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A Culture of Passivity

"Protecting" our "children" at Virginia Tech.

By Mark Steyn

I haven't weighed in yet on Virginia Tech — mainly because, in a saner world, it would not be the kind of incident one needed to have a partisan opinion on. But I was giving a couple of speeches in Minnesota yesterday and I was asked about it and found myself more and more disturbed by the tone of the coverage. I'm not sure I'm ready to go the full *Derb* but I think he's closer to the reality of the situation than most. On Monday night, Geraldo was all over Fox News saying we have to accept that, in this horrible world we live in, our "children" need to be "protected."

Point one: They're not "children." The students at Virginia Tech were grown women and — if you'll forgive the expression — men. They would be regarded as adults by any other society in the history of our planet. Granted, we live in a selectively infantilized culture where twentysomethings are "children" if they're serving in the Third Infantry Division in Ramadi but grown-ups making rational choices if they drop to the broadloom in President Clinton's Oval Office. Nonetheless, it's deeply damaging to portray fit fully formed adults as children who need to be protected. We should be raising them to understand that there will be moments in life when you need to protect yourself — and, in a "horrible" world, there may come moments when you have to choose between protecting yourself or others. It is a poor reflection on us that, in those first critical seconds where one has to make a decision, only an elderly Holocaust survivor, Professor Librescu, understood instinctively the obligation to act.

Point two: The cost of a "protected" society of eternal "children" is too high. Every December 6th, my own unmanned Dominion lowers its flags to half-mast and tries to saddle Canadian manhood in general with the blame for the "Montreal massacre," the 14 female students of the Ecole Polytechnique murdered by Marc Lepine (born Gamil Gharbi, the son of an Algerian Muslim wife-beater, though you'd never know that from the press coverage). As I wrote up north a few years ago:

Yet the defining image of contemporary Canadian maleness is not M Lepine/Gharbi but the professors and the men in that classroom, who, ordered to leave by the lone gunman, meekly did so, and abandoned their female classmates to their fate — an act of abdication that would have been unthinkable in almost any other culture throughout human history. The “men” stood outside in the corridor and, even as they heard the first shots, they did nothing. And, when it was over and Gharbi walked out of the room and past them, they still did nothing. Whatever its other defects, Canadian manhood does not suffer from an excess of testosterone.

I have always believed America is different. Certainly on September 11th we understood. The only good news of the day came from the passengers who didn't meekly follow the obsolescent 1970s hijack procedures but who used their wits and acted as free-born individuals. And a few months later as Richard Reid bent down and tried to light his shoe in that critical split-second even the French guys leapt up and pounded the bejusus out of him.

We do our children a disservice to raise them to entrust all to officialdom's security blanket. Geraldo-like “protection” is a delusion: when something goes awry — whether on a September morning flight out of Logan or on a peaceful college campus — the state won't be there to protect you. You'll be the fellow on the scene who has to make the decision. As my distinguished compatriot Kathy Shaidle says:

When we say “we don't know what we'd do under the same circumstances”, we make cowardice the default position.

I'd prefer to say that the default position is a terrible enervating passivity. Murderous misfit loners are mercifully rare. But this awful corrosive passivity is far more pervasive, and, unlike the psycho killer, is an existential threat to a functioning society.

— *Mark Steyn, a National Review columnist, is author of America Alone.*