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Children should be held responsible for violence

Recent incidents of juvenile crime cannot be blamed simply on the media or 'Southern culture'

Rambo's got nothing on these kids. Ten days ago, two youths gunned down their classmates at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark. When the chaos ended, four girls and a teacher lay dead, apparently the victims of two boys not yet old enough to drive away in their getaway van.

Dressed in camouflage, Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Andrew Golden, 11, are accused of hunting their peers with an arsenal worthy of Hollywood's most spectacular action movies. But while the tragedy shocked the nation and the small town of Jonesboro, Johnson and Golden are not alone on the chain gang of murderous minors.

OPINION



Jonas Allen

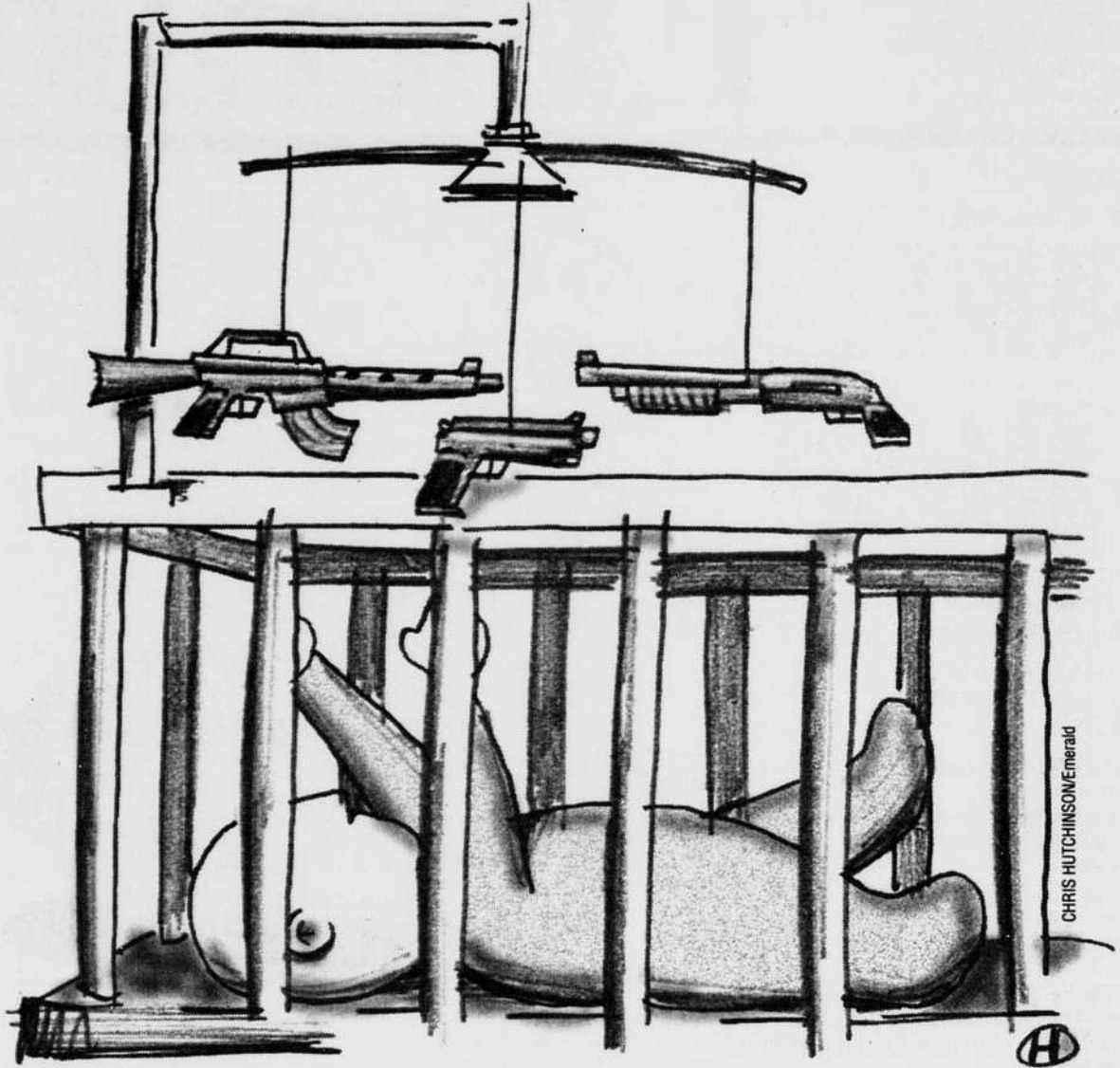
On Dec. 1, 1997, Michael Carneal, 14, walked into Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., ready for a test. According to U.S. News & World Report, what he tested were the limits of a pistol, two shotguns, two rifles and 700 rounds of ammunition. Carneal was accused of killing three classmates and wounding five others, one of whom was left paralyzed.

Nearly two years before Carneal's rampage, 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis aimed an assault rifle at an algebra class, killing two classmates and a teacher at Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Wash.

Despite the elements of a Hollywood shoot-'em-up blockbuster, these stories have no happy endings. The victims are not extras; they are real people with real families. Some are left really dead. The only prequel we have is recounted in the history of school records and family memories.

And the thought of a sequel makes the nation shudder.

Child violence is not a new topic, although the extent to which it is being carried out is not ordinary. For decades, people have blamed delinquent behavior on numerous things. First it was ghetto life. Then it was the infamous media, from music to television and movies. But while the youths' arsenals resembled those in "Rambo," the chances of the students being old enough to even remember that movie are slim, at best.



The most recent shooting spree has been blamed on a "Southern subculture of violence," according to U.S. News & World Report. So why will the next students be out for first blood? Who or what can we blame for these violent behaviors when they happen again?

The transition from a "Field of Dreams" to a "Children of the Corn" society did not happen overnight. According to U.S. News & World Report, the juvenile homicide rate rose nearly 57 percent between 1990 and 1996. With such violent crimes over the last two years, it is ignorant to think the most recent actions will end up as isolated incidents.

What people have ignored is that the scapegoat for these crimes has wandered through the gates of nearly every demographic in America. The most common excuse for criminal behavior is an unstable family. But according to The Associated Press, one successful security sys-

tem used parents and grandparents as hall monitors at a high school in Alexandria, Va.

So it must have been an anomaly when three youths beat a Eugene man to death for \$90 last July. After all, one of the assailants was the victim's own granddaughter. There was no "Southern subculture," no ghetto and no violent movie. Rather, there were three teens, unable to vote yet able to violently rob an elderly man.

What has troubled the nation more: that these crimes were committed at all or that they were committed by children?

Johnson and Golden, Jonesboro's suspected schoolyard assassins, thought like adult criminals. According to U.S. News & World Report, the suspects robbed Golden's grandfather to get seven of their 10 guns and barreled down specific girls. They packed sleeping bags and a radio and even stole a getaway van.

They also packed two bags of potato chips and a stuffed animal.

These delinquents are truly children, but they are also criminals and victims.

Robbed of their youth and innocence, these children must be reprimanded for robbing others of their lives. There is no one to blame but the students themselves. The future of these juveniles is in the legal crosshairs, and the courts must not fail to pull the trigger on accountability for these murders.

Children used to play Cowboys and Indians and tie each other to trees. Now they choose to hide behind trees and execute their classmates. Scraped knee or broken law, youths must accept the consequences of their "games."

Jonas Allen is a columnist for the Emerald. His work appears on alternate Fridays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

Thumb



TO THE U.S. HOUSE: Surprisingly, the full House voted down a proposal by Oregon Rep. Bob Smith that would have made it easy to cut down "unhealthy" forests. Under Smith's proposal, forests would have been rescued from the dangers of fire and disease by clear cutting. Smith's plan and others like it are ways for the timber industry to circumvent environmental laws without penalty.

Thumb



TO CHANGES IN OREGON UNIVERSITY SYSTEM FUNDING: Oregon's public institutions will begin keeping their own tuition money instead of pooling it. The Register-Guard accurately pointed out some of the problems with this in an editorial. Its biggest fear is a legitimate one: Smaller schools that charge less tuition and attract few-

er out-of-state students, such as Southern Oregon University, will lose funding from already tight budgets. An additional concern not raised by The Register-Guard is also crucial: The proposal would hurt many vital programs. Because schools will compete for students, especially out-of-state students, programs that appeal to only a few students and that

don't attract wealthy students or non-Oregonians will likely be cut, while those classes that prove popular will become redundant features at all Oregon universities. Finally, the greatest risk is that large portions of scholarship funds will go to attract first-year, out-of-state students, who will then lose their funding in following years (after they have settled into Eugene).

CORRECTION

The Programs Finance Committee funded an across-the-board increase of 1.9 percent — just below its benchmark of 2 percent. The article "Senate approves budgets, sets measures" (ODE, April 2) quoted one PFC member as saying the committee had come in just over its benchmark. In addition, the tag accompanying the story should have said ASUO Student Senate.

The article titled, "OSPIRG survey protests surcharges at ATM machines" (ODE, April 2) should have said the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that banks earned \$2.5 billion in profits from ATM surcharging in 1997.

The Emerald regrets the errors.