

## Blaming the guns

By Timothy Wheeler

In Springfield, Oregon last week, 15-year-old Kip Kinkel was arraigned in court, charged with murdering two classmates and wounding 20 others in a cafeteria shooting rampage. It appears likely that the young man had murdered his parents as well. This is just the latest in a string of similar nightmares across the nation during the 1997-98 school year, including Edinboro, Pa.; Jonesboro, Ark.; West Paducah, Ky.; 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.

As parents grieved last month in Jonesboro, television commentator Kate Couric suggested that the shootings were rooted in a gun and hunting culture. She was not alone in this, and it's easy to see why. Each of this year's 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 all along in American history. Generations of American youths 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. Kim Rhode of El Monte, California has practiced with firearms since she was in grade school. If guns really do cause



violence, Kim should be in serious trouble with the law by now. Instead, at 17 she became the youngest woman in Olympic history to win a gold medal in a shooting sport.

If guns don't cause criminal behavior, another popular explanation is the long-term effects of violent television, movies and video games. In his May 23 radio address, President Clinton said the recent shootings are "symptoms of a changing culture that desensitizes our children to violence, where most teenagers have seen hundreds or even thousands of murders on television and in movies and in video games before they graduate from high school, where too many young people seem unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and where all too often everyday conflicts are resolved not with words but with weapons, which, even when illegal to possess by children, are all too easy to get."

But however debased our popular culture might have become—and debased it certainly is—this explanation is as unsatisfying as the first: Only a tiny fraction of the millions of children exposed to TV violence go on to imitate the mayhem they have seen portrayed by Hollywood actors.

Both explanations fail because they try to pin the blame for violence on something outside the individual—they deny that a young man is ultimately responsible for his own actions. Blaming anything or anyone but the perpetrator himself has become the order of the day. Perhaps the most extreme example of this was the infamous "twinkie defense" employed by the murderer of San Francisco Mayor Moscone. The accused could not be held responsible, his attorney argued, because he had consumed junk food. Since then we have grown used to hearing that every action is not based on free will, but is the result of some exterior cause, whether 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 the firsthand results of a generation of moral neglect of our young people. Appalled by the lack of standards in public schools, parents are increasingly placing their children in private academies or church-sponsored schools where responsibility and morality can legally 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.

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

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