

Teaching Hatred - Rampage didn't happen because of one man's twisted thinking

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Author: Clarence Page, Chicago Tribune

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Rampage didn't happen because of one man's twisted thinking

After years of seeding and feeding, the hate industry hit the jackpot with Benjamin Nathaniel Smith.

Mr. Smith, 21, was the suspected gunman in a three-day shooting rampage against blacks, Jews and Asians that left two people dead and nine injured in Illinois and Indiana before he killed himself.

Police say they are investigating why Mr. Smith did what he did and whether he acted alone. But it is easy to see that he didn't act alone. He had many cheerleaders.

Young people don't learn that kind of fear and hatred in a vacuum. They have to be carefully taught. In that effort, Mr. Smith and others like him have many tutors.

Mr. Smith had a reputation for distributing racist literature in his neighborhood and at college campuses in Illinois and Indiana. He was closely associated with a "white pride" group called the World Church of the Creator and its leader, Matthew F. Hale, 27.

Before Mr. Smith's shooting spree, you could find Mr. Hale's group on the Web, offering a potpourri of misinformation about nonwhites as subhuman "mud people" and Jews as conspirators against America. It also called for "RAHOWA," an abbreviation for "racial holy war." The Web site shut down as media calls to Mr. Hale picked up, but I suspect the site will be back once the heat is off.

Mr. Smith testified on Mr. Hale's behalf in the law school graduate's battle with Illinois officials who have denied Mr. Hale a law license, even though he has passed the state's bar exam.

Yet Mr. Hale washes his hands of responsibility for Mr. Smith's rampage. "For the same reason the pope in Rome doesn't feel responsible for abortion clinic bombings, I don't feel responsible for these shootings," Mr. Hale told a reporter.

But the pope preaches love for everyone, not just his own race.

Members of Mr. Hale's organization also have been linked to several attacks or foiled attempts against blacks and Jews, including the 1991 murder in Florida of a black Persian Gulf War veteran and the 1998 robbery and pistol-whipping in Florida of a Jewish video store owner.

"Everyone hates, though few admit it these days," Mr. Hale said on CNN Tuesday. Ah, but there are many, many levels of hate.

It is one thing to hate pineapple slices on pizza. It is quite another to hate entire groups of people or, to put it in Mr. Hale's terms, to preach "loyalty" to any one race or ethnic group over others.

If Mr. Hale isn't responsible for feeding Mr. Smith's madness, who is? How about all of the other people who preach the message that white people are a new oppressed class?

That is the language you find on the Web sites of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and the hundreds of white hate groups that have been identified across the country by civil rights organizations.

Yes, Mr. Smith had many cheerleaders. Hate sells, especially if you cloak it in the language of victimization, even white victimization in an overwhelmingly white country.

You hear it from the demagogic radio gasbag who belabors "racial preferences" as if affirmative action was the worst problem facing American society.

You hear it from the political opportunists who turn legitimate issues like welfare reform, school desegregation, "midnight basketball" or "political correctness" into thinly veiled racial code words.

And, yes, you sometimes hear it from some of my fellow African-Americans and other nonwhites. The black hater has much in common with the white hater.

And what about those of us who, instead of attacking other groups, simply remain silent while others attack? When justice hangs in the balance, the silent people can be the most dangerous of all.

All of them deserve applause from the David Dukes and the Matthew Hales of this world. All throw kerosene on the flames of anger and hatred in the minds of confused youths.

Yes, the haters hit the jackpot with Benjamin Smith. Once again the nation is shocked, just as it is shocked by school shootings or assassinations.

The high school massacre in Littleton, Colo., led to a spontaneous national dialogue and debate on the roots of school violence. It would be a wonderful tribute to Mr. Smith's victims if his rampage led Americans to engage in a long-overdue dialogue on the hatred that festers just beneath the surface of our national tranquillity. We need to talk. Our silence is deadly.

Clarence Page writes for the Chicago Tribune.

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