

[Back to index](#)**The Columbine Incident and the Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum****- Responses -**

Tuesday, 1 February 2000

Dr. Adam M. Garfinkle, author of "Searching for Heroes in the Midst of Tragedy":

After sleeping on it for a night or two, I have concluded that Nicholas Turse's rebuttal deserves a comment: four comments, to be specific. I will be brief.

First, let us review the matter of who can and cannot read. Mr. Turse's revulsion against the "system"-whatever that is, for it is never defined-seems clear enough to me upon rereading his text. He does call the "system" "insidious" and he does say that Harris and Klebold fought it "with good reason." The fact that Messrs. Harris and Klebold attacked the loathsome system "that had failed them" through their protest suggested to me that Turse considers their behavior understandable if not entirely laudable.

So much for my reading abilities; now what about Mr. Turse's? I did not call Mr. Turse a Nazi, as he claims. I thought then, and I think now, that he is just confused, and that his confusion has led him to nurse endearing sentiments about behaviors and views that are objectively Nazi-like. (And pace Mr. Sykes, I do not think that the release of the Columbine tapes undermines my assessment of Harris and Klebold's behavior; I think it strengthens it.)

Second, as to Turse's claim that Harris and Klebold "reinvented" guerrilla theater, and hence his dismissal of the complaint of all three commentators that the 1960s metaphor was inappropriate: well, let me only express my full agreement with David Farber's point that anything can be defined as political if one debases the concept enough. This claim was, and remains, in Farber's parlance, "silly."

Third, I must admit to having been set on my heels by Mr. Turse's claim that his original article was "based upon, and written in, the rapid-fire style of random, senseless violence." Therefore, he suggests, I should not have tried to find a logical train in what he wrote. It's been a long time since I was a graduate student. Has something fundamental changed since then? What does it even mean to write in a rapid-fire, random, and violent way? Are graduate students no longer required to use logic when

Finally, and most amazing-to me, anyway-is Mr. Turse's refusal to make a moral judgment between someone who dies for the sanctification of God's name, and someone who murders innocent people for whatever reason. Mr. Turse writes: "I do not have such a high opinion of myself to pass judgment on whether others' actions are right or wrong." What is required to make a moral judgment is not a high opinion of oneself but an elemental moral sense. If Mr. Turse cannot judge between Cassie Bernall on one hand,

If he claims to make no moral judgments at all, then he is just not telling the truth. Otherwise, how could he have written in his original essay that the American educational system and way of life are, in his words, part of "a system as insidious as the military-industrial complex was to [Harris and Klebold's] 1960s counterparts"? Isn't that a moral judgment?

Either way, this is more than silly. It is downright sad.

 Wednesday, 19 Jan 2000
Dr. Samuel R. Smith (University of Colorado), author of [Changing Times, Dissimilar Decades](#)

To the Editors:

I want to begin by thanking Marc Sykes for his efforts in putting together "The Columbine Incident and the

Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum." Nicholas Turse raises interesting questions, and even where the panel of respondents disagrees with him our examination of the tragedy benefits from consideration of his thesis.

I'm writing to briefly address the concluding section of Adam Garfinkle's rebuttal, where he applauds the heroism of Cassie Bernall, who "died for the sanctification of God's name." Faith and commitment of this magnitude is certainly to be respected, even by those among us with differing religious views.

Garfinkle, though, makes the same assumption I did early on - that the accounts of Bernall's affirmation of faith, leading to her death, were accurate. In fact, in a piece I wrote shortly after the shootings "[Columbine & the Power of Symbols](#)," I wrote:

"Cassie Bernall was indeed a heroine, even for those of us who don't count ourselves as Christian, because these days we so rarely find somebody whose courage is genuine enough that they will die for their convictions. If I were faced with such a moment, I hope I'd have her bravery, but we never really know until the barrel rests against our heads, do we?"

It now appears that the original accounts of Bernall's death were inaccurate. In-depth features from both [Salon Magazine](#) and [Westword](#) tell us that most of what we know about Columbine is wrong. I can't help wondering how our exchange in the forum would be different if we took into account that the shootings were not racially motivated, jocks and Christians were not targeted, and that if there ever really was a "Trench Coat Mafia," Harris and Klebold were not members of it. More to the point, all available evidence indicates that it was Valeen Schnurr, who survived the attack, and not Cassie Bernall, who "said yes."

Of course, while many details in the popular account may be unreliable, there can be no doubt at all that the killers were lashing out at an institution that represented, for them, the primary source of their discontent. And as the Westword feature makes chillingly clear, the depiction of Columbine as a place that doesn't tolerate those who are different is all too accurate.

There's no justifying what Harris and Klebold did, period, but if we want to make sure it never happens again, we'd do well to turn a critical eye on a whole host of social institutions. Columbine High School and the Jefferson County school system tolerated, if not condoned, the marginalization and harassment of those who looked and acted differently, a condition that did not end after the shootings. The sheriff's department, the local Christian community, and the press played key roles in constructing a myth of the events that only serves to reinforce a narrow, exclusionary image of normalcy. All things considered, the canonized version of Columbine and Cassie Bernall's martyrdom seems more likely to inflame the disease than to cure it.

Maybe these observations make no difference, or maybe they make all the difference in the world. In any event, our attempts to understand the nature of youth resistance, if in fact that's what Columbine was all about, hinges directly on our ability to understand the context in which Harris and Klebold developed, and that means we have to scrutinize the institutions and ideologies under attack.

Dr. Samuel R. Smith, Denver, Colorado.
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Thursday, 20 Jan 2000

Myshel from Denver Colorado wrote:

I only read a couple of the essays- both of Nick's and Sam's - so forgive me if this is repetetive but I really enjoyed what I did read and want to respond!

It continues to amaze me to observe that none of the discussions regarding school-shootings and the rising tide of "youth violence" take special note of the fact that these disaffected rebels or psychopaths- whichever you prefer- are exclusively white males. Which is odd, because that is exactly the factor that has everyone is alarmed! Black male violence is perhaps taken for granted but always labelled as such, "Black Male Violence." So where is the committee on White Male Violence? Or the incredible problem of male violence in general?!

It is also worth noting that teen-age boys have been gunning down, beating, or stabbing girlfriends and ex-girlfriends in greater numbers, often with the complicity of other male friends. The largest percentage of

women who are murdered are murdered by men they know. This co-incides perfectly with the increasing violence against women as demonstrated by their adult counter-parts.

Then there were the white boys who murdered one of their teachers because he was a homosexual. Radical as the Klan.

Conformist institutional culture combined with techno-alienation and economic competition/hopelessness, a nihilistic national zeitgeist dominated by consumerist spectacle that increasingly targets youth, and poor literacy and communication skills (which in my experience as a teacher in a juvenile prison directly correlates with violent expression)- sure, it's enough to make anyone want to blow SOMETHING up! But wait, women and girls also experience this despair! Hell, I was so incapable of adapting to the socialization program in highschool that I simply stopped speaking and stayed in bed for the better part of a year! Furthermore, the ridiculous "radical" justifications for the scale of violence at Columbine don't stand up to the complaints of young women who are increasingly threatened. "The Jocks [also white boys] make fun of us," does not compare with, "The Quarterback raped me and then peed in my face and called me a slut and I had an abortion and I'm afraid I'll go to hell and my boyfriend..

Straight white males have been asserting their power, values and identity by perpetrating extraordinary violence against women, homosexuals and people of color etc. etc. for a VERY VERY long time! Perhaps it's time for Government and University pundits alike to own up to this and question their own culture and history and own these kids as their pedagogical children. Maybe we should start hearing less about the "woman problem" and the "black problem" and more about the "disenfranchised white boy problem."

I do see some of Artaud's "agonized poetry" in the violence at Columbine, but I think a Nazi comparison is also valid in that so many young men who avidly joined the program knew little about the real politics involved. They were mostly from the countryside where the economic failure- and the uncertainty and insecurity that goes along with it, i.e. loss of power-was hitting hard and were greatly attracted to such a blatant image of power and force they could identify with and weild- not to mention pay-back to any in their small towns who may have criticized or belittled them, "I've got a uniform and a gun now! I'm not taking anymore crap!"

The horrifying thing to me about Columbine is that while everyone is experiencing such shock that nice white boys are violent- as opposed to those "bad" black kids in those "bad" neighborhoods, who apparently just can't be helped- is that it really is just the new horrible face on the same old fucking thing. You may say "radical," but I say, nice try- how about "reactionary?!"

Thanks for the project and the open forum! -Mysheh

From scrawny_punk@hotmail.com :-

I am a sophomore in high school, and know of its bullshit social hierarchy system. Harris and Klebold were on the edge, or the bottom, of this system and chose to be there. The amount of mental and emotional (and often physical) abuse is hardly realized by adults on such voluntary (and involuntary) outcasts.

I think they were not insane, just unstable. They were pissed off and felt helpless in this oppressive society (and please don't spout about how free we are, with any sort of government the people are never free). They thought in sort of a moral quarantine, and didn't realize truly the true loss of life that would occur.

My point is, don't speak as if Harris and Klebold were ignorant and insane. They weren't, and don't blame them or their parents. The social system is to blame, and revolution is our only hope of regaining individualism.

From Alan Moore, City University of New York :-

Interesting and provocative thesis here considered.

The link with neo-conservative campaign to refute '60s radical activism (and by extension, anti-globalist activism of today as "nostalgic") give Turse piece its ideological charge. (This, from an NYC perspective, since the NY Times gives a lot of play to those conservative voices that dish '60s activists.)

If you're looking for '60s demons, I'd look more closely at historical African-American activism (I'm reading William L. Van Deburg's *New Day in Babylon*, 1992), many of whose advocates were explicit in threatening violent retaliation against massive racist reactions to their demands. Put that together with the "gangster rap" hip-hop culture, rooted in that activism, and you have your '60s gun-crazy context.

The issue is construed in the USA as making gun control self-evidently necessary... But the Panthers, like Daniel Shays, were about the 2nd Amendment; Columbine was a surreal adaptation (like the 1960s British movie "If", which is precisely about gunning down the school).