Designed to Kill:  
Gun Control and the Dunblane and Columbine Massacres

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In Memory of Laura Wilcox
and everyone
whose dreams were
cut short by
gun violence.
Introduction

On March 13, 1996, Thomas Hamilton opened fire in Dunblane Primary School’s gymnasium in Scotland, killing sixteen five- and six-year olds and their teacher as well as himself. Just over three years later, on April 20, 1999, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot and killed fourteen students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Colorado before taking their own lives. Each incident shocked the world and redefined each nation’s sense of safety as two suburban towns came to symbolize all that is dangerous in the world. The stories of the injured, dead, and emotionally scarred entered the national psyche (Homsher 2001: 232). Although not representative of gun violence nationally, these mass shootings defined the gun issue in the public’s mind. Consequently, they were defining moments in each country’s gun control debate. The actions taken as a consequence had the potential to redefine the national identity. Despite the similarities of the incidents, the effects were markedly different. In the United Kingdom (UK), lawmakers had put in place a ban on all private handgun ownership in homes within two years of the incident. In contrast, the Columbine shootings brought no significant changes in national gun laws, or even other types of violence-related legislation.

The parallels between the Columbine and Dunblane shootings were undeniably strong. The number of casualties was comparable, and both affected primarily young people. In each case, the killers ended the attacks with suicide, preventing any sense of understanding or retribution through trial. Both took place in state run schools, where the government was responsible for the safety of the children. Equally importantly, both towns were traditionally unlikely sites for violence—areas average citizens recognized as similar to their homes. Yet the aftermath of the incidents quickly developed in drastically different directions. Although this difference may easily be dismissed as a product of the UK’s weaker gun culture and lobbies, it is
important to note that guns were once a powerful force in British politics (Squires 2000: 6). The influence of guns had, nonetheless, weakened considerably over the course of the twentieth century in the UK, while, if anything, the US gun lobby increased its influence on American politics. This influence was strengthened by the second amendment of the United States Constitution, which has cast a shadow of Constitutional confusion over gun control efforts. Additionally, the British collectivist attitude towards social problems was far more conducive to gun control than the American tradition of individualism, which favors one person’s right to own a gun over public safety concerns. This circumstance, compounded by the comparative weakness of the British gun lobby, made politicians in Britain more open to gun control legislation. Meanwhile, the Columbine community chose largely to focus on God to explain the horrific deaths rather than seeking answers from society or the government, making material action less likely. Relatively few Columbine families chose to pursue gun control legislation in response to the massacre. In contrast, Dunblane parents united behind preventing what to them was the most obvious cause of the tragedy: gun access. Thus, they were effectively able to harness the already more favorable conditions of British society into a massive public outcry against handguns. The press largely aided them in their endeavor due to their unabashedly partisan approach to news coverage. The lucky coincidence of an upcoming election heightened the political pressure to act on public opinion, while the British political system allowed the newly elected Prime Minister to act on his goals without caving to the objections of the opposing party. Combined, these factors created a political and cultural difference so large that British gun laws became some of the toughest in the world while weaker American gun control bills never became law.
Violence Out of Bounds

The Dunblane and Columbine murders horrified the world because of their randomness, seemingly stemming from a larger societal violence (Sugarmann 2001: 156). The failure of the legal system to protect schools also powerfully threatened each nation’s protective instincts toward its children (Flaherty 2001: 25, 133; Cannon 1999: 43). Politicians used the vulnerability of children to encourage action. President Clinton envisioned “a future where society guards our children better against violent influences and weapons that can break the dam of decency and humanity in the most vulnerable of children” (Clinton 5/20/99).

The power of the incidents was further increased by their locations. Columbine was located in white, suburban, affluent middle-class Littleton, Colorado, challenging preconceptions about where violence occurs (Spina 2000: 216, Sugarmann 2001: 158). The white killers shocked the media and the public because of the challenge they posed to the conventional wisdom about who uses violence (Arnowitz 2000: 216). Frequent press references to “middle class suburbs” and the “familiar trappings of suburban comfort” (Johnson and Brooke 4/22/99) brought home the vulnerability of all Americans to violence. Jonathan Alter of Newsweek wryly noted:

For years now, an average of roughly forty teenagers a week have been murdered in this country, nearly ninety percent killed by guns. That’s the equivalent of 150-Littleton massacres a year. But they happen mostly one by one, off school grounds—no national news potential there—and slightly more than half of the teen killers and victims have been black (qtd. in Homsher 2001: 193).

Thus, the setting of Columbine was responsible for much of its news power.

Many also expressed terror at the normalcy of the killers’ lives (Spina 2000: 46). Thomas Friedman noted in the New York Times, “the shootings in Littleton were not by deprived youths, and they were not carried out by an obviously depraved single gunman, who
could be written off as a psycho. Rather they happened in a ‘Leave it to Beaver’ neighborhood, and the gunmen were Wally and Eddy Haskell” (qtd. in Klein and Chancer 2000: 146). The large number of deaths at once helped bring press attention, forcing people to accept that this was “our” problem, not just an urban phenomenon (Garbarino 2001: 6). Bob Walker, President of Handgun Control, Inc. noted that the “normal” setting of Columbine High School had led people to “begin to recognize that it could happen anywhere” (Bruni 5/30/99). As mourners flocked to Columbine, one bemoaned “suburban America is so vulnerable” (Brooke 5/6/99). In Littleton, people were seen to mourn “not only just the sons and daughters who were cut down but also the area’s old-fashioned sense of safety and maybe even its old fashioned faith in the future” (Terry 4/22/99). The sense of vulnerability created by Columbine was increased by the seven multi-victim school shootings in the preceding two years, suggesting a trend of violence. This perceived trend emphasized the importance of the story (Lawrence 2001: 100). The media consequently drew on a stream of interest groups clamoring for a say in the aftermath (Lawrence 2001: 103, Walker 1999: 78). Not least were politicians, who were drawn to the tragedy because of its “archetypal suburban setting that both parties have cast as pivotal political battlegrounds” (Bruni 5/30/99). Thus, the setting of Columbine was ideal for attracting national attention and provoking action.

Dunblane, too, was a seemingly unlikely site for a massacre. Many assumed such tragedies were limited to the gun-saturated US. The Daily Mirror observed, “You think it happens in America—not to someone just across the street” (qtd. in Squires 2000:131). Yet Dunblane was not only located in the seemingly sheltered British Isles, but also in a quiet and relatively safe corner of the country. Press described the town as:
…the sort of place most people dream of living. An idyllic retreat in which a close-knit community exists in peace. Until yesterday. It is hard to imagine such a cruel massacre in the most deprived inner city area in the world … But yesterday the unimaginable happened. The impossible became real…we cannot even begin to grasp the evil, it is beyond comprehension (qtd. in Squires 2000: 128).

Others echoed the sentiment, describing “prosperous” Dunblane as “among the least likely places in Scotland, or anywhere else in the British Isles, where one would expect an atrocity like that on Wednesday” (“Dunblane Tragedy” 3/15/96).

The shock of the Dunblane killings was further increased by the unpredictability of the incident. Mothers saw their worst nightmares carried out, as young children on an ordinary morning were shot dead in their school. Steve Boggan summarized the horror in the Independent: “Less than an hour before their mothers and fathers were asking if they had cleaned their teeth, telling them to fasten their shoes properly and checking they had packed their gym kit…a scene played out in hundreds of thousands of homes across the land” (Squires 2000: 128). Many commented on the unimaginable evil in killing such young children. A Daily Mirror writer wondered, “How anyone could slaughter so many tiny children, to kill and keep on killing those helpless little ones” (qtd. in Squires 2000:128). Families around the nation felt vulnerable and helpless as they searched for causes of the tragedy in hopes of preventing more (Squires 2000: 129, Young 1999: 9).

Security and Faith

The senseless murder of sixteen young children in a quiet Scottish town deeply challenged the UK’s sense of a secure identity. A Guardian article aptly summarized the perceived fall from grace of British society: “It might have been easier if Hamilton was simply a madman who came out of nowhere, but in fact his casual slaughter comes out of a society which
itself is showing signs of deranged and violent breakdown” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 133). The nation searched for explanations for the tragedy, hoping that by finding some fault in the system before March 1996, it could restore its shattered security (Eastman 3/14/96). Many blamed British society for the deaths, lamenting, “…[We are witnessing] a subculture of violence, and an enthusiasm for power and weapons taking grip in some parts of the UK…and we can’t dismiss it” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 133). Police, violent media, and school security were also commonly invoked causes of Thomas Hamilton’s actions, just as they were blamed in the US for the Columbine shootings.

British sources were initially ambiguous about how to frame the role of God and evil in the tragedy. Naturally, many bereaved parents took comfort in their churches. One injured child explained, with painful maturity, “There were just too many of us for God to save” (Clouston 10/16/96). School principal Ron Taylor commented, “Evil visited us. We don’t know why; we don’t understand it, and I guess we never will” (Clouston et al 3/16/96). Again asserting the incident’s place in the battle between good and evil, a Daily Telegraph article asserted, “Suffering, even the suffering of children, is necessary for men to know the difference between good and evil” (qtd. in Porter 3/16/96).Politicians, however, rejected religion as an explanation for the tragedy in favor of more material causes. A Guardian article noted that it is easier to face evil through the frame of religion than that of politics, explaining why politicians feel obliged to seek a concrete cause to act on while many theologians simply offer condolence. “Only by finding some other, explicable, pragmatic cause, rooted in society and therefore somehow rectifiable by it, can the public man begin to promise that the crime won’t happen again” (Young 3/14/96). Perhaps comparing Britain to the more religious United States, he notes, “If religion
counted for more than it does in our society, perhaps the utilitarian delusion would be less prevalent” (Young 3/14/96).

Many journalists, however, feared that religion might preclude rational inquiry into the attack. One writer noted that the concept of evil implies a loss of control and responsibility. If evil is a part of society, then we are not responsible for or in control of our collective fate (Porter 3/16/96). If suffering is necessary to life, then the future is not secure from such horrors. One writer summarized, “If this man was allowed to have handguns under license, it is not demonic evil, but a failure of resistance. Why I am worried about corroborating a notion of evil stalking abroad is because it lets people off the hook” (Porter 3/16/96). Local vicar Colin McIntosh, too, was reluctant to attribute the massacre to God’s superior wisdom. Although admitting moments of doubt, he assured mourning children the Sunday following the shootings, “Our only comfort lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that our children should die, that in those fatal, frightening moments in the school gym, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break” (qtd. in Samson and Crow 1997: 147).

Like Dunblane, Columbine shook many citizens’ sense of security, prompting reminisces about the “good old days” and fear that society was decaying and children were drifting out of their parents’ control (Homsher 2001: 134, 191). Many of the factors blamed for the deaths were similar to those explored in Britain. In the wake of multiple similar incidents, Columbine sparked fears of the breakdown of parental control and the power of violent media. President Clinton urged Columbine survivors to “give us a culture of values instead of a culture of violence” (Clinton 5/20/99). Two years later, a Gallup Poll showed that seventy-five percent of respondents nationwide still felt that shootings like Columbine reflected a serious problem in the country (Moore 3/26/01). However, the role of religion was notably different. Perhaps because of
the greater influence of religion in the US, politicians, including the President, did not hesitate to
call for prayer—unlike their British counterparts (Ombascik 1999: 40). Then-presidential
candidate Buchanan warned that Columbine represented a “polluted and poisoned culture” and
provided “a glimpse of the last stop on that train to hell, that reboarded decades ago when we
declared that God is dead and that each of us is his or her own God who can make up the rules as
we go along” (qtd. in Woodruff and Schneider 4/23/99). Most would not declare such an
extreme view, but the religious zeal of the Littleton community no doubt affected as well as
reflected the nation’s view of God’s role in the tragedy.

Columbine alumnus Brooks Brown recalls a school environment where non-Christians
were subjected to guilt, harassment, insults, and threats of divine punishment (Brown and Merritt
2002: 148). Although, in a notable concession to the purity of victims’ faith, this phenomenon
was absent from virtually all press coverage, it is reflected in the heavily Christian influence in
the town’s mourning process. Public services included Christian performers and Billy Graham’s
son Franklin, who compared the school’s sufferings to Job’s (Savidge 4/25/99; “You are not
alone” 4/25/99). Students who survived the massacre frequently professed to prefer their
churches’ comfort to the therapists who flooded into the town after the shootings. Some felt that
God had protected them, since, “The whole school was meant to blow up. Good always
overpowers evil” (qtd. in Rimer 6/6/99). Others gave God a more active role in the tragedy.
One student professed, “I totally believe that God always wants the best for us, no matter what,”
while others went so far as to say, “God was with [the victims] every step of the way. He chose
them for some special reason,” and that the incident was “God’s will” (qtd. in Rimer 6/6/99).
Thus, the lessons to be learned from the massacre were not how to protect ourselves but how to
accept God’s will: the “utilitarian delusion” that politics could find and fix a fault in the system
and thereby prevent further incidents was unnecessary. Indeed, of the twenty-one books available on Amazon.com about Columbine on January 31, 2002, eight focused on Christianity\(^1\).

Many bereaved families also called for a return to religious values to honor their children’s deaths (Zewe 4/24/99). One victim’s funeral, televised nationwide, promoted strongly conservative Christian values and included a vehement call to join the church (Brown and Merritt 2002: 153). The presiding minister welcomed the opportunity to gain national attention: “If I had called a press conference before this, you would have laughed…. This has been a way to get our message out” (qtd. in Rimer 5/22/99). Religious organizations nationwide looked to shooting victim Cassie Bernall as a martyr because of her alleged, although highly contested, affirmative answer to the killer’s question, “Do you believe in God?” Multiple books were written about Cassie’s death, including *She Said Yes*, written by her mother, which was number eight on the New York *Times* best seller list (Brown and Merritt 2002: 197; Janofsky 10/4/99). Instantly raised as an example of faith by the Christian Right, Cassie’s funeral attracted at least a thousand mourners as her minister declared, “Cassie died a martyr’s death. She went to the martyr’s hall of fame” (qtd. in Brooke 4/26/99, 4/27/99). Other families, such as Rachel Scott’s, also raised their children as pinnacles of faith, whose deaths should call others to follow their paths in life. Rachel’s family wrote a book, *Rachel’s Tears*, and toured the country giving speeches about her life and what they believed to be God’s plan for her (Brown and Merritt 2002: 192; James 7/20/00). For these families, preventing further tragedy was not as important as obeying and spreading God’s message.

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\(^1\) Data based on a search for “Columbine” at Amazon.com’s book section, [http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/browse/-/283155/ref%3Dtab%5Fgw%5Fg%5Fb%5Fg%5F3/103-5517388-6772651](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/browse/-/283155/ref%3Dtab%5Fgw%5Fg%5Fb%5Fg%5F3/103-5517388-6772651)
**The Gun Control Movements**

While the Christian Right seized on the Columbine tragedies as a call for a return to Christian values, untold other organizations used the incident to highlight the importance of their causes, from securing school grounds to reducing children’s access to violent media. Some of the most vocal among them were gun control advocates. To them, Columbine became a symbol of the danger of guns. In recent years, guns have come to be the second leading cause of death among youth (Sugarmann 2001: 111). Fights have always been a problem among young people, but as Ronald Stephens, National School Safety Center director, explains, “In the old days kids would walk away from a fight with a few bruises. Now it’s a body count” (qtd. in Klein and Chancer 2000: 131). To compound the problem, as of 1994, there were approximately 231,243,491 guns owned in the United States, any number of which may be accessible to a determined adolescent (Kates et al 1995: 261).

Nonetheless, many argue that gun access cannot be reduced because the United States Constitution guarantees the “right to bear arms” in its second amendment. This argument is probably the most popular and least questioned NRA argument. It precludes almost all debate on the subject, and demands absolute gun rights. However, the issue is far less clear-cut than the NRA would have it. The second amendment’s unclear language has never been settled, and many gun opponents take it to guarantee the right of organized forces such as the police or National Guard to carry firearms. Although the pro-gun lobby is extraordinarily strong and has impeded numerous promising gun control measures, its Constitutional argument has not been supported by the Supreme Court. It has declared that the Second Amendment does not bar states from banning guns, and while no direct ruling has been made on whether individuals have a right to own guns or whether the amendment was intended to apply to militias, courts have tended to
favor the latter interpretation. Of the 20,000 gun control laws nationwide, none have ever been struck down on the basis of the Second Amendment (Squires 2000: 74-75, Sugarmann 2001: 200).

Nonetheless, gun control in the United States has remained weak and riddled with loopholes throughout the twentieth century. The most recent gun bill, the Brady Bill of 1994, requires background checks on all gun purchases at Federal Firearm License (FFL) dealers (Cook and Leitzel 2000: 93). Loopholes, however, allow states to practice other types of background checks or, in some cases, forgo them all together (Kopel “Background Checks” 1995: 55). The only other federal regulation of guns are the Federal Firearms Act of 1938, which banned the possession of machine guns and sawed off shotguns and regulates interstate trade of firearms, and the Federal Gun Control Act of 1968, which banned all fully automatic weapons, restricted weapons imports, and increased fees for FFLs (Squires 2000: 76). Federal law also prohibits FFL sale of handguns to minors under 21 and any gun to youth under 18—although children may own guns if an adult purchases them (Sugarmann 2001: 119). None of these laws apply to non-FFL gun sales. In the twenty years before Columbine, gun control advocates carefully constructed a campaign against the industry including lawsuits, billboard campaigns, and journal articles. Simultaneously, an increasingly extremist NRA was alienating many of its more moderate members (Gegax and Fogg 8/2/99). Nonetheless, the gun lobby has continued to win political battles while attracting new gun owners with the promise of self-defense.

American gun culture has increasingly centered on self-defense, which complicates the gun control fight. In 1995, seventy-five percent of Smith and Wesson pistols purchased were for self-defense purposes, and sixty-three percent of all handguns were purchased for self-defense
(Sugarmann 2001: 55). In the wake of Columbine, some argued that more such pistols in circulation would have reduced the scale of the massacre (Homsher 2001: 26). However, FBI statistics indicate forty-one handgun murders and 109 handgun deaths overall for every justifiable defense homicide, and others have found that guns purchased for self-defense are forty-three times more likely to kill a family member, friend, or acquaintance than an intruder (Sugarmann 2001: 65; Spina 2000: 18). Nonetheless, the self-defense argument proved a powerful defense of private gun ownership, as news sources generally avoided substantive inquiry into arguments presented by political organizations. The self-defense argument held additional appeal because of the tradition of individualism in the US, which places the right to own a gun over the potential effects the decision may have for the rest of society. Thus, a citizen may hold a gun to increase his or her personal safety even if, for example, the theft of that gun might endanger others.

Columbine, however, prompted a spike in press attention and public interest in gun control (Homsher 2001: 15). An Associated Press poll found that Columbine apparently caused a nine point increase, to fifty-one percent, in the percentage of Americans who thought that more gun control laws would be a better solution than tougher enforcement (Mitchell 5/14/99). Other polls indicated that the public blamed easy access to guns for the shootings more than any other single factor (Woodruff and Schneider 4/23/99). A Gallup Poll just after the incident showed sixty percent of Americans blaming guns “a great deal” for “shootings like the one in Littleton” and sixty-two percent favoring stricter gun control for teenagers (Lawrence 2001: 109). This change in opinion took the form of increased gun control activism. For example, Handgun Control, Inc. raised over $500,000 between April and July 1999, and its membership increased from 22,000 to 400,000 (Hoerl 2000: 87). However, even given a consensus that something
needed to be done about guns, just what the solution might be was far from clear. In the aftermath of Columbine, Gallup Polls asked citizens about solutions including background checks at gun shows, lifetime gun bans on juveniles convicted of a felony, banning high capacity ammunition clips, holding parents legally responsible for children’s crimes committed with their parent’s guns, raising the minimum age to buy a handgun, registering all firearms, required safety locks on new guns, mandatory sentences for gun crimes, and banning semi-automatic weapons, among others (Gallup Poll, 4/22/99, 5/28/99, 6/16/99 and 7/13/99). With so many methods of addressing gun control, it is difficult to unite its advocates behind a common goal.

Another Gallup Poll just after Columbine found that Americans were spread across the spectrum on gun control: four percent felt there should be no gun restrictions, thirty percent favored mild ones, thirty-eight percent preferred major restrictions and a surprising twenty-two percent believed all guns should be illegal (Gallup Poll 5/3/99).

Some parents also chose to direct their grief towards increasing gun control in the US. Notably, victim Daniel Mauser’s father Tom spoke on behalf of Colorado-based Sane Alternatives to the Firearm Epidemic (SAFE), attracting more attention to the organization because of people’s instinctive empathy with his bereavement (Hoerl 2000: 90). One leader for SAFE explained the group’s strength due to its proximity to the Columbine massacre: “We’re at ground zero of the gun debate. We did not choose to be there” (qtd. in Lacey 4/13/00). Because of its tragic appeal and terrifying familiarity to most Americans, Columbine redefined the gun control movement to focus on school violence rather than more typical urban or domestic gun use. Unfortunately, SANE’s goals for national gun laws were unclear, minimizing its large-scale impact. Nonetheless, the sudden increase in concern helped to defeat numerous bills backed by the National Rifle Association (NRA) at state and federal levels (DeConde 2001: 276; Hoerl
Women were especially open to gun control after Columbine, yet over half the population still supported the NRA (DeConde 2001: 276). Similarly, even the sudden spike in gun control support failed to reach previous high levels of gun control support in 1993, just before the Brady Bill passed (“Poll” 7/30/99).

Despite the comparative weakness of gun control efforts, even after Columbine, the NRA began to feel victimized and defensive in the wake of the murders (Sugarmann 2001: 161). Strikingly, they were forced partially to cave into anti-gun sentiment by scaling back their 1999 conference in Denver under intense pressure from the city’s mayor (Homsher 2001: 82; DeConde 2001: 276). The conference was held under a month after the massacre, only a few miles from its site, despite protests of 8,000 people outside the conference (“8,000 Protest” 5/1/99). Nonetheless, the NRA lost little time in deflecting attention from guns. It emphasized the role of violent media in inspiring the killers, and created an effective campaign to focus on individual behavior (Klein and Chancer 2000: 132; DeConde 2001: 277). The NRA also cited the ineffectiveness of previous gun laws in preventing the attack, even though the bills were so full of loopholes as to be useless because of their weakness, not in spite of their strength (Sugarmann 2001: 199). In the end, Columbine produced little national change in gun attitudes or law. Only women showed any long-term increase in gun control support (DeConde 2001: 179).

The effect of the Dunblane massacre on gun availability was far greater than that of Columbine. However, it is worth noting that the starting point of each nation on gun control was by no means the same. As far back as 1920, the Firearms Control Act of the UK declared that the people held no inherent right to bear arms (Squires 2000: 7). This declaration made gun control far easier to enact than in the US, where the vaguely written Second Amendment
continues to provoke controversy about the extent of gun rights. Consequently, only 200,490 handguns, and 1,900,000 guns overall were legally held as of 1995 in the UK—well over one hundred times fewer than in the US (Campbell 8/14/96). Additionally, shooting in Britain has a distinctly elitist background, unlike the populist “frontier” tradition of the US. The UK held a generally collectivist view of gun rights, viewing it as a matter of public safety compared to the US crime control interpretation (Squires 2000: 7). Hence, guns are inherently problematic (Squires 2000: 8). As a Guardian writer noted, “The decision to own a handgun, and the privilege to use it in target shooting, is not simply a personal one. There is a wider public interest” (Windlesham 10/17/96). Self-defense was not viewed as an acceptable reason to own a gun in the UK, and generally was unnecessary since criminals themselves rarely bothered to carry them due to the extra sentences gun crimes carried (Squires 2000: 99; Grant 10/14/97). Increasing firearm use also pushed public opinion against gun control (Squires 2000: 98). Even police opposed carrying guns, partially because of the influence of Northern Irish disarmament efforts and partially because of the intense British desire to be different from the United States (Squires 2000: 98, 109). Another Guardian author, referring to the United States’ exponentially higher gun homicide rate, warned, “If we import the American way of life, we must expect the American way of death” (Mellor 10/14/96). Shooting was viewed as suspicious as it became increasingly “Americanized;” non-shooters questioned the increasing use of humanoid targets, rapid fire, high powered guns and military clothing in “practical shooting” ranges, forcing some clubs to ban military outfits (Squires 2000: 99).

Nonetheless, target shooting was generally excused as a legitimate reason to own a gun (North 2000: 143). Britain’s mixed attitude towards guns is captured by a brochure sent to Mick North by the National Trust of Scotland, just before his daughter was shot to death at Dunblane
Primary, urging him to “look beyond the fact that firearms are designed to kill” (qtd. in North 2000: 86). Although guns were frequently viewed as primarily murder weapons, previous efforts to improve gun control were limited by the formidable pro-gun lobby (North 2000: 144). For example, the Hungerford killings of 1987 led to the creation of a Firearms Control Commission under the Conservative government, but the Commission was conspicuously dominated by the pro-gun lobby² (North 2000: 145).

Despite previous strength, the British gun lobby was severely crippled by a backlash following Dunblane. Like the killer at Hungerford nine years earlier, Thomas Hamilton killed with legally held guns, indicating a failure of the licensing system (Squires 2000: 8, 98). The British Association for Shooting and Conservation sought psychological screening in hopes of deflecting further criticism (Squires 2000: 135). Gun holders argued, “You can’t legislate against someone going berserk. I hope that if there are any changes in the law they will not lead to guns being driven underground” (qtd. in Elliot 3/19/96). Nonetheless, the majority of the public turned against guns and the concept of a British “gun culture,” and the press generally followed suit (Squires 2000: 97). Prominent organizations also called for stronger gun control. The British Medical Association argued, “Tragedies such as Dunblane can be seen…as the price to be paid for society’s decision to allow legal access to firearms” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 136), and psychological screening was not reliable enough to prevent future incidents. The police, too, noted that the potential danger of gun ownership was more important than sporting needs (Clouston 6/14/96). One police chief proposed psychological testing because, “handguns attract people, invariably men, with personality problems. It is an unhealthy worship of what guns are

² In 1987, Michael Ryan wandered through the small town of Hungerford with two legally held guns, murdering his mother, fifteen random strangers and, finally, himself (Malcolm 201). The Firearms Amendment Act of 1988 responded, to the satisfaction of no one, by banning automatic guns and limiting the size of a magazine to two shots (Squires 103).
capable of doing” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 134). Others, however, went further; the Police Federation announced, “No amount of further amendments to firearms legislation, short of an outright ban on handguns, will…ensure that all steps have been taken to prevent another atrocity” (qtd. in Mullin 8/14/96). Such condemnations led to serious concessions by gun owners. The Stirling Rifle Club, where Thomas Hamilton has practiced, closed after the massacre because its members felt “collective guilt by association” (qtd. in Hetherington 4/6/96).

Public opinion was shaped and transformed into action largely by the efforts of the Snowdrop Campaign against handguns, formed by local parents and Ann Pearston, a friend of many of the bereaved families (Squires 2000: 140, North 2000: 148). The campaign was aided by the press, although definitions of a “handgun ban” varied slightly (Squires 2000: 140-141). The *Sunday Mail* initiated the idea of a petition against handguns by using a photograph of victim Megan Turner to launch its massive anti-gun petition (Squires 2000: 140, Samson and Crow 1997: 33). This original campaign collected 400,000 signatures, with the blessing of Turner’s parents, who supported the cause, and many families who helped to turn in the petition in London (Samson and Crow 1997: 18). Shortly thereafter, the families of the dead decided to use their position publicly to advocate gun control (Samson and Crow 1997: 65). Bereaved father Mick North was interviewed in the *Guardian* soon after the incident, where he questioned humanoid target use, which was favored by Hamilton (Squires 2000: 129). Many families contributed to their campaign because of what Pam Ross, mother of victim Joanna, described as the need to “do something” for their children (Samson and Crow 1997: 90). Rod Mayor, whose wife Gwen was the only teacher to die in the incident, decided to release details of his wife’s injuries because “it was the only way to highlight the damage a gun can cause” (qtd. in Samson and Crow 1997: 63). John Crozier, whose daughter Emma died, was repeatedly quoted for his
passionate plea, “Guns are made to kill people. They should no longer be allowed in a civilised society. My daughter’s right to live is more important than anybody’s right to shoot guns” (qtd. in Boseley 7/10/96). The family also released Emma’s photograph for use in an advertising campaign by the Society Against Guns in Europe (“Campaign” 8/10/96). These efforts were united by the Snowdrop Campaign, which eventually topped the Sunday Mail’s petition with 700,000 signatures (Samson and Crow 1997: 18). However, the Conservative Party’s response to the campaign, leaving all weapons under .22 caliber legal, was unacceptable to anti-gun campaigners. As Ann Pearston explained, anything less than a total ban meant that “we and our children are expendable so that target shooters can retain their right to pursue a sport that uses weapons designed to kill” (Travis 10/4/96). Echoing Crozier’s earlier powerful language, Pearston’s comments helped ensure the continuing importance of the issue even after some action had been taken.

While the Snowdrop Campaign rejected the .22 exception as insufficient, pro-gun activists were still furious at the ban on most of their weapons (Squires 2000: 155). Highlighting the arbitrariness of the exception, which both sides conceded, Richard Law of the Shooters’ Rights Association noted, “The Snowdrop group have claimed that the .22 is the commonest killer in the US. We say that the .22 is the most common killer worldwide” (qtd. in Bowcott 10/18/96). Therefore, they reasoned, if the .22 is legal, all guns should be legal. Even more than their American counterparts, shooters felt victimized (North 2000: 187). The Shooters’ Rights Association said the already restrictive Tory gun bill was “[paving] the way for the kind of government that can rule by decree by first disarming the people it is supposed to serve” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 157). In a massive public relations effort, shooting organizations tried to charge its members twenty-five pounds a head to fund a campaign (Travis 7/17/96). The gun lobby
assured the public that “Every one of us would give up anything to bring the children back, but
[handing in guns] won’t” (qtd. in North 2000: 146). Nonetheless, the public was consistently
outraged by public relations blunders by gun advocates. One gun organization representative
threatened, “There will be suicides among those who livelihoods depended on this sport” (qtd. in
Bowcott 10/24/96), in seeming obliviousness to the seventeen deaths that had sparked the debate.
More outrageous to the public were Prince Philip’s comparison, supported by the gun lobby, of
guns to cricket bats (DeConde 2001: 262) and Richard Law’s complaint, “All the political parties
are taking on board a gun ban. We have as much representation in Parliament as Jews had in the
Reichstag” (qtd. in Millar 10/24/96). One gun shop owner even claimed he had more to lose
than Dunblane parents did if guns were outlawed (North 2000: 154). Such massive mistakes
made the gun lobby an easy target. Ann Pearston’s criticism, “They seem to worry about
protecting themselves from some unknown threat, but this only reinforces to the British public
that guns should go—and go now” (qtd. in Squires 2000: 157) noted the beginning of the end of
the gun lobby, which was effectively destroyed by the aftermath of Dunblane (Squires 2000: 7).

The Press

Although Britain was far better prepared to accept a gun control campaign than the US,
neither the Snowdrop Campaign nor the misjudgments of the gun lobby would have had the
massive impact they did without the massive press coverage they received. Dunblane was under
media siege within hours of the shooting. The first news story appeared at 10:40 AM, when
British Broadcasting Company (BBC) radio broke through its normal stories to announce the
shootings. As more media outlets picked up on the story, they sent more and more reporters to
the scene, resulting in five hundred members of the media surrounding the school within three
hours of Hamilton’s opening shots (North 2000: 96). The media deluge was so overwhelming that the police called in an extra superintendent to handle the onslaught (North 2000: 98). By two PM, engineers had set up a media center in the town to centralize information (North 2000: 101). Unfortunately, much of the early information released was inaccurate, including the first estimate of the death toll, at thirteen dead children and two adults rather than sixteen children and one adult (North 2000: 97). Forty-five minutes later, at 1:45 PM, the accurate death toll was released, even before parents had been informed of their children’s deaths (North 2000: 98). The dead teacher’s name was also available to the press by 3:30, and a local photo company released copies of the class photo to the *Daily Record* in exchange for money for the Dunblane Fund (North 2000: 101).

The community was initially cooperative with the media, but gradually the small town became saturated with press (Preston 9/30/96). Indeed, by the sixteenth of March, the police superintendent was obliged to ask the press to leave, under a veiled threat of legal action—a threat legally untenable in the US (Harrison 1999: 209). The mass media is generally the first and central source of information in a crisis—often for the people involved as well as others (Granatt 1999: 104). As such, the media’s interpretation of events is critical to the public’s understanding of them (Squires 2000: 20). Therefore, it was critically important for the families to cooperate with the media in order to get their message heard. Early on, the press focused on their shock at the scene, frequently comparing it to a war zone, and praising the handling of the incident by the school’s headmaster and police (North 2000: 100). Nonetheless, families soon realized that as the press turned to issues surrounding the tragedy, they had to make their voices heard so the consequences of their personal tragedy would not be taken out of their hands (North
Gwen Mayor’s Primary One class photo, released to the press

Roses left outside the school

A father waiting for news
Early on, individual families spoke to the press. Mick North’s early press statement, which the police rejected as “too political,” urged, “please no more guns and certainly no more worship of guns” (North 2000: 111). Soon, in their weekly support meetings, the families united behind their common cause and utilized their unique position to advocate a ban on handguns (North 2000: 147). By sharing their personal grief with the press, victims’ families were able to increase the impact of their anti-gun arguments better than any politician could (North 2000: 159). Although they understood well the need for privacy, publicly rejecting suggestions that their children’s funerals should have been televised (North 2000: 121), the families realized the importance of the media to their work (North 2000: 152). They therefore gave many interviews in the months after the massacre and press conferences after major developments such as the release of Lord Cullen’s report following his public inquiry into the murders (North 2000: 170, 175). This openness dovetailed well with the media’s desire for the parents’ responses to all new developments (North 2000: 163). Over time, the families learned to use the media while still retaining privacy to mourn for their children. On the first anniversary of the shootings, the parents requested no media attention in the town, suggesting that people could light candles in the evening in memory of the children instead. In response, the Daily Record gave away candles to its readers, which were seen in windows across the nation (North 2000: 263).

To an extent, the community of Dunblane also united behind gun control and the Snowdrop campaign. One reporter commented, “Everyone looked on them as ‘our bairns’” (qtd. in Vulliamy 8/14/96). Nonetheless, the community’s interests were markedly different from those of the victims’ families, and primarily focused on its public image. Reverend Colin McIntosh hoped that “a whole nation, perhaps even the world, will remember us not for the tragedy that took place here, but because of the way we met it and with God’s help overcame it”
(qtd. in North 2000: 107). Others were reluctant to be nationally known at all, criticizing the Snowdrop Campaign’s Ann Pearston for continuing to draw attention to the community as part of the anti-gun campaign. Notably, the children’s parents came to her defense, citing her as a friend who was helping to honor the memories of their children (North 2000: 263).

Despite the organization of the families around a common goal and the general support of the community, the press could not have had as large an impact in the campaign to ban handguns without the UK tradition of partisan newspapers (Semetko 2000: 343). Liberal segments of the press fueled the public’s anger in a way that “unbiased” American newspapers do not, and Conservative segments were unable to muster the same appeal (Squires 2000: 98). Indeed, many relatively conservative newspapers, such as the Times, supported gun control, although many stopped short of a ban on .22 caliber guns (Squires 2000: 141). Liberal papers helped the campaign in many ways, including starting a petition against handgun violence, raising money, publishing exposes, and publishing other articles in support of gun control (North 2000: 148, 154, 234; Squires 2000: 138). The Guardian condemned automatic weapons as “spraying out death in the most efficient manner possible,” (Moore 3/14/96). Most newspapers’ focus shifted from the event to the perpetrator to the legality of his guns, thereby concluding that the system had to be changed (Squires 2000: 136). A different focus in the media could easily have changed the outcome of the campaign. Even today, when all handguns have been banned from private homes, newspapers continue to cover gun control: in 1999, there were fifty-four articles on the subject in the Guardian and the Observer (North 2000: 224).

As at Dunblane, Columbine created a media frenzy. One study found that the shootings were the third most watched story of the decade (Cannon 1999: 142). The press was onsite almost immediately. A trapped student used his cell phone to call local news station KUSA,

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3 Bairn is the common Scottish word for child.
which broadcast his story live along with CNN (Mifflin 4/26/99). Cameras rushed to the scene to meet the dramatic scene of students rushing from the building and injured student Patrick Ireland crawling out the library window to SWAT teams’ aid, all broadcast live to the nation (“Dangling Student” 4/23/99). The media generally over-reported the scale of the murders at first, reporting as many as twenty-five deaths, compared with the real toll of seventeen, and using buzzwords such as siege, which affected later interpretations (Eldridge et al 62). These exaggerations only increased the awareness and fear after the incident (Shaw 2001: 3). This effect was greater in the US due to the profit-oriented news structure, defined by adversarial and commercial relationships (Patterson 2000: 241, 244). Different media sources tended to have similar approaches to stories, as the sources keep a close watch on each other to stay competitive (Patterson 2000: 248). The Fairness Doctrine, demanding that news give equal emphasis to both sides of an argument, also encourages homogeneous news across media sources while encouraging event-driven rather than issue-driven news (Patterson 2000: 243, 254). The media prefer new and unpredictable stories (Patterson 2000: 253), but frequently minimize change through their responses (Hoerl 2000: 143). Often tragedies are portrayed in the media as reinforcing ideas of right and wrong (Eldridge et al 1997: 63). For example, stories of tragedy often center on victims and families as heroes (Lule 2001: 43). Slain teacher Dave Sanders was heralded for shepherding students to safety (Barron 4/22/99). Daniel Rohrbough was also celebrated at his funeral because “he chose to hold the door for others so they might make their way to safety. They made it. Danny didn’t” (qtd. in Lin and Savidge 4/26/99). Such interpretations comfort the public by giving meaning to the victims’ deaths (Lule 2001: 54). While heroes were created at Dunblane, the extreme youth of most of the victims made the tone
of most early stories more shocked and angry than in the US. These constructions define the problems created by incidents and thereby set the agenda of the nation (Lawrence 2001: 92).

Despite the different focus of American media, many affected by Columbine used the media to communicate with the public as the Dunblane families did. As in Dunblane, the police used the media to communicate with the public, although some information was incorrect (Brown and Merritt 2002: 172, 182). Some residents, however, were able to correct mistakes and spread information or personal messages via the media (Brown and Merritt 2002: 134, 178). The press helped further by using its influence to present exposés on police mistakes, such as faulty and inconsistent reporting and inaction following reports about gunman Eric Harris’ threatening website preceding the attack (Brown and Merritt 2002: 162, 222). The community of Littleton also used the media to display its solidarity in the face of adversity, proudly announcing, “We are Columbine” (Brown and Merritt 2002: 158). A few families, notably the Mausers, fought for press attention for gun control following their children’s deaths (Hoerl 2000: 90). However, unlike in Dunblane, the families were divided, with many fighting for religious values, tolerance in schools, or other perceived ways of reducing violence.

The extra influence the community had due to its sufferings could only have been increased by the press’ often sensationalistic coverage of the events. Published photos of the killers’ dead bodies lying in the school library increased the horror of the story (Brown and Merritt 2002: 225), as did the many pictures of injured students limping or receiving aid outside the building, published in many major news sources. Some, starting with Time magazine, also viewed the killers’ pre-recorded taped messages in search of clues, and often released chilling details of the killers’ message (Brown and Merritt 2002: 201). Voyeuristic photographs of grieving students also captured national attention. At one funeral, the victim’s casket was placed
Columbine in the News

Students were photographed receiving aid after the shootings. The dramatic rescue from a second story window

News companies watched from helicopters as students escaped to safety. Crosses were erected on a hill next to the school in memory of the victims.

Images of jocks moved to tears
reinforced the nation’s shock

open by the door, so cameras waiting outside captured the expressions of emerging mourners who had just seen their friend or family member’s dead body (Brown and Merritt 2002: 155-6). In comparison, the Dunblane photos were far more subtle, with no gore to be seen and generally less overt emotional displays.

The substantive messages the press drew from the tragedy, however, were mixed. Gun control was pushed suddenly to the front pages, and most of the political news about Columbine focused on gun control (Homsher 2001: 15, 81). Nonetheless, explanations for the killings varied significantly. Between April and August 1999, twenty-four percent of New York and Los Angeles Times articles about Columbine focused on gun control. However, a further sixteen percent focused on popular culture, three percent on teen lifestyles, two percent on parenting and two percent on mental health (Lawrence 2001: 106). However, violence experts and media violence controversies together received more attention than guns because the first offers more angles and the second has close ties to the news industry (Lawrence 2001: 104). One study concluded that the most popular explanations for the tragedy in the media were lack of gun control, violent media, poor parenting, and inexplicable evil, two of which implied necessary government action and one cultural change (Klein and Chancer 2000: 131). Unfortunately, government-related action was implicitly discouraged by the press, which tends to have an adversarial relationship with the government in the US (Patterson 2000: 248, 263). The resulting mistrust of the government lessened public faith in a government-mediated solution. Gun control may have suffered disproportionately from this effect, since eighty-five percent of gun control stories after Columbine focused on events in Washington (Lawrence 2001: 108). If the federal government is ineffective, then its gun laws could be expected to be unhelpful as well.
With such a mixed interpretation of the lessons of Columbine, both from the families and the press, little momentum was present for stricter gun laws.

**The Politics of Guns and Tragedy**

However weak the final results, politicians’ initial response to Columbine were just as profuse as that of the press. The park next to Columbine High School, housing fifteen memorial crosses for the victims, hosted President Clinton, Vice President and presidential candidate Al Gore, Martin Luther King III, and other national figures (Brooke 5/6/99). President Clinton professed to be “profoundly shocked and saddened,” and echoed religious sentiments expressed locally, urging prayer and reflecting:

> We don’t know yet all the how’s or why’s of this tragedy; perhaps we will never fully understand it…. St. Paul reminds us that we all see things in life darkly, that we only partly understand what is happening…. We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons (qtd. in Brooke 4/21/99).

This initial emphasis on the role of families by a liberal president immediately drew attention away from gun control and lessened the chances that the public would view guns as central to the attacks. This family values theme continued in later speeches, as Clinton urged Americans to end the “culture of violence” and protect their children, and Gore implored parents to pay attention to their children because, “We must teach them right from wrong. We must teach them about violence in popular culture” (Brooke 4/26/99). Later actions drew attention to a politically safe mix of factors. Clinton’s first major response was to call a summit to answer the questions, “What should we do about guns? What should we do about culture?” (“Clinton plans meeting” 4/30/99). Media members, gun makers, NRA representatives, government officials and religious leaders were invited to reflect on the wave of youth violence in order to “Help parents pass on their values to children” (qtd. in Aliniak 1999: 96). This mix of Republican and Democratic
agendas—media violence and gun control, respectively—effectively cancelled out both agendas. Gun control was largely “lost in the shuffle” (DeConde 2001: 277). The public remained ambivalent, both demanding government action and suspecting that government did not hold the answers to tragedies like Columbine (Cannon 1999: 143; Franken and King 4/22/99). Politicians appeared equally perplexed, grasping at various popular explanations without seizing on any course of action. Clinton reflected this confusion at a Virginia high school, where he admitted to being mystified by the massacre but promised to search for answers—without mentioning any course of action (“Scourge” 4/25/99).

Despite initial confusion, the opportunity to increase gun control did not long escape attention. Conveniently, a juvenile justice bill languishing in Senate committees was long overdue to come to the floor on April twentieth, 1999 (Bruni 5/30/99). There was significant pressure for that bill to address gun control. The New York Times commented on a recorded gun control vote, “It is the least that Congress can do in this moment of national grief” (“Scourge” 4/25/99). Advocates often use the vulnerability of children to encourage change in gun laws. Senator John Chafee lamented, “our children are being killed and are killing” (qtd. in Kopel “Children and Guns” 1995: 310). Many sensed a change in national attitudes towards guns. A Republican-sponsored poll found strong support for more gun control, allowing Democrats to take the offensive, as Republicans proposed a weak version of the background check for gun shows after defeating a similar bill the day before (Cannon 1999: 142; Mitchell 5/14/99). The high stakes of the 2000 elections made reading the public mood more than usually important (Bruni 5/30/99). Senator Robert Torricelli predicted, “No force on earth can stop [gun control] now from becoming a central issue in the 2000 elections debate” (qtd. in Mitchell 5/14/99). Polls supported the assertion: seventy-eight percent of Americans told Newsweek that gun
control would be an important factor in their presidential choice (Hosenball et al 8/23/99).

Clinton accused the Republican-controlled Congress of being out of touch with the American people because of its reluctance to face gun control, conveniently denying his own ambiguous initial stance (Cannon 1999: 142). Carefully framing his position as moderate, Clinton accused, “the House of Representatives gutted our bill in the dark of night – literally, after midnight – because the gun lobby didn’t want commonsense gun legislation to see the light of day” (Clinton 6/19/99). However, politicians’ conceptions about the best solution to the gun problem varied. Republicans tended to prefer stricter enforcement of existing laws, while Democrats preferred prevention programs and more gun control (Bruni 5/12/99). Clinton, meanwhile, proposed a highly controversial bill to hold parents responsible for their children’s gun crimes (Glaberson 4/27/99). Nonetheless, by debating the issue, Congress gave legitimacy to the gun control debate and helped to sustain press attention (Lawrence 2001: 108).

The bill finally settled on by the Senate enacted background checks at gun shows and banned magazines of more than ten bullets (Homsher 2001: 15). Gun shows, which were an enormous loophole in the Brady Bill, were an important issue to gun control advocates because roughly forty-five percent of annual gun sales occur privately or at gun shows, which are not subject to background checks (DeConde 2001: 277). The bill was the first gun control measure to pass the Senate since 1994, when Democrats lost control of Congress, sparking hope among gun opponents that it would become law. Nonetheless, the bill was killed by House amendments supported by the NRA, which made the gun show checks too weak for many Democrats but still too strong for hard-core gun supporters (Homsher 2001: 82). Even among closely affected Colorado Representatives, only one, from Littleton, voted for the bill. Although he supported prayer and moral education as well and was normally a strong NRA proponent, he admitted, “I
can’t go home and say we didn’t do anything, because guns aren’t an issue. Guns are an issue. They did take children’s lives” (qtd. in Brooke 6/21/99). Nonetheless, Republicans less closely touched by the tragedy felt no change of heart. Although the rejection of gun control sparked an initial outrage, the second effort to improve gun control rapidly died after public attention on the issue waned (DeConde 2001: 278). Public opinion was simply too weak to propel gun legislation through Congress, even during a close presidential race (Homsher 2001: 82). The second Juvenile Offenders Act avoided the gun issue, simply offering states money for prosecution and prison costs and imposing penalties on minors for having or using guns (Homsher 2001: 194). House majority leader Trent Lott carefully prevented any gun control amendments to the bill by placing them at the end of the agenda, where they would be likely to be cut off (Bruni 5/12/99). The Senate also took other non-gun related courses by passing a bill to require Federal investigation of whether the entertainment industry encouraged violence (DeConde 2001: 178). Such half-hearted efforts at action were the most Congress managed for any suspected cause of violence. A New York Times article lamented of Columbine, “to say that their crimes changed much in the nation would be an exaggeration. While Congress raised the specter of Columbine and other school shootings in the debates on tougher gun-control measures, the last session ended with no new legislation” (Janofsky 8/15/99).

Because of the imminent presidential elections, the first anniversary of Columbine brought slightly more political action on gun control. Gore and Clinton urged tighter gun laws as they commemorated the massacre. Gore observed, “The one thing that all of these events, including Columbine, have in common is that they involve guns in the hands of people that shouldn’t have them” (qtd. in Bruni and Nagourney 4/21/00; Lacey 4/13/00). In response, Governor and presidential candidate George W. Bush encouraged character education (Bruni and
Nagourney 4/21/00). Meanwhile, the Republicans railroaded through Congress a crime bill granting aid to states that increased jail sentences for gun crimes. The New York Times explained, “Conceding vulnerability on a hot campaign issue, House Republican leaders today sent to the floor a popular gun-crime bill, written by Republicans, and passed it so they would have something to show before the impending anniversary of the fatal shootings at Columbine High School” (Schmitt 4/12/00). If they were indeed vulnerable beforehand, the Republican tactic apparently prevented any political damage from the gun issue: they retained control of the House and Senate just after the elections and narrowly won the Presidency.

Some, however, were less prone to forget what they saw as the lessons of Columbine. SAFE sent a group of Colorado high school students to meet with Washington politicians about gun control in summer, 1999. The most promising reception the students received was from Democrats, who posed with them after Clinton promised to veto any bill that weakened gun control (Seelye 7/16/99). Even this rather weak promise was more encouraging than the students received from others, leaving them feeling that politicians did not understand the impact of Columbine (Bruni 7/15/99). Even the press gave them a lukewarm reception. As one girl underlined a key point in the gun debate, unquestioned in the UK, the New York Times summarized, “Dismissing concerns that [gun] regulations trampled on the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution, Rosa Chavez, 17…asked: ‘What’s more important: the right for people to bear arms or of people not to be killed?’” (Bruni 7/15/99). This bitingly dismissive language doubtless increased the students’ feelings of helplessness against the political machine. Nonetheless, many returned two years later. With Columbine out of the headlines, one Colorado state representative refused to meet with the group, while another’s aide explained, “All I know is that what helped us get here is our gun stance, and we can’t change that or else the National
Rifle Association will take our funding away” (qtd. in Brown and Merritt 2002: 253-4). This position echoes that of many politicians: total NRA contributions of $1.35 million to Republicans and $283,000 to Democrats make votes that pit NRA interests against suburban security concerns politically unpopular (Mitchell 5/14/99). In comparison, Handgun Control, Inc., the largest American gun control organization, donated just $12,000 during the 1992 elections (Worsnop 1994). With such heavily moneyed interests fighting against them, students felt heavily discouraged. One summarized, “We’d seen that for the individual who wants to bring about change, the political road is one roadblock after another” (Brown and Merritt 2002: 256). The American public agreed. A 2001 poll indicated that only forty-nine percent of Americans believed that government or society could prevent future incidents, as opposed to forty-seven percent who believed nothing could be done (Moore 3/26/01).

The road to tighter gun control in Britain was clearer from the start than in the US. The mass killing in 1988 in the streets of Hungerford, England led to increased gun restrictions. Although the effort was dominated by shooting interests determined to deflect pressure for a total ban, the bill helped pave the way for a ban on handguns because, as one activist noted, “The principle is exactly the same” (Squires 2000: 148; qtd. in “Jumping the Gun” 8/1/96). Guns had already been treated as dangerous weapons in need of government control; this was simply one more step in the process.

However, before gun control had arisen as an issue, politicians were reacting to the enormity of the tragedy. Local Members of Parliament (MPs) Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth, Conservative, and his Labour shadow secretary George Robertson were on a plane to nearby Stirling by 12:15 on the day of the attack (North 2000: 99). Tony Blair, then leader of the Labour party and soon to be Prime Minister, characterized Britain as a “nation in mourning.
This is no war, no catastrophe of nature. It was the slaughter of innocents. Politics is silent today” (qtd. in North 2000: 102-3). Politicians flooded to Dunblane, including Prime Minister Major and Blair, who visited together in symbolic unity, and several royal family members (Squires 2000: 139). A one-minute silence was declared nationwide for March eighteenth in memory of the slain (North 2000: 103). Nonetheless, the shock was not so strong that political issues were fully ignored. Robertson, as the local Member of Parliament (MP), asked that Labour party members delay any comments, but added, “Once it has settled down, questions will have to be asked about whether there needs to be a change in the gun laws” (qtd. in Wintour 3/14/96).

Early support for gun control was strong and loud. Tony Banks, Labour MP, noted, “There are moments in a political life when you have to seize the opportunity. Such an opportunity has been provided by this murderous attack in Dunblane” (qtd. in Wintour 3/19/96). Home Secretary Michael Howard announced a gun amnesty by late April for any illegal or unwanted guns to be turned in to the government, no questions asked, in recognition of public anger about gun proliferation (North 2000: 111). In response to criticism that criminals would not hand in their guns, Howard noted that every weapon handed in “is one fewer that can be stolen and used by criminals. Taking part in the amnesty is something that will reduce the risks of guns falling into the wrong hands” (qtd. in Travis 4/25/96). Chief Constable Leslie Sharp echoed the fear of gun theft by describing the gun supply as a “bottomless pit of firearms which criminals can hire [rent], steal or borrow” (qtd. in Vulliamy 8/14/96). Interestingly, the fear of legal guns falling into the wrong hands rarely surfaced in non-academic gun control debates in the US. In the UK, it was such a significant issue that even the relatively pro-gun Conservative party brought up the concern in support of its policies. Indeed, Major committed to going further
in investigating gun control, although changes were delayed until after the Cullen Inquiry into
the crime released its findings. Nonetheless, Major was attacked for not making swift or strong
enough changes (Squires 2000: 139). A *Guardian* article commented that Parliament should
follow public opinion because once attention waned, the gun lobby, though “not as formidable as
its American cousin,” would thwart efforts towards change (“Handguns Must be Banned”
5/2/96). The *Times* agreed, commenting, “legislating in haste is rarely wise,” but “sometimes
one event draws attention to a pressing need. … Dunblane was such an event” (qtd. in Squires
2000: 140). Soon after Dunblane, Australia suffered its own gun massacre⁴. Its rapid political
response was held by many Britons as an example to be emulated. The *Guardian* wrote:

> [Australia’s] decision shows how politicians can seize the moment of public
> concern to take an initiative from which they might have backed away
> before…opinion polls show that an overwhelming majority supports a wide
> ranging firearms ban. … The question to ask is not whether there is not whether
> an individual should be denied a firearms license, but whether there is any good
> reason for the possession of such a weapon at all. Public opinion would accept
> this: politicians should lead (qtd. in Squires 2000: 140).

This ringing endorsement for representative government illustrates a vastly different way of
approaching the gun issue from the US—that of a public safety issue overriding any personal
preferences rather than a matter of rights.

Most political parties quickly endorsed stronger gun control in response to the public
outcry after Dunblane. The Liberal Democrats called for a new look at firearms, and joined
Labour, the Scottish Nationalist party, and Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru in advocating a
ban on all handguns (North 2000: 103). Some national politicians issued stinging condemnations
of gun use. Plaid Cymru leader Dafydd Wigley warned, “playing with guns means playing with
lives by people whose personal indulgence comes before assuming safety of communities” (qtd.

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⁴ In April, 1996, a gunman killed thirty-five tourists in a Tasmanian resort. Twelve days later, state, territorial and
federal governments agreed to ban imports, ownership and sales of all high-powered weapons (Zinn 5/11/96).
in North 2000: 103). Pressure to back gun control was increased by petitions submitted by Dunblane families demanding that parliament ban handguns (North 2000: 155). The Snowdrop campaign’s petition included 700,000 signatures. About thirty-seven percent of MPs responded, with seventeen Labour signatures, five Conservative, four Scottish Nationalists and three Liberal Democrats (the latter two parties have many fewer representatives) (Campbell 7/23/96).

Nonetheless, in defiance of regional solidarity, many MPs from Scotland refused to sign the petition (North 2000: 148). The most formidable opponent to the Snowdrop petition, however, was Major, who deeply offended parents after the Sunday Mail petition by defending the gun lobby because “guns aren’t really the problem” (qtd. in North 2000: 151-2).

Deeplly upset by Major’s indifference to their plea, Snowdrop campaign members merged their efforts with those of the Gun Control Network (GCN) to create a unified national gun control organization (North 2000: 161). Its goals were to make private handgun ownership illegal, ban weapons over .22 caliber and multi-shot rifles, implement tighter certification procedures, enact a minimum age of 18 to buy a gun, establish firearms control board, ban deactivated and replica weapons, restrict gun and ammunition sales, and tighten gun club monitoring (North 2000: 154). In response to the launch of the GCN, the pro-gun Home Affairs Committee decided to produce a report using pro-gun sources, which concluded, predictably, against any sort of gun ban (North 2000: 162; Squires 2000: 142). Having promised to delay any decisions until after the Cullen report was released, Conservatives were deeply embarrassed at the release of the report. Media attacks from nearly all major papers furthered the humiliation, causing the remainder of the party to disown the committee as damaging to the party as a whole (North 2000: 162; Squires 2000: 144; Travis and Arlidge 8/1/96). One former Conservative Home Office minister complained that Labour was “outflanking us on law and order” (qtd. in
Travis and Arlidge 8/1/96). Like Clinton in the US, but with more success, Labour used the gun issue to portray Conservatives as out of touch, meanwhile gaining large-scale support for their own support of a total handgun ban (Squires 2000: 146). As the Labour party stumped Conservatives by preempting any gun proposals with their handgun ban position, Conservatives continued to lose ground as revelations of Conservative MP shooting interests increased public outrage (Travis 5/13/96; Squires 2000: 148). Terrified of being labeled the shooters’ party, Conservatives accused Labour of capitalizing on the tragedy (Travis 10/17/96; Squires 2000: 150). However, they had already lost much of their credibility (Squires 2000: 150). The press was no kinder to the Conservatives, portraying pro-gun politicians as unsympathetic, unaccountable and factional (Squires 2000: 149). A Times article accused:

The do-nothing defense mounted by the conservatives is woeful… the fact that illegal guns are mainly used in crime is irrelevant since Dunblane was committed with legally held weapons. … [The] other flimsy straws thrown up by the Tories include problems for starters of races, or people wanting their guns in a hurry and problems of loading guns at tournaments. … Can these MPs really think that the chance of a minor inconvenience to sportsmen should come before protecting citizens? (qtd. in Squires 2000: 147).

Again, public safety preempted all personal rights, even in the more conservative Times. The power of Dunblane is also clear in the press reaction: even if Dunblane was atypical, it proves a fault in gun laws. The American response to Columbine was far more ambiguous about the role of gun law in the crimes.

Like the American NRA, the British gun lobby felt cornered and victimized by anti-gun sentiment. The Sportsman’s Association threatened to “target every MP who votes against the legitimate ownership of handguns,” adding, “We will look at the constituency, find the strongest opposition candidate and back that person to beat the sitting MP, who will be out. Our supporters want to punish these people for being small minded” (qtd. in Travis 11/1/96). The
NRA is well known in the US for using similar tactics. A leaked NRA memo once revealed, “our methods have an extremely efficient ‘political cost exchange ratio’ making it exceedingly expensive, difficult and unpleasant for the target to remain in office. Victory springs from imparting excruciating political pain in unrelenting political attacks on a single politician as an example to others” (qtd. in Worsnop 1994). However, the British gun lobby lacked the resources to carry off such an ambitious plan. Leaked memos relating to the campaign to defeat gun control forces caused a scandal in the press. A public relations consultant wrote, “We need to know as much about our enemies as we can. Snowdrop is the most vociferous, and it is important for us to dig up any facts that can be used to question the integrity of those who run, organise, front and contribute to that organization.” As if to seal his doom, the writer added, “As a professional communicator I know how to distort information and manipulate facts” (qtd. in Arlide 11/3/96). This thinly veiled threat towards recently bereaved parents reflected badly on the pro-gun forces, permanently tainting their credibility. With the gun lobby severely weakened and anti-gun sentiment at a high, one Conservative MP noted, “Public revulsion at the slaughter at Dunblane should have made gun control a tepid potato which no politician feared grasping.” Nonetheless, the Conservatives had “shown an almost perverse determination to turn it into a red hot [potato]” (Squires 2000: 155).

The Conservative government was not ready to implement a total handgun ban, preferring to ban only weapons above .22 caliber, as recommended by the Cullen Report (“Dunblane: The Cullen Report” 10/17/96). Many MPs still feared the gun lobby, assuming that, as had recently happened in the US, pro-gun constituents would vote on the gun issue and gun control advocates would not (Mellor 10/14/96). Many also voted for compromise because of the strong pressure to vote party line in the UK. An effort to make a free vote, unrestrained by party
positions, on the issue was overruled by Major (Macaskill 11/15/96). Dunblane parents attempted to lobby Conservative MPs to vote for a total ban in spite of the party’s position (North 2000: 184). Snowdrop spokeswoman Ann Pearston threatened to run a gun control candidate against Conservatives if nothing was accomplished, adding, “We voted you in, and if you don’t ban them all, we can vote you back out” (qtd. in North 2000: 170, 175). Their threats and pleas were unsuccessful. The partial ban was passed just before the 1997 elections, with only one Conservative, David Mellor, voting outside the party. Mellor predicted, “The damage for the [Conservative] Government is that this is a pyrrhic victory. The majority of the population by a large margin want a complete ban” (qtd. in Macaskill 11/19/96). Indeed, polls showed that while twenty-six percent favored the version of the law as passed, fifty-four percent wanted the ban to extend to all caliber handguns (Squires 2000: 155). With Labour promising to pass a stronger bill if elected in 1997, Conservatives were left to hope that gun control would not determine a majority of citizens’ votes (Squires 2000: 156).

The GCN, however, was eager to make sure that gun control was an important campaign issue. It urged people to vote against Conservatives, citing low approval ratings for a total handgun ban. Only twenty-nine percent of Conservative candidates voiced support for the ban, as opposed to ninety-seven percent of Labour candidates and eighty-six percent of Liberal Democrats (“Tories Denounced” 4/25/97). Dunblane families expressed hope that Blair would fulfill their campaign’s goals and dissatisfaction with local Conservative MP Michael Forsyth (“People Must Not Forget” 3/7/97). Labour candidates won the majority of Parliament seats on the first of May 1997, placing party leader Tony Blair as Prime Minister. Party spokesmen believed they had gun control to thank for much of their success (North 2000: 191). Whatever the factors that placed Labour in power, Blair made good on his promise. Because the British
system assures that the Prime Minister’s party holds majority control in the House of Commons, completion of an important campaign promise is a virtual certainty compared to the more divided American legislative process. The previous high capacity ban was in place by late September 1997 with nearly one hundred percent compliance, and a .22 caliber handgun ban was in place by February 1998 (North 2000: 193; Millar 10/18/97). Within two years of the Dunblane massacre, widespread anger and concentrated activism led to a sweeping change in law. No handguns can now be held legally in British homes. Whether because the supply of illegal guns was diminished or because police were free to concentrate on finding illegal weapons, handgun offenses fell sharply after the gun ban, vindicating the battle in the eyes of most Britons (Squires 2000: 15).

Conclusion

Gun control has been a central concern to public safety and crime control advocates since the early twentieth century. Social trends such as Prohibition, the “Red” scare and increasing drug use have increased its importance, but frequently, single events such as an assassination or a mass murder dramatically raise public awareness and provide the impetus for legislative change. The school shootings at Dunblane Primary and Columbine High School were well placed to create such a shift in public opinion, yet only Dunblane created any notable change. Understanding the differences in the aftermath of each tragedy is important to explaining this difference and preparing for future gun control campaigns.

Even before the Dunblane massacre, Britain had a far greater chance of enacting strict gun regulations than the United States. Its collectivist approach towards the gun issue placed the public’s safety above gun owners’ preference, favoring gun control far more than the
individualist American “gun rights” tradition. The second amendment of the US Constitution also provides strength to the pro-gun argument by placing significant legal ambiguity on any efforts to enact overriding gun control. American politicians were further confused by the host of gun control measures being offered, which complicated and fractured gun control movements and thereby strengthening the gun lobby. In contrast, the British gun lobby was vastly weaker than the NRA, as well as less politically organized and competent, releasing politicians from the financial and political constraints the NRA is capable of imposing in the US. The Prime Minister was also free to pursue his agenda once elected, whereas Bill Clinton was unable to overcome the opposition of a Republican congress. In Britain, an upcoming election also aided gun control advocates by increasing pressure to give in to public opinion and giving the opposition party incentive to take a stronger stand than the Conservative government in hopes of attracting more votes. In contrast, American politicians acted cautiously in the face of the 2000 elections, reflecting the ambiguity of public opinion as well as the threat of an NRA backlash. Nonetheless, without the careful coordination of activism among the victims’ families, media pressure, and public outrage, Dunblane might have had as little lasting impact on British politics as Columbine did on the US. The Dunblane community, in reflection of most of the society at large, rejected religious interpretations of the tragedy, which placed such events in God’s hands rather than blaming weaknesses in society or the law. Instead, the families almost unanimously entered the political arena in support of massive gun control increases. They were aided by the partisan press, which, unlike the American press, is not obliged to provide balanced coverage of issues and thus generally supported and aided the Dunblane families’ efforts. United behind a clear goal and with the support of the press, the Dunblane survivors were able to mobilize public support to a spectacular degree, thereby pressuring politicians to act. This combination of public
mobilization and advantageous political circumstances led to the overwhelming success of the Snowdrop Campaign.

In other respects, the tragedies were eerily similar. The number of victims at Columbine was nearly identical to Dunblane. Although the children were older, they still lived with their parents, were minors, and attended public schools, theoretically under the state’s protection. The lost potential of a teenage life was as wrenching as the lost innocence of a child’s. Both massacres affected communities society generally views as immune from disaster: middle-class, white, suburban areas far from the turbulent inner city or a war-torn country, in the news daily but distant and unreachable. Thus, the differing results can be attributed to cultural differences and the particular circumstances of the incidents. Columbine caused large-scale national shock and grief, but without the unity of purpose felt after Dunblane, there could be no national change.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Bibliographic Note: All articles published by major British news outlets The *Guardian* and The *Times Educational Supplement*, associated with the *Times* of London, regarding Dunblane between March 1996 and December 2002 were consulted. The New York *Times* and *CNN.com* articles on Columbine from April 1999 to December 2002 were also consulted.