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Gun Control: A Poor Substitute for Good Government

by Scott McPherson

Following the horrific mass murder of 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in the spring of 1999, the anti-gun Left went into overdrive to pass further restrictions on Americans' Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms. Their argument was that without access to guns and ammunition, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold would not have been able to commit their monstrous act.

In fact, one month to the day after the killings, President Clinton spoke to students at Columbine High, telling them they could "help us keep guns out of the wrong hands" by using what they'd endured to "reach across all the political, and religious, racial and cultural lines" to promote a gun-control agenda. In a statement praising the Senate for passing legislation that would extend the background check to firearms purchased at gun shows and pawnshops, Clinton called the action a "historic vote to close the gun-show loophole and keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children."

In the aftermath of so devastating and brutal an act of violence, few would rise to challenge the president's — and the world's — contention that guns are to blame for violent acts. Even the pro-gun National Rifle Association voted to curtail its annual convention in Denver that year amid chants from 8,000 bitter protesters calling the organization a "pusher of Child Killer Machines" and shouting, "Shame on the NRA."

But truth be told, there was little truth in the many politically motivated statements bashing Second Amendment supporters following the Columbine killings.

For instance, gun-control promoters used the deaths of the 12 children to further their cause "for the children," claiming that more gun control would make students safer when in actuality a child is more likely to die playing high-school football than at the hands of a gun-wielding maniac at his school.

In a similar vein, we know that gunowners kill more criminals every year than the police and they use their weapons to defend themselves around 2.5 million times per year. (In more than 90 percent of such cases, the gun only needs to be brandished to thwart an assault.) But little

would be mentioned of these figures in the many discussions of the “gun culture” in the aftermath of the Littleton slayings.

Interestingly, when it was discovered that some of the guns used by the killers were purchased at a gun show, it was a cinch to “close the gun-show loophole” — despite the fact that Clinton’s own Justice Department had reported *two years earlier* that *fewer than 2 percent* of criminals arrested for using a firearm in a homicide purchased their weapons at a gun show.

No, after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had wrought such unforgivable pain and suffering on members of their suburban community, the only thing of importance in the gun “debate” was the best and quickest way to pass even more gun-control laws — and if that meant demonizing law-abiding gunowners and passing laws that were completely inept at stopping a repeat of the massacre (a fact conceded by gun controllers even as they pushed for these greater gun-control measures), then so be it. It was “for the children,” and so America, to *its* shame, consented to the sham.

Government as savior

Americans have become quite expert at turning to government to solve their problems; like his European cousins, the average American is wed to the welfare state and has come to view government intervention in the social and economic arena as indispensable.

But it is precisely because they constantly lean on the state for assistance that practically no one can discriminate between a legitimate need for government action and those many societal dilemmas for which government is completely ill-equipped to offer a meaningful solution.

For this reason, Americans flail about without direction or principle when adverse conditions arise, turning like lost lambs to embrace whatever those in authority present as the latest great panacea.

Thus, the Great Depression spurred government control of the marketplace; labor tensions paved the way for government-sponsored unionism; poor race relations ushered in affirmative action; rising drug use requires a war on drugs; and rising costs call for price controls, just to name a few.

And, of course, whenever a particularly heinous act of violence occurs, we need more gun control.

There is no problem for which government is not ready with a cure, and it always requires that more power be given to government officials and more freedom be taken from the people.

Yet it is precisely in the area of protection against violence that government has the greatest responsibility to act in behalf of the citizen. And it is here that the state has, time and again, failed to perform its most important duty — even with the massive resources and innumerable laws already at its disposal.

Failing at Columbine

Take a further look at Columbine. In an October 30, 2003, report in the *Washington Times*, we learn that “authorities have said they knew about violent rants by [Harris and Klebold] in 1998, a year before the shootings, and that a *search warrant was not acted upon.*” [Emphasis added]

Worse, the sheriff’s office had received a tip *as far back as 1997* about Eric Harris’s website, on which the two “bragged about making pipe bombs and said they were looking for a ‘ground zero.’” According to the *Times*, “A deputy investigated the tip and forwarded a report and printouts from the Web site to a sheriff’s investigator. . . . *The report was not found until last week.*” [Emphasis added]

The report had been hand-delivered, but the officer in charge filed it in a three-ring binder *unrelated* to the investigation — where it sat for six years!

The information forwarded by the investigating officer contained *seven pages* from the website, including “a long rant [by Harris] in which he almost immediately talks about killing students he has come to hate,” reported the *Denver Post* on October 30. The website postings also mentioned that Harris and Klebold were firing BB guns at the houses of fellow students and that they had constructed four pipe bombs.

The words “probable cause” certainly spring to mind.

In spite of such damning evidence, however, two young men plotted a massacre and practically advertised their intentions while police officers played paperwork shuffle. On his site, Eric Harris had stated, “I am the law, and 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.” He clearly meant what he said, and the Jefferson County sheriff’s office got caught napping.

Perhaps it isn’t fair to criticize police officials for failing to act, but it does appear that a lot of opportunities existed for them to intervene and prevent the killings. Columbine High School principal Frank DeAngelis said that had he known of the menacing words on the website, he would have asked that an inquiry be made to determine “if the students have the means to carry out” their threats. Clearly sheriff’s office personnel were thinking the same thing, which explains why they obtained a search warrant to do just that.

But in the words of William Erickson, former chief justice of the Colorado Supreme Court and chairman of the Governor’s Columbine Review Commission, “That search warrant was botched.” It was never carried out. Not holding back, Erickson concluded, “It was just an incompetent investigation.”

In their defense, police departments are surely an overburdened lot. John Kiebusch, a former lieutenant involved with the investigation, explains that “when you look at an organization that takes something like 25,000 reports a year, you can understand the difficulty of

trying to get everything in the right pocket.” At the same time, prior to Columbine, student threats were viewed as innocuous “pranks” rather than genuine causes for concern.

That has all changed now. In the years since the Littleton shootings, police agencies are on high alert for potential repeats. Newspaper headlines tell regularly of potential mass killers who are arrested after making frightening statements.

In one such case, a Pennsylvania man who wrote about “blowing some brains out” at the University of Maryland was indicted for making threats in interstate commerce and mailing threatening communications. Jeffrey Wilinski believed the university was using satellites to spy on him, and made plans to stop it. He had 30 guns in his home when he was arrested.

But had Wilinski managed to carry out his attack, newspapers and talking heads would have focused on his “stockpile” of “high-powered weapons” and all but declared it as proof of the need for more gun control. The speed and competence of the investigating officers only seems to be relevant to these cases when they are successful.

This leads to the most important lesson of the Columbine killings: In order to adequately protect the citizenry, government must focus on its legitimate goals.

Whenever police officers speak of being overworked, it is important to understand what that means: Millions of dollars are expended annually by the police to harass gunowners for bureaucratic infractions, drug users, prostitutes, and other perpetrators of victimless crimes — while real criminals get a pass because the report didn’t make it into the “right pocket.”

Naturally, gun haters will claim that more gun-control laws will make another Columbine less likely, but Gov. Bill Owens of Colorado admitted to the *Rocky Mountain News* (December 14, 1999) that already “Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold broke 17 or 18 or 19 separate [gun-control] laws to do what they did.”

Doesn’t it make more sense to grant the presumption of innocence to gunowners and trust them with their guns so long as they are not hurting or threatening anyone?

Let’s turn our attention away from persecuting the “gun culture,” stop passing and enforcing pointless laws, and focus more police resources on finding and catching those who pose a real threat to peace-loving Americans.

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