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DELIBERATING IN THE AFTERMATH OF MASS SHOOTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Deliberating in the Aftermath of Mass Shootings examines ascriptions of blame in the aftermath of mass shootings and how those ascriptions of blame call forth or imply changes in values, practices, and policies. The project begins with the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, continues with the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, and ends with the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. The three case studies examine how the U.S.'s alleged "culture of violence," how mental illness, and how guns are implicated in the rhetoric of blame. In addition to providing a thick description of key debates following mass shootings, I argue that the concept of blame helps rhetorical scholars account for deliberation about public problems.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What are rhetorical scholars to make of deliberation about enduring public problems, such as mass shootings? Some scholars like John Gastil describe deliberation as a process whereby participants "carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view."[1] Yet deliberation after mass shootings reveals something quite different. Just a week after the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in 2012, Wayne LaPierre, the leader of the National Rifle Association, delivered a nationally televised speech to account for the mass shooting and to argue against gun control. Whereas deliberative scholars recommend creating "a solid information base,"[2] LaPierre largely relied on fear appeals by suggesting that gun control would leave "peaceful, lawful people" defenseless in a world filled with criminals and "genuine monsters."[3] Rather than "respect other participants,"[4] LaPierre charged that gun control advocates and the national media were attempting to "exploit tragedy for political gain" and that they were "complicit co-conspirators." "They don't know what they're talking about," LaPierre insisted, and so his opponents were filling "the national debate with misinformation and dishonest thinking."[5] And rather than "weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions,"[6] LaPierre claimed that his proposal for armed guards was "the only way to stop a monster from killing our kids." "We can't lose precious time debating legislation that won't work," LaPierre continued. "There'll be time for talk and debate later. This is the time, this is the day for decisive action."[7]

But the NRA was not alone in violating deliberative norms. Whereas deliberative scholars recommend creating "a solid information base,"[8] President Obama began his speech on January 16, 2013, not with testimony from experts but with quotations from letters that children had written him to express their fear and uncertainty about the recent shooting. He further relied on pathos to suggest that without gun control, future tragedies were inevitable. Rather than "respect other participants,"[9] Obama implied that those who opposed gun control were failing to fulfill their responsibilities as parents and as citizens—that they were not really interested in "protecting our children from harm."[10] And rather than "weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions,"[11] Obama asserted that his proposals were "common sense." By implication, those who opposed to his plan were thus opposed to common sense. Obama did not explore the difficult balance between rights and security, but instead charged that those who appealed to the Second Amendment and warned of government intervention were not doing so for any legitimate reason. Instead, they were merely trying to "gin up fear or higher ratings or revenue for themselves."[12] According to some accounts of deliberation, then, neither Obama nor LaPierre were engaging in deliberation.

Rhetorical scholars have regularly made qualitative distinctions between good and bad deliberation and between deliberation and non-deliberation. David Zarefsky described "Two Faces of Democratic Rhetoric"—a benign face that represents an "invitation to deliberate" and a threatening face that represents "the engineering of consent" through the use of "manipulative rather than deliberative" rhetoric.[13] What Zarefsky described as an "invitation to deliberate," others have called deliberating "in good faith"[14] and what I have called "rhetorical civility."[15] The threatening face, by

contrast, is regularly called "propaganda" and "demagoguery."[16] Zarefsky's distinction

has its antecedents from earlier moments in the rhetorical tradition. Revisiting the work

of Zeno and Cicero during the 1960s, Edward P.J. Corbett distinguished between the

rhetoric of the open hand and the rhetoric of the closed fist.[17] Indeed, such distinctions

between good and bad deliberation can be found in the earliest moments of rhetorical

theory, including Plato's distinction between a true and false rhetoric.[18]

Although these qualitative distinctions can be incredibly valuable, they also have

significant limitations. Rhetoric that falls short of deliberative ideals can become easy to

dismiss and forget. For instance, Dana L. Cloud has argued that appeals to civility or

other norms of communication can be used as a power play to silence unpopular voices.[19]

Critics are of course justified in labeling the rhetoric of someone like Wayne LaPierre or

Barack Obama as non-deliberative, or to say that they are deliberating in bad faith, that

they are uncivil, that they are demagogic, using false rhetoric or the rhetoric of the closed

fist. But the risk is that critics close themselves off from understanding rhetoric that falls

short of their deliberative ideals, from understanding how that rhetoric works, and from

understanding why some audiences might find that rhetoric appealing.

Fortunately, several scholars have begun exploring non-ideal deliberation. This

shift was inspired in part by Nancy Fraser's call to turn away from Jürgen Habermas's

"ideal speech situation" and instead to theorize "the limits of actually existing

democracy."[20] For instance, Rosa A. Eberly examined letters to the editor to understand

deliberations among citizens about what constitutes "obscene" literature.[21] Julie Lindquist

studied political and cultural arguments between patrons in a working-class bar.[22] Karen

Tracey described "ordinary democracy" by analyzing deliberations among school board

members[23] Dana L. Cloud traced the relationships among workers, union leadership, and corporate management at Boeing.[24] Together these works, among others, make a case for an expanded conception of deliberation. Arguments in newspapers, in a bar, in a school board meeting, or in a workplace might regularly fall short of reasoned and fair discourse, yet these arguments are nonetheless deliberation insofar as participants are making public claims about the shared past, present, or future, and these kinds of deliberation are important.

To study non-ideal deliberation about an enduring public problem like mass shootings—and, in turn, to develop deliberative theory—this dissertation makes a case for renewed attention to the concept of blame. Deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings regularly relies on the rhetoric of blame—blame of shooters, blame of U.S. culture, blame of mental illness, and blame of guns. Blame also offers scholarly and public value beyond the particular case of mass shootings. Although the concept of blame has not received much attention within rhetorical studies, blame has significant value as a critical concept. First, the concept of blame entails an expansive view of deliberation. What counts as deliberation should not be restricted by tests of quality or tests of purpose, even though such restrictions can at times be valuable. For the purposes of this project, I do not view deliberation as at odds with advocacy.[25] Instead, advocacy is a part of deliberation. Nor do I wish to equate deliberation with good arguments only and suggest that those "engineering consent" are anathema to deliberation.[26] The concept of blame can help critics transcend—or at least temporarily bracket out—such binaries and frame deliberation broadly as any form of communication that makes claims about the shared past, present, or future.

Second, the concept of blame temporarily allows critics to bracket out questions of authenticity to consider ascriptions of blame that seem sincere and true and ascriptions of blame that do not. Blame can be directed toward someone or something that deserves blame—or not. Ascriptions of blame can represent an attempt to assign responsibility and initiate further deliberation. Yet ascriptions of blame can also represent what Kenneth Burke described as scapegoating—blaming someone or something that really is not blameworthy but doing so anyway because it is easy, because the timing is right, because it feels good, or because it protects one's interests.[27]

Third, the concept of blame allows critics to see how claims move among rhetorical occasions or genres and among stases. Aristotle described blame and its counterpart, praise, as common topics most relevant to epideictic or ceremonial speech. Praise "makes clear the great virtue" of the subject praised; by amplifying these qualities, a speaker suggests a subject's greatness and worthiness of being emulated.[28] For Aristotle, blame, by contrast, suggested a subject's smallness and unworthiness of being emulated. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca extended Aristotle's insight by arguing that the blame and praise of epideictic rhetoric establishes the shared values that become the starting place for deliberation, as well as the values that do not.[29] Other contemporary scholars go further by pointing out how epideictic rhetoric has been used for deliberative ends, such as defining a problem or advancing a policy.[30] Building on this work, I conceptualize the boundaries among forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric as fluid. Blame is not confined to any one rhetorical occasion but contains the seeds of all three. Those who speak soon after a tragedy often praise the victims, families, and local leaders (epideictic rhetoric), but they also have to define what happened and account for

who or what is to blame for the tragedy. Questions about why a mass shooting happened and who or what is responsible (forensic rhetoric) imply—and often reappear in—policy recommendations to prevent future mass shootings (deliberative rhetoric).

Just as blame is not confined to any one rhetorical occasion, neither is it confined to any one of the stasis questions—questions of fact, of definition, of causes and consequences, of values, and of procedures and proposals.[31] Defining the shooter as "evil," for instance, rather than "sick" can entail entirely different policies. Similarly, arguing against gun control proposals entails assumptions about the causes and definition of a mass shooting—namely, that guns were not responsible or were not sufficiently responsible to justify a change in policy. Public deliberation moves among the stasis questions, and the concept of blame can help track this movement and identify where rhetors and audiences are misaligned.

I have suggested at the outset, then, that the concept of blame is valuable for studying non-ideal deliberation about an enduring public problem like mass shootings, and, in turn, that such a study can help develop deliberative theory. Specifically, I argued that blame entails an expansive view of deliberation that includes forms of communication like advocacy and manipulation that have typically been seen as at odds with deliberation; that blame allows critics to temporarily bracket out questions of authenticity and to consider ascriptions of blame that seem sincere and true and ascriptions of blame that do not; and that the concept of blame allows critics to see how claims move among rhetorical occasions and among stases.

But such theorizing of blame must be put to the test—and there is hardly a better case to study than deliberation after mass shootings, which is rampant with the rhetoric of

blame. This dissertation examines ascriptions of blame and how those ascriptions call forth or imply changes values, practices, or policies. In addition to describing key deliberations in the aftermath of mass shootings, I examine these deliberations from a critical perspective. How do the recurring kinds of blame—blame of the "culture of violence," of mental illness, and of guns—function rhetorically? That is, how does blame get ascribed in a particular moment and, in turn, what modes of being, interpretation, and action are mobilized—or stalled—by these ascriptions? Absent major changes in national policy or major changes in communal norms, what kind of rhetorical work do each of these kinds of blame accomplish and for whom? Whereas I use the descriptor "function rhetorically" to emphasize how blame operates in a given context, I use "rhetorical work" to emphasize the wider implications of that blame. "Rhetorical work" draws attention to the often subtle ways that these deliberations shape how people define and understand mass shootings, how they understand the deliberation about a particular issue (such as mental health), and how they view their perceived political opponents. In addition to offering an informed account of deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings, this dissertation can help scholars and wider publics better account for blame's role in deliberation.

The Public Problem of Mass Shootings

In *The Culture of Public Problems*, Joseph R. Gusfield argued, "Human problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced into the consciousness of bystanders."[32] He

continued, "All situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets of public action."[33] A problem becomes public, then, when it is perceived as alterable—it is a problem with which "someone ought to do something."[34]

By this definition, mass shootings have become a public problem. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed mass shootings across the United States. Thirteen killed in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Twenty-one killed in San Ysidro, California. Twenty-three killed in Killeen, Texas. Fourteen killed in Edmond, Oklahoma.[35] Between the years 1982 and 2012 there were at least 69 mass shootings in the United States.[36] The shooters were nearly all middle-aged men, but the shooters ranged from early-teens to mid-sixties.[37] Given that shootings happened in restaurants, schools, malls, an air force base, a nightclub, and a post-office, it appeared that no space was entirely safe.

Mass shootings also highlight other public problems that sometimes escape public attention. Take gun violence, for instance: 2012 witnessed seven mass shootings and 72 total deaths, yet each year approximately 30,000 people die at the hand of a gun. In 2010, 16,259 people were murdered (11,078 with a gun) and there were 38,364 suicides (19,392 with a gun).[38] As to mental illness: for each shooter who suffered from a mental illness, there are thousands of mentally ill people—the majority of whom are not violent—who fail to get adequate care and end up on the streets or in prisons.[39] The magnitude of mass shootings, intensified even further by the media spotlight, shines through the veneer of everyday life. Periodically, this unsettling of everyday life has required the nation—however briefly—to reflect upon and deliberate about fundamental questions about public violence, its sources, and its potential solutions.

One occasion that provoked deliberation was the Columbine High School shooting. On April 20, 1999, as news of the shooting was still unfolding, President Bill Clinton delivered a brief statement from the White House. He had spoken to Colorado leaders to offer his support, and he approvingly paraphrased a local official: "perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge" and work to "prevent anything like this from happening again."[40] Clinton would go on to suggest that all Americans might "build a better future for all our children" and thereby address the public problem of mass shootings.[41] But in 1999, the precise nature of that "challenge," its causes, and its potential remedies was unclear. How the problem was defined and how it was to be fixed were questions open to deliberation.

For some, the nature of the "challenge" was straightforward: the shooters were simply "sick people"[42] and "evil."[43] Rhetorical scholars have considered the ethical and deliberative implications of using "evil" more generally.[44] For instance, Rosa A. Eberly warned that "claims about 'evil' shut down deliberation." "Claims about evil have dysfunctional consequences for deliberative discourse," Eberly explained, "because such claims conceal causes and obscure possible solutions."[45] Although I agree with Eberly in general, examining deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings can offer a more nuanced answer. The language of "evil" sometimes does shut down deliberation, but at other times it merely redirects or reframes deliberation: the question at hand pivots from prevention to ensuring that a shooter can do the least damage possible.

Others did not rely on the language of evil but instead asked what conditions might have given rise to a mass shooting and how those conditions might be altered to prevent other potential shootings. Psychologists, sociologists, criminologists,

investigative reporters and others have devoted significant time to the question "Why did a/the shooter do it?"[46] Researchers of mass shootings identify a "constellation of specific factors" at work and stress that understanding mass shootings requires a "multiperspectivist interpretation."[47] Drawing from research on mass shootings in Heath, Kentucky, and Westside, Arkansas, sociologist Katherine S. Newman and her colleagues offer one valuable framework for understanding why mass shootings happen. Focusing on school shootings, they propose "five *necessary* but *not sufficient conditions*": first, a shooter perceives himself as "as extremely marginal in the social worlds that matter to him"; second, a shooter suffers from "psychosocial problems that magnify the impact of marginality"; third, a shooter encounters "cultural scripts" or "perspectives for behavior" that "lead the way toward an armed attack": fourth, a shooter exists within a context in which "surveillance systems that are intended to identify troubled teens before their problems become extreme" have failed; fifth, a shooter exists within a context in which there is "gun availability."[48] By "*necessary* but *not sufficient conditions*," Newman and her colleagues indicated that several factors worked together. Although one factor alone was not solely responsible for the shooting, "Take away any one of these elements, and the shootings at Heath and Westside would not have happened."[49]

But understanding the network of forces that contribute to mass shootings does "not lead to straightforward solutions or policies whose effectiveness is guaranteed." Newman and her colleagues explain, "in almost all cases, interventions that might make a positive difference have negative consequences that may be intolerable."[50] Because of this uncertainty and need to weigh different proposals and values, they claimed, "It is up to our society—students, parents, teachers, administrators, politicians, and citizens at

large—to weigh the pluses and minuses."[51] Responding to mass shootings, then, required

more than careful reporting, disciplinary expertise, or rigorous analysis. It required

engagement from non-experts who could evaluate questions of value and policy.

Responding to mass shootings, in short, required public deliberation—deliberation in all

its messiness.

But there is a peculiar quality to deliberation in the aftermath of mass of mass

shootings. In 2015, like in 1999, the precise nature of the "challenge" of mass shootings,

its causes, and its potential remedies are still questions open to debate. At least on the

surface, little seems to have changed. On December 14, 2012, President Barack Obama

spoke from the White House to a nation shocked by the shooting at Sandy Hook

Elementary School. Yet Obama said nearly the exact same words as President Clinton

had thirteen years earlier in his response to the Columbine shooting. Obama stated "As a

country, we have been through this too many times." He continued, "And we're going to

have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this,

regardless of the politics."[52] Given that little seems to have changed over the last two

decades, my opening question becomes even more urgent: What are rhetorical scholars to

make of deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings?

The primary goal of this dissertation is not to figure out why a shooting—or mass

shootings in general—*really* happened, nor is it to offer a plan for preventing mass

shootings. Instead, I look at public deliberation after mass shootings—responses from

those most directly affected, from citizens, from advocacy groups, and from national

leaders—to figure out how people have responded, to consider what those responses have

and have not accomplished, and to imagine how future responses might be different.

Rhetorical Scholars' Response to the Public Problem of Mass Shootings

As J. Michael Hogan and I have argued previously, rhetorical scholars "have done significant work on the gun debate" and other issues related to mass shootings, "but that work is narrowly focused and episodic."[53] Rhetorical scholars have examined media representations of mass shootings, such as 1999 Columbine High School shooting, and of mass shooters.[54] Rhetorical scholars analyzed how national leaders have responded to mass shootings, particularly the 2011 shooting in Tucson, Arizona.[55] And they have considered public mourning and memorialization in the aftermath of mass shootings.[56] Still other rhetorical scholars have addressed topics closely related to mass shootings by writing about representations of guns in spaces like museums[57] and representations of gun owners in news media,[58] in addition to analyses focused on the rhetorical strategies used by gun control advocates and gun rights advocates[59] and analyses that consider the potential relationship between gun violence and vitriolic rhetoric.[60] I will say more about these sources in subsequent chapters, but this brief overview highlights that rhetorical scholars "still lack a coherent narrative of how we arrived at today's deliberative impasse."[61]

Several rhetorical scholars have provided a starting place for crafting such a rhetorical history and for thinking about blame and gun violence. Reflecting on the deliberation between gun control advocates and gun rights advocates, James Jasinski wrote that both sides agree that gun violence is a problem, but "The two issues that drive the debate are who or what is to blame and how to solve the problem. Opponents of gun control reject the proponents' claim that guns are an important contributing factor to the

problem of violence. In other words, they reject the attribution of blame made by supporters of gun control."[62] But blame is not confined only to guns. Mari Boor Tonn, Valerie A. Endress, and John N. Diamond used Burkean dramatism—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—to interpret newspaper coverage and a trial of a hunter who accidently shot and killed a woman in her own backyard. The authors argue that, because of the community's hunting heritage, responsibility was displaced from the shooter and his gun and toward the woman he accidentally killed: "in Maine, traditions inherent in the scene helped define the roles of victim" and victimizer "even *before* the act occurred."[63] Bryan J. McCann further demonstrated how a "scene" shaped interpretations of violence. Analyzing media coverage of the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, McCann showed how discourses about race "enable and constrain deliberation regarding the prerogative of violence in civil society."[64] This previous work begins to demonstrate the many layers of blame and its role in interpreting and deliberating violence, but there is more to be said about how blame functions and the rhetorical work it does.

However, several rhetorical scholars have also provided insight for thinking about blame in relation to mass shootings. In a special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* on "Civility," the authors focused on responses to the 2011 shooting in Tucson, Arizona. Several authors briefly mentioned the concept of blame. Beth L. Boser and Randall A. Lake wrote, "In the face of calamity, people naturally search for explanation; often, as Kenneth Burke reminds us, this involved apportioning blame." [65] Boser and Lake described how Sarah Palin's speech after the tragedy blamed the individual shooter and thus shifted responsibility away from society and Palin's allegedly uncivil campaign rhetoric.[66] Similarly, Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan claimed that

conservatives engaged in "an almost surgical isolation or localization of blame." By depicting the shooter as "deranged," conservatives implied that "we could not and should not attempt to make sense of his motives."[67] Finally, Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O'Rourke traced how "media blamed rhetoric for the shooting, understanding the shooter's behavior as an all-but-inevitable reaction to overheated partisanship."[68] They pointed out that blame of America's "culture of invective" and "'blame the media' frame" were options chosen over other forms of blame, such as blame via "a mental health frame, a gun control frame, or a variety of other options."[69]

This dissertation builds on existing research to develop a sustained historical study of blame in the aftermath of mass shootings. While previous work on mass shootings typically focuses on one event (e.g., Columbine) or one issue (e.g., guns), this project offers a comparative approach by examining deliberation after several events and about several alleged causes. With case studies from 1999 to 2012, I examine deliberation about violence and the relationships among U.S. culture (chapter two), mental illness (chapter three), and guns (chapter four).

Methodology

Methodologically, I draw from two traditions within rhetorical studies: rhetorical history and rhetorical criticism.

Rhetorical History

Argumentation scholars regularly examine how issues are defined, how those definitions contribute to disagreement, and how definitions might be reframed to enable more productive deliberation.[70] Other scholars have examined the structure of a given argument by evaluating claims, evidence, warrants, and backings, and they have also traced how arguers move among different stases.[71] Still other scholars have examined the values and senses of identity that inform various positions and thus enable and constrain deliberation.[72]

Argumentation scholarship is valuable for scholars of rhetorical history because rhetorical histories detail how arguments have proceeded across time. For scholars of rhetorical history, to paraphrase David Zarefksy, the unit of analysis is not a single speech or text but rather a controversy.[73] "Controversy," G. Thomas Goodnight explained, refers to "temporally pluralistic, extended argumentative engagements."[74] The greater the time span, the more information a critic needs to process. In conducting a rhetorical history, a critic attempts to balance between what Robert Asen described as macro-level analysis to "reconstruct larger themes" and micro-level analysis that focuses on particular exchanges that "obtain significance for both their representativeness and their exceptionalism."[75] A critic tacks between a big picture perspective on the rhetorical landscape and key texts or moments in the controversy.

Similar to rhetorical histories of deliberations about poverty,[76] about abortion,[77] and about social security,[78] my dissertation provides a rhetorical history and detailed analysis of deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings from 1999 to 2013. By

focusing on the concept of blame, I provide a thick description of key deliberations following mass shootings to explain how those deliberations unfolded, how they were shaped by previous deliberations, and how they shaped subsequent deliberations.

Rhetorical Criticism

In his 1965 publication *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, Edwin Black warned that "critical method is too personally expressive to be systematized"[79] and thus, "there are no formulae, no prescriptions, for criticism."[80] What unites rhetorical critics, then, is not a lock-step process but rather, as Black argued, a shared commitment to understanding how rhetorical discourses work.[81] Though I agree with Black's assessment, I will lay out my process of rhetorical criticism here in general terms.

Etymologically, criticism and crisis are intertwined. As Black noted, criticism— in Greek, *krisis*—means judgment.[82] Moments of crisis, such as the aftermath of mass shootings, require judgment about what happened and why. Stakeholders are called upon to assess conflicting proposals about how best to respond and how best to prevent future crises. Yet if those judgments are continually at odds and if the problem they are meant to remedy worsens, then there is a need to judge those judgments. In short, deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings demonstrates a need for rhetorical criticism.

Rhetorical criticism can be undertaken for a number of valid reasons, including political activism, artistic appreciation of exemplary texts, or critical judgment to distinguish wisdom from chicanery. My goal is different. I locate my approach to criticism within a tradition perhaps best exemplified by Kenneth Burke in his review of

Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf.* Burke did not deny that the book was "exasperating, even nauseating." "Yet," Burke continued, "the fact remains: If the reviewer but knocks off a few adverse attitudinizings and calls it a day, with a guaranty, in advance, that his article will have a favorable reception among the decent members of our population, he is contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment."[83] Similarly, I seek to contribute to readers' enlightenment and understanding. There are some arguments and ways of arguing in the aftermath of mass shootings—particularly with the gun debate— that I find repulsive. Yet, writing as a rhetorical critic, I believe that I do a disservice by letting judgment and condemnation overpower understanding and explication.[84] I follow Robert E. Terrill's admonition to listen "carefully to a position" even though I might "vehemently disagree."[85] My own critical spirit is thus enlivened by the work of rhetorical scholars like Kenneth Burke,[86] Wayne Booth,[87] Robert Terrill,[88] Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin,[89] and Krista Ratcliffe.[90] For the sake of this project, I enact a model of rhetorical criticism committed to understanding how rhetorics—i.e., an individual or group's messages and ways of communicating—function and why some audiences might find those rhetorics appealing. After understanding, then judgment.

I use the concept of blame to understand how various rhetors interpret mass shootings and how they argue for change. As I suggested at the start, the concept of blame allows critics to temporarily bracket out questions of authenticity and to consider ascriptions of blame that seem sincere and true and ascriptions of blame that do not; moreover, the concept of blame allows critics to see how rhetors move among rhetorical occasions and among stases. Such a rhetorical criticism focused on blame, in turn, allows

me to develop a rhetorical history of blame in deliberation about mass shootings, 1999-2013.

Selections and Deflections

This dissertation focuses on deliberation after three mass shootings—the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. Among the many mass shootings since the mid-1990s, these ones have had the biggest cultural impact in the United States. Because of their magnitude, these shootings captured national attention and invited national deliberation. These shootings are the ones that, for better or worse, linger in public memory and continue to have a hold on deliberation.

Researchers who use a case study approach typically trace the same issue (e.g., gun access) across several key historical moments. Or, if they want to analyze different issues (e.g., gun access and mental illness), they do so within the same historical moment. However, I examine different issues and different historical moments. Doing this is justified by my subject matter and research questions. Comparing different historical moments helps me generalize beyond what may be the idiosyncrasies of one particular moment and draw conclusions about responses to mass shootings more generally. Moreover, comparing different issues honors the messiness of deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings, including the fact that deliberations about guns, for instance, regularly exist alongside—or as part of—deliberations about mental illness.

The chapter organization explores the dual meaning of *topoi*—or places. Topoi—

or the singular form, topos—refer to the literal and figurative "places from which to start

reasoning" and deliberating.[91] Each chapter focuses on a literal place (e.g., Virginia Tech)

and a figurative place, or line of argument, in the larger deliberation (e.g., mental illness).

To provide a sense of continuity among the chapters and to enable generalizations

beyond a particular historical moment, each chapter also looks backward and forward to

explore how deliberations about mental illness in the aftermath of Virginia Tech, for

instance, were shaped by previous deliberations about mental illness and how

deliberations in the aftermath of Virginia Tech shaped subsequent deliberations.

My sense of deliberation is expansive, inclusive of speeches by national leaders,

as well as demonstrations, bumper stickers, conversations among friends, comments on a

Facebook post, and so on. In seeking to chart the rhetorical landscape, however, this

dissertation slants toward "official" discourses, rather than "vernacular" ones. Although I

cannot claim to have captured "deliberation" in all its fullness, such an analysis of

primarily official discourses can offer a big picture perspective on deliberation in the

aftermath of mass shootings. The type of texts that I examine in each chapter is relative to

the particular case study. For instance, chapter four on Sandy Hook and guns focuses on

presidential rhetoric—including speeches and a key policy document—and the rhetoric of

advocacy groups like the National Rifle Association. By contrast, chapter two draws

heavily from a book by Lucinda Roy, an English professor who was the Seung Hui-Cho's

creative writing teacher and who became one of the most prominent critics of Virginia

Tech's failure to meet the shooter's mental health needs. This analysis offers a starting

place for future research, research perhaps focused on the more vernacular discourses that

can complement or modify my analysis. Future work might also look to other cases or other concepts to refine this analysis.

Since many book-length projects can and have been written about each of these shootings—and even more about U.S. culture, mental illness, and guns—my project is admittedly not comprehensive and does not aspire to be so. Instead, this rhetorical history provides a big-picture view of the rhetorical landscape, one that necessarily leaves some things out, such as lesser-known shootings and less discussed topics such as race, economics, or militarization in the United States. Yet, despite these limitations, this project draws attention to the rhetoric used in the aftermath of mass shootings, provides a thick description of some key deliberations, and sketches a rhetorical history of blame.

In this introduction, I have argued that the concept of blame can provide insight into understanding deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings and, more generally, that such a study can help rhetorical scholars better understand blame and its deliberative functions. Second, I described the public problem of mass shootings and the need for rhetorical scholars to study deliberation after mass shootings. Third, I reviewed what rhetorical scholars have said about mass shootings, highlighted how some scholars have begun talking about blame, and claimed that my project builds on this work by offering a comparative rhetorical history of blame in the aftermath of mass shootings. Fourth, I described my method of analysis—rhetorical history and rhetorical criticism. I use this framework as I proceed through the remaining chapters and attempt to answer the questions I started with at the outset. How do the recurring kinds of blame—blame of the U.S.'s "culture of violence," of mental illness, and of guns—function rhetorically? That is, how does blame get ascribed in a particular moment and, in turn, what modes of being,

interpretation, and action are mobilized—or stalled—by these ascriptions? Absent major

changes in national policy or major changes in communal norms, what kind of rhetorical

work does each of these kinds of blame accomplish and for whom?

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Chapter 2: Scenic Blame after Columbine

"We must replace a culture of violence and mayhem with one of values and

meaning."

--Vice President Al Gore, April 25, 1999[1]

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High

School, near Littleton, Colorado, with expectations of mass destruction. Their decision to

attack their peers that day was not spontaneous but was the product of months of

planning. The two high school seniors walked into the cafeteria and set down duffel bags

that looked just like the many already on the floor. Yet their bags were homemade bombs

made of propane tanks. The bombs were set to go off at 11:17 a.m., when the cafeteria

would be bustling with students. Harris and Klebold expected that hundreds would be

killed in the explosion. They strategically positioned themselves in the school parking lot

to shoot the remaining students who fled after the explosion. They had rigged their cars

with bombs, set to go off later in the day when the scene would be filled with police,

first-responders, and reporters. Altogether, they hoped to kill 500, and, in turn, to "kick-

start a revolution."[2]

But the bombs did not detonate. At 11:19 a.m., Harris and Klebold walked from

the parking lot toward their school and started shooting. Reports indicate that they

entered through the cafeteria doors, wandered the halls, and then ended their rampage in

the library. They threw pipe bombs, taunted and joked, and shot peers from afar and at

point-blank range. By 12:08 p.m.—with police and SWAT teams surrounding the school—Harris and Klebold committed suicide in the library. They left behind twelve dead peers, a dead teacher, and twenty-one others injured. They left behind thousands more traumatized, heartbroken, angry, and fearful.[3] They left behind a nation with questions, captured succinctly by a *Newsweek* headline: "Why?"[4]

What happened at Columbine High School was at once familiar yet unprecedented. The day after the shooting, an article in the *New York Times* began, "Once again a routine school day was interrupted by blasts of gunfire,"[5] while another article began "In the deadliest school massacre in the nation's history."[6] The rhetorics of accumulation ("once again") and magnitude ("deadliest") compounded to make Columbine seem to be a tipping point. As President Clinton expressed on the day of the tragedy, "perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge" and work to "prevent anything like this from happening again."[7]

But what were the dimensions of this "challenge"? Public discourse in the aftermath of Columbine posited many explanations for what made the massacre possible, including easy access to guns[8] and a failure of school security.[9] Public discourse also turned to questions of motive to comprehend not just *how* the shooters did it but *why* they did it. Those interested in motive offered at least three different answers. First, some concluded that the "massacre was inexplicable: We can never understand what drove them to such horrific violence."[10] In short, the shooters were just "sick people."[11] A second response came much later—after reporters, investigators, and psychologists had time to sift through the journals and videos that the shooters left behind and to piece together the events leading up to the massacre. They concluded that the shooters were

mentally ill. Klebold was "depressive and suicidal," whereas Harris was a "psychopath," and together they were a toxic mix.[12] A third response placed blame not on the shooters, but the contexts in which they lived. This kind of blame is best epitomized in the phrase popularized after the Columbine shooting—"a culture of violence."

Understanding the meanings and functions of the phrase "culture of violence" is the focus of this chapter. To use Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism, motive can be understood using five terms—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Blaming the culture of violence did not focus on the agents—the shooters' mental health, which is the focus of chapter three. Nor did this form of blame focus on their agency—their access to and use of guns, which is the focus of chapter four. Instead, blaming the "culture of violence" located responsibility in the scene, or the contexts in which the shooters lived. Blaming the culture of violence was a kind of scenic blame—blame that focused on the "background of the act, the situation in which it occurred."[13] Other types of scenic blame could have offered a narrower scope by focusing on the day of the shooting, or the experience of being a member of Columbine High School in the mid- to late-90s. Blaming the culture of violence, however, expanded the scope of scenic blame to U.S. culture more generally. Harris and Klebold, in this view, were not predestined to become mass shooters. As one of Klebold's friends wrote, "I knew Dylan long enough to know that he didn't start out as a monster. He became one. And that's what makes his fate so scary."[14] Blame of the "culture of violence" indicated that character is neither biologically ingrained nor a basic choice; instead, character was the interplay among individual choices and interpersonal, communal, and cultural influences. For those who identified Harris and Klebold as normal kids gone astray—rather than as radically evil—

the shooting seemed to indict different parts of U.S. culture and the individuals who constituted that culture.

Public discourse at both the local and national levels engaged in such scenic blame. Within a week after the attack, a carpenter from Chicago drove to Colorado and erected fifteen crosses near the school—twelve for the students who were murdered, one for the teacher, and two for the killers. The carpenter "taped a black-and-white photo of one victim or killer to each cross, and he left a pen dangling from each one to encourage graffiti."[15] While the messages for the victims were "loving and uncontroversial," the comments on the crosses for the killers were mixed. Some blamed the killers as "evil" bastards who would "burn in hell," while others implicated themselves in the blame: "Sorry we all failed you."[16] The crosses for the killers were taken down and destroyed after a few days, but the questions about responsibility remained. Appearing on the *Oprah Winfrey* show, security specialist Gavin DeBecker declared: "These boys give us all the opportunity to look at ourselves."[17] The opportunity to "look at ourselves" was indeed taken up after Columbine, but with drastically different conclusions.

This chapter extends the work of previous rhetorical scholars by providing a new perspective on public discourse after the Columbine shooting. Kristen Hoerl analyzed newspaper coverage of the Columbine shooting in the *Denver Post*. She found that the shooters were depicted as "monstrous youth" who were "genetically predisposed" to act as they did, and so "it was unlikely that adults could transform Harris and Klebold into normal citizens."[18] If such "monstrous youth" could not be transformed then society must work to protect itself from them. As one *Denver Post* article put it, "what this shattered world needs is more childproofing."[19] And as Hoerl noted, such childproofing happened:

"School officials installed cameras in classrooms and metal detectors at school entrances, and on April 20, the Jefferson County school board banned black trench coats and combat boots from schools."[20] Hoerl reasoned that this depiction of the shooters—and consequent "childproofing"—allowed audiences to remain angry at the shooters, yet not have to engage in self- and cultural-examination necessary for transforming sports culture and bullying, along with their cultural presuppositions of hierarchy and competition. By looking beyond the *Denver Post*, however, this chapter demonstrates that national leaders, advocates, and families did not depict the shooters only as monstrous youth. In fact, rhetors did engage in self- and cultural-examination, or what I call scenic blame.

In addition to better understanding mass shootings such as Columbine, this chapter can also help rhetorical scholars better account for how scenic blame functions more generally. Rhetorical scholars have focused on the 2011 shooting in Tucson, Arizona, in part because public discourse after the shooting explored a fundamental question in rhetorical studies: Could "incivility" and "polarized rhetoric" contribute to violence?[21] Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O'Rourke pointed out that while this line of questioning was interesting to rhetorical scholars, blaming polarized rhetoric also has significant implications for understanding and responding to the Tucson shooting. Blame of the "culture of invective" frame was one option among many options; the selection of this frame, in turn, had deflected blame from other frames such as "a mental health frame, a gun control frame, or a variety of other options."[22] While Stuckey and O'Rourke begin to point out the rhetorical constructedness of such blaming, there is more to be said. Blame of the "culture of invective" frame after Tucson and blame of the "culture of violence" after Columbine are both part of what I call scenic blame, and thus this chapter

can help rhetorical scholars understand how scenic blame functions and what rhetorical work it has done and continues to do.

This chapter explores one kind of scenic blame by examining blame of the "culture of violence" after Columbine and similar forms of blame in the aftermath of subsequent shootings. What is the culture of violence and to what extent was it to blame for what happened at Columbine? Who can change the culture of violence and how? While summarizing these deliberations, I also examine them from a critical perspective. How does blame of the "culture of violence"—and, more generally, scenic blame—work rhetorically? Absent major changes in national policy or major changes in communal norms, what kind of rhetorical work does this blame do and for whom?

Columbine and The "Culture of Violence"

Commentators responding to the Columbine shootings alleged that the culture of violence was a consequence of inadequate moral, civic, and religious instruction; absent role models in homes and schools; and violent music, movies, and video games. The proposed remedy was not to be found in local, state, or national policy but adjustments to individual and communal attitudes, values, and practices. The living were called upon to change how they lived and interacted with others so that they might atone for the wrong that was done, honor the dead (what I call the "warrant of the dead"), and secure a better future.

This section examines the rhetoric of three different types of participants to give a fuller sense of the meanings and functions of the "culture of violence" in the aftermath of

the Columbine shootings. Those three types of participants are the National Rifle Association, the Clinton administration, and what I am calling culture warrior parents. The time frame of these discourses vary: The National Rifle Association responded two weeks after the tragedy and the Clinton administration responded the day of the shooting and several times over the course of the next month. My analysis of the parents' discourse moves to approximately a year after the tragedy, when two families of different victims published widely circulated books that offered their perspective on what happened on April 20, 1999 and why. The timing of their discourses begins to highlight how deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings stretches across time.

National Rifle Association

The National Rifle Association—today the most prominent gun rights advocacy group—began after the Civil War as an organization devoted to marksmanship training. Through the 1950s, the NRA's mission represented a commitment to "Firearms Safety Education," "Marksmanship Training," and "Shooting for Recreation."[23] Yet the NRA's membership and mission changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s in response to legislation like the Gun Control Act of 1968 and the organization became increasingly committed to protecting the Second Amendment. Given its commitment to defending the rights of gun manufacturers and gun owners, the National Rifle Association (NRA) regularly joins—or is at least implicated in—deliberation about guns and gun policy in the United States.

But in 1999 the NRA faced an exceptional rhetorical situation. Their annual convention was scheduled for May 1, less than two weeks after the Columbine shooting. Moreover, the convention was to be held in Denver, Colorado, about 10 miles away from Columbine High School. The Mayor of Denver requested that the convention be canceled. On May 1, 1999, approximately 3,000 protestors "encircled the site," singing songs and carrying signs.[24] Inside the convention center, the NRA members and leaders gathered for an "abbreviated annual gathering."[25] Yet the Columbine shooting could not be ignored. The following analysis examines the rhetoric of NRA President Charlton Heston to explicate how the NRA responded to this situation.

By 1999, Heston had long been an iconic figure. With a square jaw and deep voice, Heston stood six foot three. Born in 1923, he rose to fame as an actor. Among his roles, he starred as Buffalo Bill in *Pony Express* (1953), as President Andrew Jackson in *The President's Lady* (1953), as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and as Judah Ben-Hur in *Ben-Hur* (1959). Off screen Heston was a "lead negotiater with Ronald Reagan for the Screen Actors Guild in its successful struggle to win medical and pension benefits for members."[26] He participated in the civil rights movement and stood a mere fifteen feet from Martin Luther King, Jr., as he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963.[27]

Heston's civic engagement and public advocacy continued. Part of his concern was about the entertainment industry and its relationship to violence: "In July 1992 Heston publicly demanded Time-Warner stop selling the rap group Body Count's debut CD, which contained the track 'Cop Killer' and which Heston and the National Association of Chiefs of Police accused of glorifying killing police."[28] Heston had also become

increasingly concerned about gun rights. After he delivered a speech at the 1989 NRA

members' meeting, Heston was presented with a "beautiful, handcrafted musket. Lifting

the gleaming muzzle-loader high over his head, Heston had intoned in his best Moses-

with-the-Tablets voice: 'From my cold, dead hands!'"[29] The implication was clear—

Heston saw no room for compromise in the clash between gun control advocates and gun

rights advocates. The "gun grabbers," he implied, "would have to kill him to trample his

Second Amendment rights."[30] In 1996, Heston "campaigned for more than fifty

candidates who supported gun rights." [31] In 1997, NRA leaders convinced Heston that his

celebrity could give increased visibility to the organization. [32] He was elected vice-

president that year, became president in 1998, and served in that role until 2003. While

his commitment to civil rights and gun rights might suggest different political ideologies,

Heston "saw gun rights as an extension of his campaign on behalf of personal

freedom."[33]

In his keynote speech on May 2, 1999, Heston spent most of his time defending the

Second Amendment and NRA members. Heston began, "I was advised not to be here, not

to speak to you here. That's not the first time. In 1963, I marched on Washington with

Dr. Martin Luther King, long before Hollywood found civil rights, um, fashionable."[34]

By drawing the connection between 1963 and 1999, Heston presented himself not as a

partisan but as someone of independent judgment and virtuous character, someone

committed to doing the right thing, even if unpopular. Just as earlier generations

struggled to protect civil rights, so the NRA and its members were now engaged in a

struggle to protect gun rights. "The individual right to bear arms," Heston proclaimed, "is

freedom's insurance policy." Moreover, guns were not just about self-protection; guns

were about protecting the rights that make America possible. Heston stated, "if you like your freedoms of speech and of religion, freedom from search and seizure, freedom of the press and of privacy, to assemble, and to redress grievances, then you'd better give them that eternal bodyguard called the Second Amendment."[35] NRA members, then, were protectors of liberty. This framing differed substantially from how the NRA had been portrayed. Heston claimed that the debate was wrongly framed as "those who believe in murder versus those who don't" rather than "those who believe in the Second Amendment versus those who don't." Moreover, he suggested that the gun debate had been depicted as a "struggle between the reckless and the prudent, between the dim-witted and the progressive," yet this was a caricature that ignored that the NRA "spans the broadest range of American demography imaginable" and defies "stereotyping, except for love of country." The NRA and its members were committed to the rule of law and they worked tirelessly to promote "safe, responsible use of firearms."[36]

But how did Heston attempt to make sense of what happened at Columbine? If guns were not to blame, what was? In part, Heston dismissed that question's importance. Rather than claim to be an expert on mass shootings or attempt to offer an explicit account of what motivated the shooters, he claimed that the Second Amendment was so important that tragedy—whatever its causes—did not warrant an infringement on the Second Amendment. He suggested that tragedy did not warrant change in gun policy for pragmatic reasons—the dangers of guns were outweighed by their benefits. He also claimed that tragedy did not warrant change in gun policy because guns were a right: "We cannot, we must not, let tragedy lay waste to the most rare, and hard-won human right in history. A nation cannot gain safety by giving up freedom."[37]

Yet, even though he focused on making a case for the value of the Second Amendment, he also needed to show that guns were not responsible for what happened at Columbine. He did this by depicting guns as a "tool" and by claiming that responsibility rested with "gun abusers" and "evil doers." What motivated these gun abusers and evildoers? His answer, in short, was a culture that thrived on divisiveness and sensationalism. "I see our country teetering on the edge of an abyss," Heston proclaimed. "At its bottom brews the simmering bile of deep, dark hatred." Citing examples ranging from corporate take-overs to sports brawls to "high school gangs and cliques," he claimed that the "American competitive ethic has changed from 'let's beat the other guy' to 'let's destroy the other guy.'"

Heston's blame of U.S. culture had several different functions. First, it offered an explanation of what might have motivated the shooters. Guns were not to blame. What was to blame was "evil doers"—those who lacked restraint, who lacked proper moral instruction, and who had been shaped by a culture committed to sensationalism and division. Second, his blame attempted to redirect responsibility from the NRA to its opponents. Critics of the NRA were the ones trying to "demonize others for political advantage, for money and ratings." He blamed politicians for using tragedy to try to pass legislation, and worse, to let "political gain…bloom on fresh graves." He also blamed the media: "Reporters perch like vultures on the balconies of hotels for a hundred miles around. Camera jockey for shocking angles as news anchors race to drench their microphone with the tears of victims." Worse than violating decorum, the media were profiting from it. Worse still, their coverage "makes the unspeakable seem commonplace." He thus implied that the sensationalist coverage by news media was

laying the groundwork to inspire future shootings—something that Loren Coleman has described as the "copycat effect."[38] Finally, blame of U.S. culture allowed Heston to engage in divisive rhetoric while simultaneously declaring that he was opposed to it and committed to finding common ground and unity. He claimed, "the screeching hyperbole leveled at gun owners has made these two camps so wary of each other, so hostile and confrontational and disrespectful on both sides they have forgotten that we are first Americans." He then called on "all of us, on both sides, to take one step back from the edge" to recognize other another as "different, imperfect, diverse, but one nation, indivisible." Yet what kept "both sides" from finding common ground, according to Heston, was his opponents' bad behavior.

Blaming U.S. culture thus allowed Heston to decry polarization while simultaneously engaging in it, to depict the NRA and its members as virtuous and their opponents as not. And this strategy seemed to work. Former NRA lobbyists Richard Feldman noted that "the NRA used the public and political outcry over the tragedy—the 'gun grabbers' were loose again—to promote a surge in membership and contributions. Soon after Columbine, several hundred thousand new members had joined, and total membership soared to more than 4 million by Election Day."[39] As I will explore in chapter four, the NRA's message changed very little between 1999 and 2012.

The Clinton Administration

The NRA's blame of U.S. culture is perhaps unsurprising, given that blaming U.S. culture displaced blame from guns and gun owners while simultaneously affirming

ideals concerned with America's spiritual, moral, and civic state. But the culture of violence was blamed not only by the NRA. The NRA's professed enemies also blamed the culture of violence. President Bill Clinton, First-Lady Hillary Clinton, and Vice-President Al Gore spoke about Columbine on several different occasions. Unsurprisingly, their rhetoric varied according to who spoke, when, and to whom. Hillary Clinton, for instance, spoke to reporters about the need for further gun restrictions just six days after the Columbine massacre, but there was no mention of guns in the speech she delivered to the Columbine High School community a month after the tragedy. Despite this variation, however, there was a consistent theme across all of their speeches—blame of the culture of violence.

While blame of the culture of violence was a prominent response to the Columbine shooting, it was by no means a natural or inevitable response. Blaming the culture of violence was a choice—a choice shaped not only by the details of the case but also by the preexisting constraints and goals of the Clinton Administration. In April of 1999, Bill Clinton's approval rating was relatively high at 60%.[40] Yet he was nonetheless a vulnerable president. He had been embroiled in a scandal after his affair with Monica Lewinsky was made public. He was called before national audiences to defend his actions, both as a president and as a husband. On December 19, 1998, he was impeached for lying under oath. Rhetorical scholars have devoted significant attention to this imbroglio and his efforts to reestablish his credibility.[41]

Blaming the culture of violence seemed to be relatively non-controversial. News reports suggested that the shooters had been shaped by a culture of violence; reports claimed that the shooters had been bullied, that they were part of a trench coat mafia, and

that they regularly watched violent movies and played violent video games.[42] Yet,

concern about the influence of the media and entertainment industry, concern about a

decline in spiritual, moral, and civic values, concern about youth violence, and concern

about the status of the family were long-standing cultural concerns. Moreover, they were

long-standing concerns of the Clintons and Gores. During the 1990s, crime prevention

was a national priority and, more generally, concern about youth violence was amplified

by long-standing anxieties about the status of the family. Tipper Gore, Al Gore's wife,

co-founded the Parents Music Resource Center in 1985, a group that successfully pushed

for "Parental Advisory" stickers to be placed on music with profane language. But what

did the Clinton administration mean by the "culture of violence"? And what additional

rhetorical work did it do?

On April 25, 1999, Vice-President Gore traveled to Colorado to speak at a

memorial service. Given the occasion and timing, it is unsurprising that Gore attempted

to provide his audience with comfort and hope. As is common in a national eulogy, Gore

had to make sense of what happened. Moreover, the puzzling circumstances of the

massacre made it particularly difficult to identify potential sources and solutions to mass

shootings. Yet the situation required that he indicate how local community and national

audiences might process what happened and imagine how to move forward.[43] Gore

asked, "Now, as we are brought to our knees in the shock of this moment, what say we?

What say we into the open muzzle of this tragedy cocked and aimed at our hearts?"

Gore insisted, "All of us must change our lives to honor these children."

Reminiscent of Lincoln at Gettysburg—"these dead shall not have died in vain"—Gore

claimed that the living have an obligation to the dead to honor their lives and to secure a

better future. It is what I call the "warrant of the dead." Gore assumed, rather than argued, that the living have such an obligation and that such an obligation is what the dead would have recognized or wanted. Calling on "all of us"—rather than those who seek to do harm—implied that everyone, including himself, was in some sense responsible for America's violent culture and must therefore atone for it.

How should the living change their lives? Gore's answer reflected the title of Hillary Clinton's 1996 book *It Takes a Village*, which invoked the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child."[44] According to Gore, adults must recognize their responsibility to care for the nation's children: "every one of us is responsible for the children of our culture." And no child should be excluded or ignored: "We must have the courage not to look away from those who feel despised and rejected." Caring for children required spiritual, moral, and civic education. "All adults in this nation must take on the challenge of creating in all of God's children a clean heart, and a right spirit within." Moreover, children must be protected from "the violence and cruelty in our popular culture" and taught that "embracing the right values transcends a moment's cheap sensation."[45]

While parents have a unique obligation to care for children, responsibility extends beyond the home to schools, communities, and America itself. The task for all, according to Gore, was to "replace a culture of violence and mayhem with one of values and meaning." This required making it more difficult for "a young child to get a gun" and changing a culture that constantly exposes them to "lessons in how to use one." It required "more discipline and character in our schools, and more alternatives to crime and drugs." It required looking out for children who show the "earliest signs of trouble"

and teaching them to "resolve their differences with reason and conscience, not with flashes of passion." Most generally, it required living up to the promise of America by creating "a community of goodness, of reason, of moral strength." In Gore's telling, then, the source of the culture of violence—and thus the Columbine massacre—was a failure to care for one another and a lack of moral guidance and discipline. Rather than being guided by poor role models or fleeting emotions, he offered reason and a moral compass as guides. According to Gore, Columbine illustrated a cultural problem—a problem that was not easy to change but one that required everyone's effort.

On April 29, 1999—four days after Gore's speech and nine days after the tragedy—a reporter asked Hillary Clinton what she thought "needs to be done to address the problem of youth violence."[46] Her impromptu answer acknowledged that there is not "one single strategy that will answer this problem" and that what was needed was a "unified approach." She went on to discuss the need to work together to create a national campaign against youth violence, to improve mental health services, to reduce children's access to guns. Yet she also challenged Americans to change the "culture of violence." She challenged the "entertainment and media industry" to be more responsible and not create "the kind of video games that these young men played" or the "kind of horrible movies that they watched." She further challenged media consumers and parents to exercise "more responsibility" by "turning of the television sets, not buying or letting your kids use those video games." More fundamentally, she challenged everyone— "everybody has to search his or her heart about how we take care of children." She continued, "What kind of time do you spend with your kids? How much do we really

listen to them?" Parents needed to "really get back into our children's lives," even if it required rearranging schedules or forgoing "some material possessions."[47]

According to Hillary Clinton, then, blame was to be directed not only to others (as Heston had argued) but also toward oneself. This self-blame and atonement worked to alleviate suspicions about the Clinton as a family, while simultaneously removing responsibility from the Clinton Administration to take federal action in response to the Columbine shooting. The tragic shooting—interpreted through the ongoing concern about youth violence—suggested a need for change but that change was needed in the home. It was not the Clinton administration that could prevent youth violence, but parents. Her rhetoric made no distinction between good and bad parents, but implicated all parents. She implied that whether parents spent two minutes or twelve hours a day with their child, parents might do more.

On May 20, 1999, Bill and Hillary Clinton traveled to Colorado and spoke at a small, indoor gathering of Columbine students, parents, and community members. It was now a month after the tragedy and just a few days before graduation. As epideictic speeches, the language in Bill and Hillary Clinton's speeches was consolatory and prescribed a path forward. Yet their speeches were also forensic in nature as they sought to explain what happened and why, and their speeches were deliberative in nature as they sought potential solutions to prevent future tragedies. The Clintons had spoken on other occasions about the need to restrict gun access, but on this occasion there was only one passing mention of guns—"You can help us to keep guns out of the wrong hands."[48] Moreover, that single line mention of guns and its placement suggested this was not an important theme: it was situated between a call for establishing a culture of values and for

helping America's youth. According to the Clintons, the source and solution to what happened at Columbine was at root a spiritual, moral, and civic struggle. Bill Clinton reasoned, "These dark forces that take over people and make them murder are the extreme manifestation of fear and rage with which every human being has to do combat." Notably, the shooters were not presented as radically other; instead, the struggle against "dark forces" that the shooters faced was one that "every human being" must face. While that struggle was perhaps most present internally and individually, its conditions were also external and collective. Clinton imagined a future "where parents and children are more fully involved in each other's lives": "where students respect each other even if they all belong to different groups"; "where schools and houses of worships and communities are literally connected to all our children"; and "where society guards our children better against violent influences and weapons that can break the dam of decency." This future of engagement, respect, and goodness could only be brought about if individuals changed their attitudes and practices. It was a large responsibility— potentially empowering and potentially overwhelming and unfocused. Yet it was a responsibility that depended on each individual's daily acts. Following a series of "you" and beginning a series of "you can," Bill Clinton explained, "You can give us a culture of values instead of a culture of violence."

The speeches by Al Gore, Hillary Clinton, and Bill Clinton all mentioned the culture of violence as responsible for what happened at Columbine. Together, they seemed to place responsibility on everyone, themselves included. They imagined a future in which people were more respectful and supportive of one another. But how did this blame function and what sort of rhetorical work did this blame do? As I have explored

throughout my analysis, blaming the culture of violence selected some details of the shooting over others. This is not necessarily a criticism; as Kenneth Burke reminds us, selection is an essential and inevitable function of language use.[49] But it is also important to bear in mind that these selections were not a natural reception of facts. Preexisting concerns about the status of the family and the influence of movies, games, and music all shaped these selections. Moreover, blame of the culture of violence was shaped by the Clinton administration's personal and political constraints and goals. For instance, Vice-president Al Gore was positioning himself for the 2000 presidential campaign. Blaming the "culture of violence" was relatively non-controversial and it had bipartisan appeal. Gore used this same rhetoric at the 2000 Democratic National Convention. He recounted his visit to Colorado after the Columbine massacre and concluded that "laws and programs by themselves will never be enough"; that all of us, and particularly parents, "need to take more responsibility"; and that, working together, we need to "change our hearts—and make a commitment to our children and to one another."[50]

Finally, blaming the culture of violence gave the appearance of assigning responsibility without actually holding anyone accountable. If blame had focused on the entertainment industry and criteria were established for judging video games, then it would be possible to assess whether change had happened. But if everyone was responsible for change, then, in a sense, no one was. It was not clear how to assess values like "respect" or listening. Bill Clinton's repetition of "you" stressed that his audience could take actions, but this "you" can also be interpreted as "not me," thus freeing the Clinton administration from having to take action. The only obligation that Bill and

Hillary Clinton assigned for themselves was the same one they assigned to all other parents: to be "more" involved in the lives of children.

Parents as Culture Warriors

Family members of several victims became public figures in the aftermath of Columbine. The fact that their children died gave them a kind of automatic authority to speak about how to honor the dead and about how to prevent future mass shootings. Some blamed guns for what happened. Tom Mauser, whose 15-year-old son Daniel was killed at Columbine, advocated for gun control, and he has continued to do so in the aftermath of subsequent mass shootings.[51] For other families, however, the lesson of Columbine was less about guns and more about cultural norms. They saw Columbine as a battle in a much larger spiritual and moral war, a war in which the culture of violence could be defeated by embracing religion or by becoming better parents.

By 1999, the "culture war" was far from new. The passionate and polarizing battles over "the family, art, education, law, and politics" had been ongoing for years. James Davison Hunter sought to explain the dynamics of these battles in his 1991 book *Culture Wars*. According to Hunter, the culture war represented not merely difference of opinion, but a rift between orthodoxy and progressivism that was "rooted in different systems of moral understanding."[52] As Hunter's subtitle suggested, this was a rhetorical struggle—*The Struggle to Define America*—in which some perceived the stakes as "nothing less than the life and death of our society."[53]

For some, then, the "culture of violence" represented the failures of progressivism and the antidote was a commitment to religious and family values. Responses to the Columbine shooting, Ralph W. Larkin suggested, could not be understood apart from the "political and cultural conservatism of Southern Jefferson County."[54] He claimed that "Columbine became a battleground in the American culture wars as the religious and cultural right defined the massacre as the outcome of a liberal, crime-tolerating, secular, anti-Christian society that fails to teach the children right from wrong, prevents children from praying in school, and refuses to display the Ten Commandments in public schools."[55] Blame of the culture of violence was due in part to Harris and Klebold's reported animosity to their Christian peers. Yet, in some sense, the facts of the case were less important than those who were interpreting them. For culture warrior parents, the shooting was an evil act, and the existence of an evil act was a sign of religion's absence and a need for its presence.

Cassie Bernall was a 17-year old student at Columbine High School. Early news reports indicated that before killing Bernall, Harris and Klebold peeked under the library table where she was kneeling and they asked her a question: "Do you believe in God?" Her response was an unequivocal "yes." Whether this exchange actually happened is disputed, and the strongest evidence suggests that it was in fact another student, Valeen Schnurr, who was asked the question and who was not killed. Regardless of what happened or did not, the story became a powerful one for Christian proselytizing.[56] The story seemed to capture Bernall's moral courage in the face of her destroyers. Moreover, the story suggested a motive and cause: the killers were waging a war against religion

and those who believe in God; their immoral rampage could be explained by their lack of religious guidance.

Rachel Scott was also shot and killed at Columbine. For Rachel Scott's parents, the shooters' immorality was not interpreted as their choice as fully autonomous individuals, but rather a state of being that was shaped by a corrupt culture. In the aftermath, Darrell Scott traveled to schools and churches throughout the country. A year after the tragedy, he co-authored a book that shared his daughter's faith and his own ideas about how America must now change. It was titled *Rachel's Tears: The Spiritual Journal of Columbine Martyr Rachel Scott*. Scott claimed, "In the year since that fateful day, Columbine has become a potent symbol of the alienation and violence that can often lie hidden beneath the seemingly tranquil surface of contemporary American life."[57] He continued, "the most crucial factor leading to the Columbine tragedy was that many young people today have been raised in a culture where there is a complete lack of moral or spiritual exposure."[58] Darrell Scott and Beth Nimmo, Rachel's mother, claimed that America has failed to honor and to foster religious virtues and had therefore created a culture that prized violence. Nimmo wrote,

> Our society isn't perfect, and perhaps we all bear a share of the blame for what happened at Columbine. There is certainly enough to go around. We feed our kids a steady diet of hatred and violence. That's what they are being raised on. People think it's entertaining, and those boys were entertaining themselves with some pretty nasty material.[59]

Rachel Scott's parents suggested that Harris and Klebold had been taken over by evil forces; although they lost that battle, other troubled youth could potentially be saved from corrupting influences, most clearly expressed in popular entertainment.

How might other youth be rescued from a culture of violence? According to Rachel Scott's parents and their many supporters, the spiritual battle required the guidance that only religion could offer. Darrell Scott wrote, "We must recapture our nation's great spiritual inheritance of Judeo-Christian values."[60] Those who argue for gun control were misguided, according to Scott, because gun control represented "legislative Band-Aids on our country's gaping social and spiritual wounds."[61] Claiming to know what motivated the killers, Scott explained, "Guns are not the reason people died. The reason people die is that there is murder in the hearts of other people."[62] The "ultimate issue," according to Scott and Nimmo, was not about guns or gun policy. The ultimate issue was about understanding why people are willing to break existing laws and moral standards. It was the "ongoing battle between the forces of good and evil."[63] In a line of reasoning similar to the NRA, it was not the gun but the shooter that was to be blamed. Yet the shooters were not entirely to blame either, since they had been nurtured on a diet of "hatred and violence" and thus starved of religious values.

While Rachel Scott's parents emphasized the need for a religious revival, Cassie Bernall's mother suggested that this spiritual battle was to be won or lost in the home. Within a year after the Columbine massacre, Misty Bernall published a book that reflected on her daughter's life and death. Since its publication, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* sold "over a million copies."[64] The book focused less on the disputed question of what happened in the library on April 20, 1999 and more

on Cassie's journey of getting to "yes"—of her transformation from a troubled youth to a virtuous youth. While the book was ostensibly about Cassie Bernall and an affirmation of her faith, the book can also be read as a counter-narrative that suggested why the two young killers did not undergo a similar transformation. Cassie's transformation was depicted as her own choice, but one that was shaped by the influence of her parents. Once Misty and her husband learned that their daughter was harming herself with drugs and making plans to harm others, they made decisive and drastic changes in their family to prioritize their daughter's welfare. They made Cassie switch schools, and they moved into a different neighborhood. Misty quit her job so she could better take care of her children. Cassie was not allowed to leave the house; they got a restraining order against one of her old friends; they monitored her phone conversations; they searched her book bag and room. And while Cassie resisted, eventually she changed.[65]

This narrative about parental intervention stands in contrast to that of the parents of the killers: Harris and Klebold had been caught stealing from a van; Klebold had written stories in class about harming others and Harris had threatened to harm a classmate. While the parents knew, they did not exercise the kind of intervention and discipline that Misty Bernall did with her daughter. Harris and Klebold had planned an attack and recorded videos explaining it, acquired guns and ammo, and made and stored bombs in Harris's basement, without giving their parents the slightest suspicion of what they were up to.[66] Misty Bernall acknowledged that parenting is hard and some things are out of a parent's control. While she does not explicitly blame the parents of the killers, her narrative implied that if the parents had monitored and intervened, like she had done with her daughter Cassie, then Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold might have been caught

and forced to transform from evil to good, too. More generally, this book offered other parents a model of parenting committed to engagement, surveillance, and discipline, which Bernall suggested could stem the power of America's culture of violence and might prevent future tragedies.

For some audiences, blame of parents was delimited to the Harrises and Klebolds. Dave Cullen claimed that since the shooters committed suicide and were not around to be blamed, people needed something or someone else to blame. While people blamed a variety of culprits, "85% of the population in a Gallup poll" blamed the parents.[67] This blame suggested that, since the children were still teenagers, the parents were responsible and should have done more to keep their kids from becoming violent. Unlike blame of the entertainment industry or blame of a competitive ethic in American culture, blaming the parents simplified the shooting's causal complexity and absolved audiences from having to change. For others, however, the blame of the killers' parents posed a warning for all other parents. As with the rhetoric of the Clinton Administration, blame of parenting for the culture of violence located responsibility for change in private homes, rather than public policy. Misty Bernall's narrative spoke of her particular experience with her daughter, while inviting readers to reflect on their own potential responsibility to care for youth in America.

Summary

In his speech before the National Rifle Association, Charlton Heston blamed the news media and entertainment industry for corrupting the spiritual and civic health of the

United States. By blaming critics of the NRA, Heston attempted to displace blame from guns and reaffirm the virtue of gun owners and gun rights supporters. For the Clinton administration, blame of the culture of violence allowed them to minimize the political liability of discussing gun policy. While they suggested that everyone was responsible for the culture of violence—and not just their political opponents—this form of blame paradoxically entailed that no one was responsible. Moreover, this form of blame located responsibility for change in private homes, rather than in public policy. Finally, I noted that culture warrior parents claimed that the culture of violence was brought about by a lack of religious teaching and parental guidance.

Legacies of Scenic Blame

While blame of the "culture of violence" was particularly prominent after Columbine, I next want to examine how the broader category of scenic blame has functioned in response to subsequent mass shootings. Doing so can help establish that scenic blame is a recurring mode of public deliberation. I briefly consider three cases that illustrate how the scenic blame topos was repeated and expanded: the 2007 shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), the 2011 shooting at a political rally in Tucson, Arizona, and the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut.

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shooting, the culture of violence topos was repeated and thus demonstrates the power of memory in shaping public deliberation. Since 1999, there had been several mass shootings, including the murder of nine on

March 2005 in Red Lake, Minnesota. Yet because Virginia Tech now had the peculiar

distinction of being the "deadliest school shooting in U.S. history," Columbine became

its point of comparison. The public memories formed in the aftermath of Columbine

became a topos for interpreting and deliberating what happened at Virginia Tech.

While memory is often a valuable resource for understanding the present, the

culture of violence topos can also be more distracting than helpful. This topos is evident

by the type of questions that are asked and the kinds of evidence that are considered.

Blame of the culture of violence after Columbine included blame of video games,

including reports that the shooters had regularly played a first-person shooter game called

Doom.[68] That perceived lesson about video games resurfaced in 2007 as people tried to

make sense of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. Shortly after the attack at Virginia

Tech, Chris Matthews of MSNBC conducted a live interview with student Karan Grewal.

Although Grewal was not friends with the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, he shared a dorm

suite with him. Matthews began his line of questioning by asking about "girl troubles"

and then asked about the shooter's media consumption: "What did he watch?" According

to Grewal, Cho watched professional wrestling and game shows. "Game shows" was a

piece of evidence that did not fit the narrative that Matthews expected, so he went to the

next question: "Let me get into this video game thing. Do you know anything about

Counterstrike, as a video game?" Grewal said he was personally familiar with the game,

but that he never saw Cho playing that game or any video game. Instead, he was usually

watching TV or typing into a word document on his laptop. Matthews returned to the

topic a few questions later, asking if there was a sub-culture of video games at Virginia

Tech.[69] Whether there was or was not a sub-culture of video games at Virginia Tech

seemed an irrelevant and forced question, given that Grewal had just stated that he never

saw the shooter play video games. Matthews's failure to listen makes the interview

painful to watch. However, the point is not to critique Matthews; the point is that the

script that Matthews relied on was a cultural one, a script existing in public memory that

was used even when the evidence did not seem to support its use.

As public deliberation unfolded after Virginia Tech, questions about the "culture

of violence" became less important than questions about the shooter's mental illness (for

reasons I will explore in chapter three). Yet some persisted in blaming the "culture of

violence." Like with Columbine, some argued after Virginia Tech that moral and

religious renewal were necessary to prevent future tragedies from happening.[70] And like

with Columbine, others insisted that moral, civic, and religious ideals had been corrupted

by the entertainment industry. However, a review panel, commissioned by Virginia

Governor Timothy Kaine, found little evidence to support these claims. Their report

indicated that, according to a roommate, "the only activities Cho engaged in were

studying, sleeping, and downloading music." The roommate also reported that he "never

saw him play a video game." Ironically, the roommate interpreted Cho's failure to play

video games as "strange," rather than a badge of honor, since "he and other students play

them."[71]

Other responses to mass shootings illustrate scenic blame more generally,

extending beyond blame of the culture of violence to incivility in public discourse. On

January 8, 2011, Jared Lee Loughner opened fire at a "Congress on Your Corner" event

in Tucson, Arizona, striking U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, injuring several

others and killing six. Public discourse turned to the quality of public discourse itself for

explaining why the shooting happened. Pima Country Arizona Sheriff Clarence Dupnik blamed vitriolic rhetoric common on talk radio and cable news: "To try to inflame the public on a daily basis, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, has an impact on people, especially who are unbalanced personalities to begin with." Dupnik concluded, "It's time that this country take a little introspective look at the crap that comes out on radio and TV."[72] Notably, these allegations were based on the fact that Loughner shot a political figure and that political discourse was polarized, even though there was no clear connection between the two details. Dupnik's allegations made no mention of Loughner's motivation or his history, and thus seemed to be more about Dupnik's personal beliefs than the facts of the case. Nonetheless, concern about polarization sparked a national debate about the relationships between uncivil rhetoric and violence. Indeed, it was the civility topos that dominated President Barack Obama's speech at the Tucson memorial service, rather than a discussion of mental illness or guns. While sidestepping questions of what might have caused the tragedy, Obama suggested that, moving forward, everyone had a responsibility to "expand our moral imaginations" and to "listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together."[73]

While Dupnik and Obama seemed to implicate everyone as responsible for vitriolic rhetoric, others framed vitriolic rhetoric as a partisan issue—it was a problem that one's opponent had created. One touchstone in the deliberation was a webpage created by former Alaskan Governor and Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. The website featured a map of political contests and included cross hairs over Giffords' district. The causal connection between the map and the shooting was loose at best, yet

for some the map indicated a larger problem with public discourse in the United States.

However, as Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan point out, the "nature of

these critiques were highly partisan," with liberals blaming conservatives for uncivil

rhetoric, and, in turn, conservatives blaming liberals for trying to connect the shooting to

conservatives' rhetoric.[74] This example illustrates the use of blame as a strategic device,

as well as the use of civility as a strategy to appear civil while simultaneously attacking

and trying to silence one's opponents.[75] Reading this moment through the larger history

of deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings suggests that the strategy of scenic

blame is not new, yet previous mass shootings happened seemingly apart from polarized

discourse.

Blame of the culture of violence that was so prominent after the Columbine

shooting reappeared in December 2012, after the Sandy Hook Elementary school

shooting. Just as former NRA leader Charlton Heston argued after Columbine, current

leader Wayne LaPierre blamed America's culture of violence. LaPierre claimed, "There

exists in this country a callous, corrupt and *corrupting* shadow industry that sells, and

sows, violence against its own people." He listed video games—including an online game

called "Kindergarten Killers"—as well as "blood-soaked slasher films" and music videos

that "portray life as a joke and murder as a way of life." LaPierre blamed the media for

their "race to the bottom" to "shock, violate, and offend every standard of civilized

society."[76] His speech offered no evidence that the shooter played such games or

watched such TV; instead, LaPierre attempted to draw from and amplify preexisting

attitudes and beliefs. Although LaPierre was widely criticized for scapegoating the

entertainment industry and news media, in other deliberations after mass shootings,

scenic blame had a broader base of support in deliberation after other mass shootings.

Scenic blame had broad base of support after the 1999 Columbine shooting and it was

expressed most forcefully by the Clinton Administration. Moreover, Obama and others

relied on scenic blame to interpret the 2011 Tucson shooting

Critics of Scenic Blame

Yet scenic blame is not without its critics. In 2002, Michael Moore released

Bowling for Columbine. The film drew in over $20 million dollars and won an Academy

Award in 2003 for Best Documentary Feature.[77] Moore countered the claim that music,

movies, and video games contributed to the mass shooting at Columbine and gun

violence more generally. Moore argued that there were more Goths and more fans of

Marilyn Manson's music in Germany than the United States, yet Germany only had 381

gun homicides per year; there were the same violent movies in France as in the United

States, yet France only had 255 gun homicides per year; there were the same violent

video games in Japan as in the United, yet Japan had only 39 gun homicides per year. By

contrast, the United States had 11,127 gun homicides per year. Moore gave partial

credence to the claim that there was something wrong with American culture, as he

identified a culture of fear perpetuated in part by news coverage and a war culture in

which the U.S. military used its weapons and influence to regularly kill thousands around

the globe. Yet, according to Moore, all of the talk about culture misses an obvious point.

The disparity between other countries and the United States in gun homicides can be

explained by a simple fact: those countries have restrictions on guns that the United States does not.

In 2013, just a month after the Sandy Hook shooting, novelist Stephen King released an essay titled *Guns*, with proceedings benefitting the Brady Campaign Against Gun Violence. Like Moore, King attempted to counter those who blamed the entertainment industry. After describing the most popular books, movies, video games, and TV programs during 2012, King concluded that the United States is the "culture of Kardashian" (reference to celebrity Kim Kardashian) rather than the "culture of violence." King did not deny, however, that cultural artifacts can have *some* influence on how individuals think and act. In fact, several mass shooters in the 1980s and 90s claimed that they had been influenced by King's own novel, *Rage*. Yet, according to King, it was a mistake to claim that a book can *cause* a shooting; instead, the shooters "found something in my book because they were already broken."[78] King acknowledged that the first amendment protected his right to publish his book, but that he had his publisher pull the book "because in my judgment it might be hurting people," and so, he implied, the same should be done with guns. Again like Moore, King acknowledged that potential mass shooters need help, yet in the meantime America has a responsibility to make sure those who do need help do not have access to guns. Attempting to counter those who blame the culture of violence, then, Moore and King claimed that the influence of culture on an individual's acts are only marginal at best and that a preoccupation with questions of entertainment and morality only distracts from addressing the underlying problem of guns.

Some rhetorical scholars have made a critique similar in form to Moore and King by suggesting that responses to mass shootings that blame things like parenting or the entertainment industry are largely distractions that provide a false sense of change. In her analysis of newspaper coverage of Columbine, Kristen Hoerl concluded that news media sought to protect the myth of the American Dream, rather than engage the deeper challenges to that myth as represented by underlying cultural, economic, and political problems. According to Hoerl, such media coverage "diverted our attention from the fact that competitive, capitalist values cause real and consistent harm to many individuals struggling to survive in the suburbs."[79] Hoerl thus critiqued those who blame the culture of violence by suggesting that such blame was indeed wide but it was not deep enough. Her analysis suggested that public discourse might look beneath bullying or parental involvement, for instance, to the economic and cultural forces that make some forms of behavior possible and others not. Calls to become more engaged as parents or to become more respectful as peers might thus ignore the underlying structures and conditions that make such engagement and respect difficult or impossible. In another context, Dana L. Cloud critiqued this kind of rhetoric as "rhetoric of therapy"—as talk that emphasized "individual adaptation rather than social change," talk that was "impoverished in its isolation from structural critique and collective action."[80] Isolated actions might make individuals feel good, but in Cloud's view, the danger of such "feel good politics" was that it provided little hope of redressing underlying problems without organized collective action.

Conclusions

At the start of this chapter, I noted that rhetorical scholars, including Stuckey and O'Rourke, have begun to indicate the rhetorical constructedness of scenic blame but that there was more to be said. From analyzing deliberation after the Columbine shooting and subsequent shootings, this chapter has offered a fuller picture of how scenic blame, particularly blame of the culture of violence, functions.

My analysis of the NRA's response, of the Clinton administration's response, and of cultural warrior parents' response to Columbine revealed that the culture of violence had different meanings, served different fuctions, and did different rhetorical work. While all commentators identified a moral deficit in American society, they had different explanations for how that deficit came into being. Representing the NRA, Heston described a form of civic decay brought about by those who took an ethic of friendly competition and corrupted it into demonization and destruction; those who prized sensationalism and commercialism over depth and dignity; and those who parted ways from America's founders, their belief in the rule of law, and their commitment to liberty and self-defense. For Heston, blaming the culture of violence displaced blame from guns and from NRA supporters to its critics. The Clinton Administration, by contrast, described a form of civic decay brought about by a failure to listen to and care for America's youth. Everyone—but particularly adults who were parents, who worked in schools, or who worked in communities—was challenged to make children a priority; to monitor them and look for warning signs; to teach kids discipline and character; and to help them respect others and better respond to conflicts that might arise. For the Clinton

Administration, blaming the culture of violence also displaced blame from guns, and gave the appearance of assigning responsibility to everyone. Misty Bernall argued that adults must better monitor, discipline, and teach children, while others like Beth Nimmo and Darrell Scott suggested that such transformations could not happen through civic ideals or a secular morality alone but required religion. Blaming the lack of religion added further support to the ongoing "culture war" among some religious supporters and their perceived opponents. For some, blame of parenting scapegoated the parents of Harris and Klebold, while for others the killers' parents stood as a warning for all other parents to better monitor and discipline their children.

My brief examination of scenic blame after subsequent shootings illustrated how the blame of the culture of violence was repeated and expanded. I suggested that blame shapes and is shaped by public memory: that what gets remembered after one shooting becomes a resource—for better or worse—for interpreting subsequent mass shootings. Scenic blame was at times inclusive and suggested that everyone was responsible for improving public discourse. Yet at other times, scenic blame was used as a political weapon to displace blame from guns or to attack one's perceived political opponents.

Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the rhetorical constructedness of scenic blame. Scenic blame is a selective interpretation of a mass shooting—it represents a choice to talk about the scene rather than the weapon used, for instance; it also represents a choice to focus on some elements of the scene, such as parenting, rather than other elements. Those interpretations shape and are shaped by a rhetor's memories, beliefs, and goals. Moreover, scenic blame does rhetorical work—it shapes how rhetors

and audiences understand a particular mass shooting, how they view their perceived

political opponents, and how rhetors and audiences interpret subsequent mass shootings.

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> It matters little in the end whether or not Cassie was quoted correctly in this circumstance. The fact that so many who knew her instantly accepted the initial reports that she said 'yes' is a clear indication that, without any doubt whatsoever, she would have said it! Cassie's mother, Misty Bernall, in her highly recommended book, *She Said Yes*, made it clear that Cassie said, "yes" every day.

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Chapter 3: Blaming Mental Illness after Virginia Tech

Seung-Hui Cho was twenty-three years old, an English major, and about to graduate from Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Virginia. Yet rather than go to class, spend time with friends, or apply for jobs, on the morning of April 16, 2007, Cho went on a killing spree. Just before 7:00 a.m., Cho went to West Ambler Johnston, a residential hall near his own. He arrived a few minutes before Emily Hilscher's boyfriend dropped her off at the dorm. He then entered the residence hall. At about 7:15 a.m., he shot and killed Hilscher and then shot and killed Ryan Christopher Clark, a resident assistant who lived next to her. Cho then went back to his dorm.

Police secured the crime scene in West Ambler Johnston by 7:30 a.m., and they had begun interviewing residents in the dorm. No one saw Cho and so they were "unable to provide a suspect description."[1] Hilscher's friend came to the dorm to walk with her to chemistry class. "She is questioned by detectives and explains that on Monday mornings Hilscher's boyfriend would drop her off and go back to Radford University where he was a student. She tells police that the boyfriend is an avid gun user and practices using the gun. This leads the police to seek him as a 'person of interest' and potential suspect."[2] The search began for Hilscher's boyfriend. Classes started at 8:00a.m. At 8:25, "The Virginia Tech Policy Group meets to plan how to notify students of the homicides."[3] The second class period began at 9:05 a.m. At 9:26, "Virginia Tech administration sends e-mail to campus staff, faculty, and students informing them of the dormitory shooting."[4]

The email explained that a shooting had happened and the university community was "urged to be cautious."[5] Between 9:31 and 9:48 a.m., Hilscher's boyfriend was pulled over in a traffic stop. "A gunpowder residue field test is performed on him and the result is negative."[6]

Cho, meanwhile, was going about his day. At 9:01 a.m. he went to the post office and mailed a package to NBC News in New York City. The package contained "pictures of himself holding weapons, an 1,800-word rambling diatribe, and video clips in which he expresses range, resentment, and a desire to get even with his oppressors."[7] At about 9:40 a.m., Cho entered Norris Hall—an engineering building—chained the doors shut, and started shooting. The first 9-1-1 call was made at 9:42 a.m., and the first police officers arrived within three minutes. After struggling with a locked door, police used a shotgun to blast it open. Investigators believe that the sound "alerted Cho to the arrival of the police" and at 9:51 a.m. he committed suicide.[8] "Cho's shooting spree in Norris Hall lasted about 11 minutes. He fired 174 rounds [i.e., bullets], and killed 30 people in Norris Hall, plus himself, and wounded 17."[9]

On April 16, 2007, reporters gathered in the White House for their daily press briefing. News of the Virginia Tech shooting was still unfolding, but reporters wanted to know whether President George W. Bush and his administration intended to do anything to prevent future tragedies. A reporter asked, "What more does this White House think needs to be done as it relates to gun issues?"[10] Dana Perino, the Acting White House Press Secretary, responded, "the President believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed."[11] Another reporter pushed back by implying that current policies were not working: "Columbine, Amish school shooting, now this,

and a whole host of other gun issues brought into schools—that's not including guns on

the streets in many urban areas and rural areas. Does there need to be some more

restrictions? Does there need to be gun control in this country?"[12] Perino responded that

she would update the press if the Administration's policy changed. For now, however,

their policy consisted of "enforcing all of the gun laws that we have on the books and

making sure that they're prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."[13] When the press

gathered on April 18, 2007, reporters again asked about gun policy, including the

President's stance on weapons-free school zones.[14]

By April 19, 2007, however, public deliberation about mass shootings turned

from guns to mental illness. In the briefing room, a reporter asked: "Has the President

been briefed, or seen all the disturbing footage of the Virginia Tech shooter, the video

and the photos?" NBC had decided to broadcast and distribute the materials that Cho had

mailed to them. In his manifesto, Cho claimed that his peers were immoral and

oppressive, and that they deserved his destruction: "You forced me into a corner and gave

me only one option."[15] His specific claims, however, became less important than what his

texts seemed to reveal about his character.

After April 19, 2007, many who participated in public deliberation took Cho's

mental illness for granted. Yet they relied on radically different depictions of mental

illness that had significant implications for how best to respond. This chapter examines

public deliberation about mental illness in the wake of public violence by focusing on

responses to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. What constituted mental illness and to

what extent was it to blame for what happened at Virginia Tech? While summarizing

these deliberations, I also examine them from a critical perspective. How does blame of

mental illness function rhetorically? Absent major changes in national policy or major changes in communal norms, what kind of rhetorical work does this blame do and for whom?

Combining the insights of Michel Foucault's work on the historical construction of "madness"[16] and Kenneth Burke's work on the rhetorics of identification and division,[17] rhetorical scholars have been interested in several related questions: What does labeling someone mentally ill do? What does it do to them and what does it do for those who do not identify as mentally ill? Kristen E. Hoerl, Dana L. Cloud, and Sharon E. Jarvis have analyzed newspaper coverage of presidential assassination attempts between 1973 and 2001. Although the attackers were "only sometimes mentally ill," major news media nonetheless presented them as lonely and demented outsiders.[18] Hoerl, Cloud, and Jarvis argued that some coverage "acknowledged economic and professional hardships," but reporters failed to connect "the personal hardships of the attackers to the broader social context of economic recession and generalized economic anxiety."[19] Katie Rose Guest Pyral claimed that coverage of the 2011 mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona, followed Kenneth Burke's scapegoating process whereby "a social group can unload its worst: worst thoughts, words deeds, or worst group members. This unloading ritualistically cleans the social group."[20]

Rhetorical scholars have also noted that this shift of responsibility from society to the individual—from scene to agent—often shuts down deliberation about potential causes and solutions to violence and thus thwarts responses that might help prevent future acts of violence. Pyral argued that "News reports and opinion pieces create an in-group of the 'sane' and then divide the 'insane.'" In turn, "this division allows for rhetorical

aggression toward the insane."[21] Also analyzing responses to the Tucson shooting, Francesca Marie Smith and Thomas A. Hollihan claimed that some commentators engaged in "an almost surgical isolation or localization of blame." Depicting the shooter as "deranged" implied that "we could not and should not attempt to make sense of his motives."[22]

Building on the work of these rhetorical scholars, I examine two depictions of mental health and illness in public discourse after Virginia Tech. The first depiction suggested that mental illness was synonymous with evil and that mental health was an individual responsibility. The second depiction suggested that mental illness was not synonymous with evil and that mental health was a public responsibility. I trace how Seung-Hui Cho was depicted as an outsider in President George W. Bush's rhetoric. This analysis provides a fuller account of how blame of mental illness functioned and what rhetorical work it did. Next, I turn to the rhetoric of Lucinda Roy to examine what Hoerl, Cloud, and Jarvis have described as a "counter-frame." Roy reversed the scapegoating process of the individual shooter to turn blame back to society. She drew from her personal experience as a Cho's teacher to offer a nuanced view of mental illness that encouraged audiences to consider the complexity of mental illness and to deliberate its potential sources and solutions. Examining these two depictions of mental illness—as exemplified by Bush and Roy—provides insight about deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings.

Mental Health as an Individual Responsibility: George W. Bush

President George W. Bush spoke publicly after Virginia Tech, and this decision

was likely shaped by the precedent set by the Clinton administration after the Columbine

shooting and by the magnitude of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. On the day of the

shooting—April 16, 2007—Bush delivered a brief statement from the White House. He

explained that "more than 30 people were killed and many more were wounded"; he said

that he had talked with Governor Tim Kaine and Virginia Tech President Charles Steger;

Bush pledged that his administration "would do everything possible to assist with the

investigation"; he spoke on behalf of the nation to express grief and empathy for those

directly affected; and he offered prayer and the promise of God's love "to comfort those

who are suffering today."[23]

On April 17, 2007, Bush traveled to Blacksburg, Virginia, and spoke at a

memorial service. Similar to Vice-President Al Gore's rhetorical situation after the

Columbine shooting, the similarly puzzling circumstances of the Virginia Tech massacre

made it especially difficult to identify potential sources and solutions to mass shootings.

However, the situation required that Bush say something to comfort his audience and to

explain what happened.[24] Bush's speech attempted to resolve these exigencies. Yet a

crucial question remained: How was the local community and nation to move forward?

On this question, Bush's response focused on individual grief rather than national policy.

"In such times as this," Bush explained, "we look for sources of strength to sustain us."

He suggested that his audience's sources of strength were to be found within the Virginia

Tech community, within their families, and within their relationship with God. Aided by

the power of prayer and the power of remembering those who had died, Bush argued,

such support from others would help to see them through. Bush's April 17th speech did

not offer an explanation of why the shooting happened or offer suggestions about how

future shootings might be prevented. Similar to President Clinton's speech after

Columbine, Bush claimed, "It's impossible to make sense of such violence and

suffering." But whereas Clinton nonetheless offered a partial explanation for the

Columbine shooting by blaming the culture of violence—as I explored in chapter two—

Bush insisted that those who died at Virginia Tech "were simply in the wrong place at the

wrong time."[25] Depicting the victims' fate as a chance encounter—rather than a causal

consequence of bullying or bad parenting or video games—affirmed that the victims were

indeed innocent and that, more generally, Americans had no burden of responsibility and

thus no need to change.[26]

Bush's rhetoric after Virginia Tech—beginning with his speech the day of and

continuing to his statement marking the one-year anniversary of the tragedy—claimed

that little could be done to prevent future tragedies. This claim was enabled and

supported by the Bush administration's depiction of the shooter. Bush acknowledged the

shooter's mental illness, but he implied that mental illness was synonymous with evil and

that both mental illness and evil were a choice. This blame of the shooter served many

functions: not only did it scapegoat mentally ill people, but it deflected blame from guns

and dismissed claims for action on behalf of the federal government.

By the time of the April 18, 2007, White House press briefing, NBC had not yet

released the shooter's writing, photos, and video, and little was known about him. Yet

Dana Perino—speaking on behalf of the president—blamed the shooter's mental state as

a way of deflecting blame from guns. A reporter asked about gun policy, and Perino responded: "I'm not going to comment about—obviously, the investigation in ongoing on Virginia Tech."[27] Asked again, she responded, "I think that what the President thinks is that, in this time of mourning and grieving and thinking about the aftermath of one individual's actions, that it's only natural that you think about what led to such a tragedy and how to prevent one in the future."[28] The phrase "in this time of mourning and grieving" appealed to a sense of decorum and suggested that deliberations about policy questions should be deferred to a more appropriate time. By characterizing the tragedy as "one individual's action," rather than as representative of a larger trend in gun violence, she suggested that the shooter at Virginia Tech was an outlier, and that federal policy should not be based on outliers. In that same briefing, Perino was asked about guns yet a third time. Because she further displaced blame from guns to the shooter, her response is worth quoting at length:

> As I said yesterday, I think that there's going to be a debate. The President said there's going to be a debate, and it's one that we have in our country about the right to bear arms, as well as gun control policies. In addition to that, I think one of the things that we're learning out of this investigation, as we have from many of the others, is that there *are some individuals who are disaffected in society*, *lonely*, and we have to figure out as a society how to identify those individuals and get them help prior to them having— going on a rampage and killing all this innocent life. (emphasis added)[29]

Even though Perino had refrained from commenting about guns and she said she did so because the investigation was ongoing, she did not refrain from commenting on the

shooter's mental state and social status, of which little information was known at the time. In addition to shifting blame away from guns to the shooter, Perino shifted blame away from society to the individual by relying on rhetorics of identification and division. The shooter was "disaffected from society" and "lonely."[30] He was apart from "us"—those who were presumably not disaffected in society and not lonely—and so there was no reason for us to change. Since he was "other," he—and he alone—was to blame. Moreover, the word "disaffected" was a peculiar word choice. It meant that Cho was not merely apart from society but he was actively undermining it.

By April 19, 2007, no correspondents in the briefing room asked questions about guns. They had willingly turned away from the topic of guns to mental illness. Asked about NBC's broadcast of the shooter's materials, Perino said that she did not know if the President had seen them, yet she offered her own reaction on his behalf. Her response began by reiterating that the investigation was ongoing and she concluded by acknowledging the families who "are having a very difficult time in the days following this event."[31] Yet between these two points, she discussed the shooter's mental state: "there was, unfortunately, a very disturbed and deranged individual who was a loner on campus and who needed help for his own mental health, and that did not happen in time to prevent a tragedy."[32] It turned out that the shooter had repeatedly sought help for his own mental health but he did not receive adequate care, although this information was not yet public knowledge. In the press briefing, Perino explained: "And so I think that's one of the things that, as a society, we're going to have to continue to think about, as to how do you recognize the signs of somebody who is so disturbed that they would take 32 innocent lives, and then take their own?"[33] Perino's characterization of the shooter as "a

very disturbed and deranged individual" rightly indicated that his actions were horrific.

Yet this characterization also undermined her call to continue a deliberation about mental

illness and how to recognize the warning signs of mental illness. Her very language—

"disturbed," "deranged," "loner," and killer—stigmatized mental illness and further

ostracized those who have a mental illness.

On April 20, 2007, President Bush spoke about mental illness in his weekly radio

address. Although his statements were subtler than Perino's, he used many similar lines

of argument. Like his statements at the start of the week, Bush continued to console. Yet

his radio address also discussed the shooter and what might be done to prevent future

tragedies. Bush acknowledged, "We can never fully understand what would cause a

student to take the lives of 32 innocent people."[34] He continued, "What we do know is

that this was a deeply troubled young man—and there were many warning signs. Our

society continues to wrestle with the question of how to handle individuals whose mental

health problems can make them a danger to themselves and to others."[35] Positioning the

federal government in the role of assistant rather than leader, he claimed, "Colleges and

state and local officials are now confronting these issues, and the Federal government

will help."[36] The mission of the Federal government at this point in time was not yet to

lead but to "help" and to first gather information: "I've asked top officials at the

Department of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services to provide the

Virginia Tech community with whatever assistance we can, and to participate in a review

of the broader questions raised by this tragedy."[37]

Bush's call to understand the broader "questions raised by this tragedy"

demonstrated openness, yet there is a troubling inconsistency with this first half of this

radio address and its conclusion. Bush began with a call for inquiry and a debate about "questions of how to handle individuals whose mental health problems can make them a danger to themselves and to others."[38] By the conclusion, however, Bush implied that mental illness was a choice and that mental illness was synonymous with evil. Bush approvingly cited a letter written by a Virginia Tech graduate: "Evil can never succeed, not while there are…men and women like the people of Virginia Tech who reach every day for success, and endeavor for the improvement of the human condition across the planet."[39] This former student's letter did two important things. First, the letter attempted to purify Virginia Tech: "the people of Virginia Tech who reach everyday for success" elided the fact that Cho was also a student of Virginia Tech. Second, the letter reduced Cho to his act and both to "evil." By quoting this letter, Bush suggested that the battle between good and evil was not one in which mental illness was a disease and mentally ill individuals were ultimately on the side of good. Instead, mental illness was presented as a choice and mentally ill individuals were on the side of evil.

Bush and Perino did not state outright that mentally ill people have chosen their state, but it is hard to conclude otherwise, given their depictions of the shooter. Dana Perino had referred to the shooter as "a very disturbed and deranged individual."[40] Since she provided no indication of any external source that might have contributed to Cho being disturbed and deranged, she left audiences to conclude that his state came from within. Moreover, Perino claimed that Cho was "disaffected from society," implying that he had made a judgment of society and a decision to be apart from it.[41] The shootings represented "one individual's actions"—the event happened because of his actions, not from being overtaken by demons or disease.[42] After Cho's footage was made public and

his mental illness was inferred, Bush claimed that Cho was "a deeply troubled young man—and there were many warning signs."[43] The claim that there "were many warning signs" suggested that his mental state was not inevitable but could have been otherwise. Yet Bush offered little hope that society might have done more for Cho. As Bush had claimed earlier, "It's impossible to make sense of such violence and suffering."[44] If it were indeed impossible to understand what happened, there would be little hope for prevention or treatment. Bush seemed to suggest Cho had either chosen to be mentally ill and evil, or that some sort of evil demon possessed him. My reading of Bush's rhetoric leads to the former conclusion. Bush suggested throughout his statements that humans had agency in choosing good and doing battle over evil. As he approvingly quoted scripture, "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." [45]

Other rhetorical scholars have examined Bush's depiction of a Manichean world—of a battle between good and evil.[46] In his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush repeatedly used the word evil. "Claims about 'evil,'" Rosa A. Eberly has noted, "shut down deliberation," and this is true of Bush's rhetoric after September 11th and after Virginia Tech.[47] An act of evil, in Bush's rhetoric, was not an invitation to deliberate or a question about why people act evilly. Instead, an act of evil provided a call to arms to do battle against evil. On September 14, 2001, Bush declared, "our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."[48]

Bush's war rhetoric after September 11th is remarkably similar to the conclusion of his radio address on April 20, 2007,

And somehow we know that a bright morning will come. We know this because together Americans have overcome many evils and found strength through many storms. And we know there will be a day, as promised in Scripture, when evil will meet its reckoning and when every tear shall be wiped away.[49]

May God bless those who mourn and may God bless our wonderful country.

Just as the student whom Bush quoted had symbolically excised the shooter from Virginia Tech and thus portrayed the school as purely good, so Bush symbolically excised the shooter from his depiction of the United States and portrayed the United States as a purely good nation. Bush's last phrase "our wonderful country" positioned Cho as an outsider, similar to the terrorists of September 11th. Cho's Korean race, coupled with early media reports that described him as an "Asian male," no doubt made this depiction easier than if Cho's last name had not been Cho.[50] On the one hand, then, it could be argued that Bush used fear of the Virginia Tech tragedy to marshal support for what was by 2007 an unpopular war in Iraq.[51] On the other hand, Bush used the framework of terrorism to make sense of the Virginia Tech shooting. By framing the Virginia Tech massacre as part of the larger struggle against evil, Cho's history and the sources of his horrific actions became irrelevant and indistinguishable from the September 11th terrorists. By equating mental illness with evil, Bush's rhetoric closed down the possibility for reforming mental health care in the United States. Put differently: any findings by Bush's commission about ways to address mental illness would likely be a mere formality.

Two months after the shooting, on June 13, 2007, Bush's commission released its report. The commission consisted of Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Speaking to the press on half of the commission, Leavitt shifted responsibility from the federal government to the state and local level. His main recommendations were for improved information-sharing; he suggested that the problem was not with existing laws but how the laws about information-sharing had been interpreted. More generally, Leavitt suggested the limits of any action aimed at prevention. "We live in a world that is a free and open society," he proclaimed, and we are "constantly trying to struggle with this question of what's the balance between safety and privacy, what's the balance between security and liberty."[52] Leavitt articulated a legitimate and complex tension, one especially prevalent given privacy concerns after the 2001 Patriot Act. Yet he also used this tension to close off certain types of responses. Funding for mental illness research and care, for instance, would not constitute an infringement of privacy. By mentioning our free and open society three different times, Leavitt not only affirmed that there were limits to government action but also suggested that mental health was not a public responsibility but an individual responsibility.

What was made of the commission's recommendations? Some progress was made to keep guns away from mentally ill individuals. The Virginia Tech shooter had passed a background check before acquiring his guns, but he should have failed that background check since he had been involuntarily committed. However, the information was not in the system. In January 2008, Bush signed the NICS Improvement Amendments Act into law, which "required states to provide data on mentally unsound individuals to the

National Instant Criminal Background Check System."[53] While this was an improvement, gun control advocates have continued to argue that the background check system still has too many gaps. As I discuss further in chapter four, federal background checks are only required in sales between federally licensed dealers, thus excluding private sales.

Yet there was no "debate," as Perino promised, and no wrestling with questions about mental illness, as Bush had promised. Given Bush's rhetoric, there was little need to carefully reflect on mental illness; he implied that mental illness was an individual choice and that mental illness was synonymous with evil. On April 15, 2008, Bush marked the one-year anniversary by issuing a statement—a statement that assumed to know the inner state of those affected by the tragedy and assumed that all was now well. "Students, teachers and alumni have overcome evil with good by supporting each other with love and compassion."[54] By the time of the one-year anniversary, then, there was no mention of mental illness and thecollapsing of mental illness into evil had become complete.

Mental Health as a Public Responsibility: Lucinda Roy

Seung-Hui Cho's parents had been worried about their son for a long time. He did not like to be touched as a child, and he seemed unusually quiet. The family had tried to live with it. Shortly after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, however, a fifteen-year-old Cho wrote "a disturbing paper in English class," expressing "generalized thoughts of suicide and homicide, indicating that 'he wanted to repeat Columbine.'"[55] The family took Cho to see a psychiatrist and he was diagnosed with major depression

and selective mutism—"an anxiety disorder that is characterized by a consistent failure to speak in specific social situations where there is an expectation of speaking."[56] Through therapy and medication, Cho improved. The improvement was taken as a sign that Cho was now fixed: the doctor decided to stop medication and Cho grew tired of therapy. Cho began classes at Virginia Tech in August 2003. His parents and counselor worried that the school was too big for Cho, and that without special accommodations and support, he would flounder.[57]

In the aftermath of the shooting, it became clear that Cho had floundered. His failure to speak had made it especially difficult for others to understand his character. His seemed to have no friends; his suitemates in the resident hall had tried talking to him but they gave up after he did not respond. Classmates reported that "his voice was literally inaudible in class, and he would only whisper if pushed."[58] Cho had started college as a Business Information Technology major, yet by the start of his junior year he had changed his major to English.

It was members of the English department, then, who seemed to have the closest contact with Cho. Lucinda Roy was Chair of the English Department and Cho's teacher. After another professor became disturbed by Cho's behavior and refused to have him in class any longer, Roy began privately tutoring Cho so he could earn credit for the course. On several occasions, she tried to get Cho to see a counselor. After the shooting, Roy spoke to reporters about Cho and about the challenges of helping someone who needed help. In 2009, Roy published *No Right to Remain Silent: What We've Learned from the Tragedy at Virginia Tech*.

Roy's rhetorical situation was significantly different from President Bush's. While Bush and Roy both attempted to make sense of the tragedy and suggest how the local community and the nation might move forward, Roy had first-hand knowledge of the school and the shooter. Moreover, Roy was free from the many constraints of the presidency. While both Bush and Roy responded during the week of the tragedy, Roy devoted months to research, write, and speak about the tragedy. Yet her rhetoric nonetheless serves as a valuable point of comparison to Bush's. Unlike Bush and others who implied that mental illness was a choice and suggested that mental illness was synonymous with evil, Roy offered a counter-narrative. Roy suggested that the shooter struggled with mental illness, but that mental illness was not synonymous with evil. Moreover, Roy suggested that mental health was a public responsibility, not just an individual one.

On April 19, 2007—just three days after the shooting—Roy appeared on the CBS News program "Eye to Eye." While she made it clear that she was "not a professional psychologist or psychiatrist," she nonetheless suggested that she had adequate reasons to be concerned about Cho's mental health.[59] Beyond Cho's "angry" writing, Roy's evidence consisted of Cho's "disturbing behavior": he had taken pictures of students in class without their knowledge or consent; when Roy emailed him a note saying that his behavior was inappropriate, he responded with an "ardent" defense of himself that Roy characterized as "strange" and "angry," written in an "inappropriate" tone; when they met in person, Cho wore sunglasses and a hat, which he refused to take off. She also observed that he generally seemed depressed. Another professor shared Roy's concern. Poet Nikki Giovanni insisted that Cho be removed from her classroom because he was disturbing

other students. While college was frustrating for many college students, Roy thought Cho's mood seemed different: "there is anger that almost all students feel and they get frustrated sometimes" and then "there's a deeper kind of anger that seems to come from a place that you don't usually find in a student." Because Cho "seemed to be going through a lot of difficultly," she decided to "alert people to it" in 2005, two years before the shooting. She contacted the police—something that she had done only one other time in more than twenty years of teaching. Roy also expressed her concern and shared "documentation" with the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, the Counseling Center, and Student Affairs. When asked about their response, Roy suggested that the police and college both tried to be helpful but could not act because there did not seem to be "an overt threat." In this interview just a few days after the shooting, then, Roy indicated that she had reason to be concerned and that she alerted several offices at Virginia Tech. Although Roy did not blame any particular person or office on campus, she did suggest that there was a missed opportunity to intervene. Her frustration with the university—what later became an explicit theme in her rhetoric—was here indicated only subtly: her first contact with Cho had been in an introduction to poetry class; because of a budget crisis, she had to teach a 300-person version of the course. Although she stated this as an aside, it might be viewed as synecdochal of Roy's critique that Virginia Tech had failed to provide adequate personal attention to its students.[60]

Roy again appeared on CBS in 2009, marking the two-year anniversary of the shooting and the release of her book. Her tone had changed drastically—from disbelief to frustration—and her blame of Virginia Tech was now pronounced. Roy was frustrated by her sense that university administrators were trying to silence her efforts to speak out.

Moreover, the investigation—which culminated in a 260-page report by Governor Kaine's review panel—offered a fuller picture and suggested negligence, not just error, on behalf of the university. She concluded her CBS interview, "You get very, very few opportunities to help someone who is mentally disturbed—very few. And when you get them, you must take them."[61] Roy claimed that she had provided sufficient warning about Cho but that the university had failed to take this warning seriously.

In her 2009 interview, as in her book, Roy identified at least three problems with how Virginia Tech's responded to Cho's mental illness. First was the challenge of intervention. In an introduction to Roy's interview, CBS host Katie Couric explained, "Roy knew that Cho needed help. The problem, she says, was getting it because Cho couldn't be forced into treatment."[62] Intervention might not have been necessary if Cho had received better services or if more information about his mental illness had been shared. Yet absent that, Roy felt she had sufficient evidence that Cho was severely mentally ill and desperately needed help but state and federal law did not allow her to intervene. Moreover, she suggested that the university did not permit intervention because they were fearful of being sued. The second problem was the failure of the university to provide adequate care. At the time Cho was a student, Virginia Tech had 2,750 students per counselor. Cho went to the counseling center three times in just over two weeks, "but was never really examined," nor did he receive any treatment based on the counselor's evaluations. Third, was the failure of adequately sharing information. At a child, Cho had been diagnosed with a mental illness and had received counseling throughout high school. However, Virginia Tech did not know this because of federal privacy laws, including FERPA and HIPAA. Since Cho was over 18, his parents were

never told of his "disturbing behavior" or struggles at Virginia Tech. According to Roy, Virginia Tech was more interested in protecting Cho's privacy than they were in protecting Cho and the other students on campus. Yet existing laws—or a misinterpretation of them—were not the only reason; information was also not shared because of negligence and bureaucracy. While the police, courts, teachers in the English Department, and the counseling center each had a different perspective on Cho's struggles, "no one connected all the dots."[63]

Roy's appearances on CBS offered a markedly different account of mental illness than the one offered by the Bush administration. While Roy also described Cho as troubled and angry and concluded that he suffered from a mental illness, she did not depict his behavior within a moral framework of good and evil. Her account of mental illness also favored the particular over the general. In part because of her position in the university and her first-hand experience with Cho, her rhetoric attended to the particular symptoms that Cho displayed. Roy described Cho's silence, his anger, and his depression, rather than use "mental illness" as an all-inclusive label that lumps together all illnesses and abnormal behavior. Cho did not choose to be mentally ill and his choices to get help were thwarted by others' choices. While Roy did not take a firm stand on the causes of mental illness, she did suggest that his inability to get the help he needed was partially the fault of Virginia Tech. More generally, what was at fault—and thus, what needed to change—were the practices, attitudes, and policies throughout the United States that obstructed others with mental illness from getting the support and care that they needed.

In *No Right to Remain Silent*, Roy described several challenges to addressing mental illness. She claimed that solutions for addressing mental illness required national deliberation followed by both individual action and systemic change. She advocated a sincere examination of mental illness, rather than just using mental illness to deflect blame from guns: "After the Virginia Tech tragedy, cautious state politicians didn't want to mention the word gun. For this reason, they paid a lot of lip service to mental health reform and campus security."[64] Yet even sincere efforts to address mental illness could be thwarted by institutional, cultural, legal, and political practices and policies. She wrote, "Although comprehensive legislation has been introduced by Governor Kaine to address some of the severe problems Virginia has relative to mental health, both mental health care and campus security are in dire need of a much greater infusion of funds. Neither is likely to get them given the current shortage of budget shortfalls."[65] While blaming Cho might have been satisfying, for Roy such blame skimmed over deeper structural problems that made it exceptionally difficult for Cho to get the help he needed. These problems, according to Roy, were not attributed to cosmic forces of good and evil but on-the-ground problems that required public support and engagement to address.

Two Depictions of Mental Illness

How, then, did blame of mental illness function after Virginia Tech? Through examining the rhetoric of the Bush Administration and the rhetoric of Lucinda Roy, I have identified two general paths for talking about mental illness. This section compares these depictions. First is the question of whether the shooter—and more generally, those

with a mental illness—should be viewed as among or apart from society. Bush engaged

in division: the shooter was not part of society but was "disaffected in society" and

"deranged." Mental illness became conflated with "evil." Roy's rhetoric was different.

She condemned the shooter's act while insisting that he was not a radical "other" but that

he was among "us" and that there were others struggling with mental illness and in need

of help.

The question of who the shooter is in relation to "us" is intimately connected to

another question: Who or what was responsible? Whereas Bush claimed that mental

health was an individual responsibility, not a public one, Roy claimed that mental health

was a public responsibility, not just an individual one. According to Bush, Cho was

responsible for Virginia Tech and, by implication, he was responsible for his mental

condition. Bush acknowledged society's obligation to recognize the "warning signs," but

this suggested that society ought to serve as a check against unusual behavior, not that

society had an obligation to help those with mental illness before they demonstrate

unusual behavior. Roy claimed that the shooter was responsible, but so was U.S. culture

for stigmatizing mental illness and so was Virginia Tech and the state and federal

government for not providing adequate funding to help those with a mental illness.

Bush and Roy also disagreed about the nature of mental illness and whether

anything could be done to help. Speaking at the memorial service on April 17, 2007,

Bush claimed, "It's impossible to make sense of such violence and suffering."[66] President

Clinton before him and President Obama after him expressed a similar sentiment in their

responses to other mass shootings. However, there was a crucial difference: Clinton and

Obama acknowledged the difficulty of understanding and still tried, but Bush took the

difficulty in understanding as a reason not to try. The shooter was simply evil. So there was little reason to understand his mental state, to deliberate how society might change, or to reform mental health care to try to prevent future tragedies. By contrast, Roy offered a more complex view of mental illness. Roy described Cho's struggles in school and her struggles with him to navigate the mental health care system on campus. Cho's decision to become a mass murderer was not inevitable, in Roy's telling, and she pointed to individual and systemic failures that kept Cho from getting the help he needed.

What sort of rhetorical work did these different forms of blame do? First, these different forms of blame depicted mental illness and the mentally ill. By engaging in rhetorics of division, Bush oversimplified mental illness, and demonized and ostracized mentally ill people. Second, these different forms of blame entailed different responsibilities for different audiences. Whereas Bush's rhetoric placed blame squarely on the shooter and thus made no requirement for audiences to deliberate what happened, Roy's rhetoric extended the blame to others to invite self-and cultural-examination and reform. Roy concluded *No Right to Remain Silent* by arguing for a national deliberation about mental illness: "Through more open communication and a national commitment to education, it is possible to make this campus and others safer than they are currently. It's not too late to engage in meaningful dialogue."[67] By contrast, given Bush's blame of the shooter and framing of him as entirely evil, Bush's rhetoric provided no exigence for such a national deliberation.

Although I have evaluated Bush's rhetoric as shutting down deliberation, there are a numbers of reasons that his rhetoric might have nonetheless been appealing to audiences in the aftermath of Virginia Tech. In a moment of uncertainty, his rhetoric

offered the prospect of certainty and clear moral judgment. While Bush's appeal to "evil" arguably oversimplified what had happened and why, that simplicity was understandably satisfying and cathartic for some. As one Virginia Tech student wrote shortly after the shooting,

> [Cho's] parents worked to provide a good life as they thought they could for him. What atrocities could possibly have befallen him as he grew up on the mean streets of northern Virginia? HE KILLED A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR!! I don't care how 'unstable' he was. It was evil. Pure. Unadulterated.[68]

In the face of grief and anger of those directly affected, then, Roy's call for self- and cultural-examination might have seemed too wishy-washy and too detached. Moreover, in the video manifesto that NBC aired, Cho had tried to blame society for what he was about to do. Bush's rhetoric, then, was satisfying as it clearly labeled the shooter, divided him from "us," and affirmed that "Those whose lives were taken did nothing to deserve their fate"[69] and that the United States was still a "wonderful country."[70]

Legacies of Blaming Mental Illness

Since Virginia Tech, the topos of mental illness has continued to play a role in deliberation about mass shootings. In January 2011, Jared Loughner opened fire at "Congress on Your Corner" event held by Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona. Months before the shooting, Loughner filmed himself walking through the campus at Pima Community College. He was angry about his own education and called

college America's "genocide."[71] After learning of the tape in 2010, Pima Community College suspended Loughner, and he soon withdrew after they requested he obtain mental health clearance. After the shooting, he was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic.[72]

In July 2012, James Holmes opened fire in a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, during a midnight screening of the Batman franchise film *The Dark Knight Rises*. When police took Holmes into custody, he claimed he was the "joker" from the Batman movie series. Holmes was a doctoral student in neuroscience. Well before his shooting, Holmes had visited with at least three mental health professionals at the University of Colorado.[73] "A University of Colorado psychiatrist told campus police a month before the Aurora movie theater attack that James Holmes had homicidal thoughts and was a public danger."[74]

In December 2012, Adam Lanza opened fire at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. "From early childhood, it was clear to those around him that Adam was a deeply disturbed young man," and in elementary school he was "diagnosed with mental illness."[75] He allegedly had negative reactions to medication, stopped taking it, and his condition worsened. He tried to cope with his sensory perception disorder by taping his windows shut to block out the light. He became increasingly anxious and in the days before his attack he had stopped communicating with one of the only people he talked to—his mother. His parents had long struggled to find adequate care for him, and his mother's emails released posthumously suggest that she was starting to lose hope.[76]

In September 2013, Aaron Alexis opened fire at the Washington Navy Yard. He had been hearing voices. Alexis believed that he was "being controlled by

electromagnetic waves"[77] and he allegedly took apart his hotel bed because he feared

someone was hiding under it. A month prior to the shooting he sought help at "two

Veterans Affairs hospitals in and around Washington for sleep-related issues."[78]

How has deliberation after these shootings addressed mental illness? Similar to

Bush's rhetoric after Virginia Tech, mental health was largely depicted as an individual

responsibility, rather than a public one. "Mental illness" was again used as a strategic

appeal to displace blame from guns. After the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary

School, Wayne LaPierre—leader of the National Rifle Association—argued for the value

of guns by claiming that "our society is populated by an unknown number of genuine

monsters—people so deranged, so evil, so possessed by voices and driven by demons that

no sane person can possibly *ever* comprehend them."[79] Again and again, mental illness

was taken as a stand-in for "evil." The shooter was described as a "loner" and

"deranged." Images of the shooters staring wide-eyed—and in the case of Loughner,

grinning—only furthered perceptions of mentally ill people as radically other and evil.

Although less common, there are also some more complex depictions of mental

illness that warn of demonizing mentally ill people and argue that mental health is public

responsibility, similar to what Lucinda Roy had argued. After the 2012 shooting at Sandy

Hook Elementary School, Liza Long published a widely circulated essay titled "I am

Adam Lanza's Mother: It's Time to Talk about Mental Illness." Although Long was not

actually Adam Lanza's mother, she used personal experience with her own child to

explain the unique challenges of raising a child with mental illness and to issue a broader

call for the United States to provide more support to help individuals and families

struggling with mental illness. She wrote, "I am sharing this story because I am Adam

Lanza's mother. I am Dylan Klebold's and Eric Harris's mother. I am James Holmes's

mother. I am Jared Loughner's mother. I am Seung-Hui Cho's mother. And these boys—

and their mothers—need help. In the wake of another horrific national tragedy, it's easy

to talk about guns. But it's time to talk about mental illness."[80] Long's repetition of "I

am" did not scapegoat the mentally ill or their parents, but rather helped her and her

audience identify with them, thus turning blame away from individuals to society.

While President Obama's rhetoric focused on reforming gun laws—as I explore

in chapter four—he also invited mental health professionals to contribute to the national

deliberation after the Sandy Hook shooting. Obama also called for talking about mental

illness in more thoughtful and nuanced ways, as he reminded his audience that "someone

with a mental illness is far more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the

perpetrator."[81] Obama thus identified a challenge that will long endure: to be willing to

recognize and deliberate broader problems with mental health care that are sometimes

amplified in the aftermath of a tragedy, while simultaneously not letting "mental illness"

become a generic term for all abnormal behavior, not letting mental illness and violence

become linked, and not letting mental illness become a stand-in for evil.

Conclusions

As I noted at the start of this chapter, rhetorical scholars have detailed how public

discourse in the aftermath of violence shifted blame away from society to the individuals.

They have also indicated that this shift of responsibility often shuts down deliberation

about potential causes and solutions to violence. This chapter has considered how Bush's

rhetoric after Virginia Tech fits within this framework. Yet my analysis also builds on previous work of rhetorical scholars by showing that Bush ostracized the mentally ill, equated mental illness with evil, and suggested that mental illness was not understandable. This analysis adds additional support to Katie Rose Guest Pyral's insight that "publicly scapegoating the mentally ill assuages popular guilt over the lack of care our society provides to the mentally ill and the lack of money to provide it—care and money that could help prevent tragedies."[82] Even though Bush's rhetoric shut down deliberation, I considered why some audiences might have found Bush's rhetoric to be accurate and satisfying.

This chapter also examined what Hoerl, Cloud, and Jarvis call a "counter-frame." I claimed that Lucinda Roy's rhetoric after the Virginia Tech shooting offered such a counter-frame by reversing the scapegoating process and turning blame back to society. Roy disrupted Bush's link between mental illness and evil by depicting the shooter as among us—rather than radically other—and by highlighting the systemic failures that constrained the shooter from getting the help he needed. Roy's rhetoric depicted mental health as a public responsibility, not just an individual one. I have also traced how Roy's concerns have reappeared in subsequent responses to mass shootings.

Finally, examining the rhetorics of Bush and Roy after Virginia Tech and briefly examining subsequent deliberations about mental illness has highlighted not only how blaming mental illness functions but also its rhetorical work. This chapter builds on Jordynn Jack's claim that autism is a "rhetorical disorder," one that is "understood and even experienced through rhetorical frameworks that shape realities of different individuals"[83] and the same might be said of mental illness. Responses to mass shootings,

then, are doing more than framing what happened or how society should or should not respond. These deliberations attempted to shape public understandings of mental illness and mentally ill people. These deliberations thus had—and continue to have—significant rhetorical and material implications.

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Chapter 4: Blaming Guns after Sandy Hook

For many families in Newtown, Connecticut, December 14, 2012, started as a day of excitement and promise. "For parents, the chaotic hustle and bustle of getting their children out the door for school on the morning of December 14 was amplified for two reasons: it was a Friday and Christmas vacation was fast approaching."[1] Charlotte, a six-year-old, argued with her mother about whether she could wear a new dress to school, rather than save it for the holidays. Jesse, another six-year-old, had spent the prior evening purchasing gifts "for friends, family members, and his beloved first-grader teacher."[2] He was spending his Friday morning eating breakfast at a local deli with his father before the school day started. Josephine was anticipating her birthday party the next day, and her family was "busy planning an indoor pool party with all of her classmates."[3] None of the children knew Adam Lanza, nor had any reason to suspect that a 20-year-old would come to their school that day.

School started at Sandy Hook Elementary School at 9:05 a.m. Lanza arrived at the school at 9:35 a.m. Visitors were required to gain permission before entering the school, but Lanza shot his way through the locked front entrance. Startled by the commotion, principal Dawn Hochsprung and school psychologist Mary Sherlach went into the hallway to see what was happening. Lanza shot and killed them. Teachers hearing the gunshots tried to lock doors and protect the six- and seven-year-olds, yet Lanza forcibly entered two first-grade classrooms. He shot and killed six adults and twenty children. He then committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a 10mm pistol.[4] The killing spree lasted less than five minutes, during which time he had used a Bushmaster .223

semi-automatic rifle to fire 154 bullets.[5] The lone survivor in one of the first-grade

classrooms—a six-year-old—"ran out of the school building covered in blood from head-

to-toe and the first words she said to her mom when she got outside was, 'Mommy, I'm

OK but all my friends are dead.'"[6]

Public discourse after Sandy Hook searched for explanations of what enabled

Lanza to do something so ghastly and solutions to make sure it never happened again.

There was some blame of mental illness, as I explored in chapter three. In 2005, Lanza

was described as having "significant social impairments and extreme anxiety," "lack[ing]

empathy," and having "very rigid thought processes."[7] He had a sensory perception

disorder and exhibited "extreme anxiety and discomfort with changes, noise, and physical

contact with others."[8] He had been prescribed medication and visited with a therapist, yet

he was not getting the help that he needed. His mother—the person closest to him, yet

also the first of his victims, as he murdered her while she slept—had started losing hope

that he would ever get the help he needed.[9] Others suggested that Lanza's actions

demonstrated what Loren Coleman has labeled the "copycat effect."[10] Investigators found

files on Lanza's computer that contained "a list of mass murders broken down into

categories by number of victims killed."[11] Matthew Lysiak argued that "The seven-by-

four-foot-long chart discovered in Adam's room that listed the names, numbers of kills,

and weapons used by the most brutal mass killers throughout history was likely a

scorecard that he was hoping to top with his name."[12] According to this interpretation,

Lanza targeted an elementary school because young children were the most vulnerable

and defenseless of victims.

Public discourse in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting posited many

explanations for what made the massacre possible, including blame of mental illness,[13]

blame of the shooter's family life,[14] and blame of America's "moral decay."[15] But public

deliberation at the national level focused on guns. Sandy Hook was yet another mass

shooting carried out with a semi-automatic rifle; and while Americans might have

become numb to mass shootings in general, the murder of children before the holidays

made it difficult to remain numb. On January 16, 2013, President Obama announced his

proposed plan to expand background checks, to ban semi-automatic rifles, and to ban

magazines that held over ten rounds of ammunition. The proposals were ultimately voted

down in the Senate on April 17, 2013. Yet between the Sandy Hook shooting and April

2013, there was a national debate about Obama's proposals, and, more generally, the role

of guns in the United States.

Why weren't gun control advocates and gun rights advocates able to reach a

compromise? Obama claimed that gun control advocates were in the majority, but that

gun rights advocates were "better organized. They're better financed. They've been at it

longer. And they make sure to stay focused on this one issue during election time."[16] *New

York Times* columnist Robert Draper suggested that the National Rifle Association

ultimately thwarted the political process by rejecting compromise and by using its money

and influence to intimidate senators.[17] Yet, as accurate as that account is, it invites the

question of just how the NRA was able to appeal to some audiences and to gain such

influence. The failure to reach compromise, as I explore in this chapter, depended on a

rhetorical struggle between gun control advocates and gun rights advocates—a rhetorical

struggle that dates back at least to the 1960s, and to some extent, to America's founding. Moreover, it is a rhetorical struggle that is not yet very well understood.

This chapter examines public deliberation about guns. Given that the contemporary gun debate appears stalemated, it is particularly important to reflect on the longer history of gun debates and then to closely analyze a recent exchange to offer a more nuanced picture of the gun debate.[18] Analyzing the speeches of President Obama and NRA leader Wayne LaPierre after Sandy Hook is one such recent exchange that can provide insight about the enduring debates among gun control advocates and gun rights advocates. To what extent were guns to blame for what happened at Sandy Hook? How did advocates make their case that a mass shooting warrants—or does not warrant— changes in national gun policy? In addition to tracing the arguments made by Obama and LaPierre, I examine the rhetorical dynamics of these arguments. How does blame of guns—and deflection of blame of guns—function rhetorically? Absent major changes in national policy, what kind of rhetorical work does this blame do and for whom? Such an analysis contributes to what J. Michael Hogan and I have identified as a need within rhetorical studies for a "rhetorical history" of gun debates that offers a "coherent narrative of how we arrived at today's deliberative impasse" and suggests how deliberation might productively move forward.[19]

A Brief Rhetorical History of Gun Deliberations before Sandy Hook

To better account for the gun debate after Sandy Hook, it is worth reflecting on the longer history of debates about guns. I do so here by focusing on the relations among

rhetoric, politics, guns, and tragedy. Several rhetorical scholars have examined how guns

have been blamed or not blamed after gun violence, including shootings of individuals[20]

and mass shootings.[21] Scholars have also examined representations of guns in spaces like

museums[22] and representations of gun owners in news media[23] and in online comment

threads.[24] Yet rhetorical scholars have not closely examined debates between gun control

advocates and gun rights advocates, nor traced these deliberations throughout U.S.

history. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a comprehensive rhetorical

history of the gun debates, I want to sketch a brief rhetorical history by making three

claims. First, deliberations about guns are regularly intertwined with violent events that

capture national attention. Second, deliberations about guns do various kinds of rhetorical

work, sometimes explicitly and sometimes subtly. Finally, factors such as laws,

worldviews, and previous debates enable and constrain gun debates and thus establish its

rhetorical parameters—the constraints on what is said and unspoken, sayable and not.

Violence and Gun Deliberations

Deliberations about guns are regularly set in motion by violent events that capture

national attention. One of the landmark pieces of legislation was The Gun Control Act of

1968. The act regulated the interstate sale of guns—effectively banning the transfer of

rifles through the mail—and restricted certain types of criminals and mentally ill

individuals from owning firearms. The legislation saw its roots in the 1963 assassination

of President John F. Kennedy, who had been slain with a rifle ordered through the mail.

Support for gun regulations was further aided by the 1966 mass shooting at the

University of Texas at Austin, along with the 1965 assassination of Malcom X and the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. The desire for gun control, of course, did not "just happen." Facing resistance, President Lyndon Johnson advocated heavily for the reforms and his case counted on, and perhaps contributed to, public fear of gun violence.[25]

The next two significant pieces of gun legislation were passed in 1994. Public support for them was also intertwined with a fear of gun violence. The first piece of legislation was the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, a 10-year ban that restricted the manufacture and sale of semi- and fully-automatic weapons, a ban that lapsed in 2004. Public support for the bill came in response to mass shootings, such as the 1989 shooting in Stockton, California, in which a man shot 34 children and a teacher with an AK-47 automatic rifle. The second piece of legislation was the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, more commonly referred to as the Brady Bill. The bill required a federal background check before individuals could purchase a weapon from a licensed dealer. It was named after White House Press Secretary James Brady, who had been shot and paralyzed in 1981 when a shooter attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan. Over a decade passed between the act of violence and passage of legislation, yet Brady's story, as it was circulated, demonstrated the power of violent events to shape public opinion and legislation.

Although there has not been major federal gun legislation since the mid-1990s, mass shootings have continued to have a profound impact on the gun debate. The mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 sparked a debate about background checks and what became known as the "gun show loophole." Although the Brady Bill required

federally licensed dealers to conduct a background check before selling a gun, there was an exception for private sellers who sold guns at places like gun shows. It is unclear whether closing the gun show loophole would have stopped the Columbine killers: they were underage at the time and had a friend purchase their guns for them (what is called a "straw purchase") and she may or may not have agreed to purchase the guns if a background check was involved. Yet for gun control advocates the case of the Columbine shooting seemed to indicate a larger problem in gun policy. An amendment was proposed after Columbine to close this alleged loophole. Vice-President Al Gore broke a tie vote in the Senate, yet the amendment was later voted down in the House of Representatives. Although the legislation failed, the NRA nonetheless sought revenge against Gore and other gun control supporters by spending $20 million in the 2000 election.[26] As of 2013, estimates suggested that "40 percent of all gun purchases occur through private sales at gun shows, at flea markets, through classified advertisements, or among friends with no background check."[27] In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, gun control advocates again attempted to reform background checks at the national level and they were again unsuccessful.[28]

Public discourse after the 2007 Virginia Tech mass shooting began with guns but soon focused on mental illness, as I described in chapter three. Yet this case illustrates how a mass shooting led to some modest reform to gun access. In the aftermath of the tragedy, legislation was passed in Virginia and at the federal level to increase sharing of information to ensure that "data on mentally unsound individuals" would appear in the "National Instant Criminal Background Check System."[29] The Virginia Tech shooter had undergone and passed a background check before acquiring his guns. Yet he should have

failed that background check. He had recently been involuntarily committed, but that information was not available in the system. The legislation was considered a modest adjustment to existing law. Because the legislation was limited in scope and focused only on individuals with a history of mental illness, there was no sustained or entrenched national debate about gun policy.

I have suggested that violent events regularly spark debate about guns, but it is worth emphasizing that this relationship is not a natural process that just happens. Some violent events gain national attention, while others that are just as horrific are neither noticed nor remembered. Among those violent events that do gain national attention, some events were framed as a "gun problem" while other events were not. These processes are by no means simple; they depend on a confluence of factors, including media coverage, social capital of the shooters and victims, timing, speakers' arguments, and audiences' receptivity. Finally, throughout this brief history there is disagreement not only about whether guns should be blamed, but also about timing and whether moments of tragedy are the best moments for discussing gun policy. Gun control advocates claim that assassinations or mass shootings highlight more general problems of gun violence that should already be the topic of sustained national deliberation, whereas gun rights advocates suggest that gun policy should not be linked only to tragedy or determined only in moments of tragedy.

The Rhetorical Work of Gun Deliberations

In one sense, debates about guns have stalled. There has not been major federal gun legislation since 1994, so it is hard to see how deliberation has influenced policy. Moreover, the very arguments of the gun debate seem to have stalled. Commenting on the 2011 Tucson shooting, David A. Frank described "The gun control debate and its predictable argumentative scripts, rehearsed by partisans on both sides of the issue."[30] Frank's insight about the "predictable argumentative scripts" suggested that the same arguments are repeated again and again, without any sort of consequence or development. Yet I would suggest that the gun debates are doing other forms of rhetorical work. Besides legislation, these debates have contributed to the formation and transformation of advocacy groups, and they have had a more subtle impact by shaping how gun control advocates and gun rights advocates interpret gun violence and engage with their perceived political opponents.

Anxieties about gun violence have regularly been met with counter-anxieties about a government overstepping its bounds and infringing on the rights of gun owners. Gun control advocates used violent events of the 1960s to argue for the Gun Control Act of 1968. But while the Gun Control Act of 1968 was perceived as a success for gun control advocates, some gun rights advocates perceived it as a failure—a restriction not only on guns but also on liberty. It was taken as a sign that more restrictions would come unless gun rights advocates resisted. The National Rifle Association—today the most prominent gun rights advocacy group—began after the Civil War as an organization devoted to marksmanship training. Through the 1950s, the NRA's mission represented a

commitment to "Firearms Safety Education," "Marksmanship Training," and "Shooting for Recreation."[31] Yet the NRA's membership and mission changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s in response to legislation like the Gun Control Act of 1968, as I mentioned in chapter two. Some leaders believed that the NRA was not doing enough to protect the rights of gun owners. "Guns, in the new NRA's view, were about self-defense, not just hunting," Adam Winkler wrote. "Armed with a new philosophy, the organization's membership tripled, it's fund-raising multiplied, and its influence soared."[32]

Since its shift in mission, the NRA has used its increased influence to shape the political landscape and the terms of the gun debate. After the 1994 passage of the Brady Bill and Federal Assault Weapons Ban, the NRA sought to retaliate against the elected officials who supported the bills. Old and new NRA members infused the organization with money. President Bill Clinton pointed to the NRA's influence after the 1994 mid-term election, when he told a local newspaper that, "The NRA is the reason the Republicans control the House."[33] By targeting gun control legislation—and by warning of more gun legislation to come—the NRA was able to tap into and amplify fears. Guns and the Second Amendment became symbolic of a much larger struggle over America's future—a fight against government trying to extend its control and to stifle individual rights and freedom. In 1995, for instance, NRA leader Wayne LaPierre solicited money from members by comparing federal agents to storm troopers from Nazi Germany and referring to them as "jack-booted government thugs" out to "attack law abiding citizens."[34] While such appeals alienated some gun members—including President George H.W. Bush who wrote a public letter retracting his lifetime NRA membership—

such appeals also fostered resentment among gun rights advocates and gun control advocates.[35]

Gun control advocates have also used the gun debate to raise awareness of its concerns and to establish coalitions. After becoming a victim of gun violence, Mark Borinsky formed the National Council to Control Handguns (NCCH) in 1974.[36] More recently, there have been rallies in support of gun control. On Mother's day in 2000, "an estimated 750,000 people converged on the National Mall in Washington to participate in the Million Mom March and rally." Reacting in part to the Columbine High School shooting a year earlier and a recent shooting at a Los Angeles day care center, "the purpose of the event was to promote 'common sense gun control legislation.'"[37] Although no legislation was passed, the group gained cohesion and name recognition. Today it is part of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, named in honor of James Brady and his wife Sarah Brady. Although it lacks the members and donations of the NRA, today the Brady Campaign is the most visible of gun control groups.

Debates about guns, then, are always doing rhetorical work. Sometimes legislation is passed, and sometimes advocacy groups are formed or transformed. At other times, the rhetorical work of these debates is subtler. As I will explore later in this chapter, moments of deliberation shape how gun control advocates and gun rights advocates define and interpret mass shootings and gun violence, as well as how they view their perceived political opponents. Moreover, there are material consequences of these debates. After the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, for instance, fear of coming gun legislation boosted NRA memberships and gun sales.[38]

Rhetorical Parameters of Gun Debates

National gun debates are enabled and constrained by a variety of factors that establish the debates' rhetorical parameters. At times, these factors are explicitly invoked and at other times these factors are implied, but in either case they establish what is and is not said, sayble and not. I want to focus on three factors: laws, worldviews, and previous debates.

Although the Second Amendment has been a touchstone of the gun debate since at least the 1960s, it has only recently become a significant concern of legal scholars and the Supreme Court.[39] The amendment's syntax is ambiguous, making it unclear whether the right to own guns is conferred to militias for national defense or individuals for self-defense: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."[40] The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1939 *United States v. Miller* that the Second Amendment should be read not as an individual right but a collective right "to insure the viability of state militias."[41] For organizations like the National Rifle Association, that first part of the Second Amendment was a distraction. For much of the 20th century, though, the Supreme Court avoided hearing any further cases about the Second Amendment. It was not until 2008 that the Supreme Court heard a major Second Amendment case, the *District of Columbia v. Heller*. The plaintiff argued that Washington D.C.'s handgun ban infringed on the right to self-defense. The court found the gun ban unconstitutional, and since then handgun bans in other cities like Chicago have been dismantled. The 2008 decision

reversed the 1939 *Miller* decision by arguing that the Second Amendment guarantees an

individual right to bear arms.[42]

The *Heller* case thus established rhetorical parameters for subsequent gun

debates. Prior to 2008, it was unclear whether the Second Amendment conferred an

individual right to own guns. Yet the Court's 2008 decision established that the Second

Amendment protects such an individual right. The question up for debate is about what

sort of restrictions, if any, should be placed on this right. The Court claimed, "Like most

rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited" and the right "was

not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for

whatever purpose."[43] The Court continued, "nothing in our opinion should be taken to

cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and

mentally ill people, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as

schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the

commercial sale of arms."[44] What types of "arms" should be available, to whom, and

under what conditions were left as open questions to determined by public deliberation

and gun policy.

Second, deliberation about guns is also enabled and constrained by worldviews.

Pollsters and commentators have highlighted that one's position on guns largely reflects

one's political affiliation: "About seven-in-ten (69%) Republicans say protecting gun

rights is more important, while about the same proportion of Democrats (72%) say gun

control is more important."[45] Yet one's position is also about more than one's political

views. After touring the United States and speaking with gun supporters, Dan Baum

claimed that for gun rights advocates, guns "stood in for a worldview that, broadly

defined, valued the individual over the collective, vigorous outdoorsiness over pallid intellectualism, certainty over questioning, patriotism over internationalism, manliness over femininity, action over inaction."[46] In other words, the gun debate is about far more than guns. Radio host Glenn Beck wrote that the key issue was control: "that's what this is really all about: control. Not of guns, but of *us*. Controlling what we eat and drive, how we heat our homes, and how we educate our kids."[47] In her analysis of internet comments by Second Amendment advocates, Laura J. Collins concluded that, ""the unbridled Second Amendment is more about identity than it is about political action or change."[48] Interpretations of a violent event or judgment of a particular policy, then, are not confined to facts or sound reasons. Interpretations and judgments depend on beliefs, habits, and views of oneself and the world; these are often deeply ingrained, hard to change, and more powerful than explicit arguments.[49]

Finally, deliberations about guns are enabled and constrained not only by worldviews but also by previous debates. Labels like "gun grabbers" and "gun nuts" reveal a history of demonization and mistrust between gun rights advocates and gun control advocates, a history that bears on any present deliberation. Moreover, slogans like "guns don't kill people, people do" date back decades and enable and constrain gun rights advocates and their perceived opponents. Previous debates have established the topoi—what Edward P.J. Corbett and Rosa A. Eberly referred to as the "bioregions of discourse" and "places where discourse can be planted and where reasoning may grow"[50]—that act as the argumentative resources of imitation and invention and thus set the parameters of deliberation. Although it is possible for rhetors to invent new paths of

argument—to extend beyond the well-trodden paths and taken-for-granted slogans—

rhetors and audiences are constrained by earlier arguments.

Context of the 2012-2013 Debates

By the time of the Sandy Hook shooting on December 14, 2012, gun debates had

been ongoing for decades. Just as there was a tradition of adjusting gun policy in the

wake of tragedy, so there was also a counteracting tradition in which advocates argued

that such adjustments were unjustified. The debate from December 2012 until April 2013

was ostensibly about background checks, about magazine capacity, and about whether to

renew the assault weapons ban, which had expired in 2004. Yet the debate also rested on

enduring questions about the relationships between guns and violence, between guns and

public safety, and between guns and the meaning of America.

This chapter now moves from a general rhetorical history of the gun debate to a

particular expression—the debate after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

Rhetorical analysis can offer a more nuanced account of ongoing gun deliberations. It can

offer insight into these deliberations by demonstrating how some of the most influential

contributors made their case that the shooting warranted gun control, or did not. Such an

analysis can also clarify why gun control advocates and gun rights advocates did not

reach compromise and are unlikely to do so. I first examine the rhetoric of the Obama

administration and then turn to the rhetoric of the National Rifle Association to analyze

part of the contemporary debate between gun control advocates and gun rights advocates.

Gun Control Advocates after Sandy Hook

President Barack Obama's response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School

shooting was not the first time he had spoken publicly as president after a mass shooting.

This was the fourth time since he had been elected in 2008. Obama spoke in November

2009 after a shooting at the Fort Hood military base near Killeen, Texas; he spoke in

January 2001 after a shooting at political gathering in Tucson, Arizona; and he spoke in

July 2012 after a shooting in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. Yet Sandy Hook was

the first time he had spoken at length about gun control. Although it is difficult to know

precisely why Sandy Hook was different, the political moment offers some insight.

Conventional wisdom among politicians is that, whatever one's personal feelings,

engaging the gun debate does more harm than good. For Obama, pushing for gun control

in July or August of 2012 would have been dangerous for his presidential campaign. Yet

by December of 2012, the campaign was over and he had the security of not having to

worry about another reelection. In addition to the political moment, the Sandy Hook

shooting seemed qualitatively different than previous mass shootings. While children had

been injured or killed in the previous mass shootings, the majority of those killed at

Sandy Hook Elementary School were first-graders. Finally, public opinion suggested that

gun control might be politically feasible. Public opinion shifted slightly after the

shooting, and for the first time since Obama was elected, more Americans prioritized

"gun control than the right to own guns" (by a margin of 49% to 42%).[51] Obama could

have taken many different approaches to argue for gun control, yet his approach was

based on political pragmatism. In relation to others, his proposals were moderate—one

that more radical gun control advocates could view as progress, but one that also
attempted to appease gun rights advocates.

In Obama's speech from the White House on the day of the shooting and in his
speech at a memorial service in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 16, 2012, he did
not make an explicit call for gun control, although it was implied by his questions: "Are
we really prepared to say that we're powerless in the face of such carnage, that the
politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children
year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?"[52] Yet guns soon became
explicit. On January 16, 2013, Obama appeared alongside Vice President Biden and
families from Newtown to announce his plan, titled "Now is the Time: The President's
Plan to Protect Our Children and Our Communities by Reducing Gun Violence." The
third and fourth items on his list were "making schools safer" and "increasingly access to
mental health services." Items one and two—the emphasis of his list—were about gun
control. The first item in his four-point list would extend the background checks that
were required by the 1994 Brady Bill; the extension would require a background check
not just for weapons purchased from federally licensed dealers but all gun sales,
including sales at gun shows and between friends. The second item entailed reinstating
and expanding the 1994 ban on assault weapons that expired in 2004 by "banning
military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines."[53]

In addition to the speeches already mentioned, the following analysis also looks at
his rhetoric near the time of the senate vote. On April 3, 2013, Obama made a final push
for legislation by speaking in Denver, Colorado, before the Denver Police Academy. In
addition to being the site of the 1999 Columbine shooting and the 2012 Aurora movie

theater shooting, Colorado had recently passed state legislation restricting magazine capacity to fifteen rounds and requiring background checks for private sales. On April 8, 2013, Obama spoke in Hartford, Connecticut. In addition to being the site of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, the state of Connecticut had recently passed legislation just like Obama's proposals.[54] Finally, Obama spoke from the White House on April 17, 2013, after the senate voted down all of his gun control measures.

Obama faced different rhetorical situations in his speeches from December 2012 to April 2013, but it would be a mistake to treat these speeches as entirely disconnected since they demonstrate recurring and interlocking topoi. And while Obama should not be taken as a stand-in for all gun control advocates, he was one of the most important voices in the debate after Sandy Hook. Understanding how he made his case for reforming gun laws can help us understand the gun debate more generally. The following analysis traces five key moves in Obama's rhetoric after Sandy Hook. Obama (1) linked what happened at Sandy Hook to gun violence in general; (2) framed gun control as a parental responsibility; (3) argued that gun rights and gun control could peacefully co-exist; (4) dismissed his opponents as being "political" while assuming that his position was non-political and non-controversial; and (5) asserted that his plan was "common sense."

Linked What Happened at Sandy Hook to Gun Violence in General

Obama extended beyond the case of Sandy Hook to suggest that change was necessary because the United States was facing a crisis. He did this by moving back in time to identify Sandy Hook not as an anomaly but as the most recent shooting in a series

of mass shootings. Speaking on the day of the shooting—December 14, 2012— Obama claimed "we've endured too many of these tragedies in the past few years." One mass shooting could rightly be called "too many," so the phrase did not reference a precise number in which X number of mass shootings is tolerable, but X+1 was not. Instead, Obama was exercising judgment by declaring this shooting as the one that was one too many. The phrase "too many" allowed Obama to locate Sandy Hook within a tradition of mass shootings and to simultaneously declare Sandy Hook a turning point. Obama continued: "we have been through this too many times. Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago."[55] The movement of his sentence goes back in time to suggest that what happened in Newtown was part of a larger pattern of mass shootings. The repeated conjunctions—or, or, or, or—suggested that this problem was one that had not gone away and was unlikely to go away without human intervention.

The last portion of this sentence—"a street corner in Chicago"— linked Sandy Hook and previous mass shootings to gun violence more generally. No one disputed the tragedy of twenty-six deaths in Connecticut, but Chicago witnessed more homicides every month.[56] In 2012 alone, there were 506 murders in Chicago—435 with a gun. This led some to call the city "the murder capital of America."[57] Moreover, the phrase "a street corner in Chicago" implied a racial dimension to gun violence and policy. According to *New York Times'* analysis of homicides and census data, "Residents living near homicides in the last 12 years were much more likely to be black, earn less money and lack a college degree."[58] Subtlety, then, Obama reminded his audience that while

mass shootings tend to unsettle white communities, gun violence in black communities should not be ignored or forgotten.

While Obama's shift from talking about mass shootings to gun violence more generally was subtle, the stakes were not. In his telling, the crisis pertained not only to Sandy Hook but to the recent history of mass shootings; moreover, the crisis was not just about mass shootings but about gun violence that often fails to capture national attention, violence that happens on a daily basis throughout the United States. He suggested that the problem of mass shootings and the problem of guns deaths in general were one in the same—even though it is not clear that they are the same kinds of problems. Given Obama's framing, guns not only contributed to twenty-six deaths at an elementary school in Connecticut, but guns also contributed to the more than 30,000 lives lost each year.[59]

In subsequent speeches, Obama continued to argue for gun control by linking what happened at Sandy Hook to gun violence more generally. On December 16th, Obama asked, "Are we really prepared to say that we're powerless in the face of such carnage, that the politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?" His repeated prepositions—"year after year after year"—further signaled that the problem ran deep. "Since I've been President, this is the fourth time we have come together to comfort a grieving community torn apart by a mass shooting. The fourth time we've hugged survivors. The fourth time we've consoled the families of victims." Yet the problem went back before his presidency, to communities "from Columbine to Blacksburg." Meanwhile, there had been an "endless series of deadly shootings across the country, almost daily reports of victims." Indeed, his very travel back in time and his

repetition of words and phrases helped establish the problem of gun violence as one that was pervasive and persisting. It signaled, in short, that past solutions had not worked, and that time for change had come.

Obama's tacking among gun violence in general and mass shootings in particular allowed him to combine logical appeals to national statistics with emotional appeals to relatively rare events. This movement—and potential tension—between gun violence in general and mass shootings in particular can be seen most clearly in the Obama Administration's proposal for improved background checks coupled with a ban on semi-automatic rifles and magazines holding more than 10 bullets. The proposed background checks would not have stopped Adam Lanza since he got his guns from his mother. Yet the background checks offered promise for decreasing gun violence more generally. The background checks were also within the realm of the politically possible, as opinion polls from early January showed that a majority of Americans supported background checks: 85% of Americans supported background checks for private and gun show sales, and 67% supported a federal database to track gun sales.[60] On the other hand, the proposed ban on semi-automatic weapons may have reduced the number of people that Lanza killed, yet such weapons contributed very little to the larger problem of gun violence. In 2011, for instance, 323 were murdered with a rifle (including those semi-automatic and not), whereas 6,220 were murdered with a handgun.[61] Obama thus relied on an associative logic that allowed him to blur distinctions and interpretive frames: He referenced the horror of Sandy Hook to make a case for banning assault weapons while ignoring national statistics; yet, he referenced national statistics to make the case for background checks, while ignoring the specific circumstances of Sandy Hook. For gun

control advocates, Obama was likely seen as using an opportune moment to draw attention to broader problems with gun violence in the United States; for gun rights advocates, Obama was likely seen as misrepresenting or even exploiting a tragedy to advance his own political agenda.

Framed Gun Control as a Parental Responsibility

Speaking on December 14, 2012, Obama claimed that, "each time I learn the news I react not as a President, but as anybody else would—as a parent."[62] Claiming to react as a parent is not unusual for presidents speaking in aftermath of mass shootings. After the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, for instance, President Bill Clinton explained that the tragedy prompted him and all Americans to learn "a lot about ourselves and our responsibilities as parents and citizens."[63] After the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, President George W. Bush, spoke "as a dad" about a parent's love for their children.[64] By speaking as a parent, presidents are able to humanize themselves, to acknowledge the emotions of those directly affected, and to help those not directly affected move beyond the headline to empathize. Yet in the aftermath of Sandy Hook, the parent topos was not only about emotional connection; it became essential to Obama's case for arguing for gun control. Near the end of his December 14, 2012, speech, Obama said,

> This evening, Michelle and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter and we'll tell them that we love them, and we'll remind each other how deeply we love one another. But there are families in Connecticut who cannot do that tonight.

> And they need all of us right now. In the hard days to come, that
>
> community needs us to be at our best as Americans. And I will do
>
> everything in my power as President to help.

He suggested that it was normal for his audience to feel gratitude that their own children

were not harmed. However, the "but" signaled that feeling gratitude or empathy was not

enough. While the occasion of death and tragedy warranted epideictic rhetoric, the

accumulation of shootings suggested to Obama that epideictic rhetoric was not enough.

What was needed was deliberative rhetoric—rhetoric that could lead to policy, to action,

to change.

Throughout his speeches from December 2012 to April 2013, Obama attempted to

channel parental feelings into political action that would change gun policy. At a

memorial service on December 16, 2012, Obama described the challenge of parenting.

"This is our first task—caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right,

we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged. And by that

measure, can we truly say, as a nation, that we are meeting our obligations?"[65] He

concluded, "I've been reflecting on this the last few days, and if we're honest with

ourselves, the answer is no. We're not doing enough. And we will have to change."

Although Obama's call to change is clear, it is worth dwelling on the fact that he

argued for change through the topos of "parent" and parental responsibility. What did this

framing allow? First, it helped him to transcend political divisions and to find common

ground in the identity marker of "parent." Opponents of Obama may very well reject this

framing or suggest that parents have different obligations to children, but Obama

nonetheless tried to establish common ground among gun control advocates and gun

rights advocates. For those who accepted his framing, it also allowed him to make a political case while seeming non-political and non-controversial. The debate was not to be between those who support gun control and those who oppose it but between those who recognize and accept their parental and civic obligation to care for children, and those who do not. Second, this framing represented an attempt to transform an abstract debate about laws, trends, and statistics into a more accessible debate about families and responsibilities. In addition to simplifying the debate, the framing also allowed him to amplify its emotional resonance. He claimed that political action was necessary to honor and protect American youth. For the children who died, Americans have an obligation to "make our country worthy of their memory."[66]

On January 16, 2013, Obama was joined by parents who had lost children at Sandy Hook, and in subsequent occasions he had parents speak. Rather than begin his speech by appealing to policy experts or law enforcement he instead cited three letters that he received from kids throughout the United States. The children's letters expressed empathy, fear, and a commitment to change. After quoting these letters, Obama claimed, "These are our kids. This is what they're thinking about. And so we should be thinking about our responsibility to care for them, and shield them from harm, and given them the tools they need to grow up and do everything they're capable of doing."[67] By means of the parent topos, then, Obama attempted to transcend political divisions, to appeal to pathos, and to simplify and personalize the debate about guns. The parent topos allowed Obama to make the case that Americans are interdependent, and that, regardless of their political views, they have an obligation to honor the memory of the dead and a responsibility to protect the children still living.

Argued that Gun Rights and Gun Control Could Peacefully Co-exist

Establishing that there was a crisis of gun violence was not enough; Obama also needed to demonstrate that his plan would adequately respond to the crisis and that the benefits of his plan would outweigh any potential harms. One of his chief obstacles was to establish that it was consistent both to argue for gun control and to be committed to gun rights. He attempted this through a number of strategies. The first and most obvious were his direct statements in which he expressed his support for protecting the Second Amendment:

> Like most Americans, I believe the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms. I respect our strong tradition of gun ownership and the rights of hunters and sportsmen. There are millions of responsible, law-abiding gun owners in America who cherish their right to bear arms for hunting, or sport, or protection, or collection.[68]

Obama suggested that he was a defender of the Second Amendment, and that he knew, understood, and respected how important guns for some people.

Yet he would go on to claim that "we can respect the Second Amendment while keeping an irresponsible, law-breaking few from inflicting harm on a massive scale." The second strategy, then, was a process of dissociation, a process that argumentation scholars Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca describe as "separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole."[69] He suggested that further legislation would not infringe on all gun owners. Instead, proposed legislation would only affect those gun owners who were "irresponsible" and "law-breaking." While keeping guns

"out of the hands of dangerous people" and "out of the wrong hands" seems like a good

policy on its face, it was not clear who fits in the category of "dangerous people" and

"wrong hands," and who would get to decide. He referenced some of the least

sympathetic criminals—those who have committed "violent domestic abuse"—to

illustrate his point and emphasize the urgency of action, yet the restrictions would surely

extend beyond such criminals. Nonetheless, by distinguishing bad from good gun owners,

Obama attempted to assure his audience that the plan would punish only bad gun owners,

and that "law-abiding" gun owners would not be harmed and so it is therefore safe for

them to support his proposed legislation.

Obama also attempted to transcend typical identity divisions to claim that it was

consistent to support gun control while also supporting the Second Amendment.

Speaking on April 8, 2013, Obama claimed that the American people are not as polarized

as they might seem on cable news or talk radio. He acknowledged that, "There are good

people on both sides of every issue." Yet he went on to suggest that the "both sides" logic

is not representative. There are gun owners who are "also parents or police officers or

veteran, and they agree that we can't stand by and keep letting these tragedies

continue."[70] He stated that ninety percent of Americans support background checks, as do

"80 percent of Republicans, more than 80 percent of gun owners, more than 70 percent of

NRA households."[71] On January 16, 2013, Obama quoted from conservative idol Ronald

Reagan, "one of the staunchest defenders of the Second Amendment," who wrote to

congress in 1994 and urged them to pass the assault weapons ban.[72]

Finally, he claimed that the right to bear arms was important and should be

protected, yet he urged his gun rights advocates to acknowledge that the right to bear

arms should not be allowed to infringe on other rights. On January 16, 2013, Obama affirmed the importance of "rights" while extending the parameters of that concept:

> As Americans, we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights that no man or government can take away from us. But we've also long recognized, as our Founders recognized, that with rights come responsibilities. Along with our freedom to live our lives as we will comes an obligation to allow others to do the same.[73]

Obama's allusion to the Declaration of Independence and his direct reference to the Founding Fathers attempted to speak the language of his opponents who regularly appealed to the Bill of Rights to make their case. Rather than make a case for gun restrictions by arguing against the Second Amendment, he instead juxtaposed the Second Amendment next to the First Amendment:

> The right to worship freely and safely, that right was denied to Sikhs in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The right to assemble peaceably, that right was denied shoppers in Clackamas, Oregon, and moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado. That most fundamental set of rights to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness—fundamental rights that were denied to college students at Virginia Tech, and high school students at Columbine, and elementary school students in Newtown, and kids on street corners in Chicago on too frequent a basis to tolerate, and all the families who've never imagined that they'd lose a loved one to a bullet—those rights are at stake.

Whereas Charlton Heston argued in 1999 after the Columbine shooting that the Second Amendment ensured all other rights,[74] Obama argued here that the Second Amendment was actually infringing on other rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights. His broadening of the concept of rights beyond the Second Amendment thus represented an attempt to inoculate or disarm his opponents from the objection that gun restrictions infringe on the bill of rights or betrayed America's founding fathers. In Obama's telling, it was he and supporters of his plan who were truly committed to defending rights, broadly conceived.

Dismissed His Opponents as Being Political

I noted earlier that framing gun control as a parental responsibility helped Obama transcend political divisions and to find common ground in the identity marker of "parent," thus allowing him to make a political case for gun control, while seeming non-political and non-controversial. Yet there were other important ways that Obama claimed to be non-political, while obviously being otherwise. In his April 8, 2013 speech, Obama argued, "this is not about me. This is not about politics. This is about doing the right thing for all the families who are here that have been torn apart by gun violence. It's about them and all the families going forward, so we can prevent this from happening again." He then twice repeated, "This is not about politics."[75] What does this mean and what are the implications of his statement? First, he was attempting to establish a space that was apart from, or prior to, one's political affiliation. His reliance on the parent topos suggested that what comes prior to political affiliation was familial and communal relationships; "keeping our children safe," he said, "is our first task as a society." The

word "first" at once suggested a point in a temporal sequence and a value: that this task came before others and that this task was the most important one. These relationships were rooted in obligation and responsibility—words he used again and again—and such obligations and responsibilities were more fundamental than the political concept of "rights" that his opponents relied on.

Second, his claim that "this is not about politics" gave the appearance of transcending partisanship, while simultaneously attempting to mask his partisanship and to denounce his opponents. He argued on January 16, 2013, "while reducing gun violence is a complicated challenge, protecting our children from harm shouldn't be a divisive one."[76] He further claimed that transforming his plan into law would be difficult because there "will be pundits and politicians and special interest lobbyists publicly warning of a tyrannical, all-out assault on liberty—not because that's true, but because they want to gin up fear or higher ratings for themselves."[77] It was his opponents, then, who were engaging in politics, and engaging in politics meant being unreasonable and selfish. They were obstructionists, willing to "do everything they can to block any common-sense reform."[78] Moreover, those politicians were at odds with the American people. According to Obama on April 8, 2013, "there is only one thing that can stand in the way of change that just about everybody agrees on, and that's politics in Washington."[79] In Obama's telling, it was a radical minority of selfish politicians and special interest groups who were attempting to silence the voices of the American people and thwart progress. In other words, saying that this issue was "not about politics" suggested that his views were noncontroversial and not debatable—which was untrue—and that his intentions were

pure, whereas anyone who veered from his plan could only be doing so out of selfishness and pettiness.

Asserted that His Plan was "Common Sense"

Obama made a sustained effort throughout his speeches to describe his plan as "common sense" and thus as moderate. At times, he directly called his plan "common sense," and at other times he insisted, "an overwhelming majority of Americans agree with us." Bandwagon appeals—or appeals to the majority—are justified in a democracy, yet such appeals can become a means of assertion and rhetorical bullying of those unwilling to follow the masses. Obama's "we" was the moderate and reasonable majority of Americans who were committed to rights and protecting America's children. Those not part of the "we" were thus the radical and unreasonable minority, who seemed to be unconcerned about protecting children in America. More explicitly, he imparted impure motives to his opponents by claiming that they were just trying to "gin up fear or higher ratings or revenue for themselves." While such rhetoric of "common sense" might have helped pressure his opponents, such pressure was counterproductive insofar as it occluded argument and fostered resentment.

While all of Obama's proposed changes were voted down, the proposed ban on semi-automatic weapons was the most controversial. Yet he used the rhetoric of "common sense" to argue that such a ban was justified. On January 16, 2013, he stated, "Congress should restore a ban on military-style assault weapons, and a 10-round limit for magazines."[80] The word "restore" suggested that his plan was not radical—that it was

a plan that had been implemented before and that no major harms were caused by the last assault weapons ban that lasted from 1994 to 2004. While the word "restore" helped to make his plan sound more reasonable, it hid the fact that his plan actually called for congress to "reinstate and *strengthen* the ban on assault weapons."[81] Moreover, associating semi-automatic weapons with the label "military-style assault weapons" made them seem all the more ominous. Obama argued, "Weapons designed for the theater of war have no place in a movie theater." Linking semi-automatic weapons to the military is partially accurate: the AR-15 semi-automatic rifle used in several mass shootings is the civilian counterpart to the military's fully automatic M-16 rifle. Yet Obama overstated his case and relied heavily on fear appeals when he claimed that the only purpose of such "assault" rifles is "to do as much damage" as quickly as possible. Framing his discussion of the weapons within the context of the Aurora shooting allowed him to deflect or ignore concerns of gun owners, manufacturers, and gun rights advocates more generally. Obama gave no indication that some gun rights advocates value such weapons for sport, self-defense, and as a symbol of their rights as Americans. By associating semi-automatic weapons only with war and with mass murder, he was able to suggest that banning such weapons was an obvious and noncontroversial choice.

Finally, Obama appealed to common sense when he claimed on January 16, 2013, that we must "do something to protect our communities and our kids."[82] The word "something" indicated an openness about the best solution; it allowed for common ground among diverse groups all concerned with addressing the same problem. Yet the word "something" also indicated uncertainty. This uncertainty appeared elsewhere in Obama's rhetoric, when he acknowledged that "the causes of such violence are complex"

yet if "there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town" then "surely we have an obligation to try."[83] Given the trend of mass shootings and of gun violence more generally, his call to "do something" had a common sense appeal. Yet, as we will see, Obama's pragmatism here—his willingness to proceed by trial and error—along with his claim about compromising on restrictions to the Second Amendment, became a point of critique. For his critics, Obama's "common sense" represented a lack of commitment to principle.

Gun Rights Advocates after Sandy Hook

Blaming guns in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting implicated the National Rifle Association. By 2012, the NRA had become synonymous with guns and thus accountable for defending the interests of gun manufacturers, gun owners, and gun enthusiasts. And the face and voice of the NRA had become its CEO and executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, who had been with the NRA since 1977. On December 21, 2012, the NRA created a media event, televised from a conference room in the Willard Hotel, near the White House.[84] LaPierre delivered his prepared speech a week after the tragedy. Obama had not yet laid out his plan for gun control, yet LaPierre was well aware of the increasing calls for gun restrictions. As a leader of the NRA, his task was to deflect blame from guns. Since it would be difficult to argue that guns did not play a role in the mass shooting, he could deflect blame from guns by suggesting that gun control was an unjustified response or that some other solution would better address the problem of mass shootings. As the following analysis indicates, LaPierre used both approaches.

LaPierre's speech was of course not without controversy. A protestor interrupted him by yelling, "The NRA is killing our children! We've got to stop the violence, and the violence begins with the NRA!"[85] Others criticized his proposal for armed guards in schools by latching on to a sound bite, "The *only* thing that stops a *bad* guy with a gun is a *good* guy with a gun." Christine Quinn, a New York City Council Speaker, told a local CBS reporter that the NRA's plan was "some of the most stupid, asinine, insensitive, ridiculous comments I have ever heard in the public arena."[86] Many shared Quinn's assessment. "[F]ormer Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele—an NRA supporter—call[ed] the idea of armed volunteers in the schools 'very haunting' and 'very disturbing.'"[87]

Yet it would be a mistake not to take LaPierre's rhetoric seriously, since the NRA's power depends on the NRA's rhetoric resonating with some audiences. Despite its critical reception, then, it is worth analyzing LaPierre's speech to understand how he attempted to deflect blame from guns, and thus, more generally, what his approach revealed about the larger gun debate. The following analysis traces five key moves in LaPierre's rhetoric after Sandy Hook. LaPierre (1) deflected blame from guns by blaming several other potential causes; (2) framed guns as necessary tools for self-protection; (3) used time to discredit his opponents; (4) dismissed his opponents as being "political" while depicting his own position as non-political and noncontroversial; (5) argued that his plan to put armed guards in schools was the most effective response to mass shootings.

Deflected Blame from Guns

As a leader of the National Rifle Association, LaPierre's goal was to protect the interests of the NRA and its members by resisting further gun restrictions. A central task of LaPierre's speech, then, was to deflect blame from guns and to weaken the link between mass shootings and guns. Since he was arguing on the defensive—he was opposing plans for gun control—he could make his case merely by creating doubt. Throughout his speech, he blamed at least six different sources: politicians for creating gun-free school zones; the shooters for being irrevocably evil; news media for making mass shooters famous and thus encouraging copycats; legislators for not having a database to track mentally ill people; prosecutors for being soft on criminals and not adequately enforcing existing gun laws; the president for not making school security a priority; and the entertainment industry for encouraging violence and profiting through their video games, music, and movies. Although he returned to blaming the news media and entertainment industry several times, his list appeared throughout the speech, without a clear sense of hierarchy, thus suggesting equal responsibility. While it could be said that these multiple sources of blame acknowledged the causal complexity of mass shootings, pointing to multiple sources of blame also offered a rhetorical advantage by weakening the link between guns and mass shootings. Which explanation resonated most with audiences mattered less than the fact that guns were not the primary source of blame but were merely one source of blame among many. Blaming multiple sources sought to create doubt among gun control supporters and to provide argumentative resources for those already opposed to gun control.

LaPierre further argued that those who blamed guns were dishonest. He stated that, "Rather than face their own moral failings, the media *demonize* lawful gun owners, *amplify* their cries for more laws and fill the national debate with misinformation and dishonest thinking that only delay meaningful action and all but guarantee that the next atrocity is only a news cycle away." LaPierre positioned "the media" as unreasonable ("their cries"), dishonest, and opposed to actual progress. When it comes to guns, the media "don't know what they're talking about!" Moreover, the media have used their deception to "*demonize* lawful gun owners." Their blame of guns, then, was not legitimate but was instead a desperate attempt to deny their own responsibility as "silent enablers" and "complicit co-conspirators."

Although LaPierre focused his blame on news media, he suggested that all opponents of the NRA were involved in a dishonest ploy to blame guns and thus protect the interests of the entertainment industry. LaPierre claimed, "There exists in this country a callous, corrupt and *corrupting* shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people." He listed a series of video games, including an online game titled "Kindergarten Killers." He then asked, "How come my research department could find it and all of yours couldn't or didn't want anyone to know that you had found it?" It was a classic red herring tactic. LaPierre counted on listeners to infer a causal connection between games and violence and to assume that the game had motivated the Sandy Hook shooter—even though there is no evidence that Lanza played "Kindergarten Killers." Moreover, LaPierre implied that his opponents were either incompetent ("all of yours couldn't" find the game) or deceptive ("didn't want anyone to know that you found" the game). The "yours" gives the appearance of a direct opponent. While his most obvious

opponent was Obama, the "yours" functioned ambiguously as a kind of generic stand-in for anyone opposed to the NRA, whether actual or imagined. His question sought to undermine his opponents by suggesting that they were cherry-picking evidence to support their calls for gun control, even though it was doubtful that his opponents were aware of the game or had any reason to hide its existence.

Framed Guns as Necessary Tools for Self-Protection

Given LaPierre's and the NRA's commitment to protecting gun rights, it was not surprising that LaPierre argued that guns were necessary for self-protection. However, *how* LaPierre made this case was remarkable. LaPierre depicted the world as a dangerous place. Rather than claim mass shooters were rare, he asked his audience, "How many more copycats are waiting in the wings for their moment of fame"? He continued, "A dozen more killers? A hundred? More?" Similar to Obama, LaPierre broadened out from the shooting at Sandy Hook to talk about violence more generally. Yet LaPierre had a different take on gun violence and appealed to fear not of guns but of criminals. He referred to "the much larger and more lethal *criminal* class: Killers, robbers, rapists and drug gang members who have spread like cancer in every community in this country."[88] LaPierre's rhetoric relied on fear not only of criminals, but a larger fear of the "other." In this speech he used the descriptor "drug gang members," and in a brochure leaked in 2006, the NRA warned of "illegal alien gangs."[89] The fear of the other was generalized, and whether intended or not, LaPierre's rhetoric tapped into his audiences' existing fears about terrorism, about race, and about the border and immigration.

While Obama used national trends in gun violence to argue for gun control, LaPierre described a broader trend in violence to argue for greater gun access. Guns were not the problem; the problem instead was with criminals, and guns were the "only way" to stop them. LaPierre depicted a climate of fear in which the worst of the criminals were everywhere. He warned that there was an "unknown number of genuine monsters" who "walk among us every day." By suggesting that criminal activity was spreading "like cancer," LaPierre established an implicit rationale for stopping criminals. Just as cancer cannot be persuaded to stop, neither can some who is "driven by demons." While the disease metaphor implied a need for careful analysis and systematic treatment, LaPierre short-circuited the search for solutions by also depicting criminals as predators who simply must be stopped.[90] He described mass shooters as "insane," "monsters," "predators," who were "deranged," "evil," "possessed by voices," and "driven by demons." Moreover, since "no sane person can possible *ever* comprehend them," it was futile to expect that society could reach these people and prevent mass shootings. The world LaPierre described was a world in which citizens needed to be armed to defend themselves, rather than leave themselves and children "*utterly defenseless*."

In making his case for the necessity of guns, it is worth emphasizing that LaPierre did not dwell on mass shootings or gun violence more generally, as Obama had. Instead, LaPierre framed the debate by asking his audience to imagine the individualized experience of being alone, unarmed, and thus unable to defend against a criminal. He blamed "the press and political class here in Washington so consumed by fear and hatred of the NRA and America's gun owners." It was the gun-free school zones they supported that left "a lone, unarmed school principal" defenseless against "evil monsters" like

Adam Lanza. "No one," he argued, "has the right to impose that sacrifice." Just as that

principal in Sandy Hook should not have been defenseless, LaPierre asked his audience

to imagine whether they would want to be defenseless when "you hear your glass

breaking at three a.m." By framing the debate in terms of being alone and defenseless,

LaPierre attempted to evoke a visceral reaction in which fear of harm and a desire for

self-protection were more important than national statistics about gun violence or long-

term plans that sought to reduce crime.

Gun violence, in LaPierre's telling, suggested a need for more guns. He asked,

"since when did the word 'gun' automatically become a bad word?" Just as guns were

used by the secret service to protect the president, and just as guns were used to protect

the United States, so they ought to be used to protect children in America's schools. His

references to the socially acceptable uses of guns helped him make the case for his

proposed plan for putting armed guards in schools. He also attempted to influence his

opponents by having them acknowledge that guns were not wholly bad, that they could

be used for good, and that further restrictions on guns was not desirable. Doing so helped

to displace blame from the gun to the person using it and to suggest that guns were not

the problem but the solution.

Used Time to Discredit His Opponents

Just as Obama used a sense of time and timeliness to advance his claims—just as

the Obama Administration named their plan "Now is the time"—so LaPierre's speech

appealed to time to advance his claims. In his second paragraph, he stated, "Out of

respect for those grieving families, and until the facts are known, the NRA has refrained from comment. While some have tried to exploit tragedy for political gain, we have remained respectfully silent."[91] At the most basic level, LaPierre explained why the NRA waited until a week after the tragedy to make an official statement. In LaPierre's telling, their delay was not a matter of negligence or of scrambling to create a response. The NRA's delay was instead a deliberate choice, guided by a commitment to prudent judgment and to "respect for those grieving families." This claim seems peculiar, since the families were still grieving and the facts were not known when LaPierre spoke. Of course, LaPierre's judgment of when it was respectful to speak was not guided by an objective standard but a relative one. It did not matter whether his opponents spoke four days or four minutes before LaPierre—his opponents speaking first was offered as proof that they had broken decorum. His accusation suggested that the NRA was committed to prudent judgment and respect to those grieving, but that opponents of the NRA were not. Despite the NRA's reservations, they were compelled to speak by their unreasonable opponents. Worse than violating decorum and showing a disregard for facts, LaPierre charged his opponents with trying to "exploit tragedy for political gain." Appealing to time thus allowed LaPierre to dismiss any arguments that his opponents made, not on the basis of the quality of their arguments but on the basis of their timing.

LaPierre also relied on time to make his case about moving forward: "How do we protect our children *right now*, starting today, in a way that we know *works*?" Rather than directly discuss the merits of arguments for different forms of gun control, he implied that these were all long-term and thus impractical solutions. By contrast, "devising a protection plan" and putting guards in schools was something we could do "now."

LaPierre continued, "We can immediately make America's schools safer." The words "right now" appeared six times in his speech and some form of the word "immediate" appeared five times. He called on Congress to "act immediately" and thus "to make sure that blanket of safety is in place when our children return to school in January." There is, of course, nothing wrong with long-term solutions, and in fact they are often what is required to adequately address a problem. Yet LaPierre appealed to the pathos of the moment and fear of other children in danger to dismiss gun control as a long-term solution. Gun control was a solution that might not work, and even if it did, it would take too long. According to LaPierre, the world was filled with bad guys yet existing guns laws have failed to stop them, so hope of prevention was the task for another day. Instead, the best way to deter criminals and thwart attacks was to be armed.

Given his call to act "right now" and "immediately," there was little time for reflection, research, or discussion. He claimed that "Before Congress reconvenes, before we engage in any lengthy debate over legislation, regulation or anything else, as soon as our kids return to school after the holiday break, we need to have *every single school in America* immediately deploy a protection program proven to work—and by that I mean *armed security*." Although LaPierre seemed open to the value of debating guns, or any other policy different than his own, he was not. Note, for instance, his condition: he was willing to engage in such a debate, but only after "every single school in America" adopted his plan—a condition that would never be met. Later, LaPierre said, "We can't lose precious time debating legislation that won't work.... We must act now." Rather than "debating legislation," LaPierre dismissed it out of hand because he claimed to know that

it would not work. Worse, he appealed to time to close off the possibility for actual debate.

Dismissed His Opponents as Being "Political"

Similar to Obama, LaPierre appealed to ideals of being non-political or beyond politics. LaPierre stated near the end of his speech that, "We mustn't allow politics or personal prejudice to divide us. We must act now."[92] The juxtaposition of these two sentences illustrated an inconsistency throughout his speech: being non-political and non-prejudiced entailed unquestioningly following LaPierre's political views and prejudices.

LaPierre claimed to value common ground and respect, but he engaged in their opposites throughout his speech. As I have suggested earlier, LaPierre implied that his opponents were the ones unconcerned with facts and decorum who were willing to "exploit tragedy for political gain." His opponents were part of "a callous, corrupt, and *corrupting* shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people." Their "race to the bottom" was a competition "to shock, violate, and offend every standard of civilized society." Moreover they attempted to "*demonize* lawful gun owners" by spreading "misinformation and dishonest thinking that only delay meaningful action and all but guarantee that the next atrocity is only a news cycle away." It was the "press and political class here in Washington" who were "so consumed by fear and hatred of the NRA and America's gun owners that you're willing to accept a world where real resistance to evil monsters is a lone, unarmed school principal left to *surrender her life* to shield the children in her care."

According to LaPierre, the NRA had been oppressed but they had reasons to feel proud and superior. They valued facts, sound policy, and commitment to realistic solutions. LaPierre's speech did not depict the NRA as a lobby group; instead, they were "4 million mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters" who "join the nation in horror, outrage, grief, and earnest prayer for the families of Newtown, Connecticut." LaPierre did not shy away from Obama's effort to think of gun policy through the lens of a parental obligation. His rhetoric reaffirmed that children should be protected, yet he asserted that more guns, rather than fewer guns, were necessary for that task. Moreover, LaPierre suggested that the NRA was not mischievous, as they are often caricatured. The NRA consisted of lawful people committed to self-protection against criminals. LaPierre spoke not of the NRA's involvement in the legislative process, but their original mission—their commitment to "gun safety, marksmanship, and hunter education" for over a century. In the last 25 years in particular, LaPierre claimed that the NRA's "Eddie Eagle Gunsafe Program has taught over 26 million kids that real guns aren't toys, and, today, child gun accidents are at the lowest levels ever recorded." While LaPierre left his audience to infer a causal connection between the education program and the decrease in child gun accidents, his statement contributed to a larger goal of depicting the NRA as a socially responsible organization, sincerely committed to children's security.

Argued That His Plan to Put Armed Guards was the Most Effective Response

J. Michael Hogan and I have argued elsewhere that the NRA's plan to put armed guards in schools was "a cockamamie scheme—prohibitively expensive, precluded by

liability issues, and neither practically nor politically feasible."[93] Yet is worth reflecting on how LaPierre gave the appearance that his plan was legitimate and feasible. The plan ultimately rested on LaPierre's claim throughout that since reaching criminals or preventing crime were impractical, the best solution was protection against them. He supported this claim by depicting a climate of fear and insisting on the the need to act "right now." But it is also worth noting that he attempted to remove doubts about his plan by giving it an aura of authority and suggesting its feasibility.

He used several strategies to give the NRA plan an aura of authority. He promised that the NRA was going to "bring all its knowledge, dedication and resources to develop a model National School Shield Emergency Response Program for every school that wants it." The length and blandness of the program's title—NSSERP—suggested its seriousness. LaPierre further promised that this program would be "multi-faceted" and "developed by the very best experts in their fields." Asserting that the plan would be complex and guided by experts suggested its legitimacy.

LaPierre ended his speech by introducing the person who would be responsible for leading this program. It was not to be someone unknown, without gravitas, nor even an NRA insider. The person responsible for leading the NRA's program would be Asa Hutchinson. LaPierre described Hutchinson as a former congressman who would use his expertise and experience from his work as a "U.S. Attorney, Director of the Drug Enforcement Agency, and Undersecretary of the Department of Homeland Security."[94] Finally, LaPierre attempted to establish the credibility of his plan by indicating that it was one he had proposed five years earlier after the Virginia Tech tragedy. He suggested that this plan was one he had long been developing. Moreover, it was a plan that if it had been

taken seriously five years ago, then "26 innocent lives might have been spared" at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

LaPierre also used a number of strategies to suggest his plan's feasibility. In part, LaPierre attempted to establish the feasibility of his plan by undermining the feasibility of other plans. He proclaimed that his opponents "perpetuate the dangerous notion that one more gun ban—or one more law imposed on peaceful, lawful people—will protect us where 20,000 others have failed!" Gun control, he suggested, was an impractical cause, and unlike gun control, his plan would not "impose" any restriction on "peaceful, lawful people." Only the law-breakers should be punished. Guards in schools offered "the only line of positive defense that's tested and proven to work." He also promoted the NRA's plan by avoiding questions of cost. At times he suggested that police, military, security professionals, firefighters and rescue personnel, along with "an extraordinary corps of patriotic, trained qualified citizens" would volunteer to serve as guards in schools. At other times, he displaced responsibility to congress for finding a way to fund the plan. At still other times, he deceptively suggested that the NRA would "make that program available to every school in American free of charge," eliding the fact that while the plan might be distributed for free, there would be substantial costs for implementing the plan.

Conclusions

I began by asking: How did advocates make their case that a mass shooting warrants—or does not warrant—changes in national gun policy? How does blame of guns—and deflection of blame of guns—function rhetorically? Looking at Obama's

rhetoric and LaPierre's rhetoric has provided a partial answer to those questions. Obama made the case for blaming guns by situating the Sandy Hook shooting within a tradition of mass shootings undertaken with semi-automatic weapons; he then situated mass shootings as part of a larger problem of gun violence that happens on a daily basis but that escapes national attention. Given the political climate within the United States, blaming guns was a controversial move. Yet he used several rhetorical strategies to make gun control seem non-controversial. He argued on pragmatic grounds—we must "do something to protect our communities and our kids"—and he also appealed to majority opinion and claimed that his proposals were "common sense." He suggested that gun control was consistent with, rather than at odds with, the Second Amendment. He also called on gun control advocates and gun rights advocates alike to react not as partisans but as parents who could find common ground in their commitment to protecting children. While gun policy was a debate about national trends, good reasons, and rights, he also framed the debate in terms of personal obligation and responsibility to honor the children who died and to protect the children still living.

LaPierre did not deny the need to react as parents and protect America's youth. Yet he argued that the best way to protect America's youth was by placing armed guards in schools. Whereas Obama admitted the causal complexity of mass shootings but focused on guns, LaPierre insisted on the causal complexity of mass shootings and downplayed the role of guns. LaPierre attempted to weaken the link between mass shootings and guns by dispersing blame to a variety of sources, including news media, politicians, the shooters, and the entertainment industry. He attempted to reverse the negative connotation of guns by suggesting that "gun" was not a "bad word" and he

reminded his listeners that society valued guns for protecting our country against enemies, for protecting leaders, for protecting banks, and for protecting one's home. He depicted a world that was dangerous, filled with "genuine monsters" that are "driven by demons" and show no hope of being reformed. Gun control, he argued, would not disarm criminals but would instead disarm law-abiding citizens who would become defenseless against such "monsters."

What kind of rhetorical work did this blame of guns—or deflection of blame of guns—do? Given that the senate voted down Obama's proposed gun legislation, it is possible to judge Obama's rhetoric and LaPierre's rhetoric in instrumental terms and say that one failed and the other succeeded. Yet it is also important to evaluate the potential effects of their rhetorics not only in terms of legislation passed or blocked. As I suggested in my brief rhetorical history, debates about guns are always doing rhetorical work, and the same is true of the exchange between Obama and LaPierre in the aftermath of Sandy Hook. Both of their rhetorics relied on demonization and only seemed to exacerbate mistrust between gun control advocates and gun rights advocates. Obama charged that gun rights advocates were trying to thwart gun control, not for any legitimate reason, but merely because they wanted to "gin up fear or higher ratings for themselves." Consequently, LaPierre charged that gun control advocates were malicious, willing to "fill the national debate with misinformation and dishonest thinking" and willing to "exploit tragedy for political gain." Obama suggested that gun rights advocates were willing to let children die, while LaPierre suggested that gun control advocates were willing to let children die. Such depictions of one's political opponents, I suspect, make it

hard for gun control advocates and gun rights advocates to take each other seriously and to trust one another.

In addition to breaking down trust, Obama's and LaPierre's rhetorics also did some damage to the gun debate by closing off space for argument. Writing about "problematic elements of discourse," David Zarefsky warned about the use of "argument by definition" (e.g., death tax), which often "assume" rather than "defend a controversial proposition."[95] Obama's repeated appeals to "common sense" represented argument by definition: he asserted his proposals were common sense and thus assumed that those who shared his views were part of the moderate and reasonable majority of Americans, while any who dissented were therefore part of the radical and unreasonable minority. He depicted semi-automatic rifles as "assault weapons" that were "designed for the theatre of war," whose only purpose was to "do as much damage" as quickly possible. While this framing allowed him to suggest that banning such weapons was an obvious and noncontroversial choice, it attempted to cover up the fact that such a ban was a controversial choice according to some gun rights advocates.

LaPierre similarly attempted to thwart engaged debate. He presented straw-man arguments by suggesting that gun control advocates wanted to leave individuals defenseless, even though most gun control advocates recognized value of guns for self-defense, and even though the Supreme Court made it clear in its 2008 *Heller* decision that the question open to dispute was not whether or not guns were allowed for self- defense but what types of restrictions could balance the right to self-protection with the right to public safety. LaPierre further exaggerated the need for self-defense by suggesting that there were "an unknown number of genuine monsters," monsters that "walk among us

every day" and are on the verge of attack. Such fear appeals attempted to reduce the gun debate to a simple choice of whether to be armed or unarmed when facing such a "monster"; this framing exaggerated the need for self defense and ignored that there were other options for self-defense. His depiction of criminal behavior suggested that they were all the same and that they were all irrevocably evil, thus attempting to bypass careful reflection about more complex depictions of mental illness and crime and about potentially systematic sources and solutions to violence. Finally, LaPierre attempted to thwart debate by invoking time. "There'll be time for talk and debate *later*," LaPierre proclaimed, but now is the time for "decisive action." Rather than engage arguments by gun control advocates, then, he dismissed them out of hand as impractical. In his telling, there was no time for debate, there was only time to follow his lead.

LaPierre's and Obama's strategies were in some sense necessary, given their strategic goals and given the nature of fast-paced, mediated communication. Yet such strategies were also at odds with deliberative ideals that prize careful reflection, analysis, and argument.

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Chapter 5: Conclusions

On September 16, 2013, there was yet another mass shooting. Twelve people were murdered at the Washington Navy Yard by thirty-four-year-old Aaron Alexis. The National Rifle Association and the White House echoed their responses from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December 2012. Appearing on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Wayne LaPierre briefly mentioned America's "broken" mental health system and then focused on improving security protocols on military bases.[1] In a memorial speech for victims of the Navy Yard shooting, President Obama briefly mentioned America's mental health system and then focused on the need to take "common-sense actions to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and dangerous people."[2]

Although Obama insisted that actions might be taken to prevent future tragedies, he also sounded a more pessimistic note: "After all the speeches and all the punditry and all the commentary nothing happens." He continued, "Alongside the anguish of these American families, alongside the accumulated outrage so many of us feel, sometimes, I fear there's a creeping resignation that these tragedies are just somehow the way it is, that this is somehow the new normal. We can't accept this." He insisted, "Our tears are not enough. Our words and our prayers are not enough." Instead, "we're going to have to change." He concluded, "Wisdom comes through the recognition that tragedies such as this are not inevitable, and that we possess the ability to act and to change, and to spare others the pain that drops upon our hearts."[3]

Just as the shooting was not inevitable, neither was the course that public deliberation took afterward. My analysis throughout this dissertation has illustrated that deliberation took a specific course in 2013, but, as I have suggested, that course could have been different in 2013, or 2012, or 2007, or 1999. If the United States should witness another mass shooting and leaders, advocates, and citizens are required to interpret what happened and decide how to move forward, there are options. There are options, too, during moments of perceived tranquility. Reflecting on past deliberations can help rhetors, audiences, and rhetorical critics understand previous deliberations and can offer insights for those committed to a more deliberate—and thus, perhaps, more deliberative—future.

This project has been guided by several questions that seek to understand the character and quality of public deliberation, particularly non-ideal and seemingly ineffectual forms of deliberation. This dissertation has asked: How do the recurring kinds of blame—blame of the U.S.'s "culture of violence," of mental illness, and of guns— function rhetorically? That is, how does blame get ascribed in a particular moment and, in turn, what modes of being, interpretation, and action are mobilized—or stalled—by these ascriptions? Absent major changes in national policy or major changes in communal norms, what kind of rhetorical work do each of these kinds of blame do and for whom? In this concluding chapter, I first consider how these questions might be answered in light of the three case studies. Based on these conclusions, I speculate about how deliberation might be improved. I then close by indicating subsequent questions that future research might explore.

Blame and Deliberation

At the outset of this dissertation, I claimed that blame is central to deliberation about some public problems like mass shootings. Moreover, I claimed that blame, as a critical concept, helps scholars account for deliberation. These claims entail an expansive view both of deliberation and of blame. Scholars like John Gastil have imagined deliberation as a process whereby participants "carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view."[4] In contrast, I have claimed that blame entails an expansive view of deliberation that includes forms of communication like advocacy and manipulation that have typically been seen as at odds with deliberation. Those who participate in public deliberation might not necessarily be committed to finding the best evidence, respecting opposing views, or carefully considering the benefits and drawbacks of different proposals, yet they are nonetheless engaged in deliberation insofar as they make claims about the shared past, present, or future. They provide an answer to questions, such as: What happened? What should be done?

This project also entails an expansive view of blame. Previous scholars have framed blame in the Aristotelian sense of a subject's unworthiness of being praised and emulated.[5] They have also explored blame as representing what Kenneth Burke calls scapegoating—blaming someone or something that really is not blameworthy but doing so anyway because it is easy, because the timing is right, because it feels good, or because it protects one's interests.[6] In contrast, I have claimed that blame should not be limited only to a scapegoating function. Blame can fulfill—and has fulfilled—other

functions, including self-blame and attempts to assign responsibility and initiate change. More generally, the concept of blame temporarily allows critics to bracket out questions of authenticity to consider ascriptions of blame that seem sincere and true and ascriptions of blame that do not. Doing so allows critics to better account for actually existing deliberation and to see why audiences might find some rhetorics more appealing than others.

My case studies have provided at least four additional insights about how blame functions in deliberation and what sorts of rhetorical work blame does. First, blame is selective. Second, blame is constituted by contexts, rhetors, and audiences. Third, blame is shaped by and shapes public memory. Fourth, blame distributes and disperses agency.

Blame is Selective

Interpretations and arguments made in the aftermath of mass shootings are not "automatic" or "objective" but are selective. Interpretations and arguments are selective simply because mass shootings are complex events. Yet they are also selective because they are expressed through language. As Kenneth Burke claimed, "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality."[7] Choices must be made about what details of a case to attend to—and which not to attend to. Someone interpreting the Columbine High School shooting, for instance, cannot say everything at once, even if they wanted to. And even within the context of blaming the

"culture of violence," selections were made about whether the entertainment industry was most responsible, or whether parents were, or whether the absence of religion was.

Blame is Constituted by Contexts, Rhetors, and Audiences

The "facts" of a given case are not determinative. Which facts and forms of blame resonate with rhetors and audiences depend on broad political and cultural contexts, as well as rhetors' and audiences' preexisting language, beliefs, worries, and goals.

In terms of broad political and cultural contexts, consider President Obama's responses to mass shootings. He spoke publicly in the aftermath of three mass shootings before the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, but he had not made an explicit call to reform gun laws. Yet he declared Sandy Hook a tipping point by claiming that "we've endured too many of these tragedies in past few years."[8] Why was this shooting that one that was one too many? In part, public support for gun control had shifted because the victims were primarily children. In part, Obama had just been re-elected to his second term and so the political liabilities of arguing for gun control were not as pressing.

The broad political and cultural context also influenced how audiences perceived Obama's call for gun control. Not all viewed Obama's gun control proposals through the same lens. Some gun rights advocates distrusted Obama in particular—they believed he was scheming to take their guns[9]—and believed more generally that government should not thwart liberty by intervening in human affairs. Thus, they interpreted the mass shooting not as a gun problem, but as a problem with one individual, or mental illness, or the culture of violence.

Obama's own rhetoric seemed to acknowledge a much broader point about deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings: facts alone were not enough. He spoke on April 17, 2013, after the Senate voted down his proposals for gun control. He puzzled through why his proposals did not become law. Part of his explanation had to do with politics, money, and experience: even though a majority of Americans supported his proposals, Obama reasoned that gun control advocates were defeated because gun rights advocates were "better organized," "better financed," and had "been at it longer." [10] According to Obama, gun control advocates would need to sustain the same kind of focus and passion during election time as gun rights advocates had demonstrated. Yet another part of Obama's explanation implicitly acknowledged that deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings existed in a much messier rhetorical universe than the one espoused by some deliberative scholars. He stated that gun control advocates "claimed that it would create some sort of 'big brother' gun registry, even though the bill did the opposite. This legislation, in fact, outlawed any registry. Plain and simple, right there in the text. But that didn't matter." And that did not matter, he claimed, because "those lies upset an intense minority of gun owners, and that in turn intimidated a lot of senators."[11] While Obama had blamed gun rights advocates for lying, he also seemed to recognize an important lesson about actually existing deliberation: the better argument—or most sensible compromise—was not necessarily going to win the day. Moreover, what was written "Plain and simple, right there in the text" would not stand on its own, but that text would be filtered through preexisting fears and hopes, that the text might well be ignored, and that it would almost certainly be contested.

Responses to the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 further demonstrate that blame is constituted by contexts, rhetors, and audiences. Ralph W. Larkin, for instance, claimed that responses to the Columbine shooting could not be understood apart from the "political and cultural conservatism of Southern Jefferson County."[12] He claimed that "Columbine became a battleground in the American culture wars as the religious and cultural right defined the massacre as the outcome of a liberal, crime-tolerating, secular, anti-Christian society that fails to teach the children right from wrong, prevents children from praying in school, and refuses to display the Ten Commandments in public schools."[13] Building on Larkin's insights, it seemed that blame of religion's absence was due in part to details of the case, such as the fact that Harris and Klebold had animosity toward Christians. Yet, in some sense, the facts of the case were less important than those who were interpreting them. For some audiences the shootings were a sign of evil, and thus a sign of religion's absence and the need for its presence. Those who blamed the lack of religion amplified details that indicated the shooters' opposition to religion, while downplaying details that did not indicate such an opposition.[14]

Blame is Shaped By and Shapes Public Memory

Memory, rhetorical scholars have noted, is the storehouse of invention. Public memory contains the topoi or common places—the claims, appeals, and warrants—that are crafted, used, and reused in public deliberation.[15] After the Virginia Tech shooting, for instance, *MSNBC* host Chris Matthews persisted in asking Seung-Hui Cho's roommate about the influence of video games on the shooter, even though the roommate

stated that he did not see Cho play video games. The moment illustrated that the Virginia

Tech shooting was interpreted through the script of prior shootings that had gained

national attention, such as Columbine, and the perceived lessons from those previous

shootings. In addition to providing lines of argument, public memory directed affect and

perceptions of trust. I noted, for instance, that the gun debate after Sandy Hook was

shaped by a decades-long dispute over guns, a history that had fostered mistrust and

resentment among gun control advocates and gun rights advocates.

Not only is blame shaped by public memory, it also shapes public memory and

thus does significant rhetorical work. While some deliberations in the aftermath of mass

shootings are neither noticed nor remembered, others are. Even though mass shootings

are more rare than other forms of gun violence and automobile deaths, researchers have

found that "being a victim in a mass or random shooting" is among Americans' top five

fears.[16] Mass shootings have a hold on public memory, and my analysis suggests that

blame after mass shootings also has a hold on public memory. If the lesson that was taken

from Columbine was that the "culture of violence" was responsible, that lesson left

audiences with questions about actions that they could take to prevent violence. Should

parents monitor their children's behavior and search their personal space? Should

children be allowed to play video games? Is a story that a child wrote merely creative

expression or a sign that he or she is a threat to others?

Blame's shaping of public memory has significant implications not only for how

people interpret subsequent events, but also for how people interpret the object of blame

and their perceived political opponents. After the Virginia Tech shooting, for instance,

deliberation that depicted the shooter had profound implications for shaping

understanding of mental illness and mentally ill individuals. President Bush's depiction

of the shooter as both mentally ill and evil—and eventually collapsing these descriptors

so they were one in the same—risked further isolating mentally ill people and

undermining the need to better support mental health in the United States. This blame

also shaped public memory about other issues; I suggested, for instance, that Bush's

rhetoric increasingly framed the Virginia Tech tragedy as akin to the September 11

terrorist attacks, thus serving as a warrant for supporting an unpopular war in Iraq.

Blaming in the aftermath of mass shootings can also shape how participants in

public deliberation view their perceived political opponents. Deliberation after Sandy

Hook, for instance, risked further polarizing gun control advocates and gun rights

advocates. President Obama suggested that those opposed to his proposals were opposed

to "common sense" and were only trying to "gin up fear or higher ratings for

themselves."[17] NRA leader Wayne LaPierre attempted to counter proposals for gun

control by claiming that his opponents were only trying to "exploit tragedy for political

gain."[18] Such blaming seemed only to exacerbate mistrust between gun control advocates

and gun rights advocates, thus making future deliberations even more challenging.

Blame Distributes and Disperses Agency

As I anticipated at the start of this project, blame sometimes follows the

scapegoating process, as Burke described. Some public discourse after the Columbine

shooting, for instance, placed responsibility on the shooters' parents. NRA leader

Charlton Heston blamed the media and this blame, in turn, attempted to deflect blame

from guns. Yet I also discovered that sometimes people implicate themselves in the blame. Rather then use the language of "you" or "they," commentators spoke in terms of "us" and "our." Vice President Al Gore's speech after Columbine shifted blame from the shooters to society as a whole, as he called on everyone—parents and leaders in the entertainment industry, community members in Colorado and elsewhere—to work together to "replace a culture of violence and mayhem with one of values and meaning."[19] Such a distribution of blame, I noted, potentially has good and bad effects. On the one hand, such blame highlighted that culture is constituted by individuals and that individuals have the power to change, and that their daily acts matter. On the other hand, I drew from the work of Dana L. Cloud and Kristen Hoerl to note that this form of blame might offer false hope that searching a child's room, for instance, will make a significant difference, while ignoring deeper structural sources and sustaining cultural values like competition and hierarchy.[20] Moreover, I noted that the rhetoric of holding everyone responsible for changing U.S. culture could be used to remove responsibility from national leaders and advocacy groups and to disperse responsibility so widely that no one was actually held accountable for changing.

In sum, then, blame can be used at times to start a deliberation. Blame can be an invitation for self- and cultural-examination—an invitation for reflection, research, discussion, and change. After the Virginia Tech shooting, for instance, Lucinda Roy's rhetoric did not depict mental illness as an individual responsibility or as synonymous with evil. Rather than use "mental illness" as an all-inclusive label, she discussed her first-hand experience tutoring the eventual shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, including his silence, his anger, and his depression. Roy condemned Cho's actions, but she also highlighted

that Cho did not choose to be mentally ill and his choices to get help were thwarted by others' choices. She suggested that what was at fault—and thus, what needed to change—were the practices, attitudes, and policies throughout the United States that obstruct others with mental illness to get the support and care that they need. For others, however, Roy's calls for self- and cultural-examination may very well have seemed wrong. I claimed that Bush's rhetoric shut down deliberation about problems with mental health care in the United States, and while this shutting down of deliberation circumvented necessary reforms it also contributed to the need to restore a sense of order. For some audiences, the problem was not with "us" but with the shooter. In a moment of uncertainty, Bush's depiction of the shooter as "evil" offered certainty and clear moral judgment. Blame, as I have suggested throughout, spans forensic, epideictic, and deliberative goals, and sometimes these goals conflict. Moreover, blame can represent what David Zarefsky calls the benign and threatening faces of democracy. Blame can be an "invitation to deliberate" but it can also represent an attempt to "engineer consent" through the use of "manipulative rather than deliberative" rhetoric.[21]

How Might Deliberation Be Improved?

How might deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings be improved? And will this improved deliberation make a difference? As I mentioned in chapter one, the primary goal of this dissertation is not to figure out why a shooting—or mass shootings in general—*really* happened, nor is it to offer a plan for preventing mass shootings. However, my analysis can offer some insight about how responses to mass shootings

might be different. In short, some ways of talking are better than others for understanding, engaging, and potentially transforming the public problem of mass shootings. Some forms of communication invite further deliberation about the sources and potential solutions of mass shootings, while others do not.

Through my analysis, I have become convinced that we need discourse that invites further deliberation by considering systemic sources and solutions to public problems, rather than considering only individual acts in isolation. Much of the discourse after Columbine called for self- and cultural-examination. This examination might have gone much deeper, as work by Dana L. Cloud and Kristen Hoerl suggested, but the examination seemed to be on the right track. In the case of Virginia Tech, Lucinda Roy's rhetoric invited deliberation about mental illness, rather than equating mental illness with evil. Rather than blame the individual shooter and then move on, rhetors might invite further deliberation to consider, for instance, the systemic sources and solutions to mental illness. Rather than treat mental illness as an ahistorical aberration, rhetors might invite further deliberation about the shift of responsibility from communities to individuals for mental illness that dates back to the deinstitutionalization policies of the 1960s and the funneling of money away from mental health care to prisons.

Efforts to improve public deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings will inevitably be gradual and imperfect. Given the other demands on citizens' time and energy, I do not imagine everyone in the United States will study mass shootings and the complicated policy questions that they invite. Yet one strategy to improve public deliberation is by intervening in public memory—both at the moment of forming memories, and in the subsequent circulation and reuse of memories. Dave Cullen

reported on the Columbine shooting in 1999 and he spent the next ten years researching and writing his book *Columbine*. After the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, Cullen appeared on *CBS This Morning*. After the Columbine shooting, reporters depicted the shooters as loners who were part of the trench coat mafia and who engaged in destruction to retaliate against jocks who had bullied them. Cullen claimed that none of this was true, but that those interpretations still stuck because they were the immediate ones offered by news media. Since the media spotlight will always fade—even from the most horrific tragedy—and turn to the next big story, these immediate interpretations are the ones that constitute public memory. In his *CBS This Morning* appearance just a few days after the Sandy Hook shooting, Cullen's warning was simple: "this week, whatever we leave the public with, is going to be with them forever."[22]

When a mass shooting happens and when leaders, advocates, and citizens draw from the past to make sense of the present, they can be supported by experts who have spent time studying the sources and potential solutions to mass shootings. People like Dave Cullen and Lucinda Roy are valuable public advocates because they are willing to address public audiences, they are able to provide context when a mass shooting happens, and they are willing to urge caution and careful argument, while others are willing to throw easy answers at the question "why?" Noting that tragedies often invite knee-jerk reactions for "trying to 'fix'" them, lawyer Kate Klonick argued that "While we can't quash our impulse to blame, we can do something about how we react to it—by slowing down."[23] Such a form of exploratory blame can be exhausting. Deliberative rhetoric can be at odds with the occasion of tragedy and the need for more traditionally epideictic rhetoric; at times, the goal of problem solving is at odds with other legitimate needs, such

as catharsis. Yet it seems that blame which opens up further deliberation—rather than closing it down—offers the best hope for making sense of these tragedies, including their material and rhetorical effects.

Alternatively, asking more pointed questions might also help reframe and improve public deliberation. One question worth dwelling on is this: Do guns contribute to more or less violence? Gun control advocates and gun rights advocates both made assertions after the Sandy Hook shooting, yet their assertion were antithetical. In part, the facts are hard to come by. In the mid-1990s, conservatives in Congress blocked the Center for Disease Control and Prevention from researching gun-related deaths.[24] Some research suggests a strong correlation between high rates of guns and high rates of homicide.[25] Critics point to flaws in research methodology and argue that those studies show only correlation not causation. Such a question requires a careful and accurate answer, regardless of one's political preferences.

Yet it is also important to recognize that public deliberation is not guided by careful research alone, but by identification and division, by feelings, by values. Thus, answering a pointed question about causation will not resolve the gun debate, nor will it resolve debates about U.S. culture and mental illness. As Katherine S. Newman and her colleagues have argued, understanding the network of forces that contribute to mass shootings does "not lead to straightforward solutions or policies whose effectiveness is guaranteed. Indeed, in almost all cases, interventions that might make a positive difference have negative consequences that may be intolerable."[26] Because of this uncertainty and need to weigh different proposals and values, they claimed, "It is up to our society—students, parents, teachers, administrators, politicians, and citizens at

large—to weigh the pluses and minuses."[27] It is up to society, then, to deliberate whether the existence of gun violence warrants a change in national policy; to deliberate whether gun violence should be viewed through the frame of national statistics and trends or the individual experience of being unarmed and defenseless, or both; to deliberate questions of rights and security and to find a way to balance or reimagine these values. It is a rhetorical struggle that probably will not be resolved quickly or happily, but one that can nonetheless benefit from greater clarity about which issues are actually being deliberated and why.

In the face of complexity and uncertainty, deliberation will and should continue. Or as David Zarefsky put the point, "In democracies, there are no final victories."[28] Deliberation will continue, and, as I have claimed throughout, this deliberation matters a great deal. Even absent changes in national policy, this deliberation shapes how people interpret mass shooting and how they perceive their political opponents. As much as the various forms of blame—of U.S. culture, of mental illness, and of guns—are shaped by worldviews, this blame also shapes worldviews: the private and public memories that become the basis for interpretation, being, and action. This blame teaches us—for better and worse—what it means to be good friends, good parents, and good citizens.

Future Research

Although my dissertation has offered several conclusions, it also offers several questions for further research, both in terms of studying responses to mass shootings and in terms of studying the role of blame in deliberation. Let me first consider future paths

for studying deliberation in the aftermath of mass shootings. This dissertation focus on "official" discourses by national leaders and advocates. How does looking at more vernacular voices[29]—including at rallies or by means of social media—modify my analysis? Does blame function in similar ways as deliberation following other mass shootings? What about shootings that do not gain as much national attention or deliberation as the shootings at Columbine, Virginia Tech, or Sandy Hook? Was there still blame of U.S. culture, of mental illness, or guns? Who and what else has been blamed, and by whom? What rhetorical work did that blame do? And whose interests were served or not served?

Moreover, what are rhetorical scholars to make of deliberations after mass shootings that do not seem to be structured by the concept of blame? One case that stands out is the October 2, 2006, shooting in an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.[30] Amish life appeared different enough from mainstream U.S. culture that news reporters, commentators, and advocates could not rely on their familiar argumentative scripts. Moreover, family members of the slain children expressed forgiveness to the killer and his family. In short, public deliberation after the shooting seemed absent of blame, and mainstream news outlets instead focused on the character of the Amish people. Did this seeming lack of blame support or thwart deliberation about violence? What are the implications of the response to the Nickel Mines shooting for deliberation about violent events that exist outside of Amish communities? To what extent does media coverage shape deliberation about mass shootings?

Finally, what are rhetorical scholars to make of shootings that appear to have clear motives—not a seemingly "senseless" act of violence like the Sandy Hook shooting, but

a shooting with an explicit religious or political purpose? As I am writing in the spring of 2015, news is still unfolding about an attack in Kenya in which "at least 147 people, mostly students, have been killed in an assault by al-Shabab militants." Witnesses claimed that the "militants singled out Christians and shot them."[31] I suspect that since the shooting was attributed to a terrorist group, news coverage and deliberation will focus on terrorism and questions about radical religious ideology. This seems to fit into what I called "scenic blame," and I suspect that commentators will engage in a kind of scenic blame that is others-focused. The fact that this shooting occurred in Kenya, rather than the United States, will likely change how commentators interpret the shooting. I suspect that there will not be much deliberation about guns or mental illness. Is this because the shooting occurred outside the United States, apart from the entrenched debate among gun rights advocates and gun control advocates? Is it because the shooting is classified as religiously motivated terrorism? More generally, what is it that makes an act of violence "gun" violence?

In terms of understanding deliberation more generally, future research might further explore the value of "blame" for understanding deliberation. Does blame function similarly in deliberation about other public problems, such as racial or economic inequality? In what ways does blame in these contexts shift responsibility from the individual to society, or from society to the individual? Does blame in these contexts also function to shut down deliberation by scapegoating? Are there instances in which blame initiates deliberation by pointing to potential sources and solutions to the problem? On a more abstract level, future research might consider the potential of "blame" as a critical concept for understanding deliberation. While blame seems to make some aspects of

deliberation present—e.g., advocacy, emotional appeals, etc.—what aspects of deliberation does blame downplay or ignore?

 While there is much future work to do, this dissertation has contributed to scholarly conversations and deliberation about public problems by highlighting the rhetorical dimensions of blame, by arguing that blame is central to deliberation about public problems, and by suggesting that blame, as a critical concept, can help rhetorical scholars better account for deliberation as it happens in the "Human Barnyard."[32]

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