



PROJECT MUSE®

Comprehending Columbine

Larkin, Ralph W.

Published by Temple University Press

Larkin, W..

Comprehending Columbine.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/45929>

1

ARMAGEDDON (WELL, ALMOST)

NOTHING HAPPENED. It was 11:19 A.M., April 20, 1999. By 11:09 A.M., Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had hauled into the Columbine High School cafeteria two bombs hidden in large duffel bags and placed them near the tables where the athletic crowd ate lunch. Each bomb was a twenty-gallon propane tank wired to a one-gallon can of gasoline that was attached to a detonator and a timer set to go off at 11:17 A.M. The duffel bags blended in with the backpacks strewn all over the cafeteria floor by the approximately 480 students who were eating lunch at the time.

Eric was in the junior parking lot, southeast of the main entrance, and Dylan was in the senior parking lot, southwest of the main entrance. Each was strategically located approximately forty-five degrees from the south entrance of the high school so they could shoot at fleeing students without endangering each other. Klebold was dressed in cargo pants, a black T-shirt that said “Wrath,” and a black trench coat. Underneath his coat was an Intratec TEC-DC-9, 9-mm semiautomatic handgun attached to a strap slung over his shoulder. His cargo pants had large pockets that allowed him partially to conceal a Stephens 12-gauge double-barreled shotgun, particularly since the barrel had been cut down to approximately twenty-three inches. Harris, also wearing a black trench coat, wore a white T-shirt underneath that said, “Natural Selection.” Both wore combat boots. Harris hid a

Hi-Point 9-mm carbine rifle on a strap under his coat. He carried a Savage Springfield 12-gauge pump shotgun in a duffel bag that also held numerous explosive devices, including pipe bombs and CO2 canisters, and ammunition. The shotgun's stock and barrel had been cut off, reducing it to twenty-six inches. In addition, the boys were armed with several knives, including a nine-inch kitchen knife, a dagger, and two combat knives, one a folding blade knife about four inches long, and the other having a hatchet blade of about 3 1/2 inches in length, the handle of which doubled as brass knuckles with ten sharp spikes protruding outward. Their cars were booby-trapped with bombs timed to explode later in the day when the parking lot would be filled with emergency personnel.

By 11:19 A.M., nothing had happened. The bombs did not explode. No ball of fire ripped out the cafeteria windows. No dismembered body pieces were propelled through the air. No mortally wounded students were lying on the cafeteria floor, groaning and calling for their mothers. The ceiling above the cafeteria did not collapse, dropping the fifty-six students studying in the library above, the debris from the floor, and the tables, chairs, stacks, and other equipment onto the unsuspecting students in the cafeteria below. The ground did not reverberate; thick black smoke did not emanate from the cafeteria. No chaos had broken out as students ran from the scene. No flood of students ran for safety through the south entrance to the high school only to be mowed down in a withering crossfire from semiautomatic weapons. Harris and Klebold's apocalyptic vision of the destruction of their high school was thwarted only because the detonators they had purchased were defective.

The Columbine massacre was the most important news event in 1999; throughout the 1990s, only the O. J. Simpson trial received more media coverage (Muschert 2002). Despite the overwhelming media coverage and the subsequent national debate over youth violence, precious few attempts were made to analyze the causes of the shootings. As Downs (1998) has shown, the media have a very short attention span, moving from excited involvement to loss of interest in a short span of time. Because of the magnitude of the story of the Columbine shootings, daily reportage lasted for a full month. Despite the salience of the story, the vast media presence, the large number of local, state, and national investigators, at the close of the investigation, nobody could offer a coherent explanation as to why Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold set out to kill their peers and destroy their school. Even though there was agreement, for the most part, about the facts of the case, the question of "why" has never been adequately addressed. This study examines personal, local, and societal factors that propelled Harris and Klebold to attempt to kill 500 of their fellow students and destroy their high school.

THE ASSAULT

Months of preparation and meticulous planning culminated in that moment. Over the past year, the boys had collected weapons, made and tested pipe bombs, wrote to-do lists, drew up plans, conducted field research, and fantasized about the coming revenge that they were going to exact from Columbine. In his Trenchcoat Mafia web site, Eric Harris opined that he could kill 500 students. If the bombs had exploded as the two boys had originally planned, the number of dead and wounded may well have approximated that number.

With their watches and the timers synchronized, they waited in the parking lot for an explosion that never happened. They had apparently walked to the top of the stairs that led to the west entrance of the school. When they realized that their plans needed revision, they looked at each other, and one of them said, “Go, go!”

It was a warm spring day, and Rachel Scott and Richard Castaldo had decided to eat their lunch on the grass beside the west entrance. When Harris and Klebold reached the top of the stairs, they saw Rachel and Richard. Rachel was killed in a hail of bullets, and Richard was seriously wounded. The assault had begun. Then they turned and started shooting down the stairs at students who were behind them and who were apparently walking to the “smokers’ pit,” a congregating place in Clement Park just to the north of the school where smokers gathered to have a cigarette. They shot Daniel Rohrbough, Sean Graves, and Lance Kirklin. Rohrbough died instantly, but Kirklin and Graves survived. Then Harris and Klebold turned in a more westerly direction and began shooting at five students on a grassy slope. As they ran away from the gunman, two were hit: Michael Johnson was able to run up the hill and hide behind a shed containing athletic equipment; Mark Taylor was seriously wounded and could not move.

Dylan Klebold ran back down the stairs toward the rear entrance of the cafeteria. On his way, he shot Lance Kirklin at close range. Klebold entered the cafeteria and stood at the rear, apparently trying to figure out why the bombs did not explode. He stood there for less than a minute, exiting the cafeteria and running back up the stairs to Eric. By that time, Eric had taken off his trench coat. He shot down the stairs at Ann Marie Hochhalter and hit her several times as she struggled to run for cover into the cafeteria. One of the gunmen shouted, “This is what we always wanted to do! This is awesome!” The boys threw pipe bombs onto the grassy area, into the parking lot, and onto the roof of the school, creating several explosions.

At about this time, teacher Patti Nielson, who was on hall duty during the lunch period, heard a commotion outside the west entrance to the school. Thinking that students using toy guns to film a video were making too much noise, she intended to tell them to “knock it off” as she approached the doors of the west entrance. She and a student, Brian Anderson, who was told by a teacher to get out of the school because of the shooting and the bombs, were hit with metal and glass as Eric Harris shot through the doors of the west entrance. Both Nielson and Anderson were caught between the inner and outer doors. Nielson suffered abrasions to her shoulder, forearm, and knee from the fragments. Anderson was hit in the chest by the flying glass and metal. Neither was wounded seriously, and both retreated from the doors, running in a southerly direction toward the library. Nielson ran into the library, hid in a cupboard under the librarians’ counter, dialed 911 on the school phone, and informed the police of the assault.

At 11:22 A.M., Sheriff’s Deputy Neil Gardner, who was in his patrol car eating lunch and monitoring students at the smoking pit in Clement Park, received a panicky emergency call from a custodian at Columbine High School. The deputy was needed on the south side of the school. While moving from the north to the south side of campus, he heard over the radio that a girl was down in front of the high school, apparently in reference to Ann Marie Hochhalter. As Deputy Gardiner drove from Clement Park to the south parking lot, he received a second call: A shooter was in the school. He pulled his cruiser to the end of the south parking lot where he had a clear view of the west entrance to the high school. Eric Harris saw him and began shooting. The deputy shot back at Harris four times without hitting him. Harris and Klebold then ran into the school.

News was spreading that the school was under assault. People could hear the gunfire and explosions of the pipe bombs. Teachers and students were flooding from the school in panic. In addition, five other deputies from the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department arrived on campus. The scene was chaos. The sheriff’s deputies tried to get information from the students and teachers. This is what they reported:

As the first deputies arrived on campus, they were met by chaos and hysteria. Terrified students and teachers were fleeing in all directions from the high school in the suburban neighborhood. Others were still inside. The deputies could hear explosions coming from inside the school. The students were telling them about bombs, guns and hand grenades, and about gunmen with assault rifles and semiautomatics. There were other

reports of possible terrorists, four shooters, six shooters, seventeen-hostages. There was a man wearing a trench coat; there were two guys in trench coats. There was a guy in a white T-shirt, with a hat, not with a hat. The gunmen had changed clothes to blend in with the other students. There was a shooter on the roof. The gunmen were in the auditorium. No, they were in the cafeteria. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999)

A female student observed Brian Anderson staggering down the hall toward the library and Patti Nielson ducking into the library. She informed science teacher Dave Sanders, who was standing at the top of the stairs that led from the cafeteria to the upper-level of the school where the library and the science classrooms were. Sanders told the female student to go downstairs. At just about this time, Harris and Klebold entered the building through the west doors. They began shooting and walking in an easterly direction, laughing as they were shooting.

A teacher and several students were in the hall. Klebold suddenly ran down the hall shooting, wounding student Stephanie Munson in the ankle. She escaped by running past the administrative offices through the eastern entrance of the high school into the teachers' parking lot. Klebold stopped in front of a bank of telephones, turned around, and returned to where Harris was standing at the intersection of the halls. At this point, Sanders and the custodians were frantically trying to herd kids away from danger. As Sanders rounded the corner into the West Hall, he saw Harris and Klebold, who also saw him. He turned around in an attempt to retrace his steps back towards the stairs that led to the cafeteria. However, as he did so, he was shot twice in the back. He staggered around the corner and collapsed on the floor. He then crawled to the science hallway. Several students pulled him into a science classroom and administered first aid.

By this time, the halls were empty. Students were either hiding in rooms with the doors blockaded or had fled from the building and were being redirected toward Leawood Park, which was across Pierce Avenue, to the east of school. Harris and Klebold, apparently uncertain about what to do next, began walking up and down the library hall shooting their weapons and randomly throwing bombs.

At 11:29 A.M., they stopped in front of the library doors. The fifty-two students in the library had been told by Patti Nielson to hide under the desks. Nielson, hiding under the front counter, was on the phone to the 911 operator. Harris and Klebold entered the library, shouting, "Get up! All athletes stand up," and "Anybody with a white hat [part of the uniform of the athletes] or a sports emblem

on it is dead. Today is your day to die.” When nobody stood up, Harris said, “Fine, then I’ll just start shooting.” He fired his shotgun across the front counter. Flying splinters injured Evan Todd, who was hiding behind the copier machine at the end of the counter. Harris and Klebold then walked from the front counter of the library toward the windows. As they passed Kyle Velasquez, who was sitting at the computer table, Klebold shot him, killing him. The two gunmen set down their duffel bags, which were filled with pipe bombs, Molotov cocktails, CO₂ canisters, and ammunition. The boys then fired through the windows at fleeing students and law enforcement personnel. Fire was returned, forcing them to back away from the windows.

At this point, Harris and Klebold began their killing in earnest. In the next 7 1/2 minutes, they killed ten and injured twelve of their fellow students. After backing away from the windows, Dylan Klebold turned to his left and fired his shotgun, wounding Daniel Steepleton, Makai Hall, and Patrick Ireland, all who were hiding under a table. Patrick Ireland, although wounded, began administering first aid to Makai, whose leg was gushing blood. Ireland was shot again. All three boys survived their wounds. Patrick floated in and out of consciousness. After the assault was over, he crawled to the window where he was helped out by firemen and placed onto the top of a fire emergency vehicle that had been driven there to rescue him.

Klebold then took off his trench coat and dropped it on the floor. Harris turned to his right and shot Stephen Curnow at close range, killing him instantly. He also shot at Kasey Ruegsegger, injuring her. The boys were laughing and enjoying themselves immensely. Some girls were overheard to ask, “Why are you doing this?” They answered, “We’ve always wanted to do this. This is payback. We’ve dreamed of doing this for four years. This is for all the shit you put us through. This is what you deserve” (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office 1999; Zoba 2000, 34).

Harris turned to his left and walked to a nearby table. Rapping it with his knuckles, he taunted, “peek-a-boo,” and stuck his shotgun under the table. With a single blast, he killed Cassie Bernall. However, the gun recoiled and smashed into Harris’s face, breaking his nose. He was momentarily stunned, and blood began to flow from his nose. He then turned to Bree Pasquale and asked her if she wanted to die. As she was pleading for her life, he laughed and said, “Everyone’s gonna die. We’re gonna blow up the school anyway.” Meanwhile, Klebold had moved to a table adjacent to the one under which Cassie Bernall was hiding. He spied Isaiah Sholes, a black student. Klebold said, “Hey look, there’s that little nigger,” and began pulling Isaiah out from underneath the table. This

comment seemed to snap Eric Harris out of his daze, and he walked over to the table and shot Isaiah point blank three times, killing him. Dylan stated, "Man, I didn't know black brains could fly that far." Dylan then shot under the table several times, killing Matthew Kechter. Eric Harris threw a CO₂ canister underneath the table where Daniel Steepleton, Makai Hall, and Patrick Ireland were lying wounded. Makai Hall grabbed the canister and threw it in a southerly direction where it exploded without injuring anybody.

Harris and Klebold then walked toward the stacks in the middle of the room. Eric jumped on a table. He grabbed the top of one of the bookcases and attempted to tip it over, cursing at his failed effort. Harris shot his gun into a southerly direction between the bookshelves at nobody in particular. Klebold headed toward the library door, turned to his right, and shot out the display case just to the south the library door. Then he walked around the display case and shot at Mark Kintgen who was hiding underneath the table nearest the case, injuring him. Klebold then noticed Lisa Kreutz, Valeen Schnurr, Jeanna Park, Kelly Fleming, Diwata Perez, and Lauren Townsend huddled together underneath the next table. The first shot injured Lisa Kreutz and Valeen Schnurr. Dylan shot his gun as fast as it would fire, killing Lauren Townsend.

Eric, walking toward Dylan, looked under a table where two girls were hiding, and said, "Pathetic." Valeen Schnurr, who was seriously wounded, was crying, "Oh my God, oh my God." Overhearing Valeen's pleas, Dylan asked, "Do you believe in God?" She responded, "Yes." He said, "Why?" and walked away.

Harris and Klebold then headed south along the eastern side of the library. They stopped at a nearby table, and Harris shot underneath, wounding Nicole Nowlen and John Tomlin. Tomlin crawled out from under the table, and Klebold shot him dead. The boys then turned, traversing back toward the table where the girls were hiding, and shot under it several times, killing Kelly Fleming and injuring Jeanna Park and Lisa Kreutz.

The shooters then walked to the middle of the library between the stacks, where they reloaded their guns. Eric Harris noticed somebody under an adjacent table. He shouted, "Who is under the table? Identify yourself!"

It was John Savage, a former friend of Dylan and a boy both shooters knew. He identified himself and asked Klebold what he was doing, to which Klebold responded, "Oh, just killing people."

Savage asked, "Are you going to kill me?"

Klebold hesitated and told Savage to leave, which he did. Another student under the same table did not fare so well. Eric Harris went over to the table and shot Daniel Mauser dead. The boys moved south to a table under which several

students were hiding. One of the young gunmen said to the other, “I have been waiting to do this for a long time.” The other responded, “You know what else I want to do?” His partner responded, “Yeah, to stab someone.”

They opened a barrage of fire, killing Cory DePooter and injuring Jennifer Doyle and Austin Eubanks. It was 11:35 A.M. Harris and Klebold left the library and walked into the science area. Their actions now seemed disjointed and random. They shot into empty science rooms. They saw students who were hiding and apparently did nothing. They taped a Molotov cocktail to a science room door, which started a small fire that was later put out by a faculty member. They then walked down the stairs to the cafeteria.

The apparent reason for Harris and Klebold’s return to the cafeteria was to explode the propane bombs that they had made and to create a conflagration of serious proportions. Upon entry into the cafeteria, Eric knelt on one knee, resting his rifle on the banister of the stairs leading into the cafeteria, and fired several shots at one of the bombs. Again, nothing happened. Dylan went over to the bomb and fiddled with it. He then stepped away from the bomb and threw either a pipe bomb or a CO₂ canister toward it, which exploded and started a fire. Still the propane bombs did not explode. The boys left the cafeteria, taking drinks of water from containers left by fleeing students. The fire in the cafeteria was eventually extinguished by the sprinkler system.

The boys returned to the library at noon, which was deserted with the exception of the dead and those wounded who could not move. According to the coroner, the boys committed suicide by firing bullets through their heads. Although the rampage lasted about forty-five minutes, because of the confusion and slowness of the police to secure the premises, some researchers mistakenly reported that it was four hours long (Newman 2004, 154).¹

AFTERMATH

The fallout from the Columbine shootings was immediate and terrifying. The country was horrified. The attack on Columbine was unprecedented in its magnitude, body count, and viciousness. President Bill Clinton addressed the nation, stating that he was shocked and saddened by the shootings and offered condolences to the members of the Columbine community (Stout 1999). Vice President Al Gore was dispatched to Colorado to attend the April 25th memorial services for the victims of the Columbine massacre. The shootings lead network news programs for several days. Talk shows were inundated with telephone calls from people expressing opinions about the shootings and the state of today’s youth.

On National Public Radio, listeners called in to relate how they, too, were bullied and terrorized as high school students.

The country was convulsed into fits of self-reflection and finger-pointing. Debates on bullying, access to guns, violent video games and television shows, rock-and-roll music, parenting, and school security were renewed. Blame for the assaults focused on gun culture and the ease by which weaponry could be obtained, the so-called goth youth subculture, lack of parental supervision, and of course, a general lack of values (Gibbs and Roche 1999; Staten 1999; Verhovek 1999).

Harris and Klebold hoped that their act would generate a massive revolt. In one of the videotapes, Harris said, "We're going to kick-start a revolution" among the dispossessed and despised students of the world (Gibbs and Roche 1999). Although they did not engender a revolution, their acts resonated among students who had been bullied and humiliated by their peers. In the weeks following the Columbine High School shootings, schools across the country experienced thousands of bomb scares, scores of attempted bombings, and several attempted copy-cat killings (Emergency Net 1999). The two self-styled revolutionaries partially achieved their apocalyptic vision of a nationwide revolt. The most serious incident occurred in Taber, a farming community of 7,200 people, located about 110 miles southeast of Calgary, Alberta. On Wednesday, April 21, the day after Columbine, a student opened fire with a sawed-off .22-caliber rifle at W. R. Myers High School, killing one student and seriously wounding another. On April 23, in a town outside Baton Rouge, Louisiana, two fourteen-year-old boys were arrested for shooting and wounding a fellow student at a middle school. Four boys were charged with planning a rampage killing at Hollins Woods Middle School in Port Huron, Michigan, on May 15. On May 20, a boy upset with his girlfriend brought a gun to Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia, and attempted to shoot her.

Terrified school administrators hardened their school environments by increasing hall patrols, installing metal detectors and security cameras, recording all incoming telephone calls, meeting and coordinating security policies with local police, and mandating zero tolerance antiviolence policies, many of which abrogated the First Amendment rights of students. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was swamped with telephone calls from students and parents complaining about the arbitrary suspensions and expulsions of students for writing satirical essays, wearing trench coats, black clothing, or Marilyn Manson T-shirts to school. Many expressed opinions that might have been construed as sympathetic to Harris and Klebold (Graves 1999).

Since the initial reaction, numerous other school shootings have occurred, including a rampage killing by Charles "Andy" Williams in Santee, California,

on March 5, 2001, in which he killed two students and wounded thirteen others. Williams claimed to be exacting revenge for the bullying and intimidation he received from his peers (Roth 2001). Less than three weeks later, on March 22, 2001, at neighboring Granite Hills High School, former student Jason Hoffman shot and wounded five persons before he was shot and disabled by a school security officer. Between those two shootings, on March 7, Elizabeth Bush wounded a fellow student in the cafeteria at Bishop Newman High School, in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. She was a victim of teasing by her peers. Of the twenty school shootings in which persons were injured or killed since 1996, this was the only one perpetrated by a female. On September 24, 1993, Jason McLaughlin killed two fellow students at Rocori High School in Cold Springs, Minnesota. McLaughlin claimed that one of the victims had bullied him; the second death was the result of a stray bullet.

On March 22, 2005, Jeffrey Wiese, the grandson of the former tribal police chief of the Ojibwa nation, killed his grandparents, five fellow students, a security guard, and himself in a rampage shooting at his high school on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota, in the worst shooting since Columbine (Wilogoren 2005b). Wiese patterned his attack after Columbine by wearing a black trench coat to the school and asking a fellow student if he believed in God before killing him. Wiese, like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, flirted with Nazism, posting messages on Nazi web sites under the names of “Native Nazi” and “Todesengel,” German for “angel of death.” He complained of lack of pride and advocated racial purity among members of his tribe (Wilogoren 2005a). At the time of the shootings, he was being home-schooled because of threats that he had made toward the school.

Columbine is arguably the most famous high school in America. Its name is synonymous with the rampage killings of Harris and Klebold. In the wake of the shootings, a new term, the “Columbine effect,” has emerged, which refers to the increased willingness of students to inform authorities when they hear of an act of violence about to be committed by their peers. Prior to Columbine, this did not happen. In the post-Columbine period, numerous plans of violent adolescents have been disrupted, including the capture of Al Joseph DeGuzman, on February 1, 2001. DeGuzman planned a shooting rampage at De Anza College in California and had stockpiled weapons and bombs in preparation for the assault, which was planned for February 2nd. In November 2001, an attempt at a rampage shooting in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was foiled because a student overheard the plans and reported them to authorities. The planned attack was conspicuously modeled after Columbine (Butterfield and McFadden 2001).

Meanwhile, in Columbine, just to the west of Littleton, Colorado, what was once just another newly-developed affluent suburb with its tracts of three-, four-, and five-bedroom houses on winding streets with a spectacular view of the Rocky Mountains, emotions ran rampant. Three processes were occurring simultaneously and mutually contradictorily. First was the necessary gathering together and mourning of a community in great pain over the loss of its children and a teacher. Second were recriminations, assessment of blame, and questioning of the behavior of authorities, both prior to and subsequent to the attacks. Third was the media circus.

From the moment the shootings began, confusion reigned. News of the shootings was communicated rapidly throughout the valley. Within the first minutes of the attack, children inside the school were calling parents and 911 on their cell phones. The news media were alerted and had crews on the scene by 11:30 A.M. Brooks Brown, a friend of Eric Harris, had encountered, by pure happenstance, Eric in the parking lot just minutes prior to the assault. Harris told him to go home immediately and not look back. He went to smoke a cigarette, unaware of what was happening. When he realized that Eric and Dylan were attacking the school, he phoned first the police and then his father, and again he called the police. Panicked parents approached the school and were told by police officers that they would not be allowed near the school and that they were to pick up their children at the Leewood Elementary School gymnasium, which was located a few blocks away. Anxious parents had to wait as school buses ferried students from Columbine High School to the elementary school. As each school bus pulled up, relieved parents hugged and kissed their children in tearful reunions. However, confusion and apprehension grew later in the afternoon as waiting parents were told that more buses were coming. When it was determined that no more buses would be arriving from the high school, horrified parents understood that their children was either dead or seriously wounded. They were inconsolable; several parents walked out of the gymnasium and vomited.

Harris and Klebold compiled hit lists that numbered sixty-seven students against whom they had grudges. Their behavior during the rampage seems to indicate that if they came across people they actually disliked, they would have killed them, but they encountered only two persons who were specifically mentioned in their hit lists. The names on their lists have not been revealed by the police, although they revealed that apparently one person on a hit list was wounded in the assault. Apparently, the other one was not hurt. Specific targets were not the goal of Harris and Klebold; they were there to inflict pain on the entire community. If that was their goal, then they surely succeeded.

Columbine High School was not just a good school; it was one of the best schools in the state. Its students won academic honors. Its sports teams, especially its football and soccer teams, were perennial contenders for state championships; their football team, the Rebels, won the state championship in their division in 2000, 2001, and in 2003 (Tobias 1999). Their marching band had recently marched in the Fiesta Bowl and Rose Bowl Parades; the band finished sixth in state competition. Columbine High School cultivated an image of clean-living, God-fearing, virtuous youth. The school won Jefferson County's Paul Davis Sportsmanship Award two years running (Kurtz 1999). Columbine students averaged in the seventy-first percentile in reading and the seventy-sixth percentile in math nationwide; 82 percent of its seniors go on to college. Ninety-one percent of the teachers at Columbine are teaching in their own area of expertise (*Columbine High School* 2001).

The shootings came as a terrible shock to what had been a self-satisfied community. On television, on April 20, 1999, a burning image of the shock of the community was portrayed by a teacher, her keys hanging from a blue and white Columbine Rebels' lanyard around her neck, crying out over and over, "How could this happen here?"

Because Columbine is in unincorporated territory, government seems to be at arm's length. Governmental services, including education, are provided by Jefferson County whose offices are located in Golden, about fifteen to twenty miles away. The city of Littleton is several miles to the east and is in neighboring Arapaho County. Southern Jefferson County has no town hall, no post office, and no police department. Much closer, the local community is held together more intimately by its many religious institutions. It is not surprising that the clergy were the most visible leaders in the healing process. Churches were opened to anyone who needed comforting; youth groups gathered daily. A major response to the horror of the shootings was to present Columbine as a majority of residents viewed it: patriotic, religious, and unified in its opposition to the evil perpetrated by Harris and Klebold. Beginning with the memorial service five days after the shootings, Americans became familiar with the call and response, "We are...Columbine!"

From President Clinton to Jerry Nelson, the pastor of Southern Gables Evangelical Free Church, people called for a time of reflection and healing. Prayers were given for the souls of the dead and for the recovery of the wounded. People prayed publicly and privately. Jonathan and Stephen Cohen, Columbine students, composed a song of comfort, entitled "Columbine, Friend of Mine." An excerpt reads:

*Can you still hear raging guns
Ending dreams of precious ones.
In God's sun, hope will come,
His red stain will take our pain.
Columbine, friend of mine.
Peace will come to you in time.
Columbine, friend of mine.*

Few communities in America are as culturally homogenous as Columbine. As in all communities, however, an event as momentous as a shooting is bound to create divisions. As time passed, the reflection and healing process looked more like the eye of a hurricane. Controversies broke out about the actions of the SWAT teams and the decisions made by Jefferson County Sheriff Stone. Residents asked how Harris and Klebold were able to arm themselves with semiautomatic weapons. Accusations about the harassment of students at Columbine High School by athletes and the laissez-faire attitude of the staff toward such behaviors were trumpeted in the media. The question of the culpability of the parents of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris was raised. Lawsuits proliferated: the parents of Isaiah Sholes filed suits against the Klebolds and HARRISES; the school district and the sheriff's office were sued for negligence because of failure to provide sufficient security at Columbine High School and failure to act on the early warning signs of Harris's and Klebold's violent attitudes. The Klebolds and HARRISES sued the sheriff's department over the ownership of their sons' videotapes made prior to the assault. Additionally, the sheriff's department was being sued by numerous complainants, including the parents of Daniel Rohrbough, who contended that their son was shot not by Klebold but by law-enforcement fire. The wife of Dave Sanders, the murdered teacher, sued over the delay in allowing emergency medical services personnel to minister to her husband's wounds, which resulted in his bleeding to death. Parents of the victims sued the three persons who procured weapons for Harris and Klebold.

In addition, whispers were heard among members of liberal Protestant sects concerning the evangelical cast of the memorial service. Reverend Jerry Nelson's veiled anti-Semitism in his sermon during the memorial service created controversy. The myth that Cassie Bernall was murdered because she said she believed in God caught on and spread through the evangelical community like wildfire. Tensions between evangelicals and liberal Protestants that had hitherto been suppressed emerged.

Columbine was the largest mass murder on American shores between the Oklahoma City bombing in 1996 and the attacks on the Pentagon and the World

Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It received extensive coverage for months in national media. After the initial coverage, local news outlets, especially the *Rocky Mountain News*, the *Denver Post*, and *Westword* (a local weekly), kept their readers updated on the police investigations, the various lawsuits, and reactions of the local communities to the shooting.

The Columbine shootings were the most intensively reported and investigated act of violence in the history of American education (Muschert 2002). To this day, there is no coherent explanation as to why Klebold and Harris took it upon themselves to try to destroy their high school and kill as many of their peers as possible. After months of investigation, John Stone, Sheriff of Jefferson County admitted:

In preparing this report, we have relied on the work of approximately 80 investigators from all levels of government. Under the direction of the Jefferson Sheriff's County Office, the investigators contacted students, teachers, and others who may have had information about the crime. In all, investigators concluded about 4,400 leads. They examined videotapes, 911 recordings, posted reports, medical and autopsy reports, and physical evidence collected at the scene and the conspirators' residences. ...

While this report establishes the record of events of April 20th, it cannot answer the fundamental question—WHY? That is, why would two young men, in the spring of their lives, choose to murder faculty and classmates? The evidence provides no definitive explanation, and the question continues to haunt us all (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999).

Because of its magnitude, the assault on Columbine High School has become an important sociocultural event. In the wake of the shootings, a variety of pundits have suggested numerous causal factors: harassment and bullying, video games, television violence, homophobia, religious hatred, mental illness, political liberalism, lack of values, easy access to weapons, rock-and-roll music, the goth youth subculture, lack of parental supervision, and even Jewish conspiracies. Some explanations are counterfactual, others may have some basis in fact but their influences may be different than originally thought, and still others may be suggestive but misguided. In addition, contributing factors, such as the influence of a paramilitary culture, have not been explored. As an example of counterfactual arguments, in the wake of the shootings, several web sites sprouted, suggesting Klebold and Harris's rampage was a Jewish conspiracy because Klebold's mother is Jewish, although the family occasionally attended

Lutheran services. Although Zoba (2000) rightfully maintained that religious hatred motivated the shootings, she failed to analyze why the boys hated evangelicals in the first place. If the boys were seeking retribution, the question arises, “Retribution for what?”

Despite all the speculation, there is no comprehensive understanding as to why it happened and why it happened where it did. What is it about Columbine that created a climate in which two boys could hate so much, define themselves as superhuman, and reserve for themselves the right to kill as many people as they possibly could? Although investigators repeatedly indicated that Klebold and Harris were equal opportunity haters, they were not equal opportunity killers. They went after their peers, their school, and their community. In order to piece together the reasons why Klebold and Harris engaged in their rampage, we need to investigate not only those factors that impinged upon their lives in the immediacy of family and peer relationships, but we must examine the institutions of our society and the cultural trends that contributed to their behavior.

In this book, several sources are explored, including interviews my wife, Debra Larkin, and I conducted with reporters, members of the community, Columbine students, religious leaders, and experts in the field, as well as media reports, books written about Columbine, and police investigation documents, in order to piece together a comprehensive understanding of the factors leading to the Columbine shootings. As a consequence of the investigation, several explanations could be ruled out immediately because of the lack of supporting data or because they were unverifiable assertions that could not possibly be explored empirically. In the former category were explanations such as political liberalism and lack of parental supervision. In the latter category were lack of values and the presence of Satan. It was obvious from the outset that the boys had easy access to a high-powered weapons and explosives. However, such access did not cause the shootings; rather, it enabled the shootings and bombings to occur. Another enabling factor was the use of violent video games, although not in the way alleged in the media. Rock-and-roll music and goth subcultures gave vent to feelings of alienation; however, whatever links there were between German industrial music, the boys’ favorite genre, and the shootings were, at best, tentative.

In this book, four major themes are explored in relation to the shootings:

- (1) the presence and tolerance of intimidation, harassment, and bullying within the halls of Columbine High School and on the streets of the larger community
- (2) religious intolerance and chauvinism in southern Jefferson County

- (3) the rise and popularity of paramilitary culture in Western states in the 1990s
- (4) the culture of celebrity in postmodern America. Subsumed within these four major themes are the roles of video games, television, rock-and-roll music, adolescent subcultures, and mental illness.