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Playing the Blame Game — Who Is to Blame for Blacksburg?

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In the aftermath of disaster, a phenomenon called the “blame game” often soon rears its head. The impulse to assign moral responsibility is normal — even healthy — but the game often plays itself out in irrational ways.

Just observe much of the media coverage surrounding the Virginia Tech killer and his murderous slaughter. Some quickly moved to assign blame to the university’s administration and police department. There will no doubt be a thorough review of both in the future, but they are not to blame for the killings.

We must blame the killer.

Other commentators and theorists attempted to place the blame on society as a whole, on the young man’s parents, or on his generation. The theorists of the therapeutic culture have rushed to argue that a stigma against mentally ill persons drives some to heinous acts of violence, and thus this stigma is to blame. Still others try to blame guns, grades, or any number of other factors — anything and anyone but the murderer.

Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Gary Lavergne of the University of Texas at Austin argues that this has to stop. Lavergne is author of *A Sniper in the Tower: The Charles Whitman Murders*, a recounting of the infamous tower shootings at his university in 1966.

As Lavergne explains:

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

His conclusion:

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

in a free society, we will be vulnerable to those who do harm — because they want to and know how to do it.

This is an important argument, and a much needed assertion of moral clarity. We dare not make this clear-headed killer into yet another victim.

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