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The Legacy of the Texas Tower Sniper

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**DARK DAY IN BLACKSBURG
COMMENTARY**

On August 1, 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman ascended the University of Texas Tower, in Austin, and in 96 minutes fired 150 high-powered rounds of ammunition down upon an unsuspecting university family. Students, faculty and staff members, and visitors heard "strange noises" and thought nothing of it until they saw bodies and blood on the sidewalks. The shooter killed or wounded nearly 50 people that day.

The Whitman story is enduring because it was our introduction to public mass murder and school shootings. It also preys on our worst fear: A stranger aims and kills you because he wants to — and he doesn't give a damn that he, too, is about to die.

I researched and wrote *A Sniper in the Tower* from 1995 through 1997. The university-press trade paperback is in its fifth printing, and the tragedy at Virginia Tech will most likely push it into a sixth. One reason the story of this crew-cut, blond, blue-eyed, "all-American" boy will not go away is that it encompasses many of the salient psychological and criminal-justice issues we debate today. Like the tower tragedy, the Virginia Tech incident will see passionate discussion about whether or not violence is the result of organic disease. Is the killer's brain different from ours? Did drugs influence his actions? Was he taught to kill by the military? By his father? Did his situation push him to do what he did? Why wasn't this young man helped?

Within a week of the Texas shootings, Travis County officials announced that a brain tumor had been discovered during Whitman's autopsy. Some claim that it had to have produced a seizure of sorts, which overrode his ability to both control himself and discern the difference between right and wrong. Other Whitman disciples (yes, he has disciples) advance the "amphetamine psychosis" theory: that his abuse of Dexedrine brought about a chemically induced psychotic episode. Then there are those who advance his prior military indoctrination as the

culprit: He had been trained as a Marine to kill. Other "explanations" include the fact that he was broke and had no immediate prospects of success; his parents were separated; his own marriage was in shambles; he was taking too heavy a schedule at Austin; and during childhood he had been spanked often by an overbearing and dangerously surly father.

Anyone with common decency would not wish those things upon anyone, and, indeed, it is our mission in higher education to investigate and determine, as best we can, if there are "dots" to be connected. But during our inquiry we should not delude ourselves or ignore the obvious. A detailed account of his actions shows that Charles Whitman was fully conscious of what he was doing. He could not have done what he did otherwise.

So what does this have to do with Virginia Tech? The details are sketchy, but initial reports are that the gunman had appropriate ammunition and weapons designed for efficient killing. Reports of chained doors to prevent escape and of the gunman's purposeful behavior to inflict the greatest possible damage on his victims are consistent with what Charles Whitman did in Austin in 1966. Unless I see dramatic evidence to the contrary, the man in Blacksburg, Va., who broke our hearts was a cold-blooded murderer, in the Whitman mold.

In *Sniper in the Tower* I concluded, and later the FBI's premier profiler, John Douglas, in his book *Anatomy of Motive* would agree, that "[Whitman's] actions speak for themselves." Any cause-and-effect theory, whether organic (brain tumor), chemical (amphetamine psychosis), or psychological (military training or child abuse), embracing the idea that Charles Whitman's judgment or free will was impaired, is not consistent with what he did. He carefully planned every move and detail, and he succeeded in doing what he set out to do — murdering people and getting himself killed in spectacular fashion. The Whitman case taught me that sometimes our zeal to champion causes important to us or to explain the unexplainable and be "enlightened" blinds us to the obvious.

Charles Whitman was a murderer; he killed innocent people. We should not forget that. In Virginia we appear to have a Whitman-like character. It is vitally important for all to remember that there is only one person responsible for what happened in Blacksburg, and that is the man who pulled the trigger. But in Virginia the diversions have already begun. As I write this, less than a half day since the senseless killing of nearly three dozen innocent

people, Web headlines on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC read: "Did Virginia Tech's Response Cost Lives?" "Parents Demand Firing of Virginia Tech President, Police Chief Over Handling," "Students Wonder about Police Response ..." Ironically, those headlines are juxtaposed with pictures of law-enforcement officers administering medical treatment and hauling wounded students to safety. Next to those pictures are videos of Virginia Tech's president and chief of police, in pain and in the midst of a nightmare, bombarded with sensational questions from irresponsible reporters.

Of course there are lessons we can learn. We can look back to Austin in 1966 and recall the obvious: The university had no real police department — only a few unarmed men who spent most of their time issuing parking permits. The Austin Police Department was utterly unprepared and caught off guard, and the disturbing truth was that at the time no similarly situated police department in the United States could have done much better. Today we have real university police departments and SWAT teams.

Before we identify and learn the lessons of Blacksburg, we must begin with the obvious: More than four dozen innocent people were gunned down by a murderer who is completely responsible for what happened. No one died for lack of text messages or an alarm system. They died of gunshot wounds. While we painfully learn our lessons, we must not treat each other as if we are responsible for the deaths that occurred. We must come together and be respectful and kind. This is not a time for us to torture ourselves or to seek comfort by finding someone to blame. Maybe as a result of the tragedy we will figure out how to more effectively use e-mail and text messages as emergency tools for warning large populations. We may come up with a plan that successfully clears a large area, with a population density of a midsize city, in less than two hours. Maybe universities will find a way to install surveillance cameras and convince students and faculty members that they are being monitored for their own safety and not for gathering domestic intelligence. All of those steps might be helpful in avoiding and reducing the carnage of any future incidents. But as long as we value living in a free society, we will be vulnerable to those who do harm — because they want to and know how to do it.

If Virginia Tech's next 40 years resemble Austin's experience since 1966, the university will struggle with how to memorialize the victims and remember what happened. Until recently the University of Texas had no plaque or historical marker reminding people of what happened on August 1, 1966, and perhaps that was best. Charles Whitman should not be allowed to turn the University of

Texas Tower and South Mall, where entering freshmen dance and commencement ceremonies are held, into an area that reminds us of murder. Critics accused the university of insensitivity toward the victims and even of institutional denial. University leaders and administrators continue to struggle with questions about how to remember such events without romanticizing those who perpetrate them. That is not an insignificant challenge Virginia Tech faces.

Time will not erase the horror witnessed on the Blacksburg campus. But in time the university will return to its work of granting degrees to thousands of individuals who lead us to better lives. That, after all, is what magnificent institutions like UT-Austin and Virginia Tech do.

What is Charles Whitman or Cho Seung-Hui compared with that?

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