



# The Big Payback

Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris wanted to be infamous. On Tuesday, 20 April 1999, they went to their school, Columbine High in Colorado, knowing that it wasn't going to be a normal school day. Instead of textbooks and pens, their bags were filled with bombs, sawn-off shotguns, a semi-automatic carbine and a semi-automatic pistol. They knew who they wanted to kill and that they themselves would be dead by the time the day was over. It was going to be their last day on this earth, a day they hoped would never be forgotten.

The first shot rang out at 11.19am as Harris yelled "Go! Go!" In the next hour or so, they murdered 12 students and a teacher and wounded 24 others. Some of the victims were taunted and then shot at close range. They cornered 59 people in the library and demanded: "Everyone with a white cap, stand up" (students who made it into one of the school's sports teams were given a white cap to wear as a sign of honour). When nobody stood up, Harris or Klebold yelled: "Fine, I'll start shooting!" And so they did. When Harris shot Cassie Bernall in the head, his gun recoiled into his own face, breaking his nose and causing it to bleed. They left the library, continuing their rampage in other parts of the school, but returned later. It was in the library among the bodies of their victims that they committed suicide by shooting themselves in the head. The school was so chaotic that it wasn't until four hours later that the police declared the area "safe".

Americans were shocked. What had gone wrong? How did



these teenagers get hold of deadly weapons? Why did they do it? Why hadn't their parents kept them under control? In the years that followed, a lively debate took place and many theories were voiced. In his film, *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore attacked his country's free-and-easy "gun culture". Although Harris and Klebold were too young to buy guns legally, they got an adult friend to do the purchases for them.

Novelist Todd Strasser also comments on this in his book, *Give a Boy a Gun*, which describes a situation similar to the Columbine shootings. In the book, you will find some chilling statistics:

- *There are 280 million people and 240 million guns in America.*
- *More children in America are killed by firearms than by all natural causes combined.*
- *There have been around 750,000 firearm deaths inside America since 1960 (that's about ten times the number of Americans killed in wars during the same period).*

These statistics suggest that easy access to guns plays a very important role in school shootings in the US. Another fact that Strasser mentions is the influence of television – it seems that, by twelve years of age, the average American has viewed more than seven thousand murders, just by watching "the idiot box".

It seems that Harris and Klebold were fans of violent video games, *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*, but suggestions that they were lonely "nerds" weren't really true. They had a circle of friends and weren't seen as victims of schoolyard bullying. Musically, they followed the German rock bands, *Rammstein* and *KMFDM*. Both these bands were attacked for their lyrics but deny any Nazi links. Harris and Klebold also loved the film, *Natural Born Killers*, which showed mindless violence and killing. It isn't known if they were influenced by Leonardo DiCaprio's performance in *The Basketball Diaries* in which he shoots six classmates at school.

Psychiatrists have suggested that Harris and Klebold were both mentally ill. Harris may even have been using anti-depressant medication at the time. Could this have made him heartless and more aggressive? The debate goes on.

For years before the shootings, Harris had a personal website in which he made violent threats – even death threats – and talked about hating society and wanting to kill those who annoyed him. In January 1998, he and Klebold were caught with stolen goods, went to court and then to counseling. Harris pretended to be sorry for his crime and later boasted about his acting performance. He continued to keep a diary expressing his hatred for society and plans for an attack. Reading Strasser's book, you get the impression that in American high schools teachers favour students who are good at sports. The sports kids become the popular kids. Postings on the internet often show a great gap between the popular and not-so-popular kids in American high schools. One anonymous posting reads: "I went to three high schools, and in none of them did I for a moment feel safe. High school was terrifying, and it was the casual cruelty of the popular kids that made it hell."

Even if Harris and Klebold were not outright bullied, they may have felt that they were being treated as inferiors and outsiders. Along with easy access to handguns, this could create an extremely dangerous situation. "So long as some kids go out of their way to make high school hell for others, there are going to be kids who crack, and not all of the kids who crack are going to quietly off themselves," writes an anonymous youth on the internet.

The urge for revenge is as old as humanity and can be incredibly strong in some people. The Columbine shootings have often been seen as an insane act of revenge by Harris and Klebold against authority – a payback for being told what to do and how to think. But can *anything* justify what they did? Or is there no excuse at all?

Poets and writers throughout history have noted that, in the short term, revenge is "sweet" and gives some satisfaction but, in the long term, it eats you up and destroys you as a person. Harris and Klebold fell victim to the ancient curse of Revenge.

*I am Revenge: sent from the infernal kingdom,  
To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind.*

*William Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, c. 1594*