THE COLUMBINE TRAGEDY

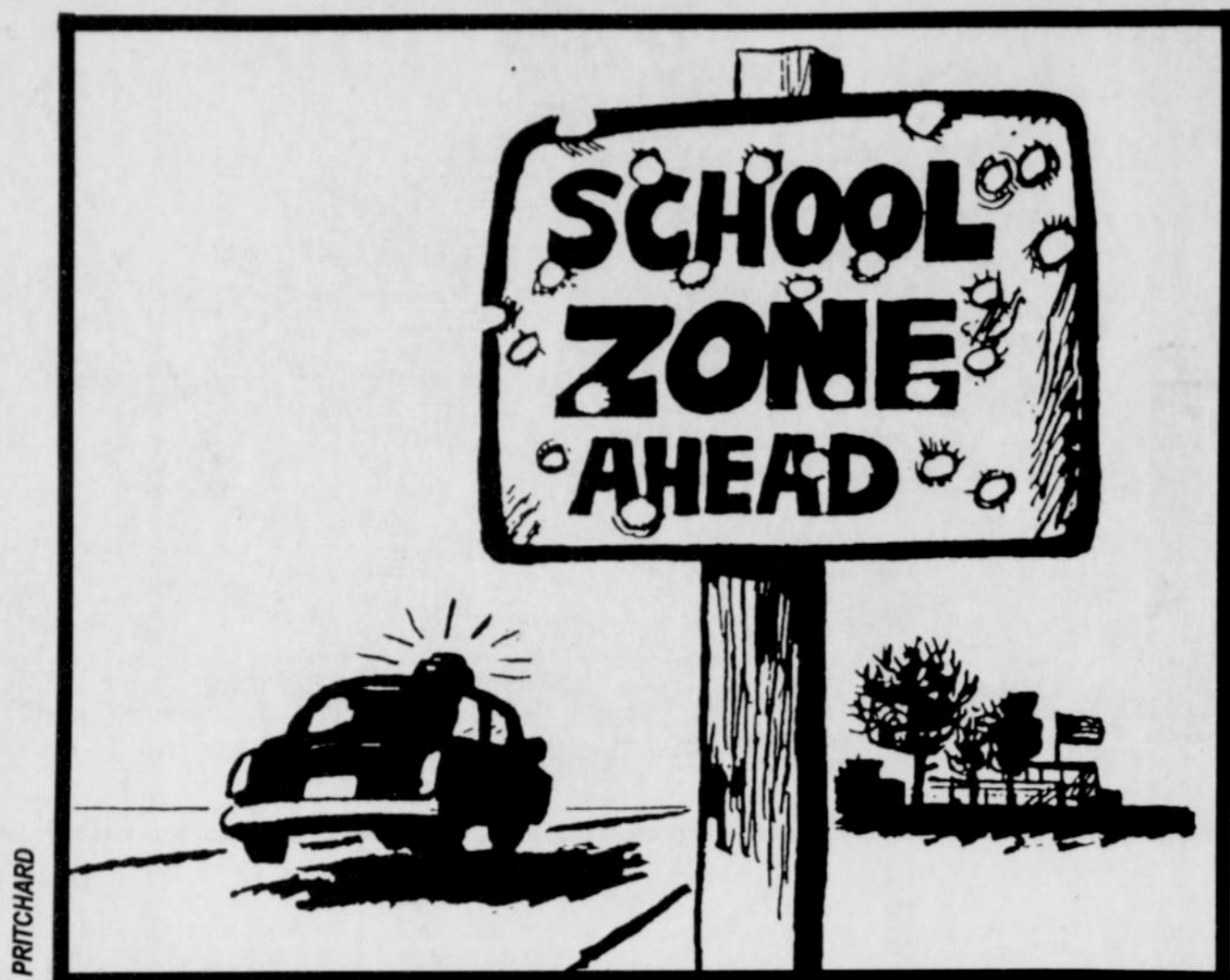PRITCHARD

COUNTERING THE HYSTERIA

BY BARBARA DORITY

Columbine High school is an open, attractive, sprawling campus in the middle of a relatively safe suburban enclave in Littleton, Colorado.The school was a showplace when it opened, distinguishing itself in academics, music, drama, and athletics. Thus it was an unlikely setting for a tragedy of the magnitude that took place April 20, 1999, when witnesses say at least two students —18 year old Eric Harris and 17 year old Dylan Klebold — killed thirteen people and wounded twenty-three others before shooting themselves.

Fellow students later said the group Harris and Klebold belonged to, self-proclaimed the Trench Coat Mafia, had been a target of derision for at least four years. Members were picked on, harassed and excluded — "always on the outside looking in." Most of the time, the members appeared to like it that way. As many cliques of young people do, the members played up their differentness. They wore army gear, black trench coats, and Nazi symbols. They spoke German to each other and were quite vocal about their fascination with Hitler and World War 2.

Membership in such groups is just one of a remarkable assortment of 'explanations' and assignments of blame that panicked overreaction to this tragedy has produced, accompanied by an onslaught of repressive 'solutions' allegedly designed to prevent recurrences. We are witnessing the institution of a myriad of alarming civil liberties violations, most aimed at obstructing the basic rights of young people – an already heavily restricted group of U.S. citizens.

This is a classic scenario: particularly shocking incidents of violence, especially those involving young people, lead to mass hysteria and are invariably used to justify repressive government intervention. Fred Medway, psychology professor at the University of South Carolina, says, "People feel much more comfortable overreacting than underreacting. It makes them feel they've done something to prevent a potentially negative thing from happening."

It is in the midst of just such frightening and dangerous times that this tendency must be most forcefully resisted. A few reality checks can be the first step in countering panic and assisting us in putting the situation into a realistic perspective:

~According to information from the National School Safety Center, killings are the exception, not the rule, at schools across the U.S., and suburban and rural schools remain safer than their inner-city counterparts.

~The number of violent deaths in both urban and suburban neighborhoods has dropped dramatically since 1992. More than 95% of children are never involved in a violent crime.

~Not one of the mass school shootings of the past two and a half years has occurred in an inner-city area, and nearly all victims have been white.

~A 1998 report by the U.S. Department of Justice and Education says children have more chance of getting killed by lightning than suffering a violent death on campus — which boils down to less than one chance in a million.

~The current generation of teenagers is less likely to use drugs, more sexually conservative, and less likely to be caught up in school violence than the one of twenty years ago.

~It's not unusual for young males, especially students at large suburban schools, to make videos of shootings and robberies in video-production classes (as Harris and Klebold are said to have done); in fact, nearly half do.

~In a recent survey of 900 fourth through eighth grade students, almost half said their favorite video games involve simulated violence.

~High-profile school violence isn't new. Similar incidents have occurred at least as early as the 1950s.

But despite all these facts, we're being told that the primary cause of the Columbine and similar tragedies is violence on network television and in cartoons, comic books, music, and movies. As usual Hollywood is to blame. Next in line are various "violent" games, especially "killing" video games and "violent" toys.

And, of course, we must not forget that wildly dangerous and insidious corrupter of American youth: the Internet — where Harris and Klebold are said to have gotten their bomb-making knowledge. It must be noted, however, that such terrorist know-how, complete with illustrated instructions for making bombs, is also frequently available in military manuals at surplus stores, as well as in numerous mail-order civilian manuals, which are available through some public libraries. Are proponents of censoring this information advocating that we somehow locate, remove, and destroy all these sources?

Alexander Coxburn addresses a closely related aspect of public reaction in The Nation's May 17 issue:

"Commentators have fastened onto the fact that one of the youths had a personal Web site 'espousing an addled philosophy of violence.' Those were the words of the New York Times' (editorial team, the same people) who espoused an addled philosophy of violence a few days earlier when they suggested that NATO intensify the bombing of Serbia. Perhaps ...it wasn't a personal Web site the kid had in his computer but nytimes.com."

I'm not, of course, insinuating that the war in Yugoslavia caused the Columbine tragedy or any other instances of domestic crime. I am, however, appalled at the hypocrisy of those who blame such incidents on the media and popular culture while simultaneously ignoring violence perpetrated by our own government.

They ignore, too, that the institution most adept at putting guns in the hands of youngsters (many of them troubled) and training them to kill their fellow human beings is, of course, the U.S. military — which also insists on the right to accept teenagers at an age younger than most other nations. It is amazing that those who are now blaming media violence for the Columbine tragedy – President Clinton among them – can completely exclude sanctioned, even glorified violence of this magnitude from their analysis. Yet, clearly they can and do fail to realize that, in order to maintain consistency and credibility, they must equally condemn all violence. This incredible feat of dissociation by government officials and the American public is so complete that no one noticed the appalling irony when the Air Force sent F-16s over the funerals for those killed in Littleton.

In reality, and contrary to thousands of news sources, absolutely no causal link has been established between simulated violence in media and actual real-life violence. Just one example of how the media blatantly misrepresents this issue can be found in an Associated Press story that appeared a few days after the Littleton incident. It was picked up by most major newspapers under various versions of the headline 'Scores of Studies Link Media & Youth Violence'. The story opens by referring to a bill in Congress to require the U.S. Surgeon General to conduct a comprehensive study of the effects of media violence on American youths, then immediately goes on to state that "the evidence already exists." Finally, five paragraphs into the story, we read that "a few scholars object to this research, saying the links do not prove cause and effect."

Among those who object is Jonathan Freedman, professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. He points out that correlative links could come from many factors, including the likelihood that children who watch a lot of violent television are often those least supervised by responsible adults. Freedman tries repeatedly to make the simple point most researchers recognize: that correlations don't establish causal links.

Harvard psychiatrist James Gilligan, who spent years interviewing murderers in Massachusetts, has concluded, "Nothing stimulates violence as powerfully as the experience of being shamed and humiliated."

Still, one after another, Congressional representatives continue to pronounce that simulated violence produced by Hollywood is to blame for violence in our society. They then threatened government intervention to curb violence in movies, video games, and music if this is not done "voluntarily." Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut have likened the content of popular entertainment to a vice industry, claiming that, like tobacco, it requires special attention on public-safety grounds.

The April 28 edition of 20/20 presented a particularly shameless and sensationalistic feature about a "violent movement" spreading across America to which Harris and Klebold supposedly belonged. The followers of this new movement, Sam Donaldson grimly reported, called themselves "Goths." This feature then proceeded to demonize and place blame for violence on the Gothic American subculture. Parents were told that "warning signs" include being "attracted to a very strange group of people and listening to very alternative music." Diane

Sawyer then haphazardly lumped together music groups with very little in common. As was the case with many of the music groups that various news sources connected with the Columbine suspects, most of them don't even fit the Goth mold. In fact, the boys themselves didn't fit any known Goth mold. Neither did their lifestyles.

And never mind that the modern Goth lifestyle dates back to the 1970s. "What they're thinking," warned the Denver Police Department's Steve Rickard in the 20/20 report, "is totally irrelevant to a normal person's thoughts." What does this say about the many thousands of young professionals who grew up listening to Goth music, who solved video games like Doom and Quake years ago, and who once participated in the grandfather of all supposedly mind-warping games, Dungeons & Dragons? If 20/20 is to be believed, most of us are surrounded by ticking time bombs.

The obvious appeal of "very alternative" music, like many other forms of pop music, is that it gives voice to feelings of loneliness or anger shared by many young people and usually serves as an outlet for these feelings. Out-of-the-mainstream lifestyles, complete with music, provide a vital form of release. Many other seemingly anti-social behaviors are part of the rebellion we've come to accept as a normal and healthy part of the maturation process. Usually kids outgrow its self-destructive and counterproductive aspects. Similarly, although many video games do feature virtual guns and carnage, for all but a tiny percentage of young people they serve as a means of blowing off steam, certainly not as a blueprint for actual killing.

On the front page of my May 2 newspaper was an 8X10 inch color photograph of four police officers in the main foyer of a local high school. Some are seen talking to students, others are standing guard, and so on. Certainly I've no problem with students meeting and relating to police officers.But students becoming used to seeing police constantly monitoring their normal daily activities? How will this experience affect their perceptions and expectations of privacy? Many are so frightened they welcome this police presence, but what are the implications of creating citizens who feel safe only when directly watched over and protected by law enforcement personnel?

We're also instituting SWAT training in schools; installing metal detectors; conducting random locker searches (these have been mandated for all schools in the Seattle, Washington, school district, along with metal-detector checks in classrooms and at sports events); supplying teachers with walkie-talkies; banning black clothing, symbols of any kind, and any type of trench coat; mandating school uniforms; searching students' backpacks, purses, and such; banning the production of "gruesome" videos in school video classes; and conducting "lockdown drills."

One proposed 'solution" to the school violence problem that is enjoying a surge of support is the concept of prosecuting parents for teenagers' crimes (which does not seem particularly ridiculous when in most states, until now any 18 year old could purchase a gun-show pistol immediately). Twenty-three states have extended some form of legal sanctions against parents whose children commit crimes, although rarely are these enforced. Thirteen states now have laws making parents criminally responsible for failing to supervise delinquent children — but, again, rarely are such charges brought.Five states have adopted laws threatening parents with fines or imprisonment for negligent parenting, although some have been struck down by the courts.

All these simplistic solutions avoid confronting the much more difficult problems affecting children, like reducing poverty, improving child-rearing skills, and funding child-care services. Bruce Shapiro, writing in the May 17 Nation, states that "only a broadly conceived community safety net — derided as bleeding-heart social work by those now rushing to blame the culture — can catch some children as they fall."

Finally, there is one particular aspect of the American public's reaction to this tragedy that cries out for rational evaluation by freethinkers, as it is rooted in the irrationality of religion. We are subjected to pronouncements that the cause of Columbine and other violent episodes in schools is "Godless parenting" and "America's spiritual drift." Syndicated columnist Donna Britt actually wrote, "Kids grounded in God often have more spiritual weapons with which to fight darkness." The beliefs of Christian kids, she maintains, "get media attention only when the awfulness is done in His name."

When I opened my newspaper on April 27 to the headline 'Deaths Seen Through The Prism of Christianity', I felt a chill. "How much worse can it get?" I asked myself. I discovered that several of the murdered students were eulogized at funerals and memorial services as 'Christian martyrs.' Friends and family were quoted expressing how glad they were that these "strong Christians" had the privilege of dying for their belief in Jesus Christ. This is almost incomprehensible.

Unflinchingly facing reality has never been more critical. There is no evidence that Christians or those who believed in God were selectively murdered. The Reverend Barry Palser, minister at the church of one of these Christian martyrs, was quoted as saying, "Inside that school library, they knew what they were doing. They knew what they were going after. That's what Hitler did." What planet are we on here? If these murderers had been adherents of Hitler's doctrines they would have embraced Christianity and murdered only Jews, atheists, and others outside their faith.

Christians are certainly free to comfort themselves with the fantasy that some of these youngsters were "Christians who died for their beliefs" and to "thank God" they got to go out as "martyrs." But it's just another delusion to avoid dealing with the simple truth: twelve beautiful young people and their teacher were in the wrong place at the wrong time, died tragically and needlessly, and are gone forever.

The even less appealing truth is that we don't know why the murderers did what they did. We don't know why other incidents of school violence have occurred. We don't know if any one incident is meaningfully related to any other, or which incidents, if any, are related to which of a variety of factors in our society. Nor do we know how to prevent future incidents. We certainly can and should continue sincere efforts to learn as much as we can, but we're a long way from any definitive answers. As we await further information from law enforcement officials, it is our task — indeed our duty as citizens — to resist panicked responses and stand in opposition to such tragedies being used to rationalize draconian violations of young peoples' civil liberties.

Barbara Dority is president of Humanists of Washington, executive director of the Washington Coalition Against Censorship, and cochair of the Northwest Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force. She wrote this article for The Humanist.