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The Columbine Incident and the Radical Tradition in America: An Interactive Forum,
edited by Marc R. Sykes (Rutgers University)

New Morning, Changing Weather: Radical Youth of the Millennial Age

by Nicholas Turse (Columbia University)

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold engaged in a shooting and bombing spree in Columbine High School that left fifteen students, including the alleged gunmen, dead. Shortly thereafter, feints at copycat-ism, threats of similar violence, and other school shootings followed. These events fit a pattern which seems to have emerged in the late 1980s, has been nurtured throughout the 1990s, and, if we are to believe the outlook of media pundits and politicians, is worsening as we bid *adieu* to the century. Are scenes of school violence—of young men arming themselves to make war on their classmates—the social problem of the coming millennium? Do we stand on the edge of an apocalypse brought upon us by teens without morality, driven mad by Marilyn Manson, video-gaming, and television violence? Is this the proverbial seventh sign? Or is this simply the radical protest method of choice in America today?

When a youngster decides to make war on his school and classmates, the media leaps to vilify him, his alleged influences, his weaponry, and his parents. Politicians are keen to do the same, and capitalize on the shootings by pushing for new firearm regulations and stiff penalties. And why not? Don't we punish psychotics bent on threatening life and property, set upon destroying the "American" way of life? Shouldn't we condemn those who take the lives of others through "senseless" violence? Or should we try to make sense of it? Preferring the latter option, I propose that kids killing kids may be the radical protest of our age, and that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold may be the Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman figures of today.

Merely positing that the seemingly recent phenomena of kids killing kids at school may be analogous to, or the "Generation Y" equivalent of, the radical movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s will no doubt raise the ire of many. Critics will undoubtedly ridicule my assertion as misinformed and absurd. I will be lambasted for asserting that schoolhouse murderers may be entitled to the same status and legitimacy given to 1960s-era leftist protesters, even formerly violent protesters such as Rudd. Many will assuredly cry that these wanton young killers have nothing in common with the "power to the people" radicalism and peace and love counterculture of 30 years ago. Killing children, they will say, has nothing to do with protest, it does not seek to and will not solve our great problems, and it is assuredly not the path pointed to by the 1960s radicals of the Left.

When I attempt to raise the image of the Weathermen's violent behavior of the 1970s as a defense, my critics will undoubtedly counter that the Weather Underground betrayed the principles of its parent organization, the Students for the Democratic Society (SDS) and the movement itself, by poisoning the Left with violence. They will further point to the fact that even members of Weatherman have since renounced and denounced their violent past. I, however, posit that today's child-killing children never read Mark Rudd's repudiation of violence in the January 18, 1989 issue of the *Guardian*. Moreover, I will go so far as to say that most, if not all, of these youthful killers have never heard of Rudd, Weatherman, Abbie Hoffman, or many of the icons and intricacies of the radicalism of the 1960s. Beyond Woodstock, a few Jimi Hendrix songs, and the folk singer who they probably know primarily as the *father* of Wallflowers lead singer Jakob Dylan, they probably have little knowledge of the turbulence of the 1960s. Be that as it may, I still contend that these killers are the heirs of the youth rebellion of the sixties, that they are engaged in a similar struggle, and that they may have upped the ante on their radical forebears.

While these young boys may have no Port Huron statement, no manifesto, and no coordinated actions (that we know of), they are a legitimate radical faction that may have one-upped the violent Weather Underground and the revolutionary Abbie Hoffman. These boys have truly embraced "revolution for the hell of it," maybe better than Abbie ever did. The randomness of their "non-campaign" may be the ultimate expression of "rage against the machine," ripping into the system, as it were, at its most vulnerable and fundamental level, perhaps more so than Weatherman's bombing of the U.S. Capitol.

While these school-age killers have no Vietnam War to protest, and may be criticized by former hippies for having no cause for which to fight, I contend that the struggle in which these boys are engaged may be as fundamentally important as ending the war in Vietnam (or imperialism, or racism, etc.) was to the hippies, Yippies, Diggers, and Panthers of the bygone era. These children, while they do not articulate the sentiment or may not even realize it, are fighting a system as insidious as the military-industrial complex was to their 1960s counterparts. They are fighting the American educational system and, by extension, the so-called American way of life. And, it would seem, with good reason.

While these killer youths come from markedly different geographic areas, have different family backgrounds, and are from different religious faiths, their anti-social, murderous behavior manifests itself in the same manner, lashing out at the arena designed to socialize them. They riddle with bullet holes the halls of the system that teaches them to read, write and think, and splatter blood across the institution that attempts to mold them. These are not, by most individuals' standards, well-adjusted youths. It would seem, then, that both the site of their aggressive outbursts and their choice of targets point to a system that has failed them and now bears the brunt of their anger.

Disaffected, feeling betrayed and unfulfilled, these boys lash out with a rage that shocks the nightly news viewer. Their show of defiant dissatisfaction and willingness to go to war to redress their grievances shows a willingness and ability to shake the system to the core. They mean to make others suffer, it would seem, or they would simply kill themselves to end the misery. Their protest goes beyond that of the Yippie who may have been bloodied by the "pigs," or that of the radical who may have bombed a bank with the Weathermen. These children have brought the battle to the foundation of the American system, the realm in which young Americans are shaped into "solid citizens." They have garnered headlines as only the money-burning Abbie Hoffman could have in the past. The youthful killers have re-invented guerrilla theater; indeed, they have made guerrilla warfare a prime-time, Technicolor spectacle that transcends the shock of mere violence. They have chosen a venue that demands attention and selected targets that grab headlines and force us to take notice. They are the "living TV ads," as Hoffman once called his fellow Yippies.

The violence unleashed by these juveniles also acts as a call to action for like-minded individuals. Their ability to gain recognition and exert power grows with each like incident, forcing us to look for connections and search for scapegoats. Maybe they have no pithy slogans, no unifying symbol, maybe Marilyn Manson is no Bob Dylan, and maybe their Woodstock '99 is a poor rip-off of the original (which "ripped off" Monterey), but no one can deny the radicalism of their murderous behavior. Who would not concede that terrorizing the American machine, at the very site where it exerts its most powerful influence, is a truly revolutionary task? To be inarticulate about your goals, even to not understand them, does not negate their existence. Approve or disapprove of their methods, vilify them as miscreants, but don't dare disregard these modern radicals as anything less than the latest incarnation of disaffected insurgents waging the ongoing American revolution.

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