

THE TRAGEDY IN LITTLETON: A SYMPOSIUM

Blaming guns and media violence misses the point



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America is shocked by the carnage at Columbine High School, the latest and bloodiest of a string of similar nightmares that have taken place across the nation over the last 18 months, including Springfield, Ore.; Edinboro, Pa.; Jonesboro, Ark.; West Paducah, Ky.; and Pearl, Miss.

All involved young killers with guns and without self-restraint. Nearly everyone agrees that we have moved beyond the realm of mere coincidence, that there is some connection between these horrible events. But that's where the agreement ends.

Even before all the details were known and the police had conducted their investigation, television reporters were looking to assign blame for the shootings. Once again, fingers pointed toward America's "gun culture."

MSNBC's Pete Williams summed up the conventional media wisdom in a comment to the mother of a girl killed last year in Jonesboro. "I know you ... believe that if we got the guns out of schools and out of the hands of younger Americans, ... of their parents and older Americans, if we stopped giving guns as Christmas gifts in some families ... then perhaps this wouldn't be as pervasive a problem."

He was not alone in this, and it's easy to see why. Each of these tragedies took place in regions where legal gun ownership is commonplace, and where youngsters are often taught about firearms.

But if the blame lay solely with "gun culture," one should expect this sort of violence to have happened throughout American history. And yet, generations of Americans have grown up around guns without feeling at all compelled to commit multiple murder.

To the contrary, most young people who train today in the shooting sports learn excellence and discipline as they do in any sport. Kim Rhode of El Monte has practiced with firearms since she was in grade school. If guns cause violence, Kim should be in serious trouble by now. Instead, at 17 she became the youngest woman in Olympic history to win a gold medal in a shooting sport.

If guns themselves don't cause criminal behavior, another popular explanation is the long-term effects of violent television, movies and video games.

President Clinton referred to violence in the media, and advised parents to "take this moment to ask what else they can do to shield our children from violent images and experiences that warp young perceptions and obscure the consequences of violence."

Good advice as far as it goes. But however debased our popular culture may be, simply pointing the finger at Hollywood is as unsatisfying as pointing the finger at gun owners. Only a fraction of the millions of children exposed to TV violence go on to imitate the mayhem they have seen portrayed on the screen.

These explanations fail because they try to pin the blame for violence on something outside the individual; they deny that these young men are responsible for their own actions.

Blaming anything or anyone but the perpetrator himself has become the order of the day. We have grown used to hearing that every action, good or evil, is not based on free will, but is the result of some exterior cause, be it too much TV, a bad family life or access to a weapon.

This is the result of a long-term philosophical shift away from the idea of human free will, and the results of that shift have now come home to roost with the children of the baby boom generation.

The good news is that we are finally recognizing the terrible consequences of this philosophy, as we see firsthand the results of a generation of moral neglect of young people.

Appalled by the lack of standards in public schools, parents are increasingly placing their children in private academics or church-sponsored schools where responsibility and morality can be taught. It took us a generation to trash the truth, and we will struggle just as long in coming to our moral senses as a nation.

In the meantime we can pass a law to ban guns, or place new ratings codes on TV, movies and video games. But the former will only serve to redefine as criminals millions of previously law-abiding citizens, and the latter will do nothing to change what consumers want to buy.

What law can remedy fatal character defects? By banning the "culture of guns" we will not stop teen murderers. But by rebuilding a culture of loving, moral guidance for our children, we will.