The Columbine High School Shootings

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The Columbine High School Shootings

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The April 20, 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado is among the most infamous of crimes perpetrated in an American school. The attack was executed by two students, Eric Harris (aged eighteen) and Dylan Klebold (aged seventeen), as an expression of their rejection of their school and community. While the shooters failed to carry out their intentions to blow up their school and kill hundreds, they nonetheless killed twelve fellow students, one teacher, and themselves. On the ground, many events occurred simultaneously. In separate sections, we discuss the details of the attack, the police response, and the mass media coverage of Columbine. In addition, we examine the effects this crime had on the social and cultural life at the turn of the Twenty First Century. Columbine is among the best-known among school-related shootings to occur in the Twentieth Century, and it has strongly affected public discourse about American youth and juvenile delinquency.

The Setting and Crime

Columbine High School is located in southern Jefferson County, Colorado [Jeffco], an upper-middle class white suburb twenty miles south of Denver. What distinguished this area from the rest of the U.S. was its rock-ribbed cultural and political conservatism. It was heavily religious with approximately one church for every 250 persons, with 30% to 40% of the population being Christian evangelicals. [INSERT SIDEBAR "WHERE'S LITTLETON?" HERE.]

Columbine had a reputation for strong academics, well-behaved students, and one of the most decorated sports programs in Colorado. Practically every year between 1990 and 2006, one of Columbine's sports teams won a state championship, and the school

was a consistent winner of their league's sportsmanship award. The Columbine High School Rebel football team won state championships in 1999, 2000, and 2003. Academics were also important, and approximately 85% of Columbine graduates went on to further education, many attending selective schools.

This idyllic environment was shattered on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, when Harris and Klebold attempted to blow up their school with bombs made from 20 gallon propane tanks placed in the cafeteria near the football team's table. When the bombs failed to detonate, Harris and Klebold attacked the school with semi-automatic weapons, shotguns, and handmade bombs. At the onset of the assault, they shot at students outside the building, and then ran inside shooting down hallways. Early in the attack, they killed two students, wounded six others, and fatally wounded one teacher who slowly bled to death over a period of three hours. [INSERT SIDEBAR "ERIC HARRIS" HERE.]

The more devastating part of the attack occurred ten minutes after it began, when Harris and Klebold entered the school library, shouting, "Get up! All athletes stand up," and, "Anybody with a white hat [typically worn by student athletes] or a sports emblem on it is dead. Today is your day to die." During this deadliest phase of their attack, they killed ten students and injured twelve others, all the while laughing and enjoying themselves. Some girls were overheard to ask, "Why are you doing this?" They answered, "We've always wanted to do this. This is payback. We've dreamed of doing this for four years. This is for all the shit you put us through. This is what you deserve." As one student was pleading for her life, Harris laughed and said, "Everyone's gonna die. We're gonna blow up the school anyway."

Also in the library, Klebold spied Isaiah Shoels, the only black student fatally wounded in the attack, and said, "Hey look, there's that little nigger." Harris shot Isaiah point blank three times, killing him. Klebold commented, "Man, I didn't know black brains could fly that far." Also in the library, the seriously wounded Valeen Schnurr cried out, "Oh my God, oh my God." Overhearing Valeen's pleas, Klebold asked, "Do you believe in God?" She responded, "Yes." Walking away, he said, "Why?" As a result of this exchange, an apparently erroneous rumor spread that Cassie Bernall, who had been fatally shot several minutes earlier, had been asked if she believed in God by one of the shooters. As the rumor goes, she responded, "Yes," and then was shot point blank.

Harris noticed somebody under an adjacent table. He shouted, "Who is under the table? Identify yourself!" John Savage, a former friend of Klebold, identified himself, and asked the shooters what they were doing. Klebold responded, "Oh, just killing people." Savage asked, "Are you going to kill me?" Klebold hesitated and told Savage to get out of there, which he did. [INSERT SIDEBAR "DYLAN KLEBOLD" HERE.]

After their killing spree in the library, the shooters returned to the cafeteria to attempt to detonate their defective propane bomb. Harris knelt on one knee, resting his rifle on the banister to the stairs leading into the cafeteria and firing several shots at the bomb. After the device again failed to go off, Klebold returned to the bomb and fiddled with it. He then stepped away from the bomb and threw a pipe bomb toward it, which exploded and started a fire. After the propane bomb failed to explode, the shooters returned to the library, where they carried out their mutual suicide pact by shooting themselves in their heads. Forty-nine minutes after it began, the attack was over.

Ultimately, twelve students, one teacher, and the two shooters died in the attack, and an additional twenty-five others were seriously wounded (Columbine Research Site, 2003; Larkin, 2007; Zoba, 2000). [INSERT SIDEBAR "TIMELINE OF EVENTS" HERE.]

Criminal Justice Response

Within five minutes of the first shots, law enforcement officials were on the scene (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff, 2000; West, 1999). By the time the shooters killed themselves, emergency response teams and criminal justice personnel had arrived from numerous agencies, including the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, the FBI, the ATF, SWAT teams from several local police agencies, EMS teams, and fire departments. News media commentators routinely praised the police in their efforts to control the crime scene and maintain order, yet from the beginning, law enforcement personnel were confronted with problems. For example, police lacked intelligence about the attack, and rumors were indistinguishable from facts. Details necessary to respond were unavailable, including the number and location of the shooters. As students streamed from the doors of the school, police were afraid that the shooters would hide among them. In addition, they feared the school had been booby-trapped. Inside the school, unexploded bombs lay strewn about, fire alarms sounded, and the sprinkler system in the cafeteria doused fires started by pipe bombs.

Columbine was a new sort of attack, and law enforcement agencies were caught off guard in their ability to respond. Those with military experience equated the Columbine attack with contemporary styles of urban warfare. Thus, Sheriff Stone instructed officers to secure the perimeter around the building, while SWAT teams swept

the school. The problem with this approach was that it ignored indications that some of the wounded needed immediate care, something that contributed to the public impression that the police were more concerned with their own safety than of those trapped inside. Despite students putting signs in the window of a science room indicating the need for medical attention for a wounded teacher, police did not respond, fearing that it was a ruse. The teacher, Dave Sanders, was not discovered by SWAT teams until 2:20 p.m., and EMS arrived 20 minutes later. By that time it was too late to save him, and he died from loss of blood. Despite the disorganized nature of the police response, the scene was eventually secured.

Once the smoke cleared, Columbine High School became a massive crime scene. Under the supervision of the lead investigator Kate Battan, the Columbine Task Force consisting of 80 investigators broke into several teams each investigating a facet of the case. A threats team investigated potential threats in the local area including copycat attempts, while an associates team identified and interviewed the shooters' friends. The ATF team traced the weapons that were used in the assault. Another team investigated the shootings on the school grounds, while the cafeteria and library teams were charged with developing a second by second sequence of events in their respective areas. The shooters' online habits and usage were investigated by a computer team. Finally, the crime scene team gathered evidence throughout the school. The research conducted by the Task Force culminated in the issuance of the 11,000 page Columbine Report in May 2000 (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff, 2000), a valuable asset to anyone who wants to explore the Columbine shootings, which contains the best available and most objective description of the crime itself. One major conclusion contained in the report is that

Harris and Klebold were the only perpetrators in the attack; however the investigation remains officially open.

Covering Columbine

For most Americans, the Columbine Shootings were more of a media spectacle than an historical event, making it important to understand Columbine as it emerged in the mass media. Few stories have sparked such high levels of public interest and debate, and in this section we explain the role of the mass media in the making of the Columbine story. Although Columbine's newsworthiness may be explained in part due to the magnitude of the attack, other elements contributed to the salience of the story. At the time of the shootings, mass media personnel were in Boulder, Colorado, approximately forty miles away, awaiting breaking news in the JonBenet Ramsey case. When news spread of the attack at Columbine, news crews were immediately dispatched. In many cases, news personnel arrived before law enforcement. For example, CNN broadcast live a call to the Sheriff's public information officer, requesting details about the attack. He could do little more than verify that an attack had occurred, and that he was still en route to the scene.

From the site, news cameras broadcast live images of horrified students running out of the school, searching for their friends and families. The injured received triage on the front lawns of suburban houses, while parents wandered amid droves of students, searching for their sons and daughters. Viewers remained glued to their television sets as the media captured heart wrenching images, both joyous and tragic. Parents reunited with their children released sobs of joy. Then, the media showed the clumsy rescue of an

injured student who escaped from a broken second-story window, trailing blood behind him.

Besides broadcasting such images, ironically the news media on the site were also participants in the response to the shootings. Although the perpetrators were dead within forty-nine minutes following their commencement of the attack, this fact did not emerge until SWAT teams were able to sweep the school three hours later. During this time, the news media received phone calls from students who were still hiding inside the school, and media personnel began to realize that the attackers might be able to watch their live broadcasts from the cable-equipped televisions inside the school. This prompted news cameras on the ground and in helicopters to pull back, so as to avoid tipping off the perpetrators to police actions outside. The Sheriff spoke on-air with a reporter at a Denver television news station, suggesting that media coverage of the event might spark copycat crimes. The reporter agreed, responding, "And the conflict is that you can't not cover it" (Savidge et al., 1999).

And cover it they did. Throughout the day, media personnel continued to arrive in droves, and they were directed by local authorities to set up shop in the 285-acre Clement Park, adjacent to Columbine High. Ultimately, the media presence included an estimated 400 to 500 reporters, 75 to 90 satellite trucks, and 60 television cameras. To feed the media's thirst for information the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office held hourly press conferences (Jefferson County Colorado Sheriff's Office, 2000). By various measures, Columbine was one of the most salient stories of 1999, or even the entire decade. By CNN ratings, Columbine was the largest news story of the year, and the story was closely followed by 68% of the U.S. viewing public (Pew Research Center for the

People and the Press, 1999). Relative to any other school shooting incident in U.S. history, Columbine attracted more intensive coverage (Maguire, Weatherby & Mathers, 2002).

Although the media undoubtedly fulfill an important role in society, the actions of some media personnel were not above reproach. In some ephemeral way, the news media may have been part of the equation in which two youth executed such a horrible attack in order to gain infamy. In addition, social science research indicates that communities experience a secondary disruption at the hands of the media. However, such accusations are abstract, and we limit our description of the media's more specific failings. In the rush to cover Columbine, media crews flooded the community, contacting an estimated 50% to 75% of students from the school. We question the ethics of interviewing youth who have been witness to horrible crimes, particularly if they are asked to recount details. For example, on *Good Morning America* the day following the shootings, Charles Gibson asked a student who had narrowly escaped being targeted, "Did you think, maybe, I'm going to die here?" The student replied, "Yeah. I was just hoping they wouldn't come over and shoot us" (Gibson and Sawyer, 1999).

There are numerous cases where the news reported erroneous facts. For example, Richard Costaldo, the young man in the wheel chair who in "Bowling for Columbine" attempted to return the bullet lodged in his spine to the store where it was purchased, was reported by one newspaper to have been fatally shot. In addition, some eyewitness accounts broadcast live appear to have been hoaxes. For example, a spokesperson at a hospital treating wounded students later identified himself as Howard Stern, and a caller

who claimed to have been a student witness provided a name that did not match any known student at the school.

Nonetheless, we cannot fault all media personnel and organizations for contributing to the secondary victimization of the community. National Public Radio's reportage was the most detailed, among the least intrusive, and most sustained of all national news sources. However, it is the local news sources, both print and broadcast, that stood out as most laudable. Perhaps because they are rooted in the community, many of them residents, local news personnel were more sensitive to the impact that their organizational practices may have on persons and groups already traumatized by the attack itself. While locals at Columbine were left to deal with the long-term effects of the attack, the national news media entourage stayed only until the next big story hit. On May 3, 1999, the strongest and deadliest tornado since 1979 touched down in Oklahoma, killing thirty-six people and causing $1.1 billion in property damage. At this, the media entourage pulled out of Colorado, heading east towards Oklahoma.

The Aftermath at Columbine

Closer to home, the fallout from the Columbine shootings was broader and long lasting. President Clinton addressed the nation on the shootings; Vice President Gore was dispatched to Colorado to attend the April 25th memorial services for the victims. On-going debates about bullying, access to guns, violent video games and television shows, rock-and-roll music, parenting, and school security were rejoined. Attributions of blame for the assaults focused on gun culture and the ease by which weaponry can be obtained, the so-called "Goth" youth subculture, lack of parental supervision, and "lack

of values." Residents asked how Harris and Klebold were able to arm themselves with semi-automatic weapons. Accusations about the harassment of students at Columbine High School by athletes and the laissez-faire attitude of the staff toward such behaviors were trumpeted in the media. Others questioned whether the shooters' parents were to blame.

Sheriff Stone was not above reproach. Although publicly praised at the outset, within twenty-four hours following the attack, critics began to question the appropriateness of the police response to the Columbine attack. Reporters discovered that Harris and Klebold had been arrested for vandalism and had been placed in a diversion program that they had successfully completed. The most persistent among the accusations of police inadequacy came from Judy and Randy Brown, the parents of Columbine student Brooks Brown, who claimed that they had filed a complaint against Harris for making death threats against their son on his "Trench Coat Mafia Website." The Browns also claimed to have reported Harris's bomb-making, and had alerted the Sheriff that he could be violent. In response to allegation raised by the Brown family, Sheriff Stone, claimed that the department was investigating co-conspirators of Harris and Klebold, and that Brooks Brown was under investigation. He stated that the sheriff's department had no record of a complaint by the Browns. When a grand jury investigated, the Brown complaint mysteriously disappeared from the desk of the responsible officer.

The department also had an unexecuted search warrant for the Harris house. Further, Sheriff Stone was accused of impeding the Columbine investigation, attempting to cover up the prior knowledge of the contacts the department had with Harris and Klebold, and allowing the media to view the tapes the boys had made prior to the

shootings, later excerpted in *Time* magazine. Stone served out his term as Sheriff and did

not run for reelection. In 2005, under a successor, the department found two prior

complaints against Eric Harris filed by the Browns in 1997 and 1998; the latter one filed

a year before the attack on Columbine High.

Social, Political, Legal Issues

In the weeks following the Columbine shootings, schools across the country

experienced thousands of bomb threats, scores of attempted bombings, and several

attempted copycat killings, one resulting in a fatality. In the wake of the shootings, a new

term has emerged, called the "Columbine Effect," which refers to the increased

willingness of students to inform authorities when they hear of an act of violence about to

be committed by their peers. In the post-Columbine period, numerous plans of violent

adolescents have been disrupted and several rampage shootings have consciously

mimicked Columbine.

Despite Columbine's brief duration as a dominant media story, social and political

effects of the case were longer-lasting. Columbine joined a list of familiar place names

where school shootings have occurred, and in fact the term "Columbine" has become a

keyword that brings to mind complex and contested issues surrounding youth, religion,

gun control, and other social dimensions. Earlier school shootings, including Pearl,

Paducah, and Jonesboro, had raised the issue of school violence as a social problem;

however Columbine stands out at fundamentally different due to its dramatic severity and

level of premeditation. While there have been subsequent shootings in such places as

Conyers, Santee, el Cajon, and Red Lake, Columbine stands out as the quintessential

school shooting. When it comes to the discussion of what is right and wrong with youth in society, Columbine is often recognized as an agenda-setting case, a key referent for public discourse.

Despite the rarity of rampage school shooting attacks, Harris and Klebold have become the poster children for juvenile delinquents and disaffected youth. Following the shootings, public opinion polls indicated that many parents were fearful that a Columbine-type attack could occur in their children's school, and they demanded action. This heightened fear and outcry ran somewhat counter to reliable evidence about the risks of such an attack. In 1999, the probability that an American school child would be fatally wounded in firearms violence at school was one in two million, roughly the probability of being struck by lightning. All reliable sources of evidence about youth victimization indicate that schools are among the safest places for youth, and that children are a higher risk of being victimized at home. More, research (Addington, 2003) indicated that students' fear of victimization did not increase following the Columbine incident

On a more practical level, there have been changes in school policies and juvenile justice practices to respond to school shooting attacks and, to a lesser extent, to address the underlying causes. Many suburban and rural schools have installed surveillance systems, such as video cameras, mandatory use ID cards, and metal detectors. Punitive policies have expanded greatly, including zero-tolerance policies for rule transgressions, often leading to expulsion. In the news media, we have observed ridiculous cases where administrators have gotten caught up in the hype, such as the suspension of a primary school student for holding a banana as if it were a gun. Meditative responses have also expanded, although at a slower rate than punitive measures. Schools have expanded peer

conflict resolution programs, and have established better systems for students to report rumors of planned or threatened attacks. Since 1999, dozens of Columbine-type attacks, at various levels of development and sophistication, have been thwarted nationwide.

In the two years following Columbine, school shootings remained an issue on the public agenda, however the 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. changed this focus. The attention moved away from American youth, and the general anxiety about school shootings has declined. As a result of the attention garnered by Columbine, most schools in the U.S. have disaster plans that may be carried out in case of an attack or disaster. Emergency first responders are part of these plans, and they have clear protocols for how to act in a variety of scenarios. Despite some residual fear of Columbine-style attacks, American children really are relatively safe at school. Still, there is no way completely to safeguard against such attacks. [INSERT SIDEBAR "DID YOU KNOW?" HERE.]

Framing the Issue

In their coverage of Columbine, journalists struggled to come to terms with this emergent form of violent behavior. Initial media reportage focused narrowly on the facts of the case, the perpetrators, victims, and details of the attack. Within a week, all the victims had been buried, and the news media began to focus on possible causes of the attack, with attention to the incident's connection to key social issues.

When a social problem, such as school shootings, becomes a significant public concern, spokespersons from various groups and social causes compete to characterize the problem as relating to their social/political issues. These discussions are by no means new, and many familiar commentators rushed to speak on behalf of their social causes.

For example, commentators from various sides of the gun control issue commented on the Columbine attack. There are multiple social dimensions on which Columbine might have been characterized, including the gender dynamic in which nearly all school shootings are executed by boys, as a problem arising from suburban life, as a problem arising from exposure to mass media violence, or as resulting from poor parenting. Given the racially and religiously loaded stories that emerged concerning some of the victims, many leaders from African-American and evangelical Christian groups were cited widely in mainstream media as they attempted to seize upon the opportunity to advance their causes (Muschert, 2007).

The discourse of Columbine reveals the most salient social issues circulating at the time of the attack. Early in the coverage, spokespersons from various domains competed to be the dominant frame of understanding the problem. Despite the existence of numerous possible frames of reference for understanding Columbine, it is the Christian spiritual and psychological versions of the story that prevailed. Columbine became a battleground in the American culture wars as the religious and cultural right defined the massacre as the outcome of a liberal, crime-tolerating, secular, anti-Christian society that fails to teach traditional values, prevents children from praying in school, and refuses to display the Ten Commandments in public schools (Epperhart, 2002; Porter, 1999; Scott & Rabey, 2001; Zoba, 2000). Evangelical groups felt that Columbine was an attack on their values, while mainstream groups were more horrified about the magnitude of the crime and its seeming senselessness.

The evangelical Christian characterization of school shootings as indicative of a spiritual problem in American youth has been very powerful. One of the most dramatic

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elements of the Columbine story was that of Cassie Bernall, the student victims and an evangelical Christian who had allegedly affirmed her belief in God. Cassie's affirmation stood out in opposition to the shooters' nihilism, and became the subject of a book (Bernall, 1999) and video (*She Said* Yes, 1999) published on a religious press. Among evangelical youth, the story of Cassie Bernall remains poignant.

Those seeking a secular characterization of what happened at Columbine have been unable to find such a neatly circumscribed explanation. Within American culture there is a well-diffused popular understanding of psychology, and a tendency to individualize the sources of social problems. More, social science research suggests that youth often acts as a noteworthy mitigating factor, and that "it's not as simple as it seems" to explicate the culpability of youth offenders (Spencer, 2005). Therefore, the most effective and persistent secular characterization of the Columbine shooters' actions has been to explain the attack in terms of their unmet mental health needs.

Columbine has been most strongly defined in terms of its expression of the need for improvement in either of two areas: addressing the spiritual needs or the mental health needs of American youth. These two discourses are illustrated in a CNN *Larry King Live* program featuring then Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper. On the one hand, Mr. Gore spoke about the problem of evil as at the root of Columbine, "Sometimes there's a more basic issue between good and evil, and we have to confront the kind of – of evil that does exist in the world" (King, 1999). In contrast, Mrs. Gore spoke about meeting the mental health needs of youth, "I think this is a wake-up call to all Americans, to parents, and also to other teenagers, because they often are the first to know who is the most troubled and they need to be supported. They need to have a place to go to: an adult, a

mental health center" (King, 1999). This dual characterization of the problem of

Columbine, as either a religious or mental health issue, continues as dominant framing

for this event in the public discourse.

Impact on Legal Issues and Pop Culture

In the Columbine community, lawsuits proliferated: the parents of Isaiah Shoels

filed suits against the Harris and Klebold families; the school district and the Sheriff's

office were sued for negligence in their failure to provide sufficient security and for

failure to act on the early warning signs of Harris and Klebold's violent attitudes. The

shooters' parents sued the Sheriff's department over the ownership of their sons'

videotapes made prior to the assault. The Sheriff's department was additionally sued by

numerous complainants, including the parents of Daniel Rohrbaugh, who contended that

their son was shot not by Klebold, but by law-enforcement fire. The wife of Dave

Sanders, the murdered teacher, sued over the delay in allowing emergency medical

services personnel to minister to her husband's wounds, letting him bleed to death.

Parents of the victims sued the three persons who procured weapons for Harris and

Klebold. Two of them were convicted of illegal gun trafficking and received stiff

sentences.

Ironically, the wider legal implications of the Columbine shootings were

nugatory. Despite the evidence that much of the weaponry used by Harris and Klebold

was purchased at gun shows, no changes were made to the gun show exception to the

Brady gun control bill (News Batch, 2005). The controversy about violent first-person

video games resulted in several states passing legislation to ban such games; however,

because of First Amendment concerns they were not enacted (Wikipedia, 2006). Finally, several states passed "parental responsibility" laws that made parents liable for the felonious behavior of their children, even though there was no evidence of parental culpability in the Columbine shootings (Keen & Brank, 2005).

The Columbine shootings were and continue to be media-driven. Harris and Klebold had especially strong media savvy and awareness. Harris set up the "Trench Coat Mafia" web page on AOL in which he advertised his xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic beliefs and told of his intentions to blow up the school. When they made their videotapes prior to the massacre, Eric Harris sat in a chair swigging a bottle of Jack Daniels and holding in his lap a sawed-off shotgun named Arlene, after a favorite character in the Doom video game (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). The boys were quite facile in the use of video games. They played Doom for hours on end. Eric Harris created new "wads" (combat interiors) for the game and posted them on the Internet for other players. He complained about not receiving feedback about his wads; however, other players complained about their difficulty and violence level.

Klebold was enamored by the anticipated social consequence of the attack, and seemed to be enthralled by the notoriety that they would receive. [INSERT SIDEBAR "WHY 4/20?" HERE.] He mused over which movie director could best be trusted with the script of their story; Quentin Tarantino topped their list (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Both shooters wanted the story to have a lot of "dramatic irony," but instead, they got Gus van Sant's "Elephant," which was dramatically flat. In 2003, several television series, including *Law & Order*, *ER*, and *Boston Public* contained episodes that included Columbine-style rampage shootings. A play by P.J. Paparelli, titled "columbinus," that

explored the motivations for the shootings toward the country and received a rave review in *The New York Times* (Isherwood, 2006). An online version of a video game that was a model of the Columbine shootings generated controversy in 2006, and was quickly pulled off the Internet (Farrell, 2006).

Although Harris and Klebold have not been extensively portrayed, their actions have stimulated more wide-ranging discussion. The most significant appearance the two have made in popular culture was as the inspiration for Michael Moore's 2002 documentary film "Bowling for Columbine." The title stems from the erroneous story that the shooters attended their early morning bowling class prior to executing their plans for mass murder. Despite this inaccuracy, the point is well-placed – that the Columbine shootings were particularly troubling because they were carried out by what appeared to be normal youth expressing a disconcerting nihilism. This generalized angst touched a nerve, which Moore used as a point of departure for an exploration of gun culture and the climate of fear in the United States. The film was widely applauded, and in 2003 won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

The Internet contains several memorial web sites dedicated to the victims, especially Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall. The myth that Cassie was killed defending her faith spread across the country like wildfire. National media picked up the story; during the month of May 1999, *Time* and *Newsweek* ran cover stories on the Columbine massacres that mentioned her martyrdom; feature articles on Cassie appeared in the *Weekly Standard* and Salon.com. Her parents appeared on Christian talk shows claiming that her death was a victory of Jesus Christ over Satan and an affirmation of the family's evangelical beliefs.

In addition, countless web sites have sprung up as open forums for expressing opinions about issues related to the shootings, including debates over gun control, bullying, parental responsibility, proper actions of the police and school administration, the psychology of the shooters, and drug use. One of the most common themes in the web sites was whether or not Harris and Klebold should be forgiven for their deeds. Several sites have been maintained as information clearing houses on the shootings themselves. Over five years after the shooting, there still exists the "Eric Harris Worship Site" ("Trench," 2005) and www.dylanklebold.com on which relevant issues are still debated. The personages of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold maintain an underground existence. For many young people who find themselves in similar positions in their schools as Harris and Klebold, the boys strike a resonating chord. Some people in chat rooms regard them as heroes; most regard them as villains. In rare cases, they are exemplars.

Since April 20, 1999, numerous rampage shootings have occurred in middle schools, high schools, and colleges across North America. For every shooting carried out, several have been discovered and thwarted before their execution. In most cases, the Columbine shootings were used as a template, an inspiration, or a record to be surpassed. A small sampling includes Tabor, Alberta (1 dead), Baton Rouge, Louisiana (1 injured), Conyers, Georgia (6 injured), and Red Lake, Minnesota (9 dead, including the perpetrator). Several thwarted shootings mimicked Columbine, including an attempt at a Port Huron, Michigan middle school, De Anza College in California, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Riverton, Kansas. Clearly, Columbine has made schools and students feel more vulnerable, and since 1999 there have been an average of about three

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rampage shootings a year in American schools. In 2006, several children were killed in two school invasions by sexual predators. The Columbine shootings exist in American popular culture as both a dark moment and a source of fascination. Columbine was shocking when it occurred, and it still ranks as one of the great American traumas of the past Century.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Sidebars

Where's Littleton? The Columbine shootings did not happen in Littleton, Colorado. The place name of Littleton has erroneously become attached to Columbine High School due to the school's proximity to the town of Littleton, and because Columbine uses a Littleton mailing address. Columbine is located in Jefferson County, while Littleton is a separate municipality adjacent to southern Jeffco, located mainly in Arapahoe County. The town of Littleton maintains a separate school district and police department, which participated in the law enforcement response to the Columbine shootings.

Eric Harris: The Harris family moved around the country. Eric Harris's father was an Air Force pilot, who after 20 years of military service, retired and moved back to his home territory in Jeffco. At the time of the attack, Eric was a good-looking 18-year-old, blond haired, a bit shorter than average in height, slight of build, extremely bright and sensitive, and shy. He was diagnosed alternatively as having bipolar personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and psychopathology, now identified as antisocial personality disorder. Eric himself confessed to being depressed. Although not a member of the now infamous Trench Coat Mafia, he identified with the group. Eric expressed his feelings in voluminous writings, and it seems that he viscerally hated his peers for the bullying, harassment, and humiliation he experienced from the athletic crowd and Christian cliques at Columbine. In the Columbine massacre, Eric was the leader who conceptualized the assault and wrote about it in his journal (Larkin, 2007).

Dylan Klebold: Dylan Klebold, 17 years old, lived in southern Jeffco all of his life. He was tall, socially awkward, and ungainly. Although diagnosed ex post facto as having depressive personality disorder, Dylan's depression was most likely a consequence of his low peer status and the teasing he experienced at the hands of student athletes. In addition, Dylan was experiencing an identity crisis on two fronts. First, he came from mixed Christian-Jewish parentage, and his reaction to his Jewish heritage was a self-hateful anti-Semitism and worship of Adolf Hitler. Second, Dylan apparently questioned his sexual orientation. In school, Dylan was identified as gifted, although in high school his academic motivation declined. Dylan was Eric Harris's willing follower in the assault (Larkin, 2007).

Timeline of the Events

- April 1998: Begin of planning, acquiring weaponry, scouting out the cafeteria to see when it would be the fullest, and making videotapes explaining their motivation for the shootings.

- April 18, 1999 – Harris and Klebold attend the Columbine High School senior prom.

- April 20, 1999 – 6:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m., final preparations: synchronizing watches, booby-trapping cars, putting bombs in the trunks of their cars, planting diversionary bombs in a nearby park, and driving to school.

- 11:07 a.m.: Harris and Klebold haul two bombs into the Columbine High School cafeteria, locating them at the table where the jocks sit. The bombs are made of 20-pound propane tanks hooked up to gallon cans of gasoline and detonators timed to explode at 11:17 a.m. The boys return to their cars, which are strategically located to provide crossfire directed at the south entrance to the high school.

- 11:19 a.m.: Two minutes past the time when the bombs were set to explode, Harris and Klebold realize there is something wrong. They signal to each other and from the respective positions in the north and south parking lots, run up the stairs to the west entrance of the school and begin shooting. During this part of the siege, two students are killed and six are wounded.

- 11:24 a.m.: Sheriff's Deputy Gardner, alerted to the shootings, pulls into the parking lot and exchanges fire with Harris. The shooters enter the school through the west doors.

- 11:27 a.m.: Harris and Klebold walk down the halls randomly shooting and throwing pipe bombs. One student and a teacher, Dave Sanders, are wounded.

- 11:29 a.m.: Harris and Klebold enter the library where 56 students are hiding under tables. In the next 7 1/2 minutes, 10 students are killed and 12 are injured.

- 11:36 a.m.: Harris and Klebold leave the library and walk toward the science area in the east wing of the building. They wander the halls, shooting randomly and throwing pipe bombs.

- 11:44 a.m.: The shooters go downstairs and enter the cafeteria. Harris shoots at one of the propane bombs, without result. Klebold goes over to the bomb and fiddles with it, backs away, and throws a pipe bomb toward it. They return to the library.

- 11:54 a.m.: CNN begins its six-hour live coverage of Columbine.

- 12:08 p.m.: Harris and Klebold commit suicide.

- 2:42 p.m.: SWAT teams find the wounded teacher, Dave Sanders, receiving triage from students in a classroom.

- 3:02 p.m.: Sanders dies.

- April 25, 1999: Vice President Al Gore speaks at a Columbine memorial service attended by 70,000 mourners.

- May 3, 1999: Deadly tornado occurs in Oklahoma, and news vans leave Columbine.

- May 2000: *Columbine Report* released.

(Source: Larkin, 2007)

Why 4/20? There are a number of urban legends surrounding 4/20, and the rumors about the Columbine shooters' selection of April 20th for their attack are among

the latest additions. 4/20 is a term synonymous with marijuana, and its likely origin is from a group of youth in California who congregate to smoke at 4:20 in the afternoon (Adams, 1986). There is no direct evidence that supports the marijuana connection with Harris and Klebold, and a more likely connection is that Adolf Hitler was born on 4/20/1889.

Did You Know? In contemporary usage, Columbine Massacre refers to the 1999 school shooting incident, but historically the term referred to a deadly labor dispute. In 1927, striking coal miners were gunned down by a special state police force, and this event was known as the Columbine Mine Massacre. Six workers died, and are still memorialized in Lafayette, Colorado on a roadside monument at the junction of Colorado Highway 7 and Interstate 25 (Shuler, 1986).

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