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A Volatile Young Man, Humiliation and a Gun

By Bob Herbert, Op-Ed Columnist

“God I can’t wait till I can kill you people.”

— A message on the Web site of the Columbine killer Eric Harris.

In the predawn hours of Monday, Aug. 1, 1966, Charles Whitman, a former marine and Eagle Scout in Austin, Tex., stabbed his wife to death in their bed. The night before he had driven to his mother’s apartment in another part of town and killed her.



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Later that Monday morning, Whitman gathered together food, water, a supply of ammunition, two rifles, a couple of pistols, a carbine and a shotgun and climbed the landmark 30-story tower on the campus of the University of Texas.

Beneath a blazing sun, with temperatures headed toward the mid-90s, Whitman opened fire. His first target was a pregnant teenager. Over the next 80 or so minutes he killed 14 people and wounded more than 30 others before being shot to death by the police.

More than four decades later we still profess to be baffled at the periodic eruption of murderous violence in places we perceive as safe havens. We look on aghast, as if the devil himself had appeared from out of nowhere. This time it was 32 innocents slaughtered on the campus of Virginia Tech. How could it have happened? We behave as if it was all so inexplicable.

But a close look at the patterns of murderous violence in the U.S. reveals some remarkable consistencies, wherever the individual atrocities may have occurred. In case after case, decade after decade, the killers have been shown to be young men riddled with shame and humiliation, often bitterly misogynistic and homophobic, who have decided that the way to assert their faltering sense of manhood and get the respect they have been denied is to go out and shoot somebody.

Dr. James Gilligan, who has spent many years studying violence as a prison psychiatrist in Massachusetts, and as a professor at Harvard and now at N.Y.U., believes that some debilitating combination of misogyny and homophobia is a “central component” in much, if not most, of the worst forms of violence in this country.

“What I’ve concluded from decades of working with murderers and rapists and every kind of violent criminal,” he said, “is that an underlying factor that is virtually always present to one degree or another is a feeling that one has to prove one’s manhood, and that the way to do that, to gain the respect that has been lost, is to commit a violent act.”

Violence is commonly resorted to as the antidote to the disturbing emotions raised by the widespread hostility toward women in our society and the pathological fear of so many men that they aren’t quite tough enough, masculine enough — in short, that they might have homosexual tendencies.

In a culture that is relentless in equating violence with masculinity, “it is tremendously tempting,” said Dr. Gilligan, “to use violence as a means of trying to shore up one’s sense of masculine self-esteem.”

The Virginia Tech killer, Cho Seung-Hui, was reported to have stalked female classmates and to have leaned under tables to take inappropriate photos of women. A former roommate told CNN that Mr. Cho once claimed to have seen “promiscuity” when he looked into the eyes of a woman on campus.

Charles Whitman was often portrayed as the sunny all-American boy. But he had been court-martialed in the Marines, was struggling as a college student and apparently had been suffering from depression. He told a psychiatrist that he absolutely hated his father, but he started his murderous spree by killing his wife and his mother.

The confluence of feelings of inadequacy, psychosexual turmoil and the easy availability of guns has resulted in a staggering volume of murders in this country.

There are nearly 200 million firearms in private hands in the U.S., and more than 30,000 people — nearly 10 times the total number of Americans who have died in Iraq — are killed by those guns each year. In 1966 Americans were being killed by guns at the rate of 17,000 a year. An article in *The Times* examining such “rampages” as the Charles Whitman shootings said:

“Whatever the motivation, it seems clear that the way is made easier by the fact that guns of all sorts are readily available to Americans of all shades of morality and mentality.”

We’ve learned very little in 40 years.

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