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

Searching for Heroes in the Midst of Tragedy

by Adam M. Garfinkle

I find it difficult to respond to Mr. Turse's short essay, not because I agree with it and therefore have little to criticize, but because I cannot find any argument with which to take issue. When one strips away all the breathless defensive prose that decorates most of the piece, one is left not with an argument but an assertion that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were "lashing out at the arena designed to socialize them." Turse labels the two "disaffected insurgents" who "brought the battle to the foundation of the American system." But where is the evidence, or even any logical train to support such an assertion? Best as I can make out, there isn't any.

We really don't know what Harris and Klebold "meant" by their act. They weren't merely inarticulate about it; they were either silent or incoherent, depending on how seriously one takes incidental hearsay "facts" about the two young men. The prima facie evidence points more to borderline psychopathology than to insurgency. If the school is the enemy and the students are victims, why kill fellow victims—other students—instead of the principal and his aides? But the school isn't the enemy; the core agent of socialization is the family, not the high school, and Harris and Klebold held no murderous animus toward their parents. They hated jocks and cheerleaders, and, apparently, people who believed in God... or who were black. How does one possibly derive from that oddball grouping a struggle against socialization?

And if revolution for the long haul, or even just "for the hell of it," is the cause for which they fought, why suicide? Why not carry the struggle to court and then to jail? When Abbie Hoffman was talking about "revolution for the hell of it," he was full of life and life-affirming to the fullest. So was the counterculture, which sought authenticity, vivid experience, and liberation from all that was thought deadening. It was also, in my view, a search for a new religious anchoring in a world easily taken to be one of gray-suited conformity and hypocrisy. No, I'm afraid Mr. Turse's assertion does not bear even the slightest burden of logic, and so his images don't work.

Take, for example, the contention that Harris and Klebold re-invented guerrilla theater. This is also quite wrong. Guerrilla theater was a propagandizing device that deliberately tried to merge audience and players, art and politics. In a way, it was the quintessential countercultural form. Its point was to evoke at close quarters both creative thought and moral feeling by scrambling received categories and borders. It acted out violence only to affirm the abhorrence of it. The actors of guerrilla theater performances were trying to win over their audience, not murder it. There is no evidence, nor even a hint, that Harris and Klebold intended some perverse kind of performance art in what they did. As Turse has it, television was their guerrilla theater medium, but this is impossible: television is remote and does not interact with its audience, and thus hardly qualifies as close quarters. And the young murderers were not trying to evoke creative thought and moral feeling in others, but were engaging in what appears to be at the same time narcissistic and nihilistic violence. What Harris and Klebold did, and which Turse seems to applaud, was not to evoke an abhorrence of violence, but to extol violence perpetrated against innocents in hopes that others might copy it.

There was a twentieth-century movement that extolled violence, combined narcissism and nihilism in nauseating ways, denied a loving God, hated minorities, considered abstract idealism a hoax, and tended to attract deeply disaffected, borderline psychotic members. But it wasn't any type of Leftism. It was Nazism. If Mr. Turse hates the "American machine" and longs for allies like the late Messrs. Harris and Klebold in his campaign against it, he's chosen interesting company.

That isn't all Mr. Turse has wrong. To speak of Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman in the same breath is a little silly. Now Rudd, it is true, had a penchant for violent speech. But he lacked the courage to actually do anything violent. Instead, on October 8, 1969 at the infamous "Days of Rage" in Chicago, Rudd ran away when police tried to stop a Weathermen crowd that had started to smash windows and loot stores. Some Black Panthers, who had refused to support the "action" but who had assembled to watch it, saw Rudd in

flight, took up a successful chase, and then proceeded to beat the living shit out of him. As for Abbie, this is a man who, with Allen Ginsberg, once tried to levitate the Pentagon while chanting "Om." Abbie Hoffman was not a violent man any more than Rudd was a counterculturalist. Yippies were not the same as SDSers, and SDSers circa 1966 were not the same as the Weathermen circa 1969. Turse lumps together that which ought to remain distinct, both in this instance and, I think, in his essay as a whole.

A final remark, if I may: There were several heroes amid the Littleton tragedy, but neither Mr. Harris nor Mr. Klebold are counted among them, as Mr. Turse would have it in his hopeful if misguided search for a remnant of violent protest in America. By far the most remarkable of these heroes was Cassie Bernall. When her murderer put his gun to Cassie's head and asked her if she believed in God, she doubtless understood the reason for the question, and she must have realized that answering "no" might have saved her life. Nevertheless, she answered "yes"—and was summarily slaughtered. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, it doesn't matter—any pious person can see that she died for the sanctification of God's name. As an observant Jew, my admiration for that brave young Christian woman is almost beyond expression. May her memory forever be a blessing among the living.

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