

CULTURAL ATTACKS UPON INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY ...

Aftermath of the 1960s?

by Thomas Sowell; Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Someone recently said that mass shootings, such as those at Virginia Tech or Columbine High School, are largely a phenomenon of the 1960s and afterwards. If so, these tragedies can be added to the long list of disastrous consequences of the heady notions and extravagant rhetoric of that decade.

What was there in the 1960s vision of the world that could possibly lead anyone to consider it right to shoot at individuals who had done nothing to him?

Collective guilt is one of the legacies of the 1960s that is still with us. We are still seeing a guilt trip for slavery being laid on people who never owned a slave in their lives, and who would be repelled by the very idea of owning a slave.

Back in the 1960s, it was considered Deep Stuff among the intelligentsia to say that American society — all of us collectively — were somehow responsible for the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King.

During the 1960s, the idea spread like wildfire that whatever you were lacking was someone else's fault — society's fault. If you were poor, whether at home or in some Third World country, you were one of the “dispossessed” — even if you had never possessed anything to dispossess you of.

The urban ghetto riots that swept across the country during the 1960s were all blamed on society. This view was formalized in a much-hailed report on urban violence by a national “blue ribbon” commission headed by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois.

President Lyndon Johnson likewise blamed urban violence on social conditions, saying: “All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs.”

This sweeping and heady vision made it unnecessary to stoop to anything so mundane as hard facts — which would have included the fact that urban riots struck most often and most violently when and where this collective guilt vision prevailed.

Southern cities, where at that time discrimination and poverty were more pronounced than in the rest of the country, were not nearly as often or as hard-hit as cities outside the South.

Detroit, which suffered the most deadly of all the ghetto riots of the 1960s, with 43 deaths, had an unemployment rate among blacks of 3.4 percent — which was lower than the national unemployment rate among whites.

Chicago, where Mayor Richard J. Daley was not buying the liberal guilt trips of the time, was one of the few big Northern cities to escape the wave of riots that swept across the country in 1967.

The kinds of mass urban riots that occurred all across the country during Lyndon Johnson's administration became virtually unknown during the eight years of the Reagan administration, which projected a completely different vision of the world.

But, then as now, facts often came in a poor second to heady visions and sweeping rhetoric.

If other people are somehow responsible for whatever is lacking in your life, lashing out at random against individuals who have done nothing to you personally can sound plausible to many people.

Whether or not the latest mass killings at Virginia Tech were a result of medically verifiable insanity, there have always been insane people but there have not always been mass killings with the frequency we have seen since 1960.

Nor is gun control the magic answer, as often suggested by the same kind of people who believe in collective responsibility instead of individual responsibility.

Since murder is illegal everywhere, why would someone who is unwilling to obey the law against murder be willing to obey a law against getting a gun — which is easy to get illegally?

One of the many hard facts that get overlooked by those impressed by visions and rhetoric is that mass shootings almost invariably occur in gun-free zones like schools, workplaces, or houses of worship.

When has a mass killer opened fire on a meeting of the National Rifle Association or fired on a group of hunters?

Instead of banning guns, maybe we should rethink 1960s dogmas.



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