

# “Columbine”

by Dave Cullen  
(Twelve Publishing, 2010)

Reviewed by Sid Heal

There can be no doubt that the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999 forever changed the way law enforcement handled active shooter calls. In terms of lessons learned, it was a near perfect storm of things gone awry despite the best efforts of everyone involved. Perhaps that is why the contemporary strategy of surround and negotiate was so quickly challenged and determined to be inadequate. As the tragedy begins to fade into time, new generations of tactical officers are missing the significance of the sea change in thought and actions that occurred as a result.

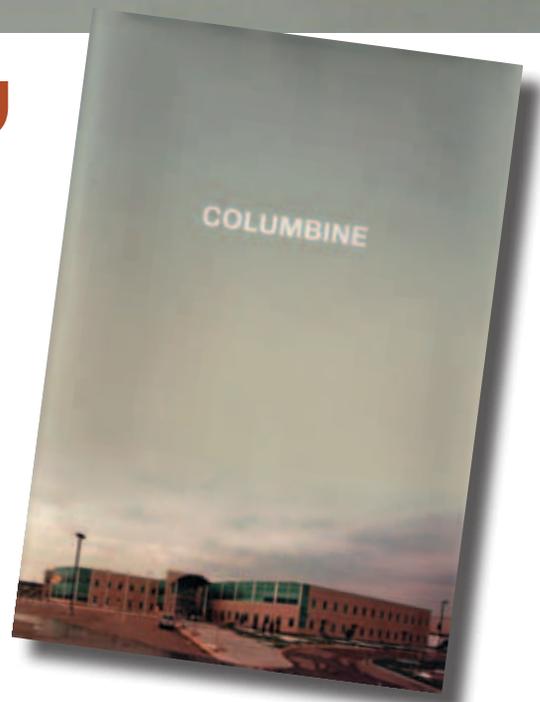
The author of this book, Dave Cullen, was a reporter on the scene who stayed with the story for the next decade. His unremitting search for answers has provided the most complete and objective overview to date. He interviewed the victims, their parents, school officials and first responders. He visited the scene and the homes of many of the involved, and sought to try and understand, and more importantly for our purposes, to explain. He superbly describes the factors and influences involved and even the personalities and feelings of some of the major players. While the fault of the tragedy is quite

justifiably laid directly on the psychotic killers, an astute student of tactical interventions can't help but recognize leverage points and opportunities for intervention that were never exploited.

While the book generally follows a chronological pattern of the events, Cullen breaks the pattern by providing background information that elucidates critical factors and helps the reader put them into perspective. The book reads like a novel and is a gripping story even without any tactical lessons, but the real value for modern law enforcement tacticians is the extraction of essential lessons to avoid repeating mistakes.

Alternately, the reader feels alarm, grief and anger that intensifies to rage, as the events unfold without intervention. Cullen describes in detail the heroism of some of the students, the natural human fears that affect decision-making, the role of school authorities and the effects of PTSD, the motives of the killers and the early warning signs that were missed.

Near the end of the book the author presents a comprehensive timeline that not only provides a sense of the duration of planning but highlights some of the major events that were conspicuous only



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in retrospect. The author's notes provide additional insight and also refute some information that was reported but didn't happen. The book is the most comprehensive overview of school safety issues and challenges for future actions of any that exist, even when compared to those written exclusively for that purpose.

To enhance the lessons learned, a short video and free 55-page instructor guide in PDF format is available from Cullen's website at <http://www.columbine-instructor-guide.com/columbine-instructor-guide-teacher's-guide.pdf>. This book should not only be considered a must-read by law enforcement tacticians, but deserves to be in personal and unit libraries as a reference. ■

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