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The Columbine Incident and the Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum

Postscript: The Columbine Tapes

by Marc R. Sykes

On December 14, 1999—just days after I wrote the Introduction to this forum and as I was preparing to send the collected essays to the editorial team in England—CNN, along with the major wire services, broke the news that home videos made by the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, had been released to the media. Reporters Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche of *Time* magazine prepared a shocking compilation of excerpts from the tapes, together with the reactions of some of the principals, including school officials, policemen, and other Columbine students and their parents. As I write this on Thursday, December 16, their story is scheduled to hit newsstands in four days, although it's already available free of charge on [Time's website](#). Once again, we see the perils of writing what I have termed "very recent history"; it's not only possible but probable that new sources will continually pop up to blow one's tentative analysis out of the water.

But what do the so-called "Columbine tapes" tell those of us who are still trying to make sense of the incident? Well, although the tapes reveal previously unknown facts about the planning of the massacre—for instance, that the killers had never planned to enter the school, and only did so when their bombs, designed to lure students out to the parking lot, failed to explode—those seeking insight into the killers' motives will find any number of parties to blame, making the potential fallout from the tapes' release enormous.

Those who blame our supposedly ultra-violent popular culture will no doubt make much of the tapes' continual references to violent video games such as *Doom*. "It's going to be like f___ing Doom," Eric Harris claims in one of the tapes. "Tick, tick, tick, tick... Haa! That f___ing shotgun is straight out of Doom!", Harris laughs, referring to the sawed-off shotgun he has named "Arlene," after, of course, the sawed-off shotgun featured in the video game. Harris' favorite CD, which apparently meant so much to him that he willed it to a female friend in the closing minutes of the final tape, was entitled "Bombthreat Before She Blows." Indeed, as Gibbs and Roche argue in the *Time* article, Klebold and Harris were "completely soaked in violence," and gory movies and video games certainly played their part.

On the other hand, the two also quoted Shakespeare's *Tempest* during their videotaped rantings, noting that "Good wombs hath borne bad sons." Clearly the two young men were able to find inspiration in a wide variety of sources, both from pop culture and elsewhere. In fact, Harris comments on the duo's resourcefulness in yet another videotape, noting that even if they had been unable to have friends buy guns on their behalf, "we would have found something else." The same argument could apply to the daily jolts of violence they absorbed courtesy of *Doom*. Just as it did even before the tapes' release, the notion that posits a direct correlation between violence in popular culture and violence in society seems more than a little simplistic.

And what of Nicholas Turse's argument that Harris and Klebold may have been the Abbie Hoffman and Mark Rudd figures of their generation? Our noted panel of respondents has raised some important caveats, and I find Sam Smith's argument that our age's "essential character precludes the very existence of Mark Rudds and Abbie Hoffmans" to be particularly interesting. Indeed, though it may be a little reductionist to argue that all sixties-era youth shared a common cause in opposing American "institutional evil" in general, and the Vietnam War in particular, certainly today's youth cannot even approach the level of consensus that existed thirty years ago. Moreover, it certainly seems unlikely, as all three respondents argue, that they'll find such consensus through violent acts such as those perpetrated by Harris and Klebold.

But the evidence contained in the Columbine tapes appears to counter Adam Garfinkle's assertions that Harris and Klebold were engaged in little more than "narcissistic and nihilistic" acts of rage. The two clearly rejected the efforts of other schoolhouse murderers, both noting that their plan had been hatched "before the first one ever happened," and that their cause was more significant than that of "those f___s in Kentucky with camouflage and .22s." Those kids, Harris says, "were only trying to be accepted by others," whereas "We're going to kick-start a revolution." Sure, we could dismiss such statements as typical teenage male braggadocio—*they're* a bunch of sissies; *we're* the real deal—but if we do so, we deny prima facie evidence that these two young men felt themselves to be fighting for a cause. Whether that cause, or the manner in which they fought, are reasonable or rational appears to be somewhat beside the point.

I too initially felt, as Adam Garfinkle does, that the organizing principles behind Harris and Klebold's acts lay closer to Nazism than to sixties-era radicalism. Students' testimony that the two appeared to be gunning for visible minorities, as well as the regrettable tale of Cassie Bernall that Dr. Garfinkle recounts, certainly evoke images of race hatred and xenophobia that parallel some sort of neo-Hitlerian agenda. But when the duo list their catalogue of enemies during one of the tapes, it includes not only "niggers, spics, Jews, [and] gays" but also "f___ing whites." Moreover, Harris and Klebold's taped conversations reveal the intent to kill not only the enemies that abused them, but also the friends that, they say, didn't do enough to defend them. What seems clear is that these two young men had been building up rage, not only against specific individuals and groups, but against society in general, literally since preschool (Klebold mentions the "stuck-up" kids at the Foothills Day Care Center). Playing the race card trivializes their intentions.

What strikes me most about the Columbine tapes is Harris and Klebold's indictment of American youth culture. Both boys, it seems, felt themselves to be "at the bottom of the ladder." Harris remembers the constant abuse he received at school over "my face, my hair, my shirts." The two paint a picture of the social climate at Columbine High School as "jock culture" gone haywire; a situation that also led to tragedy at a high school in Glen Ridge, New Jersey several years ago, as Bernard Lefkowitz has intelligently argued in *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb*. Not surprisingly, as in the Glen Ridge case, Columbine officials and parents have repeatedly denied such allegations. English teacher Steven Meier claims that "these kids had a dismal view of life and of their own mortality. To just focus on the bullying aspect is just to focus on one small piece of the entire picture." Noting the popularity of Klebold's brother Byron, Meier asks "Why would a family have one good son and one bad son?" Well, perhaps it's exactly because Byron was popular and athletic; he, as well as his friends, were by all accounts among the two boys' most frequent tormentors.

But ironically, it's football player Evan Todd's *denial* of the existence of a poisonous culture at Columbine that strengthens this argument the most. Todd tells *Time* that

Columbine is a clean, good place except for those rejects. ... Sure, we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; 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 that's wrong."

To posit the existence of such a hierarchical and intolerant culture at Columbine High is not, of course, to excuse Harris and Klebold's actions. But it might help us advance our understanding of them, which seems crucial if we are to stop the tide of similar actions that continues to flow. Comparisons to sixties icons, and the understandable denials that they evoke, aside, Nicholas Turse does indeed appear to be on to something with his argument that Harris and Klebold's massacre can be considered a form of protest. In his infamous AOL website, which police ignored until it was too late, Eric Harris warned students at his school, the people of Denver, and, seemingly, society at large that "I'm coming for EVERYONE soon and I WILL be armed to the f___ing teeth and I WILL shoot to kill." Seen in the light of such evidence, Harris and Klebold's actions are not simply "brutal or ... self-indulgent," as David Farber argues; they are patently, and potently, political.

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