. Harris and Klebold also used the internet to find bomb-making construction advice and schematics. Harris then posted his own set of bomb making instructions on his AOL webpage (Flynn).

Harris also posted a series of rambling complaints on his webpage. It is the discussion of these rants that caused commentators to start discussing the internet as a force in fueling hatred. Typical is the following excerpt from a *Rocky Mountain News* article, which first discusses the various warning signs that students saw, but discounted, in everyday interactions with the killers, then discusses Harris's internet use:

> But on the Internet, Harris' veneer of normalcy fell away. His Web pages reflect a soul-searing level of hatred, frustration and powerlessness, the invective of a person driven crazy by everyday life. Country music. Zippo lighters. People who cut in line. R-rated movies edited for cable. "YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE!!!?" Harris asked in one rant. "People who think they can forecast the weather!!! Like just the other day, this punk i know was saying 'Yeah tomorrow we are gonna get like, 2 feet of snow in just a few hours. They were saying its gonna be the biggest snow in ten years.... And that day we get an inch of snow.... I feel like getting a baseball bat, breaking it over his head, and then STABBING him with the broken end!!!!" (Anton and Ryckman)

The article portrays Harris as "crazy," suffering from some sort of Jekyll and Hyde multiple personality disorder. In its version of events, Harris was able to maintain a mostly normal social persona in real life, yet the internet was where the real Harris came out.

Taken alone, this presentation of Harris's ranting might seem to be a discussion of

the internet as a warning sign, not as a cause of Columbine. But the article later points

out "It's unknown whether Wayne and Kathy Harris ever saw their son's Web site.

Unknown whether Klebold's parents knew about it, either" (Anton and Ryckman). News

articles like this helped fuel a resurgence of parental concern over the negative impact of

the internet. The following example was posted in July 1999 in *WebProfession*, a

website for the International Webmasters Association:

> With the recent terrorism at Columbine High School and other schools
> across the country, many discussions are taking place about the role that
> the Internet is playing in our children's lives. Today, children often know
> more about computers and the Internet than do their parents. It is time we
> as parents take responsibility for our children's access to the Internet, just
> as we do in all other aspects of preparing our children for life. Is the
> Internet alone to blame for the recent events at our schools? No. Timothy
> McVeigh learned how to make bombs from books and the public library.
> So did the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynsky. The Internet just makes it
> easier to get this information. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were Internet
> savvy and had created web sites for personal use. They had also helped to
> create the Columbine High School web site. Information on these web
> sites contained information on making pipe bombs. Neither the parents,
> nor the school, took the responsibility of monitoring the content of these
> web sites. Why? Are your children in the driver's seat in your family on
> the "Information Super Highway?" (Beldo)

The metaphor of the child in the "driver's seat," especially when that child could be the

next Dylan Klebold or Eric Harris, is designed to persuade parents to take control of

internet use in the house. We will return to the call for more parental control of children

later in this chapter. This piece also accuses Columbine High School of negligence in not

finding the bomb-making material posted on its website; this claim, however, seems to be

a conflation of the fact that Klebold and Harris had worked on the school's web site and

had posted bomb-making information on their own AOL websites. In any event, it

reinforces the idea that adults who are not computer literate are at the mercy of their

children. The piece then highlights the dangerous role of the computer as an agent of a

harmful, predatory "real world":

> Our home computer is no longer just a computer anymore. It is not a toy.
> It is not a babysitter. It can be a potential threat to your child as well as be
> the greatest learning tool since the history of time. The home computer has
> rapidly risen from being a glorified typewriter to do school assignments to
> a machine that brings the real world right into your home. Or worse yet,
> your child's bedroom, if you have allowed a computer to be placed there
> (Beldo).

The violation of "your child's bedroom" is an image specifically playing on the fears of

internet predators seeking to find children to assault and other violations of child sexual

innocence. This again emphasizes the actively harmful role of the internet.

The *Rocky Mountain News* article invokes this fear of the internet as a means of

the "real world" attacking or seducing children when it attempts to link the Columbine

shooters to internet-organized "hate groups":

> Late last year, researchers for the Simon Wiesenthal Center found a Web
> page signed by the Trench Coat Mafia, with links to sites urging anarchy.
> "We see hundreds of sites like this every day," said Rabbi Abraham
> Cooper, who coordinates the center's study of hate groups. "At the time,
> there were no threats being made. It certainly didn't say wait until April 20
> and name a school because obviously we would have called the
> authorities." Picking the dangerous needle out of the haystack of the Web
> is getting harder all the time, Cooper said. Last year his center tracked
> 1,400 hate sites. In April 1995 they had identified one. "Look, being a
> loner in a high school is as old as the first high school," Cooper said. "The
> bomb-making information has been around for a long time. But the
> convergence of all this stuff and the marketing of it on the Web -- this
> didn't exist five years ago. But it sure is now. Front and center" (Anton
> and Ryckman).

Not only does this link Klebold and Harris to hate groups, but it brings up the fear of the

open quality of the internet; anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection

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can post writings online that can be read by anyone else in the world with the same access. Hate groups have used the internet to organize, just as many other organizations and cultures have. But under the model presented by this article, the internet is actually causing hate groups to expand and recruit; the term "marketing" implies this recruitment angle, and high school "loners" seem to be the recruiters' targets.

Hate

Many of the early media reports discussing Klebold and Harris portrayed them as racists or neo-Nazis. As stated earlier, the date of the shooting, April 20, Hitler's birthday, was one reason for this argument. Joe Conason of *Salon* summarizes the other reasons in a May 4, 1999 article:

> Documents seized from the suspects' homes by Jefferson County sheriff's investigators indicate that they were obsessed with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. They seem to have planned the assault to commemorate the Nazi dictator's 110th birthday. Eyewitnesses say that they purposely executed Isaiah Shoels, a diminutive black football player, as well as two girls who were known as devout Christians. The killers' fascination with Hitler and their targeting of Christians and blacks, combined with their apparent preoccupation with "industrial" music, together suggest the possible influence of a fascistic youth subculture that has inspired horrific violence elsewhere (Conason).

Like the anti-goth articles discussed earlier, Conason also argues that Marilyn Manson and other representatives of industrial music (industrial music is a genre whose fan base often overlap with that of goth music) glamorize the Nazis and racists like Charles Manson. This overlooks the fact that KMFDM, an industrial band that Harris quotes on

his website, is clearly anti-fascistic in its lyrics; it also blatantly overlooks the role of

irony and parody in much pop culture use of "racist" imagery by artists like Marilyn

Manson.

The argument linking Klebold and Harris to organized racist groups was

established early in the post-shooting coverage, but it was soon abandoned in favor of

charges that Klebold and Harris were acting out their own personal prejudices or those of

the clique they supposedly belonged to, the Trenchcoat Mafia, and as such the killings

should be considered hate crimes. The argument that the killings were racist hate crimes

is based primarily on statements made by witnesses to the shootings and the death of

Isaiah Shoels, the only black student shot in the attack. A *Washington Post* article from

April 23, 1999, "Prejudices Drove Killers Witnesses Say," presents the event as follows:

> "There's that little nigger son of a bitch right there," classmates who were
> in the library at the time recall one of the gun-wielding assailants
> screaming when he saw Shoels. "Let's go get him." And they did. . .
> "This was a hate crime," Michael Shoels said of the death of his son, who
> longed to follow his father into the music recording business. "There was
> too much hate in those kids' hearts" (Goldstein, Sanchez, and Fletcher
> A1).

The Shoels family claims to have encountered a racist environment at Columbine past

Klebold and Harris, stating that other members of the Trenchcoat Mafia had harassed

Isaiah and his sister, Cheryl, a few months before the shootings (Goldstein, Sanchez, and

Fletcher). The article then presents Michael Shoels's belief that racism was key to the

massacre:

> "My heart is burning right now," he said. "When Isaiah had confided to
> him that he was the brunt of "some racial situations," he had counseled his
> son to stay focused on "the big picture," to look beyond the harassment
> and the petty taunts. Recalling their conversation, Shoels now wonders

whether he gave his son poor advice. "Maybe my son would be alive today," he said (Goldstein, Sanchez, and Fletcher A1).

Shoels's claims of racism would later expand beyond the Trenchcoat Mafia and Klebold and Harris. An AP news article covering the family's move to the Houston area in early 2000 presents these expanded claims of racism:

> The Shoelses experienced a variety of criticism after talking of conspiracy theory against their son and hiring high-profile Michigan lawyer Geoffrey Fieger to file a $250 million lawsuit against the killers' parents. "Initially, they had the sympathy that the other victims' families had," said Sam Riddle, a family spokesman. "As soon as the Shoelses started speaking out about the almost perverse form of denial the state of Colorado was in regarding hate, anti-Semitism, and racism, they began to be treated as if they pulled the trigger. That was wrong." Michael Shoels said the death of his son, the public scrutiny, the cold shoulder from the community and anonymous threats to his family contributed to the family's flight from Colorado. He vows never to go back. He even plans to have Isaiah's body exhumed from the cemetery in Colorado and brought to Houston. "That soil ain't fit for him to be in. It's contaminated with hate and racism," he said ("Columbine Family").

The article also mentions that Shoels specifically requested that his real estate agent find him a home in an integrated neighborhood "because of the prejudice going on in the nation." It also states that Shoels "contends that his son was the victim of a hate crime and that a group such as the Ku Klux Klan or Aryan Nation might be involved" ("Columbine Family").

The Shoels family ties its loss to a larger narrative of American institutionalized racism, and it also claims that the Littleton community rejected them because of its denial of this racism. A *New York Times* article contains more details of the Shoels claims:

> "Nigger," says Michael, all but spitting out the word. "That's the last thing he heard. Should that be the last thing you have to hear before leaving your body?" Because of that word and all it represents, the Shoelses say, Isaiah's murder was more egregious, more shattering, more

evil, than the murders of others at Columbine. "It was worse than the others," Vonda [Isaiah's mother] says. "What happened to Isaiah was worse." And it follows, they say, that their family is owed more. "We are like victims of an earthquake or a hurricane," Michael says. "Our lives have been destroyed" (Belkin).

This feeling of victimization by the Littleton community, and by America's racism in general, is used by the Shoels family to justify its claims. At the same time, these claims have distanced them from the rest of the victims' families. The *Times* article notes that several of the families resent the Shoels lawsuits, seeing them as destructive to the community (Belkin).

A second hate crime theory focuses on the shooters' supposed hatred of Christianity as a motivating force behind the shootings. This theory also tends to maintain that the Columbine shootings intent as an anti-Christian attack is purposely suppressed by the mainstream media. An introduction to a June 1999 newsletter posted online by Christian radio station KHCS is a representative example of the more extreme arguments supporting this idea:

> Kosovo. The Sudan. Rwanda. Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. PIRA terrorists in Northern Ireland. And of course, the PLO, Hamas and Al Fatah in Israel. Now, 15 killed in Littleton, Colorado. It seems like everyone is still talking about this horrible massacre. What you don't know about this tragedy is that the 13 victims of Columbine High were evangelical Christians. You have been told that the killers were looking for athletes. If so, why did they go to the library instead of the gym? Why did they ask Cassie Bernall and many of the other victims, "Do you believe in God?" The network TV producers on the scene knew this. But, network headquarters in Washington and New York censored this angle of the story. It's like "hate crime" doesn't exist when the victims are Christians! (KHCS)

A more moderate *Christianity Today* article by Steve Rabey points out that the December

1999 *Time* article on the killers' pre-shooting video tapes omits a series of anti-Christian

comments made by Klebold and Harris on those tapes:

> "What would Jesus do?" asks Klebold, yelling and making faces at the
> camera. "What would I do?" Then he points an imaginary shotgun at the
> camera, takes aim, and says "Boosh!" "Yeah, 'I love Jesus. I love Jesus.'
> Shut the f— up," Harris says on the same tape, made on March 15. "Go
> Romans," Harris says later. "Thank God they crucified that a—hole."
> Then the two teenagers both chant, "Go Romans! Go Romans! Yeah!
> Whoo!" Klebold, who reportedly had a crush on Christian student Rachel
> Scott, singles her out for particular disdain, calling her a "godly whore"
> and a "stuck-up little b—." Darrell Scott, who says his daughter Rachel
> was the only victim singled out in the tapes, believes the killers felt a deep
> antipathy for the things of God: "There seemed to be an extra element of
> hatred and vengeance there" (Rabey).

The article follows up its discussion of Klebold and Harris's supposed anti-Christian

prejudice with coverage of a lawsuit filed by the families of some Columbine victims

against the Jefferson County school district who "unconstitutionally prohibited relatives

from using Christian imagery in memorial ceramic tiles that members of the Columbine

community were invited to create, and which were to be installed at the school" (Rabey).

While no commentary linking these events is provided, the juxtaposition of the killers'

statements with the school district's decision to omit religious imagery from the tiles

shows a deliberate attempt to comment on the latter, establishing the origin of Klebold

and Harris's anti-Christianity in the community.

The construction of Klebold and Harris as hate criminals spawned by an anti-

Christian society is of vital importance in supporting the martyrdom claims of Cassie

Bernall and Rachel Scott. One of martyrdom's functions, according to Justin Watson's

The Martyrs of Columbine, is to express a "group/ideological conflict" in which "The

martyr challenges the authority of a group or its agents to impose its definition of truth or reality" (Watson 23). In other words, a martyr must oppose a group attempting to deny the martyr his or her identity or faith. Klebold and Harris, as lone, possibly deranged killers, do not represent a group. Klebold and Harris as haters of Christianity and products of an anti-Christian mainstream do, however, represent a group, and a group constructed as more powerful in worldly ways than the assumed group of true Christians represented by Bernall and Scott.

The concept of Columbine as a hate crime in later mainstream media treatments tended to focus on a loose, undefined concept of "hate" that drove Klebold and Harris to commit their murders. This hate was not for any particular group, but a dangerous buildup of anger from years of mistreatment. This is similar to the way that the label "terrorism" ended up drifting away from its specific definition and started being attached to anything that made people feel afraid following the September 11 attacks. A website designed by the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Live Without Hate," provides a good example of the Columbine shooting as a situation that causes changes in the conception of hate. Although most of the website focuses on hate as the enemy of religious and racial tolerance, this focus changes with the discussion of Columbine:

> How important is it to make sure that hate has no home in your school? Ask the students of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. On April 20, 1999, two boys, students at that school, began randomly shooting people. When it was all over, 15 people, including the two boys, were dead. Was that a hate crime? Maybe not in the legal sense of the term (although some racial epithets were uttered during the event), but hate and misunderstanding probably played a big role in the shooting at Columbine. The two boys who did the shooting felt unwelcome at school. Students there said the killers were different from other kids, outcasts, not well liked by others. . . School was not a place where they felt secure and

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comfortable with who they were and how they fit in ("Live Without
Hate").

In this treatment of hate, the hate that caused the killings did not originate within Klebold

and Harris; it was a quality of the climate of the school that eventually caused Klebold

and Harris to react against it. Ultimately, Klebold and Harris become seen as victims of a

negative school environment; this hateful environment, whether directed at blacks,

Christians, or both, becomes the real killer. This is the much the same model used by

proponents of the bullying theory, discussed later in this chapter.

Godlessness and Secularization

Related to the idea of Columbine as an anti-Christian hate crime is the theory that

school shootings are generated by an increasingly aggressive secularization of American

culture. Under this model, the gradual removal of Christian symbols and practice from

public life over the last few decades has brought about a general moral degeneration. A

good overview of this theory can be found in an editorial by William F. Jasper posted on

The New American website, which counters gun control arguments fueled by the

shootings by blaming a combination of educational, cultural, and entertainment industry

factors for Columbine:

> What is painfully clear is that the Columbine killers and their fellow teen
> sociopaths imbibed deeply of the toxic waste that course through the
> culture of death now engulfing our whole society. And they were
> particularly vulnerable to these toxins because the adults who aren't
> actually involved in promoting this moral subversion and cultural
> pollution have, because of cowardice or indifference, done little or nothing
> to protect children from these influences. Moreover, they have allowed

> the militant secularists of academe, the decadent culture vultures of Hollywood, and the left-wing activists in the courts and legislatures to evict God, prayer, the Bible, the Ten Commandments, and moral absolutes not only from the government schools, but almost entirely from the public sphere. But nature abhors a vacuum, and the God-shaped vacuum we have allowed to be formed in our midst has been filled with diabolical venom that is now killing us (Jasper).

The disease and toxicity metaphors Jasper uses paint a picture of a previously healthy Christian society being killed off by an immoral infection brought about by powerful and evil forces. Although Jasper targets public ("government") schools as one source of the infection, Hollywood, the academy, and liberal politicians and judges are also to blame.

Arguments for godlessness as a cause for Columbine often mention public schools as a primary site for the transmission of many ideas they view as anti-Christian. Evolution and abortion are often specifically mentioned, and they are then tied into this narrative of decaying moral standards, the natural end of which is killings like those at Columbine. The website of the Biblical Counseling Association makes the following statement in a piece called "Columbine High School and You":

> Students have been freed from Bible reading and prayer. They have been freed from being exposed to a copy of the Ten Commandments hung on a wall. By preventing creationism from being taught in the schools, evolution (that pseudoscience that says anything can happen if you allow enough time) has freed them from the God of Creation. They have been freed from a Creator who says what is right and wrong. They have been freed from a God who will judge and punish. They have been freed from a heaven to gain, and from a hell to avoid. Students have been freed from the value of life. . . If an expectant mother can kill her unborn baby, we have taken a big step in freeing students to take the lives of fellow students ("Columbine High School and You").

In this model, the school's god-free environment leads down a slippery slope to a complete degeneration of society.

A similar argument is posed by anti-feminism spokeswoman Phyllis Schlafly,

who argues that the public schools and educational theory are a direct extension of

government liberals' plan to take parental rights away and indoctrinate children with new

concepts of right and wrong:

> Hilary Clinton has volunteered her intuition that "part of growing up is learning how to control one's impulses." Putting aside the point that most of us don't have impulses to go on a killing rampage, who is going to teach kids to control their impulses? Certainly not the "village" (i.e. the government or government schools), which Mrs. Clinton believes should have prime responsibility for raising children. For the past 25 years, the prevailing dogma in public school teaching has been *Values Clarification* (as in the tremendously influential 1972 book of the same name by Sidney Simon). That means teaching students to reject "the old moral and ethical standards," and instead "make their own choices" and "build their own value system." Indeed, Eric Harris and his sidekick, Dylan Klebold did "build their own value system, which allowed them to kill 13 people at Columbine, then take their own lives. . . *Values Clarification* teaches that, since there are absolutely no absolutes, students should engage in personal "decision making" about behavior instead of looking to God, the Ten Commandments, parents, church, or other authority which teaches that behavior should conform to traditional morality. . . The world view of Cassie Bernall, who looked into the barrel of a gun and said "Yes, I believe in God," is not acceptable within the rubric of *Values Clarification*. She was killed by a fellow student who had built his own value system (Schlafly).

Schlafly's model relies on Cassie Bernall as a sign of hope, an indication that

"government schools" and "the village" have not brainwashed all students into becoming

amoral killers like Klebold and Harris. Here Bernall is not only a martyr for being a

Christian; she becomes a martyr for resisting the liberal ideas of the public school.

Bullying

The *Cincinnati Enquirer*'s version of Columbine as a hate crime, that is, a crime

caused when the hatred of classmates influenced Klebold and Harris, who "felt

unwelcome at school," to seek revenge, is a version of the bullying theory. This theory

maintains that the origins of Klebold and Harris's murders can be found in a culture of

bullying and harassment at Columbine. A *Washington Post* article, "Dissecting

Columbine's Cult of the Athlete," details the accusations made by some students against

a clique of athletes centered a wrestler named Rocky Wayne Hoffschneider:

> Hoffschneider's circle – known as the "steroid poster boys" – had their
> cafeteria table. On the other side of the room, shy skinny boys – among
> them Klebold and Harris – claimed a table, too. The athletes threw Skittle
> candy at them, said senior John Savage. Once, athletes threw a bagel
> close to the table, and the cafeteria emptied for fear of a fight. In the boys'
> bathrooms, a graffiti war broke out – "Jocks rule!" Came the rejoinder:
> "Jocks suck!" In the halls, body slams were common. Trenchcoat
> students got pushed more than most. "A football player reached out and
> stepped on the cord of one of these girls' Walkmen and it ripped out and
> fell and broke," remembered Melissa Snow, who graduated in 1998. "She
> just didn't say anything. For those kinds of kids it's really hard to stand
> up to a bunch of football players, who are all standing around thinking it's
> really funny what this guy did to you." Harris and Klebold absorbed it all.
> As the year went by, they drifted closer to the Trenchcoaters, but unlike
> most students, they seemed to take the taunting to heart. "They just let the
> jocks get to them," [student Pauline] Colby said. "I think they were
> taunted to their limits" (Adams and Russakoff).

The videotapes that Harris and Klebold made prior to the shootings, released by law

enforcement in December 1999, seemed to confirm this theory; on the tapes, Harris

complains that "People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts" and Klebold,

after noting a list of people who he felt had victimized him, declares "I'm going to kill you all. You've been giving us shit for years" (Gibbs and Roche 44).

The bullying theory has been widely accepted by school officials and mental health professionals, sparking a growth in anti-bully programs throughout the country. As a *Christian Science Monitor* article explains, after Columbine "a number of states, including Kentucky, Florida, Massachusetts, and California, have launched antibullying initiatives, and many individual school districts have adopted programs as well" (Coeyman). The article does note, however, that experts in favor of these antibullying programs are worried that many of these programs are "fads" and that "only a handful" are considered to be effective in fighting the bullying problem (Coeyman). Concern that these anti-bullying programs will be ineffective and are the product of "self-proclaimed 'experts' who try to act like they know what they're talking about" drives one internet commentator, after stating that bullies are "the true cause of school violence and school shootings," "sadists," and "just the same as Hitler but there's only a difference of degree," to offer victims of bullying "realistic advice" such as

> Keep something on your person where you can pull it out in under a second that you can use as a weapon in case you get attacked. This can be either keys, or anything sharp like a sharpened pencil, but if you bring a knife or a gun to school with you and the bullies see it, they'll likely complain about it because it'll give you a slight chance to defend yourself (CyberWoLfman).

The aforementioned website is an example of the concern by many believers in the bullying theory that bullying is too deeply ingrained in American culture to be removed by surface-level treatment like anti-bullying programs. An article in the online version of *The Progressive Populist*, for example, argues that

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The story of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris and the shootings at Columbine High School, according to various press reports, begins with a school culture in which the more popular students, the stronger students, the jocks preyed upon the weaker students and outsiders, pushing them into lockers and generally harassing them. . . It is the legacy of the bully, a legacy we seem willing to accept and even endorse, its sinister effects seeping into our political and economic cultures, our films and music and television, our dealings with just about everyone with whom we must interact. . . This violent streak is part of our American mythology, is central to the legend we've created about our westward expansion, our growth as a superpower. We believe we should always meet might with might, strength with strength and violence with violence (Kalet).

In this view, America itself creates both the bully and the reaction to the bully, and bullying is absolutely central to the American perception of the world, not just a chance aberration that can be removed with a school program encouraging tolerance.

There is a heavy level of resistance to the bullying theory, especially by certain members of the Columbine High School community who resist its tendency to cast the perpetrators of the shootings as victims. The *Washington Post* article cited above talks about this resistance as manifested by the students and families involved with Columbine's athletic programs:

These parents and students experienced a Columbine where camaraderie was strong, discipline evenhanded and harassment minimal. To say otherwise, they say, is to validate the mind-set of murdering madmen. "They had no school spirit and they wanted to be different," Randy Thurmon, parent of a wrestler and football player, said of the killers. "Anyone who shows any kind of school spirit, any pride in the school, they're accepted" (Adams and Russakoff).

The insistence that Klebold and Harris chose to be "different" is a strategy designed to move the responsibility for their mistreatment back upon them: those the community "accepted" didn't create the deviance, as only deviance creates deviance. This supposed conscious choice to be different is characterized, even before the shooting, as a rejection

of the Columbine community, which would have accepted them had they only wanted to be accepted. A *Rocky Mountain News* article about Craig Scott, Rachel Scott's brother, presents a similar attack on the bully theory:

> Columbine made them do it. That's how Craig thought the media reported the tragedy, and he was furious. "The media victimized Eric and Dylan as getting pushed to the edge. They weren't pushed to the edge. They walked to the edge," he said. The gunmen saturated themselves with violent music, readings and videos and allowed that to have a huge influence on their lives, he believes. Instead of focusing on Harris and Klebold, Craig said the emphasis should have been on the victims, a teacher and 12 students, who went to school one day and never came home. "Every single one of them was a nice person. I'm serious," he said. "Matt Kechter was the nicest kid on the football team. Every single kid, from Lauren Townsend to Daniel Mauser to Kyle Velasquez to Steven Curnow to Kelly Fleming to my sister, all of them, were really sweet people" (Bartels).

Scott emphasizes the niceness of the victims, who stand in for Columbine in general, taking the place of the bullies characterized in the bully theories as the embodiment of Columbine; this moves the origin of negative, destructive behavior back onto the shooters who, using his metaphor of physical movement, "walked to the edge" under their own will.

Another version of the bully theory, put forward by Izzy Kalman of Bullies2Buddies.com, continues this move to keep the blame for the Columbine shootings directly on Klebold and Harris. Although Kalman acknowledges "the suffering of victims of teasing and bullying" and that bullying was a factor in the Columbine shootings, the cornerstone of his "anti-bullying" program is the idea that bullying victims are always to blame for bullying problems:

> The only reason that people become victims of relentless teasing and bullying is that they do not practice Freedom of Speech. The attitude

> "You have no right to say that" is the source of almost all anger and aggression between people. Freedom of Speech is the ultimate solution to the problem of teasing and bullying. . . Granting others this right is the most basic ingredient for peace, understanding, and love between people (Kalman).

Under this model, it is the target of bullying, not the bully, that is the true aggressor and the one who is taking "rights" away. Kalman tends to favor the word "teasing" rather than bullying, and he focuses exclusively on verbal acts:

> Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were not resilient. They were brittle, and they shattered when they couldn't take the insults anymore – insults they had been unwittingly inviting upon themselves by believing that insults hurt feelings. And this is the problem with all the student murderers: society impaired their natural sense of humor so that they couldn't take a joke about themselves. The solution is not to punish the rest of us by forcing us to live a humorless life. No one is going to be better off when we stifle our laughter. . . The truth is that we would be become absolutely miserable if we eradicated teasing from the world. We would be left with a humorless life, a life devoid of laughter, a heavy, serious life (Kalman).

With the shift to talking about "teasing" rather than bullying, Kalman links bullying to humor and jokes, countering what he sees as an exaggerated focus in anti-bullying discourse on the brutality and viciousness of bullies. Kalman's model is particularly noteworthy in that it utterly excludes discussion of physical acts of violence on the part of those who "tease," such as the various forms of assault attributed by some witnesses to the Columbine bully culture; violence becomes exclusively the realm of the teased who can't take a joke.

Schools

      Although public schools are invoked as a villain in both the bullying and the

godlessness theories, there is also a theory maintaining that the conformity enforced by

public schools is the real culprit, aside from concerns specifically about religion or safety.

Such an argument is put forward by a posting by Jacob G. Hornberger to the libertarian

website *The Future of Freedom Forum*. Hornberger notes that

> Every time aberrant behavior takes place in the United States, the
> commonly held assumption is that it has occurred in the context of a
> healthy, normal environment. . . The search for responsibility for the
> Columbine massacre immediately focused on the family life of the killers,
> and that certainly would be a rational place to begin an inquiry. The
> problem, however, is that all too many middle-class Americans do not
> wish to explore an alternative explanation for the bizarre behavior in their
> midst – the nature and extent of coercion in the American educational
> system. For instance, throughout the post-Columbine analysis, the
> "given" in all of the answers and solutions was public schooling.
> Principals, teachers, students, and parents should come together and study
> ways to recognize potential aberrant behavior in advance and devise ways
> to avoid it. Build more schools. Make class sizes smaller. Encourage
> more parental participation in public-school process. Enact more stringent
> gun-control laws. Have guards and metal detectors. By working together
> within the system everyone could more rapidly find the answers and
> solutions to the Columbine High School massacre. There's one big
> problem with all of this, however. What if Columbine High School – or
> more accurately, public schooling itself – is a major cause of bizarre and
> aberrant behavior? What if the public-schooling system psychologically
> screws up some people so badly that they are ultimately driven to commit
> extremely weird and destructive acts? (Hornberger)

In this theory, the markers of "school safety" advocated by many school administrators

and law enforcement are actually indicators of the same system that gave rise to the

killings in the first place; the assumption of a "healthy, normal environment," driven by

Americans' romantic view of school, is said to be clouding our perception of the real

problems. Hornberger ties this romanticism of school and its role in society to Franklin

Roosevelt and the move towards larger national government that he started:

> The problem, of course, is that the doctrines about freedom that public
> school people teach the children of the country are bald-faced lies. In fact,
> it is ironic that the Columbine High School killers emulated Adolf Hitler
> and his fellow Nazis. Why? Because the core principles of Germany's
> system of National Socialism were the very things that American public-
> schoolteachers teach are the core elements of a free society: public
> schooling, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, a national highway
> system, economic regulations, farm subsidies, welfare, and subsidized
> education. How can all this coercion and perversion of reality not have a
> deep psychological effect on at least some students – especially those who
> are already emotionally on edge owing to a dysfunctional family life?
> (Hornberger)

This argument is the secular version of the anti-public school arguments based on

religious and moral grounds discussed earlier in this chapter. The rhetorical device of the

Nazis, another use of the belief that Klebold and Harris admired Hitler, "wearing trench-

coats similar to those worn by Hitler's SS" (Hornberger), is used to give this argument

about a "perverse" and "coercive" national system extra support.

The public school is not always singled out as the only type of dysfunctional

educational establishment, however. Jon Katz posted the following comments on

Slashdot.org on April 26, 1999, inspired by the vast number of e-mails he received from

students from around the country worried that they would be the target of what Katz calls

"geek profiling":

> For many kids – often the best and the brightest – school is a nightmare.
> People who are different are reviled as geeks, nerds, dorks. The lucky
> ones are excluded, the unfortunates are harassed, humiliated, sometimes
> assaulted literally as well as socially. Odd values – unthinking school
> spirit, proms, jocks – are exalted, while the best values – free thinking,
> non-conformity, curiosity, are ridiculed. Maybe the one positive legacy
> the Trenchcoat Mafia left was to ensure that this message got heard, by a

society that seems desperate not to hear it. . . Many of these kids [who e-mailed Katz] saw themselves as targets of a new hunt for oddballs – suspects in a bizarre, systematic search for the strange and the alienated. Suddenly, in this tyranny of the normal, to be different wasn't just to feel unhappy, it was to be dangerous (Katz).

In this scenario, it isn't just students who are the perpetrators of exclusion, as is the assumption of the bullying theories. Although the entire school structure is to blame in his argument, school administrators are blamed by Katz for the most disturbing acts:

The e-mailed stories ranged from suspensions and expulsions for "anti-social behavior" to censorship of student publications to school and parental restrictions on computing, Web browsing, and especially gaming. There were unconfirmed reports that the sale of blocking software had skyrocketed. Everywhere, school administrators pandered and panicked, rushing to show they were sensitive to parents' fears, even if they were oblivious to the needs and problems of many of their students (Katz).

In this way, Katz's article uses a theory centered on school as a generating factor for shooting to attack internet and video game-centered theories. Not only are the administrators missing the key factor in creating Columbine, according to Katz, but they are making the problem worse by adding to the stigmatization of students deemed to be "oddballs."

Lest people think that only public schools are the problem, Katz includes two stories specifically identified as happening in private schools:

"This is not a rational world. Can anybody help?" asked Jamie, head of an intense Dungeons and Dragons club in Minnesota, whose private school guidance counselor gave him a choice: give up the game or face counseling, possibly suspension. . . In a New Jersey private school, a girl was expelled for showing classmates a pocket-knife. School administrators sent a letter home: "In light of the recent tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, we all share a heightened sensitivity to potential threats to our children. I urge you to take this time to discuss with your children the importance of turning to adults when they have concerns about the behavior of others." This solution was straight out of "1984." In

fact, this was one of the things it's protagonist Winston was jailed for: refusing to report his friends for behavior that Big Brother deemed abnormal and disturbing (Katz).

While Big Brother is assumed to lurk only in "government schools" by critics of public schools, Katz points out that this kind of destructive, conformity-seeking behavior is practiced by school administrators of all types. This argument, that reaction to Columbine is generating a dangerous, witch hunt atmosphere, is a key element of the arguments posed by the experts discussed in Chapter Six.

Insanity/ Mental Health

Most of the theories attempting to explain the Columbine shootings do so from a standpoint that assumes that certain elements of Klebold and Harris's social environment or society in general had a decisive effect in making them kill. Certain psychological theories about the killings, however, assume that Klebold and Harris suffered from psychological conditions which were the ultimate cause of their violent behavior. Dave Cullen, who had written a series of articles dispelling the "myths" about the shootings for online magazine *Salon*, posted on article on the *Slate* website on April 20, 2004 presenting the theories that several psychologists had developed as early as the FBI's Leesburg summit in 1999. These FBI-associated psychologists argue that Klebold and Harris's behaviors were very different from each other. Klebold is discussed as "hotheaded, but depressive and suicidal." Harris, on the other hand, is diagnosed as a "psychopath," afflicted with a "superiority complex," "perpetual deceitfulness," and "a

total lack of remorse or empathy." After pointing out that psychopaths "are often serial

killers," the article ends on the idea that Harris could have become a serial killer had he

not committed the Columbine attacks:

> Harris was not a wayward boy who could have been rescued. Harris, they
> believe, was irretrievable. He was a brilliant killer without a conscience,
> searching for the most diabolical scheme imaginable. If he had lived to
> adulthood and developed his murderous skills for many more years, there
> is no telling what he could have done. His death at Columbine may have
> stopped him from doing something even worse (Cullen).

Such a model treats Harris as the victim of an inborn, intrinsic psychological bent

towards evil. "Irretrievable," there is no way that intervention of any sort could have

saved him from his natural inclinations.

More typically, the psychology-based theories about school shootings tend to

avoid the determinism of serial killer discourse. The National Alliance for the Mentally

Ill released a press release in 2001 publicizing its concern that school shootings are the

product of untreated mental illness:

> From Columbine to Santee…Violence in America's schools is no longer
> rare; it's epidemic. The public is outraged, parents are grieving, and
> fingers are pointed at the availability of guns, at broken families, at peer
> pressure, or at a pervasively violent culture. But no matter what experts
> may say, we all should know at least one thing instinctively: 14 and 15
> year olds who resort to violence may be suffering from more than just
> alienation. As the mother of a son with schizophrenia, and a former
> classroom teacher, I earnestly hope the epidemic of school violence forces
> us to confront the fact that, contrary to some popular misconceptions,
> children and adolescents do develop diagnosable and treatable mental
> illnesses. Early diagnosis, appropriate intervention and treatment can save
> lives (Shannon).

The "epidemic" of school violence is portrayed as a mental health crisis here, a crisis that

can be fixed with a more thorough application of what we already know about the

treatment of mental illness. Important here is the "illness" metaphor; while psychology

becomes destiny in the Cullen coverage of the diagnosis of Harris as a psychopath, here it

supports the idea that mental deviance is a disease that can be treated.

Another example of the psychologist's approach to school shootings is James

Garbarino's *Lost Boys*, published in 1999 just before the Columbine attacks. Garbarino

argues that while "there are individuals and cases that defy explanation,"

> we can make some sense of youth violence from the inside out, that is, by
> looking deeply into the lives of kids who kill and by listening closely to
> their own stories. In doing so we can see how problems accumulate and
> recognize the sequence of events in the life of a child that leads from
> childhood play to lethal violence, whether these events occur in urban war
> zones or in the small towns and suburbs of the heartland (Garbarino 6).

For Garbarino, violent youth, boys in particular, are "troubled" or "traumatized"; violent

feelings have an origin in feelings of helplessness, meaninglessness, and shame

(Garbarino 217-32). The way to counteract these feelings is by "connecting" the boys in

question

> to positive values and embodying them in positive relationships. These
> values and relationships help boys compensate for early experiences of
> emotional deprivation and trauma and protect them from the influences of
> social toxicity, negative peer groups, mass media violence, and the crass
> materialism of our culture (Garbarino 150).

While Garbarino acknowledges here that some of the factors posited as causes of school

shootings by other theories can certainly have a negative effect on a troubled child, the

child must be troubled in the first place for them to have an effect. In particular,

Garbarino sees the need for "adults who commit themselves unconditionally to meeting

the developmental needs of kids" (Garbarino 150). This brings up the parental

responsibility theory, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

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An opposing theory argues that school shootings are an iatrogenic illness, that is, they are generated by children's interaction with mental health professionals. In particular, this theory targets the rise in the use of drugs to treat mental illness in adolescents. An example of this argument was posted on the *Insight* website, the web extension of *The Washington Times*. The article, "Doping Kids," notes that Eric Harris was taking the drug Luvox and argues that many other school shooters, including Kip Kinkel, were on similar drugs, like Ritalin and Prozac. In order to establish psychiatric drugs as a causal connection between the shootings, the article dismisses many of the other causal theories:

> A great deal has been written about all of these cases. There have, however, been no indications that all of these children watched the same TV programs or listened to the same music. Nor has it been established that they all used illegal drugs, suffered from alcohol abuse or had common difficulties with their families or peers. They did not share identical home lives, dress alike or participate in similar extracurricular activities. But all of the above were labeled as suffering from a mental illness and were being treated with psychotropic drugs that for years have been known to cause serious adverse effects when given to children (O'Meara).

The article later quotes Bruce Wiseman, president of an organization called the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, "a California-based organization that investigates violations of human rights by mental-health practitioners": "If you think the Colombian drug cartel is the biggest drug dealer in the world, think again. It's your neighborhood psychiatrist. . . putting our kids on the highest level of addictive drugs" (O'Meara). Images of psychiatrists as "drug dealers" are used by this argument to cast doubt on the authority of the mental health field in general.

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Guns

That guns were used in the Columbine attack is indisputable. The controversial

claim occurs when guns are argued to be a critical causal factor in the attack and the

major element to change to prevent future acts of school violence. One of the critical

elements of this claim is to establish that the killings could not have happened with any

other weapons other than firearms. In a column for the online magazine *Renaissance*, for

example, James Iannone argues that

> Guns allow a person to kill many from a distance. A knife or another
> weapon could never cause the type of massacre that occurred in Littleton,
> Colorado. Guns allow a murderer to kill and remain almost detached from
> the carnage (Iannone).

A problem for this theory is the countertheory that the bombs Klebold and Harris set in

the cafeteria were intended to be the primary attack on Columbine and that the firearms

the killers carried were just a back-up plan (Cullen). Writing for *Salon*, Jake Tapper

argues against the idea that this countertheory invalidates the causal role of firearms in

the Columbine attack:

> They knew they wanted the kind of light, easily concealed, rapid-fire
> semi-automatic weapons they saw in their favorite video games and
> movies. Say, a TEC-DC 9 semiautomatic pistol. And a Hi-Point carbine
> rifle. . . The propane bombs didn't go off. If the bombs had exploded,
> hundreds would have been killed. But they didn't work. The TEC-DC 9,
> the Hi-Point carbine rifle and the two sawed-off shotguns did (Tapper).

Equally critical to the theory that easy access to guns caused the Columbine

shootings is pointing out the loopholes in existing gun laws that allowed them to acquire

their weaponry. Tapper focuses in particular on the role that the Tanner Gun Show in

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Denver, which he calls "the conduit of the Columbine shooting," played in supplying

Klebold and Harris. He starts his statement by pointing out that a variety of factors

created the boys' urge to kill,

> But the Tanner Gun Show is how the twisted nightmares of Klebold and Harris went from the dark recesses of their warped minds into the horror that appeared on our televisions on April 20. And without the National Rifle Association and its allies in government protecting the right of the Tanner Gun Show to be an anarchic flea-market for weapons of murder, it's quite possible that neither Klebold or Harris would be names we know (Tapper).

Not only are firearms "weapons of murder" in this assertion, but the gun show itself

becomes dangerous, "anarchic." By extension, for Tapper, the NRA's role in fighting

background checks at gun shows makes it responsible for arming Klebold and Harris.

The "weapons of murder" themselves, the specific types of firearm used by

Klebold and Harris, are also constructed by this theory to be key to enabling massacres.

In this argument, the shotguns that Klebold and Harris used, hunting weapons that had

been sawed-off for concealment purposes, disappear; the other two guns that the killers

used, the TEC-9 and the Hi-point carbine, both semiautomatic, become the focus. Tapper

argues that

> If you want to kill a lot of people in a short amount of time, the two higher-tech guns Klebold and Harris got are good buys. They're not hunting rifles. They're not the kind of guns real sportsmen use for target shooting. These guns, according to [Kristen] Rand [of the Violence Policy Center], are "military weapons. They're made for mowing people down." Mowing down people like sophomore Lance Kirklin, who snuck out of Columbine High School with two friends that morning for a smoke. A single shotgun blast certainly could have wounded or killed any of the three. As would have a hammer. Or a knife. Or a rock. But only a gun with real firepower could mangle three young bodies from head to toe in a matter of seconds – killing one of them, injuring another, and piercing Lance Kirklin with bullets in this face, chest, groin, leg, and foot (Tapper).

The vivid description of the injuries to Kirklin is meant to emphasize the "real firepower"

of the weapons, as is the accusation that such weapons have no legitimate sporting use.

Again, this is part of a move to demonstrate that no other type of weapon could have

enabled Klebold and Harris to kill as many people as they did. Iannone uses a similar

technique when focusing on the TEC 9:

> Guns in the 1790's were long, bulky rifles that an expert marksman would
> have a difficult time getting two accurate shots off inside of a minute.
> They bore no resemblance to a modified TEC 9 semiautomatic handgun
> that can fire 36 shots without being reloaded that Eric Harris and Dylan
> Klebold brought to Columbine High School on April 20 (Iannone).

Repeated assertions that weapons like the TEC 9 are different from the weapons the

Founders had in mind when drafting the Second Amendment create the picture that the

existence of these weapons is to blame for schoolyard massacres; they become the crucial

shift needed to explain why school shootings were not a problem in our nation's past.

The TEC 9 is also useful in attacking the assertions of the gun lobby that gun

owners and gun manufacturers are for the most part law-abiding, law-respecting citizens.

It attained a high level of infamy in the 1990s, being mentioned by name in various

pieces of city legislation and on the list of assault weapons whose sale and import was

banned by Congress in 1994. Tapper includes that infamy in his discussion of

Columbine:

> The TEC-DC 9 is a spinoff of the TEC 9. The TEC 9 is more likely to be
> used in violent crimes than any other handgun. . . Criminals like the TEC
> 9 because it's relatively cheap, small (about a foot long) and therefore
> easily concealed, and can carry 36-bullet clips. Its manufacturer, the
> Miami-based Navegar, has advertised the gun's "excellent resistance to
> fingerprints," and lauded the weapon as "high-spirited" and "as tough as
> your toughest customer." The difference between the TEC 9 and the

> TEC-DC 9 is one of marginal construction and maximum obnoxiousness. The city of Washington banned the TEC 9 by name in 1991, so Navegar made a slight modification – removing the threads on its barrel where a silencer fit and re-released the gun as the TEC-DC 9. It's said that the "DC" was thrown in as a middle finger aimed at Washington, D.C. . . . Klebold fired his TEC-DC 9 55 times. It killed four people and wounded two others (Tapper).

By including the narrative of the TEC-DC 9's origin, Tapper not only repeats the assertion that gun manufacturers are to blame for urban crime, but ties this older claim to the Columbine shootings. The weapon's history thus becomes the history of the Columbine shootings; the company's recklessness and defiance of gun control measures becomes a weapon for Klebold and Harris.

There is a theory put forward by some gun ownership advocates to counter the call for more gun control measures, however, that maintains that gun control measures were actually a factor in creating the Columbine shootings. An editorial by Paul Gallant and Joanne Eisen states this argument, citing a University of Chicago study claiming

> deaths and injuries from mass public shootings – like Littleton – fall dramatically after right-to-carry concealed-handgun laws are enacted. Their analysis of data from 1977-1995 shows that the average death rate from mass shootings plummeted by up to 91% after such laws went into effect, and injuries dropped over 80%! (Colorado was in the midst of considered just such a law when Klebold and Harris intervened.) Lott [one of the researchers behind the study] explained: "People who engage in mass public shootings are deterred by the possibility that law-abiding citizens may be carrying guns. Such people may be deranged, but they still appear to care whether they will themselves be shot as they attempt to kill others" (Gallant and Eisen).

Gallent and Eisen then extend this argument, asking, if fewer guns bring safety, "Why, then, the Littletons all of a sudden, when far fewer children today have legal access to guns, and familiarity with them?" They then observe that "Stricter gun laws have served

only to change the pattern of firearm access, fueling the black market. Forty years ago, kids could buy a gun over the counter, and it was considered normal for them to carry guns around for hunting and recreation. No Littletons then" (Gallant and Eisen). They then argue that "gun-free school zones" are a further aid to school shooters; they support this by pointing out the role that an firearm-owning school official had in stopping the Pearl, Mississippi shootings: "Assistant Principal Joel Myrick retrieved a handgun from his car, and interrupted Woodham's shooting spree, holding him at bay for four and a half minutes until police arrived" (Gallant and Eisen). In this view, firearm ownership would have prevented Klebold and Harris from developing their reckless attitude towards firearms, and if that hadn't prevented the shootings, concealed handguns among the school staff would have stopped the Columbine shootings before they reached the level they did. Rather than a marker of "anarchy" and destruction, as they are often portrayed in calls for more gun control, guns here become a symbol of responsibility and protection.

Militarization

A theory related to the theory blaming gun culture for Columbine is one that blames America's militaristic culture in general for generating school shootings. This argument tends to combine elements of the media violence and gun possession theories with a third element, America's use of and beliefs about its armed forces. Ronnie Casella

includes the following statement in a chapter about the role of militarization in zero

tolerance policies in her book *At Zero Tolerance*:

> When a question arises about the connection to school violence and other
> forms of violence in US society, a debate often ensues about influences,
> especially the influence of gun production, militarism, and popular culture
> on youths. While different issues arise when we speak of each of these
> three topics, they are connected in that they comprise what I have come to
> see as a military-economic complex. They have influenced the creation of
> a US society that is, in part, militaristic and supportive of corporate forces
> that have made the country a leader in gun manufacturing, firearm
> possession, and the production of an extremely violent popular culture
> (Casella 141).

Casella goes on to elaborate on this point:

> If US society continues to support militarism, to tolerate the mass
> manufacturing and distribute of weapons that have caused what health
> experts call a national health crisis in the country, and then to patronize
> needless violence in the media, then, those who take part in such activities
> continue to produce a culture that is partly defined by violence. This
> violence may, if other factors fall into place, lead to youth and school
> violence (Casella 145).

This is the ultimate example of the "corrupted system" arguments about Columbine;

rather than the product of a disease-like counterculture or subculture, Columbine was

caused by the means by which American society as a whole conducts itself, both

officially and unofficially.

In particular, such arguments are fueled by the fact that the United States was

engaged in a bombing campaign against Kosovo at the time of the Columbine shootings.

Casella links her arguments specifically to Columbine (and Kosovo, by extension) with

an anecdote describing an occurrence following the keynote address about school

violence at a national education conference:

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After the address, a member of the audience raised the issue of the unprecedented violence at Columbine High School by noting what he saw as irony: that, at the time of the high school shootings, US war planes had begun the bombing of Kosovo, while Bill Clinton in public speeches was lamenting the violence that had seemed to overrun the nation. The point was made, and, with knowing nods of the head, some in the audience showed their agreement that aggression in school is just one part of a more nationwide violence. Many felt Bill Clinton had missed the boat when he did not recognize his own connection to the problem (Casella 142).

A more aggressive version of this argument appeared on the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 21, 1999:

America's rulers claim, and perhaps believe themselves, that they can conduct clean, surgical wars from which US society can be insulated. They may have deluded themselves into believing that the images they manufacture comprise reality. But every objective act has objective consequences, and filthy acts have filthy consequences. There is a connection between the bombs that fall on Belgrade and the bullets that were fired into the helpless children in Littleton. For the past two decades the political establishment and the media have cultivated militarism, chauvinism and every form of social backwardness, the breeding grounds for anti-social and fascist elements. They have produced the Timothy McVeighs and Eric Rudolphs. The dead suspects in the Littleton shooting, who turned their weapons on themselves, belonged to a group that disdained black and Hispanic students and reportedly painted swastikas on their bodies (*World Socialist Web Site*).

This link between militarism, fascism, and the Columbine shootings brings us back to the hate crime argument. This time, however, the source of the hate is posited to be mainstream US culture and its political leaders.

This argument was not only found among those on the left. In the Phyllis Schlafly piece cited earlier, after Schlafly criticizes Hilary Clinton, she also includes a jab at the then-president:

[Eric] Harris was thrilled when Bill Clinton started bombing Yugoslavia. A classmate who sat next to him remembers Harris saying, "I hope we do go to war. . . [I want to] shoot everyone." Harris tried to enlist, but Marine

recruiters turned him down when they discovered he had taken a powerful anti-depressant drug called Luvox (Schlafly).

For the socialists of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Klebold and Harris are the manifestation of the basic fascism of American culture. Schlafly, on the other hand, portrays Harris as the extension of the Clintons. When Bill Clinton (not the military, notably, but the military anthropomorphized into Clinton) attacks Kosovo, Harris enthusiastically attacks Columbine. The accusation is the same as that used by the socialists, but the target is different; the system is not corrupt in this view, but the small group of people running it is.

Parental Responsibility

Of all the theories regarding the origin of the Columbine shootings, perhaps the most common invoked is the theory that the parents of the shooters are to blame for their actions. Most uses of this theory are based on general assumptions about the role of parents in raising children, not on specific condemnations of the Klebold or Harris families. In these theories, what are perceived by the commentator as typical characteristics of modern parents are projected onto the parents of the killers. The following editorial posted in the *Utmost Way* online magazine, is an example of this type of argument:

> Plain and simply, these kids [Klebold and Harris] were never taught right from wrong. Although I have never met any of the families involved, I cannot help but partially blame the parents for what has happened. The current generation of young people is being raised in a society that believes that all people are generally good. Society believes that children

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only learn evil from others. . . I know of many families that do not choose to give their children moral training when they are young. They believe that restrictions will stifle a child's creative outlets. I guarantee that there are certain creative outlets (such as blowing away classmates) that should be stifled. The parenting strategies of the 60's and 70's are backfiring on us. We didn't train our children in the right moral way, and so they choose their own path, that of death and destruction (Oakes).

The image of the permissive parent giving rise to an amoral killer is the center of such arguments. Contrary to the logic of most arguments blaming parents for the creation of killers, especially serial killers, the possibility of the Columbine shooters being the product of abusive parents is never discussed in these theories. As a result, the parental responsibility theories for Columbine argue that the school shooting crisis is the result of the failed experimental parenting techniques, usually personified in the figure of Dr. Spock, said to be favored by the Baby Boomers once they became parents, causing a drift away from the traditional American family; this protects the traditional family from being blamed and posits a return to traditional values as a solution.

The parental responsibility argument is often used as a debunking mechanism by those seeking to discredit one or more of the other causal theories discussed previously. One example of this can found in a *Rocky Mountain News* article about the post-Columbine move towards gun control; the article quotes Joe Leiper, the president of the Colorado Gun Collectors Association, who claims "It's not about guns. . . It's about education and family values – it's about people teaching their kids right from wrong" (Vaughan and Sprengelmeyer). A similar sentiment appears in an editorial posted on the website GamesAreFun.com, which invokes the parental responsibility theory to deflect blame away from video games and other entertainment products:

Notice that after the Columbine incident, the parents of the shooters quickly gave reasons why their kids would walk into their school with an arsenal of weapons and injure and murder others. But, notice that none of those reasons came back to them and their ability as parents. Instead, it was *Doom,* Marilyn Manson, and KMFDM that made their children do these heinous acts. . . Why didn't the parents realize their kids weren't happy? Why didn't the parents know that the kids had an entire arsenal of weapons stashed in their own houses? Did they even care? But, we're apparently not allowed to question the ability of these parents. They said that video games and music were the cause, and the media has decided to go with that angle (Altersitz).

The parents of Klebold and Harris not only get blamed for the massacre in this piece, but they also get blamed for originating the concern about video games and music as a cause of the shootings in order to act as a smokescreen to cover up their own neglect. There is absolutely no evidence to support this second accusation; the Klebold and Harris families issued no statements immediately after the shooting, and by the time they did start talking, the video game and music accusations had already been established. In fact, when he consulted the Klebolds as a source for an editorial piece, the *New York Times'* David Brooks reports that the Klebolds blamed Columbine's bully culture for Dylan Klebold's part in the killings, while Klebold's mother asserted that "Dylan did not do this because of the way he was raised. . . He did it in contradiction to the way he was raised" (Brooks, A17).

Many specific statements blaming the Klebold and Harris families were made as well, though, especially in the Littleton community. Among the first people to do so was the Jefferson County Sheriff, John Stone. An AP article from April 24, 1999 quotes Stone following the discovery of a diary kept by one of the gunmen and the discovery of "a shotgun barrel on a dresser and bomb-making materials" in one of their homes; Stone

declared that "A lot of this stuff was clearly visible and the parents should have known. . .

I think parents should be accountable for their kid's actions" (Hendren). Michael Shoels

also publicly blames the parents of the killers for the death of his son. At an event in

Brooklyn with Al Sharpton, Shoels stated, in a speech to the audience, "They ask us if we

blame the parents?. . . Who else do we blame? I taught my son right from wrong. My

son wasn't shooting people up. My son was in the library doing what he was supposed to

do" (Belkin). Even Tom Mauser, the father of victim Daniel Mauser, who has primarily

directed his energies towards advancing gun control legislation as the solution to

preventing future Columbines, dedicates a brief section of his website to criticizing the

Klebold and Harris families:

> I'm not a person who's prone to judge, condemn or look for blame in one
> place. I don't know the killers' parents, so I don't know much about their
> parenting. And, most unfortunately, the parents of the killers have shared
> none of their experiences or lessons with the world. I realize there are
> many factors that played into the development of the killers' hateful and
> dysfunctional behaviors. And I realize that child psychologists tell us that
> teens can hide much from parents. On the other hand, I must say that I
> cannot imagine how a loving parent could not be tuned enough into their
> child to see that they were harboring such hate that could lead to the desire
> to commit mass murder. How involved were they in their child's life that
> they could not see such alienation, such despair and such hatred? This
> aspect is simply beyond my comprehension as a parent (Mauser).

Although Mauser acknowledges his lack of complete information and his awareness of

"many factors" involved, he still uses his own experience as a parent to judge the killers'

parents as negligent.

The issue of the parents' legal responsibility for the shootings is also important.

The Klebold and Harris families, along with the family of one of the providers of the

killers' firearms, sought a settlement in 2000 to end the lawsuits against them, offering a

group of sixteen victims' families a total payment of $1.6 million (Sprengelmeyer and Abbot). All of these lawsuits except the one brought by the Shoels family for $250 million have been settled by the time of this writing.

Conclusion

Each presentation of the theories discussed here falls into one of two basic categories based on the primary metaphor that it uses to account for the Columbine shootings and school shootings in general. The first category consists of theories that portray the forces behind the shootings as an invasion or pollution threatening a generally sound society; this usually supports a call for the elimination of the polluting factor and a return to a supposed earlier state of normalcy. The second category sees Columbine as the product of a fatally flawed society; the solution in these cases usually involves drastic, novel social change.

The invasion metaphor emphasizes the role of an alien force from outside of ordinary, everyday society in causing Columbine. This alien force is typically the result of recent events, almost always the product of events going back no later than the 1960s. Two exceptions to this chronological limit are found in the theories presented in this chapter; one exception is that group of theories that links Klebold and Harris to Nazism, and the other exception is the Hornberger argument, which links the shooters to both Nazism and Roosevelt's post-Depression expansion of the federal government. For the most part, however, the invading force is portrayed as being the result of liberal

movements in the 1960s and 1970s. This narrative of moral decay bringing about the fall

of a great civilization echoes the generally accepted story of the fall of Rome, a once

strong, morally upright nation decaying into a corrupt cauldron of sexual depravity and

murder both for political gain and sport; the Nazis used a similar story to justify their

fascism, characterizing it as a necessary turn away from the supposed depravity and

moral weakness of Weimar Germany.

The invaders' primary damage to society, and the means by which they empower

school shooters, is claimed to be an attack on ideas of "right and wrong"; the move to

alter the moral codes of the past, either through specific intent or a more passive neglect,

results in a moral anarchy, which is then personified in Klebold and Harris. The

treatment of Klebold and Harris in this respect is very similar to some portrayals of the

murders committed by the Manson family in 1969. Vincent Bugliosi summarizes this

view in the 25th anniversary afterward added his book *Helter Skelter*:

> As *Time* magazine said in 1989 on the twentieth anniversary of the
> murders, the three female killers were "any family's daughters, caught up
> in a wave of drugs, sex and revolutionary blather that had swept up a
> generation of young people." Or some thought for a time after the
> murders, perhaps Manson and his disciples represented a ten- or twenty-
> year extrapolation of the direction in which the counterculture movement
> was going (Bugliosi 639).

Although Bugliosi maintains that this fear was misplaced and that "Manson and these

murders did not represent a foreboding extension of the direction in which the anti-

establishment movement was going" (Bugliosi 640), clearly the reaction of many to the

Columbine shooting indicates a strong strain of belief to the contrary.

The flawed society model, on the other hand, sees Columbine as the natural product of an unrealistic or pathological idea of normalcy. In these theories, this construct of what counts as normal accounts for violence in two ways. In the first version, that common to the bullying theories and the "geek" critique of school put forward by Katz, normalcy hurts others through exclusion or by generating violence against the excluded, and in return it drives those that don't fit in to strike back with even greater violence. In the second version, that used by militarization theories, Klebold and Harris are exemplars of normalcy, in that they were merely acting according to the core values of a violent American society.

Key to almost all theories of Columbine are conceptions of what is portrayed as "normal" and "healthy" in both the state of schools and for individual adolescent students. Although the flawed social model arguments highlight the constructed nature of normalcy, the invasion-based arguments treat normalcy as natural and unconstructed. In almost all of the cases discussed here, the Columbine shootings are considered to be a sign of danger applicable to the country in general; while school shootings are commonly acknowledged to be rare, they are still held by most of the claims-makers discussed in this chapter to be a sign of things to come, a significant indicator of danger as opposed to a freak occurrence with little relation to everyday life. The conditions that created Columbine and the other school shootings of the late 1990s are considered to be a sign that indicates a pathological condition has become accepted as "normal" in the United States, and the theories put forward to identify the causes of the shootings seek to

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establish a proper and healthy concept of normal, either constructed anew or drawn from the past, to replace this flawed and dangerous model.

It is important to note that events of school violence occurring in inner city schools during the 1980s were not perceived as marking a significant change in the conception of normal for the entire country. It was only when these acts of violence moved into rural and suburban schools that the idea "If it can happen here, it can happen anywhere" caused widespread concern that school violence was an indicator of deep American social problems. This would make sense, since, according to Lennard Davis in his book *Enforcing Normalcy*, the very concept of normal is irrevocably tied to the middle class: "With bourgeois hegemony comes scientific justification for moderation and middle-class ideology. The average man, the body of the man in the middle, becomes the exemplar of the middle way of life" (Davis 27). The portrayal of "normal" as corrupted or otherwise dysfunctional, which could only happen once the threat was perceived as affecting "healthy" parts of America, then provides justification for demands for wide-reaching change. It is also worth noted that rural areas are often posited as the seat of traditional values; in the city, deviations from tradition and the disruptions thought to come from these deviations are assumed to be common, but disruptions in "the heartland" are readily perceived an attack on said traditional values.

The next chapter will move from this discussion of the general climate of opinion regarding Columbine to the ways that policy makers attempted to transform this climate of opinion into action. Although he argues that the media plays the major role in the creation of crime waves, Fishman argues that

> It is clear that officials with a stake in "doing something" about crime
> have power over crime waves. Whether or not they inspire crime waves,
> they can attempt to redirect the focus of coverage of a crime wave already
> being reported. . . If an unwanted crime should arise, officials can use their
> newsmaking powers to deny the wave's existence or to redirect crime
> coverage into a "safe" direction (Fishman 67).

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the Columbine shooting was definitely a

"wanted crime"; it became a powerful tool for those policy makers seeking to wield the

weapon that the media and popular opinion had forged. Up until now, the battle over

Columbine has been portrayed primarily as a war of ideas struggling to become accepted

as "right." It is here, in this battle over policy, that the stakes being battled over in the

post-Columbine national social drama will become more concrete.

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CHAPTER THREE

SOLUTIONS LOOKING FOR A PROBLEM: COLUMBINE AND OFFICIAL

ACTION

In his book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, first published in 1984 and updated in 1994, Jon Kingdon introduces the model of "agenda setting," an attempt to explain governmental priorities and pushes for legislation. Kingdon arrived at this model through a series of interviews with people working at various levels of governmental decision-making. After repeatedly coming across the concept of "an idea whose time has come," the primary goal of the agenda setting model was to explain "What makes people in and around government attend, at any given time, to some subjects and not to others?" (Kingdon 1)

While policy direction can be attributed to a wide variety of factors depending on the nature of the perceived problem, many policy changes are spurred on by the public reaction to certain events that Kingdon calls "focusing events," events that force an issue to become reinterpreted as a problem requiring governmental action (Kingdon 94). Following Kingdon's example, Thomas Birkland specifically ties the concept of focusing

events to disasters. In his book *After Disaster*, he explains that the type of event that has

the potential to become a focusing event is

> an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as
> harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms,
> inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated
> on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is
> known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously (Birkland
> 22).

This definition perfectly describes the Columbine shootings. The shootings were

prefaced with no warning or buildup, and could thus be described as "sudden"; few

outside of Colorado had even heard of Littleton or Columbine High School, and few if

any in the Littleton community had expected Klebold and Harris to embark on a shooting

and bombing spree at Columbine. The event's suddenness is, in fact, a major part of its

perception, as all narrative accounts of the event continually stress its unexpectedness.

The death toll of the event (thirteen, fifteen counting Klebold and Harris

themselves) and substantial number of wounded established the "harmful" qualifier,

especially since the media was quick to point out that the death toll at Columbine was

higher than at any of the other shooting events widely perceived as being part of the

"school shooting epidemic" since the Pearl, Mississippi shooting in 1997. The

Columbine shooting, seen as the latest manifestation of this epidemic, also sparked fears

of copycat shootings, and thus also presented the threat of future harm.

While the immediate effects of the shooting were concentrated in the Littleton and

Denver area, the Columbine shootings' effect on a "definable geographical area"

expanded to the entire state, as reflected by the governor of Colorado's interest in the

case and his establishment of his investigative committee. This interest within Colorado,

however, is dwarfed by the fact that the Columbine shootings were a *school* shooting

incident, the latest in a series of such threats posed to high school students. The fact that

the majority of the victims, the group at potential future risk, and the killers themselves

were children only intensifies the feeling of crisis.

The last part of the definition, "known to policy makers and the public virtually

simultaneously," is extremely important to the study of the Columbine shootings. The

shootings were a major media event; while no cameras were at the scene when the

killings began, the cameras were there in time to capture the images of students rushing

out in droves, a body on the lawn, a wounded student being pulled to safety through a

window by police officers, and any number of other images of horror broadcast to a

shocked nation. As a live news event, authorities had little, if any, time to manage the

public's reactions to the event; this might very well be one of the reasons for the

continuing challenges to the official narrative established by the sheriff's office, as it

challenges many of the media conceptions of the event. In any case, the media coverage

classified the Columbine shootings with other infamous disaster events.   As Birkland

explains:

> Many events – the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, Three Mile Island, the Loma
> Prieta Earthquake, Hurricane Hugo – by their mere names conjure vivid
> and indelible images of destruction, fear, and environmental degradation.
> For many of us, these events serve as shared social and political
> experiences in which we ask each other, "Do you remember where you
> were when. . . ?" (Birkland ix)

An online CBS news article discussing the fifteenth anniversary of the Challenger

disaster provides a typical example demonstrating Columbine's status among other

infamous disaster events as a mass experience: "The images of the disaster were burned

into our collective consciousness and, like the JFK assassination and the Columbine shootings, it became a shared tragedy" (Weber).

While the majority of Birkland's book deals with natural disasters, he dedicates one chapter to a discussion of nuclear disasters. From looking at both kinds of disaster, Birkland observes that

> When society seems to have formed a consensus that the event was an "act of God," such as a natural disaster or freak accident, our attention turns to what we can do the help the victims. But when the disaster is the result of human failings – poor design, operator error, "corporate greed," or "government neglect" – our attention turns to the voluntary acceptance of responsibility for an event or to the more coercive process of fixing blame. Boards of inquiry are formed, legislatures hold hearings, and reports are issued, all in hopes of "learning something from this incident" to ensure that something similar does not happen again or, in the case of "unavoidable" disasters, in hopes of improving our preparation for and response to disasters (Birkland 2).

In the case of the Columbine shootings, public attention has mostly been focused on the "human failings" Birkland mentions. The desire to "learn something" from Columbine is immense; prevention of the next school shooting is always present as a stated concern of investigating parties. What makes the study of Columbine so interesting is that few commentators can agree on what needs to be done to avoid future shootings.

The effect of the shootings on local (Jefferson county) and state (Colorado) policy has been discussed previously; the actions and procedures of the sheriff's office have been subjected to scrutiny and numerous lawsuits aimed at fixing blame and identifying means of effective change, and the governor's commission report states its intent to support the governor's suggested and ordered policy changes in school security and crisis management in the state. The effect the shootings had nationally, however, is more difficult to assess from a policy standpoint. The post-massacre national crisis period

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becomes contested space, a social drama, where the actors involved present their

explanations, argue for future action, and take steps to implement their suggestions.

The power a focusing event can exert on public policy is immense, and this power

is usually more advantageous to those seeking policy change. As Birkland puts it,

> Indeed, focusing events, because they are so dramatic, sudden, and
> seemingly indicative of policy failure, can provide substantial benefits to
> advocates for policy change, particularly because focusing events usually
> indicate that something is going wrong, not that something is going
> well. . . The advantage gained by focusing events can be attributed to the
> dramatic, symbolic, and visceral power of these events, which can
> overcome more technical or statistical policy analysis (Birkland 133).

The challenge produced by Columbine was so disruptive that only one party involved, the

Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, has made any attempt at all to defend the status quo.

Every other entity that paid attention to Columbine, however, saw it as a clear demand

for some sort of change, either back to "traditional values" (a return to prayer in schools,

controlling violent media products) or forward towards a more progressive state (better

gun control, increased tolerance among students).

While he discusses the importance of focusing events to agenda setting, Kingdon

also notes that focusing events can only exert so much influence on their own. He

observes that

> In general, such a symbol acts (much as personal experiences) as
> reinforcement for something already taking place and as something that
> powerfully focuses attention, rather than as a prime mover in an agenda
> setting. Symbols catch on and have important focusing effect because
> they capture in a nutshell some sort of reality that people already sense in
> a vaguer, more diffuse way (Kingdon 97-8).

This newly defined and emphasized "reality" then calls for a solution. Kingdon makes an

important differentiation between problem selection and solution selection, however. He

uses the term "agenda" to identify "the list of subjects or problems to which

governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those

officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time" (Kingdon 3).

"Alternatives," on the other hand, are the list of considered solutions to the problems on

the agenda (Kingdon 4). This definition-enforced division emphasizes that problems and

their possible solutions are not as directly related as common sense would seem to

indicate. In fact, the cart often comes before the horse; Kingdon observes that

> In contrast to the problem-solving model, in which people become aware
> of a problem and consider alternative solutions, solutions float in and near
> government, searching for problems to which to become attached or
> political events that increase their likelihood of adoption (Kingdon 172).

The federal government's response to Columbine is a clear demonstration of this

dynamic. Although the problem of school shootings was portrayed by politicians and the

media as recent and unprecedented, the primary alternatives that ended up being

considered as solutions to the problem had been floating around Capitol Hill for years.

The agenda setting model helps to explain the field of action open to the policy-

makers participating in the national social drama following the Columbine shootings.

Although the crisis period following the shootings allowed for a far wider range of action

than was allowable prior to the entry into post-Columbine liminality, there were still

constraints on the power of the crisis. The story of post-Columbine policy making is the

story of actors working within these constraints to advocate their proposed solutions to

the fullest extent possible. The following sections each discuss one of the major

proposed solutions to Columbine and track each solution's progress either to the end of

its persuasiveness or to the time of this project's completion in December 2004.

Gun Control

One popular, pre-existing solution proposed to remedy the school shooting crisis was additional, stricter gun control legislation. Federal gun control has a long history in the United States, going back to the National Firearms Act in 1934. The most recent successful push for federal gun control legislation occurred in 1994 with the passage of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Significantly, these laws were signed during the Clinton presidency; Clinton, like many of his supporters, was in favor of gun control. The election of 1994, when the traditionally anti-gun control Republicans won control of Congress, however, marked a general move away from federal gun control legislation. Gun control initiatives, however, tend to be very reliant on focusing events; the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, for example, also known as the Brady Bill, was named for and supported by Jim Brady, the former White House Press Secretary who was shot and permanently disabled in 1981 during John Hinckley Jr.'s attempt to assassinate Reagan. The Columbine shootings, as a spectacular example of handgun violence perpetrated by minors, opened a new window of opportunity for gun control advocates.

In the immediate wake of Columbine, it looked like the gun control movement was going to make substantial political and public relations gains. The National Rifle Association cancelled most of the events that were to take place at its national convention in Denver a week after the shootings as a show of respect for the victims, but the mayor of Denver went further, asking the NRA to cancel the meeting entirely and calling on

Denver's citizens to call the NRA's 800 number to do the same (Flynn). On Mother's Day 2000, a year after the shootings, the Million Mom March brought thousands of anti-gun protesters to Washington D. C. calling for an end to the gun lobby's power and drawing parallels with the now much-weakened tobacco lobby (Starr). Even George W. Bush, then governor of notoriously pro-gun Texas, made election year attempts to distance himself from pro-gun forces, attacking Al Gore for allegedly being a former member of the NRA (Tapper). These public relations gains for gun control advocates, however, were not accompanied by much new legislation. In fact, one of the major Clinton-era gun control measures enacted prior to Columbine, the portion of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which banned the domestic manufacture of detachable magazines containing more than ten rounds and also banned the possession of nineteen specific models of semiautomatic rifles classified by the act as "assault weapons," was allowed to expire in September 2004. This was the result of a change in political leadership, as Democrats are typically far friendlier to gun control than Republicans, but it was also due to the replacement of the post-Columbine crisis with a new crisis: the September 11 attacks. This shift will be more fully discussed in the conclusion to this project.

Regulating Violent Video Games

In contrast to the gun control solution, which has a long and obvious history prior to its attachment to the school shooting crisis, the push for the regulation or elimination of violent video games initially appears to have been inspired specifically by school

shootings. The concern surrounding violent video games is a relatively new issue, only

capable of becoming a concern after video games advanced to the point where their

graphics and content were capable of being related to real-life violence; no one was likely

to complain about the violent consequences of witnessing one blip bouncing into another

blip. The seventh *MediaWise Video Game Report Card*, for example, posted online in

2002, reinforces its claims of potential dangers posed by video games with the following

descriptions:

> Even more disturbing this year is the fact that the best selling games of the
> past twelve months are not only ultra-violent, but feature brutal violence
> toward women. . . Several years ago we alerted parents about *Duke
> Nukem*, a game in which the player enters a room where naked women are
> tied to posts pleading with the gamer (as Duke), "Kill me. Kill me." *In
> Grand Theft Auto 3* (*GTA 3*), the top selling game of the past year, the
> player is rewarded if he murders a prostitute after having sex with her
> (National Institute on Media and the Family).

It is this issue's relation to depictions and representations of violence that robs it of its

novelty, however. Seen from this perspective, the move to control video game violence

is related to measures to prevent the reported negative effects of drama and poetry from

the days of Plato, movies in the 1930s, comic books in the 1950s, television in the 1960

and 1970s, and popular music in the 1980s. The largest concern of entertainment critics

has always been that consumers, especially young consumers, would emulate immoral or

antisocial behavior depicted in entertainment products. With video games, this concern is

heightened as a result of the participatory element of game playing; instead of witnessing

undesirable acts, game players virtually commit them. Joe Baca, California

congressional representative and originator of the proposed Protect Children from Video

Game Sex and Violence Act of 2002, specifically refers to this concern in his criticism of the aforementioned *Grand Theft Auto 3*:

> When kids play video games, they assume the identity of the characters in the game, and some of these characters are murderers, thieves, rapists, drug addicts and prostitutes. . . Do you really want your kids assuming the role of a mass murderer or a car-jacker while you are away at work? (Kane)

Although the previous examples are post-Columbine, a movement critical of violent video games was well established by 1995, when Dave Grossman dedicated a chapter of his book *On Killing*, a study of how soldiers are conditioned and prepared to kill, to the desensitizing effect that violent video games are reported to have on players. This was prior to the generally accepted beginning of the "school shooting epidemic," Luke Woodham's murders in Pearl, Mississippi in 1997. Interestingly, media influence in the Woodham shooting was largely overshadowed by the rumors that Woodham was part of a satanic cult. The link between media violence and school shootings, however, was primarily established by Michael Carneal's shooting spree in Paducah, Kentucky later in 1997. In 1998, a $33 million lawsuit was filed by the families of three of Carneal's victims against a series of entertainment companies, claiming that Carneal was inspired to kill by the film *The Basketball Diaries* and video games including *Doom*, *Quake*, and *Mortal Kombat* ("Parents"). Although this particular suit was dismissed in 2000, it was still active at the time of the Columbine shootings, and it likely inspired the similar lawsuit filed by the family of Columbine victim Dave Sanders.

Since Columbine, legislation has been pursued on the state and national level to restrict minors' access to games featuring content judged to be violent, sexual, or otherwise harmful. In May 2003, the state of Washington made it illegal "to rent or sell

video games containing graphic violence against law enforcement officers to children under the age of 17" (Office of Governor Gary Locke). The Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act of 2003, H. R. 669, aims do this one better on the federal level; it proposes punishing the sale or rental of violent or sexually explicit video games to minors with fines ranging from $1000 to $5000, and it was still in committee as of February 2004. Both pieces of legislation were made possible by a U. S. District Court ruling defending a St. Louis city ordinance banning the sale or rental of violent video games to minors without parental consent; the ruling established that video games are not included in the Bill of Rights' protection of freedom of speech (Cohen). The Entertainment Software Ratings Board also modified the ratings system enacted in 1994, adding "intense violence," "sexual violence," "fantasy violence," and "cartoon violence" to their list of content descriptions as of September 2003 (Weisbaum). This latest move was made in response to pressure from Senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl, among others, who in 2002 announced the possibility of holding Congressional hearings to publicize the perceived flaws and lack of information included in the ESRB's system (Wright). This movement towards self-regulation is similar to the creation of the Hayes production code and the Comics Code Authority; it is not government-mandated, but it is a response to government pressure.

Zero Tolerance Policies

A third prominent solution attached to the school shooting crisis was the idea of the zero tolerance policy. Russell Skiba and Kimberly Knesting, critics of zero tolerance

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policies from the field of education, trace the phrase "zero tolerance" back to a 1986 program aimed at impounding drug-carrying boats; by 1989, the phrase and its implied no-leniency stance started appearing in disciplinary rules passed by various school districts. The idea then appeared in the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandated that in order to receive federal funds, each state had to enact a law requiring school officials to expel a student caught possessing a firearm on school grounds for a period of at least one year, and the law must also require schools to report such students to local law enforcement. This concept evolved into numerous state rules requiring school officials to pass down mandatory punishments for infractions involving weapons, violence, and illegal drugs (Skiba and Knesting 19).

Columbine was a major focus event for advocates of zero tolerance policies; supporters of the policies argued that such a policy or set of policies at Columbine could have punished Klebold and Harris's various lesser infractions and brought them to the attention of local authorities, either scaring them onto the straight and narrow or removing them from the school before they could act on their threats. More importantly, Skiba and Knesting note that zero tolerance policies are also seen as a strong deterrent for potential future offenders, the need for which is legitimized by the perception of a "near epidemic" of school violence (Skiba and Knesting 20). More importantly to their critics, however, as with many of the other policy changes following Columbine, zero tolerance policies act as a potent symbol that action is being taken to deal with this perceived crisis. Roger Ashford, an assistant principal writing an article for the journal *Principal*, observes that

Whether effective or not, zero-tolerance policies send the American public the message that school are taking positive, aggressive action to address a situation that is perceived to be a real and present danger for school and children. The media coverage given to recent incidents of school violence only galvanizes public opinion in favor of zero tolerance and harsh penalties for students who bring weapons to school. In the face of such publicity, legislators do not wish to appear soft on crime and violence (Ashford 30).

The deadly consequences of Columbine and other school shootings act as a powerful motivating symbol, overwhelming the reservations that public officials might have about such dramatic action in ordinary circumstances. Ashford quotes an Iowa school board member: "It's so easy to condemn unless you're sitting in a position where you've got to protect all kids. . . I'd rather be seen a fool than be responsible for someone's death" (Ashford 30). Overreaction is often preferred, given the stakes perceived to be involved.

The Columbine shootings also led to zero tolerance policies aimed at a new type of disciplinary infraction: bullying. Concern over bullying in schools existed before Columbine, of course, but bullying worries were intensified by the perception that what before supposedly only resulted in hurt feelings and minor injuries could now inspire murderous rage. The attachment of bullying to zero tolerance policies, previously primarily reserved for weapon and drug possession, was justified by this perception of bullying as a life-and-death issue. Interestingly enough, however, although they are often referred to as "zero tolerance programs" by their initiators and the press, anti-bullying programs don't always establish clear and relatively immutable penalties for offences, the actual defining characteristic of the entire concept of "zero tolerance." Typical of these "zero tolerance in name only" policies is the policy enacted by the Houston Independent School District in 2001. As part of this new initiative, teachers and administrators were

given training to help spot and intervene in bullying incidents and students were encouraged to report bullying to school authorities; the *Houston Chronicle* article covering the new policy, however, mentions nothing about any new punishments for bullying. Apparently the words "zero tolerance" are used as an indicator of the intensity of the district's intent to combat this problem. Although concerns regarding "the possible ill treatment of Muslim students after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks" are mentioned in the *Chronicle* article, the specter of Columbine blatantly looms behind the policy, as indicated when the article quotes the school district's special projects manager: "Our goal is to make schools bully-free. We can't let bullying continue. . . If we have a Columbine, people will say why didn't we do anything about it. [sic]" (Bryant). Again, we see that zero tolerance policies might be intended as legitimate solutions to a problem, but they are also intended to be readily observable signs that the school district is acting, as well as a means of deflecting criticism anticipated should a tragedy occur.

The growth in the popularity of zero tolerance policies among school officials has been accompanied by the spread of zero tolerance horror stories. Skiba and Noam's book cites numerous examples of these stories, as do many of the education articles critical of zero tolerance. The internet is home to numerous sites featuring these stories; typical of these is endzerotolerance.com, which features various accounts of "zero tolerance nightmares," links to news articles about zero tolerance, and a bulletin board for readers to share their concerns. After relating the story of Becca Johnson, an 11-year old suspended for drawing "doodles" of teachers with arrows through their heads on the back of a test paper, an ABC news report contains the following sampling of zero tolerance atrocity narratives under the heading "Litany of Absurdity," while claiming that "every

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week it seems there is another case that provides fodder for arguments against the policies":

> The same week that Johnson was suspended. . . a 17-year old in Fayette County, Ga., was suspended and arrested when school officials found a machete he used in his part-time landscaping business in the back of his truck, which he'd driven to school. . . In April, a Madison, Wis., sixth-grader was suspended and told he would be expelled for a year when he brought a steak knife to school to dissect an onion for a class science project. . . Earlier this spring, a 10-year-old Sumter County, Fla., girl was suspended after she pointed an oak leaf she was pretending was a gun at a classmate during a game she called "Civil War". . . Also this spring, a Virginia boy who dyed his hair blue was given an in-school suspension because of the unusual color or his coif, which school officials termed disruptive (Schabner).

These zero tolerance horror stories tend to point toward two possible solutions: working within the public school system to change it through greater involvement or withdrawal from the system by turning to private schools or home schooling. In all cases, the suffering of the student involved is always intended to illustrate uncaring and ineffective actions committed by a rule-bound bureaucracy.

The stories posted on endzerotolerance.com tend to emphasize a feeling of violated trust in school systems. The site's introduction to "Howard's Story" sums up this general distrust of those who create and enforce zero tolerance policies:

> Parents go into these things encouraging there children to be forthright, honest and to take responsibility for their actions. They go into it naively thinking the school officials are "friends." They want to trust the system and support the system. BIG MISTAKE! You might as well put a blindfold on your child and encourage him to play pin the tail on the donkey on an LA Freeway at rush hour. Believe me if your school has Zero Tolerance policies the SCHOOL OFFICIALS ARE NOT YOUR FRIENDS AND CAN NOT BE TRUSTED when your child gets in trouble [sic, capitals in original] (endzerotolerance.com).

This claimed loss of trust is not only on the part of parents, however. "Brad's Story," written by Brad's mother, maintains that, in spite of the favorable resolution of his family's zero tolerance-related incident, Brad has been damaged by the experience:

> Some think we were lucky. When you read the many stories like mine, I guess we were, but something was destroyed in my son, something was lost, something will never be the same. My son will never trust again and this experience has definitely changed him in ways I haven't even fully seen yet (endzerotolerance.com).

The writer of "D.J.'s Story" maintains that the reckless, authoritarian actions of schools can even go so far as to destroy a young man's sense of patriotism:

> Now, two years later, we are only starting to recover and get D.J. back on track. He became a very angry young man, but is beginning to recover. He refuses to salute the American flag and tells us he wants to leave this Country when he is old enough. He knows the truth. So does the school, the courts and the little "friends" who lied about him. D.J. and his brothers are now in private schools. We do not encourage anyone to put their child in any public school (endzerotolerance.com).

From this perspective, zero tolerance policies are attacking the community rather than fighting school shootings. Any effectiveness that these policies might have had in stopping violent incidents is completely secondary to the damage the policies have done to the wallets and well-being of victimized students (universally portrayed as basically good and ultimately harmless) and their families.

Improving Physical Security

Zero tolerance policies are only a portion of the safety programs that schools have pursued following the Columbine shootings; many schools have also tightened the physical security of their campuses. These safety measures have included making

students carry clear plastic or mesh backpacks, having visitors to the school sign in, setting up metal detector stations at school entrances, adding video cameras to school hallways, and holding fire drill-like school shooting drills. These changes to schools were widely announced and were the subject of numerous news articles. An April 20, 1999 AP article by Noelle Knox, for example, "Metal Detector Industry Swamped With School Orders," maintains that Garrett Metal Detectors' sales to schools increased dramatically:

> Sales to schools have grown from almost nothing four years ago into the largest share of the company's business – surpassing orders for airports, prisons, and courts, said Jim Dobrei, vice president of marketing for Garrett, the nation's largest maker of metal detectors (Knox).

A *Rocky Mountain News* article from August 7, 1999 details the new security precautions taken at Columbine High School for the 1999-2000 school year, stating that

> Sixteen new video cameras and round-the-clock security guards will keep watch as Columbine students and staff return to school this month. The cameras and guards, as well as new student identification badges, a card key entry for after-hours use of the school building, and an additional campus security officer, are part of the back-to-school safety precautions revealed Friday [August 6, 1999] (Kurtz).

Along the same lines, a *Wired* article from August 2000 by Chris Oakes about electronic surveillance in schools says the following:

> In the post-Columbine era of school safety, closed-circuit video, metal detectors, and door monitors are becoming routine. Congress and the U.S. Department of Energy, state task forces, and district superintendents are among the ardent supporters of surveillance systems for safer schools. In large urban schools where violence can be routine, administrators see surveillance systems as a way to bring a semblance of control to chronically violent hallways. Where violence is not a major problem, principals and superintendents call the installations preventive, eager to show a tangible reaction to Columbine and other school shootings (Oakes).

This *Wired* quote illustrates the point that many of these changes are not in fact driven by "post-Columbine" fears of mass school shootings. In urban school districts, schools are more concerned about "routine" threats. Although it focuses on surveillance, the article still mentions metal detectors in a matter-of-fact way as part of the total security package. One might get a different idea after reading the above three articles, but about 1% of American schools reported using daily metal detector scans on their students and about 4% used random metal detector scans prior to the Columbine shootings in the 1996-1997 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics' *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998* (121), and only 1.7% of schools reported using daily scans and 7.8% used random scans in the 1999-2000 school year, according to the NCES's *Schools and Staffing Survey, 1999-2000* (21). While this statistical increase (nearly double) would certainly result in substantially better sales for metal detector companies, it would hardly make interesting news given the small numbers still involved. What is very interesting, given the suburban and rural focus of school massacre concerns, is that among urban schools, metal detector use was far higher both before and after Columbine; 2% and 8% of urban area schools used daily scans and irregular scans, respectively, in 1996-1997, and these numbers increased to 5% and 14.4% in 1999-2000. As these figures indicate, many urban schools adopted metal detectors as part of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (CNN). While Columbine and the other school shootings of the late 90's did cause a jump in awareness of and concern about school safety across the country, school safety was clearly already a concern in many areas.

The post-Columbine security changes, however, have resulted in a backlash very similar to that against zero tolerance policies. In the *Rocky Mountain News* article cited

above, describes the reaction of Stephanie Plank, a senior at Columbine in the 1999-2000

school year, to the school's post-shooting security measures:

> "Dylan and Eric, if this would have happened this year, they would wear
> IDs just the same and walk into the school, just the same". . . Plank
> respects the school's efforts to keep kids safe. But she thinks ID badges
> are "stupid." Columbine students weren't required to wear ID badges
> before the shootings. "It's going to be weird this year," she said. "It's not
> going to be like our school. It's going to be like a prison" (Kurtz).

The article does mention that the badges and other security measures are partially meant

to keep morbidly curious visitors away. Plank's observation, however, does highlight

two odd dynamics of the post-shooting situation at Columbine: not only is the school

assuming an external threat over an internal one and externalizing threats with rhetorical

strategies like the "We are Columbine" slogan (assuming threats to the community are

"not Columbine," even if they are Columbine High School students), but the security

measures have simultaneously sabotaged this reaffirmed sense of community.

Concerns about the effectiveness of these school security measures are included

in the aforementioned *Wired* article. Mary Ann Raywid from Hofstra College, for

example, claims in the article that the focus on security is missing two of the main causes

of Columbine, bullies and large schools:

> What people should have picked up from this is how hurt and maimed
> kids can get. They are ill-treated by their peers. So as long as you keep
> large high schools where kids can travel and never be seen, that's what
> happens to a lot of them (Oakes).

The article goes on to state that

> "As soon as you stick in a security guard, you're saying something to kids
> about what you think of them," Raywid said. While she was working in a
> New York City school, Raywid said she saw students intentionally play
> games where the goal was to hide things from security cameras, and shield
> knives and guns from metal detectors. The games even made kids who

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wouldn't be interested in bringing guns and knives to school compete just to see if they could "beat the machine" (Oakes).

As with many arguments against zero tolerance, we see here the concern that school measures are actually turning students against school and authority, potentially making school violence worse. Regardless, the move towards fortifying school security has continued in the post-September 11 crisis period, and will likely survive its end.

Conclusion

Nina Buchanan of the University of Hawaii at Hilo is quoted in Oakes' *Wired* article as saying that

> The bigger picture of what's going on in schools is sort of ignored. . .
> People want to do a quick fix. They want to just put a little money here, or do something over there – and it doesn't work, no matter what it is we're talking about – raising achievement or making schools safe (Oakes).

Each of the solutions for the "school shooting crisis" discussed in this chapter is dismissed by opponents as a misguided "quick fix" or political opportunism; if we regard Columbine as an example of one of Mark Fishman's crime waves, it is arguable that all of these proposed solutions are quick fixes. It is beyond the scope of this work to determine the exact motives of the movements in question; perhaps some are cynically using Columbine to push an agenda, while others sincerely believe that they have discovered the solution that can save lives and fight a scourge that threatens children across our nation. Regardless of the motives of the people involved, these proposals have been advanced, and they are structured in ways that present an argument that can be studied. These examples demonstrate that the various political and policy solutions that

have been proposed for the school shooting crisis have lives prior to this perceived crisis.

Although this chapter discusses these solutions primarily as abstract forces, the following

chapters will look at those specific agents, whether individuals or organizations,

proposing and advocating these solutions. Perhaps the most important lesson to be

derived from the theory of agenda-setting is the idea that problems are never just a

solitary event or crisis; they are inevitably part of a larger web of problems and issues,

not matter how novel they might seem.

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CHAPTER FOUR

FEDERAL AGENCIES ADAPT TO THE NEW PROBLEM

Columbine and the other catastrophic school shootings of the late 1990s, after

being defined as a crisis situation demanding action, were used to advance a wide variety

of preexisting plans and actions on the federal level. The previous chapter addresses

some of the attempts by the legislature to match various solutions to the school problem.

Congress was not the only federal governmental body interested in Columbine, however;

three organizations, the Department of Education, the Department of Justice (in

particular, the FBI), and the Department of the Treasury (in particular, the Secret

Service), produced widely distributed and publicized reports suggesting courses of action

for local law enforcement and school districts.

In his essay "Personal Power and Social Restraint in the Definition of Folklore,"

Roger Abrahams maintains that

> Power exists not in control over a problem situation itself but in the ability
> to objectify the situation in symbols -- words, pictures, enactments -- and
> in the presentation of the problem in a context that not only gives the

situation a name or an image but also provides for its resolution
(Abrahams 19).

From this perspective, each attempt to describe and define the conditions that produce a

school shooting, as well as each attempt to implement a set of solutions, is an exercise in

maintaining and extending power. The authority of the problem/ solution structure,

however, is not directly related to objective, actual control over a situation; it is a

function of how persuasive the symbolic presentation of the situation is. This is the

theme of the next three chapters; instead of those with immediate power to affect the

situation, the policy-makers, we will be examining those attempting to rhetorically

control the conception of the school shooting crisis.

These reports are an attempt to expand the authority of each of the three agencies

mentioned above and of the federal government in general, but not in direct terms, such

as with demands for more jurisdictional authority; neither the Secret Service or the FBI

argues that school shootings should be redefined as a federal crime, much less a crime

that they should be primarily in charge of fighting, and the Department of Education,

already maligned enough by its foes as a federal government intrusion into the power of

state and local authorities, would never realistically demand access to any sort of law

enforcement duties. These agencies instead are fighting for a role as the authoritative

expert providing advice and shaping the responses of local law enforcement; they are

fighting over the right to define and diagnose problems and then suggest treatment, but

not over the direct administering of said treatment. In real terms, this expansion of

authority would bring greater funding, prestige, and ability to accomplish organizational

goals. This chapter will examine the school shooting reports published by each of these

three federal organizations and the means by which each report attempts to establish itself, and its publishing agencies, as an authoritative voice in school shooting discourse and the nation as a whole.

The Department of Education

The US Department of Education was created in 1980. According to its website, the organization's guiding mission is "to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation." In accordance with that mission, the organization is involved in "Establishing policies on federal financial aid for education, and distributing as well as monitoring those funds," "Collecting data on America's schools and disseminating that research," "Focusing national attention on the educational issues it prioritizes," and "Prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education" (US Department of Education).

As the primary body of the federal government overseeing education, and also as the primary collector of education data and statistics, it seems well within its organizational parameters that the Department of Education would become involved in the attempt to create safer schools following the school shootings of the late 1990s. It first addressed this problem in a substantial way in 1998 with the publication of *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, a joint project with the Department of Justice and mental health and education organizations. The trigger event for this project was Kip Kinkle's shooting spree at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon

in May 1998. The introductory letter from Richard Riley, the Secretary of Education,

and Janet Reno, the Attorney General, states that

> President Clinton directed the Department of Education and the
> Department of Justice to develop an early warning guide to help "adults
> reach out to troubled children quickly and efficiently." This guide
> responds to that Presidential request. It is our sincere hope that this guide
> will provide you with the practical help needed to keep every child in your
> school out of harm's way (Dwyer, Osher and Warger i).

Although this report was issued nearly a full year before the Columbine shootings, it

helped establish many of the recommendations that would be made again after that

shooting and guide the content of the other two major reports discussed in this chapter,

and as such it is important to include in a study of the federal government's reaction to

Columbine.

Early Warning, Timely Response begins with the following statement:

> Most schools are safe. Although fewer than one percent of all violent
> deaths of children occur on school grounds – indeed, a child is far more
> likely to be killed in the community or at home – no school is immune.
> The violence that occurs in our neighborhoods and communities has found
> its way inside the schoolhouse door (Dwyer, Osher and Warger 1).

This last metaphor, violence breaking the boundary of "the schoolhouse door,"

establishes the idea that violence is alien to school; while some critics charge that the

school environment is key in generating violent behavior and especially school shootings,

this report begins with this image of a safe place polluted by the problems created in the

home and community. However, the report does later discuss the role schools play in

creating "safety and order":

> Well-functioning schools foster learning, safety, and socially appropriate
> behaviors. They have a strong academic focus and support students in
> achieving high standards, foster positive relationships between school staff

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and students, and promote meaningful parental and community involvement (Dwyer, Osher and Warger 3).

The report also states that

> Research has demonstrated repeatedly that school communities can do a great deal to prevent violence. Having in place a safe and responsive foundation helps all children – and it enables school communities to provide more efficient and effective services to students who need more support (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 5).

While school's role in preventing violence is emphasized, school's potential role in generating violence is not; discussing school as a major cause of school shootings is a strategy completely missing from all three of the government-generated reports discussed in this chapter. The level of distrust in institutional authority needed to support such an argument seems to be incompatible with claims to authority made by a federal organization.

The primary focus of the report, as indicated by President Clinton's order for an "early warning guide," is a list of warning signs indicating potential violent activity. Before the warning signs list are a variety of warnings about how the signs should be used and the dangers of applying warning signs in a reckless fashion:

> There are early warning signs in most cases of violence to self and others – certain behavioral and emotional signs that, when viewed in context, can signal a troubled child. But early warning signs are just that – indicators that a student may need help. Such signs may or may not indicate a serious problem – they do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide us with the impetus to check out our concerns and address the child's needs . . . However, it is important to avoid inappropriately labeling or stigmatizing individual students because they appear to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. It's okay to be worried about a child, but it's not okay to overreact and jump to conclusions (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 6).

After pointing out, in bold face type, no less, that "there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted," the report presents a series of principles guiding the application of the warning signs, principles which include "understand violence and aggression within a context," "avoid stereotypes," and "understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs" (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 7). Then, immediately before the actual list of early warning signs, a final warning is issued:

> Moreover, it is inappropriate – and potentially harmful – to use the early warning signs as a checklist against which to match individual children. Rather, the early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help. School communities must ensure that staff and students only use the early warning signs for identification and referral purposes – only trained professionals should make diagnoses in consultation with the child's parents or guardian (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 8).

This series of warnings and caveats is aimed at controlling the powerful rhetoric of the list of warning signs, a rhetorical device used to present points in an attention-capturing, easy to remember, and easy to apply way. The worry seems to be that the list works so well that it will overwhelm the rest of the report's recommendation. Given the preponderance of hyperbolically-presented lists of warning signs in news articles about school shootings and the centrality of these lists in all of the governmental responses to school shootings discussed here, this concern seems well-founded.

The list of warning signs in *Early Warning, Timely Response* includes "social withdrawal," "excessive feelings of isolation and being alone," "Excessive feelings of rejection," "being a victim of violence," "feelings of being picked on a persecuted," "low school interest and poor academic performance," "expression of violence in writings and drawings," "uncontrolled anger," "patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating,

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and bullying behaviors," "history of discipline problems," "past history of violent and

aggressive behavior," "intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes," "drug use

and alcohol use," "affiliation with gangs," "inappropriate access to, possession of, and

use of firearms," and "serious threats of violence" (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 8-11).

Many of these items appear on the school shooter warning sign lists generated by the

post-Columbine studies discussed in this chapter and by other, non-governmental

organizations.

     Early Warning, Timely Response also identifies a set of warning signs beyond the

early warning signs, the imminent warning signs:

> Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student
> is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self
> and/or to others. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response
> . . . When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must
> always be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken
> immediately (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 11).

The imminent warning signs include "serious fighting with peers or family members,"

"severe destruction of property," "severe rage for seemingly minor reasons," "detailed

threats of lethal violence," "possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons," "other

self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide." Separated from this list and given special

emphasis are two additional signs: "has presented a detailed plan (time, place, method) to

harm or kill others – particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted

to carry out threats in the past" and "is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has

threatened to use it" (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 11). The warning signs on the second

(and third) tier are given authority that the early warning signs lack; the imminent

warning signs section is accompanied by no warnings about stigmatization or

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overreaction, indicating a much higher level of trust that local authorities will be able to follow them to appropriate action.

One of the items on the early warning sign list indicates a conflict within the report regarding its intended mission: "affiliation with gangs." None of the school shooting suspects in the late nineties wave of catastrophic shootings was a member of a gang. The letter from the Secretary of Education and Attorney General at the beginning of the report states its clear relationship to the Springfield shooting, and the introduction of the report further outlines its focus on fighting the perceived wave of nineties school shootings:

> The 1997-1998 school year served as a dramatic wake-up call to the fact that guns do come to school, and some students will use them to kill. One after the other, school communities across the country – from Oregon to Virginia, from Arkansas to Pennsylvania, from Mississippi to Kentucky – have been forced to face the fact that violence can happen to them. And while these serious events trouble us deeply, they should not prevent us from acting to prevent school violence of any kind (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 1).

Although *Early Warning, Timely Response* was definitely created in response to the Springfield shootings and these similar school shooting events, the report maintains that it deals with all forms of school violence:

> The term "violence," as it is used in this booklet, refers to a broad range of troubling behaviors and emotions shown by students – including serious aggression, physical attacks, suicide, dangerous use of drugs, and other dangerous interpersonal behaviors. However, the early warning signs presented in this document focus primarily on aggressive and violent behaviors toward others (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 2).

The report later specifically lists the threats it is best equipped to address: "Weapons used in or around schools, bomb threats or explosions, and fights, as well as natural disasters,

accidents and suicides" which "call for immediate, planned action, and long-term, post-crisis intervention" (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger 27-8).

The "gang affiliation" warning sign and the inclusion of "fights" and "bomb threats" in the events anticipated by the report are part of an effort to re-contextualize these pre-school shooting problems and re-categorize them as serious issues needing the same kinds of immediate attention and long-term planning that preventing and preparing for school shootings requires. This desire to create a tool for universal violence prevention based on the school shooting prevention model disappears following the Columbine shooting, however, as the other reports discussed in this chapter indicate. After Columbine, the school shooting became enough of a public concern to warrant its own specialized preventative approach.

The report's methodology section makes it clear that it was assembled without the benefit of first-hand research. It has an extensive references list, however, and maintains that "Each assertion in the guide is backed by empirical data and/or expert consensus" (Dwyer, Osher and Warger 32). This ends up being a major difference between this report and the post-Columbine reports primarily authored by the FBI and the Secret Service, which rely extensively on interview material. The authors of *Early Warning, Timely Response* clearly are not satisfied with the appearance that the report is only based on "ivory tower"-style book research; this is evident by the way the report elaborately explains the drafting process it went through and the various groups who provided feedback:

> The guide was conceptualized by an interdisciplinary panel. The writing team, led by Kevin P. Dwyer, included members of the expert panel . . .

The writing team drew upon the other expert panelists for guidance and for resources. The first draft was reviewed for accuracy by the entire expert panel as well as the staff from the federal agencies. The federal reviewers are listed on the project's Web site. . . The second draft was reviewed by family members, teachers, principals, and youth, in addition to the leaders of major national associations (Dwyer, Osher and Warger 32).

The web site given by the report does indeed list the names and brief credentials of the reviewers. This description of the review process operates to give the report an aura of authenticity supported by those with first hand experience of the current state of American education and professional consensus across a wide variety of disciplines.

As previously stated, *Early Warning, Timely Response* was prepared with the help of the Department of Justice. After Columbine, the Department of Justice (specifically, the FBI) published its own report on preventing school shootings. The Department of Education later collaborated with the Secret Service in the creation of its post-Columbine set of guidelines for educators.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation

The organization that became the Federal Bureau of Investigation was created in 1908 as an investigative agency to support the Office of the Attorney General. Prior to that point, the Attorney General had to borrow agents from the Treasury Department for any investigative purposes. Due to congressional concerns about "a national police force" transforming into a "secret police," the new agency was given neither the power to make arrests nor to carry weapons (Kessler 9-10). The organization was involved in

investigating fraud and espionage at that point, but it wasn't until J. Edgar Hoover was

named as its director in 1924 that the organization began to attain any level of power or

prestige. Hoover began a program of professionalization, demanding that agents dress

conservatively, be promoted based on merit, and be trained identically. Hoover also

established the FBI's first crime laboratory, although apparently its only actual use was to

impress visitors (Kessler 19-22).

The Bureau of Investigation made its reputation in the 1930s through a constant

war on gangsters and involvement in high profile cases like the Lindbergh kidnapping,

gradually establishing itself as an organization to be trusted. Hoover went so far as to

denounce the deaths of a Bureau agent and three other lawmen in a shootout in Kansas

City in 1933 as "a challenge to law and order and civilization itself" (Kessler 31). To

continue to association of the organization with the highest American ideals, the

organization's name was changed in 1935, as Ronald Kessler describes:

> Hoover was not persuaded; [assistant director Edward A.] Tamm pointed
> out that the initials FBI also stood for the qualities that make for a good
> agent: fidelity, bravery, and integrity, which became the bureau's motto.
> Finally, Hoover accepted the idea. On July 1, 1935, the bureau changed
> its name to Federal Bureau of Investigation. FBI became a brand name.
> Suddenly, there were G-man radio shows, magazines, comic strips, toys,
> and bubble gum cards. In 1935 alone, Curt Gentry calculated, there were
> sixty-five movies glorifying the FBI, the most popular being Warner
> Brothers' *G-Man* starring James Cagney. In every show, the G-man was a
> hero (Kessler 40).

The FBI fell on hard times by 1975, however, when both the Senate and the House

started investigating various abuses of power by the FBI, ranging "from COINTELPRO

and the surveillance of Martin Luther King to illegal wiretapping, mail openings, and

surreptitious entries or black bag jobs"(Kessler 189). These abuses led to the refocusing

of the FBI from domestic security cases back to law enforcement duties.

It was around this time that the Justice Department created the Behavior Sciences

Unit, an organization housed at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia. The BSU

popularized the process of "profiling," a method of crime solving that attempted to create

a body of knowledge about crime perpetrators to apply to specific crime scenes in order

to narrow law enforcement searches for suspects in those crimes. The BSU became

known in particular for its focus on serial killing. Philip Jenkins argues that the BSU's

framing of serial killer discourse was a major force in overcoming local law

enforcement's reluctance to participate in national law enforcement databases:

> It has already been noted that the incoming Reagan administration had to
> battle against a heritage of grave suspicion that the FBI would abuse its
> powers as it had during the Hoover years., and there were acrimonious
> debates in Congress. In 1982 and 1983, controversy resulted in the failure
> of a proposal to expand FBI databanks to include records of individuals
> suspected of serious criminal activity. . . Opposition could also be
> expected from state and local law enforcement agencies, which often
> resented federal intrusions into their jurisdictions. . . Expanding the federal
> role in homicide investigations was thus a major innovation, and was
> likely to be contentious. However, the portrayal of the serial murder threat
> in the 1980s was sufficiently plausible to win broad support for the new
> NCAVC, and the expanded computer facilities required for VICAP [both
> of which will be discussed later in this chapter] (Jenkins 57).

In 1982 through 1984, the BSU, FBI director William Webster, and other experts on

serial killers motivated support for their views on this newly defined form of crime by

testifying as part of a series of Senate hearings held by the Juvenile Justice Subcommittee

of the Judiciary Committee and chaired by Arlen Specter. The characterization of serial

killers as being both motivated by bizarre, alien thought patterns and highly mobile

helped convince the Senate and the public at large that the serial killing problem required

these broad new innovations in law enforcement; the old means of local and state-

centered law enforcement were claimed to be inadequate to deal with this new crisis

(Jenkins 58-9).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the BSU became regarded as the prominent

expert on serial killers, in no small part to its agents' portrayals in popular culture. Philip

L. Simpson notes that Thomas Harris, author of *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*,

had a particularly important effect on the public's perception of the FBI's role in fighting

serial killers:

> Two of the most famous and media-savvy FBI profilers frequently
> mention their associations with Thomas Harris's fiction and the films
> made from it. John Douglas, coauthor of two books on what he calls
> "mindhunting," makes a point of mentioning that Jack Crawford, Harris's
> fictitious FBI section chief, is modeled after him. . . It is not too surprising
> that the FBI institutional authority is generally supportive of authors like
> Harris because the resulting narratives on one level sanctify, even glorify,
> the law-enforcement reactive approach to violent crime. No doubt part of
> this institutional acceptance derives from the superficial media depiction
> of the profilers as the guardians – "the thin blue line" – between
> civilization and anarchy (Simpson 71).

The last section of this quote reminds us of the role the FBI's promotion of its anti-serial

killing expertise had in reestablishing its earlier trustworthy, professional reputation,

echoing Hoover's statements following the Kansas City Massacre.

Given its heroic and widely accepted media identity, it is no accident that the

FBI's reaction to school shootings comes specifically from the BSU and its related

organizations. A representative of the Behavioral Science Unit's approach to school

shootings is an article titled "School Violence: Lessons Learned" that appeared in the

FBI's *Law Enforcement Bulletin* in September, 1999. This article focuses on the

shootings at Pearl, Mississippi, West Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas, Edinboro,

Pennsylvania, Springfield, Oregon, and Littleton, Colorado. From analyzing these

shootings, the authors suggest a program of crisis planning and preventive measures. The

crisis planning segments focus on opening lines of communication and planning between

school officials and local police, specifically calling for police and school administration

to sign "memorandums and understanding" which will establish policies clearly and in a

mutually agreed-upon way (Band and Harpold 10). It is the preventive measures

suggested that are of particular interest, however.

First of all, the article suggests that schools create anonymous reporting programs

to monitor "leakage," that is, signs of potential danger and issued threats, among

students. The article then suggests the use of uniformed officers to "provide positive

information quickly, weed out rumors, and develop intelligence regarding potential or

planned acts of violence," while at the same time providing "students an opportunity to

develop trust and to talk to police officers in a neutral, nonthreatening atmosphere" (Band

and Harpold 12). The article also recommends that schools implement "a zero-tolerance

policy for students who make threats" (Band and Harpold 12). This series of suggestions

is similar to many made by various school and government officials that were discussed

in the previous chapter, but it does display a particularly strong-armed focus on making

signs of authority visible to and accepted by students. This is likely due to the FBI's law

enforcement audience at the school violence summit in August 1998 that gave rise to the

article. In fact, the article notes that one of the participants in the summit, an unnamed

"chief of police," specifically advocated that courts be allowed "to try as adults juveniles who commit homicide" as a partial solution to the problem (Band and Harpold 15-6).

The preventative measure of greatest note, however, are the list of "violence indicators" and the school shooter profile that the article presents in order to help teachers, students, parents, and others to spot potential leakage. Along with "low self-esteem" and "fascinated with firearms," the violence indicators list includes two theories that FBI profilers had developed during the study of serial killers. The first of these reads as follows:

> The individuals have committed previous acts of cruelty to animals. This is a symptom of child abuse, along with setting fires, bed-wetting (beyond a normal age), and being abusive to adults. FBI research has found that these indicators frequently appear in the childhoods of serial violent sexual offenders and may exist in cases of juvenile violence (Band and Harpold 13).

Referred to as the "terrible triad" elsewhere, this pattern of cruelty to animals, bed-wetting, and fire-setting being indicative of a tendency towards violence became a widely accepted maxim among law enforcement officials and true crime enthusiasts thanks to the interest the Behavior Crimes Unit's study and profiling of serial killers in the 1980s. This is the first time it appears in specific relation to school shootings; it is also conspicuously missing from the FBI threat assessment report discussed later in this chapter.

A second theory drawn from serial killer discourse is found later in the article's list of violence indicators:

> The individuals' mothers or other family members disrespect them. This creates a feeling of powerlessness when coupled with chronic abuse and can initiate the next to exert power over and control another. It also can result in extreme anger (Band and Harpold 13).

The mother is singled out here among "other family members" as a potential cause of

mental damage. This focus has a long history in serial killer discourse, best exemplified

by the theories generated to explain Ed Gein's double murder and serial grave-robbing

spree in Wisconsin in the 1950s; the media coverage of Ed Gein's killings inspired horror

writer Robert Bloch to write *Psycho*, which in turn became a major influence on how the

public viewed the thinking patterns and motivations of real-life killers other than Gein.

Richard Tithecott, in his book *Of Men and Monsters*, discusses this mother-blaming

aspect of serial killer discourse as it appeared in theories about murderer Jeffrey Dahmer,

pointing out that

> From the perspective which sees men as the originators of structure, of a
> sense of place, of visibility, the serial killer, the archetypal purveyor of
> meaninglessness, can only be the product of femaleness. The struggle
> between our law enforcers and the serial killer is represented as the
> struggle between the law of the father and the disorder of the mother. . .
> Our policing discourses, implied to be and valorized as masculine, conflict
> with feminine discourse, discourse lacking motive and logic (Tithecott
> 46).

Like the "terrible triad," this specific element of serial killer discourse is cut from later

studies of the school shooter, but the influence of serial killer discourse in general is still

in the later arguments. We will return to this issue in the conclusion of this chapter.

The school shooter profile that "School Violence: Lessons Learned" presents is

based on the six shootings mentioned earlier. The introduction to the profile claims that

> While any one of these characteristics alone may not describe a potential
> school shooter, taken together, they provide a profile that may assist law
> enforcement, schools, and communities to identify at-risk students (Band
> and Harpold 14).

First among the profile's points is that "The suspects were white males under 18 years old with mass or spree murder traits" (Band and Harpold 14). "Mass or spree murder traits" obviously assumes that the reader is familiar with the definitions of mass or spree murders, definitions that came out of the definition of serial killing. A later point, however, contradicts the two serial killer discourse-based claims based on the assumption of parental abuse made in the article's violence indicators list, claiming "They seemed to have trouble with their parents, though no apparent evidence of parental abuse existed" (Band and Harpold 14). This is an early indicator that serial killer discourse and school shooting discourse are not going to meld successfully, as we will see after examining the federal reports on the shootings.

Other items on the profile include "narcissistic views," "experienced a precipitating event (e.g. a failed romance) that resulted in depression and suicidal thoughts that turned homicidal," "history of expressing anger or displaying minor acts of aggressive physical contact at school," "appeared to be loners, average students, and sloppy or unkempt in dress," "propensity to dislike popular students or students who bully others," "openly expressed a desire to kill others," and "exhibited no remorse after the killings." Almost all of these items on the list are echoed in later "warning sign lists."

A few other items, however, only appear on this list. One item, for example, maintains that shooters "were influenced by satanic or cult-type belief systems or philosophical works" and "listened to songs that promote violence" (Band and Harpold 14). This item seems primarily based on the rumor that Luke Woodham, the Pearl killer, was influenced by a cult composed of fellow students, the rumor that Dylan Klebold and

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Eric Harris were fans of Satanist rocker Marilyn Manson, and the following statements from the article:

> . . . one of the shooters' work was influenced heavily by the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who is best known for having proclaimed the death of God and for calling himself an "immoralist," one who opposes all morality. Another suspect's writing was inspired by the musician Marilyn Manson who reportedly based his song "Antichrist Superstar" on Nietzsche's book *The Antichrist*, a critique of Pauline Christianity (Band and Harpold 13).

The implication of Nietzsche and other representatives of anti-Christian or satanic thought is a trace of another discourse in this work: the anti-satanism, anti-cult discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s. This legacy, and specifically the role of Marilyn Manson's supposed "promotion of violence" in post-Columbine discourse, is too complex to be discussed here, but will be discussed in a later section of this book.

A related claim on the profile maintains that shooters "seemed to be influenced or used by other manipulative students to commit extreme acts of violence" (Band and Harpold 14). This claim is based only on certain theories regarding Luke Woodham's case. Investigators originally claimed that Woodham was influenced by some of his fellow students; the argument went that Woodham was a member of a cult-like group called "the Kroth," and that the group's leader, Grant Boyette, persuaded Woodham to kill his mother and shoot classmates. This claim is highly disputed; Boyette himself was originally charged as an accessory to murder, but through a plea bargain he ended up being sentenced to a juvenile boot camp program as a result of the lesser charge of "conspiring to prevent a principal from doing his job" (Rossilli). Rumors of additional

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shooters or accomplices ran rampant following the Columbine shooting, but they were conclusively dismissed by the sheriff's report and the governor's commission.

"School Violence: Lessons Learned" ends with two final attempts to persuade the reader that these measures, which might still seem excessive to some, are worth implementing. The first attempt uses the folkloric device of the proverb, followed by the invocation of the "if it can happen here, it can happen anywhere" idea:

> Many Americans may find the old adage an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure difficult to believe. But who would have though that such horrible acts of school violence could occur in rural areas of the United States? Unfortunately, Americans need to accept that grisly, violent acts can occur anywhere and be committed by almost anyone, even a child (Band and Harpold 15).

The use of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" ties these measures to ideas of tradition and common sense. The use of "if it can happen here, it can happen anywhere," however, subsequently emphasizes the idea that a changing world requires dramatic changes in action. There are substantial logical problems in using such a proposition to end this piece, though. The profile presented by the article argues that we can spot children prone to this type of violence, children who are specifically white and male, yet here we have an argument that "almost anyone" could be a killer. We also have the argument that these acts can happen "anywhere," yet the shootings studied all occurred in rural areas, and shootings in urban areas aren't even considered problems from this perspective; apparently accepting that "grisly, violent acts" could happen in the city isn't hard at all, yet accepting that rural areas could generate such acts requires a major restructuring of the school system and a completely new approach to policing children.

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The article ends on this call for new policing methods:

> Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies must develop comprehensive plans
> for responding to such attacks, and they must join with their schools and
> communities to implement prevention programs. Doing so will make
> American children feel good about themselves, their families, their
> neighborhoods, and their country. To paraphrase a familiar saying, all it
> takes for the triumph of evil is for a few good people to do nothing (Band
> and Harpold 15-6).

Paraphrasing Edmund Burke, long regarded as one of the preeminent voices for

traditional (and monarchist) values, is another strategy to tie calls for radical change to

the idea of preserving continuity in adverse circumstances, as is the invocation of pride in

families, communities, and country. The emphasis on making "children feel good"

argues that these changes will ultimately be for their benefit and are not just being made

to make adults less afraid. Again, we won't see this exact rhetorical strategy echoed in

the later FBI and Secret Service documents discussed next in this chapter, but the end

result sought by all of the law enforcement reports is still the same: the call for increased

police presence and surveillance in schools

The FBI's major and most newsworthy involvement in investigating school

shootings was through its Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) and the National

Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC). These organizations worked jointly

on a symposium in Leesburg, Virginia in July 1999 and a resulting report titled *The

School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*, written by Mary Ellen O'Toole and

published in September 2000. According to the FBI website,

> The mission of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime
> (NCAVC) is to combine investigative and operational support functions,
> research, and training in order to provide assistance, without charge, to
> federal, state, local, and foreign law enforcement agencies investigating

unusual or repetitive violent crimes. The NCAVC also provides support through expertise and consultation in non-violent matters such as national security, corruption, and white-collar crime investigations. . . Typical cases for which NCAVC services are requested include child abduction or mysterious disappearance of children, serial murders, single homicides, serial rapes, extortions, threats, kidnappings, product tampering, arsons and bombings, weapons of mass destruction, public corruption, and domestic and international terrorism (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

Another noteworthy NCAVC program is the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), a data file designed to help law enforcement catch repeat offenders; VICAP is often considered to be primarily useful for catching serial killers, and it even makes an appearance in Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*. The NCAVC often works with the Behavioral Science Unit, which includes among its members the authors of "School Violence: Lessons Learned," Special Agents Band and Harpold. With this background in mind, it is hardly a surprise that the NCAVC would be involved in investigating school shootings as well.

The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective states its guiding purpose as follows:

This monograph presents systematic procedure for threat assessment and intervention. The model is designed to be used by educators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement agencies. Obviously, the same events that led the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) to this subject have also led school administrators and law enforcement officials across the country to consider and develop their own policies and procedures for dealing with threats or acts of violence in schools. This model is offered in the hope that it may help refine and strengthen those efforts (O'Toole 1).

In order to convince the potential audience for this report that it is needed, the report then portrays many of the preventative measures undertaken by schools following Columbine as panic-driven and ineffective:

Under the intense spotlight of national media coverage, a tragedy such as the Columbine High School shooting spreads horror, shock, and fear to every corner of the country. Educators, mental health professionals, legislators, law enforcement officers, parents, students, and the rest of the public all share a sense of frustration and helplessness and a compulsion to take some quick action that can prevent similar incidents in the future. Though understandable, this impulse can lead communities to forget the wisdom of H. L. Mencken's aphorism: "For every problem, there is a solution which is simple, neat, and wrong." In a knee-jerk reaction, communities may resort to inflexible, one-size-fits-all policies on preventing or reacting to violence (O'Toole 2).

By portraying the post-Columbine situation in such a light, the FBI and the NCAVC rhetorically establish themselves as the only trustworthy solution; local authorities are incapable of fixing the problem (with their "compulsion" to "knee-jerk reaction") without the guidance of well-trained federal law enforcement experts. Later, the report further seeks to establish the authority of its account by criticizing the media and other researchers:

News coverage is inherently hasty and often relies on sources who themselves have incomplete or inaccurate information. And journalists ordinarily do not have access to police or other investigative reports that may contain highly significant but confidential information. . . To the extent that academics, researchers, and other specialists writing in professional publications base their articles on news accounts or other public sources, these too should be viewed with some reservations since they will also lack critical information available only in confidential school or law enforcement files (O'Toole 3).

Later in the report, the NCAVC is even more direct about the importance and urgency of its recommendations, claiming that its recommendations must be followed. It asserts that "A school cannot ignore any threat of violence. Plausible or not, every threat must be taken seriously, investigated, and responded to" (O'Toole 25). This is a clear demand for a change of policy at many schools; it was a matter of course at many schools to dismiss

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many potential threats prior to the schools shooting events of the late nineties, as

indicated by the observation made by NCAVC and others that so many school shooting

plots were known to peers and others through threats made beforehand. The report is

even more aggressive about the authority of its finding at another point:

> Educators, law enforcement, mental health professionals and others must realize they cannot handle threats in the same "old" way. Those tasked with assessing threats must be trained in the basic concepts of threat assessment, personality assessment and risk assessment as presented in this monograph, and realize the importance of assessing all threats in a timely manner (O'Toole 10).

This is an authority-establishing strategy that the FBI has used before, especially in its

successful campaign to dominate serial killer discourse. Philip Jenkins points out that

> A serial murder problem had now [in the 1970s and early 1980s] been established on the lines advocated by the Justice Department; but during the late 1980s, the same agency enjoyed continued success in redefining the issue along lines that provided the maximum benefit and prestige for the FBI and its investigators. Specifically, this meant presenting the FBI's behavior scientists (the "mind-hunters") as uniquely qualified to deal with the serial killer menace, and this interpretation became very influential (Jenkins 70).

The narrative of the heroic profiler or "mind-hunter" was so powerful and persuasive that

it allowed the FBI and law enforcement in general to wrest control of serial killer

discourse from psychology. Not only did the profiler narrative convince the public of the

profiler's superior moral clarity (fighting evil rather than sickness), but, according to

Richard Tithecott, it also convinced the public with its aura of scientific accuracy:

> Compared, then, to the debased and parochial language of psychology, compared to what the FBI call "psychological jargon," is the clarity, purity and universality of the language spoken by the FBI. But for the FBI's construction of monstrosity to gain credence, it must also be inscribed with the mark of *truth*, and in a world of knowledge still mostly divided between scientific fact and artistic interpretation, the mark of truth is

conferred by science. . . As the FBI seeks to give its discourses an aura of scientific truthfulness, psychiatry loses the public's confidence in its scientific credentials (Tithecott 102).

It is this claim to scientific accuracy that becomes the primary method by which post-profiling school shooter studies work to establish control over school shooting discourse. Ironically, one of the problematic solutions to the school shooting problem that *The School Shooter* criticizes is the idea of a school shooter profile, stating that profiles

> may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or "checklist" of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list (O'Toole 2-3).

The report differentiates its own model from the profile model by emphasizing the importance of reacting only to issued threats:

> This model is not a "profile" of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school. These things do not exist. Although the risk of an actual shooting incident in any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem in any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important (O'Toole 1).

The specter of the "checklist of danger signs" never fully leaves this issue, however. A CNN report on the FBI's report, "FBI Report on School Violence Urges Vigilance, Intervention," briefly quotes the report about its not being a profile or danger sign checklist and that the signs should only be used after a threat is made and an assessment has occurred, then presents an attention-grabbing bullet point list of "possible warning

signs" including old school shooter standbys like "poor coping skills," "alienation," "inappropriate humor," "low self esteem," and "fascination with violence-filled entertainment" (Frieden). In this way, the news report actually re-packages the report's findings as a reinforcement of the stereotypical school shooter profile, even as it denies profile status.

The NCAVC's study is based on a pool of eighteen school shootings cases from various parts of the United States. *The School Shooter* includes an appendix discussing the method by which the NCAVC collected data upon which to base their recommendations. While the locations and identities of the studied cases are not disclosed due to confidentiality issues, various other aspects of the group's methodology are covered by the report. The group requested a set list of source materials from investigators in each case, including "tape or transcripts of interviews with the offender(s)," "witness statements," "crime scene photography and videos," "Examples of the shooter's writings, drawings, doodles, essays, letters, poems, songs, videotapes, and audiotapes," and "pre-sentence psychiatric reports and psychiatric evaluations by either defense or prosecution experts" (O'Toole 34-5). The investigators also interviewed "law enforcement and school personnel" in order to "obtain additional insight about the shooters, their families and background, the social climate and atmosphere of the school, and any other factors or stressors" (O'Toole 35). The shooters themselves were not interviewed; this is an interesting omission, given their prominence in the Secret Service's threat assessment study discussed later in this chapter.

By relying exclusively on second-hand information and not interviewing students, family members, or the shooters themselves, the NCAVC study could have trapped itself in an odd epistemological bind. It sets itself forward as the ultimate solution to the problem, yet the research upon which it bases its conclusions was gathered by the same local authorities who it claims need to follow the NCAVC's guidance. Listing the specific items requested from local authorities, items which are observational materials relatively free from local analysis (with the exception of psychiatric evaluations and school records), makes it clear that the analytical work was actually done by NCAVC experts. The degree to which these items might have been influenced by ideas like profiling and other suspect methodology is unaddressed, however.

In examining these collected materials, the NCAVC investigators had a set list of "critical aspects" to look for, including "The shooter's behavior patterns in relating to family members, peers, teachers, and persons in authority," "Reported incidents of aggressive behavior and/or anger management problems," "Student's preference in literature, artwork, and Internet sites," "Student's circle of friends, including girlfriends, and his apparent role in the group," "Statements by the student directly or indirectly telling others ahead of time about a planned shooting," "Extent of planning and preparations before the crime," "Types of weapons brought to the scene," and "Type and extent of the interaction between the shooter and victims before and during the shooting." These aspects of the case studies would be very important in establishing the group's hypothesis that shootings are planned beforehand.

There is a major limitation to the NCAVC study, however, and it is only dealt

with briefly in a footnote near the beginning of the report:

> The threats that some schools face may not fall within the experience of
> the NCAVC. For example, some urban schools have experienced threats
> not like the threats within this monograph. Therefore, the applicability of
> the recommendations made in this monograph may not cover all situations
> (O'Toole 4).

What actually constitutes a Columbine-like "school shooting" is a very important issue;

the NCAVC avoids this issue entirely and attempts to cover its lack of definition with this

footnote. More importantly, guidelines on the situations that would fit threat assessment

model and those that wouldn't are completely missing. Are urban schools the only

schools that have these ill-defined non-NCAVC-style threats? Do urban schools ever

have these type of planned and telegraphed threats? How does a school decide to use

these guidelines for threat assessment and when to use alternate guidelines? These

questions are unanswered in *The School Shooter*.

The NCAVC's exclusive focus on school shooting-type threats is a substantial

departure from the more generalized approach adopted by the Department of Education's

Early Warning, Timely Response. The Department of Education approach uses public

concern about school shootings in an attempt to change the way that other forms of

school violence are viewed and treated. *The School Shooter* assumes that an approach to

deal with school shootings is incompatible with other forms of school violence. This is a

trend that the Secret Service's reaction to Columbine continues and intensifies, even

though its report is a collaboration with the Department of Education.

The Secret Service

According to the history posted on its own website, the United States Secret

Service was founded in 1865 to combat counterfeiters. In 1867, the Service's

responsibilities were broadened to include

> "detecting persons perpetrating frauds against the government." This
> appropriation resulted in investigations into the Ku Klux Klan, non-
> conforming distillers, smugglers, mail robbers, land frauds, and a number
> of other infractions against the federal laws (US Secret Service).

Philip Melanson, in his book *The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic*

Agency, states that Chief William P. Hazen initiated the Secret Service's mission of

presidential protection in 1894. Hazen assigned agents to protect Grover Cleveland

because Secret Service agents in Colorado "had been investigating 'suspicious persons

who might be Western gamblers, Anarchists, or cranks' who were issuing threats against

President Cleveland" (Melanson 24). Melanson explains that

> When the Secret Service had assumed protective duties of President
> Cleveland and his family, Director Hazen had agreed to the technically
> illegal measure because the Secret Service was the only federal law-
> enforcement agency of any real note. . . To mask their duty somewhat, he
> dubbed [the agents guarding Cleveland] "special policemen" (Melanson
> 26).

The presidential protection aspect of the Secret Service didn't become official,

however, until the Sundry Civil Expenses act of 1907, five years after William McKinley

was assassinated (which, interestingly enough, occurred while McKinley was being

guarded by the Secret Service and numerous other law enforcement officials) (Melanson

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32). Melanson claims that this new duty completely redefined the identity and future of

the organization:

> [Prior to McKinley's assassination] the Secret Service could have evolved
> to become something like the latter-day FBI or the CIA, or even a
> combination of both, performing both domestic and foreign intelligence
> roles. Instead, it was sidetracked and reshaped by a variety of factors,
> including political intrigue and bureaucratic rivalries. The key factor,
> however, proved the emergence of a new mission that was to become the
> organization's hallmark – presidential protection (Melanson 28).

It is this role as protector of the president and other important dignitaries that defines the

Secret Service to this day. It is also this role that gives rise to the Secret Service's

involvement in the movement to prevent school shooting incidents.

A June 21, 1999 article from the *New York Times*, titled "Secret Service is

Seeking Pattern for Key to School Killers," discusses the creation and activities of the

National Threat Assessment Center, an organization within the Secret Service:

> "We think that some of the same ideas used to help protect the president
> may also help keep our nation's school children safe," said Brian Stafford,
> the new director of the Secret Service. "We want to offer any assistance
> we can to prevent this from happening again." So the Secret Service has
> shed some of its secrecy, and begun forming the National Threat
> Assessment Center. . . Working from a warren of desks two blocks from
> the White House, the group of fewer than a dozen members has widened
> its research to celebrity stalking, then to workplace violence and now to
> school shootings (Dedman).

Although the National Threat Assessment center was established in 1998, it found a

major crisis to address after the Columbine shooting. The *Times* article mentions the

center's previous subjects of study, but none was as high-profile as the investigation of

school shootings. After all, "celebrity stalking" only affects so many people, while fears

of catastrophic school shootings were nearly universal in 1999.

In 2002, the Secret Service and the Department of Education published the

findings of a project called the Safe School Initiative, "an extensive examination of 37

incidents of targeted school violence that occurred in the United States from December

1974 through May 2000" (Vossekuil, et al. 3). The primary work of this program

involved adapting the Secret Service's concept of threat assessment (as practiced by the

National Threat Assessment Center) to the school shooting crisis in order to

> attempt to identify information that could be obtainable, or 'knowable,'
> prior to an attack. That information would then be analyzed and evaluated
> to produce a factual, accurate knowledge base on targeted school attacks.
> This knowledge could be used to help communities across the country to
> formulate policies and strategies aimed at preventing school-based
> attacks" (Vossekuil, et al. 3).

The Safe School Initiative report estimates that the odds of a student dying by the

hand of another student at school or by his or her own hand are "no greater than 1 in 1

million" and points out that the number of case studies in its research sample of school

shootings is incredibly small: "The combined efforts of the Secret Service and the

Department of Education identified 37 incidents of targeted school-based attacks,

committed by 41 individuals over a 25-year period" (Vossekuil, et al. 6-7). The report

justifies its interest in the perceived school shooting crisis by observing that

> While it is clear that other kinds of problems in American schools are far
> more common than the targeted violence that has taken place in schools in
> this country, the high-profile shootings that have occurred in schools over
> the past decade have resulted in increased fear among students, parents,
> and educators. School shootings are a rare, but significant, component of
> the problem of school violence. Each school-based attack has had a
> tremendous and lasting effect on the school in which it occurred, the
> surrounding community and the nation as a whole (Vossekuil, et al. 7).

The same argument could be made for assassinations, of course, which matches up nicely

with the Secret Service's highest-profile mission. Although assassinations are very rare,

Secret Service security precautions, no matter how cumbersome, are perceived as a

given; a president abandoning his or her Secret Service security detail would be seen as a

foolishly life-threatening risk.

The Secret Service's model of threat assessment comes out of its role as provider

of security to prevent the assassination of the president and other important political

figures. It is based on the premise that, while stopping attacks in progress on important

targets is necessary, spotting attacks before they are put into motion is just as necessary.

The Secret Service threat assessment process consists of three stages:

> identifying individuals who have the idea or intent of attacking a Secret
> Service protectee; assessing whether the individual poses a risk to a
> protectee, after gathering sufficient information from multiple sources;
> and managing the threat the individual poses, in those cases where the
> individual investigated is determined to pose a threat (Vossekuil, et al. 5).

The central means by which the report justifies the application of a model

designed to identify possible assassins to the identification of potential juvenile

murderers is the idea of "targeted violence." A 1992 Secret Service study defined

targeted violence as "any incident of violence where a known or knowable attacker

selects a particular target prior to their violent attack" (Vossekuil, et al. 4). This

definition, however, seems to exclude the Columbine shooting, which according to

current consensus was not an attack on any specific person or even a type of person. The

report attempts to bridge this gap by switching to identifying a location, a school, as a

target rather than trying to identify a targeted person. In establishing its methodology, the

report explains that

> For the purposes of this study, an incident of targeted school violence was defined as any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at his or her school with lethal means (e.g., a gun or a knife); and (ii) where the student attacked purposefully chose his or her school as the location of the attack. Consistent with this definition, incidents where the school was chosen simply as a site of opportunity, such as incidents that were solely related to gang or drug trade activity or to a violent interaction between individuals that just happened to occur at school, were not included (Vossekuil, et al. 7).

Although this definition seems at first to just narrow the terms of the discussion, it

ends up being utterly crucial to the Secret Service's attempt to apply its frame of

reference to school shootings when we examine the report's findings. The first finding of

the study, for example, echoes the NCAVC report, declaring that "There is no accurate or

useful 'profile' of students who engaged in targeted school violence" (Vossekuil, et al.

19). The report denies that race, social relationships, academic performance, or

disciplinary problems can be used as easy indicators of targeted school violence potential.

This sets up the idea that the only real indicators are deeper and more subtle than initial

appearances.

It is hardly an accident that the report also finds that "Incidents of targeted

violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts" (Vossekuil, et al. 23). Considering

that the criteria of selection in the study insists that a student must have "attacked

purposefully" and couldn't do so at a "site of opportunity," this finding seems pre-

determined. What is more interesting, however, is the study's insistence that these

attacks

appeared to be the end result of a comprehensible process of thinking and behavior: behavior that typically began with an idea, progressed to the development of a plan, moved on to securing the means to carry out the plan and culminated in an attack.. This is a process that potentially may be knowable or discernable from the attacker's behaviors and communications (Vossekuil, et al. 32).

This emphasis on "knowability" is a direct attack on the belief that school shootings are senseless, random, or the product of alien, inscrutable, or even supernaturally possessed minds. But at the same time, the report also maintains that this is not an easy process and that the current tools with which schools are battling this menace are ineffective. Although one might assume that threats made by the potential attacker to a victim would be a good indicator of approaching violence, for example, the report finds that "Most attackers did not threaten their target directly prior to advancing the attack" (Vossekuil, et al. 25). Of course, this finding supports the basic premise of the threat assessment process: acting in response to directly declared threats is good, but acting to head off threats before they occur is just as good (or in this case, even better).

Other indicators, however, can provide clues to revealing a school shooter's plans. The report states that "Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack" (Vossekuil, et al. 25). This finding refers specifically to friends or fellow students, but adults also reportedly see trouble signs: "Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help" (Vossekuil, et al. 26). Instead of focusing on a rigid concept like a profile or "type," the report encourages a focus on

> a student's *behaviors and communications* to determine if that student
> appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. Rather than asking
> whether a particular student "looks like" those who have launched school-

based attacks before, it is more productive to ask whether the student is engaging in behaviors that suggest preparations for an attack, if so how fast the student is moving toward attack, and where intervention may be possible (Emphasis in original) (Vossekuil, et al. 34).

The report repeats this assertion later, referring to threat assessment as a "fact-based investigative and analytical approach that focuses on what a particular student is doing or saying, and not on whether the student 'looks like' those who have attacked schools in the past" (Vossekuil, et al. 41).

This differentiation between "looks" and behavior is never made clear by the report beyond the insistence that there isn't a reliable demographically-based profile of the school shooter. Some of the report's claims, however, seem to establish an alternate, behavior-based profile. The report mentions that three quarters of the studied school shooters "felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident" (Vossekuil, et al. 21), for example. This could easily be interpreted as a litmus test by school administrators and teachers: if a student isn't bullied, then it would seem that he or she is unlikely to become a school shooter. One of the report's other findings is that "Over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence, through movies, video games, books, and other media," and "The largest group of attackers [out of this group interested in violence] exhibited an interest in violence in their own writings, such as poems, essays, or journal entries" (Vossekuil, et al. 22). Unlike the majority of the report's other findings, this finding is not developed into any recommendations or given any additional explanation; it is simply stated, then left without further commentary. What exactly constitutes an "interest in violence" is left

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undefined; the educator is on his or her own in determining this, and as such this could

hardly be considered to be an opinion based on solid interpretations of the case studies.

The report focuses extensively on establishing its own authoritative voice. It

emphasizes the reliability of its findings, claiming that "Researchers were cautious not to

overreach in drawing conclusions from this information [that is, the case studies]" and

"researchers were cautious not to draw a conclusion in a particular area of inquiry if that

conclusion was supported by fewer than the majority of the responses to the subject

question" (Vossekuil, et al. 10). The report also refers to its recommended means of

determining threats as "a fact-based threat assessment approach" (Vossekuil, et al. 41).

The emphasis on "facts" and carefully drawn conclusions is obviously designed to create

a trustworthy image for the report's findings, and also for the report's methodology.

As a result, the report seeks to change the way that administrators and educators

approach and conceptualize problems. It claims, for example, that

> the time span between the attacker's decision to mount an attack and the
> actual incident may be short. Consequently, when indications that a
> student may pose a threat to the school community arise in the form of
> revelations about a planned attack, school administrators and law
> enforcement officials will need to move quickly to inquire about and
> intervene in that plan (Vossekuil, et al. 32).

This statement emphasizes the need for preparedness; there will be no time to make these

decisions later. More to the point is a footnote referenced at the end of the above quote

that discusses *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening*

Situations and Creating Safe School Climates, the companion volume to the report. It

explains that

The guide will include recommendations for investigating and evaluating threats and other behaviors of concern in school; address considerations for developing policies and the capacity to support threat assessment efforts in schools; and provide suggestions for approaches schools can adopt to foster school environments that reduce violence (Vossekuil, et al. 32).

The Safe Schools Initiative final report and *Threat Assessment in Schools* work together to encourage a shift from the previous educational and law enforcement models of dealing with school shootings to the threat assessment model. The report never directly says that school shootings can only be prevented with threat assessment, but it does rigorously advocate training and support for law enforcement and educators in threat assessment:

In relying on a fact-based threat assessment approach, school officials, law enforcement professionals and other involved in the assessment will need tools, mechanisms, and legal processes that can facilitate their efforts to gather and analyze information regarding a student's behavior and communications. For example, school and law enforcement personnel should be offered training regarding what information to gather, how to gather and evaluate it, and how they might try to intervene in cases where the information collected suggests a student may be planning or preparing for a school-based attack (Vossekuil, et al. 41).

The Secret Service's report on school shootings was the subject of a CBS news article on May 15, 2002. The article, "To Stop a Massacre," glowingly credits the *Threat Assessment in Schools* publication in particular, not just the general threat assessment methodology, with stopping a potential school shooting in Massachusetts:

Arthur Kelly is a police chief in New Bedford, Mass., a small city where an attack on the high school was the last thing the cops were looking for. But in November, five teen-agers were charged in an alleged plot to detonate bombs in the school and shoot the students who ran outside. One of the kids allegedly bragged they were going to "Out Columbine, Columbine." How did New Bedford uncover the plot before it was too late? Kelly says because they were one of the first cities to get a look at

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the Secret Service's draft report "Threat Assessment in Schools." [sic] One of the key findings was that school shooters almost always tell others what they are planning. Kelly's officers in the schools were trained to listen and take threats, no matter how incredible, seriously. . . The strategy that may have saved New Bedford High is in a two-year study that will soon be available to every school (CBS).

The article also outlines one strategy that the Secret Service experts use in seminars on preventing school shootings and the planned reach of these seminars:

> Barry Spodak and David Swink are psychotherapists who normally teach Secret Service agents how to interview potential assassins. They are also involved in seminars to help schools spot potential shooters. Spodak plays the role of an adult in the school trying to figure out whether a student is just angry or truly dangerous. An actor plays the role of "Jeff," an angry student. Jeff is an angry teenager, is all the school shooters wrapped into one. He's part of that seminar for teachers. He's an actor who has been trained with everything they've learned in the school shooter study. Over the summer, they will run seminars all over the country to spot the signs that a kid poses a true threat. Rod Paige, the Secretary of Education, intends to put the Secret Service study on the department's Web site and sent a guidebook on the research to every school in the country (CBS).

Following such an approach could leave the Secret Service open to charges of solipsism; the teaching simulation is created as a composite of a very small, and highly selective, sample, then used to prepare educators for all potential school shooting situations. Once this is taken into account, the reasons for the Safe Schools Initiative's constant insistence on the soundness of its research methodology become much clearer. The fact that the researchers "learned all this by going to the source" (CBS), that is, by interviewing surviving school shooters and studying the case histories of the deceased shooters, is the epistemological foundation of the National Threat Assessment Center's claims to expert knowledge.

The way was prepared for this joint Secret Service/ Department of Education

project with a journal article in *Psychology in the Schools* titled "Evaluating Risk for

Targeted Violence in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and

Other Approaches," published in 2001. This article was written by the same team that

wrote the Safe School Initiative report. It begins by listing, then dismissing, the current

approaches to preventing school violence:

> In their quest to avoid becoming the next statistic or headline, those with
> the responsibility to prevent school shootings have focused preventative
> resources primarily on increasing physical security (e.g. installing cameras
> and metal detectors), hiring school security officers, developing tactical
> plans for responding once a shooting has occurred, and implementing a
> range of programs such as legal education and conflict resolution.
> Unfortunately, these responses are not likely to be effective in preventing
> planned school-based attacks (Reddy, et al. 157).

The article then refers to "a cottage industry of school safety products" that gives "little

or no empirically based guidance on how best to assess the risk posed by a student for

targeted violence in schools" (Reddy, et al. 158). The article also makes an argument in

support of the specialized approach to addressing the school shooting problem, stating

that

> Youth who commit acts of targeted school violence may differ
> substantially not only from juveniles who engage in nonviolent
> delinquency but also from other juveniles who engage in different types of
> homicide. . . The question is not whether the student might be at increased
> risk for engaging in some form of aggressive behavior during adolescence,
> but rather whether he or she currently poses a substantial risk of harm to
> another identified or identifiable person(s) at school (Reddy, et al. 160).

This is another clear rejection of the earlier attempt to address school shootings as

another variety of violent behavior at school. Other models purportedly yield inaccurate

results; only specialized models hold the promise of a solution.

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This leads in to the article's discussion of the three main rivals to threat assessment in the identification of potential school attackers. The first of these rivals is profiling, including the FBI profile developed by Band and Harpold in "School Violence: Lessons Learned." The article argues that the application of profiling techniques to school shooting prevention is primarily flawed because of the techniques' origins as a "retrospective" method; that is, profiling was originally designed to determine the possible characteristics of a criminal, thus giving investigators a narrower group of people to focus an investigation on, from the evidence left at a crime scene. The use of profiling in school shooting prevention is based on a "prospective" approach, predicting future offenders from the characteristics of past offenders, an approach that is not proven to be accurate in any way (Reddy, et al., 161-3). The article also calls into question the accuracy of the specific profiles generated by profiling approaches; for example, it claims that Band and Harpold's model is based on too small of a sample, focusing on only six school shooting cases over a three year span when the NCAVC threat assessment study includes almost forty cases from a twenty year period. The article also points out that many inaccuracies in profiling approaches are drawn from flawed media coverage of school shooting events (Reddy, et al. 162-3).

"Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools" then assesses the effectiveness of the other two rivals of the threat assessment approach, "guided professional judgment" and "automated decision making." "Guided professional judgment" is characterized as the creation of a series of questions or a checklist of potential warning signs to guide assessment of an individual by a mental health

professional or other authorities. The article specifically includes *Early Warning, Timely Response*, the Department of Education's response to the Springfield shooting, in this category. It argues that guided professional judgment is useful in determining "risk of general aggression," but not in determining the risk of targeted school violence, maintaining that such approaches, in order to be accurate, require a statistical field far larger than the small number of school shootings to date can provide (Reddy, et al. 164-5). The same concern limits the effectiveness of "automated decision making," either through weighted formulas or computer programs; these systems are designed with the same type of statistical basis that is used to create accurate guided professional judgments. An additional concern limits the use of automated decision making, particularly with computer programs, because

> when an expert systems approach is used to determine risk of targeted school violence, there is a risk the user may discount their own knowledge of the student in question and rely primarily, if not solely, on the computer-generated decision instead (Reddy, et al. 166-7).

After establishing the flaws of the other approaches to the school shooting problem, the article lists the advantages of the threat assessment approach. The threat assessment approach, unlike the previous approaches, is "deductive"; it works from the "facts" of the current case "rather than on a series of factors shared by similar perpetrators or other violent youth" (Reddy, et al. 167). The focus of threat assessment on "behavior of concern" and on the idea that, while threats must be taken seriously, "threats are not a necessary threshold for concern" is emphasized, as in the Secret Service/ Department of Education report (Reddy, et al. 168). While the strengths of the threat assessment approach are asserted, its major weakness is discussed, too:

> We recognize that although the threat assessment approach is based on empirical research on targeted violence, it too lacks the benefit of comprehensive empirical knowledge on targeted violence in schools. The most effective approach for understanding and preventing planned school-based attacks will be the one that is informed by empirically derived knowledge about the antecedents, motives, idea development, communications, and planning behaviors of all known perpetrators of targeted school violence (Reddy, et al. 170).

The way this "weakness" is presented, though, actually helps the threat assessment method in two ways. First, it repeats the idea that threat assessment is based on empirical research, even if that research isn't yet complete. As such, it continues the argument that threat assessment is the only approach to school shootings based on sound research methodology. This paragraph also serves as a call for further research directed by the threat assessment model, potentially generating more research funds for threat assessment scholars and further cementing threat assessment's position at the top of school shooting models.

Conclusion

The common element linking each of the federal reactions to school shootings discussed in this chapter is the desire to control the definition, conceptualization, and range of solutions to the school shooting problem. This control of a field of discourse can be very profitable for an organization, as the FBI's profilers discovered after gaining control of serial killer discourse. Jenkins points out that

> By the end of 1984, the serial murder problem had been formulated and projected with enormous vigor and success, and the claims-makers succeeded in achieving many of their policy goals. A number of federal

agencies were indeed created to provide the investigative assistance and intelligence collation sought by the claims-makers. The formation of the NCAVC was regarded as sufficiently important to be announced by President Reagan personally. . . Over the next year, the new unit was divided into a research operation, the Behavioral Sciences Unit, and an Investigative Support Unit, which housed VICAP (Jenkins 68).

This series of benefits was relatively short-lived, however. By the early nineties, VICAP's effectiveness was being challenged (Jenkins 68), and the records of the profilers in addressing the problem that they had defined were being disputed by Jenkins, Tithecott, and others. At the same time, the FBI suffered severe setbacks in its public image with its involvement in the raids against David Koresh's Branch Davidians in Waco and its botched operation against Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge. The public perception of the FBI had changed, too; even Thomas Harris, who had been essential in establishing the FBI's association with the heroic profiler, portrayed the organization as a vicious, treacherous monster in 1999's *Hannibal*, the sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*. Given this set of problems, it is easy to see why involvement in the school shooting problem offered the FBI a potential payoff.

The Secret Service stood to benefit from its involvement in school shooting discourse, too. The National Threat Assessment Center was an attempt to broaden the organization's range beyond its VIP security and counterfeit/ fraud operations, and Columbine occurred shortly after its founding. Control over Columbine would also help the Secret Service promote its approach to threat assessment in a burgeoning field of threat assessment experts both in the government (like those in the FBI) and in private industry.

The Department of Education also sought to increase its fortunes through providing its own guidance to school and law enforcement officials in dealing with school shootings. Long under fire from critics, especially from conservatives opposing federal involvement in education, the organization addressed school shootings with joint projects, both of which were undertaken as partnerships with law enforcement organizations within the executive branch, the Justice Department and the Secret Service. The association with law enforcement gave the reports and their recommendations the visibility and credibility that the Department of Education needed.

In fact, the overall effect of the executive branch's reaction to school shootings is overwhelmingly driven by law enforcement models. Calls for greater surveillance of children by their peers and school officials are the ultimate result of all of the approaches discussed in this chapter. The emphasis that, under the right set of circumstances, any child could become a killer ends up setting the stage for the treatment of all citizens as potential criminals. Tithecott discusses this dynamic in serial killer discourse:

> With the psychiatric profession being commonly perceived as failing in its (fatherly) duties of punishing the suspect, the FBI has stepped in to carry out those duties as an extrajudicial element in the penal system and to naturalize the metaphor "child as potential criminal" by its figuration of serial killing as originating in preadulthood. In the process, the prevention of serial killing is restricted to the policing of childhood, an activity which is instrumental in the *construction* of our idea of childhood, that is, it is a space to be policed (Tithecott 46).

In many ways, school shooting discourse is the ultimate realization of this movement to redefine childhood as space to be policed; now instead of having to use the childhood origins of adult killers as justification, law enforcement has child killers, ultimately making their calls for the policing of childhood far stronger.

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Tithecott also argues that this dynamic has a reach far beyond the control of children in the school environment:

> In locating the origins of serial killing in childhood, our policing discourses (those that we speak as fluently as the FBI) reenact the simultaneous construction of and investigation of the space with which psychoanalysis has been especially preoccupied. However, we are happy also to reverse the metaphor's terms (criminal as child), to regard the relationship between police and criminal as one of father to child, a move which can help to normalize the inscription of all us who are not part of the "law enforcement community" as children/ potential criminals, and to normalize the idea of members of that "community" as apolitical patriarchs. The stories we tell about serial killing have the effect of sustaining the mystique of patriarchal/ police power, and indicate a "childish" trust, a "childish" respect for that power (Tithecott 47).

The school shooting crisis gave law enforcement on all levels a new opportunity to dramatically extend its powers and influence. This campaign was interrupted in late 2001 by an even greater opportunity to achieve these goals, however: the discourse of anti-terrorism.

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CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERTS AND THE EXTENSION OF THE CRISIS

        Government bureaucrats and policy-makers are not the only actors in the national

post-Columbine social drama, however. A number of private organizations and citizens

became interested in becoming regarded as experts holding the answer or answers to the

school shooting crisis. When I use the term "expert" here, I am not using it as an

endorsement; I am using it to describe those who have, successfully or unsuccessfully,

attempted to attain expert status, a status that allows a person or organization to serve as a

source for media articles, author books or articles, give seminars for communities or law

enforcement, or engage in other acts establishing symbolic authority in the school

shooting debate. As with the government organizations discussed in Chapter Four,

experts have an interest in both arguing for the existence of the school shooting crisis and

in presenting themselves as those with the solution to the problem; they, too, are out to

seize symbolic, advisory control over the problem, uninterested in attaining or unable to

attain the power to enact their changes themselves. Out of the field of individuals and

organizations claiming expert status in the wake of Columbine, this chapter will focus on

three people who exemplify the use of a specific rhetorical strategy to attain expert status:

a pattern of associating the worst possible results from previously harmless-seeming acts.

Gateways and the Rhetoric of the Warning Sign

An event that is perceived as unique and unlikely to recur will not become a crisis

that will affect policy or expert culture; such an event will be classified as a freak

occurrence, and as such measures to protect against it will be unnecessary. The events

that become policy- and culture-changing are those events that are seen as likely to recur.

The greater the perceived likelihood of recurrence, the greater the likelihood of social or

political action following a crisis.

One common strategy used by expert cultures looking to extend their influence in

the face of a perceived crisis is to emphasize the possibly tragic consequences of minor,

trivial-seeming decisions. This dynamic is noted by Bill Ellis in his study of Halloween

sadism legends. In his study of the safety advice often distributed during the Halloween

season, Ellis observes that a pattern of "horror stories" is common:

> These rules are, on the face of it, good advice, but they rely on a common
> pattern, stressing the worst possible consequences from a relatively trivial
> act. This pattern was underscored by the public comments of a local
> police chief, who commenting on the rules of costuming, told parents to
> make sure that the costume is warm enough for their children. "They try
> to rush a little too much when they're chilled," he added, "and it might
> cause problems. . . They might dash across the street because they are cold
> and just forget for that one little second." The chief's tactful silence over
> what happens next underscores the message: on Halloween, it only takes

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one trivial act of carelessness and that "one little second" to cause a child's death (Ellis, "Halloween" 30).

This pattern of hyperbolic consequences is especially visible in the discourse following the Columbine shooting regarding the identification of potential future school killers. A case study demonstrating this pattern is *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*, the story of Cassie's martyrdom as written by her mother, Misty Bernall, and published by Plough Press, an evangelical Christian publishing company. The way Misty tells it, Cassie was a basically good child until she fell in with a bad friend named Mona (a pseudonym) in her early high school years. One of the key signs that Misty and her husband, Brad, focused on as an indication of trouble was the music that Cassie and Mona were listening to:

> I don't know exactly when it was, but at some point Brad began examining some of Cassie's music and realized that it wasn't "just" entertainment. Despite the innocuous covers, the lyrics themselves often carried an unmistakable message (Bernall 45).

Misty then includes a brief sample of lyrics from a song performed by the rock group Marilyn Manson. She claims that the group was "a favorite of the two boys at Columbine who killed [Cassie]," an assertion which had been popular for the first few weeks after the shooting but has since been called into question by a variety of sources. That argument aside, however, the song is entitled "Get Your Gunn," the two n's on "Gunn" referring to a murdered abortion doctor, David Gunn (Manson 3). Misty misquotes the song's lyrics, however, transforming the song's refrain from "get your gunn" (as indicated clearly in the album's liner notes and on any internet listing of the song's lyrics) to "get your gun" (Bernall 45). With a slight misrepresentation of its

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lyrics, the song is transformed from an ironic commentary on a murder committed by a

pro-life activist to an apparent endorsement of gun violence. Misty then comments, "I

shudder to think where we might be today, had I not come across those letters. That was

a real wake-up call" (Bernall 45).

The possibility that Cassie and Mona posed a danger to Brad and Misty's lives is

confirmed for Misty when she discovers a series of letters from Mona that Cassie was

hiding in her room:

> There was endless talk about the "sexiness" of black clothes and makeup,
> the "fun" of contraband alcohol, marijuana, and self-mutilation, and the
> adventures of a classmate whose girlfriend went to "this satanic church,
> cult thing where you have to drink a kitten's blood to get in." Several of
> the letters advised Cassie to do away with us and thus solve her
> innumerable problems. One ended, "Kill your parents! Murder is the
> answer to all of your problems. Make those scumbags pay for your
> suffering. Love you, me" (Bernall 38-9).

Misty and Brad see these letters as a sure sign that Cassie is up to no good, and they

report the children to the police. At a meeting with a police detective and the Bernalls,

Mona's parents don't see what the big problem is. Misty reports that Mona's mother

"could not understand why we had the need to bring [the letters] to the attention of the

law, or to involve her husband in the matter," but that

> Thankfully the detective and the investigator took the situation as
> seriously as we did, and supported our desire for a restraining order to bar
> Mona from further contact from Cassie. Among other things, the sheriff
> told Mona's parents that the letters were the worst he had seen during
> more than a decade in juvenile crime, and he warned them that if Mona
> had had any sort of prior record, she would have been called before a
> judge. Still they showed no surprise or remorse (Bernall 52-3).

The narrative we see developing here is one insisting on parental authority, and

specifically that Misty and Brad Bernall were right in splitting up Mona and Cassie.

Mona's parents are presented as gullible, over-indulgent monsters; Misty reports that she

was traumatized by their behavior, claiming

> I can still feel their cold, level stares. Nor will I forget how Mona's
> mother walked her back to their car after our meeting, rubbing her
> shoulder and reassuring her, as if to say "Oh, honey, it's okay, the Bernalls
> are just mean people" (Bernall 52).

The proof that the Bernalls acted appropriately comes in the actions of other black-clad

trouble children; Mona is never mentioned again after her exorcism from Cassie's life.

Misty mentions a case in 1997 when a fourteen-year-old from a nearby suburb "said he

was going to kill his parents" and then subsequently stabbed his father the next day.

Misty notes that "After the stabbing, satanic carvings and other Goth trappings were

discovered in the boy's bedroom" (Bernall 61). She maintains that "In a time when

supposedly peaceful middle-class suburbs like ours are breeding children capable of such

things, you begin to realize that talk is never just talk" (Bernall 61).

   The ultimate proof offered by Misty Bernall's account to support the claim that

the Bernalls acted in Cassie's best interests is Misty's assertion that Cassie was a devout,

genuine born-again Christian by the time she was killed at Columbine High School by the

very type of black-wearing, Marilyn Manson-listening, murderous freaks that she could

have ended up being. This is demonstrated when Misty sympathizes with the Klebolds

and Harrises after she receives an apology letter from the Klebolds:

> Even if Cassie were still alive, we would be able to understand their hurt
> and humiliation. Before she changed directions, we agonized over her in
> the same way the parents of her killer surely agonize over him now. And
> even if we could never compare the weight of our separate griefs, we have
> at least one comfort: the knowledge that our daughter died nobly. What
> balm do they have? (Bernall 131)

What Bernall stops short of saying, apparently out of sympathy with the Klebold

and Harris families, other sources say directly, as in this editorial from the *Baptist*

Standard:

> So, Cassie transformed from a candidate for the Trench Coat Mafia to a
> winsome Christian leader in her youth group. She might've been a
> defiant, angry co-conspirator. . . One wonders how thousands of lives
> might be different today if the parents of Harris and Klebold had
> intervened in their lives, if those boys had been exposed to the sweet
> gospel of Jesus in a loving church youth group (Knox 2).

The seeds of this narrative are in Bernall's book, and Cassie's story carries this meaning

with many of the people who are retelling it and taking it to heart. The *Baptist Standard*

editorial emphasizes that it was "the persistent 'tough love' of her parents and the gentle,

affirming ministry of her church" that turned Cassie's life around (Knox 1). An article

from evangelist minister Charles Colson makes the agenda of evangelical Christianity

clearer on this specific issue:

> The best way all of us can honor Cassie's memory is to embrace that same
> courageous commitment to our faith. For example, we should stand up to
> our kids when they want to play violent video games. We should be
> willing to stand up to community ridicule when we oppose access to
> Internet pornography at the local library (Colson 2-3).

Obviously the parents of Klebold and Harris (and Mona's parents, and any other lax

parents) should have "stood up" to their children and to the culture that ruined those

children. Christian parental authority is posited as the best answer to the school shooting

crisis.

The emphasis these warnings place on relatively minor rebellious acts, such as

playing violent video games, viewing Internet pornography, and listening to Marilyn

Manson, is particularly interesting given the more serious nature of Harris and Klebold's

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rebellious behavior prior to their shooting spree. Harris and Klebold's illegal possession of firearms and their bomb making activities were one form of this rebellion. Harris also threatened on his website to kill a friend of his, Brooks Brown; Brown's parents went to the police with news of the threat. Harris and Klebold had been in other legal trouble as well; they had been arrested for theft and had been suspended for hacking into Columbine's computer system (Commission 20). Apparently, warning parents that children in trouble with the law might be in danger of future trouble with the law would not expand the perception of crisis sufficiently for the purposes of those doing the warning; there are far more adolescents committing minor or novel, alien acts of rebellion than are mundanely getting in trouble with the law. Involvement with the law is also already controlled by a well-established expert culture; police, lawyers, and courts; the only secular experts governing societal reaction to more minor acts of teen rebellion, on the other hand, are schools and psychologists, the authority of both rivaled by attacks from both the right and the left. Ironically, control over the conceptualization of these minor acts of rebellion influences how legal and law enforcement discourse deals with teen criminals; the prosecution of the suspects in the West Memphis Three case, for example, a triple murder case in West Memphis, Arkansas, was largely brought about through the persuasive power of anti-cult discourse in the absence of decisive physical evidence (Leveritt 100, 288-9).

As the Ellis quotes at the beginning of this chapter indicate, the use of patterns of hyperbolic consequences was in existence long before Columbine. In particular, this rhetorical strategy gained significant ground through the anti-Satanism experts of the

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1980s and 1990s. It is through the writings of two of these experts, Bob Larson and Carl

Racshke, that we will examine the means by which persuasive elements of anti-Satanism

discourse were repackaged following the Columbine shooting, and we will examine a

third expert, Dave Grossman, whose use of the hyperbolic consequences pattern operates

independently of anti-Satanism.

Bob Larson

Bob Larson is a Christian radio host and author who bills himself on his website

as "the world's foremost expert on cults, the occult, and supernatural phenomena"

(boblarson.org). He is an advocate of a belief system often referred to as "spiritual

warfare," a belief among some evangelical Christians that demons and the devil are real

beings, not abstract forces or metaphors, and that they often possess humans. When he

discusses Satanism, it is from this perspective; Satan is real, and Satanists are tools of this

real entity.

Larson primarily established his reputation as an opponent of Satanism in the

1980s, culminating in his 1989 book *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth*. Each

of *Satanism*'s chapters begins with a selection of dialogue between Larson and various

troubled youths who have called in to his radio program. It is his work with young

people that Larson uses as his primary claim to authority; he claims his contact with them

has given him the experience he needs to understand the working of Satanism,

particularly his interviews with teen murderer and self-proclaimed Satanist Sean Sellers.

Larson characterizes Satanism as a threat that comes about through a series of subtle influences. Usually these influences involve some level of participation in imaginary wrongdoing, "vicarious sin." Based on his interpretation of the Christian teaching that "anyone looking lustfully has committed adultery in his heart" and the command "to ignore evil imaginations and avoid 'every thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ'" (Larson, *Satanism* 52-3), Larson sees any involvement in the occult, from participating in Halloween to seeing a horror movie, as a dangerous step on "The Slippery Street to Satanism" (Larson, *Satanism* 106). Although Larson is not the first to apply these scripture-rooted beliefs, his explanation of them reveals some of the roots of the belief in hyperbolic consequences.

A narrative type related to the pattern of hyperbolic consequences is the "dabbler" narrative. In the dabbler narrative, adolescents "dabble" in harmless-seeming activities, but their dabbling draws them inexorably into a web of more and more depraved and dangerous acts, usually culminating in a murder or suicide. A perfect example is found in *Satanism* when Larson relates the story of Sarah, one of his callers:

> Sarah's involvement with Satanism started with drugs, heavy metal music, and various forms of anti-social behavior. She did pot, speed, LSD, any drug she could get her hands on. She slept with every guy who would have sex with her. Soon the friend who was eventually burned alive [a sacrificial victim] invited her to a party, which turned out to be a satanic ritual. At first, it was an electrifying departure from her strict Christian upbringing. Sarah didn't realize that killing a few animals preceded human torture and murder (Larson, *Satanism* 23).

The dabbler narrative emphasizes the helplessness of the dabbler; all sense of agency is stolen from him or her by the powerful and evil forces which he or she is unwittingly

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playing with. Its power also relies on a sense of inevitability: if you dabble, terrible

things *will* happen to you.

One of the primary satanic influences that Larson discusses is heavy metal music.

He divides satanic musicians into two categories. The first is best epitomized by his

discussion of the band Slayer, whom Larson spent time with while they were on tour.

Larson portrays Slayer as a group of poseurs, more interested in money than in advancing

a satanic agenda:

> The Slayer fans I've talked with on my radio show think the band indulges
> in an endless orgy of devotion to the devil. In truth, Slayer was pampered,
> bored, and anxious to get home. They wanted to buy postcards of castles
> on the Rhine, not black candles and sacred daggers to summon demons
> (Larson, *Satanism* 16).

Larson casts their concern about money in a more evil light, however, when the band

refuses Larson's request to record a few words of encouragement to help a troubled

listener of his "get out of Satanism":

> The members of Slayer, who had so carefully crafted evil lyrics glorifying
> Satan worship, weren't willing to say one encouraging word to a
> misguided teenager who really believed they meant what they said in their
> songs. Doing so would risk demolishing their image, and that would mean
> fewer record sales, concert tickets, and less money. When you're the
> kings of black metal music, you don't abdicate, even when a life is at
> stake. Somewhere, I could hear Lucifer laughing (Larson, *Satanism* 18).

Slayer's sin is not a direct allegiance to occult forces, but an allegiance to money, or

Mammon, as Larson explains it, citing the Biblical aphorism that "The love of money is

the root of all evil" (Larson, *Satanism* 18-9). They use the images of Satanism to appeal

to fans, and as such they are just as much a part of the problem as the second group of

musicians that Larson discusses, the genuine occultists.

The genuine occultists among musicians are represented here by Larson's discussion of another heavy metal musician, King Diamond. Larson describes various parts of King Diamond's stage show, which are really not much different from the shows of Slayer and the other poseur bands, but then claims that

> Though many black metal bands espouse Satanism tongue-in-cheek, the King is no diamond in the rough. "What you see with me in 100 percent real. . . I do understand the dark side of life. Because I profess being a Satanist doesn't mean I go around killing babies. It simply means I understand the powers of the unknown" [from a 1988 interview in *Hit Parader*] (Larson, *Satanism* 74).

Larson uses King Diamond's supposedly real Satanism as a jumping off point to discuss Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page's interest in British occultist Aleister Crowley. Crowley is a central point in much anti-Satanist discourse; Larson will return to Crowley again, and we will see Carl Raschke use Crowley in a similar way.

The fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* is another of Larson's targets. *D&D* is the primary example Larson relies on for his argument that exposure to imaginary unchristian acts lays the groundwork for future unchristian behavior. He warns that

> At minimum, *D&D* replaces reality with a contrived universe where anything goes and moral absolutism is absent. Certain players may become so detached from the outside world that the death of their character triggers violent rage (Larson, *Satanism* 50).

The confusion of fantasy with reality that supposedly accompanies *D&D* is supposedly so complete that reality is replaced; the simulacrum becomes more believable that reality, and influences reality in turn.

Larson further argues that the game is "an explicit education in occultism." To support this claim, he quotes portions of the *D&D Players Handbook* in order to accuse the game's creator, Gary Gygax, of purposefully seeking to draw players into the occult:

> Gygax wastes no time, informing his protégés, "The casting of spells, clerical and magical, is a very important aspect of play. Most spells have a *verbal* component, and so must be uttered. . . Clerical spells, including the druidic [witchcraft], and bestowed by gods so that the desired. . . spell components will be placed properly in his or her mind." Gygax continues to instructing players to memorize the appropriate spells to "impress the potent, mystical spell formulae upon the mind" [all previous bracket notes and omissions through use of ellipses are in Larson's original text] (Larson, *Satanism* 51).

Whether he is doing so deliberately or through ignorance, Larson is taking the previous quotations out of context. The quotes from Gygax are discussing how the *D&D* world operates from the point of view of its characters. A player's imaginary character memorizes spells. The player can't memorize any of the spells, as the texts for such spells aren't included in any of the *D&D* manuals beyond the mention of a few symbols, gestures, and materials used by fictional spell casters; these descriptive story elements aren't enough to count as an actual ritual by any definition. The detailed instructions for *D&D* spells don't appear in the book because they don't exist, and the vast majority of these imaginary spells have absolutely no parallel in the spells of real world believers in occult magic. Larson is, ironically, also experiencing the confusion between game play and reality and using said confusion for rhetorical effect.

Next Larson discusses horror films as a gateway into the occult. Larson describes his experiences watching horror films while researching his book:

> While researching the phenomenon of horror films, I assumed the unpleasant duty of sitting through hours of ritualized, satanic screen

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> savagery. Most of these movies were R-rated. Yet almost always I was
> the oldest person and the only adult in the theater. Average age?
> Approximately fifteen. The worst part was the audience reaction as bodies
> were disemboweled and limbs amputated. Instead of hung heads and
> disapproving groans, the murderous mayhem met with cheers, laughter,
> and indifference. . . Blood, guts, and gore on the screen. Popcorn, candy,
> and pop for the audience. No one gagged or grimaced. Beyond shock, the
> kids intently observed the wizardry of special effects that simulated
> savagery. Since you weren't in the theaters to see for yourself, come with
> me on a spine-tingling journey through the world of horror films to
> consider their effect (Larson, *Satanism* 63-4).

Larson portrays himself as a bold explorer, enduring the savage wilderness of horror

films and their audiences, bringing back knowledge so that his presumed innocent readers

can be spared the horror of this encounter themselves. What he finds in this wilderness

he reports as evidence that horror films desensitize young viewers to real violence. He

credits this effect of the films to their very structure and the viewing situation they create:

> The often chaotic plot lines and disjointed camera sequences of many
> horror films are randomly based. Instead of fostering mental stability, the
> cinematic techniques leave movie-goers what will happen next. Such
> unpredictability enforces morbid fears that young minds cannot process.
> Tell the teen who wants to watch horror movies that the human mind can
> handle only so much stress before it becomes overburdened and
> desensitized. Scenes of gore galore can become so indelibly imbedded
> that the film becomes a living nightmare, triggering neuroses, trauma, and
> ongoing phobias. Don't hesitate to declare that something is tragically
> wrong with anyone who watches a movie for the thrill of watching blood
> flow (Larson, *Satanism* 67-8).

The occult subject matter of these films is only part of the problem for Larson; it is the

depiction of flowing blood and other acts of graphic violence that he focuses on. In his

arguments, the means of presentation itself is harmful and akin to brainwashing.

Watching the films causes another blending of fantasy and reality; again, eventually, the

fantasy becomes the reality.

The model Larson uses for heavy metal, *D&D*, and horror movies is metaphorical; it is a derivation of his understanding of how drug abuse works in occult situations. He maintains that

> Drugs and Satanism have been uniquely joined for centuries. . . For many participants in satanic ceremonies, like Nancy [one of Larson's callers], the lure of drugs is the enticement attracting them to Satanism. Once involved in the cult, the use of drugs, along with hypnotic suggestion, becomes a form of brainwashing. Satanic cult leaders know that even though their philosophy is based on moral anarchy, they must maintain cohesiveness with their followers. Drugs render the devil's devotees addictively dependent and less likely to abandon their allegiance to Satan (Larson, *Satanism* 88).

The dabbler narrative discussed above is derived from discourse about drug addiction. Marijuana in particular is often described as a "gateway drug"; according to this idea, marijuana use can lead to the use of presumably more dangerous drugs. This gateway drug concept is often used in anti-marijuana arguments, which often take on the same sense of the denial of agency that dabbler narratives exhibit. Larson extends this logic to Satanism; drugs are a gateway to the devil, a means of breaking down one's natural resistance against evil. He quotes a police cult expert as saying "The more you do drugs, the less you are able to think clearly. Then you become less aware of what is being done to entice you into Satanism" (Larson, *Satanism* 89). This is Larson's claim about all of the satanic influences discussed so far; they act to change the thinking of participants and make them vulnerable to satanic manipulation.

Larson also maintains that witches and Wiccans, although they deny connection to Satan, are satanic due to their involvement in magic. While discussing witches, he invokes fears of a shadowy conspiracy:

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> Estimates regarding the number of witches in America is anybody's guess. Witches can be anybody. They don't have warts on their noses, and they don't spirit through the night on broomsticks. They are ordinary people who secretly practice their occult arts without fanfare (Larson, *Satanism* 169).

The danger witches present is less than that of Satanists, according to Larson, but they are still dangerous: "Though all forms of witchcraft and occultism are not equally damaging, all have the same essential belief systems that glorify selfish impulses and favor unhindered eroticism over restraint" (Larson, *Satanism* 171). It is the removal of the "restraint" supposedly provided by Christian beliefs that is Larson's greatest fear, as all of the sections of his book cited here indicate.

Implicit in these claims is a belief that minor-seeming acts of rebellion or exploration are not minor at all; any deviation from parental- or society-defined norms could result in tragedy for parent and child alike. Although manifested in narrative form in Misty Bernall's account of Cassie Bernall's life, this cause-effect relationship is not always tied to a narrative form; it is better described as a rhetorical technique. Larson uses both narrative and non-narrative versions of this pattern throughout his work. One of his most common non-narrative uses of the pattern of hyperbolic consequences is his constant use of warning signs lists. We have seen warning signs lists before; they appear in all three of the major federal reports on school shootings, and they are a common part of school shooting discourse. They were a substantial and important part of anti-cult and anti-Satanist discourse as well. In *Satanism*, Larson relies extensively on the persuasive power of the list. The first list of the book, for example, is a list of "Signs of Satanism." Items on this list are "An unhealthy preoccupation with fantasy role-playing games like

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)," " An interest in Ouija boards and other occult games,"
"A preoccupation with psychic phenomena like telepathy, astral projection, Tarot cards, I
Ching, and parapsychology," "An addiction to horror movies. . . whose main characters
kill and maim," "An obsession with heavy metal music, particularly black metal bands. . .
that evoke satanic symbolism," "An affinity for satanic paraphernalia, including posters
of black metal bands, skulls, knives, chalices, black candles, and robes," "An inclination
to write poems or letters about Satanism or to sketch designs of upside-down crosses,
pentagrams, the number 666, names of the devil, or skulls and other symbols of death,"
"An attraction to satanic literature and such books as *The Satanic Bible*, the
Necronomicon, the writings of Aleister Crowley, or keeping a private journal such as a
Book of Shadows (a self-designed secret chronicle of satanic activities and ideas)," and
"An involvement with friends who dress in black, greet each other with the satanic salute
(index and pinkie finger extended, with palm facing inward), speak and write backwards,
or organize secret meetings" (Larson, *Satanism* 29). This list focuses on behaviors that
Larson specifically labels "satanic" or "occult."

Another list of "danger signs" is included later in the book; some of the elements
repeat from the earlier list, but others are new: "Grades drop drastically," "Isolation,
aggression, and anger surface," "A wider circle of friends is exchanged for a select group
belonging to the developing coven," "Sports and extracurricular activities are avoided,"
"Suicidal thoughts are often expressed or written down in distorted poetic forms," "Secret
agendas are established, often involving unexplained activities during late night hours,"
"Self-mutilation is practiced and a calendar of regular rituals is scheduled," and

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"Available time is spent devoted to satanic literature, often borrowed from a local library. Books like the *Necronomicon*, written by science fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft. . . and *The Satanic Bible* are devoured" (Larson, *Satanism* 116-7). While the first list focuses specifically on satanic or occult activities, this list includes signs that can indicate other forms of trouble, such as mental illness or drug abuse. Elements from both of these lists show up in the lists of school shooting warning signs assembled by Larson and others. *Satanism* includes a series of other lists, too: a series of questions regarding spiritual beliefs for parents to discuss with their children (page 47), a list of deaths supposedly linked to *Dungeons and Dragons* (page 49), a list of specific horror films to avoid (page 66), a list of questions to guide parental response to teen drug abuse (page 96), a series of "satanic symbols" with brief explanations of each (page 109), the "Nine Satanic Statements" from LaVey's *Satanic Bible* (page 111), and appendices featuring lists of "occult games" (pages 197 to 200) and "black metal" bands (pages 203 to 208), as well as a "calendar of Satanism and witchcraft ceremonies" (page 209).

Echoing a belief common among evangelical Christians in a corrupt "world" that Christianity opposes, Larson characterizes Satanism and the occult as a counterculture out to destroy devout Christendom. Despite his association of money with evil and statements like "Gross- out movies are big grossers on the screen" (Larson, *Satanism* 63), Larson still primarily characterizes Satanism as an invader that can be stopped before it attacks normal children:

> Before you dismiss any evil influence as innocuous, remember that the concept of evil triumphing over good and the system of Satan worship aren't ingrained in our culture. Those who worship Satan get the idea through movies, books, music, videos, adult propaganda, or other avenues.

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Expose the entry and post a STOP sign before your child becomes a
servant of Satan (Larson, *Satanism* 117).

Here agents promoting Satanism and the occult are oddballs and eccentrics, not in the

cultural mainstream. They are unscrupulous members of a cultural elite (like Hollywood

types) or members of underground cultures, like the groups advocating "radical

feminism" that Larson claims use witchcraft as a proselytizing tool (Larson, *Satanism*

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There are two prominent deviant figures whom Larson and other anti-Satanists

tend to portray as primary vectors of Satanic belief. The first is the aforementioned

Aleister Crowley. Larson describes Crowley's legacy as the belief "that uninhibited lust

and licentious freedom are the way to spiritual truth," noting that "His philosophy of 'Do

what thou wilt' has also inspired serial killers" (Larson, *Satanism* 153). The second,

considered by many to be inspired by Crowley, is Anton LaVey, the founder of the

Church of Satan. Larson states that LaVey's *Satanic Bible* is mentioned as a source of

information by many of his teen Satanist callers, including Sean Sellers, and he claims

that "On some college campuses, it outsold the Christian Bible" (Larson, *Satanism* 110).

Although Crowley never really considered himself a Satanist, and LaVey's Church of

Satan denies that it encourages human sacrifice or other violations of secular law, Larson

argues that "LaVey's philosophy quite naturally leads to crime and violence" (Larson,

Satanism 114).

Although Larson does not claim that Satanism is a natural or unavoidable product

of American culture, he does argue that the problem is dangerous and widespread to the

point of being a major concern for law enforcement and society in general. He quotes a

Chicago police detective when he proclaims that "satanic felony and murder" are "the

crime of the 90s, " then he argues that

> Young murderers like Sean Sellers are loners whose misdeeds are acts of
> emotionally disturbed individuals. But the most sobering menace to
> society comes from members of organized criminal cults controlled by
> adults who deliberately commit violence as part of their satanic beliefs
> (Larson, *Satanism* 126).

These cults are claimed to be widespread and powerful. Larson cites another police

officer who claims that "95 percent of all missing children are victims of occult-related

abductions" (Larson, *Satanism* 125). These cults supposedly avoid public knowledge

through cunning and misinformation:

> In fact, the story of ritualistic abuse of children remains largely untold
> simply because it is so unbelievable. Satanic cults deliberately fabricate
> preposterous forms of child victimization, knowing that the more
> unthinkable their atrocity, the less likely the victim will be believed
> (Larson, *Satanism* 126).

According to this logic, the more unbelievable and bizarre a story of abuse is, the more

likely it is to be true. This creates an epistemological problem that has plagued anti-

Satanism, as well as other movements addressing claims of extreme cases of child abuse;

how does one actually differentiate between true and false claims? Larson leaves this

issue unaddressed, however, favoring an attitude of universal credulity to claims of ritual

abuse.

The "crime of the 90s" did not end up being satanic ritual abuse or ritual murder,

however, at least in the way Larson and other anti-Satanists characterized it in the late

1980s. From 1997 on, the new crime of the age was the school shooting. Larson adapted

to the demands of the new age, publishing his book *Extreme Evil: Kids Killing Kids* in

1999. According to his own account, Larson's initial involvement in Columbine was

prompted by his close proximity to Littleton, and he turns this proximity into a hometown

advantage:

> Unlike others who watched what went on through the eyes of Katie Couric
> or Dan Rather, who jetted across the country to report from the scene, I
> drove ten minutes from my Denver-based office to be on-site and find out
> what really motivated the killers (Larson, *Evil* 5).

Unlike these powerful media representatives, who Larson portrays as pampered

carpetbaggers, Larson claims to have the "easy" answer to why school shootings occur,

claiming that "Much of what I discovered wasn't reported in the secular press" (Larson,

Evil 5).

As in his earlier work, his claims to expert knowledge are rooted in his claim of

first-hand experience. Departing from his pattern of using callers to his radio program as

information sources, Larson's initial information on Columbine is collected from

interviews with students in the Columbine parking lot in the days following the

shootings. He describes interviews with Columbine students in which the students, being

interviewed in groups, accuse Klebold and Harris of being variously racists, vampires,

gay, and marijuana users. Typical is the following exchange between Larson and a

student named Eric, who earlier observes that Klebold and Harris "were into Wicca. . .

Why doesn't the [expletive deleted by Larson] press talk about that?":

> "So, why do you think they did what they did?" Eric uttered an expletive,
> taking God's name in vain, his anger coming through clearly. His
> blasphemous adjectives were incongruously followed by the answer to my
> question. "Witchcraft! That's the only reason they would think and act in
> such a dark kind of way. They were homosexuals too, or at least that's
> what most kids thought. Maybe they weren't, but they were called that"
> (Larson, *Evil* 8-9).

Larson makes a series of assumptions with this interview material. He assumes that Eric

isn't Christian because of "the string of profanities coming out of his mouth," and

subsequently claims that, as such, "he had no religious bias" to affect his statements.

This material and the quote above indicate that Larson assumes that the only people who

would ordinarily fear witchcraft are Christians, and that Eric's mention of it, being free of

bias, is true. Larson follows this logic with much of his interview material, assuming it to

be true because he heard it from a variety of students. He admits that "the evidence that

Harris and Klebold were heavily influenced by drugs, homosexuality, vampirism, and

witchcraft is admittedly hearsay," but goes on to defend his belief in the accusations:

> But I heard these same themes repeated again and again by other students
> who knew them, those who had no reason to tack part of the blame on
> these aberrant forms of behavior. In fact, none of the students to whom I
> spoke saw these forms of behavior as objectionable. Rather, such actions
> were stated matter-of-factly, like it was no big deal these kid killers were
> described in such a way. That in itself was disturbing. The very things
> that may have been at least part of the reason these kids killed weren't
> taken seriously. The evidence was right in front of these young people,
> and they couldn't see it. Neither could the press. They were more
> interested in body counts, police briefings, and psychological theories than
> moral issues (Larson, *Evil* 12).

Although the majority of statements Larson reports fit the pattern he describes, he

blatantly ignores the disgust towards witchcraft expressed by Eric in making his claims

that Klebold and Harris's supposed aberrant behavior was accepted by peers. He also

blatantly ignores the coverage that the press gave to "moral issues" with their coverage of

the reported martyrdom of Cassie Bernall and, later, Rachel Scott. Such tunnel vision is

necessary to reinforce Larson's claim to specialized knowledge; only he, with his

experience in fighting "extreme evil," is capable of seeing what today's deluded children and the secular media miss.

Much of what follows in *Extreme Evil* is a repackaging of elements from *Satanism.* Instead of discussing the dangers of "black metal" music, for example, Larson discusses goth music; while he maintains that goths are "sexually confused" and include "a significant number of those interested in vampirism and witchcraft," he points out that Klebold and Harris weren't goth and that most goths aren't murderous. However, he continues a trend found in much of the other media coverage of goths, assuming that non-violent goths are really poseurs and not "true" goths, sinisterly noting that now that goths have "been outed by the press," "the real Goths will go underground, and true Gothic believers will become more extreme in their fascination with all things dark and deadly" (Larson, *Evil* 48-51). His discussion of Marilyn Manson allows him to claim a direct link to his crusade against Satanism, observing that "Manson admitted he grew up reading the writings of famed black magician Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey," and "he seems to view his concerts as an actual focus of demonic energy"; he also describes Manson's act as "demonic evangelism" (Larson, *Evil* 54-5).

A section on violent video games is perhaps the most important change in Larson's focus, although his argument remains firmly rooted in arguments that he made about *Dungeons & Dragons* and other board games in *Satanism.* Larson portrays the video game as a window into the psyches of school shooters, and he uses a brief experience of playing *Doom* as another of his field experiences of evil, echoing his earlier forays into the theater to see horror movies:

> Sooner or later I had to do it. I couldn't just write about it, I needed to experience it. In some small way, I had to get inside the minds of these kids who kill. If Harris, Klebold, Golden, Johnson, and Solomon did it, so should I. I loaded *Doom* on my computer and proceeded. Like most of you reading this book, I had never played a violent video game before, so this was like stepping into a whole new world. No, it was more like a whole new universe (Larson, *Evil* 40-1).

Larson casts himself once again as the explorer charting deadly territory in order to simultaneously inform and protect an audience constructed as innocent. Through the game, he claims an intimate knowledge of Klebold and Harris:

> For the next few minutes, I was Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. . . What struck me immediately was how quickly I got going. Within minutes of loading the software, I was firing away. It was challenging and mesmerizing – a virtual-reality world of mayhem and murder that tugged at the emotions and drew me in deeper. I could easily envision a kid needing to quit to do homework or something else, and finding it difficult to arrest the allure of going on with the game. I was oblivious to the passage of time. The craving set in. I'll beat this thing. Just a little closer. Pow! Got him! Next? (Larson, *Evil* 41-2).

Unlike Larson's description of his encounter with horror movies, which emphasized the effects of the movies on the audience and included no indication that he was drawn into this audience effect at all, this description establishes the power of the video game to draw its player into its corrupt world. Larson isn't just studying Klebold and Harris through the video game; he claims he is identifying with them, even becoming them. Larson maintains that video games are a powerful teaching tool, claiming that they follow the same pattern as military simulations designed to increase the soldier's readiness to kill through desensitization. Although he cites no source for this claim or for his supporting related claim that the number of soldiers willing to fire their weapons in combat jumped from 20 percent in World War II to 95 percent in Vietnam due to the use

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of military shooting simulations (Larson, *Evil* 43-4), it seems to be drawn directly from the anti-video game arguments posed by Dave Grossman, who will discussed later in this chapter. Larson also uses an addiction metaphor to discuss the games, using words like "craving" and "allure" in his description of his time playing video games and also by comparing games to alcohol: "Obviously not every kid who plays a video game becomes a killer. But then not everyone who drinks heavily becomes an alcoholic" (Larson, *Evil* 44).

Larson uses his argument about video games' supposed military origin and their pedagogical effectiveness to argue that video games are fundamentally different from the "shoot-'em-up versions of cowboys and Indians in the backyard" familiar to Larson and his audience (Larson, *Evil* 43). Along the same lines, when he returns to the familiar grounds of criticizing movies, he emphasizes how these movies have created a new, dangerous environment for children to grow up in. Instead of just attacking horror movies, Larson now attacks violent movies in general, mentioning *The Basketball Diaries, Natural Born Killers, Pulp Fiction,* and *The Matrix* by name. He portrays the real danger of these films as being not in their depiction of violence, however, but in their supposed depiction of "violence for the sake of violence":

> A starting point might be to teach children the difference between aggressive acts of unjustified hostility and legitimate images of morally acceptable ferocity. When Christ took a whip and drove the moneychangers from the temple, the zeal of God consumed him. The same can't be said for the movie *The Matrix*, which features a final shooting scene so intense, it would be humanly impossible for any person to fire so many rounds so savagely at so many targets. . . Yes, even the Bible has violent scenes, but there is spiritual depth and meaning in the context of the ferocity (Larson, *Evil* 57).

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Unlike those commentators who tried to argue a link between America's socially approved uses of violence, like the bombings in Kosovo, and Columbine, Larson attempts to articulate a clear difference between socially approved violence and destructive violence. Larson also uses his critique of meaningless and irresponsible media violence to deflect blame from gun owners, claiming that "By shifting the focus from human responsibility to an inanimate, cold piece of steel, their conscience is off the hook" (Larson, *Evil* 59).

Larson makes it very clear early in the book that he sees the Columbine shootings as a product of invading cultural forces; he denies that what he defines as the core values of American culture were involved in generating the shooting at all:

> The short version of [President Clinton's] conclusion was this: "We're all to blame. We're all responsible." No! A thousand times no! We're not all culpable, and neither are millions of fine God-fearing families. Some kids don't wear trench coats to school. They don't idolize Hitler. They don't indulge in violent video games, and they don't sit unsupervised in front of a television set for five hours a day. They don't listen to gangsta rap and they don't go to movies like *The Matrix*. They don't build bombs in our garages without their parents knowing it (Larson, *Evil* 5-6).

Note the blurring of "obvious" dangerous behaviors (building bombs, idolizing Hitler) with vastly more common behaviors (wearing trench coats, listening to rap, watching unsupervised TV, playing violent video games). In this list of signs, all signs are given equal weight; a parent who allows one of these more common, less stigmatized behaviors might as well be allowing his or her children to build bombs. It is through this blurring of signs of deviance as defined by mainstream society and as defined by Larson's conception of ideal Christian parents that Larson constructs "the culture that kills our

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kids" (Larson, *Evil* 6); "the culture" here is a deviant counterculture, not the genuine

America, just as Larson describes the source of the Satanism problem.

As such, the solution that Larson suggests is centered in the Christian faith and

the Christian family. In particular, Larson sees Columbine as a call for prayer:

> We must make the world see God's love for every creature, especially the
> Eric Harrises and Dylan Klebolds among us. Politicians won't do it.
> Teachers can't do it. Hollywood refuses to do it. You and I must point
> them to the Lamb. We must pray. At home, on the job, and even in
> school. They can't stop us. No law can silence the cry of the heart. They
> prayed in Columbine that dreadful day. We must pray every day (Larson,
> *Evil* 176).

Larson then calls for this prayer to be backed by "action," although action in this case is

"belief in God and personal responsibility" and "[consoling] the wounded and the dying"

(Larson, *Evil* 177). Conspicuously missing are calls to officially return prayer to schools,

post the Ten Commandments, ban video games or violent entertainment, or any other

legislative action; this makes sense upon reviewing Larson's statement above that

politicians won't act to solve the problem as Larson defines it. Other than prayer,

showing love for one's children is the other solution Larson advocates; as in much

American discourse, the nuclear family becomes the solution to social ills. Larson ends

his book with an image of the family fending off evil. Larson tells us about an encounter

with his young daughter; she asks him to pray with her to help her go to sleep. After

describing the scene, Larson's last paragraph presents the family and divine intervention

as forces to oppose "extreme evil":

> When I finally crept out of my daughter's room, I paused by her bedroom
> door to glance back one more time at her. She slept so peacefully. She
> knew the angels were there, and so was her daddy. No matter what
> extreme evil raged all around her, she was surrounded by extreme Love,

unconditional Love, the Love that never lets go and never leaves (Larson, *Evil* 179).

Carl Raschke

Carl Raschke provides a more academic model of anti-Satanist discourse than Larson presents. A professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, Raschke argues in his 1990 book *Painted Black* that Satanism-related crime is a "national epidemic" "growing faster than AIDS" (Raschke, *Black* 56). Rather than being the product of a real demonic force, this crime is generated by a pernicious "aesthetic terrorism" that manifests through occultism, *Dungeons & Dragons*, heavy metal music, and drug use. Satanism is just the latest packaging of this aesthetic to appeal to the masses; earlier versions of this aesthetic, according to Raschke, could also be found in the words and deeds of Nietzsche, the Epicureans, the Romantic poets, Baudelaire, occultists from the Kabbalists onward, and the Nazis.

As is the case with Larson, the key metaphor guiding Raschke's model of satanic influence is that of drug abuse. The connection between Satanism and drug use begins in Raschke's discussion of the Matamoros killings, fifteen victims murdered on the orders of a drug trafficker named Adolfo de Jesus Constanzo, their bodies discovered by authorities in 1989 (Raschke, *Black* 3-4). Constanzo was a practitioner of a bizarre self-created form of magic, combining, as Raschke puts it, "Mexican peasant folk magic, the Hollywood horror movie *The Believers*" and Constanzo's own inventions (Raschke, *Black* 4). From this point on, Satanism and drug use become intertwined in Raschke's

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theories. He then discusses another murder committed by drug abusing Satanists in

Joplin, Missouri, observing that "The linkage between the rise of satanism and the drug

culture is so transparent it is often overlooked by most experts," then asking the rhetorical

question "Would it have been possible for satanism in America to grow at the pace it has

since the opening of the present decade had not "getting stoned," if only on the sly,

become fashionable with America's educated elites?" (Raschke, *Black* 35-6). Raschke

answers his own question later in the book, clearly stating that

> Substance abuse is not only one other "perversion" or form of degeneracy
> that adds to the aesthetic terrorism. It is a necessary and sufficient
> condition thereof. . . Drugs not only intensify perceptions and incoming
> messages for the brain, they create a general receptivity for new messages,
> They help break down old habits of felling and responding (Raschke,
> *Black* 173).

The clearest indication that drug abuse is the guide for Raschke's model comes

near the end of the book when Raschke refers to an idea conveyed to him by law

enforcement cult expert Dale Griffis:

> Griffis himself has pointed out that the standard usage among certain
> "experts" of the term *satanic dabblers* is woefully misleading. One does
> not "dabble" in satanism any more than one "plays around" with heroin.
> The latter is forthwith addictive. The former creates certain and
> immediate bondage, as the Tarot card "the Devil" has wryly suggested for
> centuries (Raschke, *Black* 243).

This echoes Larson's "slippery slope" and the pattern of hyperbolic consequences in

general. Any idea of a continuum of interest in the occult is collapsed into a binary

opposition of "safe" and "damned." Fear of heroin as the ultimate "hard drug," a

dangerously addictive substance, the use of which can act as a vector for lethal

bloodborne diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis, is crucial to this conceptualization of

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Satanism. The criminal organizations that profited and grew in power from drug

trafficking also provide Raschke with an analogy to describe the modern threat of satanic

crime. Referring to the difficulty skeptics have in accepting the existence of satanic

crime, Raschke argues that

> For a decade and a half the same myopia prevailed in an effort to
> "contain" the drug problem. But the problem continued to grow, like
> poisonous nightshade in the sheltered earthdamp, until it shifted suddenly
> within the ken of public awareness from a "social concern" to an
> international enemy with formidable financial clout and military might.
> The same is happening with satanism. Evil cannot be cajoled (Raschke,
> *Black* 244).

Heavy metal music is another potent form of Raschke's aesthetic terrorism and

another important way for the message of Satanism to spread. Raschke states that

satanism had been a part of rock music since the Rolling Stones and Black Sabbath in the

1960s and 1970s, but only as a means of irritating the unhip; music didn't start really

becoming dangerous until the heavy metal sound of the 1980s. While Raschke joins

Larson in criticizing the lyrical content of heavy metal songs and the images used in

videos, he also argues that the music's structure itself is designed to act as a form of

brainwashing:

> Then in the eighties something changed. Something changed drastically.
> What was called "hard rock" now became heavy metal. And it had a
> message. The Satan ensconced with the new lyrics became a power rather
> than merely a verbal cat-o'-nine- tails to flog the ethical sensibilities of the
> nation. The change was evident in the sound itself.   It began with the
> punk scene. The messages became brawling and brutal. But even more
> significantly, the sound itself was stripped of all melodic tenor. The
> decibels and beats per minute were precipitously increased. The effect
> was to swathe the brain in constant tonal simulations of fury and
> venomous anger. The end result is to erode the nervous system with
> noise, as drugs destroy the cerebellum (Raschke, *Black* 244).

The drug metaphor comes up again here; drugs have a measurable and concrete effect on the user's body, and the argument that music does the same, a far more difficult phenomenon to scientifically measure and evaluate, needs the power of the drug metaphor to support it.

Raschke's arguments about *Dungeons & Dragons* being a harmful influence are similar to Larson's, and he supports them by quoting freely from one of the introductory game books. While Larson fears that the game actually teaches detailed magical practices and opens the door to real demonic possession, however, Raschke argues that the game's only real power is as an introduction to the worldview of the occultist, although this worldview is itself intensely dangerous:

> "Dungeons and Dragons" is not a libretto for the triumph of good. It is a knotted, tortured, and maddening script in which good and evil become progressively indistinguishable – and ambiguous. *Real* effort and *real* strength fail, as when the beautiful "cleric" dies an ignominious death in the dungeon. Since real deeds are now discredited, the very magical means that have been discarded by a society one brimming with self-confidence now acquire status once more (Raschke *Black* 189).

In Raschke's model, the *D&D* player, convinced that the world is an evil place that cannot be struggled against with conventional means, turns to magic in the hope of affecting the world. As in Larson's arguments, the game causes a confusion between fantasy and reality, and the fantasy is a cruel world that creates cruel inhabitants.

Raschke characterizes this occult worldview as dangerous due to its call for the transgression of legal and moral boundaries:

> Once the "magical force" takes over, there is no telling how the reasoning processes of the child's occult fantasy will unfold. If the child thinks of black magic as "good magic," and of magic itself as the effective principle by which the traumas and anxieties of his or her young life are resolved,

then there can be no distinction between initiative and aggression, between criminal or antisocial behavior and self-expression. The rule of magic says there are no boundaries. When someone puts limits in your way, they must not be heeded. You must defy them! (Raschke, *Black* 190).

This desire for boundary breaking is created by the "fantasies of power" that Raschke sees as the core of *D&D*'s appeal, and also as the core of heavy metal fandom:

The kind of role-playing that occurs with D & D. . . is an increasingly desperate effort to achieve heightened fantasies of power. Complex fantasies of power by their own momentum give rise to paranoia. The more treasure the player gains, the greater the peril. Because there is no exit to the dungeon fashioned brick by brick in the mind, the "suicide solution" [the title of one of Ozzy Osbourne's songs] frequently seems the only cogent alternative. If the solution is not suicide, it is rage and aggression in a desperate gambit to bring about a triumph of the will (Raschke, *Black* 193).

The last line ties *D&D* and heavy metal to fascism, specifically Nazism. Again, a documented and agreed-upon danger (the Nazis, like drug abuse and drug cartels, certainly exist and have been universally accepted in mainstream American society as dangerous, destructive, and evil) is used to reinforce Raschke's argument of a serious new threat.

Raschke also follows the example of Larson and other anti-Satanists when he links these ideas of a desire for power and a subsequent desire to shatter societal constraints in the pursuit of that power to the writings and actions of Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey. Crowley is described as "the first true occult hero with a public persona in the modern epoch" (Raschke, *Black* 95), and Raschke claims that his desire to establish a new society based on occult principles was part of an older strain of "the Cathar concept of a pure, perfected, and illumined secret order, which would raze the entire spectrum of European institutions while giving vent to repressed 'evil' as a creative

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power" that was a major influence on Hitler and the Nazis (Raschke, *Black* 98). LaVey

and his Church of Satan, who Raschke characterizes as advocating "a conscious choice to

live in a world without God or without values or without obligation to others or without

scruples" (Raschke, *Black* 136), are more directly blamed for the epidemic of satanic

crime that Raschke identifies at the time of his book's publication:

> LaVey and other apologists for contemporary satanic worship and
> behavior have routinely protested that they bear no responsibility
> whatsoever for the "bad moon rising" over the American cultural
> landscape in the guise of an epidemic of satanism-inspired criminal
> enterprise. The fault lies with the "sickos" and demented malefactors who
> do not properly appreciate and who misuse the figurative, or purely
> theatrical, messages of satanic villainy, the apology goes. The argument is
> similar to that of the purveyor of sadistic pornography who insists that his
> mass retailing of videos and photographs showing women under torture or
> in cruel bondage cannot possibly have any social impact. The blame
> should fall squarely upon those "perverts" who are deranged enough to
> walk into his store and furnish him with a livelihood (Raschke, *Black* 70).

The pornography analogy ties the question of responsibility for satanic crime to a social

debate raging over the course of the 1980s. It also further associates LaVey and other

defenders of Satanism with perversion and violence.

Raschke argues that the overcoming or dismantling of moral and ethical systems

that LaVey, Crowley, and other occultists seek is being brought about by a brainwashing

technique called "unfreezing," attacking and then changing "the key symbol, or concept,

by which people steer their loyalties and organize their experiences. . . One of the ways

you unfreeze a belief system is to convince the victim that everything he deemed good is

now evil and everything he longed for is impossible" (Raschke, *Black* 172). Raschke

then argues that, in order to create this dangerous ideological inversion, the primary

target of satanic attack is parental authority. Once parents are cast as "the quintessence of

apocalyptic evil" (Raschke, *Black* 173), the value structure of Satanism can step into the

place the parents and their values once held.

Raschke goes to great lengths to carefully construct and defend his model of

Satanism as a means of coercion and brainwashing to bring about the fall of traditional

Christian and American values in both the individual and society in general. The identity

of the villains behind Satanism and the exact nature of their connections to each other,

however, are ever-sliding in Raschke's work, as the following passage demonstrates:

> Satanists per se are not really serious, but the hucksters are. The members
> of the Matamoros cult where only part-time "believers." Most of the day
> they were engaged in rural guerilla warfare. Satanism had a purely
> pragmatic purpose. It enabled them to profit at the dope trade. Many of
> today's young satanists are not characterized, or motivated, so much by
> the will to do evil as they are by a metaphysics of exhaustion and
> hopelessness. A culture of despair becomes ever easier pickings for the
> *nacrotraficantes*, or the child pornographers or perhaps the professional
> terrorists themselves. . . The outcome of the siege, therefore, would be to
> bend society to the will of what the occultists themselves have called "the
> master of fear" (Raschke, *Black* 244-5).

Here Raschke argues that Satanism as a terrorist aesthetic belief used to weaken ordinary

people in order for drug lords, child pornographers, and "professional terrorists," those

presumably who sell satanic products like heavy metal, *D&D*, and various occult belief

systems, to better prey on the weakened populace. This would seem to imply that the

puppet masters in this scheme of domination are relatively few in number. Yet then

Raschke argues that Satanism is an extension of the misguided, revolution-seeking

idealism of the sixties, extending blame to an entire corrupt generation out to destroy

civilization. For example, Raschke discusses *D&D* roots in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien

as follows:

> Tolkien captured the imagination of sixties youth during the Vietnam and hippie days because he was essentially writing fairy tales for grown-ups. And the sixties generation was, in a quite profound manner of speaking, the generation that did not want to grow up. And still today it does not want to, as the popularity of New Age nonsensicalities and non sequiturs shows (Raschke, *Black* 184).

In this case, the stage for *D&D*'s manipulation of its players through occult fantasy and other forms of satanic influence is set accidentally by the immaturity of Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers are portrayed as far more destructive, however, when Raschke discusses the founding of LaVey's Church of Satan in the 1960s:

> The Church of Satan did a very precise job of strategizing and shepherding the era of the Evil One. The hippies unleashed the sexual urge itself with their love-ins and their naked-savage mode of undress. The Church of Satan took custody in loosing the dark drives of humanity. The rationale was already there in the rhetoric of the sixties. It was not just "do your own thing." It was also, as a memorable slogan on the side of a building in Berkeley in 1968 said, "F---- civilization" (Raschke, *Black* 169).

Instead of immaturity or incompetence, here the motivating force of the 1960s is an active desire to destroy civilization. Raschke combines the two accusations later:

> Today's young satanists, as we see so vividly in the life of Peter Roland [the murderer in the aforementioned Joplin case], are not shaking their fists against a repressive society. They grew up in an era when all the straw men of the old avant-garde had been torn asunder and hurled to the four winds. Roland had no object of rage, except the all-enveloping disorder and turmoil he experienced in every niche of his existence. The turbulence was everywhere – in his family, in his sense of values, in the music. He was the offspring of unrelieved personal terror and confusion . . . He was the younger brother of an earlier generation of Charlie Mansons. He was the child of the children of the sixties (Raschke, *Black* 242).

At the same time, the "children of the sixties" become permissive and murderous; they are simultaneously Dr. Spock and Charles Manson. In this paragraph, familial laxity and a general sense of "confusion" are far more to blame for satanic crime than a specific

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conspiracy of drug dealers, which is the argument that Raschke initially uses to link the

Joplin case to the Matamoros slayings (Raschke, *Black* 27).

Exactly who orchestrates and who benefits from the terror generated by Satanism

and the murderous crimes it inspires in young Satanists who buy into its scam is not

defined. It is this nebulous nature of the conspiracy, however, that allows the reader to

project current events and crimes into this model; without a specific villain, anyone

suspicious can be suspected of being a participant. Raschke goes so far as to extend the

satanic conspiracy to critics of anti-Satanism theories. He attacks Arthur Lyons's book

Satan Wants You: The Cult of Devil Worship in America, for example:

> Books like Lyons's count as neither serious reporting nor scholarship.
> They are cleverly worded appeals to prejudice, particularly the high-brow
> know-nothingism that sees the world as its own kind of mythic,
> Manichean battle between enlightened libertinism and the moral
> fanaticism of Middle America (Raschke, *Black* 132).

Ignoring the fact that he presents a similarly "Manichean" picture of a battle between

corrupt, amoral rebels and civilization itself, Raschke goes on to paint Lyons as a

example of "cult apology":

> Cult apologists are usually social scientists or general authors who hang
> around offbeat religious groups for such a span of time that they tend to
> become one with the group mind. Many of them prefer to play
> "anthropologist" or become involved with the group in such a manner that
> they think they can begin to profoundly understand the groups from the
> inside. . . Many cult apologists are academics who have only marginally
> made it in the traditional route to authority, status, and prestige. The fact
> that the world largely ignores them is offset by the friendship,
> camaraderie, and fawning that cult members show toward them. In
> gratitude they become unwitting public relations spokespeople (Raschke,
> *Black* 133).

Those who criticize Raschke are accused of being substandard scholars who, due to their academic failures, have fallen under the coercive influence of the Satanists; only Raschke and his anti-Satanist allies have the insight to see the real problem. He goes on to attack those who dismiss Satanism as an urban legend or treat it as the product of rumor panics:

> Stories about satanists are supposedly like reported trick-or-treat poisonings. They are nought but dark hauntings and things that go bump in the night, things that strike a primal chord in middle-class America's fantasy soul while mining the mother lode of human credulity. Antisatanism is a huge conspiracy of the malicious and the stupid, including hordes of people with Ph. D.'s and impressive professional certificates (Raschke, *Black* 133).

With this passage, Raschke caricatures the way that folklore scholars and sociologists such as Bill Ellis, Joel Best, Jeffrey Victor, and others have studied the fear created by rumors of satanic crimes in the 1980s. Ellis in particular, in his 1989 piece "Death By Folklore," studied the way that Satanic and occult belief actually might be translated into murder in rare situations, although the fear of the crimes is far more widespread than the actual danger posed by these occasional crimes. Raschke justifies his argument by appealing to the educational qualifications of his allies; this is also designed to debunk the folkloric study of anti-Satanism, playing off of the general, and incorrect, view that folkloric elements are only found among the uneducated.

Raschke also claims to differ from those who attempt to draw distinctions between "'bad' and 'good' occultism, as if they somehow existed in entirely different universes without common linkages and crossover," stating that

> Such rhetorical nitpicking tends to brush aside the fact that there is a dynamic of involvement in the occult that under the right conditions erases most of the technical distinctions between "black magic" and "white magic". . . The dynamic is, simply stated, the attainment of power for

oneself and the warding off, if not the destruction of adversaries. Satanism should never be considered a religion per se; it is the carrying of magic and intrigue in its violent hues to the utmost extremes (Raschke, *Black* 13).

This is an etic category; Raschke dismisses the stated beliefs and definitions of practitioners. It doesn't matter if an occult practitioner believes in Satan or not; the important part is that power and destruction are believed to be the occultist's primary motivation by observers like Raschke. As a result of his position that Satanism is not an actual religion, and as such is not worthy of the protections granted to religious beliefs, he shows a great deal of frustration regarding the constraints that "certain kinds of political prejudices and social reservations" have placed on police officers and other authorities investigating and trying to prevent occult crime:

> Police are constantly reminded by superiors and civil libertarians that they must not prosecute people for their religious "beliefs," when in fact many of the beliefs in question explicitly encourage criminal activity, which is not guaranteed under the Constitution. Police instead must look for specific violations of the law and only then prosecute or intervene (Raschke, *Black* 74).

Statements like this, combined with Raschke's frequent attacks on what he sees as the foolishness of many of his fellow academics and his dismissal of the Baby Boomers as childish and selfish, create a feeling that not only are occultists about to destroy society, but they are receiving ample help from many people in power.

The satanic crime wave that Raschke predicted in *Painted Black* never seemed to fully materialize, and the news media eventually abandoned satanic conspiracy stories. Raschke, however, retained the core of his earlier arguments when he responded to the

Columbine shootings. On April 21, 1999 Raschke was interviewed as part of a *Denver Post* article about the Trench Coat Mafia. The article quotes Raschke as follows:

> "It's pretty clear to me that this [the Trench Coat Mafia] is a self-styled and self-named group, but it follows a pattern we've seen in other high school terrorist incidents," said Dr. Carl Raschke, author of "Painted Black," which explores violent youth culture. "It appears you have a bunch of kids who've been into black metal music – Marilyn Manson – who basically have apocalyptic fantasies and (who operate under) a heavy code of neo-Nazism," added Raschke, professor of religious studies at the University of Denver. "A lot of these kids start to live out their beliefs," he added. "They conceive of themselves as junior terrorists". . . Raschke said Tuesday that the fact that the Columbine rampage fell on the birthday of Adolph Hitler "probably explains a lot more than we want to imagine." "These kids see themselves as young storm troopers," he added. "They want to honor the memory of the master and these kids seriously look to Hitler the same way that young blacks look to Martin Luther King and the way many Christians look to Jesus." (Greene and Briggs).

The section of the article that quotes Raschke doesn't mention Satanism or occultism at all; even though "black metal music" is a label applying specifically to Satanic heavy metal, the label is left unexplained in this article and is unlikely to be familiar to most readers. Instead this section of the article highlights the idea that the Columbine shooting was committed by "terrorists" and neo-Nazis. As with many of the news articles dealing with goths immediately following Columbine, Raschke's comments and the overall article highlight the idea that people like Klebold, Harris, and the Trench Coat Mafia can be found in other high schools and that these similar people are potential killers.

Raschke presents a line of argument more similar to his arguments in *Painted Black* in an editorial piece he wrote which was published in the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 25. Again Raschke maintains that the Columbine attack was "carefully planned and superbly executed terrorist violence":

The so-called Trench Coat Mafia were obsessively into neo-Nazism, bomb-making and images of death. They fit the same ideological profile of the little band in Pearl, Miss., that called itself The Kroth – another name taken from the fantasy world of popular occultism and fascist romanticism – and without prior warning gunned down a number of their classmates. . . In short, they were domestic terrorists – callow counterparts to the like of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B).

Referring to the Trench Coat Mafia instead of just Klebold and Harris, doing the same with Luke Woodham and his accused accomplices in Pearl, and then tying the two events together is an even more specific attempt to establish the involvement of the nationwide fantasy-forged occultist conspiracy, the same conspiracy he argues for in *Painted Black*. His description also takes the most dramatic descriptions of the killers' difference from ordinary students (especially supposed interest in Nazis and the occult) and emphasizes them in an attempt to portray those who missed the warning signs as especially incompetent and permissive. He goes on to explain that

These types of disquieting adolescents have been a routine item in suburban high schools and urban dance clubs since the early 1980s. They have gone by diverse and sundry names – punkers, stoners, metalheads, skinheads, headbangers and, now, "goths." They are the minions of a flourishing youth anti-culture, which from year to year, concert to concert and album to album finds novel and creative ways of celebrating the emblems of apocalyptic violence and trashing minimal standards of human decency. They think of it as fashion, if not "art." "Revolutionary" art. They aim to frighten and to shock. (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B).

In Raschke's view, goths set out to "frighten and shock" the moral and decent world, and as such they are terrorists just as much as Klebold and Harris, and the Satanists before them, were terrorists. Their external and visible difference from mainstream fashion and aesthetics is deemed a specific threat.

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Raschke again blames this supposed turn towards Nazism and the occult on

permissive parents and authority figures:

> When many of these kids' parents and community leaders seem to believe
> in nothing and stand for nothing, the only way they can articulate their
> adolescent rebellion is by embracing the one archetype that the oh-so-
> politically correct who preach tolerance find absolutely intolerable – the
> persona of Adolf Hitler. As some psychologists who have studied
> adolescent Satanists for more than a decade note, most of them come from
> socially permissive and often affluent backgrounds. They literally sell
> their souls to the devil because at least the Prince of Darkness has certain
> identifiable standards of conduct. The adults they see have none
> (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B).

Raschke continues his attack on "children of the sixties," specifically singling out Bill

Clinton and his recently revealed sexual misconduct:

> When a sizable majority of Americans blandly excuses the president of the
> United States for moral turpitude and overt law-breaking, the argument of
> the now cultural "avant-garde" – the original argument of the Nazis, by
> the way, during the Weimar Republic – that they are only being honest,
> not hypocritical, in their brutal show of amorality has a certain chilling
> logic to it (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B).

In this scheme, the Baby Boomers are cast as the decadent denizens of the Weimar

Republic, their lack of morality setting the stage for the next generation to become

stormtroopers. He bitterly claims that Columbine administrators ignored the "obvious"

threat posed by the Trench Coat Mafia because had they acted, "they would be branded

by various educated apologists for teenage excess as too authoritarian and intolerant of

those who opt for 'alternative lifestyles'" (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B). Again we see his

frustration at the excuses he sees the overly permissive making that prevent an obvious

evil from being dealt with. Unlike the later accusations that the Jefferson County

Sheriff's office failed to follow up on specific threats made by Klebold and Harris,

Raschke, like Larson, believes that the shooters' habits prior to the shootings (as reported and exaggerated in reports immediately after the shootings) constitute a threat that indicates the dangerous negligence of law enforcement and school officials.

For Raschke, those engaging in "teenage excess" are not protected by free speech or any other protections because they are using their freedoms only to oppress, threaten, and harass normal people. Showing sympathy towards these aesthetic terrorists or excusing them as troubled or mentally ill just perpetuates the problem; Raschke declares that

> We are so mesmerized by the saccharine rhetoric of the "human services" professions, which has convinced us there is always an excuse for someone's outrageous criminal behavior, that we can't imagine a set of circumstances when someone is self-conscious about what they are doing and, as Saint Paul once put it, without excuse. (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B).

He ends the piece with a statement that emphasizes his position that sympathy for aesthetic terrorists is dangerous: "One girl told a reporter how she had come to feel a deep sympathy for the world's 'outcasts.' If that is true, it is pointless to quibble about who gave Harris and Klebold the bombs and grenades. We gave them permission" (Raschke, "Outrage" 1B). This piece tellingly provides no guidelines to help distinguish aesthetic terrorists from those who might have a valid "excuse" for their behavior or who pose no danger of murder sprees; according to the logic of this piece, all outcasts are terrorists, and any child who causes adults concern in any way becomes a murderer waiting to strike. Showing any restraint in dealing with these Nazi-inspired terrorists will only make the crisis worse. This viewpoint, especially in regards to terrorists, will be discussed again in Chapter Seven.

Dave Grossman

        Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a professor of military science, is the founder of the field

of "killology," which his website defines as

> The scholarly study of the destructive act, just as sexology is the scholarly
> study of the procreative act. In particular, killology focuses on the
> reactions of healthy people in killing circumstances (such as police and
> military in combat) and the factors that enable and restrain killing in these
> situations (Killology Research Group).

His first book, *On Killing*, published in 1995, ends with a chapter applying the study of

how military and police personnel learn to react in killing situations to the "epidemic of

violence," specifically murder and other violent crime, that he argues was spreading

through the US in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. Grossman argues that the only

factors that had changed significantly enough to bring about this epidemic were the

popularizing of television, an increasing level of film violence, and the introduction of

violent video games; these factors constitute a

> systematic process of defeating the normal individual's age-old
> psychological inhibition against violent, harmful activity toward one's
> own species. Are we taking the safety catch off of a nation, just as surely
> and easily as we would take the safety catch off of a gun, and with the
> same results? (Grossman, *Killing* 304)

The primary idea behind Grossman's work is that killing is primarily a learned behavior.

Grossman claims these forms of entertainment act on psychological principles of

conditioning behavior, referring specifically to the experiments of Pavlov and Skinner.

He also makes numerous references to the infamous conditioning sequence in Stanley

Kubrick's movie *A Clockwork Orange*, using it as an example of how this kind of

conditioning could work through visual images. The end result of this conditioning,

Grossman argues, is that

> We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain
> and suffering has become a source of entertainment: vicarious pleasure
> rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it
> (Grossman, *Killing* 311).

This desensitization has occurred through a steady diet of escalating media violence.

Grossman portrays the American citizen's media experience as starting with violent

cartoons, then advancing to murder-filled news reports and television dramas, eventually

leading to R-rated movies featuring "vivid depictions of knives penetrating and

protruding from bodies, long shots of blood spurting from severed limbs, and bullets

ripping into bodies and exploding out the back in showers of blood and brains"

(Grossman, *Killing* 308).

The major piece of support for Grossman's arguments is his assertion (which later

shows up as an uncited piece of information in Bob Larson's *Extreme Evil*) that military

training was successful in increasing the readiness of American soldiers to kill in combat

between World War II and the Vietnam War:

> In World War II, 75 to 80 percent of riflemen did not fire their weapons at
> an exposed enemy, even to save their lives and the lives of their friends.
> In previous wars nonfiring rates were similar. In Vietnam the nonfiring
> rate was close to 5 percent (Grossman, *Killing* 250).

Although Grossman points that this increase was partially achieved through changes in

the general culture of boot camp that created a "deification of killing" by portraying the

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enemy as subhuman, he argues that the primary force behind the change was the adoption

of new, more realistic firearms training methods, which Grossman describes as follows:

> Instead of lying prone in a grassy field calmly shooting at a bull's-eye
> target, the modern soldier spends many hours standing in a foxhole, with
> full combat equipment draped about his body, looking over an area of
> lightly wooded rolling terrain. At periodic intervals one or two olive-drab,
> man-shaped targets at varying ranges will pop up in front of him for a
> brief time, and the soldier must instantly aim and shoot at the target(s).
> When he hits a target it provides immediate feedback by instantly and very
> satisfyingly dropping backward – just as a living target would. Soldiers
> are highly rewarded and recognized for success in this skill and suffer
> mild punishment (in the form of retraining, peer pressure, and failure to
> graduate from boot camp) for failing to quickly and accurately "engage"
> the targets – a standard euphemism for "kill" (Grossman, *Killing* 252-3).

While he maintains that movies and TV serve to desensitize, making killing decisions

easier, Grossman also argues that certain first-person shooter video games create the

same potentially destructive learning situation as the modern methods of military

firearms training:

> When I speak of violence enabling I am not talking about video games in
> which the player defeats creatures by bopping them on the head. Nor am I
> talking about games where you maneuver swordsmen and archers to
> defeat monsters. On the borderline in violence enabling are games where
> you use a joystick to maneuver a gunsight around the screen to kill
> gangsters who pop up and fire at you. The kind of games that are very
> definitely enabling violence are the ones in which you actually hold a
> weapon in your hand and fire it at human-shaped targets on the screen.
> These kinds of games can be played on home video, but you usually see
> them in video arcades. There is a direct relationship between realism and
> degree of violence enabling, and the most realistic of these are the games
> in which great bloody chunks fly off as you fire at the enemy (Grossman,
> *Killing* 315).

In this book, Grossman uses no specific case studies or evidence to support the idea that

games played with a light gun are more dangerous than games played with a joystick, not

does he use case studies or evidence to back up his assertions about video games in general. He does cite quite a few sources to support his attack on television and movie violence, but his warnings about video games are entirely based on their resemblance to military training methods.

Grossman published a second book, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, with Gloria DeGaetano in 1999, re-packaging his killology findings to address school shootings, in particular the Columbine shootings and the Jonesboro, Arkansas shootings; Grossman notes in his introduction that he is from Jonesboro (Grossman and DeGaetano 2). This book is in many ways an expansion of the final chapter of *On Killing*. It continues the earlier book's arguments against violent television and film, again citing CDC research claiming that had TV never been introduced, "there would today be 10,000 fewer murders each year, " but specifically mentioning *Natural Born Killers*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Matrix* as "hyperviolent movies" presenting "violence for its own sake" (Grossman and DeGaetano 32-34). Grossman and DeGaetano, like Bob Larson, also display concern about quick edits, and like Larson cite no research to back up their concerns; they advise parents to

> Count the seconds between image changes. If each images changes
> rapidly, every two or three seconds, the pace is too quick. With images
> changes that vary in length, children will have time to digest what they see
> and will be conditioned to interact with what they watch rather than
> merely react to quick impressions (Grossman and DeGaetano 98).

Content is not the only danger; the structure of presentation is just as important.

Violent video games become the center of the argument in *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, however. While Grossman had no case studies to work from to support his arguments against video games in *On Killing*, he and DeGaetano start this next book with an account of Michael Carneal's shooting skill during the Paducah school shooting:

> Prior to stealing the gun, he had never shot a real handgun in his life. The FBI says that the average experienced law enforcement officer, in the average shootout, at an average range or seven yards, hits with approximately one bullet in five. So how many hits did Michael Carneal make? He fired eight shots; he got eight hits, on eight different kids. Five of them were head shots, and the other three were upper torso. . . I tell law enforcement officers about this when I train them, and they are stunned. Nowhere in the annals of law enforcement or military or criminal history can we find an equivalent achievement. And this from a boy on his first try. How did Michael Carneal acquire this level of killing ability? Simple: practice. At the tender age of fourteen he had practiced killing literally thousands of people. His simulators were point-and-shoot video games he played for hundreds of hours in video arcades and in the comfort of his own home (Grossman and DeGaetano 4).

This portrayal of Carneal as an inexperienced shooter who learned to shoot solely through video games has been widely disseminated. Grossman presented Carneal as a video game-created "master killer" to the House Judiciary Committee in May 1999 (*Youth Culture*), and Carneal ends up being used as a central example in most of the media articles about or quoting Grossman (see Kiesewetter for an example). A partial counterargument to Grossman's claim isn't as well publicized, however. A *New York Times* article from October 1999 states that Carneal told investigators that he had learned to shoot at a 4-H camp the summer prior to his shootings (Belkin). This marksmanship training was likely with a rifle, not a handgun, so Grossman's statement is technically correct; this real-world firearms training of Carneal's, however incomplete it may have

been, is never mentioned, even to later be refuted as a noteworthy effect on Carneal's

performance during the shootings, in articles focusing on the anti-video game argument.

Harris and Klebold's connection to the video game *Doom* is presented in a way

that modifies Grossman's statements about in *On Killing* about games that use a joystick

instead of a light gun being "on the borderline in violence enabling." Since *Doom* is

played with a joystick or with a combination of a mouse and a keyboard, Grossman and

DeGaetano have to account for what role the game had in influencing Klebold and Harris

to kill:

> These boys, like the other boys mentioned, practiced for hundreds and
> hundred of hours, perfecting their craft. Therefore, it should not be
> altogether surprising that their killing spree resembled something out of
> the cyberworld of a typical Doom scenario. (In fact, Eric Harris
> programmed his edition of Doom so that it looked like his neighborhood,
> complete with the houses of the people he hated.) They moved from room
> to room, stalking their prey and killing almost everyone in their path.
> And, not unlike most kids' response to video game mayhem, Dylan
> Klebold and Eric Harris laughed the killings off. The realism of a game
> like Doom, played on the home computer, can be extreme, especially with
> the multitude of "add-on" packages available to upgrade systems. For
> example, in the wake of the Columbine massacre, many in the game
> industry claimed that Doom, played only with a mouse and a keyboard,
> can't possibly teach a player real combat skills. First, we have to
> understand that even when Doom is played with a mouse, it is still a good
> enough combat simulator that the Marine Corps uses a modified version of
> it (called Marine Doom) to teach recruits how to kill. They use it as a
> tactical training device, as opposed to teaching motor skills – although
> when used with a pistol grip joystick it has some value there, too – Its
> primary value is in developing the will to kill by repeatedly rehearsing the
> act until it feels natural (Grossman and DeGaetano 78).

This claim takes a different approach than Grossman's claims about Carneal. While

Carneal is said to have learned marksmanship from a game, Klebold and Harris learned

desensitization and tactics. As proof of the desensitization, Grossman presents their

laughter during the event, which he then ominously links to the reactions of ordinary

children to a video game; laughing at a game becomes just a step away from laughing

while committing mass murder. The tactical influence of *Doom* is supported with

assertions that the game, due to its "realism," acted both as a rehearsal of the killings

(simulating the real world) and an influence in shaping their structure (the real world

becomes altered by the game). However, the claim that Eric Harris's *Doom* levels were

designed to look like his neighborhood, or to look like the halls of Columbine High

School in other versions of the claim, is false; according to the popular urban legend

website Snopes.com, Eric Harris did post self-designed *Doom* levels on his AOL website,

but none of these levels depicted his neighborhood or Columbine High School

(Mikkelson).

Grossman and DeGaetano also argue that the goals of, structure of, and social

structure around video game play make it significantly different from the use of training

simulators by the military and police:

> There often are no safeguards at home and in arcades, no supervision, nor
> anyone around to put this technology into perspective for a child. In the
> military and law enforcement worlds, the right option is often not to shoot,
> and recruits receive extensive training about this. Often, recruits and
> reprimanded, punished, or even "failed" and kicked out for making too
> many mistakes – that is, for shooting the wrong targets. But when a kid
> puts his quarter in a video machine, there is *always* intention to shoot.
> There is never an incentive not to shoot. And there's always some
> stimulus to keep excitement high, heart rate up, thinking functions closed
> down. This process is extraordinarily powerful and frightening. The
> result is ever more homemade pseudosociopaths who kill reflexively, even
> when they don't intend to (Grossman and DeGaetano 78).

This moral vacuum around the player of violent games allows the game to condition the player away from the natural state of reluctance to commit violence. This is in some ways the opposite of Raschke's picture of the school shooter as what happens when civilization weakens and is stripped away; for Grossman, the killing reflex can only be learned, and the "pseudosociopath" occurs only when the learning method is being applied randomly, without any kind of moral or logical restraint. The dedication of the book reinforces this idea: "To the children of the world and to the survival of their innocence." Innocence is posited to be a natural state, threatened by the current recklessness of civilization.

In order to reinforce their overall arguments, Grossman and DeGaetano use a series of analogies to connect their conception of the media violence problem to problems that have already been accepted by the general public as crises. To counter the arguments of those who point out the lack of studies demonstrating a clear, irrefutable relationship between media violence and real-world violence, for example, Grossman and DeGaetano observe that the connection between smoking and lung cancer is widely accepted,

> But the case against tobacco has always lacked the kind of experimental data with humans that would demonstrate a clear-cut, scientific, cause-and-effect relationship. It is because of this that many scientists have been able to truthfully assert that, in the purest sense, the relationship between tobacco and cancer cannot be proven (Grossman and DeGaetano 24-5).

If we are willing to bridge certain gaps in our acceptance of tobacco research, we should do the same for media violence research. Later in the book, Grossman uses an elaborate AIDS metaphor in an attempt to explain the desensitizing effect of media violence:

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> AIDS doesn't cause people to die. Rather, it destroys the immune system
> and makes the victim vulnerable to death by other factors. The "violence
> immune system" exists in the human brain. The conditioning of our
> children by violent visual entertainment creates an "acquired deficiency"
> in this immune system. AVIDS, "Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency
> Syndrome," weakens appropriate cognitive, emotional, and social
> development, causing more children to become increasingly vulnerable to
> other violence-enabling factors in our society such as poverty,
> discrimination, drugs, and the availability of guns. Children with
> weakened violence immune systems also become increasingly vulnerable
> to conditioning. Their attitudes, behavior, and values change as a result.
> Although only a small percentage are currently committing violent crimes,
> many of our kids are developing AVIDS (Grossman and DeGaetano 64).

The connection to AIDS not only acts as an explanatory model, however; like the

smoking and lung cancer example, it rhetorically links media violence to a greatly feared

fatal disease. AIDS is perhaps even more effective towards this purpose that smoking-

related lung cancer, as it bears strong connotations of sexual impurity, an extreme

violation of the "innocence" that the authors seek to protect.

Grossman and DeGaetano's use of analogies is particularly prevalent in their

attempts to model possible solutions to the media violence problem. In order to

circumvent the "free speech" argument that claims violent media is protected as an art

form, they suggest that violent material should be treated the way that pornography is

treated now, since "The ultimate obscenity may well be violence, and perhaps it is time

for us to initiate legislation that recognizes this fact"; to bring this about, "we would treat

screen violence in much the same way that we treat sexually obscene material: adults can

have access to it, but anyone who provides it to kids can be subject to prosecution"

(Grossman and DeGaetano 108). Grossman and DeGaetano rely on the generally

unquestioned American belief in the harmfulness of sexually explicit material to minors to support similar treatment of violent material.

In another strategy, Grossman and DeGaetano compare the entertainment industry to tobacco and alcohol producers. The accepted physical and social damage caused by these products contaminates violent entertainment by association, as with the AIDS metaphor. In addition, the taxation of alcohol and cigarettes inspires Grossman and DeGaetano to suggest another means to attack violent entertainment:

> Our society determined, earlier in this century, that in America adults have a constitutional right to buy and drink alcohol. But the government also has a right to tax this product, and tobacco, and many other products, in order to recover some of the costs associated with the products' impact on society. Money is usually the incentive for pushing violent entertainment in all its forms; hitting back in the pocketbook would probably be very effective – and it would send the out the message that these products are dangerous and do have consequences when sold to kids (Grossman and DeGaetano 110).

The taxation argument makes little sense as a financial punishment for selling products to children; alcohol or cigarette producers are not taxed more if accused or proven guilty of such conduct. Taxation seems to be primarily intended as an incentive to discourage people from producing or consuming violent entertainment in general. It is the "message," however, that is the really important part of this proposal. If accepted, it would place whatever governmental body that passed such a law in the position of publicly affirming that violent video games are harmful, clearing the way for liability lawsuits against the game creators and marketers. Grossman and DeGaetano invoke past successes of the consumer safety movement to defend the use of tort claims against the creators of violent entertainment:

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> Because of our litigation system we have the safest cars and the best-trained cops in history. Lawsuits, or even the threat of them, help keep businesses and governments from acting recklessly. So maybe one solution is to sue the makers of violent entertainment when it is clear that their product was in some way responsible for violence in the real world (Grossman and DeGaetano 110).

Grossman then uses the lawsuit filed by families of victims of Michael Carneal's shooting spree in Paducah against the producers of various video games, films, and pornographic websites as an example of this type of legislation. The problem with Grossman and DeGaetano's model currently is that persuading judges to believe the basic cause-and-effect link at the heart of the media violence liability cases is extraordinarily difficult; the Paducah lawsuit was dismissed, and the judge presiding over the case wrote in his decision that "[The shooting] was a tragic situation, but tragedies such as this simply defy rational explanation and the courts should not pretend otherwise" ("Paducah").

Perhaps the most drastic attempt to redefine violent entertainment as a problem comes with Grossman and DeGaetano's attempt to classify violent entertainment as a form of child abuse when they state that

> many of the twenty million children in this country are experiencing a form of abuse in the constant bombardment of violent visual messages throughout their childhood and adolescence. All are being imprinted with visual directives that make violence socially acceptable and that encourage violent self-expression (Grossman and DeGaetano 57).

Since, as Grossman and DeGaetano argue, "The concept of needing to protect children is completely embedded in science, law, and our culture" (Grossman and DeGaetano 112), it follows that, if media violence is child abuse, a concerned society must do anything in

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its power, even to the point of claiming new powers, to protect children. It is this

proposition, that media violence is on the same scale as beating or molesting a child, that

is the core of the book; it would be impossible for Grossman and DeGaetano to push for

the drastic changes in law and liability needed to solve the violent media problem without

the reader's presupposed feelings of duty to protect children.

As with many of the other demands for post-Columbine change, *Stop Teaching*

Our Kids to Kill relies on the logic of hyperbolic consequences to support its claims.

While statistics and charts are used to define the youth violence problem, as they were

used to similar effect in *On Killing*, the portrayals of school murderers Michael Carneal,

Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold act as the most powerful warnings that the end result of

violent entertainment is murder. While the book argues that video games have lesser

effects on a vast majority of players, it is the worst imaginable result that is used as

motivation. Note the association of video game play with behaviors more widely

accepted as dangerous here:

> We wouldn't let our kids buy guns if they said everybody had one; we
> wouldn't let them deal drugs because their friends did; and we wouldn't
> let them jump off the Brooklyn Bridge even if it was all the rage. So we
> absolutely should not let our guard down when it comes to watching and
> playing graphically violent fare. Abstaining won't kill our kids, or anyone
> else (Grossman and DeGaetano 103).

By extension, giving in to a child's desire for violent entertainment will kill children.

Again we see that small acts lead to the worst possible consequence, even when lesser,

although still greatly feared and undesired, results are more likely to happen.

Conclusion

The pattern of hyperbolic consequences isn't so much a narrative or a story as it is a means of interpreting signs; a sign indicates an impending narrative that the reader's mind then fills in, shaped by the pattern. As such, the pattern acts to alter people's perceptions of a problem, specifically redefining behaviors previously portrayed as harmless as dangerous; people's fears about the explained causes of a problem cause them to believe the pattern of hyperbolic consequences because it offers them a wide range of recommended preventative activities they can perform in a concrete, decisive way. As noted in the discussion of zero tolerance policies in Chapter Three, this provides a feeling of control over the chaos represented by school shootings. When the pattern of hyperbolic consequences appeals to parents, however, there is another element of persuasion in play; in a society often interpreted by its members as being too permissive towards children, the pattern of hyperbolic consequences provides support for parental authority. Parents must intervene, according to this argument, or people will die.

It is this appeal to authority to fight the school shooting crisis, a turn away from permissiveness and back to traditional values, that unites the experts discussed in this chapter. Their authority grows as their calls for more authority become more accepted, and it is no accident that each of these experts frames himself as a tough, brave, masculine authority figure: Larson portrays himself as a moral warrior both willing and able to endure the evil effects of ungodly media in order to report his findings back to his readers; Raschke maintains that he is a bold, insightful academic investigator surrounded

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by juvenile or corrupted competitors who refuse to admit the truth he has uncovered; Grossman's rank of Lieutenant Colonel and his military experience are his primary credentials as a leader in his field of killology, even though he is often quite critical of the military's training methods. In the next chapter, however, we will see examples of experts who interpret school shootings from another angle; they see school shootings as the product of the mainstream culture that each of this chapter's experts seeks to protect, and they subsequently attack the foundations of the school shooting crisis.

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CHAPTER 6

EXPERTS AND THE KILLER ESTABLISHMENT

The experts discussed in the previous chapter blame the Columbine shooting on a variety of cultural viruses that have invaded and polluted an otherwise healthy society. For these experts, the true villains behind the Columbine shooting are representatives of a harmful counterculture that must be eliminated or heavily controlled in order to solve the school shooting problem. For another set of experts, however, Columbine is interpreted as a sign that indicates that mainstream American society is dangerous and spinning out of control; these experts attempt to redefine the crisis, claiming that pinning the blame on countercultures is a dangerous form of witch hunt that distracts the nation from real dangers. The most famous of these experts is filmmaker Michael Moore, whose film *Bowling for Columbine* established him as a major voice in the post-Columbine debate; the other two experts I'll discuss here, musician Marilyn Manson and sociologist Barry Glassner, are interviewed in *Bowling for Columbine* and help the film establish its critical framework.

Michael Moore

Filmmaker and author Michael Moore first appeared in the public eye with his

documentary *Roger & Me*, released in 1989. In his 1996 book *Downsize This!*, Moore

describes *Roger & Me* in the following way:

> *Roger & Me* chronicled how the world's richest corporation, General
> Motors, destroyed my hometown of Flint, Michigan, by firing 30,000
> workers during a time when the company was making record profits. I
> filmed my search to find the chairman of GM, Roger Smith, and tried to
> convince him to come to Flint so he could see what he had done to the
> people there (Moore, *Downsize* 5).

A major theme of *Roger & Me* and *Downsize This!* is Moore's continuing critique of

what he characterizes as corporate greed and exploitation. A typical representation of

Moore's position follows, also from *Downsize This!*:

> We are a bunch of fools, aren't we? Today, we're actually earning *less*
> than we earned, in real dollars, in *1979!* Millions of people officially are
> out of work – 7,266,000. But the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the
> Census Bureau estimate another 5,378,000 are also unemployed but
> *uncounted*. Another 4,500,000 more are working *part-time* but looking
> for a full-time job. And then there are the 2,520,000 Americans who are
> working full-time and earning a wage that is *below the poverty line*.
> *That's nearly **20 million** people who cannot make the bare minimum they
> need to survive!* Meanwhile, the chief executive officers, the CEOs of our
> top 300 companies, are earning *212 times* what their average worker is
> earning. As these CEOs fire thousands of employees, they, in turn,
> become wealthier. AT&T chairman Robert Allen lays off 40,000 workers
> while making $16 million (all emphasis in original) (Moore, *Downsize* 9-
> 10).

Moore establishes himself as the voice of the poor and underrepresented against their

ruthless corporate overlords. This is a major visual theme in *Roger & Me*, when Moore's

repeated attempts to speak to Roger Smith are met with stonewalling spokespeople and

constant escorts off company property by security guards; Moore is thus repeatedly denied his right to speak to the powerful, ironically while filming the whole process for a movie that would gain nationwide release.

Moore also makes numerous attempts to get his readers to re-conceptualize poverty and corporate greed as real and pressing problems, far more important than most of the problems Americans focus on as important. For example, later in *Downsize This!* Moore compares GM's actions in Flint to the Oklahoma City bombing:

> What is terrorism? There is no question that, when an individual rents a Ryder Truck, loads it with explosives, and blows up a building, it is an act of terrorism and should be severely punished. But what do you call it when a *company* destroys the lives of thousands of people? Is this terrorism? *Economic* terrorism? The company doesn't use a homemade bomb or a gun. They systematically move out all of the people before they blow up the building. But as I pass by the remnants of that factory there in Flint, Michigan, looking eerily like the remnants of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building is Oklahoma City, I wonder: What will happen to *those* people? A few will kill themselves, despondent over the loss of their livelihood. Some will be killed by their spouse – an argument over the lack of a new job or the loss of money at the racetrack suddenly turns violent (the woman is the one who usually ends up dead). Others will be killed more slowly through drugs or alcohol, the substances of choice when one needs to ease the pain of his or her life being turned upside down and shoved into an empty, dark hole. We don't call the company a murderer, and we certainly don't call their actions terrorism, but make no mistake about it, their victims will be just as dead as those poor souls in Oklahoma City, killed off in the name of greed (all emphasis in original) (Moore, *Downsize* 15).

Moore uses a hyperbolic consequences pattern here; although layoffs are far more likely to lead to a wide range of lesser, though still potentially harrowing, difficulties, Moore emphasizes the worst possible result (death) in order to shock us into rethinking the acceptance of corporate actions as justifiable and for the greater good.

Moore applies the strategies he developed to highlight and protest against corporate greed in *Roger & Me* to the Columbine shootings with his 2002 film, *Bowling for Columbine*. Moore begins *Bowling for Columbine* with a monologue that presents a parody of sentimentalized narratives of normalcy in America:

> It was the morning of April 20th, 1999, and it was pretty much like any morning in America. The farmer did his chores, the milkman made his deliveries, the President bombed another country whose name we couldn't pronounce. Out in Fargo, North Dakota, Terry McWilliams went on his morning walk. Back in Michigan, Mrs. Hughes welcomed her students for another day of school. And out in a little town in Colorado, two boys went bowling at six in the morning. Yes, it was a typical day in the United States of America (Moore, *Bowling*).

The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" plays in the background as Moore reads this speech. On screen, a series of images is flashed, some of which match up with the sentimental narrative (such as the teacher leading her children into class) and others of which obviously contradict it (the final sentence occurring as an image of a woman in a bikini wielding an assault rifle is on screen, right before a shot of the Statue of Liberty). In the monologue itself, Moore juxtaposes a series of ordinary, everyday events with events usually regarded as disruptions of everyday life: war, through mentioning the President's bombing in Kosovo, and the Columbine shootings, the perpetrators of which, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, are the two bowlers.

This sets up another scene of sharp contrasts, in which Moore receives a free hunting rifle in exchange for setting up an account at a bank in Michigan, which, as a bank employee assures Moore, is a "licensed firearms dealer." At the end of the segment, while standing in the lobby of the bank with his new hunting rifle, Moore asks another bank employee "Do you think it's a little dangerous handing out guns in a bank?" This

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then leads into the movie's title sequence. The question, so blunt and seemingly obvious,

highlights what Moore would characterize as the uncanny nature of life in America; in an

otherwise mundane scene, that is, the application procedure for a bank account, the image

of Moore holding a hunting rifle in the bank's lobby stands out all the more as a sign of

that what Americans accept as everyday, healthy life instead seems bizarre and dangerous

upon closer inspection.

The title sequence consists of the Camper Van Beethoven song "Take the

Skinheads Bowling," which also combines the mundane (a safe, working class sport like

bowling) with the dangerous (skinheads, who are symbols of youth Nazism), played over

stock footage of people bowling. This is abruptly interrupted by a clip from a

commercial for toy guns featuring police officers who mistake children shooting the guns

for a real gun battle, announcing "looks like real!" and "sounds like real!" with broad

smiles after they realize their mistake and incredulously examine the guns. Moore then

presents a series of pictures and home movie clips depicting his own childhood, focusing

on his joy at receiving his first toy gun and his later success in an NRA shooting contest.

Moore contextualizes this by describing his home state of Michigan as a "gun lover's

paradise," stating that NRA spokesman Charleton Heston, who is interviewed by Moore

at the end of the film, was also born in Michigan and including a scene of Moore buying

rifle ammunition while getting his hair cut at a barber shop.

After a clip of comedian Chris Rock, Moore returns to Michigan with a sequence

focusing on the Michigan Militia, which Moore notes was thrust into the national

spotlight because Oklahoma City bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols had

attended some of its meetings. The first scene of the sequence shows the militia members

in the middle of target practice, firing on bowling pins, which ties in with the bowling

imagery from the credit sequence. Moore interviews the militia members, who maintain

that they are just average citizens who believe that, according to one of their members, "It

is an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible.

Who's going to defend your kids? The cops? The federal government? It's your job to

defend you and yours." After asking the militiamen about their day jobs, when it is

revealing that the man who made the above statement is a real estate negotiator, Moore

includes footage of the cheesecake calendar the militia published as a fundraiser and an

interview with a female militia member who is taking care of her young daughter as she

asks, "If you're not going to take care of your family, who is?" The emphasis that the

militia members place on the protection of family and their role as ordinary, responsible

citizens again juxtaposes images of militarism (uniforms, firearms, training drills) with

images of everyday domesticity.

Moore's coverage of the Michigan Militia leads in to his interview with James

Nichols, the brother of Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nichols. Moore fits Nichols into

his larger picture of Michigan, and his own childhood, by observing that Nichols

"graduated from high school the same year I did in the district next to mine." The

interview takes place on Nichols's farm; in fact, it is Nichols's image that is on screen in

the film's opening monologue when Moore reads the "The farmer did his chores" line.

The combination of the safe and traditional image of the hometown farmer with the

image of the anti-government zealot is displayed when, in Nichols's kitchen, he predicts

to Moore that "There'll be blood running in the streets" when the people rise up against the manipulative, lying government. When Moore brings up Gandhi's model of peaceful resistance to government tyranny, Nichols admits that "I'm not familiar with that." Moore cuts away from the interview at this point; the next scene focuses on two young men from Oscoda, Michigan, which Moore says is "across the bay from the Nichols farm." Moore observes that Eric Harris spent part of his younger days in Oscoda, which, as one of the Oscoda residents, Brent, observes, "has a bad habit of raising psychos." Harris lived on the Air Force Base in Oscoda while his father served in the Gulf War as a bomber pilot; Moore notes that "20% of all the bombs dropped in that war were from planes that took off from Oscoda." Brent reveals to Moore that he was expelled from high school for a year when he "pulled a gun on a kid"; the other Oscoda resident, DJ, tells Moore that his name was "second highest" on the list the local authorities developed of students likely to make bomb threats and that he had experimented with making napalm and other homemade explosives, but "nothing big." DJ also explains that his possession of the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, an infamous collection of instructions on bomb making, caused other bomb experiments to seek him out as a source of information. Moore then cuts back to Nichols, who shows Moore that he sleeps with a loaded .44 Magnum under his pillow, although this occurs off camera, since the cameraman was asked by Nichols to stay in the hallway. This leads into a discussion in which Moore tries to find out what level of armament restrictions Nichols would agree to; Nichols ends up agreeing with Moore that nuclear weapons should be restricted because, as Nichols observes, "There's wackos out there." Moore then immediately switches to a montage of

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footage of people firing firearms ranging from pistols to assault rifles, which then leads

into a montage of shooting death footage; the Beatles' "Happiness is a Warm Gun" plays

in the background.

The Michigan sequence as a whole establishes a series of links between firearms

ownership, paranoia, potential youth violence, and militaristic culture, while acting to

associate this mix of dangerous dynamics with the supposedly safe domains of small

town America and the family. The Michigan Militia members refer continually to fear of

attack on their families to justify their training and possession of firearms; James Nichols

is an organic farmer who fears the government and sleeps with a loaded handgun; Brent

and DJ have gotten into trouble in nearby Oscoda for wielding firearms and making

bombs, and imply that this is normal behavior in the area; Eric Harris lived on a military

base responsible for a great deal of destruction in Iraq; footage of lawful gun owners

gives way to footage of killings. The blending of these issues, through geographic area,

chronology, and film editing sets up Moore's major arguments, which are revealed in

greater detail later in the film.

After the end of the montage of firearm killings, the next scene is a green,

orderly-looking suburban street in Littleton, Colorado. A woman who is being

interviewed in her front yard says "This is a great place to raise your children. A really

great place to raise your kids. Very close knit community we have here, everybody looks

out for everybody." The next shot is of a man standing in front of a horizontal rocket (we

later learn that this interview is at Lockheed Martin) who assures us that

> This just happens to be a place where two young men made very bad, very
> wrong decisions, and there has been international notoriety as a result of it.

> Other than that, I don't know that Littleton is a whole lot different than a whole lot of other suburban communities (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore then includes a few clips from a video designed to promote Littleton as an ideal community for corporate development; these clips highlight the sunny climate of the area (compared to "southern California") and a lush, green golf course. This picture of an ideal community is immediately juxtaposed with an interview by Moore at a Littleton home; the interview subject is Denny Fennell, a home security consultant. Fennell describes the house as "pretty much your average, middle class, suburban home." He explains the importance of security by stating, "The burglar or the rapist is still here in the neighborhood, somewhere." Moore interrupts, asking "Where exactly is the burglar or rapist right now?" Fennell leads Moore on a tour of security devices in the home, including a metal gate (Moore observes that stabbing someone through the gate would be difficult, then asks, "What if I had a spear?") and a safe room (when Fennell points out that the room's door is solid wood, Moore observes that an axe could probably chop through it). Moore's questions are a means of ridiculing the hyperbolic "what if?" scenarios that drive the security business. At the end of the sequence, while trying to explain the effect that Columbine had had on the security industry, Fennell has to stop himself from crying; he then says "There is something, something overwhelming about that kind of viciousness, that kind of predatory action, that kind of indiscriminate killing."

Fennell's tearful reaction to the memory of Columbine and his stated inability to understand it serves as a transition into Moore's interview at Lockheed Martin, which Moore identifies with a subtitle as "the world's largest weapons manufacturer." The Lockheed Martin representative, Evan McCollum, states that the company has three

major facilities in the Littleton area, employing over 5,000 people, and also states that

many of the employees' children attend Columbine High School. When Moore asks

about the "We are Columbine" signs displayed around the facility, McCollum replies

"I think we probably embody that spirit that, you know, we're all members of this

community and it behooves us to help one another and to reach out to assist one another."

Moore adds a line of narration after this: "He told us that no one in Littleton, including

the executives at Lockheed, could figure out why the boys at Columbine had resorted to

violence." Then McCollum speaks again, stating that the killers' motivation probably

had "to do with their anger about various issues" and that, as a result, the company made

a $100,000 donation to the Jefferson County Schools to provide anger management

training to students. When Moore asks

> So, you don't think our kids say to themselves, well, gee, Dad goes off to
> the factory every day and, you know, he builds missiles, these are
> weapons of mass destruction, what's the difference between that mass
> destruction and the mass destruction over at Columbine High School?
> (Moore, *Bowling*)

McCollum replies,

> I guess I don't see that connection, that specific connection, because the
> missile that you are talking about were built and designed to defend us
> from somebody else who would be aggressors against us. Societies and
> countries and governments do things that annoy one another, but we have
> to learn to deal with that annoyance or that anger or that frustration in
> appropriate ways. We don't get irritated with somebody just because
> we're mad at them, drop a bomb or shoot at them, or fire a missile at them
> (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore follows this statement with another montage, this one featuring the various

military actions and interventions that the United States has engaged in since its

installation of the Shah's government in Iran in 1953. The montage moves from event to

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event, including the US's support for the assassination of South Vietnam's President

Diem, the Vietnam War, the invasion of Panama, the US's role in training Osama Bin

Laden to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Gulf War, and the September

11th attacks, the description of the events portrays each one as either an act of US

aggression or the result of such an act. This time the musical accompaniment is Louis

Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World."

Then, after listing the substantial number of military bases in the region around

Littleton, Moore ominously informs us that

> once a month, Lockheed transports one of its rockets, with its Pentagon
> payload, through the streets of Littleton, passed nearby Columbine High
> School, on its way to an Air Force base on the other side of Denver. The
> rockets are transported in the middle of the night, while the children of
> Columbine are asleep (Moore, *Bowling*).

This image of a hidden symbol of the military-industrial complex, secretly invading the

supposedly safe area of a suburb and a school, gains its power through the same strategy

of highlighting the interactions between the mundane and the dangerous in a certain

geographical location that drives the Michigan sequence. After this bit of narration,

Moore flashes "April 20, 1999" up on the screen. Instead of Columbine footage

following this date, Moore cuts to footage of the aerial bombardment of Kosovo; a

subtitle describes April 20 as the "Largest one day bombing by US in Kosovo War." A

statement from President Clinton about the attack, in which Clinton takes care to note

that the US is "making a deliberate effort to minimize harm to innocent people," occurs

between clips of narration from an unnamed news source that describes bombs hitting a

hospital and school. Then another title card flashes "One Hour Later" on the screen, and

again we see a statement from President Clinton, telling the nation about the reported attack on Columbine. Moore then shows us a series of current pictures of peaceful, deserted Columbine High School with the 911 calls placed by parents and teachers during the shooting playing in the background. As the 911 calls continue, Moore switches to showing security camera footage of fleeing students, exploding bombs, and Klebold and Harris. Then the calls stop, and Moore shows scenes from outside the school, including panicked students, worried parents, and responding police officers.

The next clip we see, after the footage of the Columbine shooting, is Charleton Heston holding a rifle aloft and declaring to an NRA meeting that "I have only five words for you: 'From my cold, dead hands!'" The transition immediately casts the NRA's decision to go forward with its membership meeting in Denver scheduled to occur 10 days after the attack in the worst possible light. Heston, and the NRA by extension, is portrayed as defiant and insensitive, coming to Denver even against, as Moore puts it, the "pleas of a community in mourning." After Moore shows a clip of Heston's speech in Denver, in which he "applauds the courage" of members coming to the meeting and criticizes the mayor of Denver (of whom Moore flashes a picture on the screen – Mayor Wellington Webb is African-American, which sets up the racial element of Moore's argument later in the film), Moore switches to footage of an anti-NRA rally, at which the father of Daniel Rohrbough, one of the students killed at Columbine, tearfully states that "Something is wrong in this country when a child can grab a gun so easily and shoot a bullet into the middle of a child's face, as my son experienced" and denounces the TEC-9 pistol, like the one that killed his son, as a weapon with "no useful purpose." The effect

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contrasts a confidently defiant Heston claiming victim status on the basis of the mayor's request that the NRA not meet in Denver with the angry, mourning Rohrbough claiming victim status on the basis of the death of his son; the contrast makes Heston's defiance appear petty and mean in the face of real loss.

The next scene is an interview with Matt Stone, who with Trey Parker created the cartoon *South Park*. Moore mentions in a voice-over that Stone and Parker lived part of their lives in Littleton, and that *South Park* was "a way to take out their anger of being different in Littleton and turn it not into carnage, but into a cartoon." Stone describes Columbine as "a real crappy school in the middle of a bunch of crappy house," and describes Littleton as "painfully, painfully, painfully normal, just absolutely painfully, horribly average." He then discusses the pressure placed on students as a potential factor in causing Klebold and Harris to kill:

> I remember being in sixth grade, and I had to take the math test to get into honors math in seventh grade. And they were like, don't screw this up, because if you screw this up, you won't get into honors math in seventh grade, and of course if you don't get into honors math in seventh grade, you won't get into honors math in eighth grade, and then not in ninth grade, and then tenth grade, eleventh grade, and then you'll just die poor and lonely. And that's it. . . You believe in high school, and a lot of it is kids, but the teachers, the counselors, and principals don't help things. They scare you into conforming and doing good at school by saying, if you're a loser now, you'll be a loser forever. So that with Eric and Dylan, right, people called them fag, and they were like, you know what, if I'm a fag now, I'm a fag forever. And you wish someone just could have grabbed them and gone, dude high school's not the end. . . It's amazing how fast you lose touch with all these people. They just beat it in your head, as early as sixth grade, alright, don't fuck up, because if you do, you're going to die poor and lonely, and you don't want to do that. They're like, fuck, whatever I am now, I'm that forever. And of course it's completely opposite. All the dorks in high school go on to do great things, and all the really cool guys are all, like, living back in Littleton as insurance agents. Almost person to person, it is completely that way.

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>   Yeah, if someone maybe would have told them that, maybe they wouldn't
>   have done it (Moore, *Bowling*).

Stone blames the social structure of high school for the Columbine shooting, specifically

attacking the belief that high school reflects the pattern of the rest of life. This is similar

to the arguments presented in Chapter Two that schools in general, not just public

schools, create a harmful environment, and the pressure placed on students to succeed

can drive them to dangerous acts. He links this pressure to what is accepted as "normal"

in towns like Littleton; "normal" is a state of crushing conformity that specifically hurts

those that will end up accomplishing "great things" later in life.

Moore reinforces this idea by following the Stone interview with a sequence

depicting various scenes of school life both before and after Columbine. Moore

introduces this segment with a voiceover saying, "I guess we'll never know why they

really did it, but one thing adults should never forget: it still sucks being a teenager." The

footage starts with a student video from Columbine in which a student explains that "I get

picked on by bastards who hate me, and the principal's a dick." Then Moore's voiceover

informs us that "Yes, and after Columbine, it really sucked being a student in America."

This introduces a montage of news stories covering a variety of zero tolerance abuse

stories, including a student suspended for bringing a nail clipper to class, a student

suspended for dying his hair blue, and students suspended for wielding a paper gun and a

chicken strip, respectively. This is the usual selection of zero tolerance atrocity stories,

following the same pattern discussed in Chapter Two: a harsh punishment follows from

an absurd or clearly harmless "threat." The sequence ends with a series of dire sounding

quotes from news stories, including a school superintendent saying "It's almost like

guerilla warfare. We don't know from which direction the enemy will be coming," and a clip from an instructional video produced by a security company discussing the need for dress codes as a student wearing baggy pants and an oversized shirt removes a series of guns, including a shotgun and a submachine gun, from his clothes. Moore follows this with a series of shots of happy, playing young children, including two boys in Cub Scout uniforms, accompanied by a voiceover in which he says, "Yes, our children were indeed something to fear. They had turned into little monsters. But who was to blame? All the experts had an answer." This is followed by a montage of experts on television programs; their statements are cut down to the bear minimum, as if directly answering Moore's question. The answers include "violent movies," "*South Park*,""toy guns," and "Satan," and they produce the impression that the experts speaking out on behalf of these theories are all equally shallow and discreditable. The montage ends with a series of experts saying "Marilyn Manson," which acts as Moore's transition into his interview with Manson, discussed later in this chapter.

After the interview with Marilyn Manson, Moore returns to the film's bowling motif, interviewing two students who had been in bowling class with Klebold and Harris. Moore then asks, after a clip from a police spokesman reveals that Klebold and Harris went to bowling class prior to their attack on Columbine,

> Why wasn't anyone blaming bowling for warping the minds of Eric and Dylan to commit their evil deeds? Was it not just as plausible as blaming Marilyn Manson? After all, it was apparently the last thing they did before the massacre (Moore, *Bowling*).

This statement dismisses the claims of experts who argue that violent entertainment had any influence on Klebold and Harris, arguing that the logic of association that such

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theories rely on to be persuasive (they played *Doom* before, so video games must be

responsible, for example) only applies to certain targets, targets that were already

suspected of causing harm. The discussion of bowling leads Moore to point out that

bowling, Marilyn Manson and other dark music, violent movies, and violent video games

are all even more popular in specific other countries than in the United States, and lists a

series of historical atrocities committed by other countries in order to dismiss the idea

that the United States' violent history is to blame for its current problems; each of these

other countries, however, has a lower yearly firearms death rate. Moore gives us a series

of figures, ranging from Germany's 381 to Japan's 39, then gives us the yearly firearms

death rate in the United States: 11,127. This shocking difference in numbers sets up a

major question for Moore, asked by Tom Mauser, the father of one of the Columbine

victims: "What is so different about Americans?"

Moore then establishes his answer to this question, and the thesis of most of the

rest of the film, with an animated segment, narrated by a talking bullet. The smiling

bullet presents "a brief history of the United States of America" and subsequently

explains that

> Once upon a time there were these people in Europe called Pilgrims. And
> they were afraid of being persecuted. So they all got in a boat and sailed
> to the New World, where they wouldn't have to be scared ever again. But
> as soon as they arrived, they were greeted by savages, and they got scared
> all over again, so they killed them off. You'd think wiping out a race of
> people would calm them down, but no. Instead, they started getting
> frightened of each other, so they burned witches (Moore, *Bowling*).

This first section establishes the role of fear in the creation of the United States. This idea of fear as the overwhelming emotion driving US history continues through the short. The narration continues:

> In 1775 they started killing the British, so they could be free. And it worked! But they still didn't feel safe, so they passed a Second Amendment which said every white man could keep his gun. Which brings us to the genius idea of slavery. You see, boys and girls, the white people back then were also afraid of doing any work, so they went to Africa, kidnapped thousands of black people, brought them back to America, and forced them to work very hard for no money. . . Doing it that way made the USA the richest country in the world. So did having all that money and free help calm the white people down? No way. They got even more afraid, because after 200 years of slavery, the black people now outnumbered the white people in many parts of the South. Well, you can pretty much guess what came next. The slaves started rebelling, there were uprisings, and Old Masters' heads got chopped off! . . . Well, just in the nick of time came Samuel Colt, who in 1836 invented the first weapon ever that could be fired over and over again without having to reload. . . But, it was too late. The North soon won the Civil War, and the slaves were freed (Moore, *Bowling*).

This section introduces the next major idea of the animated short: the overwhelming fear driving the United States has its roots in slavery, and that firearms rights have always been tied to protecting white supremacy. This idea is established through directly connecting both the Second Amendment and the invention of the revolver to slavery. The next section continues to link gun ownership and overt racism:

> Yep, they were free now to chop all the Old Masters' heads off! . . . But the freed slaves took no revenge, they just wanted to live in peace. But you couldn't convince the white people of this, so they formed the Ku Klux Klan, and in 1871, the same year the Klan became an illegal terrorist organization, another group was founded: the National Rifle Association. Soon politicians passed one of the first gun laws, making it illegal for any black person to own one. It was a great year for America: the KKK and the NRA. Of course they had nothing to do with each other, and this was just a coincidence. One group legally promoted responsible gun

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ownership, and the other group shot and lynched black people (Moore, *Bowling*).

The only major evidence that is provided here to back up the juxtaposition of the KKK and the NRA is that both were founded in the same year and that both advocated the possession of firearms; the assertion that "this was just a coincidence" is a means of further linking the two in the assumed cynical mind of the viewer, even if no further evidence is supplied. Then the association of guns with overt racism becomes an association of gun ownership with more hidden forms of racism:

> And that's the way it was, all the way until 1955, when a black woman broke the law by refusing to move to the back of the bus. White people just couldn't believe it. Then all hell broke loose. Black people everywhere started demanding their rights, and white people had a major freaky meltdown. . . They all ran fleeing to the suburbs, where it was all white and safe and clean. And they went out and bought a quarter of a billion guns, and put locks on their doors, alarms on their houses, and gates around the neighborhoods. And finally they were all safe and secure and snug as a bug. And everyone lived happily ever after (Moore, *Bowling*).

The overall effect of the short is to dismiss modern manifestations of American fear – guns ownership, home security, and gated communities in the suburbs – as the most recent manifestation of a fear that is groundless at best (we never get an explanation of what the Pilgrims are afraid of, and this idea of paranoia continues through the short) and brutal and domineering at worst (manifesting in slavery and post-slavery white supremacy). Moore follows this with an interview with Barry Glassner, which is discussed later in this chapter.

After the segment with Glassner, Moore interviews a former producer of the reality television show *Cops*. Moore argues that *Cops* portrays a disproportionate

number of black and Hispanic criminals, and he maintains that this contributes to whites'

fear of nonwhites. When Moore asks him "Why not be compelled to do, you know, a

show that focuses on what causing the crime as opposed to just chasing criminals down?"

the producer answers that

> It's harder to do that show. I don't know what that show would be. Anger does well, hate does well, violence does well. Tolerance, understanding, and trying to learn to be a little different than you were last year does less well (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore then pitches his vision of a show that would focus on what he portrays as the

cause of crime: *Corporate Cops.* A montage of scenes from this imaginary show shows a

tough-looking Moore cruising around the city and arresting a shirtless white executive as

a parody of the reggae song used as the *Cops* opening theme playing in the background.

This segment is another means of reinforcing Moore's central argument that the real

causes of crime, and also the crimes that do the most harm, go unnoticed because of the

way in which the media and the government portray the world. The interview with the

producer also portrays the media as willfully ignoring the real problems of the world in

the pursuit of profit.

In the next segment, Moore travels to Canada in an attempt to explain why

Canada, a nation very similar and very close to the United States, doesn't suffer a rate of

firearms murder that is as high as that in the United States. He starts off by interviewing

a trio of Canadian teens who are skipping school in Sarnia, Ontario. He asks the teens

why the gun murder rate in America is so high, and one responds "No idea. People must

hate each other there or something." When Moore asks if people don't hate each other in

Canada, the boy answers "Well, we do, but we don't go to the point of shooting

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somebody just to get revenge." Moore then asks what the teens do to people they don't like. The speaker from before says "I don't know – tease them maybe. Make fun of them. Ridicule them." One of the other teens adds "Throw eggs at them." Already the image of squeaky clean, orderly Canada is threatened by these truant students, one of whom has green hair. Moore follows this, however, with a brief clip from an interview with a police officer in Sarnia in which the officer states that Sarnia had no gun murders in the year of the interview and only one the previous year. Moore then includes interview footage from nearby Windsor; a citizen vaguely remembers a gun murder happening in Windsor fifteen or twenty years ago, and a police officer states that the only gun murder he can remember in the past three years was committed by an American from Detroit.

Moore then includes a segment that he calls "Fun Facts About Canada." Moore alternates statements by New Yorkers about Canadians with responses to those statements. The first, "Canadians don't watch as much violent movies as Americans do," Moore counters by showing Canadian teens at a theater watching Arnold Schwarzenegger's *The Sixth Day* and playing first-person shooter video games. The second, "There's no poverty in Canada like there is here," is dismissed when Moore includes a clip from an interview with the mayor of Sarnia, who states that Sarnia has a consistently high unemployment rate. A third statement, "I think there's mostly white people in Canada," Moore debunks by observing that 13% of Canadians are nonwhite. Moore then facetiously states that Canada's low rate of firearms murder must be due to Canadians' lack of firearms ownership, a hypothesis he then attacks with a series of clips

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of Canadian firearms owners and footage of buying ammunition at a Canadian Wal-Mart.

Moore then interviews two Sarnia residents who don't lock their homes' doors, even

though both residents had had their homes broken into. Moore follows up on this

unlocked doors theme by wandering down a Toronto residential street and discovering a

series of unlocked doors.

Moore posits that the real major difference between Canada and the US is found

in contrasting the news broadcasts of each nation and the problems that their politicians

discuss; he maintains that "Night after night, the Canadians weren't being pumped full of

fear." He follows this with another interview clip with the mayor of Sarnia, who states

that the key to "a good society" is that

> Nobody wins unless everyone wins, and you don't win by beating up on
> people who can't defend themselves. And that's been the approach,
> unfortunately, that's been spreading in some of the right-wing
> governments across North America, they pick on the people who can't
> defend themselves, and at the same time they're turning around and giving
> financial support and tax breaks and tax benefits to people who don't need
> them (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore further establishes the Canadian approach to the less fortunate by visiting a neat

and well-maintained Canadian housing project and talking to Canadians about their

nationalized health care, which one of the Sarnia teens Moore interviewed earlier in the

film defends as a manifestation of "human rights."

The Canada sequence works to debunk certain American beliefs about what

makes Canada different from the US, specifically homogeneity, lack of gun ownership,

lack of violent entertainment, lack of poverty, orderliness and respect for the rules, in

order to better focus on Moore's argument that violent crime in the US is the result of

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governmental and corporate practices that neglect the poor and working class. This leads

in to Moore's discussion of a school shooting at Buell Elementary School near Moore's

hometown of Flint. A first grade boy had found a gun at his uncle's house at brought it to

school, where he shot and killed a girl in his class named Kayla Rolland. Moore notes

that it only took the news media half an hour to completely inundate the school with

reporters and camera crews; he shows footage of reporters shooting and editing stories on

the scene. As he does so, and over a subsequent series of shots of dilapidated homes and

businesses in the Flint area, Moore includes the following voice over:

> The national media had never visited Buell Elementary, or the Beecher
> school district in which it sat, or this part of Flint, ever before. And few, if
> any, of these reporters bothered to visit it even when they were here now.
> If they had ventured just a block away from the school or the funeral
> home, they might have seen a different kind of tragedy that perhaps would
> contain some answers as to why this little girl was dead. For over twenty
> years, this impoverished area and hometown of the world's largest
> corporation had been ignored as completely as it had been destroyed.
> With 87% of the students living below the official poverty line, Buell, and
> Beecher, and Flint, did not fit into the widely circulated storyline put forth
> by the nation's media, that being the one about America and its invincible
> economy (Moore, *Bowling*).

Again Moore portrays the media as missing the real story in their rush to cover yet

another sensational, violent killing. To further reinforce his point, Moore's voiceover

provides examples illustrating the area's poverty:

> The number one cause of death among young people in this part of Flint
> was homicide. The football field at Flint Beecher was sponsored by a
> funeral home. The kids at Beecher have won thirteen state track
> championships, but they've never had a home track meet because around
> the football field all they have is this dirt ring. Years ago, someone named
> the streets in this part of town after all the Ivy League schools, as if they
> dreamed of better days and something greater for themselves (Moore,
> *Bowling*).

This series of images and observations starkly contrasts the poverty of the Flint area with the film's earlier scenes of the affluent Littleton area and Columbine High School; this shift is another attempt to move the public's attention away from spectacular acts of violence and towards what Moore sees as the far more dangerous and widespread economic problems that the media tends to ignore.

After a brief clip of Moore interviewing the principal of Buell Elementary, a clip which ends with Moore comforting the still obviously upset woman, Moore switches to a discussion of Charleton Heston and the NRA's reaction to the Buell shooting. Moore plays Heston's "From my cold, dead hands" sound clip from earlier in the film as a transition (providing a sharp contrast with Moore's display of empathy with the principal), then maintains that, just like with their visit to Denver after Columbine, that the NRA ignored the requests of locals and held a rally; a clip of a protester complaining that the NRA visit was "like they were rubbing our nose in it" is followed by a clip from a news report in which Heston defends the NRA's visit by referring to the NRA's gun education programs for five-and six-year-olds. This is followed by another interview clip with Arthur Busch, County Prosecutor from Flint, Michigan, who tells Moore, when he asks Busch if people wanted to try the Flint shooter as an adult, that

> There were people from all over America that wrote, called, and sent mail. It was amazing to me, groups that were affiliated with the NRA and groups, you know, people that I call gun nuts, writing me and telling me what a horrible thing it was that I had admonished home owners in our country to be careful about bringing weapons into their home. They wanted this little boy hung from the highest tree, and there was such an undercurrent of racism and hate and anger. It was ugly (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore follows this with an interview with one of the police detectives who had worked

on the Buell shooting case. The detective had a picture drawn by the shooter hanging

behind his desk. The clip works to remind us again that the Buell shooter was a child and

in addition was a victim of the event just as much as the child he shot.

To continue this recontextualizing of the Buell shooting as an event victimizing

more people than Kayla Rolland, Moore shifts focus to the shooter's mother, Tamarla

Owens. Moore points out that Owens was participating in a welfare-to-work program;

she was working two jobs at a mall sixty miles away from Flint in the affluent suburb of

Auburn Hills. According to Moore's voiceover,

> This [welfare-to-work] program was so successful at tossing poor people
> off welfare that its founder, Gerald Miller, was soon hired by the number
> one firm in the country that states turn to privatize their welfare systems.
> That firm was Lockheed Martin. With the Cold War over and no enemy
> left to frighten the public, Lockheed had found the perfect way to diversify
> and the perfect way to profit from people's fears with an enemy much
> closer to home: poor, black mothers like Tamarla Owens (Moore,
> *Bowling*).

Moore follows this with a clip from an interview with Flint's Sheriff, Robert Pickell, who

observes that

> You've got a one parent family, and the mother's traveling sixty miles, an
> hour, an hour-and-a-half away to go to work, an hour, hour-and-a-half to
> come home. How does that help a community? But that's part of the
> state's making parents responsible. . . welfare-to-work. That's a program
> that ought to be stopped because it really has no merit. I think it adds
> more to the problem than it does to solve it. . . I wish I could put two
> parents in every home and make every parent equally responsible, but you
> can't do that. But we're not doing anything by taking the one parent and
> putting them on a bus to send them out of town to make five dollars and
> fifty cents an hour (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore interviews one of the other workers who road the bus to the mall with Owens, then talks to Owens' boss at Dick Clark's American Bandstand Grill; her boss attests that Owens was a good worker. Moore notes in a voiceover that the restaurant chain received tax breaks for its use of welfare-to-work employees. Moore then includes his attempt to get an interview with Dick Clark (a picture of Clark posing with Charleton Heston is flashed on the screen beforehand); Clark ignores Moore's questions about his restaurant's participation in the welfare-to-work program, saying he is in a hurry, then the van he is riding in drives off. Moore completes the cause-and-effect chain by pointing out that Owens' two jobs didn't provide enough money to pay her rent. She was evicted a week before the Buell shooting; she was forced to move in with her brother, where her son found the gun that he then took to school. This chain of reasoning links corporate exploitation of the poor enabled by government welfare reform directly to the death of Kayla Rolland.

Moore than argues that social issues like welfare reform were largely ignored in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. After a montage of post-September 11th news stories on home security, Barry Glassner is quoted, saying "How are we afraid of all of these things? It's because a lot of people are making a lot of money off of it and a lot of careers off of it. And so there's vested interest, and a lot of activity to keep us afraid." As Glassner says this, pictures of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and John Ashcroft are shown. Moore then links Glassner's statement back to Lockheed Martin with a voiceover:

> And what better way to fight box cutter-wielding terrorists than to order a record number of fighter jets from Lockheed? Yes, everyone felt safer,

especially with the Army doing garbage detail on Park Avenue. And the greatest benefit of all of a terrorized public is that the corporate and political leaders can get away with just about anything (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore then flashes a picture of the Enron corporate symbol, and includes a clip of a senator denouncing the Enron scandal as a case of "cash-and-carry government." Moore then brings the argument back to gun control with the rest of his voiceover:

There were a lot of things that I didn't know after the World Trade Center attack, but one thing was clear: whether it was before or after September 11th, a public that's this out of control with fear should not have a lot of guns and ammo lying around (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore continues this argument in the next sequence, linking gun sales and corporate wrongdoing. Since Klebold and Harris had purchased the 9mm ammunition for their TEC-9 from K-Mart, Moore enlists Columbine shooting victims Richard Castaldo and Mark Taylor, both of whom were shot with bullets fired from that TEC-9, for a corporate embarrassment stunt reminiscent of his anti-corporate pranks in *Roger & Me*: he takes the two boys to K-Mart's corporate headquarters in Troy, Michigan in an attempt to "return the merchandise." After Moore introduces the boys, Castaldo and Taylor tell the corporate spokesperson who comes out to speak to them that, since K-Mart didn't sell handguns, they would like K-Mart to stop selling handgun ammunition, especially 9mm bullets. Taylor displays the bullet holes in his back, and Castaldo's paralysis is readily visible through his use of a wheelchair; Moore clearly believes that these visual, corporeal displays of the violence of the Columbine shooting will help shame the company into complying with their demands. When they make little headway at the headquarters, Taylor suggests that they go to the local K-Mart and buy up their entire supply of ammunition. The next day, Moore, Taylor, and Castaldo return to K-

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Mart headquarters with the purchased bullets, and they also have a large number of reporters with them. As they wait for another meeting with a company representative, Moore displays one of their purchased 9mm bullets and announces that it is exactly the kind of bullet in both Taylor and Castaldo's bodies; again, a powerful visual sign is used to impress upon viewers the connection between K-Mart product and the wounds carried by Taylor and Castaldo. Eventually K-Mart's Vice-President of Communications comes out to tell Moore and the gathered press that K-Mart will no longer stock handgun ammunition in its stores.

Moore credits this achievement to Taylor and Castaldo, then states that their victory inspired him to engage in another confrontation, this time with Charleton Heston himself. Moore uses a star map to find Heston's Hollywood-area home, then goes to the front gates of Heston's home to make an appointment with Heston over the intercom. Heston says he is busy, but can see Moore the next morning. Moore shows up at Heston's gates the next day; Heston greets Moore in the front yard and leads him back to the pool house for the interview. Moore begins by identifying himself as a lifetime member of the NRA, then asks Heston if he has any guns in the house. Heston does have guns in the house, and loaded guns at that. Moore asks him why he keeps them, since he has never been the victim of crime and has substantial security at his home; Heston responds that it is his right to do so, invoking the Second Amendment, and says that he enjoys the "comfort factor" that a loaded gun in the home provides. He then states that "I am exercising one of the rights passed on down to me from those wise old dead white guys that invented this country, and if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for

me." Moore then asks Heston why he thinks that other countries don't have the same firearms murder rate that the US does, specifically noting Canada's high gun ownership rate. Heston interjects "Not for long," grimly raising the specter of impending gun control legislation in Canada, but Moore continues with his question. Heston responds that "I think American history has a lot of blood on its hands." Moore challenges this, mentioning the British Empire and the Germany atrocities under the Nazis. Heston at first says that he doesn't have much else to say on the issue, but when Moore presses, Heston answers that "We have probably more mixed ethnicity than other countries, some other countries." When Moore asks him to explain this further, Heston repeats his earlier insistence that America's history is bloodier than most other countries, and while he makes exceptions for Russia, Japan, and Germany, he states "Certainly more than Canada." Moore than asks Heston about his appearance at the NRA rally in Flint after the death of Kayla Rolland. At first Heston doesn't recall the Buell shooting, but he quickly remembers the case, responding to Moore's observation that the NRA had a rally in Flint with "So did the vice-president." Moore then asks Heston if he thought it was insensitive for the NRA to go to Flint after the killing; Heston maintains that he didn't know about the Buell shooting at the time of the rally. Moore then asks him if he would have cancelled the rally had he known the facts of the case, and Heston refuses to give him an answer. When Moore asks him if he feels the need to apologize to the people of Flint or the people at Columbine and if it is acceptable for the NRA to visit the sites of shooting tragedies, Heston cuts off the interview by walking away. Moore walks after him, asking him to look at a picture of Kayla Rolland; Heston ignores him and continues

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to walk away. As he leaves the Heston home, Moore leaves the picture of Rolland

leaning against the front gate.

      The conclusion to the film features Moore delivering the following voiceover as a

montage of news reports talking about gun ownership and a Moore interview with

another gun owner plays in the background:

> I left the Heston estate atop Beverly Hills and walked back into the real
> world, an America living and breathing in fear. . . where gun sales were at
> an all-time high, and where, in the end, it all comes back to bowling for
> Columbine (Moore, *Bowling*).

This characterizes Heston as living in an unreal world, a world of safety and comfort

different from that inhabited by the rest of America. After this section, Moore briefly

interviews an employee at a bowling alley in Littleton where three people were shot to

death, implying strongly that the cycle of firearms violence that the Columbine shooting

was part of is continuing. Then Moore reminds us of his ironic invocation of a

sentimental idea of America at the beginning of the film, stating "Yes, it was a glorious

time to be an American." The end title music then begins, Joey Ramone's version of

"What a Wonderful World," echoing the use of Armstrong's version earlier in the film.

      While Moore was widely attacked for being "anti-gun" because of *Bowling for

Columbine*, gun control and even the Columbine shootings are secondary here to a

critique of the way that Americans have reacted to Columbine, specifically focusing on

making the claim that politicians (epitomized here by the Bush administration) and

corporate interests (like Lockheed Martin) have used the fear generated by Columbine

(and later, by September 11) to further their agenda. Even Heston becomes less of a "gun

nut" and more of a doddering right-winger safely surrounded by a life of privilege.

In any event, although Moore was a relative late-comer among the Columbine

experts, he became one of the most influential and certainly the most famous (or

infamous) of them. *Bowling for Columbine* was an immensely successful film, setting

the box office record for documentaries and earning Moore the Academy Award for Best

Documentary. Moore's success with *Bowling* set up his later success with *Fahrenheit*

9/11, which will be discussed in this project's conclusion.

Marilyn Manson

In the arguments made by those who maintain that violent entertainment was

responsible for Columbine, no entertainer has been more blamed than Marilyn Manson.

Manson, the lead singer of a band of the same name, is mentioned by both Bob Larson

and Carl Raschke as a messenger of evil and Satanism and is mentioned in numerous

newspaper articles as an important influence on Klebold and Harris. As a reaction to

these accusations, Manson wrote an opinion piece that appeared in *Rolling Stone* in the

May of 1999. After stating that, through the crucifixion, "Christianity has given us an

image of death and sexuality that we have based our culture around," Manson claims that

> A lot of people forget or never realize that I started my band as a criticism
> of these very issues of despair and hypocrisy. The name Marilyn Manson
> has never celebrated the sad fact that America puts killers on the cover of
> *Time* magazine, giving them as much notoriety as our favorite movie stars.
> From Jesse James to Charles Manson, the media, since their inception,
> have turned criminals into folk heroes. They just created two new ones
> when they plastered those dipshits Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' pictures
> on the front of every newspaper. Don't be surprised if every kid who gets
> pushed around has two new idols (Manson, "Columbine").

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Although his critics identify him as the personification of harmful media, Manson moves

to distance himself from the media, declaring that his persona is a reaction to the media's

obsession with violence and at the same time pointing out that the media is just a

development of a deeper cultural obsession with violence with roots in Christianity. This

is one of the rhetorical moves that Raschke attempts to refute in *Painted Black*: the

Satanic or countercultural claim to honesty after portraying traditional, Christian-

influenced culture as hypocritical.

In his autobiography, *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*, co-written with Neil

Strauss and published in 1998, Manson maintains that his reaction against Christianity

began with his education at Heritage Christian School in Canton, Ohio back when he was

still Brian Warner. Manson portrays Heritage Christian School as being obsessed with

the anti-Satanism movement. According to Manson, the form that his rebellion was to

take was determined by the school's obsessive fear of Satanism:

> As Neil [a friend of Manson's] was turning me on to heavy metal, they
> [the school officials] were conducting seminars on backwards masking.
> They would bring in Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Alice Cooper
> records and play them loudly on the P.A. system. Different teachers
> would take turns at the record player, spinning the albums backward with
> an index finger and explaining the hidden messages. Of course, the most
> extreme music with the most satanic messages was what I wanted to listen
> to, chiefly because it was forbidden. They would hold up pictures of the
> bands to frighten us, but all that ever accomplished was to make me decide
> that I wanted long hair and an earring just like the rockers in the pictures
> (Manson and Strauss 26).

Manson's portrayal of his adolescent rebellion is best understood as a form of ostension,

a dynamic that Bill Ellis defines as "an action that gains its primary meaning by being

part of a recognized story" (Ellis 281). In discussions of ostension the "recognized story"

is usually a legend, as in the case of legend tripping; legend trippers go to a site

associated with a legend, thus participating in the legend. Manson fashioned his

rebellious self according to the Heritage Christian School's definition of a rebel; if a rebel

listened to heavy metal music, then Manson gladly embraced heavy metal.

Manson's Satanism is very close to that of Anton LaVey, the founder of the

Church of Satan; accordingly, after Manson released the *Antichrist Superstar* album, he

was honored by LaVey with a card proclaiming his status as a minister in the Church of

Satan (Manson and Strauss 170). Manson explains that

> What nearly everybody in my life. . . had misunderstood about Satanism
> was that it is not about ritual sacrifices, digging up graves and
> worshipping the devil. The devil doesn't exist. Satanism is about
> worshipping yourself, because you are responsible for your own good and
> evil (Manson and Strauss 164).

The Satanist in this sense of the word does not believe in powers granted by the devil.

The LaVey-style Satanist is a powerful hoax, a con artist using people's fear of the devil

against them. Manson points out that

> All the power LaVey wielded he gained through fear – the public's fear of
> a word: *Satan*. By telling people he was a Satanist, LaVey became Satan
> in their eyes – which is not unlike my attitude toward becoming a rock
> star. "One hates what one fears," LaVey had written. "I have acquired
> power without conscious effort, by simply being." Those lines could just
> as easily have been something I had written (Manson and Strauss 167-8).

Brian Warner, following a pattern set by LaVey back in the late 1960s, invented

his Satanic identity as Marilyn Manson in an act of pseudo-ostension. Ellis defines

pseudo-ostension in the legend trip context as occuring when "adolescents seeking to

frighten peers or parents briefly impersonate 'Satanists' or fabricate evidence of 'cult'

rituals" (Ellis 282). This is to differentiate these "hoax" actions from actions committed

by individuals who believe that they are invoking (or have the potential to invoke) actual supernatural forces. Although Manson permanently adopts the Satanist image, he does so as a means to create shock and discord in what he sees as a too-complacent America. He explains the origins of his rock persona as follows:

> At the time I was reading books about philosophy, hypnosis, criminal psychology, and mass psychology (along with a few occult and true crime paperbacks). On top of that, I was completely bored, sitting around watching *Wonder Years* reruns and talk shows and realizing how stupid Americans were. All of this inspired me to crate my own science project and see if a white band that wasn't rap could get away with acts far more offensive and illicit than 2 Live Crew's dirty rhymes. As a performer, I wanted to be the loudest, most persistent alarm clock I could be, because there didn't seem like any other way to snap society out of its Christianity- and media-induced coma (Manson and Strauss 80).

It is important to note that Manson sees himself as a genuine Satanist, much as LaVey saw himself as the real thing. Those who claim that they believe in metaphysical Satanic forces become embarrassing rubes from this viewpoint; the true Satanist knows better. Bob Larson claims otherwise in *Extreme Evil* when he describes Manson concerts as a focus of satanic energy, but Manson says quite a bit in these passages that matches up with Carl Raschke's idea of aesthetic terrorism. Manson says nothing that encourages illegal actions in either his autobiography or the *Rolling Stone* piece, but direct incitements to violence or criminality are incidental to Raschke; he argues that aesthetic terrorism generates violence, even if its performers claim otherwise.

Marilyn Manson first appeared on MTV in 1995. It wasn't until the 1996 release of Manson's *Antichrist Superstar* that the real anti-Manson movement began, however. Christians picketed his concerts, and concerned communities tried to prevent the band from performing with various degrees of success. The criticism didn't just come from

the right, either; Democratic senator Joseph Lieberman (also notable for his opposition to

Jerry Springer) led a Congressional inquiry into Manson's music; this hearing featured

testimony from a father who blamed Manson's music for the suicide of his son. None of

this bad publicity seemed to bother Manson very much, and in fact it seemed to make

him even more popular. Gavin Baddeley observes that

> Above all, Manson epitomises the self-conscious scapegoat turned
> predator. When sanctimonious politicians railed against him, concerned
> parents' groups lobbied to ban his concerts and outraged evangelists filled
> their websites with apocryphal stories of blasphemous (and exaggeratedly
> criminal) excess, none seemed even dimly aware that they were acting as
> the best publicity agents that the divine Ms Manson could hope for
> (Baddeley 229).

The situation got considerably worse for Marilyn Manson and his fans, however,

after the Columbine shootings. Rumors that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were Marilyn

Manson fans began appearing in press reports the day after the shooting, as the Trench

Coat Mafia apparently included some students who were Marilyn Manson fans. As

stated earlier, however, Klebold and Harris were fringe members of the group at best and

apparently did not like Manson's music or image (Cullen 4). In spite of this, Manson has

proven to be a powerful image in Columbine debates; critics who wanted to blame the

shooting on the influence of the entertainment industry kept associating Manson's name

with the killers, as noted in previous chapters. As indicated from Harris's AOL website,

Klebold and Harris were fans of the German industrial bands KMFDM and Rammstein.

Lyrics from KMFDM's song "Son of a Gun" were featured prominently on said website.

Both bands issued statements decrying the shootings and are occasionally mentioned as

possible influences on the shooters (KMFDM's lyrics are ciritcized as "ultra-violent and

obscene" by the *New American*, for example (Jasper 5)), but neither band is mentioned as often in Columbine articles as Marilyn Manson is. The reason for this is accurately summed up by Manson in the *Rolling Stone* piece: "Since Middle America has not heard of the music they did listen to (KMFDM and Rammstein, among others), the media picked something they thought was similar" (Manson). Ironically, the reason that Manson is better known than KMFDM and Rammstein is that Manson specifically built his image out of the Satanism panics of the 1980s; he played on an established fear and rode it to infamy.

While Carl Raschke claims that post-1980s heavy metal music is far more dangerous than earlier forms of rock music rebellion, in his piece in *Rolling Stone* Manson portrays himself as part of a long line of musicians who scandalized and panicked the public with their convention-shattering behavior:

> America loves to find an icon to hang its guilt on. But, admittedly, I have assumed the role of Antichrist; I am the Nineties voice of individuality, and people tend to associate anyone who looks and behaves differently with illegal or immoral activity. Deep down, most adults hate people who go against the grain. It's comical that people are naive enough to have forgotten Elvis, Jim Morrison, and Ozzy [Osbourne] so quickly. All of them were subjected to the same age-old arguments, scrutiny, and prejudice (Manson, "Columbine").

After establishing himself as a "voice of individuality," Manson describes what he sees as the current state of conformity in American society:

> It is no wonder that kids are growing up more cynical; they have a lot of information in front of them. They can see that they are living in a world that's made of bullshit. In the past, there was always the idea that you could turn and run and start something better. But now America has become one big mall, and because of the Internet and all of the technology we have, there's nowhere to run. People are the same everywhere. Sometimes music, movies, and books are the only things that let us feel

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like someone else feels like we do. I've always tried to let people know it's OK, or better, if you don't fit into the program. Use your imagination – if some geek from Ohio can become something, why can't anyone else with the willpower and creativity? (Manson, "Columbine")

Combined with the picture of his adolescence painted in *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*, we can see that Manson defends his scary image by undercutting it; instead of a powerful, predatory Satanist, Manson presents himself as a "geek from Ohio" representing those left out of conformist America. The terrorist, to use Raschke's term, abandons the mask of power and argues that he is in fact a victim giving hope to other victims.

Manson argues that the movement to blame entertainment for the Columbine shootings is an attempt to impose meaning on an event that, ultimately, cannot be understood:

Man's greatest fear is chaos. It was unthinkable that these kids did not have a simple black-and-white reason for their actions. And so a scapegoat was needed. I remember hearing the initial reports from Littleton, that Harris and Klebold were wearing makeup and were dressed like Marilyn Manson, who they obviously must worship, since they were dressed in black. Of course, speculation snowballed into making me the poster boy for everything that is bad in the world (Manson, "Columbine").

Larson, Raschke, and Grossman, as with most commentators arguing that Columbine was triggered by a single major cause, all claim that the chaos narrative, representing Columbine as an action that is too complex to be fully explained or understood, is an attempt to cover up the real cause on the part of those ultimately responsible for the shooters' actions. Manson claims the opposite here, that imposing imaginary order is a pathological act that creates more problems and fails to solve anything.

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Manson ends the *Rolling Stone* piece with an additional strategy that Larson

criticized and attempted to counter in *Extreme Evil*; Manson extends the blame for

Columbine to America in general, stating that

> In my work I examine the America we live in, and I've always tried to
> show people that the devil we blame our atrocities on is really just each
> one of us. So don't expect the end of the world to come one day out of the
> blue – it's been happening every day for a long time (Manson,
> "Columbine").

At the same time Manson says that America is to blame for Columbine, he argues that

events like Columbine are just more obvious versions of human evil that have always

happened. Such a strategy is an attempt to deflate Columbine's power as an apocalyptic

event heralding the end of civilization, countering the way that Raschke, Larson, and

Grossman many others use the shootings, that is, emphasizing their novelty in order to

justify dynamic and far-reaching changes to American society. Earlier Manson argues

that school shootings are no different from any other sort of murder or killing, while at

the same time countering the idea that adolescent murderers need to be explained through

blaming outside influences:

> What inspires Bill Clinton to blow people up in Kosovo? Was it
> something that Monica Lewinski said to him? Isn't killing just killing,
> regardless if it's in Vietnam or Jonesboro, Arkansas? Why do we justify
> one, just because it seems to be for the right reasons? Should there ever be
> a right reason? If a kid is old enough to drive a car or buy a gun, isn't he
> old enough to be held personally responsible for what he does with his car
> or gun? Or if he's a teenager, should someone else be blamed because he
> isn't as enlightened as an eighteen-year-old? (Manson, "Columbine")

Comparing the Columbine shootings to the US military intervention in Kosovo and the

earlier war in Vietnam, as the anti-militarization causal theories accounting for

Columbine do, links Klebold and Harris's violent acts to a larger America climate of

violence. This statement then extends this critique of legitimized violence into an

argument for agency; if there is no "right reason" for violence and all perpetrators of

violence are equally responsible for violence, then Klebold and Harris alone should be

blamed for the shootings at Columbine. This last twist softens the fixing of blame on

mainstream America of the shootings; instead of blaming a toxic social environment for

violence, Manson returns to blaming the flaws of human nature.

Michael Moore includes an interview with Marilyn Manson in *Bowling for*

Columbine, interviewing him when he was in the Denver area to perform with the

Ozzfest tour in 2001. Clips from this interview are alternated with clips from an anti-

Manson rally; an excerpt from a speech delivered at the rally accuses Manson of

promoting "hate, violence, suicide, death, drug use, and Columbine-like behavior"

(Moore, *Bowling*). In the clip following this accusation, Manson states that

> The two byproducts of that whole tragedy [Columbine] were violence in
> entertainment and gun control. And how perfect that that was the two
> things that we were going to talk about with the upcoming election. And
> also then we forgot about Monica Lewinsky and we forgot about, the
> President was shooting bombs overseas, yet I'm a bad guy because I sing
> some rock n' roll songs. And who's a bigger influence – the President or
> Marilyn Manson? I'd like to think me, but I'm going to go with the
> President (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore then asks Manson, "Did you know that the day that Columbine happened, the

United States dropped more bombs on Kosovo than at any other time during that war?"

Manson responds,

> Yes, I do know that, and I think that that's really ironic, you know, that
> nobody said, well, maybe the President had an influence on this violent
> behavior. Because that's not the way the media wants to take it and spin
> it, turn it into fear. Because then you're watching television, you're
> watching the news, you're being pumped full of fear, there's floods,

there's AIDS, there's murder, cut to commercial, buy the Acura, buy the
Colgate, if you have bad breath they're not going to talk to you, if you've
got pimples the girl's not going to fuck you, and it's just this, it's a
campaign of fear and consumption. And that's what I think that it's all
based on, is the whole idea of keep everyone afraid, and they'll consume
(Moore, *Bowling*).

This section follows the pattern common to the anti-militarization arguments discussed in

Chapter Two. The bombing of Kosovo is presented as a media-neglected influence on

the shooters, and this idea is claimed to have been passed over by the mainstream media

in its rush to blame guns and entertainment. Manson then links the anti-militarization

argument to an anti-consumer culture argument, claiming that a climate of fear is

purposefully maintained to better market products. Instead of repeating his earlier

arguments about human nature, here Manson sticks to his argument that mainstream

American culture is behind the shootings, then attacks the way media culture covered the

shootings to serve its own commercial interests. This point is reinforced when Moore

asks Manson "if you were to talk directly to the kids at Columbine, the people in that

community, what would you say to them if they were here right now?" Manson replies,

"I wouldn't say a single word to them. I would listen to what they have to say. And

that's what no one did" (Moore, *Bowling*). Manson positions himself here in opposition

to the manipulative media; he becomes one who listens to voices rather than a

manipulator of them.

This last rhetorical move is particularly ironic, given Raschke's arguments about

"aesthetic terrorists." As the quotes from *Long Hard Road Out of Hell* indicate, Manson

open acknowledges himself as an artist who created a persona out of fear. In a song from

his first post-Columbine album, Manson clearly references the fear that adults have for

teens, and the power that ironically comes from it, when he sings "The more that you fear us, the bigger we get. . . and don't be surprised when we discover it" (Manson, "Disposable Teens"). At the same time, however, Manson continually reconfigures this fear into a victimhood claim; since he claims that what Americans are really afraid of is individuality, the fear of Americans is potentially dangerous and aggressive, resulting in harm to the feared. At the beginning of the *Bowling For Columbine* interview, Manson explains the media's post-Columbine focus on him as occurring because "I'm, in the end, a posterboy for fear. Because I represent what everyone's afraid of, because I do and say what I want" (Moore, *Bowling*). Although Manson often complains about having become a scapegoat post-Columbine, there is a strong element of ironic, Christ-like sacrifice in Manson's work, from the video for his song "Man That You Fear," where he is selected by lot to be stoned to death Shirley Jackson-style, to a song named after *King Kill 33˚*, conspiracy theorist James Shelby Downard's argument that the Kennedy assassination was a Masonic sacrifice of a "sacred king" figure. Generating fear for Manson is part of his persona as a Christ figure; according to the logic of this persona, by becoming a target for persecutors, he simultaneously becomes a savior of the excluded underdog.

Barry Glassner

The other commentator that introduces the issue of fear into *Bowling for Columbine* is sociology professor Barry Glassner. Glassner's book, *The Culture of Fear*,

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was published in 1999 before the Columbine shootings, but it does discuss the Paducah

and Jonesboro school shootings and their link to the general fear of "killer kids" that was

already popular earlier in the early nineties, in spite of a decline in youth crime statistics.

Glassner portrays the situation as follows:

> Violence-related deaths at the nation's schools dropped to a record low
> during the 1996-97 academic year (19 deaths out of 54 million children),
> and only one in then public schools reported *any* serious crime. Yet *Time*
> and *US News & World Report* both ran headlines in 1996 referring to
> "Teenage Time Bombs." In a nation of "Children Without Souls"
> (another *Time* headline from that year), "America's beleaguered cities are
> about to be victimized by a paradigm shattering wave of ultraviolent,
> morally vacuous young people some call 'the superpredators," William
> Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, and John DiIulio, a
> criminologist, forecast in a book in 1996 (Glassner xiv).

The typical "superpredator" was expected to be a violent gang member, usually African-

American and, as the quote from Bennett and DiIulio indicates, urban. The

conceptualization of the school shooting problem changed this expectation, however.

Glassner goes on to explain that

> Instead of the arrival of superpredators, violence by urban youths
> continued to decline. So we went looking elsewhere for proof that
> heinous behavior by young people was "becoming increasingly more
> commonplace in America" (CNN) [Glassner's citation]. After a sixteen-
> year-old in Pearl, Mississippi, and a fourteen-year-old in West Paducah,
> Kentucky, went on shooting sprees in late 1997, killing five of their
> classmates and wounding twelve others, these isolated incidents were
> taken as evidence of "an epidemic of seemingly depraved adolescent
> murderers" (Geraldo Rivera) [Glassner's citation]. Three months later, all
> sense of proportion vanished after two boys ages eleven and thirteen killed
> four students and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas. No longer, we learned
> in *Time*, was it "unusual for kids to get back at the world with live
> ammunition." When a child psychologist on NBC's "Today" show
> advised parents to reassure their children that shootings at schools are rare,
> reporter Ann Curry corrected him. "But this is the fourth case since
> October," she said (Glassner, xiv-xv).

It is Glassner's argument that fears of a school shooting epidemic are an example of

Americans being, as the subtitle of his book indicates, "Afraid of the Wrong Things."

There are two major strategies that Glassner uses to support his claims. First, he pairs

frequent references to statistics that show that school shootings are far less common that

one might suspect from media coverage with examples of media reactions that he

characterizes as hyperbole, as in this example:

> The day after the [Springfield, Oregon] shooting, on National Public
> Radio's "All Things Considered," the criminologist Vincent Schiraldi
> tried to explain that the recent string of incidents did not constitute a trend,
> that youth homicide rates had declined by 30 percent in recent years, and
> more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by
> violence in schools. But the show's host, Robert Siegel, interrupted him.
> "You're saying these are just anomalous events?" he asked, audibly
> peeved. The criminologist reiterated that *anomalous* is precisely the right
> word to describe the events, and he called it a "grave mistake" to imagine
> otherwise (Glassner xv).

Glassner argues that the print media in particular replaces meaningful statistics with what

he calls "the foreshadowing anecdote." He uses an example from the coverage of "road

rage" to make his point:

> After relaying the gory details of a particular instance of highway
> violence, they asserted that the given example "raises the overarching
> question of road anarchy" (*Time*) or represents "just the latest case of
> 'road rage' to gain national attention" (*USA Today*). A page-one story in
> the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998 declared that "road rage has become an
> exploding phenomenon across the country" and depicted the Pacific
> Northwest as a region particularly "plagued by a rise in road rage." Only
> after wading through twenty-two paragraphs of alarming first-person
> accounts and warnings from authorities did the reader learn that a grand
> total of five drivers and passengers had died in road rage incidents in the
> region over the previous five years (Parenthetical asides in original)
> (Glassner 4).

Highlighting what he characterizes as the reckless use of anecdotal evidence in certain media reporting allows him to influence the reader to watch for similar cases. When similar cases are found, the reader will be more likely to agree with Glassner's position.

The second major strategy that Glassner employs to discredit claims of a school shooting menace is the association of school shootings with a variety of other media-predicted plagues, some of which have been subjected to previous criticism (such as the war on drugs and the fear of black men as criminals), others which have already been largely discredited (such as the fear of superpredators mentioned above). The array of fears that Glassner attacks in his book is also highlighted in his book's subtitle: "crime, drugs, minorities, teen moms, killer kids, mutant microbes, plane crashes, road rage, & so much more." He also uses an extended comparison to the panic following the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* in 1938, comparing the experts to the scientific authorities who were characters in the radio play and talk show hosts and news anchors to the announcer that radio audiences found so credible, for example. This technique works in a way similar to the debunking effect of identifying a story as an urban legend; in the same way an the application of a label establishing as association with far-fetched stories like microwaved poodles and Pepsi-and-Pop-Rocks-ruptured stomachs acts to further discredit what might have once seemed a credible story, the listing of an threat along with discredited and questioned threats, especially one of the most infamous panics in US media history, acts against the story's original credibility.

Glassner also attacks the credibility of the various media scares that he discusses

by claiming that media scare stories often uncritically report the findings of dubiously

qualified experts:

> In nearly every episode of fear mongering I discussed in the previous
> chapters as well, people with fancy titles appeared. Hardly ever were they
> among the leading figures in their field. . . Arnold Nerenberg and Marty
> Rimm come immediately to mind. Nerenberg (aka "America's road-rage
> therapist") is a psychologist quoted uncritically in score of stories even
> though his alarming statistics and clinical dispositions have little scientific
> evidence behind them. Rimm, the college student whom *Time* glorified in
> its notorious "cyberporn" issue as the "Principal Investigator" of "a
> research team," is almost totally devoid of legitimate credentials. I have
> found that for some species of scares – Internet paranoia among them –
> secondary scholars are standard fixtures. Bona fide experts easily refute
> these characters' contentions, yet they continue to appear nonetheless
> (Glassner 206-7).

Again, this is a strategy of attack through association; if these specific people are frauds,

then other experts cited in scare stories become potential frauds as well.

The motivation for these scare stories, according to Glassner, is a desire on the

part of the public and the media to blame "bad people" for problems rather than "bad

policies":

> In just about every contemporary American scare, rather than confront
> disturbing shortcomings in society the public discussion centers on
> disturbed individuals. Demented drivers rather than insane public policies
> occupied center stage in the coverage of road rage. Where references
> were made at all to serious problems that drivers face, these were
> promptly shoved behind a curtain of talk about violent motorists (Glassner
> 6).

Glassner argues that this preference for covering dramatic, rarely occurring problems

rather than common problems that are far more detrimental to society as a whole is a

method of covering the effects of the more common problem without acknowledging

their real cause. In his discussion of workplace violence, he claims that the possible

reason the media inflated the danger posed by this problem was

> because workplace violence is a way of talking about the precariousness
> of employment without directly confronting what primarily puts workers
> at risk – the endless waves of corporate layoffs that began in the early
> 1980s. Stories about workplace violence routinely made mention of
> corporate downsizing as one potential cause, but they did not treat mass
> corporate firing as a social ill in its own right. To have done so would
> have proven difficult for many journalists. For one thing, who would they
> have cast as the villain of the piece? Is the CEO who receives a
> multimillion dollar raise for firing tens of thousands of employees truly
> evil? Or is he merely making his company more competitive in the global
> economy? And how would a journalist's boss – or boss's boss at the
> media conglomerate that owns the newspaper or the network – feel about
> publishing implicit criticism of something they themselves have done?
> Pink slips arrived with regularity in newsrooms like everywhere else in
> corporate America in recent years, and they didn't exactly inspire
> reporters to do investigative pieces on downsizing (Glassner 28).

Here Glassner argues that journalists don't print the important stories because of two

constraints. The first is the narrative framework of investigative reporting; a successful

story requires a "villain," and a murderer is a clearer villain than a CEO. The second is a

fear of elimination due to the increasingly corporation-controlled environment of the

news media; as portrayed by Glassner, corporate control of media leads to a direct effect

on which stories are printed and which aren't.

Glassner raises another potential motivation behind scare stories when he moves

on to his main discussion of fears about "killer kids":

> Our fear grows, I suggest proportionate to our unacknowledged guilt. By
> slashing spending on educational, medical, and antipoverty programs for
> youths we adults have committed grave violence against them. Yet rather
> than face up to our collective responsibility we project our violence onto
> young people themselves, and onto strangers we imagine will attack them
> (Glassner 72).

In this case, the denial of the real problem spreads beyond the media and corporations' interests to the general public. The public's guilt over supporting harmful governmental policies drives them to engage in the defense mechanism of projecting guilt onto another target, that is, the supposed killer kids. No longer is the public treated as a victim of manipulation from above; here the public is actively participating in the fiction.

Glassner also discusses what he sees as a pair of beliefs that support and encourage the belief in killer kids. The first is the belief that the world is a more dangerous place in the present than it was for previous generations; this argument maintains that "a unique set of social realities has conspired to turn today's children into monsters" (Glassner 74). To counter the idea that today's world is more dangerous than it was in earlier times, Glassner quotes Harry Truman, "There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know," then cites examples of juvenile crime cases from 1946, 1850, 1868, and 1786. Then Glassner attacks a recurring piece of evidence cited to support the dangerous modern world claim, "a pair of lists. . . comparing 'top problems in the public schools as identified by teachers' in 1940 and 1990." The 1940 list included "talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, wearing improper clothing, and not putting paper in wastebaskets"; the 1990 list consisted of "pregnancy, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, rape, robbery, and assault." Glassner argues that the 1990 list was actually made up of responses by principals surveyed in 1975 when asked specifically about crimes, not the most pressing general problems; after that, Glassner presents the following:

> In a nationwide survey in 1996 almost half of teachers said that textbook
> shortages prevented them from assigning homework; one in five reported

that classroom disruptions had resulted from students being forced to share textbooks (Glassner 75-6).

This last pair of observations acts to recontextualize the problem; instead of being the result of the violent degeneration of society and civilization, problems faced by schools are resituated in the argument over appropriate school funding. Glassner further argues that the belief in increasing violence is then exploited by some school officials to obtain better funding, which then gets spent on school security:

> Municipalities do not raise taxes, however, to buy state-of-the-art safety equipment for student athletes. They raise them to buy more surveillance cameras and metal detectors, and to station more police officers in schools. A few years ago the city of Dallas built a $41 million school that includes a high-tech command center where officers scan thirty-seven cameras that monitor nearly every inch of the building. Some of the school's 2,100 students complained that the five full-time security officers and numerous teacher-monitors invade their privacy. Teachers and parents raised questions about diverting so much money from educational programs into policing and what one Dallas newspaper referred to as the "authoritarian style" of the school's leadership. But Dallas officials defend the facility as a haven from the ills of the larger community (Glassner 76-7).

In Glassner's argument, this example illustrates that the current means of dealing with the situation is making things worse; if the real problem is inadequate resources (like the problems that Glassner cites related to textbook shortages), then no amount of security will correct the problem.

The second belief that reinforces the fear of killer kids is that children who display behavior problems are suffering from mental illness or some other form of inborn medical defect. In particular Glassner takes issue with what he sees as the dangers of prescribing psychiatric medicine to children. He maintains that, since the definition of what counts as abnormal or "hyperactive" behavior is socially determined and not

absolute, treating hyperactivity automatically as an issue for medical intervention is risky.

He links this concern back to his earlier anti-corporate arguments:

> From the point of view of managed care companies in the 1990s this ideal sometimes boils down to spending as little as possible to remove a patient's symptoms. Why provide expensive individual or family therapy to address a child's emotional, developmental, or family problems when with a simple prescription you can dispose of the behaviors that distress the child's parents and teachers? (Glassner 78)

He also argues that a focus on medication further distracts from addressing wider social

concerns, citing medical ethicist Lawrence Diller while stating

> reliance on Ritalin relieves all sorts of adults – doctors, parents, teachers, and policy makers alike – from having to pay attention to children's social environments, which may worsen as a consequence. "Should dysfunctional family patterns and overcrowded classrooms be tolerated just because Ritalin improves the child's behavior?" Diller asks (Glassner 78).

Although this statement criticizes Ritalin as a possible cover for dysfunctional or abusive

families, it also returns Glassner's argument to the proposition that school and other

child-supporting government programs are underfunded and neglected.

The framework of issues that Glassner sets up in *The Culture of Fear* plays a

central role in *Bowling for Columbine.* After the animated segment linking gun

ownership and white migration to the suburbs to an inflated fear of vengeful black men

rooted in the needs of slave holders to control a large subservient population, Moore

discusses a series of fears that had never materialized into actual dangers. He starts with

the Y2K panic, then discusses the "Africanized" killer bees that never arrived, then

follows Glassner's example in referring to Halloween sadism legends. He follows the

presentation of each of these stories with a series of quick clips from a variety of media

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scare stories, ranging from a story about a man attacked by a fox while on his riding lawn

mower, described by a reporter as "like a scene from a horror movie," to a story about

potential escalator injuries called "Stairway to Danger," all accompanied by the sound of

a rapidly thumping heart. This leads into an statement that the Bush administration's

terror alerts are an example showing that "The media, the politicians, the corporations,

have all done such a good job of scaring the American public, it's come to the point

where they don't need to give any reason at all"; this is supported with a clip from a new

conference in which President Bush explains that the Justice Department had "issued a

blanket alert" which was "in recognition of a general threat that we have received." This

part of Moore's argument, as evidence of the link between the fear generated by

Columbine and that generated by the September 11th attacks, will be dealt with in more

detail in my conclusion. Moore inserts an image from an old black and white movie of a

woman screaming immediately after the Bush clip, and this image serves as a transition

into Moore's walking interview with Glassner.

Glassner and Moore are walking around a south central Los Angeles

neighborhood on a bright, sunny day. The neighborhood looks more like a suburban

neighborhood than any of the street of Los Angeles shown in movies or on TV;

Glassner's first comment on film is that "I just love these boulevards down here, though;

you don't get this in most of LA." Moore asks Glassner why south central Los Angeles

is always portrayed as being so dangerous on the news, asking if the media is just

"making that up", and Glassner replies that

> No, they're not making it up, but they're choosing what they're covering.
> If you turn on TV, look on the news, what are you going to hear about?

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> Dangerous black guys, right? Unnamed black guy, you know, accused of some crime; you're going to see pictures of black guys doing bad things, and hearing stories about black guys doing bad things. And we've heard this our whole lives (Moore, *Bowling*).

This is followed by a montage of various media reports describing African-American suspects in a variety of ways. The sunny, peaceful setting of the interview offsets the general media picture of south central LA as a chaotic, dangerous area, and it simultaneously acts to further categorize the media portrayal of African-Americans as unrealistic and fear-driven.

Moore then brings up the murder cases of Susan Smith and Charles Stuart, both white individuals who murdered family members and blamed the crime on menacing, mysterious black assailants, then segues into a more detailed montage of news reports warning about "Africanized" killer bees. After this, Moore switches over to clips from an interview with Arthur Busch, the aforementioned County Prosecutor from Flint, Michigan, in which Busch points out that, through the media's portrayal of African-American criminals, "the black community has become entertainment for the rest of the community" and that the majority of cases of minors with firearms that he has had to deal with involve suburban adolescents. Along these lines, another clip from Glassner follows, in which he says

> My favorite statistic in all the research I did, discovered that the murder rate had gone down by twenty percent; the coverage, that is, how many murders are on the evening news, went up by 600%. . . Crime rates have been dropping, dropping. Fear of crime has been going up, up, up. How can that be possible? It doesn't make any sense. But it makes perfect sense when you see what we're hearing from politicians and seeing in the news media (Moore, *Bowling*).

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To reinforce his point, Moore then includes footage of Glassner and himself at the intersection of Florence and Normandie, "ground zero for the LA riots." As the stand near the intersection, Glassner states

> A couple white guys go down and walk around south central, they're going to get killed. Which I can tell you is a common perception. The odds that something is going to happen to us are really, really slight. Miniscule. But you know, if you look up there, you get a different symbol, of the Hollywood sign, it means something very different than the corner of Florence and Normandie for most Americans and most of the world, you know, it means glamour and Hollywood, except that we can't see it. . . You can't see it because of something that is probably much more dangerous for us right now, which is the stuff we're breathing (Moore, *Bowling*).

Moore clarifies this for us, interjecting "The pollution that's blocking the Hollywood sign. We're breathing this, it's far more dangerous than all the other stuff that the media is telling us to be afraid of" (Moore, *Bowling*). As Moore was shooting this footage, police helicopters and journalists arrived on the scene; apparently there were reports of an armed man in the area. Moore takes the opportunity to ask several of the journalists and crew members on the scene if they would consider doing a story on pollution in the area, and Moore finishes off the scene by asking one of the police officers present if it would be possible for him to go arrest the people responsible for polluting LA's air; the officer ignores him.

Moore uses Glassner's theory of a media-exaggerated culture of fear as a powerful tool with which to completely re-contextualize the school shooting issue. Instead of just shifting blame from one accepted media villain to another accepted media villain (from video games to guns, from guns to godlessness, or from bullying to hate), it allows him to shift blame, through the attack on corporate-controlled media, to his earlier

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concerns about corporate and political abuse of the powerless. This is especially visible

in the section of *Bowling for Columbine* that addresses the shooting in Flint; the villain

role is persuasively transferred from a killer six-year-old to rampant corporate and

political greed.

       While Moore uses the public attention paid to the Littleton and Flint shootings to

bring a new sense of moral outrage to the same issues he addressed in earlier work,

Glassner's own use of school shootings is to ultimately dismiss school shootings as a

problem altogether through arguments involving risk and probability. In a post-*Bowling*

for Columbine interview with the website Buzzflash, Glassner states that

> I am not someone who would argue that if your fears are legitimate that
> you should not respond accordingly and be cautious and take self-
> protective action. What I'm really talking about is exaggerated fears – the
> kind that are promoted by organizations in their own self-interest and that
> have unfortunate consequences, like parents raising paranoid children,
> people being suspicious of their neighbors (Buzzflash).

The issue here is not whether the correct villain gets blamed for the problem; the issue

becomes what gets defined as a problem in the first place, as when the problem shifts

from urban crime to urban pollution in *Bowling for Columbine*. Glassner later refers to

school shootings, and Columbine in particular, as just this sort of exaggerated problem:

> So, for example, if we flash back just a few years to the hysteria over
> school shootings, for instance, what we find is that this was occurring at a
> time when there were fewer deaths at schools than in the past – at a time,
> in fact, when the rate of youth violent crime was falling precipitously. So
> how was it that various politicians and journalists and others were talking
> about a quote-unquote epidemic of youth violence? Primarily they were
> doing it by taking isolated incidents and treating them as trends. There
> were some horrific incidents that any of us over the age of about 20 will
> recall of school shootings in places like Pearl, Mississippi and West
> Paducah, Kentucky, which occurred in the late 1990s. But they did not
> constitute what Geraldo Rivera, at the time, referred to as "an epidemic of

seemingly depraved adolescent murderers." And they didn't constitute what various politicians were referring to in the same terms, or worse. The word "predator" was used quite often. And then with the shootings at Columbine High School, of course, there was this general sense in the country that just about every adolescent male was a potential mass murderer, when, in fact, there were fewer of these incidents during this period than there had been in the past. And the probability of someone being shot at school was tiny. So the moral – one moral of the story – I would draw is that we should be very cautious when incidents and anecdotes that substitute for facts. And secondly, we need to ask ourselves what the real probability of danger is from what we're being led to be fearful about (Buzzflash).

This echoes Glassner's approach to similar problems in *The Culture of Fear*; an anecdote or shocking story cannot be allowed to override the larger picture of society created through responsible use of probability and statistics.

When the Buzzflash interviewer asks Glassner, "who profited or gained from the belief that was had an epidemic [of school shootings]?", Glassner responds

All those groups profited that were able to put the sorts of policies toward youth in place that they found politically appealing: for example, those who wanted much more surveillance and supervision of schoolchildren. Obviously, another group that profited is the security industry that was able to sell devices ranging from metal detectors to camera equipment, to the services of security guards. Probably the biggest beneficiary was the television news media, as is often the case, because they had a dramatic story that they could run with for a very long period of time (Buzzflash).

This statement not only serves to identify "villains," parties responsible for exaggerating the danger posed by school shootings, but it also provides hypothetical motives for this exploitation. The ultimate villain again becomes the media; a "dramatic story that they could run with for a very long period of time" feeds the interests of the other groups mentioned.

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Conclusion

The experts discussed in this chapter are like the experts in Chapter Five in that they adapted their pre-Columbine arguments into post-Columbine careers. Unlike the experts blaming a counterculture for Columbine, however, this trio of experts used Columbine as an opportunity to highlight the dangers posed by certain interpretations of mainstream American culture. Both sets of experts share a common enemy: the American media, epitomized by the news-reporting organizations, the entertainment industry, or both. They differ, however, in their accounts of whose interests the media serves. For Larson, Raschke, and Grossman, the media has been hijacked by the counterculture, taking aim at the cherished core values of American society. For Moore, Manson, and Glassner, the media is the tool of the politicians and the corporations and is an instrument reinforcing a pathological interpretation of American values that serves the wealthy and powerful.

It is important to note that experts like Moore, Manson, and Glassner tend to focus on the way that Columbine has been portrayed and used as a call to action rather than the shootings themselves. As such, they are ultimately debunking attempts, presenting other accounts for why the shootings happened (militarism, corporate and governmental neglect, fear-generated gun ownership), but primarily doing so in order to counter the previously made post-Columbine moves to fix blame upon various invading, countercultural influences. These debunking attempts are still based on treating Columbine as a crisis, but must re-categorize the danger it poses; instead of posing the

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danger of a continuing epidemic of school shootings, the real danger of Columbine lies in

the panic-driven efforts to prevent other shootings. The event no longer presents the

threat of future massacres; it presents the threat of the witch hunt. While the actions of

Klebold and Harris are certainly not condoned by this group of experts, evil is still

transferred from their actions and reassigned to the desperate actions of others to prevent

future shootings. The difference between the experts blaming counterculture and these

experts is best expressed in a single juxtaposition of arguments: Bob Larson vehemently

maintains that "We're not all culpable, and neither are millions of fine God-fearing

families," while Marilyn Manson argues that "the devil we blame our atrocities on is

really just each one of us."

   Moore and Glassner quickly adapted their arguments yet again in response to a

new crisis. This new crisis, the open-ended war on terrorism following the September 11

attacks, has decisively brought the national Columbine social drama to an end. This will

be the topic of the final chapter.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

A NEW "NEW NORMALCY"

On September 11, 2001, the school shooting crisis ended. This does not mean that school shootings stopped occurring; a student held other students hostage and then shot himself in Caro, Michigan on November 12, 2001, a student was killed and three other students were injured in a "gang-related" shooting at a high school in New Orleans on April 14, 2003, and a junior high student shot his principal, then killed himself in Red Lion, Pennsylvania on April 24, 2003 (National School Safety Center). Each of these events received some national media coverage, but each had passed into media obscurity within a day or two of occurring. Schools shootings lost their overwhelming power as a powerful motivator for American political and social change as soon as terrorists crashed three passenger planes into two very high profile targets and crashed a fourth in a try for another target. The new crisis, the war on terrorism, with its new form of villain, the terrorist, provided an opportunity for far greater expansion of power than school shootings ever did.

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Like the Columbine shootings, the September 11 attacks were a televised event.

Millions of viewers, myself included, watched the second plane collide with the World

Trade Center, and even more watched as the towers collapsed. As with Columbine, the

desire for decisive action and reassertion of control that marked the national reaction to

the September 11 attacks, which resulted in the widely approved invasion of Afghanistan

in the first stage of the war on terror, might have been the product of media framing and

presentation of the attacks as much as of the attacks themselves. In his discussion of the

media coverage of the Columbine shootings as an example of the "hyperreal,"

Christopher Smit argues that

> Because the chaos of the Columbine shooting, as provided to me on my
> TV screen, forced me to foreground my own reality, I was left wanting to
> help, but unable to do so because of my own positioning as merely a
> viewer of the hyperreal. It was from this positioning that I was
> theoretically sharing the realities of the students at Columbine. However,
> the fact that I was caught within my "at home" reality, the wrong reality,
> presented the distinct feeling of helplessness. . . In the hyperreal, as Eco
> surely would agree, the participants are deemed stationary, helpless, and
> completely at the hands of the apparatus. In the case of Columbine, the
> apparatus was TV, specifically exploited by CNN (Smit 93).

I would argue that in both the case of the Columbine shootings and the September 11

attacks, while we the viewers were originally at the mercy of television, this sense of

helplessness subsequently fueled the feeling of desperation and crisis that followed each

event, opening the door for a strengthening of governmental and expert authority in the

resulting demand for solutions.

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Terrorism and Columbine

Victor Turner's conception of the liminal period is a key part of explaining the rhetorical power of a crisis; in a liminal period, possibilities that would never be considered as viable can be reentered into play. If a possible course of action becomes accepted in the crisis period, it has a chance of becoming part of the post-crisis conception of normal life. It is important that these expanded liminal periods do not appear to be liminal periods, however; liminal periods end and normal life resumes, and awareness of this ultimately limits people's acceptance of propositions made during a crisis. Thus we find the idea of the "new normal" or "new normalcy," the assertion that the period of radical change following an event is representative of life forever after the event in question.

In an interview with Bob Woodward for a *Washington Post* article published on October 21, 2001, Vice-President Cheney gave his opinion regarding the changes facing Americans' lives following the September 11 attacks:

> The way I think of it, it's a new normalcy. . . We're going to have to take steps, and are taking steps, that'll become a permanent part of the way we live. In terms of security, in terms of the way that we deal with travel and airlines, all of those measures that we end up having to adopt in order to sort of harden the target, make it tougher for the terrorists to get at us. And I think those will become permanent features of our kind of way of life (Woodward, A1).

This concept of a "new normalcy," the beginning of a new, permanent perception of the world and the changes in action that this new world requires, perfectly sums up the way that crisis events are used rhetorically to justify sweeping social and political changes.

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Following the Columbine shooting, the new normalcy was defined by a belief that held that schools, for whatever reason, were no longer safe and that shootings posed a real threat to every school in America. This basic proposition was the driving force behind a demand for more school security and surveillance, zero tolerance policies, and a host of other miscellaneous proposed solutions (gun control, dress codes, control over violent entertainment, and reestablishing school prayer, among the many others discussed in earlier chapters of this project). Almost every solution advanced to solve the school shooting problem had been previously proposed as an answer to other problems prior to the school shooting crisis, and most had previously found an reluctant or unwilling audience; these solutions reappeared in the post-Columbine liminal period, relying on the supposed new situation to provide them with a level of persuasive appeal that they lacked prior to school shootings. Some made substantial short term gains that eventually dwindled, especially gun control, and others still weren't widely accepted as relevant or necessary, such as the desire to return prayer to the public schools. A few of these changes, however, have endured to the present, especially the call for increased security measures at schools. Of all of the proposed solutions to the school shooting crisis, only a small number survived to actually become lasting changes in the American cultural landscape, to become something that better represents a post-liminal period than the liminal, transitional period masquerading as a permanent reality.

The post-September 11 new normalcy is defined by a belief that America's national security is threatened by foreign terrorists and a correlating belief that this threat should be addressed as the most important problem facing the nation. In this new crisis

period, many changes that would have previously been seen as unnecessary or intrusive suddenly became plausible, even desirable. What Cheney discusses in the Woodward interview, airline security changes, are among the changes that are likely to last beyond the post-September 11 liminal period. Airline security in the US was considered lax compared to that practiced in other countries; the September 11 attacks supported this proposition, and airlines are unlikely to get rid of their reinforced cockpit doors, for example, at any future point. There are a host of other, far more sweeping changes, however, that are likely to have a relatively short life, lasting only as long as the sense of immediate crisis can be successfully maintained; the Bush administration's insistence on a right to maintain American security through pre-emptive attack, for example, used as one among several justifications to invade Iraq, will only remain tenable as long as the American public sees military intervention as both needed to head off a real and credible threat and worth its cost in soldiers' lives and economic backing.

The key to maintaining the post-Columbine liminal period was the construction of a suitably threatening enemy. This enemy was the school shooting, a figure combining elements of both the familiar and the alien. Like the serial killer, the school shooter is a monster, a figure capable of acts of evil that are unfathomable to ordinary humans; sympathy for or identification with such a monster is impossible, as the gap between the human and the monster is maintained through the insistence on the school shooter's (literally or figuratively) demonic evil. In some portrayals, this monster is marked by readily recognizable physical difference; this is the case in anti-goth arguments, for example, where the school shooter can be identified through his black clothing, body

piercings, and various other easily observable signs of difference. Most arguments, however, became more sophisticated than this, observing that not all goths are school shooters, and not all school shooters look like goths. From this realization grows the reliance on experts to fight the school shooting problem; since the school shooter looks like anybody else, it takes the uncanny diagnostic power of the expert to find this monster before he can strike. Whether the real enemy is the shooter or the array of forces arming or compelling him ultimately becomes immaterial; the shooter is the sign representing the school shooting problem.

The embodiment of the enemy following September 11, of course, is the terrorist. Representing the murderous aims of what some commentators have dubbed "Islamofascism" and all that hates America, the terrorist is, in many ways, a far better enemy, in terms of rhetorical effectiveness, than the school shooter. Perhaps the most immediate reason for the terrorist's effectiveness as a symbol demanding eradication is that the terrorist has the advantage over the school shooter in killing power; contrast the few dozen victims of the 1990s school shootings with the almost 3,000 killed in the September 11 attacks. Beyond that, like the school shooter, the terrorist's alien status is established through a series of emphasized differences, some physical, some psychological, and some cultural; the terrorist is an Arab, a Moslem, and the product of a presumed backwards, theocratic society made up of an endless sea of people just like him, all portrayed as irredeemably evil. This array of differences accumulates to make the terrorist completely Other to a vast majority of the American public, and as such acts to create a very persuasive definition of what counts as familiar or American. For a

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similar case, I refer to the function of the carnival freak show as explained by Rosemarie

Garland Thomson:

> The freak show made more than freaks; it fashioned as well the self-governed, iterable subject of democracy – the American cultural self. Parading at once as entertainment and education, the institutionalized social process of enfreakment united and validated the disparate throng positioned as viewers. A freak show's cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer's indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes (Thomson 10).

Thomson focuses on the physical form of the sideshow freak as a sign of difference, but

the extreme cultural difference of terrorists as constructed by Americans fulfills the same

function. The construction of the terrorist represents such a radical figure of difference

that the differences between Americans seem less pronounced; this would help account

for the many displays of unity that followed the September 11 attacks and the

unprecedented support that an extremely wide range of Americans showed for President

Bush's policies and actions immediately following the attacks.

This image of unity eventually faded, and a new similarity between the school

shooter and the terrorist emerged; both were portrayed as being enabled and aided by a

traitorous enemy operating within America: the remnants of the counterculture of the

1960s, manifested in the modern day as liberals. The causal theories linking the rise of

relativistic, secular liberalism to Columbine discussed earlier in this project are very

similar to the accusations made against liberals post-September 11. In less extreme

versions, liberals are blamed for being too "tolerant" of terrorists and for weakening

American willingness to fight the terrorist menace; Mona Charen, for example, argues in

a column that the National Education Association's suggestion for teachers to avoid

identifying Arabs as the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks amounts to "a kind of

moral disarmament of the nation" and that "Before there can be an army, navy, and air

force capable of defending us, there must be a citizenry that believes we are worth

defending" (Charen). In the more extreme versions of the anti-liberal argument, liberals

are an even greater threat than Osama bin Laden; an example of this can be found in an

online column by Don Feder, who observes that

> In a column shortly after Sept. 11, I called liberalism America's
> homegrown suicide cult and the real threat to our nation's survival.
> Osama bin Laden isn't the only one who deserves to be hiding in a cave,
> cowering every time he hears a jet overhead (Feder).

The anti-liberal argument returned to its Vietnam-era roots during the 2004 presidential

campaign. John Kerry's portrayal of his military service in Vietnam, and especially his

anti-war activities upon returning to the US, were repeatedly brought up as reasons that

Kerry could not be trusted with the office of president. On the website for the anti-Kerry

group Swift Vets and POWS for Truth, browsers are invited to sign a petition that argues

that Kerry lied to Congress about war atrocities he claimed to have witnessed in Vietnam

and even "met with North Vietnamese officials in Paris and worked with them in the

furtherance of their political and military objectives against the United States": as such,

the petition, addressed to Kerry, demands that he "Explain to the American public the

nature and extent of war crimes in which you participated," "Explain to the American

public your justification for contacting and working in conjunction with a foreign

government then at war with the United States," and "Provide an acknowledgment and

apology to the American veterans for your all encompassing accusations, and more

specifically to our POWs for any extensions of their internment caused by your actions"

(Swift Vets). This series of accusations frames Kerry as a traitor and war criminal,

directly collaborating with a foreign power, the North Vietnamese, in a way that

undermined America's military objectives in Vietnam and added to the suffering of

POWs and the stigmatization of soldiers upon their return to the US. Although the Swift

Vets argued that they were opposing Kerry just in order to keep a liar out of the White

House, other Kerry opponents maintained that Kerry's actions in and after Vietnam

directly indicated that he would fail in leading the current American war on terrorism. A

piece posted on the anti-Communist, anti-Kerry website BrookesNews.com, for example,

claims that

> Not only does his record [in Vietnam] demonstrate beyond a reasonable
> doubt that he is neither morally nor intellectually fit to sit in the Oval
> Office so do his recent comments on troop withdrawals from Iraq. To
> publicly promise withdrawals within 6 months of his inauguration will
> demoralize our friends in Iraq and encourage terrorists to intensify their
> murderous activities. . . His is a policy of continuous weakness in the face
> of terrorism that would surely invite even more terrorism (Ross).

Regarding their use by conservatives in making aggressive anti-liberal arguments, the

crisis periods following Columbine and September 11 are almost identical. These

accusations of moral weakness end up blurring the boundary between the enabler of

murder and murder itself, furthering the argument that liberals are followers of a

murderous, immoral doctrine that is the ultimate cause of all of America's problems.

George W. Bush defeated John Kerry in the November 2004 election; following

the election, two narratives have arisen to explain Bush's victory and the other

Republican election victories for House and Senate seats, widening their majority in

Congress. The first narrative states that "moral issues" were the deciding factor, specifically Bush's stances against gun control, abortion, and gay marriage; this argument claims that the country is thus becoming decisively more conservative. The second narrative argues that Bush's post-September 11 momentum, the war on terrorism, and Bush's image as a "war president" after the invasion of Iraq caused the country to support him for reelection (Tanner). As the previous paragraphs indicate, however, these narratives are not exclusive; the post-September 11 crisis allowed Bush and his allies to portray the liberal as morally weak, expanding a foreign enemy to include, and it certain ways be replaced by, a domestic enemy. The Kerry campaign's strategy of reframing the crisis facing the country as one of economic concerns, echoing the reframing strategies of Michael Moore and Barry Glassner, was ultimately unsuccessful in the face of such powerful claims.

In addition to sharing an assumed internal enemy, the terrorism and school shooting problems have become entangled in other ways. The label "terrorism" was occasionally associated with school shootings even before September 11; Carl Raschke's theory that Columbine was another manifestation of the "terrorist aesthetic" that he observed in his study of teen Satanism, for example, associated school shootings with the domestic terrorism that was a major concern for the United States during the Clinton years after the Oklahoma City bombing, and he did so a matter of days after the shootings occurred. An essay titled "Terrorism" posted on the website of the Arizona Center for Social Trauma shortly after the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 also posits a link between Columbine and Oklahoma City, observing that

> In seeking to attract attention the terrorists often carefully choose the date and place of their attack. Here in Colorado for example, the Columbine massacre occurred on April 20th, Hitler's birthday. . . The Columbine gunmen had originally chose April 19th to be their "Day of Judgment," the anniversary of the Oklahoma bombing on April 19th 1995 (Arizona Center for Social Trauma).

Similarly, in an article posted on CNN's student news website titled "Faced with violence and terrorism, students say they can adjust," Columbine is the only act of generic "violence" discussed; the other specific events mentioned, the Oklahoma City bombing, the 1998 African embassy bombings, and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, are all more conventionally defined with the label terrorism (Lawson).

Following the September 11 attacks, school shootings quickly became absorbed into the larger terrorist-inspired concern about security. This is literally the case with the Secret Service and its NTAC unit, which are now part of the Department of Homeland Security. Beyond organizational restructuring, however, we can see further signs of the blending of the two fears. The Department of Education prepared one document, for example, "Emergency Planning For America's Schools," which is linked to the Department of Homeland Security's website, which argues that schools should prepare crisis plans to address a wide range of emergencies:

> If you don't have a school crisis plan in partnership with public safety agencies, including law enforcement and fire, health, mental health and local emergency preparedness agencies, develop one. Ensure that it addresses traditional crises and emergencies such as fires, school shootings and accidents, as well as biological, radiological, chemical and other terrorist activities (US Department of Education).

One such plan, the Model Marin County School Emergency Disaster Preparedness and Incident Plan, includes plans for dealing with the ordinary range of disasters such as

earthquakes, fires, or floods as well as school shooting-type concerns such as "Stranger

or Intruder on Campus," "Explosion/ Threat of Explosion," "Bomb Threat" and

"Weapons Fired"; it also includes plans for responding to post-September 11 scenarios

such as "Threat Condition Red" (referring to the Department of Homeland Security's

color-coded terrorism warning system), "Fallen Aircraft," and "War" (which specifically

assumes a nuclear attack against the US) (Marin County Schools).

This trend continues in much of the post-September 11 work of the non-

government expert culture built up around Columbine, particularly in the work of those

experts who interpreted Columbine as a sign of the dangers created by mainstream

American culture. Barry Glassner's work on fear, for example, fits into the post-

September 11 world very nicely. Glassner's interview with Buzzflash, which is quoted in

the previous chapter, was framed by the website as a critique of "the Karl Rove/ John

Ashcroft/ Rumsfeld 'Ministry of Fear' strategy." In the interview, Glassner was asked

about the government's terrorist threat rating system, and Glassner replied

> To the extent that the government is asking us to do something specific, I
> think they need to tell us what that is in each instance, and why they are
> asking us to do that. If they meet those two criteria –- which they have not
> so far, at least to my mind -– then I think it's a reasonable thing for them to
> do. . . If, on the other hand, the alert is just a general statement with no
> specific requests, no substance behind it, I can't see how it benefits anyone
> except those persons who would like the general population to be more
> fearful. It discourages us from participating in our communities, in
> community life. This is harmful to the well-being of the community -- not
> only in terms of revenues for businesses, which is the point that is often
> raised, but in terms of what we sociologists refer to as community
> integration -- the connection between people -- the very sense of
> community, people's political engagement, and so forth (Buzzflash).

From this angle, the real threat to community is not terrorism; it is the public's fear of

terrorism. The feeling of communitas (or "community integration") widely reported by

individuals and the media and repeatedly touted by politicians (and "United We Stand"

bumper stickers) in the period of trauma recovery following the September 11 disappears,

replaced by its dark opposite, a fear-inspired withdrawal from communities. Glassner

then returns to his strategy of reevaluating risks and establishing "some sort of rational

perspective" through the use of statistics:

> So, for example, I thought I would check some of the relative levels of risk
> during 2001, the year of the terrible attacks of 9/11. So I checked the
> National Safety Council's statistics for motor vehicle deaths -– for deaths
> from motor vehicle accidents. And I discovered that that number is 42,900
> for 2001. Then I checked the number of deaths from terrorist attacks
> worldwide that year, and the number is 3,547, according to the figures
> published by the U.S. State Department; 3,000 of which were on 9/11.
> That suggests that my odds that year as an American citizen of dying in a
> motor vehicle crash were more than 10 times as high as my odds of dying
> from a terrorist attack. This comparison is relevant, partly because of the
> relative nature of the danger, and partly because the more anxious, fearful
> and distracted I am, the more likely I am to be involved in an accident,
> whether while driving a motor vehicle or doing anything else. . . And in
> terms of sociological dimension of this, high levels of fear and anxiety
> also create unfortunate social conditions, like people being more willing to
> give up civil liberties, like people not participating in the life of their
> community and political institutions and so forth (Buzzflash).

Living in a constant state of high anxiety is portrayed here as being dangerous both to

individuals and to society. For individuals, Glassner argues that fear of terrorism makes

us more vulnerable to more immediate, more common dangers, such as car accidents.

For society, America's current method of reacting to terrorism acts as a distraction from

real problems, such as adequate health care, as Glassner explains below:

> And then finally I would say, to the extent that any of us might be
> concerned about protecting ourselves and our loved ones during and after

a terrorist attack, what we should be focusing on is not what we can do to secure our homes with duct tape, but rather the condition of the public health system and the public health facilities in our communities. Because if there really is an attack of any of the sorts you've mentioned earlier, it's not duct tape we're going to need. It's a sufficiently large, well-functioning and well-funded public health system, which is not something that we have been particularly good at building in this country for quite some time (Buzzflash).

Here Glassner is attempting to change the American conception of preparedness for attack, using the widely ridiculed suggestion by the Department of Homeland Security that citizens be prepared to seal their homes with duct tape and garbage bags in the event of a terrorist attack as a caricature of the government's general approach to fighting terrorism. Ironically, Glassner ends up making an argument for public health care by linking it to terrorism readiness; Glassner uses the fear of terrorism for its rhetorical effect even as he attempts to debunk its incredible power.

Working along similar lines, Michael Moore simultaneously worked a critique of post-September 11 America into his study of school shootings in *Bowling for Columbine*. As noted in the previous chapter, Moore's "What a Wonderful World" montage, portraying the US's involvement in military actions around the world in response to Lockheed Martin spokesman Evan McCollum's statement denying a potential connection between the Columbine shootings and America militarism, ends with a shot of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center on September 11. This montage implies a link between Columbine and September 11; both are portrayed as results stemming from the American use of military force for its own political ends. Moore also attempts to link September 11 and Columbine through Lockheed Martin's physical proximity to Littleton and the company's production of weapons to help fight to war on terror. Near the end of

the film, Moore uses a montage of post-September 11 news coverage, echoing the use of

Columbine and Buell shooting coverage earlier in the film, to reinforce his transfer of

Glassner's "culture of fear' idea to the newest crisis.

Moore officially, and very publicly, shifted his focus from the reactions to

Columbine to the reactions to September 11 when delivered his infamous and widely

attacked acceptance speech for the Academy Award for Best Documentary for *Bowling*

For Columbine in March 2003. Moore used the opportunity to criticize President Bush

and the approaching war in Iraq, stating

> We like non-fiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in a time
> where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president.
> We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious
> reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange
> alerts, we are against this war, Mr. Bush (BBC).

Moore's reference to duct tape and orange alerts as "fictions" is another attempt to

transfer the "culture of fear" hypothesis from the post-Columbine situation to the post

September 11 situation, and it simultaneously argues that fear of terrorism is being used

by the Bush administration to manipulate the nation into war with Iraq. Moore continues

this argument in his 2003 book *Dude, Where's My Country?*, stating that "There is no

terrorist threat" and explaining this statement as follows:

> But just because there are a few terrorists does not mean we are all in
> some exaggerated state of danger. Yet when they [the Bush
> administration] speak of terrorists, they speak of them as if they are in the
> *millions*, that they're *everywhere*, and they are never going away. Cheney
> has called this a "new normalcy," a condition that "will become permanent
> in American life." They only hope (Moore, *Dude* 96).

Moore goes on to claim that

The right wing needs to keep this war, that war, going for as long a possible because it keeps people distracted. . . Give these guys four more years, and do you think they will give up their megalomaniacal schemes peacefully to a duly elected Democrat or Green? How many of our freedoms and our children are we ready to sacrifice just so they can line their pockets with all the money that can be made from a terrified nation and a permanent war (Moore, *Dude* 103)?

This last statement provides a possible motive for fearmongering: monopolistic control of the country, combined with the potential to generate huge sums of money. Moore thus raises the specter of coup and the fall of democracy at the hands of the Bush administration. Apparently focusing on the Bush presidency as a major manifestation of greed and oppression ended up being a winning combination for Moore, even if it wasn't for John Kerry; with his reputation as a Bush opponent firmly established with the Oscar speech and *Dude, Where's My Country?*, Moore moved on to focus full-time on September 11 with his next film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which beat the substantial box office generated by *Bowling For Columbine* ($21.6 million in its entire run) in its opening week ($24.1 million) (Gray).

The combination of school shooting preparedness with terrorism preparedness at the school level occurs in media reporting as well, especially following two major media events in late 2004: the terrorist attack on a school in the Russian town of Beslan that ended in the deaths of over 300 civilians in September and the public announcement in October of the discovery of floor plans and other information about American schools in six states on a computer disk in possession of an unnamed Iraqi man (who was later determined to be doing research on American schools and not planning a terrorist attack). An article published in the *Toledo Blade* after this second event focuses on Michigan's

Bedford Public Schools, one of the districts whose information was found on the suspect

Iraqi computer, quoting Jon White, the district's acting superintendent: "It was very

scary. . . We don't like to think about it, but if someone wanted to be really nasty, schools

are a real soft target" (Messina 1). The article goes on to sum up the current conception

of the school safety problem as follows:

> Even with greater emphasis on school safety, American school officials
> fear the same kind of tragedy that occurred recently in southern Russia. . .
> All schools in the United States increased security after the Columbine
> High School shooting is 1999 and imposed even tighter security policies
> and measures after the Sept. 11 attacks, Mr. White said (Messina 1,10).

The article explains that this concern about school security has advanced to the point that

some school districts, specifically the Toledo-area Washington Local Schools and the

Columbus-area Gahanna school system, have stopped their schools from acting as polling

locations during elections due to fears regarding the possible negative consequences of

allowing public access to school grounds, although the article also points out that the

Toledo Public Schools will continue to open schools as polling places (Messina 10). The

article thus highlights an ironic situation; attacks on democratic societies are causing a

fear centered around the act of voting, the symbolic core of democracy.

These examples demonstrate how terrorism has altered the perception of school

shootings. What is perhaps even more interesting is the way in which school shooting

discourse prepared the way for and continues to affect how Americans define terrorism.

For an example of this, I refer to an Indianapolis news article discussing an e-mail that

threatened "a Columbine-style attack" that caused an estimated 850 high school and

middle school students to stay away from school for a day in November 2003. The

article contains the following: "Shelbyville High School principal David Adams said he felt the e-mail was a form of terrorism. The e-mail 'scared a lot of people and disrupted their daily routine, and that absolutely is terrorism,' Adams said" (WRTV). Expert definitions of terrorism tend to focus on the motives of the terrorist, that is, the terrorist must be utilizing methods of intimidation and coercion in the service of a political goal. We can see this in the other attempts to classify Columbine as terrorism discussed earlier, in the way that they emphasize the shooters' links to Nazism or some other form of ideology of hate. The lay definition of terrorism posited by David Adams, however, as that which causes fear and disrupts "routine," is entirely focused on reception; the motives or goals of the terrorist are completely secondary to the reaction of the terrorized. When taken to this extreme, instead of being a specific category of action committed by a concrete group of people with specific motives, terrorism is anything that makes people afraid – it literally becomes the boogeyman, a catch-all symbol for fear that has little if anything to do with any objective reality. If this condition can be rhetorically justified by its proponents, it is the ultimate tool with which to solidify power; anything that that defies the powerful can be denounced as terrorism and subsequently annihilated. As in the Salem witch hunts and the crusade of the House Un-American Activities Committee, however, such states cannot be maintained forever; eventually the stretch is too great.

Ultimately, the combination of conditions that created the school shootings of the nineties has probably not disappeared; as noted in the beginning of this chapter, school shooting events continued to occur in the years following the September 11 attacks. The genre of the school shooting exists in the public consciousness, and it will likely be used

as a framework for local social dramas for some time to come. The national school shooting crisis is over because school shootings no longer hold the rhetorical power that allowed them to be the justification for social and political change. The liminal stage that the school shooting crisis opened nationally is now closed, its wide range of possibilities narrowed down to relatively small-scale changes in school security and highly-contested zero tolerance policies. All crisis states eventually come to an end, but the end of this particular crisis is not marked by a period of normalcy, a new, stable state of either schism or reconciliation, as suggested by Turner's social drama model. The end of the national social drama of Columbine only came when a greater crisis overwhelmed it, absorbing its concerns into itself and magnifying them to new levels of intensity.

The ultimate objective of those involved in extending the school shooting crisis, and by extension the objective of those involved in the terrorism crisis that is currently in progress, is a controlling share of the real new normalcy, the world as it will exist after the current liminal period is closed. There is an inherent danger in this strategy, however; if one perpetually extends the liminal stage or replicates it into crisis after crisis after crisis, there is never an opportunity to return to the normalcy of relative stability. This is the danger posed by the weapon of fear; fear can act as an organizing force, but it can also act as a disruptive force, a force of chaos.

A Final Note

The dire-sounding warning of the previous paragraph reveals a final element of this issue. The academic effort to destroy the power of fear through debunking and analysis, as enacted in this project, is itself an exercise of power, a harnessing of interest generated by an event to the service of a new goal. As such, I hasten to avoid the greatest danger posed by debunking, as described by Kenneth Burke:

> I think that the typical debunker in involved in a strategy of this sort: He discerns an evil. He wants to eradicate this evil. And he wants to do a thorough job of it. Hence, in order to be sure that he is *thorough enough*, he becomes *too thorough*. In order to knock the underpinnings from beneath the arguments of his opponents, he perfects a mode of argument that would, if carried out consistently, also knock the underpinnings from beneath his own argument. But at this important juncture he simply "pulls his own punch," refusing to apply as a test of his own position the arguments by which he has dissolved his opponents' position (Burke 147).

So here, at the end of this dissertation, I must follow through on that metaphorical punch. I am using my background in folklore, rhetoric, and cultural studies to construct an expert identity for myself. This expert identity will be enhanced once I have attached "Ph. D." to the back of my name. In order to convince you, the reader, that I know what I am doing, I have subjected the many arguments, theories, and positions advanced by others that I have discussed here to intense scrutiny, occasionally referring to other academics for support. All of these strategies have been used by others that I have discussed throughout this project.

Clearly I cannot categorize all such strategies as automatically suspect; after all, *ethos*, the appeal to authority or character, is one of the three major means of supporting

an argument. What I seek to do here is highlight the way that authority was created and utilized in the post-Columbine crisis. By doing so, I hope that the reader will be able to extend this awareness into his or her own life.

The first author I truly became intensely interested in at the beginning of my career as a scholar was William S. Burroughs. Burroughs has, in a very weird way, been the inspiration for much of my life as an academic. I haven't ever used heroin, my girlfriend and I have never played "William Tell," and I look silly in a fedora, but Burroughs wrote something that has been the inspiration for all of my activities as a student, teacher, and writer: "Wise up all the marks everywhere show them the rigged wheel – Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe" (Burroughs 108). Studies of the way arguments, especially arguments regarding a crisis situation, are constructed are a means of revealing and exposing the workings of power. In a world where arguments are power, I want to make that power available to all.

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