

Eric Harris: The Search for Justification

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*Sometimes we will spend an entire lifetime trying to figure out someone,
and even after that length of time we still can't possibly know
everything about that person. The same goes for ourselves.*

— ERIC HARRIS [JCSO 26,202]

INTRODUCTION

In my article “The Search for Truth at Columbine,” I demonstrate that we cannot take people’s statements about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at face value. This article seeks to show that we also cannot take statements by Eric Harris at face value. The reasons given by murderers for why they had to murder are not always reliable guides to their behavior.

To digress from Columbine for a moment, consider a Canadian mass murderer named Marc Lépine. In 1989, Lépine killed 14 women (and wounded 10 women and 4 men) at an engineering school in Montreal. The reason he gave for his massacre was that he was opposed to feminism. Apparently, in his mind, this was sufficient justification for gunning down women he did not even know, and who may not even have identified themselves as feminists. A philosophical disagreement with feminism, however, does not lead to murder. As Henry Ford reportedly said, a man has two reasons for doing something: a good reason, and the real reason. Opposition to feminism was Lépine’s “good reason” (in his mind), but it was not the real reason.

Identifying Eric’s reasons for the attack at Columbine is particularly difficult because he said different things at different times, in some cases completely contradicting himself. Another difficulty is that some of what Eric claimed appears to be at odds with what is known from other sources. There are two aspects to this article – documenting Eric’s statements at different times,

and trying to understand his changing statements. The first is factual, the second is speculative. We will begin by taking a look at Eric’s desire to cause destruction and his early claim that no one was to blame but himself.

NO ONE IS TO BLAME

When the attack on the school was in the distant future, Eric clearly took responsibility for what he planned to do. This is seen in several passages of his writing:

I will choose to kill and damage as much as nature allows me to so take that, fuck you, and eat napalm + lead! HA! Only nature can stop me. I know I could get shot by a cop after only killing a single person, but hey guess the fuck WHAT! I chose to kill that one person so get over it! It’s MY fault! Not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends, not my favorite bands, not computer games, not the media. IT IS MINE!¹

God damnit do not blame anyone else besides me and V [Vodka, i.e., Dylan] for this. Don’t blame my family, they had no clue and there’s nothing they could have done, they brought me up just fucking fine ... don’t blame the school ... the admin[istration] is doing a fine job.²

someone’s bound to say “what were they thinking?” when we go NBK [Natural Born Killers, his code name for the

attack] or when we were planning it, so this is what I am thinking. “I have a goal to destroy as much as possible” . . . Keep this in mind, I want to burn the world.³

THIS is what I am motivated for, THIS is my goal. THIS is what I want “to do with my life.”⁴

These passages from Eric’s writings are remarkable. He clearly stated that no one was to blame for his upcoming rampage, not his parents nor the media nor his friends, and not even the school. Eric took complete responsibility for the fact that he wanted to commit violence on a grand scale. He clearly stated that his goal was to destroy as much as possible – he wanted to burn the world. To do so was his only goal in life – this is what he lived for.

Eric’s statements suggest that there is another way of looking at Columbine than viewing him as a tormented boy who sought revenge. Based on Eric’s comments cited above, it seems that he first established his goal of destruction and then later felt a need to justify himself by finding causes to blame. In other words, the “real” reason existed inside him, but he needed to point his finger at “good” reasons in the world around him. (For a discussion of Eric’s personality dynamics that drove him to seek status and power over others, see my book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*.)

THE NEED FOR JUSTIFICATION

During the videotapes they made, Eric and Dylan talked casually about killing people, blowing up the school, and wanting the attack to result in more deaths than any other attack in United States history. It is one thing to talk about murder, however, and another to carry it out. And this was not the murder of an enemy, but the murder of innocent people on an overwhelming scale. How do two teenage boys face the enormity of such an act? They need to convince themselves that such an act is justified.

In one of the tapes, Eric said, “More rage. More rage . . . Keep building it on,”⁵ and motioned with his hands to show the process of building rage upon rage. He had to build his rage up to the boiling point so that he could go through with what he had long ago made up his mind to do – cause large-scale destruction.

BLAMING HIS PARENTS — OR NOT

During their videos, Eric blamed his rage on his father because his military career meant that the family had to move several times during Eric’s childhood. On 15 March 1999, Eric addressed his parents in a video: “I’m sorry I have so much rage, but you put it on me.”⁶

This allegation of blame toward his father contradicts the passage cited earlier where Eric exonerated his parents, claiming that no one was to blame but himself. At that time, Eric emphasized that his parents had nothing to do with his plans

of destruction. Also, during another passage of the videos, Eric said, “my parents are the best fucking parents I have ever known. My dad is great.”⁷ Eric vacillated between stating that his parents had nothing to do with the attack, to blaming them for his rage, to praising them as the best parents he has ever known. These are remarkable fluctuations in his attitude.

CHANGING HIS VIEW OF CHILDHOOD

Related to his anger at his parents for moving the family from one place to another, Eric also complained that because of re-locating, he was always picked on as the new kid. He said he was always at the bottom of the “food chain” and could not earn any respect.⁸ He said that people made fun of him: “my face, my hair, my shirts.”⁹

A couple of points can be made about these allegations. First, they have nothing to do with Columbine High School. If Eric were angry with his father, he could have taken revenge against him; there was no need to try to kill everyone in the school. Second, being picked on by kids in Michigan and New York does not justify killing people in Colorado.

Third, Eric’s complaint regarding being harassed as the new kid on the block can be challenged in a couple of ways. After the attack the media interviewed many people in Plattsburgh, NY (where Eric lived prior to Littleton). The reports of Eric’s life in Plattsburgh present him as an apparently normal boy with friends, not as a bullied, mistreated, or ostracized child.

Perhaps a more significant piece of evidence can be found in a paper Eric wrote for school in which he wrote about his childhood and the impact of moving several times. This paper was written over two years before the attack, probably before Eric had even conceived the idea of the attack. Several passages will be quoted to suggest the tone of the paper:

Of the three close neighbors I had, two of them had children my age. Every day we would play in the woods, or at our houses. We would make forts in the woods or make them out of snow, we would ride around on our bikes, or just explore the woods. It was probably the most fun I ever had in my childhood.¹⁰

After living there for 3 years, we moved to live on the Air Force base. It was hard leaving my friends, especially my best friend . . . I made friends there, some were good, but none were as good as my friends at my old house . . . My friends and I had a lot of fun there, too. We still lived close to a large wooded area so we would travel around in there almost every day. We were all the same age too, so that made it even more fun.¹¹

This time we moved to Plattsburgh, New York. It was real hard leaving my friends again . . . At first I had no friends there, even though there were many kids my age. Then once school started, and even with some help from my

older brother, I had some friends. It took a while for our friendships to grow, but soon we were best friends and did everything together.¹²

This paper of Eric's highlights all the great times he had with his friends. When he wrote about moving from Michigan to New York, Eric noted that at first he had no friends, but once school started, he quickly made friends with many kids. In the entire paper, Eric wrote nothing about being picked on. The only hardship he noted was the difficulty in saying goodbye to his friends.

This is not the only such account of his childhood. Eric also wrote a paper about how much fun he had in Michigan:

My brother, two friends, and I would always be running around shooting imaginary bad guys. The woods behind my house were vast, empty, and old. It smelled of a musty tree or maybe of pine trees most of the time in there. Those woods left so many memories in my mind it's amazing.¹³

These two papers paint a vivid picture of a boy having a wonderful childhood full of friends and fun. Eric appears to have had a rather idyllic youth of playing with his peers, interrupted only briefly by moving to new homes, after which he again established groups of close friends. He wrote nostalgically about his old homes and friendships, and during one of the videos he even became tearful as he reminisced about the friends he left behind.¹⁴ This is a far cry from Eric's complaint during one of the videos about always being the new kid who was relentlessly harassed.

What is the pattern here? When the attack was far off (or had not even been conceived), Eric wrote nostalgically about his childhood, all the great friendships he had, how painful it was to leave his buddies behind, but how quickly he made friends in his new neighborhood; he said nothing about being picked on. As the attack was looming right before him, however, he presented a completely different picture of his childhood and complained of chronic abuse by his peers.

This analysis is not meant to suggest that the moves were not difficult, or that Eric was never teased as a child. What is being challenged here is the idea that these factors explain Eric's desire for destruction. The evidence suggests that he shifted his perspective to make himself into more of a victim as the day of the attack approached. Why? The more he felt like a victim, the more he could build his rage to convince himself that the attack was justified.

REVENGE AGAINST PEERS

There are only two entries in Eric's journal where he complained about being picked on, and they occurred just five days apart: 12 November and 17 November 1998. These are intriguing passages. On 12 November, Eric wrote about being made fun of and wanting "ultimate fucking revenge."¹⁵ Anger about teas-

ing was not all that was bothering him, however. He went on to write, "You people could have shown more respect, treated me better, asked for my knowledge or guidance more, treated me more like a senior."¹⁶ He wanted to be respected, to be seen as a source of knowledge and guidance. But there were more complex issues, too.

Eric commented further: "Then again, I have always hated how I looked. I make fun of people who look like me."¹⁷ This is a remarkable admission. Having just complained about being made fun of for his looks, Eric admitted that he does the same thing to others. In fact, he makes fun of people who look like he does. Why? "Because I want to rip on myself. That's where a lot of my hate grows from. The fact that I have practically no self-esteem, especially concerning girls and looks and such."¹⁸ Thus, beneath his anger at being teased for his appearance, there is a deep self-hatred. Not only is he profoundly insecure about his looks and social skills with girls, but "that's where a lot of my hate grows from." His rage toward others was rooted in his own self-hatred.

The passage that began with a complaint about teasing leads into self-disclosure of surprising vulnerability. The second passage regarding peer harassment provides additional insights. Eric began by writing, "If people would give me more compliments all of this might still be avoidable ... but probably not."¹⁹ Though he qualified the statement at the end, he nonetheless was thinking that compliments might prevent mass murder. This again suggests how painfully insecure he was. He then wrote about being made fun of and how he will soon get revenge.

After this he wrote, "Fuckers shouldn't have ripped on me so much huh! Ha! Then again it's human nature to do what you did ... so I guess I am also attacking the human race."²⁰ This is almost a repeat of the first passage where he complained about being teased and then admitted that he did the same thing to others. In this passage, he complains about being teased, but then acknowledges that people are simply following human nature, which as he made clear, he himself has done.

A few lines later, Eric wrote, "Maybe I just need to get laid. Maybe that'll just change some shit around."²¹ This relates to the previous passage about his self-hatred regarding his looks and his lack of confidence with girls. Perhaps having sex would make him feel like a man, increase his sense of self-worth, boost his status. He wanted to be treated like a senior, complimented, recognized as a source of wisdom. And he wanted to feel like a man by having sex.

What these passages reveal is that even when Eric expressed outrage over being teased, he quickly disclosed other issues that caused him distress. Though these passages can be used as evidence that the attack was caused by teasing, Eric's self-revelations indicate that there were more subtle and profound issues involved. He also seemed to exonerate his peers (to some extent, at least) for their behavior by noting that he has done the same thing and teasing others is simply part of human nature. Thus, this would hardly justify mass murder.

TAKING THE BLAME, THEN BLAMING HIS PEERS

Surprisingly, having blamed others for his rage, Eric later reversed himself. In a video made on 11 April, just nine days before the attack, he seemed to forget about all the justifications he had made in recent weeks and months and reverted to his original position of responsibility.

He addressed his parents and said, “There is nothing you guys could have done to prevent any of this. There is nothing that anyone could have done to prevent any of this. *No one is to blame except me and Vodka*. Our actions are a two man war against everyone else”²² (italics added). He went back to his position that no one else was to blame. He was simply waging war against the world.

Nonetheless, on the day of the attack, when the bombs failed to blow up the school, Eric found himself in the school’s library, face to face with innocent, unarmed students whom he was casually gunning down. How did he justify this? By telling the students that he was killing them because they had picked on him. The problem with this justification is that he was shooting people who had never done anything to him. This was not retaliation.

In addition, Eric had wanted to blow up the school and kill as many people as possible, including his own friends. He and Dylan also set bombs in their cars to explode after thousands of people had gathered at the school in the wake of the attack. They just wanted to kill as many people as they could, including parents, rescue workers, law enforcement officials, and members of the media. This is not explained by being teased by a few kids at school (see my article “The Search for Truth at Columbine” for a discussion of Eric, Dylan, and harassment at school).

Harassment by peers was the “good reason” used to justify killing innocent people. The real reason had to do with Eric’s desire to play God by having the power of life and death over others and cause devastation on a large scale. In the face of committing murder, however, Eric needed a rationalization for his destructive urges; thus the search for justification.

One final quote is worth citing. In Eric’s school planner, on the day marked Mother’s Day, he wrote “Good wombs have born bad sons – Shakespeare.”²³ Eric’s writing this in the space for Mother’s Day implies that he saw himself as having been born “bad.” In spite of his vacillating attempts to blame others for his urge to commit violence, perhaps he really did believe what he had said intermittently – that only he was to blame.

CONCLUSION

The point of this article is two-fold. First, it sought to demonstrate that statements by Eric need to be carefully evaluated before they are accepted as accurate. When his comments regarding his justification for the attack are compared to what he said on other occasions, or what is known from other sources, we see striking inconsistencies.

In addition, by placing Eric’s comments from the videos in a larger context, we can identify the changes in his thinking, and attempt to interpret his statements in a way that is consistent with other sources, including his own statements made elsewhere.

It is thus suggested that the reasons Eric gave for the attack were not meaningful motivating factors. They were justifications that seemed like good reasons, but were not the real reasons Eric sought to commit what would have been at the time (had the major bombs exploded) the most deadly terroristic attack in United States history.

NOTES

- 1 Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office (JCSO), *Columbine Documents*, p. 26,012.
- 2 JCSO, p. 26,343.
- 3 JCSO, p. 26,012.
- 4 JCSO, p. 26,016.
- 5 Gibbs, Nancy, and Timothy Roche. “The Columbine Tapes.” *Time Magazine*, 20 December 1999; www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,992873,00.html.
- 6 JCSO, p. 10,377; see also www.acolumbinesite.com/quotes.html.
- 7 www.acolumbinesite.com/quotes3.html.
- 8 JCSO, p. 10,377–78.
- 9 www.acolumbinesite.com/quotes1.html.
- 10 JCSO, p. 26,772.
- 11 JCSO, p. 26,772.
- 12 JCSO, pp. 26,772–73.
- 13 JCSO, p. 26,609.
- 14 JCSO, p. 10,375.
- 15 JCSO, p. 26,014.
- 16 JCSO, p. 26,014.
- 17 JCSO, p. 26,014.
- 18 JCSO, p. 26,014.
- 19 JCSO, p. 26,015.
- 20 JCSO, p. 26,015.
- 21 JCSO, p. 26,015.
- 22 www.acolumbinesite.com/quotes3.html. See also JCSO p. 10,382.
- 23 JCSO, p. 26,312. This quote is from *The Tempest* (act I, scene ii).