



Our Nation, Our Lives, Our Ideals

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On Tuesday, April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold executed twelve fellow students and a teacher in what has become widely known as the Columbine High School Massacre (“Columbine”). Following the nightmarish event, the nation immediately pointed its fingers at the most obvious explanation, the popular crowd. The jocks and cheerleaders of Columbine High became easily recognizable as the source of Eric and Dylan’s rage. “The pair of supposed "Trench Coat Mafia outcasts" were [simply] taking revenge against the bullies who had made school miserable for them” (Cullen). When the parents of the jocks and cheerleaders simply couldn’t stand to witness their children become the target of the media, they turned the nation onto the next plausible cause for the shootout: the media. Music, television, and video games soon became the monsters every American parent loved to hate.

We look to the powerful figures portrayed by the media for guidelines on how to live. As Americans, everything from ethical reasoning to political perspective is obtained from the movies we watch, the songs we listen to, and the books we read, among other sources of influence. The news, whether it be the Channel 7 News or the Los Angeles Times, is, perhaps, the most highly influential entity in the realm of media due to its assumed honesty. This assumed honesty is a powerful weapon able to twist and bend the beliefs of anyone naïve enough to not recognize it for what it really is: faith and dependence much too easily placed. America has unwittingly become reliant upon the media for facts and ideas that may or may not be entirely truthful.

The things that we see and hear have the ability to incite a wide range of emotions in us. Sorrow, joy, and, in the case of the Columbine High School Massacre, anger, among others. The act carried out by the culprits is infuriating in itself, however, that anger and frustration was exploited and turned upon the innocents previously mentioned.

One morning, while casually pouring myself a bowl of cereal, I glanced at the television and observed a news report detailing the death of young Devin Brown, a thirteen year old boy who was unnecessarily shot dead by a police officer. Immediately following that report, was a hit-and-run. After that was the story of an attempted robbery at a small thrift store, in which the store owner shot and killed one of the robbers and wounded another. After that was live coverage of a high speed car chase. When nothing but real life violence is shown for more than five straight minutes on a program as influential as the Channel 7 News, it is astonishing that parents across the nation are able to muster up the audacity to complain about the violence in movies, television, and video games, and even more astonishing that parents would blame the violence levels in video games and the lyrics of musical artists for atrocities such as Columbine.

...When a dude's getting bullied and shoots up his school

and they blame it on Marilyn .. and the heroin

Where were the parents at? And look where it's at

Middle America, now it's a tragedy

Now it's so sad to see, an upper class city

having this happening..

then attack Eminem cause I rap this way...

- Marshall Mathers, "The Way I Am"

It is saddening that those who deviate from the conventional are those whom culpability is most easily and most commonly assigned. The thinkers, the misunderstood, the daring. These are the victims of social prosecution, day in and day out, for everything that goes wrong in this country.

Artists such as Eminem, Marilyn Manson, and other controversial musicians gained a noticeable rise in their infamously in the aftermath of the Columbine incident. “In his film The Young Poisoner's Handbook, director Benjamin Ross revealed a fictionalized view of a notorious real-life, adolescent killer, Graham Young, who poisoned multiple friends and family members in England in the 1960s. Young, unlike Columbine's Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, did not play Doom¹. Perhaps a chemistry set was not a good idea for Young” (Gonzalez). Blaming a video game for committing mass murder is cause enough to be declared clinically insane. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were responsible for the Columbine High School Massacre, no one else.

The idealists, the rebels, and the out-of-the-box thinkers take the hardest hits from society. This is due to the fact that the idealists, the rebels, and the out-of-the-box thinkers threaten the potency of the established system. Every government fears its own downfall. The American government bears no exception. When something threatens the ideals of those whom hold power, public opinion is manipulated and turned against the accused.

Richard Nixon, his administration and other right-wing politicians (including ultraconservative ancient Senator Strom Thurmond, who personally memoed Attorney General John Mitchell on the matter) were fixated on what they saw as the Lennon problem. To them, the politically outspoken singer-songwriter was an insidious subversive of the worst kind, the famous and beloved kind (“Assassination”).

John Lennon, was a threat to the stability of the United States government for dreaming. He gave his listeners hope for a possibility far greater than the United States government and anything that it could ever dream of accomplishing. Lennon was a potential end to everything

¹ Popular video game recognized as being the first in the widely popular “first person shooter” genre of video games.

that strong conservatives stood for. He was killed on December 8, 1980 by Mark David Chapman.

President Abraham Lincoln represented a huge change to the American lifestyle, and the abolishment of close to everything every hardcore Southerner lived for. To John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln was a threat to the established system that needed to be eliminated. On Friday, April 14, 1865, while the president sat watching *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre, Booth shot the commander in chief in the head, and then proceeded to stab him with a hunting knife six times before leaping over the balcony and fleeing the scene (Norton). President Lincoln never regained consciousness and passed away the following morning.

On January 30, 1948, Mohandas K. Gandhi, the 79-year-old apostle of nonviolence who led India to independence from Britain was shot and killed by Nathuram Godse (Burns). Godse received a death sentence and was hanged on Nov. 15, 1949. Gopal Godse², said in an interview that he did not regret participation in Gandhi's demise, and that "we had done away with somebody who... wanted to see Pakistan progress."

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." The civil rights activist took the nation by storm with his powerful speech and non-violent demonstrations. Having devoted his life to the obstruction of racial persecution, King became a national hero, not only for the blacks of America, but for the whites, the Asians, the Latinos, the Jews, and the Christians (Chew). He was the symbol of unity, with a dream of harmony. For this reason, James Earl Ray felt obligated to end King's life that tragic day, April 4, 1968.

² Nathuram Godse's brother. Conspired with Nathuram on Gandhi's assassination. Sentenced to life in prison after Gandhi's assassination, and released on parole after 18 years in 1967 (Burns).

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace...

- John Lennon, "Imagine"

Imagine a world like that. "No possessions and no need for greed or hunger," is a rather appealing suggestion. "Imagine all the people sharing all the world." Now, imagine a government opposed to this "perfect" lifestyle, labeling the dreamer an "insidious subversive of the worst kind" ("Assassination"). This is a world that is prevented from coming into being because the people who have the courage to enact change are repressed and killed as if they were a disease.

In his speech to the UN on June 6, 1966, Robert Francis Kennedy said

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance (Elsis).

Each of the previously mentioned subjects had not only the power, but the courage to stand up for what is right, to go against the status quo, even at the endangerment of their own lives. They possessed the will to start a revolution that could change the nation, or even the

world. However, every time that a revolutionary surfaces, the government gains another reason to fear for its wellbeing. That fear is commonly turned upon the constituents through use of propaganda in an attempt to ensure the loyalty of the citizens to the government.

“A character in Evelyn Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags* said that the difference between prewar and postwar life was that, [in a] prewar [country], if one thing went wrong the day was ruined; [in a] postwar [country], if one thing went right the day would be made” (Burgess 286). America is a postwar country. This can be seen in the September 11 tragedy, and in Hurricane Katrina.

9-11 threw the nation into turmoil. This turmoil was iniquitously exploited by the President and used to his advantage. “In George Bush's America the poor were not a priority. And after September 11th correcting America's social problems took a back seat to fear, panic and a new set of priorities” (Bowling). He soon became the nation’s hero, lashing out against the “criminals” in the Middle East. He was free not to lose sleep over the important social problems in the United States and to focus instead on his rising popularity and how he could continue to blossom as a people’s champion.

America was unprepared for September 11, 2001. We believed that we were safe, that nothing so atrocious could ever transpire within our nation’s boundaries. When it did, we were knocked to the ground. As a “prewar” nation, we did not know what to do when “the war” actually came, so we turned to the first person who stepped up and presented himself as one who could lead us through the night, Bush. We fell for a dirty trick played by an immoral asshole. Reliant on the media’s portrayal of the President at the time, and unable to judge him on our own basis’s, we fell, once again, into a hole dug by our dependence on others.

America needs to wake up and realize that nothing is handed out for free, something must always be given in return. In the specific instance of the case that I present, the nation must learn that if it is to rely too heavily on and trust too easily those whom we go to in order to satisfy our inquisitive needs, we lose all self credibility and inevitably the ability to tell fact from fallacy. America causes all of its own problems because it does not know how *not* to do it. We expect somebody to show us how to do everything, including preventing our Columbines and 9-11's. We were shown that to be a revolutionary is to die. What we really need, however, is to not need to be shown everything. We must learn to think for ourselves, to step up to the plate and shape our wonderful nation in our image, not in the images of others who wish to govern our lives and the things that we live for. We must look past the deceit of those who think they are better than us, and who believe that they possess the privilege to regulate the lives that we lead.

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one

- John Lennon, "Imagine"

I do hope that some day, this will be more a reality than a dream. I hope that one day, we as a people can learn to act on our own and make the changes necessary for a perfect nation, and in time, a perfect world.

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