

HITLER'S BIRTHDAY:
RUMOR-PANICS IN THE WAKE OF THE COLUMBINE SHOOTINGS

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On April 20, 1999, two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, came to Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, armed with a variety of weapons and thirty homemade bombs. There they opened fire randomly, killing thirteen people before turning the guns on themselves. The date was the hundred-and-tenth anniversary of Adolf Hitler's birthday, and police later found a handwritten diary showing that the attack was planned with this date in mind. The two youths were notorious at the school as being members of a misfit group that called itself the "Trench Coat Mafia" because they allegedly came to school wearing black clothing and sunglasses. (EmergencyNet News 1999).

Rumor panics immediately broke out in many other high schools, nationwide, on subsequent dates that were also said to be "Hitler's Birthday" or some such occasion for mayhem. By April 29, The Emergency Response and Research Institute reported that its Watch Center had been inundated with reports of scares coming from all parts of the United States and Canada. Such cases were especially prevalent in Eastern Pennsylvania, where at least 52 threats in 22 counties were reported to the ERRI Watch Center. An informal poll of my students documented such scares in Easton, Pocono Mountain, Wilkes-Barre, Hazleton, Berwick, Bloomsburg, Mountaintop, and Allentown. While the details of the rumor varied, in general they claimed that a group of students intended to come to school and open fire on students or detonate bombs. In many cases, a "hit list" of students to be assassinated was said to exist. In fact, nothing unusual occurred at any location, but here as nationwide the panic was used to justify tough new restrictions or harsh penalties laid out to students found responsible for some infraction at the time.

The area had also been affected by rumor panics during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Previously, I have described events that were eerily similar, as they occurred in three local high schools in the spring of 1987. In this case, a "satanic cult" was said to have encouraged a local teenager to commit suicide. As their next act, they were rumored to be prepared to attend their high school's prom and commit a massacre there. An intense panic occurred, in the course of which two reputedly "weird" students were physically beaten by a mob, and unusual security measures, including the installment of metal detectors at the prom location, were instituted. One view of these panics, I noted then, was in terms of "hysteria" or "collective delusion," a rather deterministic approach which assumed that rumors provoke a contagious, illogical response from a group. Using concepts drawn from Veronique Champion Vincent (1988) and Joel Best (1989), I argued instead that such events were logically based on narrative themes existing, often unexpressed, in the worldviews of those involved. They are, I suggested, a means of telling a story in a structured format through real-life action rather than through oral narration. First, some social unrest or of crisis must be present as an underlying cause. A "triggering event" dramatizes this unrest in an "exceptional and traumatic" way, and a following period of collective action embodies the community's reaction to the threat. This leads to a *showdown*, or

climactic moment in which the legend is "fulfilled." When such legend-derived panics occur, participants can adopt one of several stereotypical roles, and *all* such activities constitute a performance of the legend through ostension, or the patterning of real-life actions on a shared narrative model.¹

In the case of the 1987 prom-panic, I noted that the underlying stresses behind the panic were based on widespread assumptions that Satan was a real and influential supernatural force in the world and also that teenagers, in increasing numbers, were practicing satanism. Hence when a real suicide occurred, it was logical that these beliefs would form the structure of the collective action that occurred in response. In fact, in 1996, another teenage suicide in the Wilkes-Barre area provoked another similar panic, at Wyoming Valley West High School. This event led to public meetings, circulation of the usual danger signs of satanism, and a special workshop for local police on the threat of cults, held at the local Penn State branch campus (Ellis 2001: 238-40). More disturbingly, on April 24, 1998, a 14-year-old boy *did* come to a prom in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, and opened fire, wounding two students and killing the teacher who was the event's organizer and chaperone. Questioned afterwards, he said only that he had intended to make the dance "memorable."

Sociologist Jeffrey Victor (1989, 1990) has viewed such rumor panics as part of a moral crusade set in action by interest groups with an ultra-conservative, often evangelical agenda. This approach is certainly valid and helps explain why certain themes (such as alleged satanic symbols in graffiti) appear repeatedly in the information circulated during such panics. However, the Wyoming Valley West scare was unusual in focusing on satanism. A few years earlier, the Jim Thorpe Area Junior High School, in a more rural area south of Wilkes-Barre, experienced an intense panic based on a rumor that "the KKK and skinheads" were planning to commit a massacre. According to one student, it was surprising that the rumor reached the intensity that it did, because the school was mostly white, and no friction between them and the minorities who attended had been felt. Nevertheless, when a "suspicious van" was seen parked outside the school, tensions grew to the point that students began bringing weapons to school for self-protection, they claimed. "Teachers attempted to comfort students," the student recalled, "counseling was offered, and local police patrolled the hallways, to insure safety." While many students disregarded the story, he added, "Others were in a state of shock and fear, some were even crying." It took some two weeks for the affair and the community to settle down.

A similar panic, complete with suspicious van, occurred in the South London suburbs in 1989. This scare focused on a gang called "The Chelsea Smilers," and officials blamed it not on satanism but rather on violence inspired by fierce loyalty to football clubs (Roud 1989). Since such panics have continued to occur, even after the Satanism scare died down, they probably are not caused by evangelical interest groups, though these factions can and do exploit them for their own purposes. Rather, it seems likely that rumor panics, like other kinds of narrative, have a structure and rule system of their own. Set on foot by existing stresses in the community, they express and incorporate these stresses in narrative logic. Satanism and ready access to guns have been blamed as causes for real-life massacres and the rumor panics that mimic them. But the content of such rumor-panics suggests that the core issue, as defined by the participants themselves, is the unresolved "jock/head" conflict as it has developed in American high schools.

This paper will examine details from a number of these 1999 panics to study them as an emergent form of folk narrative. The gruesome details of the Columbine massacre created stress that the panics dissipated in an essentially therapeutic fashion. The involved a complex interplay

of ostensive actions modeled after existing traditions. Many of these acts of ostension--perpetrating hoaxes and making bomb threats--were criminal in nature, but they did not involve violence, and the ordeals they gave rise to cleared the air and made most parties feel as though they had defeated any similar threat. However, as I argued ten years ago, rumor panics may communicate the seeds of the violence that they warn against. As folklorists, we need to be concerned about whether some forms of folk narrative might contribute to the social problems that give rise to them.

The rumor panic took a number of forms when it occurred in Northeastern Pennsylvania. At Hazleton Area High School, "The rumor began . . . that it was Adolf Hitler's birthday and that this is the way they [the killers] were going to celebrate it. The shootings were supposed to occur during the lunch period." One version had it that "Supposedly there was going to be a bomb set off at 12:15 the one day, and someone was also supposed to open up fire and shoot people." Another added, "everyone at my school didn't want to go to school on Hitler's birthday because they were afraid someone is going to come and start shooting." At another local school, "The rumor was that two students much like the two that killed others were planning to bomb our school."

As with the 1987 panic, school proms were frequently mentioned as "showdown" dates. At nearby Berwick Area High School, "Rumor had it that on May 4th someone was going to open fire in the school." Another student recalled, "There was a rumor that at our prom a group of younger students were going to shoot and kill all the senior football players and cheerleaders. There was supposed to be a list with all the names on it." Similarly, at Crestwood High School, a story held that "after the Columbine shootings that this one kid . . . made a hit list and was supposed to kill the certain few people whose name was on the list at the prom." In the Pittsburgh area, a similar rumor emerged, claiming that a bomb would be detonated at the prom at Highlands High School. Tensions increased when police arrived at the school on a routine drug search, locked students in classrooms and opened lockers. A school spokesperson emphasized that the prom would be more secure than ever, with security guards present to guard locked doors and, if necessary, use hand-held metal detectors. But students responded with skepticism and fear (Everett 1999). At Easton Area High School, the date was an annual school-pride celebration called EAHS Day, during which a school king and queen would be chosen in a mass assembly. The morning of the event, the school received a bomb threat, stating "that since everyone in the school would be in the same place at the same time, they [the caller and his friends] would go on a shooting rampage and then set bombs off."

At most locations, students and school officials reacted with concern. At Hazleton, the panic affected the entire district, and "the principal made announcements during the entire week of school that the students have nothing to worry about because the school is a very safe place and they have security walking around the hallways." Coughlin High School, in Wilkes-Barre, escaped the bomb threats that affected local schools. But in a variation on the "satanic graffiti" theme, students came to school one day to find "DWBS" spray painted on the walls. "Nobody was sure exactly what it meant," a student said, "but it was rumored that the letters stood for 'Die Wilkes-Barre Students.'"

At other locations, though, students engaged in a more disturbing form of ostension, calling in bomb threats and leaving death threats and even fabricated "hit lists" where they could be found. In response, school officials found students bringing weapons to school--knives, BB guns, and the sort--for self defense. At Pocono Mountain High School, for instance, "The rumor

that circulated . . . was [that] on . . . Hitler's Birthday a handful of people picked out and put on a "hit-list" would be killed." These death threats tended to target "jocks," especially at Berwick, whose football team has won several regional and statewide championships. One of the members of the team recalled, "None of us . . . really cared that much but some of the cheerleaders were worried about it." He added, "Also, many of the faculty were worried about it. They were worried because we already did have a lot of bomb threats and they thought that maybe this would be real."

At Allentown Central Catholic, another school with a highly visible athletics program, a list appeared "of football players, cheerleaders, and band members that people wanted to kill going around the school." A student recalled, "Myself and a lot of my friends were on the list." At another local school, a hit list was confiscated, and rumors circulated that the student who had it "was going to bring a gun to the prom and kill those that were on the list." Likewise, Crestwood, a student was found with a similar prom hit list.

No actual incidents occurred in any of these cases. Most students claimed that they personally were not affected by the scare. A Coughlin student said, "Most people, including me, really didn't take this too seriously. . . . School went on as usual that day and nothing happened. It was apparently just more people trying to copy what went on at Columbine." But he noted that "there were some who were a little worried about it." Another said, somewhat cynically, "I wasn't on the [hit] list anyway so I didn't care." Nevertheless, at all locations many students stayed away from school on "Hitler's Birthday." At Hazleton, less than half the students showed on on that day, and when the school bell rang at 12:15, the predicted time of the massacre, one student recalled seeing one of his classmates dash for cover. At Berwick, the rumor caused a community-wide uproar, with both parents and students expressing concern. On the day of the prediction, over half the students in all grades, including elementary school, stayed away. The school also considered cancelling the Prom, but relented when the seniors objected. Bomb threats also were called in to Pocono Mountain, saying that explosives had been planted on school busses. A tennis match had to be cancelled because experts had not had time to inspect the bus needed to transport the team.

At Easton, an elaborate rumor emerged on the day of the public assembly that was to be bombed. A student observed that as soon as students heard the rumor, they began to leave, group by group, and when the king and queen were crowned, only about a hundred of the school's three thousand students and faculty chose to attend. At another high school, the rumor circulated about two disaffected students who were said to be planning a Columbine-style bombing and massacre. On the predicted day, a bomb threat was in fact phoned in, supposedly from these two (who later turned out to be innocent). Nothing happened, but a witness recalled, "what I remember the most was the scared little face of the students in the middle school. After the bomb scare many of them went home because they were so scared."

In most schools, the panic led to short- and long-range consequences. The Hazleton area schools imposed a set of new rules, the requirement of transparent or at least translucent book bags being the most visible. The new rule was imposed virtually overnight, forcing parents to travel to nearby cities to get bookbags that met the guidelines when stocks in Hazleton disappeared quickly. In Berwick, students were subject to searches when they arrived at school, and there and in Wilkes-Barre, police were permanently assigned to patrol school entrances. Students found responsible for writing false "hit lists" or calling in bomb threats were frequently given unusually harsh punishments. In the case of a Crestwood student who fabricated a prom

hit list, a classmate noted that " Normally nothing would have been done about it, but it was right after the Columbine shootings and so they gave him a three-day suspension." Ironically, though, the punishment was light enough that the student actually showed up later at his prom. A somewhat more severe penalty went to another student who

was counting down the days until he saw Limp Bizkit (his favorite band) in concert. One day he came to school with a note on his shirt saying "3 more days!!!" In the midst of all the panic, he was falsely accused of being the kid that was making all the threats, and they interpreted the note as "3 more days until everyone dies in the school." He was suspended for 10 days.

At Hazleton and at Allentown Central, students were expelled for bomb threats, and at a nearby New Jersey school two students were actually given a month's jail sentence for such a threat.

Such actions were not uncommon nationwide. In Chicago, metal detectors were installed at the entrances of public schools in the wake of an incident in which a 15-year-old was caught trying to smuggle a gun into school. At the Indiana School for the Deaf in Indianapolis, fifth-graders were seen standing up in a cafeteria, pointing their fingers as if they were guns, while one reportedly signed "I'm going to kill you." The group were suspended for five days under a new "zero tolerance" policy forbidding jokes about the incident. In several areas, black trenchcoats were outlawed, and the state of Delaware instituted a new policy under which teens making threatening statements were forced to undergo psychological evaluation and kept under detention until their parents could come and pick them up (EmergencyNet News 1999).

Another immediate reaction to the panics was renewed agitation in the area to have religious statements placed in public schools. Attempts to institute public prayer, in some form, have regularly been blocked by courts. But the story of Cassie Bernal who was shot by one of the Columbine assailants after allegedly expressing her belief in God² gave local ministers incentive to push for posting a copy of the Ten Commandments in public schools. The rationale, as one Lutheran Pastor told his congregation, was that if God were kept out of schools by law, then inevitably Satan would enter in. This move linked the panic to many of the mythological concepts present in this area, which had motivated earlier rumor panics. But this development, as I suggested earlier, was probably an effort by religious groups to exploit public concern, in much the same way as political leaders used the event to advance gun control legislation. A closer look at the incidents suggests that neither God nor guns were central to the narratives being told.

In my 1989 study, I noted that so-called "satanic" activities were best seen in terms of a traditional "jock" (athletic-oriented) versus "head" (alcohol/drug-oriented) rivalry, in which "jocks" sported all-American crew cuts and patriotic symbols, while "heads" complemented their disheveled look with demonic tokens. Kathleen Lowney, in her own study of teen Satanism, also noted that a self-defined "satanic" group in Georgia likewise defined its identity in opposition to groups that had gained approval from adults by participation in athletics or academics. In the case of the Columbine tragedy, and the rumor panic reactions it provoked, it seems clear that the main underlying stress was unresolved tension between such factions. Such an antagonism was clearly present in the notes left behind by Harris and Klebold, which included phrases such as

"We want to be different, we want to be strange and we don't want jocks or other people putting us down . . . We're going to punish you" (EmergencyNet News 1999). And the same tension has regularly emerged in other panics, where students who dressed in modes officially defined as "satanic" were subjected to official harrassment. In the 1996 Wilkes-Barre panic, a 15-year-old girl was expelled from the school affected when, after the two teens' suicide, she showed up for class in a black outfit. It was intended as a protest against the current fad of wearing pricy clothes from The Gap, she explained, and her mother backed her claim that she was in no way involved with the occult. "I searched her room," the mother added.

In the wake of publicity over the Columbine shootings, many non-conforming high school students reported similar official persecutions. Jon Katz, an online supporter of free speech rights, received hundreds of messages from self-described "oddballs" who had suffered from similar acts of intolerance. One student from a southeastern high school described how a social studies teacher had initiated a discussion in class. The student said that, while he could not condone the killings, he understood the feelings of the killers: "Because day after day, slight after slight, exclusion after exclusion, you can learn how to hate." This discussion had an unexpected result:

After the class, I was called to the principal's office and told that I had to agree to undergo five sessions of counseling or be expelled from school, as I had expressed "sympathy" with the killers in Colorado, and the school had to be able to explain itself if I "acted out." In other words, for speaking freely . . . I was not only branded a weird geek, but a potential killer. That will sure help deal with violence in America (Katz 1999).

Another student, an enthusiast of on-line video games, was banned from the Internet in the wake of Columbine and referred to a school guidance counselor, who told the student that this was a chance to "re-invent" himself, to "mainstream." "This whole Colorado thing," the student commented, "it's given them an excuse to do more of what started this trouble in the first place--to make individuals and different people feel like even bigger freaks." "This is a whole new level of exclusion," another role-playing game enthusiast from New York City agreed, "another excuse for the preppies of the universe to put down and isolate people like me" (Katz 1999). Again, this was no new reaction. After the local media had exploited the "satanic" element of the 1996 Wilkes-Barre panic, an anonymous caller left this message on the paper's "Say So" machine:

You people are missing the mark once again, and making it harder and harder for young people to get help with the real issues they face. This sensationalizing is turning young people against each other in fear. It breeds paranoia, it stereotypes them, and it dilutes the real issues. . . . This amounts to using them and adding to their confusion about who to trust. Think about it (Ellis 1996).

In fact, an especially unsettling element of rumor panics is the way in which they actually polarize existing conflicts between the two groups. In the 1996 panic, for instance, other students who regularly dressed in black received anonymous letters with messages such as "Die,

freaks!" In 1999, this conflict emerged most dramatically at Central Columbia High School in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, where students had to deal with a double shock.³ On April 19, they learned that a popular student, J. P. Cleaver, had been killed instantly in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. As usual, the event was marked with a moment of silence and the posting of memorial ribbons in J. P.'s honor. But the following days brought the effects of the Columbine tragedy, and the two reinforced each other to produce an intense panic. The trigger event was an effort by two students to enact a similar memorial in honor of the two Columbine assailants: two days after the shooting became news, they came to school in black trenchcoats, playing allegedly "Satanic" music on their car stereo. They had been at odds with "The Militia," a group of athletics-oriented students that J.P. had belonged to, and that day the two provoked a series of confrontations with the dead student's friends, male and female. Rumors soon emerged that the two planned to attack the Militia, and the school was thrown into what one participant called "a state of total lockdown," with students' jackets and bookbags regularly searched for deadly weapons.

As happened in the 1987 Hazleton panic, official sanctions were supported by vigilante justice. Three weeks later, a group of Militia supporters, who had been trailing the two "freaks," set an ambush for them on their way home from work. The two were seriously beaten and kicked, one suffering a broken jaw and ribs, the other, a concussion. In retaliation, the two students called police and pressed charges against their attackers. But when one of them put up photographs of their assailants and their friends on his website, labeled "Wanted, dead or alive," police interpreted it as a death threat. Instead of prosecuting those who attacked them, authorities ordered the two committed to a local hospital for psychiatric treatment. Even with the "freaks" temporarily out of school, rumors still circulated that one of them was intending to show up "with a bomb strapped to his back and was waiting until everyone was leaving school to set it off." The standoff continued until the end of the school year, with Militia posses escorting the threatened students to and from school and work and shadowing the two oddballs.

Such, sadly, was the conclusion of many such reactions to the Columbine shootings. Rather than dealing directly with the tensions that underlie such acts of violence, both official and unofficial actions further polarized existing factions in high schools in a way that may sow the seeds of further massacres, as I told the AFS in 1989 (Ellis 1990). Given the widespread nature of rumor panics and the way they adhere to a stereotyped narrative form, school massacres are probably best understood as a traditional means of performing these legends. In the same way, I said at the 1984 AFS meeting, some allegedly satanic murders are performances of folk narratives (Ellis 1989).

For this reason, folklorists are socially responsible for recognizing the traditional elements in such violent actions and for connecting them to the less violent but still sociopathic elements in rumor panics that end only in acts of hate and non-lethal violence. As free speech activist Jon Katz has stressed:

People who are different are reviled as geeks, nerds, dorks. The lucky ones are excluded, the unfortunates are harassed, humiliated, sometimes assaulted literally as well as socially. Odd values--unthinking school spirit, proms, jocks--are exalted, while the best values--free thinking, non-confirmity, curiosity--are ridiculed. Maybe the one positive

legacy the Trenchcoat Mafia left was to ensure that this message got heard, by a society that seems desperate not to hear it (1999).

It is unfortunate that, given the political weakness and internal divisions of the folklore community, that the people whose messages we should be hearing and interpreting for our culture largely remain unheard, except through bombs, bullets, and the distorting medium of the popular press.

The Central Columbia panic, as ugly as it became, suggests another possible direction. While teachers and administrators, reportedly, were clueless as to how to resolve the matter, Meredith, a classmate of the feuding groups thought up a way of providing closure. In addition to J. P., sadly, a young girl had also passed away during her senior year, and Meredith suggested that both seniors could be quietly honored during the graduation ceremony. A local stationery store donated a box of stickers to the school, butterflies to honor the girl, Harley-Davidson logos to honor J. P. The latter symbol was an ingenious choice, as the logo could allude both to outdoor activities practiced by the Militia and to the motorcycle as a symbol of adolescent rebellion. In any case, the entire class, including the two freaks, graduated wearing both symbols. "I was totally shocked to the [the two] wearing them on their caps," a participant later commented to Meredith, adding, "I didn't know if it was a peace offering or just a fluke. . . . You would think that they would have just chosen not to do that." "I guess so," Meredith replied, "but then again it was our only way of incorporating them into the ceremony."

Thankfully, cases like the Columbine massacre and the "memorable" Edinboro prom remain the exception rather than the rule. In many places and in many traditional ways students find ways of working through panics without further polarizing factions. As folklorists we could find ways of looking positively at the rumor panics that provide one of the inspirations for such tragedies. There are models of ordeals that provide closure by incorporating all factions into a newly found sense of community, the experience that Victor Turner (1977) called *communitas*. In any case, if we ourselves wish to be more than the oddball faction of academia, we need to be aware of the ways in which our scholarly craft can contribute at least to understanding the social implications of emergent events such as these.

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Notes:

¹ This paper was initially presented at the 1989 AFS meeting in 1989 and published as Ellis 1990. A revised version appears in Ellis 2001:199-219

² BaptistFire: The Cassie Bernall Story <http://www.baptistfire.com/articles/other/cassie.shtml> is a useful compilation of reactions, both skeptical and religious, to this story. A book, *She Said Yes*, was written by Cassie's mother Misty Bernall and has also been highly promoted in religious circles. See <http://www.Cassiebernall.org/>

³ Details on this panic come from a collection project written in April 2000 by Jess Shuman, a freshman at Penn State Hazleton, who was a close friend of many of the participants in this affair. My thanks to her for allowing me to use this material.