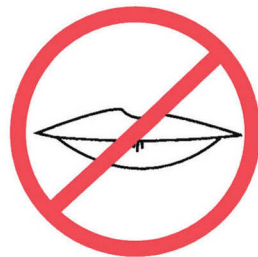


INCORRECT



THOUGHTS

Notes on Our Wayward Culture

John Leo

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INTRODUCTION

Like many people and most columnists, I keep a dignified, one-page biography on file and send it along when anyone in the media asks for it. I also have a slightly skewed, not-so-dignified version that goes to friends, and it includes a brief explanation of how I got to be a columnist.

The relevant section goes like this:

Mr. Leo left *Time* magazine at the insistence of Mortimer B. Zuckerman, owner of *U.S. News & World Report* and a fellow player on Mr. Leo's summer softball team of aging and vaguely coordinated would-be athletes in Sag Harbor, Long Island.

"Mr. Zuckerman explained at the time that he was tired of hearing Mr. Leo burst forth with interesting arguments at the dinner table, and then go back to *Time* and write stories which he woundingly characterized as "often unexciting." Mr. Zuckerman said he would prefer to reverse the process, with the interesting arguments appearing in *U.S. News*, even if it meant listening to lifeless stories over dinner at Mr. Leo's.

This sounded right to Mr. Leo, who has striven ever since to be as excitement-free as possible in table conversation with Mr. Zuckerman, thereby to increase the likelihood that his columns would seem riveting by contrast. He has been at *U.S. News* 12 years now, and is under the impression that he likes it.

I do indeed like it, and I am grateful to Mort Zuckerman for his wisdom or cronyism or whatever it was that got me the job.

Once installed at *U.S. News*, I decided to write primarily about the culture and popular trends. In the column-writing business, prestige and money generally flow toward those who write from Washington about national politics. The obvious result is that two-thirds of journalists want to be Washington-based pundits and talking heads. But when I started my column, there wasn't a lot of generally available commentary about the trends that were shaping—and sometimes convulsing—the country. So I decided to take a weekly look at what was going on in education, law, advertising, television, the news media, language, and the various liberation movements. This was an exten-

sion of what I had been doing as a reporter, covering ideas and the behavioral sciences for *Time* magazine and the *New York Times*.

As the nineties wore on, more and more of my commentary concentrated on political correctness. Most of the media treated the rise of PC as if it were a collection of unimportant oddball anecdotes—the woman at Penn State was felt sexually harassed by a Goya painting, the Sarah Lawrence student brought up on charges of inappropriate laughter, the *Boston Globe* columnist who was suspended and fined for uttering a crude synonym for “henpecked” in a private newsroom conversation with another male. But PC was actually a coherent social movement sweeping steadily through the colleges, the courts, the media, the feminist movement, and the arts world.

The goals of the movement were traditional goals of the left—equality, inclusion, liberation, racial justice—but the tactics were often less noble and the contempt for tradition, standards, and Western culture grew by the year. The movement developed a taste for censorship and coercion. Speech codes and anti-harassment policies were used as weapons to silence and intimidate opponents. Speakers were shouted down and whole editions of college newspapers were stolen to keep students from reading the arguments of conservatives and moderates.

The rise of the PC movement—what humorist Fran Liebowitz calls “the religious left”—helped give the nineties their odd character. Politically, the country was becoming ever more conservative, but culturally, it was heaving just as hard to the left, so conflict was likely to erupt at any time.

Some other stray thoughts about the pieces collected here. Columnists have to decide how they want to sound. Various famous ones have chosen to come across as erudite, polemical, debonair, or incredibly well-connected. I’ve tried to sound conversational, as if I were talking to a friend about a subject that interests us both. And if something funny occurs to me, I throw that in too, just as most of us would in ordinary conversation. People are allergic to pomposity these days, so it’s best to avoid fancy effects and all words not used in the spoken language (Goodbye to “moreover,” nonetheless,” and “mutatis mutandis.”)

Though syndicated to newspapers by Universal Press Syndicate, these columns mostly show that they were originally created for a magazine. If you opine for a newspaper, you are usually writing very quickly, in direct reaction to a breaking story, and you are usually limited to 500 or 600 words. Most magazine columns are longer and denser, and since they usually come in later than most other media commentary, they are likely to take a broader, long-term view. The good news about

broader, long-term views is that they tend to have a longer shelf life than columns reacting to quickly forgotten breaking news. This means you can collect them in books two or three years later and still interest a lot of readers. At least my publisher says this is so. I hope it is.



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PART ONE



MEDIA





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THIS COLUMN ALMOST MATTERS

A familiar nonsense phrase—"it almost doesn't matter"—seems to be making a comeback. News stories say the budget deficit is so low that "it almost doesn't matter" whether it is eliminated. The phrase shows up in crime stories too, mostly to indicate that we shouldn't care whether or not a defendant is guilty. In the Melissa Drexler case, after a high school girl gave birth during a prom and was accused of killing the baby, an editorial in *USA Today* said that the girl's predicament was so wrenching that "it almost doesn't matter whether Drexler's baby was stillborn or murdered." Whatever.

As a rule, use of the "almost" phrase indicates that someone is in the process of selling you snake oil, so it is best to turn off your hearing aid quickly and check to see if your wallet is still there. In the budget case, the "almost" phrase translates as this: "we think the deficit doesn't count, and we wish to say so emphatically, but don't hold us to it." In the Drexler case it means: "don't bother us with facts; we are busy having some important emotions."

The two most famous perpetrations of things that allegedly don't seem to matter occurred in the 1980s. *Newsweek* made the mistake of paying big money for newly discovered diaries of Adolf Hitler, but the diaries turned out to be fake. The magazine ran long excerpts anyway, telling readers "Genuine or not, it almost doesn't matter in the end." This is believed to be the first time that any news organization announced that fake news is just about as good as real news.

The other triumph of the Eighties involved another hoax, Tawana Brawley's claim that she was kidnapped and raped by white law enforcement officers. Unwilling to give up on the story, the *Nation* ran an article claiming that "this faked crime" was useful in calling attention to the suffering of blacks, so "in cultural perspective, if not in fact, it doesn't matter whether the crime occurred or not." Though morally and intellectually bankrupt, this sort of nonthinking hovered around the Brawley case for years. People who knew very well she was

lying invited her up on stage at rallies and university events as a major celebrity.

A computer search shows that the strategic use of the phrase is quite common. In New York, an official says "it almost doesn't matter" whether a controversial study of aircraft noise levels is correct because noise is obviously a problem anyway. In the *Washington Post*, an opinion piece about alleged injuries from indoor air pollution says: "In some respects, it doesn't matter whether the injuries are faked or not." In a sexual harassment case, a male executive is charged with sexist comments, but a plaintiff's lawyer says, "it almost doesn't matter what he really said because whatever it was...became the culture of the firm." A *Frontline* television report on the unearthing of repressed memories didn't use the magic words, but caught the "almost doesn't matter" mentality. A California therapist helped convince a patient that her parents had abused her. The patient sued her parents and the therapist told *Frontline*, "I don't care if it's true....What actually happened is irrelevant to me."

The recent case involving alleged racial slurs by Texaco executives displays the "almost" mentality in action. The *New York Times* reported that a secret tape recording showed the executives using a nasty racial epithet and referring to black employees as "black jelly beans at the bottom of the jar." The uproar and the damage to Texaco were so great that the company settled a long-standing racial discrimination suit for \$176 million. But the *Times* was wrong. The nasty N-word in the transcript turned out to be a holiday reference to "St. Nicholas." The "black jelly bean" comment was innocent too. It referred to words and images supplied by a diversity trainer who was working with Texaco executives. The *Times* reporter who mishandled the story wrote a Sunday piece saying that the corrections "made little difference" to civil rights groups. They almost didn't matter to some news organizations too. Several kept on reporting the nonexistent Texaco slurs as real. Author Walter Olson wrote in the *American Spectator* that after plaintiffs dismissed the corrected transcript as much ado about nothing, "it didn't matter after all" whether the slurs had really been made. The story line—a racist company brought to heel—was so strong that the actual facts never penetrated the consciousness of the media or the public.

The report from the *San Jose Mercury News* about CIA involvement in the inner-city drug trade had similar results. Three prominent newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, all investigated this report and concluded, as the *Times* said, that "scant proof" supports the allegations. The *Mercury News* backed off on the story too. But many black leaders believe "it almost doesn't

matter” whether the conspiracy actually existed, according to the *New York Daily News*, because the story has already achieved wide acceptance in the black community.

The outcome was almost identical to the more celebrated Texaco case. When the accurate transcript revealed the nonexistence of the racial slurs reported by the *Times* the media was slow to acknowledge that a serious injustice had been done to Texaco and its executives. To make things worse, Assistant Attorney General Deval Patrick said, “it didn’t matter in the end what words were on the tape.” It did, of course.

“Almost doesn’t matter” is a woeful appeal to feelings and story line over facts. It almost doesn’t belong in almost anyone’s vocabulary.

SCOTCH THE ADS? ABSOLUT-LY

It could be a put on, but *Adweek* magazine says liquor ads on television may be good for society. The magazine noted that the first booze ad shown on American TV in nearly fifty years celebrated fundamental American values. It was a Seagram commercial, placed on a station in Corpus Christi, Texas, and it featured two dogs.

One dog, labeled “obedience school graduate,” carried a newspaper in its mouth. The other, carrying a bottle of Crown Royal, was labeled “valedictorian.” *Adweek* said this positioned liquor as a reward for achievement and delayed gratification in a world sadly governed by instant gratification. Liquor ads flourished in the pre-60s culture of self-restraint, said *Adweek*, and the impact of televised liquor ads “could well be salutary.”

Maybe. But it’s possible to doubt that the rapid spread of self-restraint is what the distillers have in mind. The more likely long-term result is a set of psychologically clever ads aimed at young people and resulting in another upward tick or two each year in the death rate from drunk driving.

Adweek’s odd commentary contains a germ of truth—one genre of liquor and beer advertising does indeed stress authority, hard work, and sons following the lead of fathers. Many scotch ads are filled with dogs, castles, and other emblems of tradition, the central message being “We know Scotch tastes like iodine, but your dad drank it and you should too.” This lives on in Dewar’s current “let’s grow up and drink

Scotch" campaign, and a Chivas Regal ad in which a grown man actually wishes his father would tell him what to do more often.

But these are upscale magazine ads aimed at the well-off. Do not expect many dog and daddy ads once the booze industry gets revved up for the TV youth market and spots on *Seinfeld*. Instead we will see a lot of MTV imagery, Orwellian fantasies about sex and power, and Joe Camel-like appeals to the young.

The ad industry is very good at generating commercials that break down restraint and promote impulse. It's also important to know that the legal drug business (tobacco and alcohol) accumulates a lot of private psychological research, the better to know which of our buttons to push. The generic stuff appears in marketing magazines, but the really potent findings, which result in all those manipulative and coded ads, aren't made public. No psychologist on the take has yet come forward to blow the whistle, à la Jeffrey Weigand. But now that the Federal Trade Commission is issuing subpoenas in connection with TV alcohol advertising, it surely should try to get the closely guarded research behind many beer and liquor ads.

The general rule of thumb is: the more dangerous the product, the more coded the ads are likely to be. Newport cigarettes "Alive with pleasure" ads, for example, which seem much cleaned up nowadays, depended for years on coded themes of sexual hostility and violence running beneath all those merry scenes of outdoorsy couples at play. Among the egregious magazine ads for liquor, my favorite is the Bacardi Black "Taste of the Night" campaign with its unmissable theme of night and liquor as liberators of the real you (and your darker side) from the bonds of civilized society. Just what we need in this troubled culture—more promotion of everyone's darker side. The booze industry as Darth Vader.

When they dropped their self-imposed ban on TV ads, the distillers said they wouldn't target the young. We should be dubious. The liquor executives fear they won't be able to sell their brown drinks any more—bourbon, scotch, and brandy have not caught on among boomers or post-boomers. The trend is toward white drinks—vodka and gin—and sweet-tasting or healthy-looking drinks that disguise alcoholic content. That's why Miller Brewing is testing "alcopops," a malt-based drink that looks and tastes like lemonade. Anheuser-Busch isn't far behind. Alcopops have been successfully marketed in Britain and Australia with ads featuring lovable cartoon characters—a way of conceding that the young are indeed being targeted.

The distillers' argument about beer ads has more merit. They say a can of beer has about as much alcohol as a mixed drink, so either ban

beer from TV or let liquor ads on. In fact, some conspiracy theorists think the distillers' real goal is to drive beer off TV. That's extremely unlikely. Beer is so entrenched in TV economics that it's hard to imagine the sort of social upheaval necessary to drive it away. But if beer and liquor ads are going to be on TV, the ads should be regulated in the public interest. Alcohol is a drug and we have a long tradition of regulating drug ads to protect the public. The makers of Rogaine or Prozac aren't permitted to say whatever they wish in ads. Why should the good-tasting narcotics be exempted?

The regulation might cover TV only—our most emotional medium and the one watched most closely by children. The regulating could curb appeals to children as well as devious psychological manipulation of adults along the lines of Bacardi's Darth Vader print ad.

We know that that the televising of liquor ads will promote accelerated consumption, with predictable increases in addiction and drunk driving. If we can't stop it, let's at least set some sensible rules that reflect the true social costs involved.

PRIME-TIME "GOTCHA" JOURNALISM

NBC's *Dateline* began a recent segment with this teasing, taunting introduction by Jane Pauley: "Good evening. Do you feel that everyone is after your job, and they just might have an unfair advantage? That people can criticize you and it's OK? Are you a white American male? In California, two men have taken up the cause of the beleaguered species."

The subject, of course, was affirmative action, and alert viewers immediately knew where this segment was going. Race and gender preferences are controversial, and honorable people can be found on both sides of the issue. But maybe not in *Dateline's* opinion. The two opponents, who are trying to get the subject on the ballot in California, were portrayed as uninformed, fumbling, and perhaps deceptive members of a "beleaguered species."

The men, Tom Wood (who has a doctorate in philosophy) and Glynn Custred (a professor of anthropology), were allowed to say that they want what Martin Luther King, Jr., wanted—an open, colorblind America. Then NBC reporter Josh Mankiewicz came on like a prosecutor: "They are portrayed as 'genial scholars,' just two 'apolitical

professors,' an image Wood and Custred have worked hard to maintain." But, he charged, Wood "is actually not a professor at all." Bingo! Without actually saying so, Mankiewicz left the impression that Wood is a liar. Wood, in fact, is not a professor, but says he never pretended to be one. Last week, when I asked Mankiewicz if he had any evidence of such pretense, he said no, but "Wood doesn't seem to correct newspapers that call him a professor."

On *Dateline*, Wood denied that he and Custred "are in any sense political animals." Then Mankiewicz cut in with another McCarthyite "gotcha," saying the two are actually "key figures" in the National Association of Scholars, a group that is "hardly apolitical" since it is "very critical of many aspects of higher education, including black and women's studies (and) sexual harassment policies..."

Senator Joe himself could not have phrased this better. It artfully left the impression that NAS is a sinister anti-woman, anti-black group. Given the ideological makeover of the modern campus, NAS is indeed largely conservative, but some members are liberals, many are Democrats, and a prominent Marxist, Eugene Genovese, sits on the board of advisers. It is surely politically involved with affirmative action. But it's apolitical in this sense: it isn't partisan, and deals only with campus issues, mostly defending academic freedom and a non-ideologized curriculum.

Mankiewicz insisted on trumping everything Wood and Custred said. Wood said Tulane University has faculty quotas. Mankiewicz said some people call it a quota system but the university says "there were absolutely never any quotas." Maybe not, but Tulane's complicated and arcane system of faculty set-asides (since modified) seemed designed to achieve the effect of quotas without looking like a suspect quota plan. "Call it an unstated quota system," Tulane Professor Paul Lewis told me.

Mankiewicz was annoyed that Wood and Custred couldn't say how many white men have lost jobs due to reverse discrimination. He noted that "when it comes to hard numbers...they come up empty-handed." But nobody has good statistics on this. Since a lot of reverse discrimination is legal under Title VII, many who are hurt by it never bother to file any complaints and thus don't get counted. Demanding accurate stats is like asking how many Irishmen lost jobs when the "No Irish Need Apply" signs went up in Boston and New York.

Wood says Mankiewicz asked the same questions over and over, perhaps to get the soundbite that would make him look the most foolish. Mankiewicz said it was because Wood kept being unresponsive and was hard to pin down.

Wood and Custred may not be the most polished, camera-ready guys in the world. And we all know that NBC has reporters who can run rings around academics. But why did NBC think this was worth doing? The national upsurge against affirmative action has little to do with these two men. Race and gender preferences are wildly unpopular from coast to coast. A *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* poll last October showed that 68 percent of blacks, 86 percent of whites and 78 percent of Hispanics endorsed this statement: "Hiring, promotion and college admissions should be based strictly on merit and qualifications rather than on race or ethnicity." Instead of dealing with this upsurge, NBC thought it was a good idea to spend twenty minutes shooting two of the messengers.

The unconscious assumptions of the newsroom culture are surely part of the problem. It's almost inconceivable that NBC would try to eviscerate an environmentalist or a gay activist trying to get their initiatives on the ballot. But "beleaguered species" are fair game, because everyone in the newsroom already knows they are wrong.

Bernard Goldberg, the CBS correspondent, told me: "It was a hatchet job. They set out to demolish these two guys and ended up demolishing their own credibility. This is why people don't like or trust TV reporters. We swear we have no agenda and we go out and produce something like this."

On the next fifty panel discussions of media bias, I hope someone remembers to bring up this sorry program.

WHY RUIN A GOOD STORY?

Whenever friends complain about deep bias in the media, my usual strategy is to sigh, then try to explain the difference between bias and the framing of issues in the newsroom culture.

The Ellen DeGeneres story is a good example. This was a mildly tedious story of a likeable woman in a harmless sitcom, coming out of the closet slowly for six months to get some ratings and then having her ratings-week decision vastly overplayed because the media felt they had been stuck much too long in a no-news news cycle.

Nobody should have been surprised by the way the story was played. Almost without exception, the media tend to look at stories about gays and lesbians through the familiar lens of the black struggle for

civil rights. Whatever the actual news, these narratives are told in terms of bias, exclusion, tolerance, and rights. So the Ellen story was told as a social breakthrough against prejudice, often with reference to other firsts—the first black to get a TV series, the first frank references to sex, and so on.

This is certainly a valid narrative line. Bias and the denial of rights are real, and straights have a lot to answer for in their historic cruelty toward gays. But rights-and-bias is only one way of framing a broad, continuing, and confusing story.

In fact, most Americans have a live-and-let-live attitude toward gays, but they don't frame the story the way the newsroom does. They are mostly concerned with questions of substance, all centering on the question of what homosexuality is (or what homosexualities are) and what the social impact is likely to be as we glide rather casually from social tolerance to social approval.

Polls show a large majority have reservations and conflicted feelings, particularly when it comes to gay marriage and teaching in the schools that amounts to an endorsement of homosexuality. In the newsroom, of course, all this is viewed as nonsense and homophobia. The upshot is that because of newsroom framing, the real national conversation on homosexuality is not really being reported. It is off the table because of the narrow framing of the story in terms of prejudice.

Having worked in many newsrooms, I can tell you that most reporters are honest and try hard to be fair, but they are keenly aware of the conventional narrative line on most controversial and recurring stories. They know how such stories are expected to be handled and how newsroom rewards and punishments tend to follow certain kinds of treatment. In his 1990 *Los Angeles Times* series on abortion coverage, David Shaw explained how reporters could expect a challenge from colleagues when they tapped out a story that gave even indirect aid and comfort to anti-abortion forces.

"Angry white male" stories tend to lump any opposition to affirmative action to social intolerance, backlash, and personal fears. Here's the opening section of a segment last year on NBC's *Dateline* dealing with the two academics who got California's Proposition 209 on the ballot: "Do you think that everyone is after your job...that people can criticize you and it's ok? Are you a white American male...the beleaguered species." Intended to be jaunty and cute, the opening was simply snide. All it really showed is that the people at *Dateline* had difficulty imagining any principled opposition to race and gender preferences, possibly because such opposition is unknown on the *Dateline* staff.

A subset of the conventional angry-white-male story is the story linking conservatives to loony extremists, and linking every available disaster to angry-white militiamen. Here's how the Associated Press began an early and misguided story on the bombing at the Atlanta Olympics: "The bomber who brought terror to the Olympics was a white male, may not have worked alone and may have shared militia groups' hatred of international organizations." Could be. Or it might been a miffed Tibetan U.N. employee who is related to the Unabomber and several violent Weatherpeople left over from the 1960s.

The church-burning story is a classic example of media framing so strong that it can ward off even a sturdy set of actual facts. Once the story was seen as a startling new epidemic of classic racial hatred, it was very difficult for the media to drop this powerful narrative line, even though information piled up very quickly showing that the story was exaggerated to the point of being a hoax. Robert Lichter, the media critic, points to the odd fact that even after several prominent newspapers and magazines demolished the original story line, most of the media kept on reporting the debunked epidemic as if it were true.

The same thing happened with the dramatic reports of racial slurs in taped conversations of Texaco executives. Even after the *New York Times* ran a big story admitting that these "slurs" were based on a mistaken transcript, the media kept referring to the slurs as real. One network news show was still talking about Texaco "slurs" five weeks after the *Times*' clarification (i.e., retraction). Texaco, a hard company to love, has a terrible record on minority hiring. So the story line had a powerful pull, even though it wasn't true. That's the way it goes when reporters, mostly unconsciously, report their feelings about the news rather than telling us the news itself.

MORE GUESTS WHO GUESS

After the Jonesboro shootings, I gave an unsuccessful drive-time interview to a St. Louis radio talk show. The co-hosts were professional, polite, and single-minded. They seemed to think that gun control was the obvious main topic of the day. When I strayed to talk about something else, they gently steered me back to guns and the gun culture.

Well, yes, I said, gun control is important, but you can kill people a lot of ways. One of the pubescent killers had been flashing a knife the

day before—he might just as well have slaughtered four or five classmates with a machete. Would we then be talking about machete culture?

This was a “yes, but” point, and yes-buts do not play well on talk shows. The only thing worse in the modern radio interview is to ramble on about “many factors.” “There are many other factors,” I said, causing many mid-western drivers to grope for the dial on their car radios. For the benefit of any remaining listeners, I talked about the movement to teach adolescents impulse control so they won’t go directly from anger to violence. These programs are valuable. Teaching the habit of restraint in a culture that seems overly devoted to impulse is important work. But in the middle of this argument, I realized it had almost nothing to do with Jonesboro. The killings there were clearly premeditated and cold-blooded, not the result of sudden unchecked rage.

Most of the avalanche of analysis seemed as unsatisfactory as my own. Why did the Jonesboro massacre happen? Nobody seemed to have much of a clue. Details were sketchy, but everyone jumped in anyway, offering standard responses. Guns, television violence, and the popular culture in general all drew early and predictable abuse. One of the Jonesboro boys admired gangs, rap music, and Beavis and Butthead, thus opening three other familiar lines of analysis. Some commentators seemed eager to blame parents or the Jonesboro school, but the school quickly reported that the two boys had clean records and reporters turned up no evidence of bad parenting. A reporter for a major newspaper couldn’t resist applying her gender theories: the boys may have been influenced by the “many men” who stalk or kill their wives and girlfriends.

The “Southern culture” theory seemed to blanket TV coverage for an hour or two, then play itself out. Researchers report that homicides associated with a personal grievance are four times more common in the south than in the mid-west. In response, southern politicians tended to argue that violence is a product of the national culture (translation: we are tired of hearing that violence is a southern problem). Black commentators tended to point out that all peoples and regions can produce hideous violence (translation: we are tired of hearing that this is a black problem). Marion Wright Edelman was sure that the federal government needed to spend billions more on children.

Geoffrey Canada, a child expert speaking on ABC’s *Good Morning America*, said that children’s access to guns “turns this issue from a 13-year-old and 11-year-old who have a chip on their shoulder...into murderers.” Children’s access to guns makes me nervous too, but so do

commentators who speak as though guns themselves turn innocents into killers. In the south and west, hundreds of thousands of children grow up hunting with rifles and never shoot anybody. The enormous media coverage of Jonesboro surely underlined how rare an event it was.

Many talking heads spoke about the phenomenon of school violence, but other analysts pointed out that school violence is rare and decreasing. Ninety percent of American schools report no serious violence at all. One said that the Los Angeles Unified School district has 600,000 students and hasn't had a homicide since 1995.

Perhaps inevitably, some of the commentary made the shooters seem like helpless victims of an irresistible popular culture. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee said he wasn't sure "we could expect a whole lot else in a culture where these children are exposed to tens of thousands of murders on television and in movies." No round-up of instant wisdom is complete without a bit of long-distance psychological analysis, so a University of Kentucky researcher weighed in with a syndrome known as "fledgling psychopathy," the result of hyperactivity interacting with an emotional disorder, expressing itself in fighting, cruelty, and truancy.

Does all this instant opining have redeeming social value? Alas, the modern media are set up for the rapid collection of emphatic guesses on the causes of disturbing news. Yes, it's fair to criticize the popular culture for depicting violence as cool, effective, and emotionally satisfying. But almost automatically, the media now turn tragedies into trends, individual acts into pop symbols of decline. We no longer think it's unusual for far-off commentators to explain the actions of children they never met, or even heard of a week ago. Some of us think this is social commentary. The rest of us think it's blather.

BOYZ TO (MARLBORO) MEN

Marshall Blonsky mentioned the other day that an ad agency once offered him \$25,000 for two weeks work on a tobacco account. Blonsky, a professor at New York University, is an expert on semiotics, the study of signs, symbols, and other non-verbal communication. The agency wanted him to do a psychological profile of all existing American cigarette brands and their ads, "a sort of Human Genome project" of the mental world created by Big Tobacco. The idea was to find psychological space for a new brand.

Blonsky said no, but his story is a reminder of how hard the tobacco companies work on depth psychology. This extends to the ritual cues of smoking, right down to the satisfaction a smoker gets from crunching an empty cigarette pack and hearing the crinkle of cellophane.

Cigarette packs and their ads bristle with “visual rhetoric,” a term used by playwright Anne Devere Smith to express the idea that words are not nearly as persuasive these days as images that work on us without any argument at all. Many Newport ads are filled with coded images of sexual combat and attempts by females to eclipse the dominant males, all buried in happy scenes of outdoorsy horseplay. A decade or so ago, one brand experimented with ads showing a lot of white lines. They looked like lines of cocaine, apparently an attempt to link smoking with snorting and hipness.

Blonsky has written about Reagan-era ads for Merit filled with military imagery, thus associating the brand with the military build-up and Morning in America. Military imagery in smoking is an old story. The famous Marlboro chevron is a military insignia. Both Marlboro, named for a famous general, and the former best-seller, Pall Mall, carry the military mottoes of conquering Roman emperors on every pack. One analyst thinks the Marlboro chevron hard pack subconsciously functions as a medal, which the smoker “pins on” himself each time he stuffs it in his shirt pocket.

Maybe, maybe not. But don't underestimate the industry's commitment to finding powerful non-verbal hooks, particularly for young beginning smokers. A lot of psychologists are reportedly on the payroll, and rumor has it that they include child psychologists, too.

The most powerful hook so far is the Marlboro man, which the Leo Burnett agency more or less stumbled upon in the fifties while working on a series of images of blue-collar males. Philip Morris's research showed that young people in search of an identity were starting to smoke to declare their independence from their parents. The idea was to harness a yearning for freedom and rebellion without making the message too anti-social. (The early Marlboro man had tattoos, a much stronger anti-social symbol then than now.)

A lot of work has gone into aping Marlboro's success—70 percent of beginning white male smokers pick Marlboro. The pre-Joe Camel ads for Camel featured a lone rugged male, clearly a Marlboro imitator. Canada's Imperial Tobacco Limited mocked this Camel man because he “does not show feelings, excludes women and isn't concerned about society.” However, Imperial agreed with the selling theme of “nobody to interfere, no boss/parents.”