

The killers among us

By Stephen Singular

Apr. 16 - In late April 1999, I drove out to Columbine High School and stood next to a chain-link fence near the facility. Hundreds upon hundreds of teenagers and adults were kneeling down in the cold mud, staring in silence or bursting into tears, grabbing on to one another or clutching the fence as they wailed out their anguish.

They were in absolute shock that, five days earlier, Columbine students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had walked into this suburban school and opened fire with shotguns and semi-automatic weapons, wounding 23 students and killing 12 teenagers, one teacher, and then themselves.

Back in the spring of 1984, I drove over to the Denver townhouse where Alan Berg had lived until a few days before. The crime scene was quiet and deserted, the yellow police tape removed from around the dead man's home. I got out of the car and walked up to the driveway where he'd been murdered as he stepped from his Volkswagen. Twelve rounds of gunfire had entered his lean torso and bearded face; traces of blood were still on the pavement. Several bullets had passed through him and splintered his gray garage door, leaving behind holes in the wood.

These two events, Alan Berg's murder and the slaughter at Columbine High, were separated by 15 years and 15 times as many bodies. Yet they also were intimately connected, the natural result of a set of deadly emotional disorders and toxic social conditions.

At first, the Denver authorities believed that Berg had been killed by a lone, angry radio listener, because he'd enjoyed arguing on the air and hanging up on callers. His death looked like a single, random act of violence, but it was a carefully planned political assassination that was connected to people and to forces throughout the United States. His killer's name was Bruce Pierce, a young neo-Nazi who belonged to the Order, a small band of terrorists from the American Northwest (their name came from a blood-soaked, anti-Semitic novel by William Pierce called "The Turner Diaries").

Berg had been killed because he was Jewish and outspoken, and because he'd tangled with David Lane, one of the Order's founders, on his talk show.

Four months to the day after the murder, the firearm that ended Berg's life was found in an Idaho farmhouse filled with guns, ammunition, explosives and a room decorated as a shrine to Adolf Hitler. The Order had hoped to start a white-power revolution that would eliminate minorities, homosexuals, feminists, liberals and other of their "enemies" from the United States.

The Berg assassination was a classic "environmental" homicide. Long before Bruce Pierce unloaded his weapon into this media personality, the Rev. Richard Butler and his racist followers had begun preaching hatred of Jews and other minorities at the Aryan Nations church in the woods near Hayden Lake, Idaho. The church attracted anti-Semites and other bigots from all over the country, and the Order emerged from its congregation. After Berg's death, Butler and his minions were quick to point out that they had not violated any laws and did not advocate physically harming anyone. They were merely exercising their right to free speech and practicing freedom of religion in the Idaho forest.

Butler may not have broken any laws, but from his pulpit he'd normalized feelings of hatred toward others. Those feelings attracted people to his compound who were even more emotionally disturbed than he was. (Bruce Pierce was described by more than one person as "psychotic.") The hate generated at the Aryan Nations church eventually hardened into murder because the climate supported it. Who finally pulled the trigger was almost incidental. It was a time for hatred; bloodshed inevitably followed those feelings.

The Columbine shootings also have been widely viewed as a couple of teenagers giving in to their random violent impulses and going on a killing spree. America had seen a lot of school shootings lately, and this one, according to some commentators, was just one more. Law enforcement spokespeople, media pundits and the general public could not understand why they would do such a thing - the aching question that rose above Denver and hung in the air and lingered there, long after all the wilted memorial flowers honoring the dead had been scooped up and hauled away from Clement Park.

Why would two intelligent young men from solid middle-class families (Klebold drove a BMW, after all) have chosen to engage in mass murder and destroy themselves in the process? How could this have occurred in the upwardly mobile suburb of Littleton? And how could it have taken place at a good institution like Columbine? What was the message that the boys were sending? What was the point? Columbine, like the Berg murder, was anything but a random act of violence. It was even

more carefully plotted than the assassination of the talk show host, and it was designed to be one thing: the single largest act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States, one that would dwarf the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, which ended 168 lives. (Incidentally, Timothy McVeigh, the man convicted in the case, also had used "The Turner Diaries" as his blueprint for destruction.)

Harris and Klebold had built 95 bombs and planted most of them around Columbine for the assault. They'd intended for the explosives to detonate inside the school cafeteria during lunchtime, when it was most crowded, and as their classmates came running outside to escape the fireballs, they would gun them down one by one. Their strategy was staggering: They envisioned their bombs and gunfire killing at least 500 people. But when the bombs failed to go off and the plan went awry, the two entered the school and began shooting. Their purpose, as revealed on videotape discovered after the massacre, was almost exactly the same as the Order's.

They'd wanted to "kick-start a revolution" against all of their enemies: "niggers, spics, Jews, gays, f---ing whites." And, like the members of the Order, the pair had taken Hitler as one of their heroes: The day of their carnage was April 20, the Fuhrer's 110th birthday.

A month before the murders, Harris and Klebold had put together a detailed video outlining exactly what they were going to do and how they were going to die in the process. They sacrificed themselves for their convictions, just as Middle Eastern terrorists have been doing for a long time. This kind of commitment is virtually unheard of in the homicide annals of America, where almost every killer tries to avoid death while slaying others. But this was not homicide, which was why the event seemed so confusing and impenetrable to those viewing it from the outside.

This was war. The war they were fighting had been building and spreading underneath the facade of American life for the past couple of decades, erupting in school and workplace shootings all over the country, but it finally reached critical mass at Columbine. The bloodshed there was another classic environmental crime, but this time the poisonous environment was not limited to a handful of people preaching hatred in the Northwest woods. Now, it was permeating the entire country, and when it collided with the profound psychological problems of those two teenagers, all hell broke loose.

A very dark evolution can be found in the 15 years that separate the murder of Alan Berg from Columbine. Those who

killed Berg lived on the fringes and held obviously fanatical beliefs. They were young, angry, uneducated and unsuccessful working-class white men. They did not have good prospects in front of them and clung to their racism and hatred as a kind of liferaft, something to give them an identity and make them feel important. Their terrorism came out of their own limited circumstances and the backwoods of Idaho.

By contrast, Harris and Klebold seemed to have everything to live for and all the privileges one could want. They had money, family support, friends and educational opportunities. But they also had madness and rage, and their terrorism came out of the bombs, guns and computers in Eric Harris' well-furnished suburban bedroom.

Between 1984 and 1999, domestic terrorism, in many different forms and guises, moved from the edges of our society directly into the mainstream. It moved from the most disreputable sort of hatemongering by groups such as Aryan Nations into every part of our country's media and talk shows. It moved from the overt action of loading a gun or building a bomb into holding and publicly expressing unexamined feelings of rage - of hatred or contempt - for others whose sexuality or appearance or beliefs were different from your own. It moved from out there in the forest to inside the breath and blood of millions upon millions of upstanding American citizens. It did so because the nation's climate - and our economy - supported this change.

Columbine is the product of a cultural environment that has been nurtured, pandered to, rewarded, pampered and protected since the murder of Alan Berg - a culture of judgment, blame, division, hate and meanness that saturates the Internet, our political landscape, our urban police departments, our religions, our legal system and our media.

To experience America's emotional atmosphere at the close of the 20th century, all one had to do was click on to a hate-filled Web site or tune in an AM-radio station or cable-TV talk show and listen to hosts, guests and callers rip apart people they'd never met and knew virtually nothing about. That didn't matter. They were on the air and, like Richard Butler at the Aryan Nations compound, under the First Amendment they were free to despise anyone and everyone they pleased, free to accuse them of all manner of evil or criminal behavior - rape or child molestation or murder - regardless of the truth. Those who ran the shows prodded guests and callers to engage in this kind of demonizing because that made for better programming, and that, in turn, made for better ratings.

The '90s saw a bull market in hatred - hatred of anyone who you believed was bad or evil or different from yourself. The

fastest media career path was publicly accusing people of terrible things, regardless of what they'd actually done. Talk shows overwhelmed the rule of law and the concepts of fairness and balance that our nation is built upon. The consequences have been disastrous. In grisly and grotesque ways, we are learning - or failing to learn - one of the oldest and saddest historical lessons of all: A society that violates or destroys its ideals and underlying principles will eventually descend into violence. In the last half of the '90s, legal, political and journalistic principles have been publicly shattered one by one, and now our children have gunned each other down. Domestic terrorism has moved from the edges of our society to the boys next door.

What Harris and Klebold did was truly shocking, but just as shocking was that in the first few weeks after Columbine, according to the National Safety Center, 3,000 other students across the country - 3,000! - made bomb threats or concocted plans similar to theirs. The moral of the story? Create a hateful environment, and disturbed people will become dangerous. In Time magazine last December, Evan Todd, a 255-pound defensive lineman on the Columbine football team (he was wounded in the massacre), described the atmosphere at his school.

"Columbine is a good, clean place, except for those rejects," he said, referring to Harris and Klebold. "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 when kids come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? The whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each other's private parts. If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos, and when they did something sick, we'd tell them, "You're sick and you're wrong." If Evan Todd was right, the meanness at Columbine was the same meanness that was shaping our entire society - because that was the way America now did business. Our children, with their tears and their bullets, were trying to tell us something. The question is: Are we ready to stop the demonizing and start listening?