

**Reflections of American Ideology:  
The Columbine High School Shootings**

By

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On April 20, 1999, two heavily armed students wearing trench coats entered their Colorado high school and began firing on students and staff. Their rampage lasted for approximately 30 minutes and exacted a deadly toll. After turning the guns on themselves, the attackers would claim, in all, 15 lives. Though the Columbine shooting incident in Colorado was only one of the many violent student assaults that had recently taken place in schools across the nation, Columbine High stood out. It was to date, and still continues to be, the worst massacre by students ever to take place in a school within the United States. It soon became the central focus of government officials as well as special interest groups and concerned citizens, and all seemed to be asking the same questions—What was the cause of such violence and how were they able to get the weapons to carry out their plans? Some of the special interests groups used the carnage as evidence that our gun control laws simply are not working, while others placed the blame squarely on the parents of the two attackers. Some officials even lay partial blame on the Columbine school system for not catching the problem earlier when there were apparent warning signs. Though explanations are many and experts within the behavioral sciences offer valuable insights into the motives of such young people, the core of American culture, value, and symbolic identity must not be overlooked when analyzing such acts of violence. By using the perspective of macro-level sociology, as a basis for explaining behavior at a micro-level, a clear picture begins to be drawn between the two. Micro-level analysis would be the most

appropriate method to glean personal information that is unique to that individual and his or her actions, such as motivation (rejection by peers) and psychological history (ADHD). Macro-level analysis, such as cultural identity, however, is used when trying to understand the behavior and actions of individuals as a group. Cultural identity is how we define ourselves, whether as an ethnic group, regional population, or as a nation. Because of the rash of school shootings across the United States, all of which are unrelated to each other, there is clearly a widespread social phenomenon that is manifesting itself in the form of these teenage killers. The use of guns in these attacks may be due as much to America's love affair with guns as a symbol of personal freedom and self-reliance, as with the weapon's suitability for mass destruction.

American ideology comes under intense focus when assembling the sociological picture of a nation steeped in a tradition of violence. In light of the fact that our nation is one of the most technologically advanced, dominant powers in the world, little seems to have changed since our historical past concerning our self-identity as a nation. As Richard A. Stanford (2001) states in his essay, *American Ideology In Transition*, "American society still indulges in the rhetoric of its old ideology of individualism, and still attempts to cling to the tenets of the old ideology in spite of the realities of social change. The consequences of an American societal reluctance to accept or even recognize the realities of ideological change are confusion over the roles of individuals, institutions, and the state, and a questioning of institutional legitimacy and authority" (pgs. 3,4). This ideology has become a blueprint for American society to follow. A pattern of beliefs and values that served our forefathers generations ago, while America was still in its youth, endures today, as if our circumstances had remained static.

The roots of American culture are complex. Its earliest white settlers were willing to risk their survival in a foreign and formidable land for freedom from religious oppression. The pilgrims endured harsh conditions, only to have their descendants fight the English for independence in the American Revolution. On the heels of such independence came immigrants from other countries, who added their own cultural heritage to the evolving American culture. As Frederick Jackson Turner (1920) relates in his book *The Frontier In American History*, "The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The Scots-Irish and the Palatine Germans, or "Pennsylvania Dutch," furnished the dominant element in the stock of the colonial frontier. With these peoples were also the freed indentured servants, or redemptioners, who at the expiration of their time passed to the frontier. Very generally these redemptioners were of non-English stock." At this point, the merging of many different ethnic groups, combined with the budding opportunities awaiting those who ventured into the country's fertile lands, encouraged the growth of eclectic individualism based on the heritage brought with them and the entrepreneurial spirit of the new land. Later, around the early nineteenth century, westward expansion began. This was perhaps the most profound ideological turning point in America's history. "Nothing works for nationalism like intercourse within the nation. Mobility of a population is death to localism, and the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling a population. The effect reached back from the frontier and affected profoundly the Atlantic coast and even the Old World" (Turner, pg.). Here one can see that this budding frontier spirit was not isolated to the West, but deeply affected all of the United States. The struggles of the pioneers pushing westward worked to define an American perspective and create a system of ideology keyed to survival.

These settlers faced unforgiving, almost hostile land in which to carve out their living, as well as the harsh weather conditions of the nation's midsection.

The conditions which settlers of the West endured were undoubtedly harsh, and so in turn, was their view of anyone who ventured outside their established norms and rules. Retribution against such violators was swift and violent, and punishment was meted out not by lawmen, but by mobs. "Western democracy included individual liberty as well as equality. The frontiersman was impatient with restraints. He knew how to preserve order, even in the absence of legal authority. If there were cattle thieves, lynch law was sudden and effective" (Turner, 1920, pg.). At this point, a critical new kind of justice was born in America: vigilantism. This vigilante justice is a predominant feature of the American West, and carries with it a justification for taking matters into one's own hands and reacting violently if necessary. This kind of justice, however, was born of need. "Population was sparse, there was no multitude of jostling interests, as older settlements, demanding elaborate system of personal restraints. Society became atomized. There was a reproduction of the primitive idea that a crime was more an offense against the victim than a violation of the law of the land. If the thing was one proper to be done, then the most immediate, rough and ready, effective way was the best way." (Turner, pg.) From this perspective, one can see the intensely personal way in which crimes were viewed, as well as the swift retaliation that followed deviation from norms. As the frontiersman conquered his land and fought his foes with whatever means he felt necessary, adopting a kind of zero-tolerance policy, the gun became a constant companion to protect and serve him in his many struggles. Lynching was also a common way of delivering justice, usually carried out by posses or angry mobs. This new frontier, with its many hardships and challenges, would become the

birthplace of an ideology that would have the most profound influence on its people, one that is still manifesting itself today.

The modern American people's love of freedom and independence, touting individualism and representing ourselves as strong, capable people, has grown out of the complex melting pot of our predecessors' heritage, circumstances, ideals, and struggles for democracy. With freedom came an attitude of protecting one's interests with aggression and violence. Out of this ideology came America's love affair with the gun; as a nation we have made the gun the symbol of freedom, protection, and self-identity, though it is no longer needed as defense against the hostile, barren world of the settlers. It is so valued in our society that its possession is protected under our United States Constitution in the Second Amendment as "The Right To Bear Arms." Even in the light of such violence as the Columbine High School shootings, and other common acts of violence in the United States, restricting and restructuring gun laws has a formidable barrier to overcome within American society itself. Perhaps such refusal to change gun laws is really more reflective of a culture that has not only accepted violence, but immersed itself in its graphic imagery and reality. Violence sells, and the newspapers and news channels are so consumed with viewer-grabbing headlines that we not only concede to watch it, we expect to see it. Even our entertainment is saturated with violent acts of brutality being inflicted on others. Many times it is the "hero" who is defending his honor or someone else's who is acting in violent and aggressive ways as a means to "settle the score." Again, there is a justification for violence and retaliation that is at the very root of the American ideological perspective; the frontiersman fighting for his beliefs and his property, his very survival dependent upon aggression and mistrust.

Such ideology echoes through the pages of American history, making folk heroes out of outlaws like the Jesse James gang and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Gangsters of the Prohibition Era were the idols of the twentieth century, and today the music industry has elevated the street gang culture of rap into a lifestyle to be admired. Remarkably, though, the people on western frontier grappled with their own newly created philosophy from time to time, and understood the violent direction things were going. "Pioneer publications show Old West leaders repeatedly arguing in favor of gun control. City leaders in the old cattle towns knew from experience what some Americans today don't want to believe: a town that allows easy access to guns invites trouble. By the 1880's many in the West were fed up with gun violence. Gun control, they contended, was absolutely essential, and the remedy advocated was no less than a total ban on pistol-packing" (Ross Collins (1999) Gun Control and the Old West, pg.1). As the settlements in the Old West became more populated, the gun was no longer necessary for personal protection. As the numbers of people in these towns increased, both social pressure and strength in numbers provided largely adequate protection for the settlements. Except in the hands of the lawmen, guns became a negative force by making crime easier and more inviting to commit.

If the pioneers in fact grew disgusted with gun related violence as well the attitude that accompanied it, why has it remained so dominant in American culture? Perhaps it is the desire to idolize our ancestry that has kept this notion of the strong, independent, adventurous character alive. "In fact, most historians see the cowboy of the Old West as THE defining hero of the 20th-century America. He is used for selling everything from soap to hats. He is apparently also an ideal American for anti-gun control groups: gun shows and gun advertising promote guns using a distinctively

Old West flavor" (Ross Collins (1999) Gun Control and the Old West, pg.1). There lies the link from our historical past to our present day self-identity. We are still a nation that accepts and emulates everything we have perceived this "cowboy" to be. Our nation's collective subconscious responds accordingly, on a daily basis, by conditioning our children to think, behave, and react the way we were conditioned based on this "take nothing from nobody" mentality. The media has been part of the contributing push for this image, as children have been targeted on a continual basis by television and movies. "Gun-toting heroes have dominated both the big and small screen since the middle of this century. By the end of the decade, toy makers had sold \$283 million (\$1.6 billion in today's dollars) worth of toy guns, holsters and spurs to children" (Ayaz Nanji (2001), An Explosive History). John Wayne made millions of dollars portraying the swaggering, gruff, fearless cowboy, in a period that spanned almost three decades. Wayne always represented the "hero" no matter how much violence he perpetuated. Traditional games of American children have always centered around violence, and more importantly the rationalization behind such aggression. "Cowboys and Indians," and "Cops and Robbers" have only recently been replaced by G.I. Joe fighting figures. Toy guns of every variety and now video games actively initiate the child into the "kill" or be "killed" mentality. "Mortal Combat," and "Street Fighters," to name two are predominately targeted at children. These games portray realistic human characters being pitted against each other until one of the characters is "killed" by the other.

It is no wonder, then, that the two Columbine attackers, most likely represented in their own minds as victims defending themselves against their enemies, reacted in such an aggressive way. It is, after all, in keeping with the American ideology and perspective of individualism and the right to protect self-interests.

Though most people agree that the actions of these two young men were completely unreasonable and totally out of the realm of what American culture represents, this is contradicted when viewed from the macro level of societal acculturation. We are, after all, the product of those that have preceded us. What we have embraced from our forefathers becomes our legacy, as the American people continue to place high significance on individualism combined with an unrelenting thirst for violence and idealization the vigilante whose acts of aggression are only thinly disguised in a veil of heroism.

This venerable American ideology has led to contradiction and double standards for its people, especially the youth. For instance, the child who is encouraged to act like John Wayne and then gets expelled for fighting at school is subject to these double standards. Even at the highest level in the United States government, we see the contradiction. While the Constitution speaks of the "right to bear arms," the judicial system treats it more as a privilege than a right. Under the United States criminal justice system, a criminal has a debt to pay society which is fulfilled by the completion of a prison sentence or parole. Upon the release of this debt, all of the basic Constitutional rights of the felon have to be returned. However, these felons are never allowed the right to possess a gun again. In this sense, the American courts are interpreting gun ownership as a privilege and not a right. This society has to decide and deal with the many double standards, such as gun control and rights versus privileges.

As children become socialized into this culture, it is inevitable some of these children will find themselves inventing solutions to their problems based on this conditioning: strike out and protect yourself against those that threaten your individuality, your honor, your inability to fit in—kill or be killed. It is therefore not surprising that the Columbine High

School shooting happened. There were school shootings before the Colorado incident, and unfortunately there are sure to be more. But perhaps instead of turning our attention to the momentary glare of the media headlines, and searching for the immediate causes of such tragedies, we should turn the pages of history back for a time and reassess how we came to be such a violent culture. The same qualities that have made America a strong nation now provide the potential for internal destruction. The belief system that Americans still live by must be analyzed for its usefulness. Instead of blindly following the rhetoric for tradition's sake, we must understand what we have embraced. The landscape of the United States has changed dramatically in many ways over the past hundred years. "Industrialization, urbanization, immigration, the popularization of the corporate form of commercial organization, the growth in the numbers and sizes of corporations, and the unprecedented technological innovation have all made the America of the 20th century a quite different place than it was during the 18th and 19th centuries." (Richard A. Stanford (2001), *American Ideology in Transition*, pg.3) One of the many changes that resulted from this shift in the economic status of United States was in the growth of cities and towns. Now, into the 21st century, few people live in rural areas as opposed to those who call cities and towns home. Clearly, the living conditions and social climate of today have little in common with the settlers of the west and the many hardships that were unique to that period and time. Today, the atomic, antisocial, distrustful and aggressive traits we find so engaging about our forefathers only add a negative implication for American society today. With such a populated country as the United States, coupled with the availability of guns and rounded out by our contradictive ideology, a setup for violent confrontations between its people is inevitable. Only

from understanding the macro-level sociology of the past and the critical influences it has on our present society can we come out of the darkness to full consciousness about our present situations.

As Americans today, we have an obligation to understand our history and the critical role we play in defining our future and that of our children. If we are to change the increasingly violent direction in which our nation is going, we must learn to make rational choices based on conscious decisions. Our contradictive ideology needs to be addressed at the highest level of our government, starting with the decision as to whether the possession of guns is a right or a privilege. A consolidated effort by all Americans is necessary to understand and rectify the contradictive nature of our philosophy and the conditioning of our children. If we choose to ignore the implications of our present value system, we must be prepared to accept and live with the consequences. If we do not address the causes of violence with change in mind, we cannot hope to change the violence itself.

On the positive side, our history has shown that the nation's ideology can and does change, even within a generation. Women didn't achieve the guaranteed right to vote until 1920, Jackie Robinson broke the racial barrier in professional baseball in 1947, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and women gained equal rights in the workplace. Today very few people would argue about the validity of racial and gender equality. The reality is that these now widely accepted viewpoints have become the status quo only during the last eighty years. Smoker's rights were the hot issue a decade ago, but mandatory government laws to prohibit smoking in public places have been widely accepted now, even by smokers. Such change is indicative of how rapidly our society can assimilate new viewpoints and alter existing philosophy. Herein lies the hope that we, as a nation, can accept the need for examination of our social history to discover the

roots of violence and break the cycle. If we do not analyze this national problem from a macro-level perspective and cannot address the real issue as being our ideology, then the gun debates will continue to rage on within the government as well as our society, leaving another generation to grow up in the contradictory, confusing philosophy of our present situation. In the meantime, many assaults like the Columbine High School shootings will continue to occur until we, as a consolidated nation, reach a class consciousness concerning the issue of violence. This is a problem that crosses all racial, gender, and economic lines. If we choose to hang on to the old ideology and refuse change, than we must admit to ourselves and our children that the legacy we chose for them was violence.

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