

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

It is obvious that a graduated tax is a direct penalty imposed on saving and industry, a direct premium offered to idleness and extravagance. It discourages the very habits and qualities which it is most in the interest of the State to foster, and it is certain to operate forcibly where fortunes approach the limits at which a higher scale of taxation begins. It is a strong inducement at that period, either to cease to work or to cease to save. It is at the same time perfectly arbitrary. When the principle of taxing all fortunes on the same rate of computation is abandoned, no definite rule or principle remains. At what point the higher scale is to begin, or to what degree it is to be raised, depends wholly on the policy of Governments and the balance of parties. The ascending scale may at first be very moderate, but it may at any time, when fresh taxes are required, be made more severe, till it reaches or approaches the point of confiscation. No fixed line or amount of graduation can be maintained upon principle, or with any chance of finality. The whole matter will depend upon the interests and wishes of the electors; upon party politicians seeking for a cry and competing for the votes of very poor and very ignorant men.

Dishonest politicians...will have no difficulty in drawing impressive contrasts between the luxury of the rich and the necessities of the poor, and in persuading ignorant men that there can be no harm in throwing great burdens of exceptional taxation on a few men, who will still remain immeasurably richer than themselves. Yet, no truth of political economy is more certain than that a heavy taxation of capital, which starves industry and employment, will fall most severely on the poor.

Democracy and Liberty, W.E.H. Lecky, 1896.

THE TAX MAN COMETH.

In recognition of the arrival last week of the deadline for filing federal taxes, I thought that we should begin this week by offering three cheers for divided government. Come now, brothers and sisters, altogether. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! The much celebrated and greatly anticipated first 100 days of Democratic control of both Houses of Congress is over and...and...nothing happened. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Nothingness. Sable-vested night, eldest of things. This is cause for rejoicing.

Had the Republicans retained power last November, it is likely that they would have already spent several zillion dollars on a variety of "important new priorities and initiatives" dreamed up by the "compassionate conservative" in the White House and his fellow big government empathists. Who knows, Americans

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The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

might be blessed today with free and mandatory colonoscopies, compliments of President Bush, performed in mobile units traversing the nation, scopes at the ready, leaving a carbon footprint in its wake larger by far than that produced by Al Gore's mansion and millions of glassy eyed, traumatized citizens not certain whether to be thankful or angry.

But the Republicans lost. The public had had enough of these "conservatives." They handed the reins of power over to the Democrats. These Democrats had, of course, promised an expensive "new direction for America," which would begin, they said, with an initiative labeled "6 for '06," described by party leader Nancy Pelosi as "a list of deliverables that can happen, God willing, if Democrats take back Congress." The first of this imposing inventory of promised legislative accomplishments was to be the implementation of the recommendations put forth by the 9/11 Commission, followed by new laws aimed at energy independence, health care, jobs, college access, and retirement security.

But it didn't happen. And it won't happen. The Democrats took control and a blessed combination of gridlock, overreach, ineptitude, and just plain dull wittedness descended over the world's greatest debating society like Sandburg's fog, on little cat feet. Americans had instinctively known something that the Democrats hadn't. Voters sensed that, in light of the craven betrayal of fiscal responsibility by the Republicans, the only protection they had left from the whole thieving, sleazy bunch of Democrats and Republicans alike was to set them feuding among themselves. Purses are safe from robbers when robbers are fighting other robbers instead of snatching purses. And so it is.

This fog will eventually move on, as Sandburg said. And Congressional profligacy will resume, probably more exuberantly than ever. Washington is a hungry beast. But in the meantime Americans can be pleased that God was indeed willing, as Madam Pelosi had hoped, to hand the reins of Congress over to her, to Harry Reid, and to their lazy and bile-filled compatriots, who concluded after a few short weeks

that passing legislation was too much work and that it would be far easier and much more fun to spend their time investigating "ethical breaches" among the loyal opposition. This makes Republicans in Congress and at the White House uncomfortable, but it has been a welcome respite from the constant Republican efforts over the past six-plus years to increase the influence, power, and the cost of federal establishment.

It is helpful when considering this situation to think of the federal government as a huge recycling center for "the peoples'" money. In a highly intrusive process that makes William the Conqueror's "Doomsday Book" look positively benign by comparison, the feds extort millions upon millions of dollars from the paychecks of ordinary Americans every day, never allowing them even briefly to touch their money before giving it over. The fear in Washington is that these workers may form a paternal bond with their money if allowed to hold it to their bosom for even a moment. The fear is that they will stubbornly cling to the vain belief that they could care for it better than the unhappy lords in Washington, whom Chesterton once described as looking upon the labor and laughter of ordinary citizens "as a tired man looks at flies."

A large percentage of the money that Washington leaches from society disappears into a miasma of waste and corruption and the rest is then returned to the contributors in the form of a variety of goods and services. This distribution process is heavily influenced by the efforts of citizens and groups of citizens to convince the legislators of the worthiness of their particular petition, a task that increasingly involves paying large sums of money to the allocators in the form of "campaign contributions" and gifts of various sorts, ranging from money to obsequy.

The key to understanding the operation of this Kafkaesque machine is that in the early part of the 20th century, the collection mechanism was specifically redesigned to render it unfair. It is also important to understand that the distribution process needed no such corruptive help, being, by its very nature, conducive to creeping putrescence.

The unfairness of the collection system stems from the 16th Amendment to the Constitution, which trashed one of the key provisions in the original document, that one having to do with the requirement that federal taxes would be “uniform throughout the United States.” This quaint phrase can still be found in the Constitution, although it is, unfortunately, as much an artifact of another time as is the North Bridge at Concord or George Washington’s house at Mount Vernon.

There was considerable debate during the ratification process over what exactly the phrase “uniform throughout the United States” was intended to mean. But it was generally agreed that it meant that all Americans would be taxed the same; that no citizen or group of citizens would pay greater taxes than any other citizen or group of citizens. In fact, in Federalist Paper No. 36, Hamilton argued that this phrase adequately guarded against the possible abuse of the power of taxation, and he capitalized the word UNIFORM in the essay in order to drive home the importance of this word.

America’s founders were brilliant men and they understood that federal taxation absolutely required not only the consent of the public, but ironclad assurances that majority groups would not unite to impose higher taxes on minority groups than they themselves were required to pay. Thus, farmers, even though they were in the majority, could not unite to impose the bulk of the tax burden on city folk, and vice versa. Needless to say, the idea of an income tax under which “the rich” would be required to pay a higher percentage of their income than “the poor” would have been considered ludicrously unconstitutional at the time.

Over the next 100-plus years, populist politicians made various efforts to eliminate this pesky fairness requirement. The most important of these efforts was the passage of a “graduated” income tax in 1862, to help pay for the huge costs being incurred by the Civil War. President Grant suspended this tax seven years after the war ended, but it was just a matter of time, once the idea of such a tax had been tried as a short-term measure before it became a long-term reality.

Congress made its first attempt in 1894, during the administration of Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat elected to the White House after the Civil War. But the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional the very next year in the famous case Pollack vs. Farmers Loan & Trust Co. The formal decision was made on technical grounds, but the true objection was that a graduated tax violated the “uniformity” requirement of the constitution by exempting some citizens from the tax altogether and by taxing some at higher levels than others.

Reflecting the views and concerns of the founding fathers, Justice Field, writing for the majority, argued that “every citizen should contribute his proportion, however small the sum, to the support of the government, and it is no kindness to urge any of our citizens to escape this obligation.”

This, of course, did not put the matter to rest, but simply stirred the populist tax advocates to greater frenzy, and in 1913, in the final days of the Taft administration, the 16th amendment to the Constitution was ratified, an amendment which formally destroyed the Constitution’s “uniformity” requirement on which the founding fathers had placed so much faith. No longer did the government need to be “uniform” in its taxation, or even fair. In case you haven’t read it lately it goes as follows.

The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on incomes, from whatever source derived, without apportionment among the several states, and without regard to any census of enumeration.

As we said earlier, the system for distributing these funds is inherently corrupt, involving, as it does, elected officials deciding which voters and groups of voters should get the lion’s share of the great federal redistribution. As we put it in an article written about a year and half ago, the system is very much like casino gambling, whereby everyone “contributes” to “the house,” which keeps a generous percentage and gives the rest back to the players, either through direct payouts or through “comps” and favors of various kinds.

In the casino, the players happily accept the challenge because they hope, through a combination of skill and luck, to get back more than they contributed, thus making money at the expense of other less-fortunate and less-skilled players. The game in Washington isn't voluntary, so most of the players aren't as happy about the whole thing. But the idea is the same. The big difference is that luck has nothing to do with determining winners and losers in Washington.

In the Washington game, the big winners are those who hire the best professionals to play for them. These players are called lobbyists, and more often than not, the most effective among them are those who are provided with the most generous amounts of money with which to grease the palms of the men and women who run the game. In bygone days, before the language had become corrupted, these payments would have been called bribes. Today, they are referred to as "campaign contributions."

The American public is exceedingly familiar with this process, so there is no reason to dwell on the details here, except to note that the Chairman of the Federal Election Committee said recently that the candidates for the presidency in 2008 will spend a total of \$1 billion on the upcoming election campaigns, and that doesn't include tens of millions that will be spent on the various House and Senate races. Virtually all of this money will come from "donors," some of whom will give because they simply don't know any better, but the bulk of it will come from individuals and groups who are hopeful that their money will yield some return in the great game described above.

Now, when considering this billion-dollar figure, it is interesting to note that on March 28, 193 A.D., Rome's Praetorian guards murdered emperor Publius Helvius Pertinax, who, at that time, had held that august position for just 86 days. He had reluctantly accepted it in the aftermath of the death of his predecessor, the deranged and debauched Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus, who was murdered at the behest of his mistress and cousin, known to history only as Marcia.

Pertinax's father in law, Titus Flavius Sulpicianus, was his logical successor but, according to Gibbon, the Praetorians were apprehensive that "they should not obtain a just price for so valuable a commodity." So they "ran out upon the ramparts and with a loud voice, proclaimed that the Roman world was to be disposed of to the best bidder by public auction."

Sulpicianus began the bidding by offering 5,000 drachms to each of the soldiers in the Praetorian camp. Marcus Didius Salvius Julianus Severus, described by Gibbon as a "vain old man," responded with a bid of 6,250 drachms and was immediately proclaimed Emperor of Rome and received an oath of allegiance from the soldiers. He was beheaded 66 days later.

Now it is all but impossible to calculate the value in today's dollars of 6,250 drachms. And furthermore, we don't know exactly how many Praetorians there were in the camp. But it seems likely that the purchase price for the post of Roman Emperor was but a fraction of the \$100 million that the head of U.S. Federal Election Commission says is the "entry level" amount necessary even to get into the U.S. presidential race.

One reason for the lower price has to do with job security, the expected tenure of the Roman position in those days being shaky at best. But it also reflects the fact that the Roman post was bid upon by individuals who were using their own funds for the sole purpose of enhancing their personal station in life.

Those who would be President of the United States today represent large assemblies of individuals who pool their assets in support of a political paladin who will carry their banner in the grand tax-and-spend distribution battle described above. This system is much more sophisticated and arguably more civilized than the 2nd Century Roman one, but it is a prescription for the same kind of political and social corruption that led eventually to the disgraceful

auction by the Praetorians. Indeed, a cynic might argue that a 21st Century variation of this auction is happening here in the United States right before our very eyes.

Gibbon reports that the Roman auction “diffused an universal grief, shame, and indignation, throughout the city.” Americans today know no such grief, shame, or indignation. They write checks, cheer happily for their guy or gal, and vainly hope that if he or she wins, the result will be that the value of the goods and services that they get back from the government in Washington will exceed the value of the hard earned dollars they pay to that government in taxes. To borrow a phrase usually attributed to P.T. Barnum, “there’s a sucker born every minute.”

THE COMING NATIONAL “NON-DIALOGUE.”

Whenever there is a large-scale tragedy such as took place a week ago on the campus of Virginia Tech, the political and media elites determine immediately that the way to prevent such future catastrophes is to have a “national dialogue.” We last heard calls for such a conversation just over 18 months ago, after New Orleans was wiped out by Hurricane Katrina.

The problem with these dialogues is that they nearly always misidentify the principle and exacerbating causes of the tragedy. After Katrina, the discussion was about the failure of government at various levels, from the incompetence of President Bush’s political appointees to the indecisiveness of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco to the detachment of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. Blaming government became the default position; an excuse; a way to assign blame without having to address larger-scale, longer-term, elemental societal issues that turned a natural disaster into a national catastrophe.

This was idiotic. True, government efforts to help didn’t work well. But the fundamental problem that demanded a discussion and a great deal of follow-up

action was the fact that New Orleans is a dysfunctional city. It is a cesspool of crime and corruption at all levels, a poster child for disintegration of traditional civil society. Inept government is not the root cause of this decay. It is a symptom.

Similarly, mass shooting incidents are almost always followed immediately by calls for a national discussion on guns and the country’s “gun culture,” which, yet again, misidentifies the causes of the tragedy. Last week, the *New York Times*, the nation’s “newspaper of record,” responded right on cue, misspecifying the causes of the shooting and advocating an ill-focused solution. “What is needed, urgently” the *Times*’ editorial board declared, “is stronger controls over the lethal weapons that cause such wasteful carnage and such unbearable loss.”

This too was idiotic. While such discussions may be cathartic for some, they are just as misdirected as those that followed Katrina. More to the point, they are also, historically, counterproductive, often leading to the enactment of legislation that serves to aggravate gun violence rather than reduce it.

Counterintuitive though it might sound, “gun control” rarely has the desired effect on those who are intent to use guns to commit acts of violence. Virginia Tech was a “gun-free zone,” after all. But that didn’t exactly dissuade Seung-Hui Cho. And the nation’s largest “gun-free zone,” the District of Columbia, is the home of some of the country’s most pervasive gun violence. As economists John Lott and William Landes noted nearly a decade ago, “the only policy factor to [positively] influence multiple victim public shootings is the passage of concealed handgun laws.”

The fact of the matter is that the tragedy at Virginia Tech was no more about guns than the destruction of the Murrah federal office building in Oklahoma City twelve years ago was about Ryder trucks and fertilizer. The means of destruction are far less important to this discussion than the motivations for it. Cho was a determined killer who would have killed, even if he’d been denied access to handguns. The “how” is largely irrelevant. The real question is “why?”

But “why” is an extremely difficult and complicated question to answer, and, much like the civil collapse of New Orleans, it is uncomfortable for liberals to discuss.

So, the discussion won’t take place. Oh, of course, there will be some “conversation” about the facts as they played out in the story, but most of the agenda-setters in the country, politicians and media-types alike, will be grateful to move on and to get back to issues with which they feel more comfortable, like the war in Iraq, dead supermodels, and potty-mouthed disc-jockeys. To do justice to this story, the arbiters of modern American culture – and particularly those on the political left – would have at least to look askance at, if not officially slaughter, some of their most prized sacred cows. And that’s not going to happen.

Take, for example, the issue of mental illness. Everyone knows by now that Cho was severely mentally ill, that he had had several incidents of disturbing behavior, that he had been determined by a judge to be a potential danger to himself or to others, that he was thus involuntarily committed for the very briefest of periods, but that he was let go immediately on the condition that he would be treated on an out-patient basis. But what does any of that mean?

The left prides itself on the fact that it was able to destigmatize severe mental illness during the 1970s, and thus to deinstitutionalize thousands of persons who were suffering from severe mental illness. And while there is no question that the destigmatization process has been immeasurably valuable, the idea that no one should be compelled to receive treatment for mental illness, no matter how severe or debilitating, has contributed notably to the rise in homelessness and has almost certainly contributed to the rise, over the last couple of decades, in mass killings.

But will we have a “national dialogue” on the idea of re-institutionalizing the treatment of severe and potentially violent mental illness? Will we have a discussion about the proper balance between liberty and societal safety, even where liberty is defined merely

as the freedom not to take medication? Does it mean that the left will rethink its interminable idealization of the “offbeat” and the “nonconformist,” what *National Review’s* Rich Lowry calls the celebration of “transgression” and the romanticization of “madness?” The answer to all of these questions is, simply, “not likely.”

That said, at least the mental illness aspect of this tragedy has been raised, which is more than we can say for many of the other, equally significant cultural and societal issues that have been and will continue to be virtually ignored in the discussion of the factors that drove Cho to do what he did.

Writing in *Time* this week, David von Drehle, who has made a career of following serial and mass murderers “from the chill dawn outside the Florida prison in which serial killer Ted Bundy met his end, to the charred façade of a Bronx nightclub where Julio Gonzalez incinerated 87 people, to a muddy Colorado hillside overlooking the Columbine High School library, in which Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wrought their mayhem,” noted that all of the mass and serial killers he has witnessed up close have shared a “common trait,” namely that they are “raging narcissists.” To wit:

Psychologists from South Africa to Chicago have begun to recognize that extreme self-centeredness is the forest in these stories, and all the other things – guns, games, lyrics, pornography – are just trees. To list the traits of the narcissist is enough to prove the point: grandiosity, numbness to the needs and pain of others, emotional isolation, resentment and envy . . .

Criminologists distinguish between serial killers like Bundy, whose crimes occur one at a time and who try hard to avoid capture, and mass killers like Cho. But the central role of narcissism plainly connects them. Only a narcissist could decide that his alienation should be underlined in the blood of strangers. The flamboyant nature of these

crimes is like a neon sign pointing to the truth. Charles Whitman playing God in his Texas clock tower, James Huberty spraying lead in a California restaurant, Harris and Klebold in their theatrical trench coats – they're all stars in the cinema of their self-absorbed minds.

Will this aspect of the tragedy be pursued? Again, it's not likely.

To address the issue of narcissism in America's youth, and especially its young men, would be to assail what has become the one unassailable "truth" in 21st century child development and education theory, namely that all poor behavior in children is caused by "low self esteem" and that there is no personality problem that cannot be solved by bolstering one's self image. For three decades now, the nation's educational establishment has been preoccupied with this idea, insisting that the key to all educational progress is high self esteem and thus focusing its efforts on boosting and sustaining the self image of its charges.

Unfortunately, the educational establishment has both the cause and the effect precisely backward. Self esteem, in reality, springs from accomplishment, not platitudes, and the effect of false flattery is to create in students an image of themselves that is entirely unrealistic and which predisposes them to severe and unduly painful disappointment. C. Thomas Bradley, a political science professor at Clemson University has noted that the hundreds of "current and recently graduated high school students" he meets every year share many common characteristics, one of the most important of which is that "they have artificially inflated opinions of themselves and are unwilling to tolerate criticism." He continues thusly:

Positive reinforcement for deeds well done has been transformed by the education establishment into indiscriminate praise so that children will "feel good" about themselves regardless of whether their ideas or actions are praiseworthy or not. The problem with this binge in juvenile "self-love" is that children with unjustifiably

high opinions of themselves are becoming aggressive and even violent when confronted with criticism or teasing.

It is no mere coincidence, in our estimation, that a number of mass shooters, including both Cho and Mitchell Johnson, one of the shooters who killed four classmates and a teacher at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998, had recently been rejected by girls/women to whom they'd expressed their affection. The idea of rejection was at odds with the self-image they'd created and which had been reinforced by the educational system. This conflict, in turn, precipitated violence, or in Cho's case, criminal charges of stalking, a mental health evaluation, and then violence. Not that you should expect Cho's self image to figure prominently into the discussion of his crime.

Finally, the facet of said crime that may be most important but that will never, ever be discussed by any of the nation's political and media leaders is the issue of life and the value of it in both the eyes of the killer and the society from which he sprang. In his *Time* article, David von Drehle asks what "licensed these boys, in their minds, to murder their teachers and classmates"? His conclusion that the license was provided by "extreme narcissism," is undoubtedly true, but it is only half of the story. The other half is the belief that the lives of "their teachers and classmates" are immaterial, that life itself is unimportant.

Last week, Senator and presidential hopeful Barack Obama was knocked hard for his weak attempt to connect the violence at Virginia Tech with the "violence that was directed at young women who were role models for all of us, role models for my daughters," which was perpetrated by Don Imus. This was a stupid and shabby attempt to score political points from the slaughter of innocents, and both Obama and his supporters should be ashamed. That said, there is, in fact, a connection between the two incidents. Moreover, a third incident, the left's response to the Supreme Court's partial birth abortion ruling, is also connected.

All three incidents have, at their very core, a complete and utter disregard for human life. In the case of Imus, he was repeating the language used in some segments of the black community to describe and to debase women, women who are considered little more than garbage. Jason Whitlock, a sports columnist for the *Kansas City Star* described the culture from which Imus borrowed as “perverted, corrupted and overtaken by prison culture . . . anti-black, anti-education, demeaning, self-destructive, pro-drug dealing and violent.” It is, in short, anti-life.

As for the partial birth abortion issue, the contempt for life in the responses of Democratic leaders to last week’s ruling is overwhelming. Even if one believes that abortion is a “women’s rights” issue and not a life issue; even if one believes that the fundamental question here is one of women’s freedom and reproductive liberty; even if one believes that abortion “terminates” a “fetus,” not a baby, the very idea of defending a practice in which said fetus is partially delivered only to have scissors shoved into its head and thus to be “terminated” should be far beyond the limits of what respectable politicians are willing to do to solicit votes. The practice is vile, and the defense of it is equally so.

And that brings us back to Cho. Clearly, he had no belief in the sanctity or even the inherent value of human life. To him, others were merely props to be used and destroyed. But he is hardly alone in believing so. Just over a decade ago, we published a piece entitled “Coming Soon to Your Neighborhood . . . The Superpredators,” in which we described the “new” generation of young, male criminals who were so violent, so devoid of human empathy, so contemptuous of life that they frightened even the hardened criminals, murderers, and gang founders with whom they shared prison cells. The following paragraphs are taken from that piece:

According to [John] Dilulio, the most disheartening finding of the well-known cohort-crime studies is that “since the studies began, each generation of crime-prone boys (the ‘6 percent’) has been about three times as dangerous as the one before it . . .”

Dilulio recounts that, “On a recent visit to a New Jersey maximum security prison, I spoke to a group of life-term inmates . . . In a typical remark, one prisoner fretted ‘I was a . . . street gladiator, but these kids are stone-cold predators.’ Likewise, in his just published book, Mansfield B. Frazier, a five-time convicted felon, writes of what he calls ‘The Coming Menace’: ‘As bad as conditions are in many of our nation’s ravaged inner-city neighborhoods, in approximately five years they are going to get worse, a lot worse.’ Having done time side-by-side with today’s young criminals in prisons and jails, he warns of a ‘sharp, cataclysmic’ increase in youth crime and violence.”

Dilulio then adds the following chilling personal observation. Since 1980, he says, “I have studied prisons and jails all across the country – San Quentin, Leavenworth, Rikers Island. I’ve been on the scene at prison murders and riots (and once was almost killed inside a prison). Moreover, I grew up in a pretty tough neighborhood and am built like an aging linebacker. I will still waltz backwards, notebook in hand and alone, into any adult maximum-security cellblock full of killers, rapists and muggers.

“But a few years ago, I forswore research inside juvenile lock-ups. The buzz of impulse violence, the vacant stares and smiles and the remorseless eyes were at once too frightening and too depressing (my God, these are children!) for me to pretend to ‘study’ them.”

The difference between the violent offenders of today and those of the past is the severity and randomness of the violence associated with the crimes committed. James Q. Wilson writes, “Youngsters are more likely than adults to kill with guns [which can be done from great distances, without ever seeing the face of the victim]...they are more likely to kill strangers, and they often kill for reasons that adults regard as trivial or bizarre.”

Jack Levin, a criminologist at Northeastern University, supports Wilson's contentions about these "superpredators." He says, "They kill for trivial reasons and have less understanding of what death means. They also kill for power, thrills or revenge."

In a recent interview with Dilulio, Lynne Abraham, the district attorney of Philadelphia, concurred wholeheartedly with this sentiment. According to Dilulio: "Abraham used such phrases as 'totally out of control' and 'never seen anything like it' to describe the rash of youth crime and violence that has begun to sweep over the City of Brotherly Love and other big cities. 'We're talking about kids who have absolutely no respect for human life and no sense of the future....'"

Until last week, no one had any reason to believe that Seung-Hui Cho was a "superpredator." But clearly he was. Like those described by Dilulio and Wilson, he had no regard whatsoever for human life, indeed was raised in a culture that increasingly devalues human life. And he had no problem whatsoever destroying human life in his attempt to exact revenge on a world that he believed had wronged him. That he felt that way should surprise no one. That he is not alone in this belief should frighten everyone.

Over the next few weeks, when the subjects of Virginia Tech and the mass shooting are discussed – which will be less and less frequently – we will undoubtedly be told repeatedly that there is no way to tell what would make a young man like Cho snap and commit such a horrendous act of violence. But that's not true. The fact of the matter is that we do know, at least in part. A combination of mental instability, overwhelming narcissism and inflated sense of self-worth, and a resolute contempt for human life made Cho a danger to others. Not that you'll hear these subjects discussed at any length in a "national dialogue," mind you. That would be too uncomfortable and too difficult. Far better simply to blame the guns and be done with it.

In our piece on New Orleans a year-and-a-half ago, we concluded with the following: "The factors that exacerbated the impact of Hurricane Katrina last week are obvious to anyone who is willing to assess the situation honestly. Unfortunately, given the state of the political culture, 'honesty' is likely to be in short supply."

Honesty is still in short supply. So ready yourselves for a "national non-conversation" on the Virginia Tech massacre that will be short, banal, and ultimately inconsequential. Ready yourselves as well for future incidents of horrific violence.

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