



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>

# 7

## FROM OKLAHOMA CITY TO COLUMBINE

**T**HE ASSAULT ON Columbine High School was a unique event in the history of American education. Prior to the attack, school shootings involved a lone and deranged student or former student bringing a gun to school and shooting at teachers and peers for real or imagined humiliations. Although the shooter may have obsessed over the actions prior to the shootings, the actual act tended to be either a rampage or a targeting of a specific individual or small group. The exception to this is Jonesboro, where two boys ransacked their fathers' gun cabinet, took weapons to their middle school, set off a fire alarm, and as the school was evacuated, began shooting at girls and female teachers in an apparent retaliation by the older shooter, Mitchell Johnson, for being rejected by a girl (Domestic Violence Project 1998). In none of these cases, did the assailants plan to blow up their school. None engaged in long-term planning, collected explosives and weaponry, employed diversionary tactics, reconnoitered their school, tested their weaponry, or thought about killing hundreds of students, devising ways that would maximize the destruction.

The Columbine attack was planned over a period of at least eight months. Even though the actual attack ended up as a rampage with Harris and Klebold shooting wildly and randomly killing peers, they conducted what they planned as a "strategic military assault" (Gibbs and Roche 1999). Although puny by the standards of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, the boys were

heavily armed for an assault on a school: Each had a sawed off shotgun; Klebold had a TEC-9 semiautomatic handgun; Harris carried a Hi-Point 9 mm carbine rifle. Between the two of them, they had four knives, described in Chapter 1. They carried shotgun shells in utility belts, ammunition and CO<sub>2</sub> bombs in their cargo pants pockets. They also carried bombs in a duffel bag. They hauled two twenty-gallon propane tank bombs into the school cafeteria that were timed to explode at 11:17 A.M., when the lunch area was most crowded (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999). Why did Harris and Klebold want to create so much destruction? Where did they get the idea to blow up their school? What social and cultural forces influenced their ideas and behaviors? Why did they adopt paramilitary tactics in their assault on Columbine? What were the roles of each young man in the planning and the assault?

## ERIC HARRIS AND NAZI SKINHEADS

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris, the putative leader of the two boys, was dressed in classical paramilitary style: he wore black cargo pants held up with suspenders, combat boots, short-cropped hair, and his own personal twist, a T-shirt with the words, "Natural Selection." Such an outfit would have made him feel right at home in a gang of Nazis skinheads (Finnigan 1998; Ridgeway 1995). Moore (1993) described skinhead attire as characterized by the wearing of red tag Levi pants and jackets, flight jackets, and braces (suspenders). They also wore Doc Marten boots and T-shirts with the phrase, "No Remorse."

Eric Harris was not a member of a skinhead gang, nor is there any evidence that he had friends who were skinheads. He did, however, identify himself as a "Goth" on his web site and adopted many aspects of skinhead culture. Although both goth and skinhead youth subcultures are outcast groups, they are derived from quite different constituencies and have quite different norms, values, and behaviors. Goth is a vague and generic term that can refer to such ephemera as dressing styles and musical tastes (Hodkinson 2002). Goth youth subcultures tend to be found in middle-class high schools and contain students who may be artsy or intellectual but are alienated from the dominant student culture inhabited by jocks and their hangers-on. The mode of dress is black; clothes are often obtained from secondhand stores and further individualized by cutting holes, sewing on rock band insignia, or splashing with bleach or dye. Although there is truly no such thing as goth music, a number of rock bands, such as The Sisters of Mercy, Christian Death, Switchblade Symphony, Cruxshadows, and Marilyn Manson seemed to be associated with goth culture. Because goths are so individualized

and their subcultures are localized, there is little agreement on what constitutes goth subcultures.

Skinhead subculture is an entirely different phenomenon. Skinhead subculture might be called “in-your-face.” Skinheads are aggressive and hypermasculine where goths are ethereal and androgynous. Eric Harris did not use makeup and eyeliner or eye shadow, nor did he always wear black to school, although the trench coat he wore was apparently black. The politics of goth is that of cultural disaffection without an overtly political view. Although skinheads are culturally disaffected, their politics are openly right wing, nativist, and authoritarian (Moore 1993; Ridgeway 1995).

Other than an anomalous link to a web site entitled “Why Skinheads Suck,” Eric Harris’s website seems to be strongly influenced by Nazi skinhead ideology. Because of their antirationalism, skinheads do not have what would be considered a coherent ideology. However, skinheads share certain core beliefs (Moore 1993): anti-Semitism, racism, nativism, white supremacy, homophobia, working-class identity, nihilism, and glorification of violence. Skinheads have been closely aligned with the Ku Klux Klan and Tom Metzger’s White Aryan Resistance (WAR) organization, a virulent racist and anti-Semitic neo-Nazi organization that has ties to the Klan. With the exception of working-class identity, middle-class Eric Harris’s writings fit quite easily into the skinhead belief system.

The term “Natural Selection,” which was written across the T-shirt that Harris wore on the day of the massacre, refers to the white supremacist belief that those of Nordic background are superior not only to persons of color (mud people) but also to what racists referred to as “mixed breeds” such as Hispanics and southern Italians. Although other people, such as jocks and cheerleaders, are vilified in his web site, anti-Semitic and racist sentiments are laced throughout his web pages. For example:

- The holocaust never happened, but it would have been cool if it had.
- Negroes need to put down their forties [a reference to forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor supposedly popular in African American urban ghettos] and head back to Africa.
- Four “Hiel [*sic*] Hitlers”
- Hitler was an old school goth! He did not die in vain! Neither shall I!
- Littleton, Colorado, isn’t a great place to grow up as a white boy. If I had my druthers, I’d be anywhere else at all, even in some place with lots of malt-liquor-drinking, rhyme-busting, ass-capping Negroes and perhaps a few squinty-eyed, dog-eating Chinese people!

- [If] you're not a jock, jew or jiggaboo, not a wop, spic or country hick, not a jap, slant or my old gypsy aunt and want to get with the program, send me an email[.]

So where does a middle-class white teenager obtain such ideas? Clearly, Eric Harris adulated Adolf Hitler, a person who ranks high in the American pantheon of evildoers. His racism extends beyond mere denigration of blacks to Asians, Hispanics, and southern Italians. He is virulently anti-Semitic, adhering to the counterfactual claim that the Holocaust never occurred. He identifies himself as a goth on his web site: "By nature, I'm fairly depressed most of the time. It pretty much goes with the territory when you're a middle-American suburban goth with a penchant for computer gaming and bomb making." He then identifies affinities between himself and Adolf Hitler and "Goths," as noted above.

Skinheads have been responsible for numerous unprovoked attacks on gays. Moore (1993) quotes a 1987 skinhead publication: "[S]kinheads worldwide are warriors. We never run away, back down, or sellout. We despise the traitors, the cowards, the apathetic and limp wristed queers. We will fight forever to defend our people and our land. Our heads are shaved for battle" (84).

Moore suggests that skinheads tended to be less obsessed with the sexual behavior of gays than with their political liberalism. He noted that skinheads seem to be angry with gays for more political than sexual reasons. (Eric's homophobia was discussed in the previous chapter.)

Evidence of Eric's anti-Semitism has been presented above. In comparison to skinhead anti-Semitism, with the exception of the adulation of Adolf Hitler, Eric Harris seems quite muted. Although he expresses anti-Semitic sentiments, he is not obsessed with Jewish conspiracies, proclaiming the validity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or reading from *The Turner Diaries*, both of which are staples of right-wing anti-Semitism.

No doubt both Eric and Dylan had racist tendencies. Ironically, when Eric tended to portray himself as not racist, he came up with a racist rant:

YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE!!!!?– RACISM!!! Anyone who hate [sic] blacks, asians, mexicans, or people from any other country or race just because they arent [sic] from here or are a different color ... whoopie freakin doo man. And that goes for black people too. I've seen people on Ricki Lake or Opra or whatever saying things like "white boy, whitey, you say dat cuz you be white, yea. You white people all du same. She be white. So she baaad, I bet he did dat stuff cuz he a white boy" alllll that stuff just pisses me off to no end. It is possible for BLACKS to be RACIST to [sic]

ya KNOW ... people who think that should be dragged out onto the street. Have their arms ripped off. Then burnt shut at the stumps, and have every person of the race that YOU hate come out and beat the crap out of you. You people are the scum of society and arent [*sic*] worth a damn piece of worm crap. You are all trash. And don't let me catch you making fun of someone just because they are a different color because I will come in and break your f\*ck\*ng legs with a plastic spoon. i dont [*sic*] care how long it takes! And that's both legs mind you (Harris 1999; emphasis in the original).

While condemning the very racism that is in evidence in other parts of his web site, Eric Harris focuses in on black racism rather than the racism of whites against blacks of which he is obviously guilty.

Perhaps the most grisly evidence of the boys' racism occurred in the library, when they confronted Isaiah Sholes, one of the very few black students attending Columbine High School. When Dylan saw him, he said, "Hey look, there's that little nigger," and took him from beneath the table where he was hiding. Eric walked over and shot Isaiah point blank, killing him instantly. Dylan stated, "Man, I didn't know black brains could fly that far." Isaiah Sholes was selected for death by Klebold and Harris because he was black.

Perhaps the greatest affinity with skinhead culture exists in Eric Harris's nihilism and penchant for violence. In Eric's writings, these two characteristics were merged. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, in the basement tapes, stated that they had achieved a higher level of consciousness than mere mortals; they were God-like and had taken upon themselves to determine who would live and who would die (Gibbs and Roche 1999). On his web site, under the heading "philosophy," he wrote the following:

My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don't like it, you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die. If I do something incorrect, oh fucking well, you die. Dead people cant[*sic*] do many things, like argue, whine, bitch, complain, narc, rat out, criticize, or even fucking talk. So that's the only way to solve arguments with all you fuckheads out there, I just kill! God I can't wait till I can kill you people. I'll just go to some downtown area in some big ass city and blow up and shoot everything I can. Feel no remorse, no sense of shame. Ich sage FICT DU! [N.B.: German for "I say fuck you."] I will rig up explosives all over a town and detonate each one of them after I mow down a whole fucking area full of you snotty ass rich motherfucking

high strung godlike attitude having worthless pieces of shit whores [*sic*]. I don't care if I live or die in the shoot out, all I want to do is to kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can. ... (Columbine Research Site 2003, 10,417).

Eric Harris and skinheads maintained a wide-ranging hatred against those who were not like themselves, and neither was apparently hesitant to act upon that hatred. The literature on skinheads is replete with examples of precipitate and vicious violence against others, such as beating, stomping, knifing, and shooting putative enemies, including former members who dropped out of the organization and thus became "turncoats," members of minority groups, and leftists (Finnigan 1998; Moore 1993; Ridgeway 1995).

Eric Harris appears to be the theorist of the shootings; he wrote extensively on his web site about his hatred and his experiences in school. Dylan did not express himself as openly as Eric, but apparently he was every bit as angry. According to a mutual friend,

Dylan was just as upset [as Eric] about the way the school was. Easily just as upset. He was possibly more angry than Eric was; he just had no outlet for it. Eric let his anger out. Whether it was his website, whether it was threatening people, ... whatever it was. Whereas Eric constantly let his anger out, Dylan didn't really have that. So I actually think he was angrier about the situation than Eric was because he had no outlet (Recorded December 3, 2003).

Prior to the Columbine attack, Eric and Dylan acted upon their anger by vandalizing homes of people whom they regarded as enemies or people who had slighted them in some way. Eric chronicled their exploits on his web site under the title "Mission Logs." The acts of vandalism described in the web site were validated by a Columbine resident whose house was vandalized in ways similar to Eric Harris's descriptions. As part of their personas as members of a paramilitary terrorist group, they adopted *noms de guerre*. Eric was known as "REB," short for "rebel." Dylan's alias was "VoDKa," which was the name of his favorite drink with his initials capitalized (Gibbs and Roche 1999).

Harris and Klebold formed an underground collective. It included the two boys plus an unknown person, possibly their friend, Chris Morris. Harris described the group:

Ok people, I'm gonna let you in on the big secret of our clan. We ain't no god damn stupid ass quake clan! [NB: a reference to an organization

called, “Godz like us,” which is apparently a group of people who play the video game, “Quake,” and maintain a web site.] We are more of a gang. We plan and execute missions. Anyone who pisses us off, we do a little deed to their house. Eggs, teepee [toilet paper] superglue, busy boxes, large amounts of fireworks, you name it and we will probably or already have done it. We have many enemies in our school, therefore we make many missions. It is sort of a nighttime tradition for us (Columbine Research Site 2003, JC-001-010421).

On his web site, he described Mission no. 6 in great detail. Below is an edited version:

Awww yeya. This mission was so fuckin fun man. ... Beforehand we watched as some lights in the target's house went on ... then off. Maybe the bastard heard something. But when the strip [of firecrackers] started, he turned his bedroom lights off. The strip lasted for about 30 seconds. ... It was very fucking long. Almost all of it went off. Loud and bright. Everything worked exactly how we wanted it to ... the first target's lights were on-again in the bedroom, but we think we got away undetected. While we were walking to the next target, we shot some stuff. Heh, VoDKa brought his sawed off BB gun and a few BB's too. So we loaded, pumped, and fired off a few shots at some houses and trees and stuff. We probably didn't do any damage to any houses, but we arent [sic] sure. The gun was not loud at all, which was very good. At the next target, we set up the Saturn missile battery and the rockets. These both have fuses about 2–3 feet long. I lit them as VoDKa and KiBBz were over hiding in the shadows.

In addition to these exploits, Harris and Klebold were suspected of other acts of vandalism, such as putting a hose through a mail slot, turning on the water, and flooding the house. They also squirted superglue into house locks, rendering them inoperable. They vandalized property, victimized other people, and wrote about it gleefully.

Although Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shared the towering rage that motivates skinheads to violence, prior to the Columbine shootings, violence was expressed in the form of making and setting off bombs, theft, vandalism, death threats, and fantasies. Skinheads tend to express their violence directly in the form of beatings, knifings, and shootings, emphasizing direct physical violence. Skinheads have a reputation for stomping their antagonists. Eric and Dylan expressed



their violence in more indirect and devious ways, doing everything they could to avoid being caught.

So how does a middle-class suburban teenager figure that he can carry out a paramilitary attack on his high school, bomb it, burn it to the ground, and kill as many of his fellow students as he possibly could? As Eric stated in his web site:

We of the Trenchcoat Mafia still march around, military-style in our trenchcoats, [*sic*] especially in the school hallways, honing and developing our master plan. We will conquer the entire world once we get a few things straight and make our bombs! ... Our master plan is to kill at least 500 people at our high school, besiege the local neighborhood, seize the airport, and then crash a plane full of jocks and cheerleaders into the Pentagon.

Although Eric Harris mixes purposeful plans with fantasy, he was deadly serious about wanting to kill five hundred students. He carefully created a plan with Dylan Klebold that could have killed hundreds. His flight of imagination was prescient, prefiguring the attacks of 9/11. No high school student in American history had attempted to carry out such a deadly plot.

## YOUTH AND HISTORY

The normative view is that youths live outside history. Their behavior is not perceived as being influenced by national events. The factors that impress upon their lives pretty much end at the boundaries of the local community, although city, county, and state budgets may influence the educational, recreational, and social services they receive. James Garbarino is probably the leading researcher in the field of youth violence and victimization. With Ellen deLara, he wrote the definitive book on the emotional costs of bullying (Garbarino and deLara 2002). Central to his theme is that school bullying is institutional violence for which the institution must, but seldom does, take responsibility. He applies a systems approach to the analysis of school violence; according to Garbarino, "In a system, all people in all parts of the system are interconnected" (11). Although he mentions national trends in this analysis, he focuses on the institutional level. Talcott Parsons (1951) has suggested that the same integrative forces operate at the societal level of social organization as at the institutional level and that institutional processes are influenced by what occurs at the societal level of organization. Therefore, school violence is part of a larger issue of societal violence.

It is mentally facile to view youth as being merely acted upon by history as opposed to learning from history and acting on those lessons. For example, the vanguard of most social movements tend to be the young (Gillis 1974), whether peasants revolting against the depredations of the landlord, soldiers fighting for land and a way of life, or workers striking against capital. The 1960s witnessed a unique occurrence. Instead of young people identifying with the commune, the ethnic group, the country, or a socioeconomic class, they struggled together *as youth* against the “establishment.” Those old enough may remember the youth movement aphorism, “Don’t trust anybody over 30” (Rubin 1970), and the so-called generation gap. Between 1964 and 1969, an international youth movement began in United States, spread to Europe, including Eastern Europe, and Japan. “Youth,” no longer a convenient social category, was a cohesive social collectivity that was struggling for its own interests, politically and culturally. The 1960s witnessed a middle-class youth movement, variously called the “student movement,” the “antiwar movement,” “the counterculture,” or the “hippie movement” (Foss and Larkin 1976).

The movements of the 1960s began on February 1, 1960, when four African American students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, an all-black school, sat in a segregated lunch counter at F. W. Woolworth in Greensboro, North Carolina (Newhouse 1966). From that sit-in emerged the Civil Rights Movement, led by the more adult Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the younger, more radical, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”). After the voter registration drive in the summer of 1964, the black members of SNCC told the white members that the problem of racism was located in the white community and white students’ responsibility was to organize their own community against racism.

The middle-class youth movement began in 1964 in the San Francisco Bay area. Two phenomena were happening simultaneously: teenagers were dropping out of their suburban high schools to live with no visible means of support in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. These young cultural dissidents became known as “hippies” (Cavan 1972). Meanwhile, across the bay at the University of California, student activists, returning from their experiences of racism and oppression while trying to register black voters in Mississippi, set up recruiting tables along Telegraph Avenue. The university administration told them that they could not engage in political activities on campus; when they refused to move, they were arrested by campus police. Using the nonviolent techniques they learned in the South, student activists convened a sit-in at the administration building, effectively shutting the school down. This was called the “Berkeley Free Speech Movement” (FSM); student discontents dramatically expanded from the

exclusion of political activism on campus to *en loco parentis* regulations, lack of access to professors, and the dehumanized way in which students were treated (Mehnert 1976). The middle-class youth movement was at its most radical when cultural and political wings merged in 1968, creating the freak radical, who smoked dope, lived in a commune, took LSD and other psychedelic drugs, engaged in promiscuous sex, and protested everything from local vagrancy regulations to the prosecution of the war in Vietnam (Foss 1972).

By early 1970, the middle-class youth movement was in visible decline. Between the mythical Woodstock festival in mid-August 1969, and the disaster at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont in January of 1970, the movement began to come apart at the seams. The counterculture was shaken by the vicious murders of the pregnant Sharon Tate, Abigail Folger, and Voytek Frykowski at the home of Roman Polanski, Sharon Tate's husband, committed by members of the Charles Manson family. Although the murders occurred a few days prior to Woodstock, it was not until shortly after that people realized that the murders occurred within the counterculture. By the spring of 1970, the major organization of the political arm of the youth movement, Students for Democratic Society (SDS), had split into two bizarre organizations: Progressive Labor, a Marxist-Leninist sect that had plotted to take over SDS for several years (when it did, there was nothing left); and the Weather Underground, popularly known as the "Weathermen," who named themselves after Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," a song that had the lyrics, "You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." The Weathermen was a terrorist underground organization that engaged in acts of sabotage, robberies, and, ultimately, murder (Sale 1974). Hard rock gave way to softer, folk rock. The Beatles disbanded, singing to their disillusioned audiences, "Let It Be." The function of the Beatles since the early sixties was to express the current movement interpretation of reality in its most artful forms. Their movie *Yellow Submarine* was literally an allegory of the youth movement of the sixties, although unlike the sixties, it had a happy ending.

Yet, as the middle-class youth movement was declining, the dissidence it had addressed was spreading to women, gays, young workers, the military, and to high schools. The sexism of the New Left of the middle-class youth movement led to a schism in the 1970s with the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) (Evans 1979; Freeman 1975; Morgan 1970). The WLM became increasingly radical until about 1973, when the radical wing was superseded by corporate feminism, and the critique of sexism and patriarchy was overtaken by demands for equal access to positions in the labor force. Radical feminism, with its politicization of lesbianism, raised the issue of sexual orientation. In 1969, the

Gay Liberation Movement began with the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village of New York City (Duberman 1993).

As important, but less chronicled, was the rising dissidence of working-class youth. Young workers, to the horror of management and the disdain of older workers, were demonstrating their alienation by excessive tardiness and absenteeism, willful production of shoddy merchandise, and participation in wildcat strikes (Aronowitz 1973). Emblematic of working-class dissidence were the strikes of the General Motors plants in Lordstown, Ohio, in 1972 (Weller 1973). Younger workers did not have the work ethic of the older generation; they listened to rock music and smoked marijuana. Although they did not take pride in the objects they produced, they did take pride in the way they could challenge management and disrupt the productive process.

Of course, another sector of the working-class was the “grunts” who were being sent to Vietnam, ostensibly to make the world safe for democracy. By 1973, the world’s greatest fighting force had been paralyzed to the point of being incapable of prosecuting the war. This situation forced President Nixon to engage in a policy of Vietnamization, that is, getting the South Vietnamese to carry on a war that American soldiers were unwilling and unable to conduct. Indiscipline among the troops had risen to an all-time high (*United States Army MPs in Vietnam, 1962–1975*). Between 1969 and 1973, approximately 2000 commissioned officers were either murdered or killed under suspicious circumstances by members of the troops they were leading. In many cases, officers in fear for their lives refused to order troops into the field. At other times, the troops themselves refused direct orders to fight. This period witnessed a new phenomenon called “fragging.” Disgruntled soldiers rolled live grenades into tents of targeted victims, usually officers they hated. Between 1969 and 1972, more than 1,000 fragging incidences were officially recorded. Between 1967 and 1973, AWOLs nearly doubled from 46.9 per 1,000 to 77 per 1,000; in 1968, the rate was 138.5 per 1,000. Desertions doubled as well; drug prosecutions skyrocketed.

In the early 1970s, in upper-middle-class high schools across the country, many principals were confronting student activists who were demanding greater student participation in the decision-making process of the schools. They wanted more course options, relaxation of dress codes, and so forth. In addition, upper-middle-class high school students were adopting the trappings of the counter-culture: more kids were using marijuana and psychedelics; their motivation to achieve was declining and alienation was increasing (Larkin 1979). High school students were increasingly viewing education as absurd and meaningless. They perceived themselves as on an assembly line that was leading them to be just like their parents, which, to many, was anathema.

The points to be made are thus: The dissidence of one group can stimulate dissidence of other, strategically located groups, and young people, more than older people, are vulnerable to such social processes. It is my belief that Eric Harris, a bright, sensitive, psychologically unstable eighteen-year-old, was swimming in the tide of history. His idea to destroy his own school and kill fellow students was a logical, if irrational, outcome of the social history of the 1990s.

## THE REVOLT OF THE ANGRY WHITE MALE, 1992–1996

The revolt of the angry white male began with the standoff between federal marshals and right wing anti-Semite Randy Weaver and his family at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. It culminated with the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1996. The movement involved a constituency that consisted primarily of marginalized males from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds, and small farm families who had either been dispossessed or had been threatened with dispossession of their farms.

Although ostensibly about the defense of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, the revolt of the angry white male embraced white supremacy, anti-Semitism, fundamentalist Christianity, patriarchy, and hostility to the Federal government. The government was perceived as attempting to take away rights to gun ownership, promoting the interests of minorities and feminists, and secularizing public life (Dyer 1998; Niewart 1999; Stern 1997). The major events of the movement, besides the shootout at Ruby Ridge, included the destruction of the Branch Davidian compound, the rise of unorganized militias, the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, the derailing of an Amtrak train in the Arizona desert, and, finally, the holdout of the Montana Freemen, which ended in June 1996.

The movement was organized in the form of a funnel. At the wide end of the funnel were such conservative organizations as the Republican Party, the National Rifle Association, and various evangelical Christian churches. As the funnel narrowed, organizations existed that claimed they were legitimate and law-abiding, but either had a clandestine element or functioned, at least in part, as a conduit to underground terrorist organizations. One such organization was the Gun Owners of America, a Second Amendment defense organization to the right of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Perhaps most representative of such organizations were the private militias, which maintained a front of a legitimate organization of law-abiding members exercising their Second Amendment rights,

but having a darker, hidden face of sponsoring illegal activities. Several militias, such as the Arizona Militia and the Washington State Militia, were successfully infiltrated, and members were prosecuted for a variety of terror-related activities, such as stockpiling illegal weapons, possession of bombs, and conspiracy to commit murder (Dyer 1998; Niewart 1999). Finally, at the narrow end of the funnel existed right-wing hate groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, Aryan Nations, the American Nazi Party, Posse Comitatus, the National Alliance (a neo-Nazi group), the Order, the Freemen, and the Phineas Priests, all of which engaged in illegal activities such as bank robberies, intimidation, fraud, theft, and murder.

Dissidence was expressed in right-wing ideology: its major fomenters were males who were economically and socially marginal. They advocated for an America that was white and Christian, who they thought had superior rights to immigrant populations, minorities, and Jews. They conceived of the American Northwest as territory that should be ceded to white Christians as a homeland, free from federal government interference. They were involved in cultural wars against urban hipness, multiculturalism, feminism, and homosexuality. They advocated for a muscular Christianity based upon men as the undisputed authority in the household, as promulgated by such organizations as the Promise Keepers.

Although there is no direct link between Harris and Klebold and the movement of the angry white male, there is a cultural affinity between them. As the angry white males were marginalized in the larger American society, Klebold and Harris were marginalized in their own school and community. Their hostility and anger at their humiliation and degradation by their peers was expressed in right-wing ideology. In Eric Harris's mind, student athletes were included with Jews, African Americans, immigrants, and people with dark skin. Angry white males hated the federal government and blamed it for their degradation and marginalization; Harris and Klebold hated their school for similar reasons. Finally, and most important, the movement of the angry white male took the form of paramilitary organizations.

## ANGRY WHITE TEENAGERS

For adolescents, the most important governmental influence in their lives is the schools they attend. The question that is central to this chapter is, How do two adolescent boys not only come up with the idea for a paramilitary attack on their high school but also maintain interest, plot a strategy, field-test their weaponry, and carry out the attack with a precision not usually associated with teenagers?

Although numerous school shootings led up to the Columbine massacre, nobody had ever attempted to blow up a school. Up to that time, bombing one's high school was unthinkable.

Ideas do not come from nowhere. It is my opinion that Harris and Klebold were inspired, whether they knew it or not, by the actions of Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols, and their unindicted helpers (Dyer 1998). According to testimony by a reporter who corresponded with Dylan Klebold in a chat room, when the reporter identified himself as someone who had investigated the bombing in Oklahoma City, Klebold evinced a great deal of interest, asking questions especially about how the media responded to the event and how the bombing affected people (Columbine Research Site 2003). According to a friend of Klebold and Harris, when the Murrah Building was bombed in 1996, they were shocked because it was bombed by a white American; because of the media coverage, they probably thought that it was by Middle Eastern terrorists. They discussed the bombing in their philosophy class. Although they were repelled by the bombing, they thought that it was not completely unjustified. They were of the opinion that the bombing should make Americans think about the nature of their society, but they came to the conclusion that it did not.

Harris and Klebold constituted themselves as a self-defined paramilitary cell of two. They plotted in secrecy, keeping their plans hidden from their families and friends. The boys had a hidden life as members of their own two-man underground terrorist organization. They attempted to destroy their school within a month of their own graduations. Dylan attended the senior prom, and both boys attended the party after the prom with full knowledge that the following Tuesday they were going to bomb their school and kill their fellow students. Harris and Klebold documented their activities, explained their reasons for the assault, and bid farewell to their families in the basement tapes.

Earlier in this chapter, Eric Harris was compared to skinheads, which is a youth subculture tied in with right wing neo-Nazi organizations. Whereas skinheads are attempting to resurrect white-skin privilege in the face of lives that have no futures, Eric Harris was ostensibly living a life of white-skin privilege. However, that materially privileged life was a living hell because he was taunted, harassed, and humiliated on a daily basis by peers of his own race. So why did Eric Harris feel it necessary to hate Jews and people of color? He lived in a white suburb in which Jews and minorities were not only rare but had nothing to do with his degradation. To the best of anybody's knowledge, neither the Klebold nor the Harris family espoused intolerance or were racist. In Columbine the only time one might have to confront issues of race or ethnicity would be on TV, as evidenced by Harris's characterizations of blacks from midday exploitation shows

such as Jerry Springer and Sally Jessy Raphael, although he attributes them to Oprah and Ricki Lake-type talk shows. In this investigator's experience visiting the school, eating in restaurants, visiting libraries, driving through neighborhoods, and shopping, the presence of a black or a Chicano was extremely rare; so much so that minorities stood out.

Dylan Klebold lived in Columbine virtually all his life. Eric Harris, an Air Force brat, lived there for about five years. His previous residence was in Plattsburg, New York, near the Canadian border and about as far as you can get from an urban ghetto in that state. African Americans that he would meet as peers on Air Force bases would certainly not be the "malt-liquor-drinking, rhyme-busting, ass-capping Negroes" he wrote about on his web site. Yet, Isaiah Sholes was singled out, degraded, and killed because he was an African American.

The murder of Isaiah Sholes suggests that the boys' racism was not merely rhetorical. Apparently neither was their anti-Semitism. Dylan Klebold, while not being a member of the Jewish community, would certainly have been put into the death camps by Hitler on the basis of his Jewish ancestry. In the basement tapes, Klebold said, "My parents are going to fucking Passover" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999, 10,374), apparently joining in with Eric Harris's anti-Semitism.

So where do two suburban-raised boys develop racism and anti-Semitism, even though one of them is technically Jewish? Of course, racism and anti-Semitism are staples of right-wing extremist groups. In middle-class white communities such as Columbine, racism and anti-Semitism are not expressed openly or virulently, but rather they are embedded in the subtexts of discourse. However, Colorado is a conservative state and has more than its share of right-wing activists and organizations that were part of the funnel into the movement of the angry white males. The boys were enamored of paramilitarism and apparently adopted the perspective of right-wing paramilitary groups. But how? We know that they attended gun shows, that Eric read *Guns & Ammo* magazine, that they downloaded the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, once a staple of the left but apparently now available from numerous web sites of right wing organizations, and that they were aware of the impact of the Oklahoma City bombings on America.

In the early to mid-1990s, a great deal of media attention was focused on the newly energized extreme right. To what extent Harris and Klebold read or saw on TV about these organizations and their ideologies is unknown. However, an alternative mode may have influenced them.

On his website, Harris lauded the video game Doom and claimed that he played it whenever he could. Doom is a combat game in which the player is a Marine on Mars whose buddies have been killed by strange life forms and whose



mission is to rid the planet of these evil life forms by picking up weaponry and killing them as he progresses through labyrinths inhabited by humanoid beings. The art form is Gothic, reminiscent of comic book superheroes with an Aryan cast; the evil monsters are portrayed as sub-humans, while the heroes wear combat fatigues. Apparently Harris and Klebold took the subtext of *Doom* seriously, viewing themselves as superior beings whose mission it was to destroy beings less worthy than themselves.

Games such as *Doom* and *Quake* have no explicit politics. They are first-person attack games, that is, the player looking at the screen sees what is in front of him. A creature can jump out at any time and attack him. The viewer uses his weaponry to kill off the attackers and achieve his goal, which is to defeat the other side, whatever that is, and win the game. There is, however, an implicit political message. Obviously, the world out there is dangerous; if one is to survive, he must accumulate firepower. The problems confronting the player are monsters standing in the way of the achievement of the goals of the game. They are to be dispensed with as quickly and efficiently as possible with the weaponry one has collected. Because the characters of the game are visual images and take the form of subhuman monsters, there is an implicit message that the player is a superior being to those that he is killing.

Eric Harris was quite skilled at playing the video games. The games themselves can be reprogrammed by players. Harris apparently reconfigured *Doom* so that when victims were killed, they cried out, "Lord, why is this happening to me" (Hubbard 1999), an apparent allusion to evangelical Christians, toward whom both Klebold and Harris evinced a great deal of animus. This practice suggests that Eric used the game as a form of surrogate killing. He also used it to desensitize himself to the pain of others. According to Brooks Brown, a close friend of Dylan Klebold and an off-again, on-again friend of Eric, Eric reprogrammed *Doom* to be even more violent than originally conceived (Brown and Merritt 2002). He developed new levels to the game in which the protagonist was overwhelmed by the enemy. Brown stated that *Doom* players criticized it because there was no way the protagonist could deal with so many enemies.

Video games such as *Doom* and *Quake* glorify combat and paramilitary action. Although one can take many personas in *Doom*, the main protagonist is a United States Marine. Eric Harris wanted to enlist in the Marines but was rejected because he was taking Luvox for a psychiatric disorder. However, because the Marine is stranded on Mars, he is not subject to military discipline. Therefore, he is kind of a Rambo-like character who has military training but does not have to adhere to military discipline. It is fairly clear that in Harris's case,

the characters in the video games were stand-ins for people he wanted to kill in real life.

Paramilitary culture is based upon revenge for past wrongs. Central to the mythology of paramilitary culture is the loss of the war in Vietnam (Gibson 1994). The iconic figure is John Rambo, the character brought to life by Sylvester Stallone. The Rambo movies were very popular in the mid-to-late 1980s; the original, "First Blood," was followed by two sequels. The character of Rambo was modeled after Bo Gritz, a former colonel in the Green Berets who ran for the presidency in 1992 on the Populist Party ticket, which promulgated a racist and anti-Semitic campaign, and who was a leading light of the movement of the angry white male in the mid-1990s (Stern 1997).

The mythos of paramilitary culture is that the primordial male role is that of warrior, which must be distinguished from that of a soldier. Warriors, unlike soldiers, are not subject to control by military bureaucracy. They either operate alone or in small teams or squads outside the command structure. They view themselves as autonomous beings beyond the control of conventional society. Klebold and Harris viewed themselves in precisely the same way. Ostensibly they were normal high school students, although they associated themselves with a small group of students who were nonconformists. Yet they led a secret life in which they made and exploded bombs, collected weaponry, and planned an attack on their school. They engaged in clandestine attacks on neighbor houses and were caught by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department stealing equipment from a truck. They even thought of themselves as morally and intellectually superior to everyone else.

Second, paramilitaries are hyper-masculine (Gibson 1994). In high school, for males to be publicly humiliated by other male students who have greater physical prowess is a way by which the dominant males strip away the masculinity of those they humiliate. It is a matter of record that Harris and Klebold were publicly taunted with epithets questioning that masculinity; they were called "pussies," "queers," and "fags." Their tormentors consistently questioned their masculinity. The attack on Columbine was a way of reasserting their masculinity, taking power into their own hands, and making decisions over who lives and who dies. Certainly the long hours playing *Doom* and *Quake* allowed Harris and Klebold fantasy outlets in which their masculine prowess was unchallenged.

Third, paramilitary culture has as its fundamental ethic, "death before dishonor" (Gibson 1994). Paramilitary culture subsumes a survivalist strain that contains a paranoid notion of the righteous individual or team against a polluted and compromised world. Central to the paramilitary ethic is the concept of

dying in a blaze of glory. Fourth, paramilitary culture is xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic; paramilitaries often view themselves as defending white culture against the pollution of alien cultures (Ridgeway 1995). Paramilitaries have a special affinity for semiautomatic and automatic weaponry, such as Tech-9s, Uzis, M16s, and AK-47s and heavy-duty handguns such as Smith and Wesson .44 magnum, Colt .45, and .357 magnum (Gibson 1994). Harris and Klebold were armed with a Springfield 9 mm carbine rifle, a Tech-9 semiautomatic pistol, two sawed-off shotguns—one double-barreled and the other a single-barreled pump gun that fired five rounds before having to be reloaded—several knives, CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges, and pipe bombs.

Harris and Klebold were particularly enamored of paramilitary culture, especially the notion of dying in a blaze of glory and taking as many persons with them as possible. The Trenchcoat Mafia website is replete with allusions to paramilitary culture. The security videotapes of the cafeteria of Columbine High School clearly show Harris and Klebold. Harris was wearing combat boots and pants with suspenders. Although not military fatigues, he was dressed in paramilitary style. Klebold was dressed in black. Both were carrying weapons. The assault on Columbine High School clearly aped a paramilitary mission. The boys claimed that they had been planning the attack for over a year. They developed a plan of execution and carried it out in a coordinated effort. They had the foresight to plant their large bombs in the cafeteria prior to the armed attack. They even successfully set off a bomb a few minutes before the attack in a park about two miles away from the school to divert police attention. It was simply luck that the bombs in the cafeteria did not explode, which would have increased the death toll into the hundreds.

## RAMBO GOES TO SCHOOL

Where do two boys get the idea and the wherewithal to carry out a paramilitary assault on their high school? The evidence suggests that even those who purchased guns for them or sold them weapons were unaware of their purposes. Their closest friends did not know what they were plotting. Siblings and parents were totally in the dark. They were secretive, and they were dedicated to carrying out their deadly plot within days of their own graduation. Eric Harris, in a video he made of himself just prior to the shootings, stated that it was hard to believe that he would be dead in 2 1/2 weeks.

Harris and Klebold armed themselves to the teeth, dressed like paramilitaries, plotted their action, and when the plot went awry, went on the deadly

shooting spree, killing twelve peers and a teacher and then committed suicide. From their writings, such as school papers that were preserved by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, and from their statements recorded in the basement tapes, it is clear that Eric Harris viewed himself as a righteous paramilitary fighter. Dylan Klebold did not have as coherent a political ideology as did Eric. Dylan was simply angry and wanted to exact revenge.

The evidence suggests that Eric Harris was the moving force behind the shootings; however, Dylan Klebold was more than a willing accomplice. He was with Eric every step of the way. He had a thirst for blood and revenge. However, unlike Eric, his politics were inchoate and unformed. In addition to rock lyrics, Eric quoted Shakespeare and Nietzsche in his writing. He actually theorized about what he was doing, a sophisticated intellectual process for a teenager. As far as I can tell, the sources for Eric's justification of his actions come from his own military background, television, video games, and informal and casual contacts with the far right, primarily at gun shows.

When Eric made lists, it was not of his favorite television shows, movies, or books, but of people he would like to kill. Therefore, ascertaining the sources of his ideological position is very difficult. As noted above, he apparently spent his time playing and programming video games, especially *Doom* and *Quake*. He apparently did not read very much and was not acquainted with the literature of the extreme right, such as *The Turner Diaries* or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Despite that, he managed to cobble together an implicit ideology that coincided with skinhead neo-Nazism and paramilitary sensibilities. Both he and Klebold had come to the conclusion that they had achieved a higher level of consciousness than average human beings and that made them supermen, which accorded them the right to determine life and death.

Although the data are sketchy, they lead to the conclusion that Klebold and Harris were in tune with the times and the cultural milieu of the West. Neither boy was afraid of being overtly racist. Although it has been said that they hated everybody equally (Gibbs and Roche 1999), that simply is not true. They did not hate adults, but they hated their peers for the humiliations they heaped upon them. They hated minorities; however, they were not overtly sexist. Eric Harris, in his hate list, described people who would be on a lot of people's pet peeve list: people who walk slowly in malls, O.J. Simpson, people who cut classes, liars, R-rated movies, people who try to predict the weather, country music, people who believe that progress is real, cigarette smokers, and so forth.

Somehow, Klebold and Harris tapped into some of the central tenets of paramilitary culture: Don't get mad, get even; if you're going to die, do it in a blaze of glory; defend yourself with a gun—and the more guns you have the better off

you will be; don't let the enemy take you alive; a man is not a man without a weapon. The basement tapes open with Eric Harris sitting in a chair with a bottle of Jack Daniels and his sawed-off shotgun across his lap. The rifle is named "Arlene" after a character in the Doom video game. During the assault, they dressed the part: cargo pants filled with ammunition, T-shirts with messages ("Wrath," for Klebold; "Natural Selection," for Harris), and combat boots. The only deviation was the use of trench coats to hide their weaponry. The trench coats were taken off during the assault.

The boys borrowed from contemporary American cultural trends: They were angry at their harassment and rejection by their peers in the same way that marginalized white males were angry at what they perceived as their degradation by a hostile government that promoted the interests of minorities and women. In each case, masculinity was threatened: in the case of the angry white male, masculinity was threatened by downward mobility or relative deprivation by the putative increase in the social mobility of women and minorities. In the case of Harris and Klebold, their masculinity was threatened by the alpha males at Columbine High School who routinely and publicly humiliated them.

To be a male in America is to be able to deal with violence, especially against one's person. Dominant males, especially in high school, where sexual competition is extremely high, will seek to establish their status by humiliating their lower status peers and render them socially impotent. For Harris and Klebold, guns were not merely sexual symbols but instruments by which they reasserted their masculinity by visiting violence on their peers. Eric Harris compiled a hit list that consisted primarily of people who had harassed him and girls who had refused to go out with him. The boys, after repeatedly being harassed, humiliated, and degraded by jocks who pushed them in the halls, threw objects at them, and publicly questioned their sexuality, and by evangelicals who told them that if they did not take Christ into their hearts, they would burn in hell for eternity, asserted their masculinity, assumed their own moral superiority, and attempted to destroy their school and kill as many of their peers as possible. During their rampage, they enjoyed themselves immensely. They were thrilled with the power they exerted. They determined who lived and who died. In the last forty-five minutes of their lives, they exercised control over others. They were the ones who were meting out humiliation, making others pay with their lives, killing at will. They sacrificed their lives to avenge themselves and send a message to America that they and others like them had had enough.